DEFENCE STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

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FOREWORD

'The world is a mess. The world is as angry as it gets,' declared the new President of the United States recently. The election of Donald J. Trump has coincided with, perhaps arisen from, a period of unusual turbulence in early 21st century geopolitics. Events have become difficult to read, no less predict. For all that Twitter diplomacy, 'twiplomacy', has sought to inject concision and clarity into politics, the reverse appears to be unfolding. Truth, untruth, and post-truth: conversations around how domestic and foreign policy are communicated to populations by elected and indeed unelected politicians have shone the spotlight on what it means to call a fact a fact. Indeed, why it matters to draw a distinction between truth and lies. And why a question of ethics not simply efficacy is ever present in the decision making of strategic communicators.

These are strange times too. Bewildering, to be more accurate. Insurgent ideologues lay claim to absolute truth. There can be only one truth, and that truth is theirs. So goes their rhetoric. For them there is no 'say-do gap'. To question their view is to make a black and white choice between life and death. Daesh, for one, appears unconcerned by nuance. At the same time, some sovereign state actors have directed their broadcast media to suggest there is no single truth. Rather, there are multiple ways of viewing the same event. Consequently, a confusion of perspectives must be considered before a particular version— that state's or broadcaster's own version—emerges and shines through like a beacon to illuminate our understanding. RT (formerly Russia Today television) claims the philosophical high ground at the expense of more prosaic journalistic practice. To complicate matters further, many Western politicians make increasingly extravagant claims to evidence their arguments. Colourful assertions, however, are quickly dispelled with a brief look into the archive. Nevertheless, their messages are repeated, retweeted, and recycled so that the official record becomes clouded if not eclipsed. Sediment upon sediment of half truths and brazen cheek become today's history in the making. This would be a heyday for fact checkers were it not for the realisation that they are overwhelmed by the speed of events and short attention spans of consumers. Dynamic change, witnessed and spread through global feedback loops of television, press, and social media only serves to create a febrile environment for rumours, lies, and deliberate manipulation.

This is the world in which the second issue of Defence Strategic Communications appears. A world of renewed challenge and responsibilities. Nevertheless, a world of fascinating possibilities.

Since its first appearance, this journal has been committed to enriching the understanding of the field and practice of strategic communications. For too long, pressing ethical, historical, and theoretical questions have remained under-researched. Attention instead has been directed at the so-called business end—at the 'doing' by soldiers and diplomats. Less effort has been focused on questioning how and why we decide to communicate in a particular way; or even whether we should. The result has been to over-instrumentalise what remains, even in the era of big data analysis and social metrics, a frustratingly complex art. Albeit some still aspire to call it a science. Yet passing a message from one person to another has never been as simple or predictable as it sounds. At least the expectation that an idea might be understood the way it was intended, that it might even go on to influence the behaviour of the other, invites a host of questions that shake our simplistic assumptions. This journal aims to invest fresh research and thought into the field of strategic communications; not merely in pursuit of pure knowledge, rather to reinvest in explaining how and why states and state challengers promote their ideas. Indeed, to dig deeper into processes of influence and change, of persuasion and coercion. The practical lessons from this approach were highlighted by former President Barack Obama who claimed 'we have to be able to distinguish between these problems analytically, so that we're not using pliers where we need to use a hammer'. To partly fulfil this objective, this journal seeks to promote a research-practice axis that should be an unbroken cycle of rejuvenation.

We include contributions from both academics and practitioners in this issue. In so doing, we offer a template for the future. At the same time, this issue sets in motion a series of discussions to which we invite a considered response from our readers.

The scholars Mervyn Frost and Nicholas Michelsen propose an ethical framework in the international system within which strategic communicators—that includes militant insurgents—must operate to avoid falling victim to the ethical traps that will only delegitimise thus confound communicators' efforts. While foreign policy adviser John Williams calls for a renewal of faith in facts on the part of NATO member states to reaffirm accuracy and authenticity as the foundations of strategic communications. In short, his is a plea for a moral and practical response to the so-called post-truth era.

Meanwhile political communications adviser James Farwell looks to the Arabian peninsula. He issues a challenge to overcome the disconnect between the projection of America's foreign policy and its struggle to understand the Middle East and North Africa. His review essay highlights Yemen. And Farwell warns that NATO states overlook or misread its troubled politics at their peril. The need for sensitivity to local culture and how audiences think is a theme that increasingly preoccupies researchers. Thomas Colley interviews different voices across the British population and identifies distinct stories through which people process why they believe their country has undertaken military interventions into distant lands in recent history. Such stories frequently circulate under the political radar. A similar need to appreciate populations with whom strategic communicators engage, both at home and abroad, is voiced by researcher Claire Yorke.

She opens up a line of debate about the role of empathy. Again a timely discussion against the backdrop of populism and powerful leaders. Personal chemistry between national leaders suggests a different way of practising politics. But how that chemistry mixes with popular sentiment also serves to question whether we mistakenly see ourselves as thinking beings. Yorke proposes that feeling beings should be closer to the mark when we pursue national and international engagement. Meanwhile communications theorist Nicholas O'Shaughnessy weighs up the continuities and discontinuities of history. Drawing on new research into Nazi Germany's propaganda culture, he reveals a state where far from information and communications being an add-on to policy making, they provided a totalising culture through which all governance was practised. Significantly, he proposes that many of the techniques long considered relics of 20th century propaganda have re-emerged in Russia and China today. But with a difference.

The scholars James Rogers and Andriy Tyushka present a darker view of contemporary events. Turning their attention to Russia, they see a three-part strategic narrative emanating from Moscow. What they perceive as an effort to 'desynchronise' Russia's European Neighbourhood, they argue, is aimed at confusing or distorting what it means to be European. This overlays a further strategic initiative to force division between the United States and its transatlantic partners. Which in turn maps onto attempts to fill the ensuing confused space with fictitious accounts. Drawing on a longer view of history, strategic theorist Ofer Fridman delves into Russian military and academic literature. There he discovers two main strands of thought. One, more conceptual, that sees Information Warfare as an historic manipulation of information for political and economic ends. The other that interprets Information Warfare as a method of Western subversion that has been directed at undermining Russian security over generations. By contrast, the information and communications scholars Samer Al-khateeb, Nitin Agarwal, Rick Galeano, and Rebecca Goolsby look to the immediate past. Two case studies in Crimea in 2014 and the Baltics and Poland in 2015 offer the opportunity for fine-grained research on the use of 'botnets'—automated and coordinated programmes run on networked computers—that deviant groups use to disseminate their information strategies.

Defence Strategic Communications journal aims to inform and enlighten. As an independent academic journal its mission is consistent with NATO's commitment to innovative research and thinking, and the dissemination of ideas to all readers in the world free of cost. In so doing, the journal invites a response from its readers. This issue blends articles from authors engaged in scholarship, policy making and practice— associates of NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, affiliates of the King's Centre for Strategic Communications, and international institutions of expertise. Our contributors welcome comment on their ideas through equally considered articles rooted in the richest scholarship and evidenced practice. Ours is a complex field of study. It must resist the constant threat of falling victim to the tyranny of simplicity.

Dr Neville Bolt, Editor-in-Chief
March 2017

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: PRACTICAL TRAPS AND ETHICAL PUZZLES

Mervyn Frost, Nicholas Michelsen

Abstract

Effective communications are today recognised as central not simply to achieving foreign policy or diplomatic success, but to realising any and all strategic aims. Consequently, strategic communications professionals play a critical role in a wide range of government agencies. In the light of an ever-transforming global media ecology, and the proliferation of state and non-state political actors who are able effectively to intervene in this fluid communications space, this observation has rising salience for international relations as a whole. Faced with rising geopolitical tensions, and public anxiety associated with terrorism, strategic communications has been viewed as an essential component of an effective response to campaigns by hostile state and non-state actors seeking to shape public opinion and attitudes in pursuit of their own strategic objectives. This article asks whether NATO members have given sufficient thought to the ethical puzzles raised by the changing landscape of strategic communications for international relations practitioners, and seeks to shed light on the practical ethical challenges faced by all strategic communicators in international relations today. We argue that effective strategic communication is an action that necessarily takes place within, and draws its efficacy from, ethical architectures that are settled constitutive features of international practices.

Keywords: ethics, truth, international relations, practice, lies, strategic communications

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Introduction

Political scientists are well acquainted with the phenomena of propaganda used by governments, political parties, and all kinds of political actors, both in times of peace and times of war. We are familiar with advertising (a form of propaganda), public awareness campaigns (informing the public of the dangers of HIV, for example), the internal communications of political parties to ensure that their MPs stay 'on message' and the many uses of communication strategies in the deployment of 'soft power',[1] and with organisations, parties, movements, and religious groups propounding their ideologies. There remains, however, considerable confusion as to what the term 'strategic communications' means in the context of international relations. The problem of perception and influence has, of course, been an abiding concern of International Relations (IR) scholars, and has been recognised as playing a central role in all foreign policy and diplomacy.[2] Since the 1980s constructivists in IR have explored at length how identities, social roles, myths, narratives, ideas, norms, and discourses in IR shape political reality.[3] Only in recent years, however, have debates around their instrumentalisation through the communications strategies of different international actors taken shape.[4] Within these debates there is little agreement about the nature and significance of strategic communications for international relations as such.

To a certain extent, this confusion may be explained by the diversity of contexts within which the term 'strategic communications' is deployed, and by the correspondingly diverse spectrum of related, and sometimes interchangeable, concepts used. For example, discussions of the concept of strategic communications bridge marketing

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[1] Nye, Joseph S., *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

[2] Jervis, Robert, *Perception and misperception in international politics*, (Princeton University Press, 2015 (1976); Nye, Joseph S., 'Soft power', *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990): 153-171.

[3] See, for example, Wendt 1999; Epstein, Charlotte, *The power of words in international relations: birth of an anti-whaling discourse*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); Finnemore, Martha, and Kathryn Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics and political change', *International Organization* 52.04 (1998): 887-917; Campbell, David, *Writing security: United States foreign policy and the politics of identity*, (U of Minnesota Press, 1992); Holsti, Kalevi J., 'National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy', *International Studies Quarterly* 14.3 (1970): 233-309; Hopf, Ted, *Social construction of international politics: identities & foreign policies*, (Moscow, 1955); Weldes, Jutta, (ed.), *Cultures of insecurity: states, communities, and the production of danger*, Borderlines Vol. 14. (University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Zehfuss, Maja, *Constructivism in international relations: the politics of reality*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations Vol. 83, (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Ringmar, Erik 'Inter-Textual Relations The Quarrel Over the Iraq War as a Conflict between Narrative Types', *Cooperation and Conflict* 41.4 (2006): 403-421; Risse, Thomas, '"Let's argue!": communicative action in world politics', *International organization* 54.01 (2000): 1-39; Lapid, Yosef, and Friedrich V. Kratochwil (eds.), *The return of culture and identity in IR theory*, (Rienner, 1996).

[4] Castells, Manuel, *Communication power*, (OUP Oxford, 2013); Owen IV, John M., *The Clash of Ideas in World Politics: Transnational Networks, States, and Regime Change*, 1510-2010, (Princeton University Press, 2010); Mor, Ben D., 'Credibility talk in public diplomacy', *Review of International Studies* 38.02 (2012): 393-422; Hayden, Craig, *The rhetoric of soft power: Public diplomacy in global contexts*, (Lexington Books, 2012); Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic narratives: Communication power and the new world order*, (Routledge, 2014).

(advertising and branding), diplomacy (public and private), and military practice (psychological operations, information operations, and hybrid warfare).[5] A further explanation for widespread confusion about the term as it relates to international relations, is that an increasingly diverse variety of actors are engaged in the field of strategic communications, a phenomenon that has, in part, lead to its rise to prominence in institutional parlance within NATO and beyond. A global network of expertise has taken shape over the last three decades, linking private actors and public relations firms or contractors, with public institutions (in both democratic and nondemocratic states) and military and intelligence organisations (national and international), often in relatively complex manners. This network of actors views itself as engaging in competition with other global strategic communicative actors (both state and non-state). In this sense, we can say that a highly complex, internally segmented, global strategic communications network has emerged, which carries within it a variety of approaches, understandings, and institutional forms including states, private citizens, and innumerable nonviolent and violent pressure groups. This complex network of private companies, governments, and non-state actors has become increasingly engaged in processing, transmitting, structuring, packaging, and presenting information to populations. There is an ever more complex set of vested interests emerging in this field.

This article contends that a stable perspective on this complex set of activities may be achieved by exploring the global practices from within which these diverse activities draw their meaning. In particular, it seeks to highlight the ethical component of these practices and to draw attention to the implications of this ethical dimension for practitioners of strategic communications in international relations. Many of these implications have not yet been articulated. It has been a common misconception that the melange of global strategic communicators described above is simply involved in the deployment of a special kind of power towards a target audience. The wielders of such power may be companies, political parties, social movements, terrorist groups, states, or international organisations. According to this view, strategic communications are understood as acts directed towards an external target. The logic is instrumental—it is directed towards getting others to do what they would not otherwise have done. It is an exercise of power. The primary toolbox is understood as competitive storytelling or counter-narrating. Against this externalist view of strategic communications this article presents an internalist one. We argue that strategic communications can only properly be understood from within the global practices where they are constituted as meaningful. The focus will be on the ethical dimensions of these global practices. The multiplicity and diversity of strategic communications in international affairs need not, therefore, be viewed as presenting a barrier to identifying the generic ethical architecture within which strategic communications takes place.

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[5] Hallahan, Kirk, et al., 'Defining strategic communication', *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 1.1 (2007): 3-35; Argenti, Paul A., Robert A. Howell, and Karen A. Beck, 'The strategic communication imperative', *MIT Sloan Management Review* 46.3 (2005): 83-89; Botan, Carl, 'Ethics in strategic communication campaigns: The case for a new approach to public relations', *Journal of Business Communication* 34.2 (1997): 188-202; Andreasen, Alan R., Philip Kotler, and David Parker, *Strategic marketing for nonprofit organizations*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall: 2003); Murphy, Dennis M., 'In search of the art and science of strategic communication', *Parameters* 39.4 (2009): 105; Farwell, James P., *Persuasion and power: The art of strategic communication*, (Georgetown University Press, 2012).

Having identified the ethical frame, we shall then be able to display a range of ethical puzzles, which those who use SC will have to confront.

Our primary contention is that these ethical puzzles need to be clearly posed and answers to them sought. Given the manner in which state-to-state and state-to-non-state dynamics on the world stage take place—at the level of ideas, through social media, public advertising, iconography, or through other forms of discursive action—some of the important questions which confront strategic communications practitioners include:

- *How and when does strategic communications threaten the fundamental global practice of sovereign states and the values embodied in it?*

- *What strategies of communication threaten the global practice of individual human rights and the values embedded in it?*

- *In what ways do the new communication technologies advance or undermine the key ethical values embedded in democratic states?*

- *What limits, if any, ought to be placed on the use of strategic communications and who is entitled to institute and police such limits?*

- *What might be the ethical limits to the uses of communication techniques available to non-democratic states? For example, is the community of states ethically entitled to hack and unblock the censorship machinery of autocratic states? (Turkey, China, North Korea)*

- *Are private international actors ethically entitled to release the secret files of autocratic and also democratic states? (Snowden)*

- *Are individuals and states entitled to use the communication technologies available to them to participate in the internal politics of foreign states, and what are the ethical limits constraining those who seek to instigate shifts in opinion in foreign populations (including those that are subject to military intervention, and counter-insurgency)?*

- *How should Western governments respond to the ability of activist non-state actors, including violent groups and organisations (such as Islamic State) to foster terrorism, social upheaval, or revolutionary change, or to put pressure on democratic governments to change policies (such that the foreign, environmental, or immigration policies of NATO states might themselves be manipulated through the actions of strategic communicators)?*

- *What are the ethical implications for international organisations (like NATO), as they seek through strategic communications to promote their legitimacy, and influence the perception of their actions by populations world-wide?*

- *What ethical challenges are associated with the rise of nationalist demagoguery, which are tied up with successful strategic communications campaigns that tip into dynamics of unpredictable social change (such as Brexit, or tensions associated with the South China Sea)?*

In this article we contend that there is a need for a comprehensive analytical framework within which such ethical puzzles that arise from strategic communications can be posed and thus attended to by practitioners in their professional conduct.

Whilst we cannot resolve each and every one of these questions in this article, in what follows we shall outline such a framework. What we propose will throw light on longstanding ethical debates around the role of rhetoric in politics as it relates to state propaganda, the value of truth versus 'white lies', debates about the end justifying the means used, the ethics of inaction and omission in both private and public diplomacy. Though we will not dwell on IR theoretical or methodological debates in this article, the argument we present is an exercise in practice theory understood in holist terms. A key feature of practice theory is that it is presented from the internal point of view—that of all of us who are participants in the global practices being analysed. Our discussion will seek to elucidate the relationship between acts of strategic communication and the global practices within which they take place, paying attention to what of ethical importance is at stake for: 1) democratic societies, 2) for the international society of states, 3) for global civil society. Our intention is to offer an analytical framework for a practical ethics that will be applicable to the professional conduct of strategic communicators of all kinds in international relations.

Our point of departure then, is that in the contemporary world strategic communication takes place within two overarching international practices: The International Society of Sovereign States (SOSS) and the Global Civil Society of Individual Rights Holders (which we shall call Global Civil Society or GCS). The meaning of all strategic communications presupposes the existence of these practices. A failure fully to comprehend this is responsible, in some measure, for many failures in the formulation and execution of state policies (including the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and the global war on terror). What this means for international relations is that any act of strategic communication needs to be recognised as an action the sense of which is wholly defined within these two global practices and the settled ethical norms embedded in them. To engage the breadth of the ethical puzzles at stake, we argue, requires that the global practices in which strategic communications take place must be better understood. Such understanding will clarify how a diverse field of strategic communications actors, including private corporations, public institutions (states and international organisations) and non-state actors (from ISIS to Amnesty International) are constituted as such within those global practices. The ethical debates that arise for these different actors/participants are internal to the overarching global practices that define world politics today.

International Truth-Telling and Practical Ethics

New technologies have made it possible for new groups (sometimes very small ones) to participate in strategic communications campaigns and to influence outcomes, both nearby and distant, in world politics. Previously this was a potential confined to states, large organisations (corporations), and large social institutions such as churches. The reason small groups (Al Qaeda, ISIS, or Al-Shabab) have been able to join more effectively in the global strategic communications game is that the means for doing so have become both cheap and widely available. Particularly important has been the rise of social media. As has been well documented, the new and rapidly changing

media landscape (in particular, the shift from 'one-to-many' to 'many-to-many' online platforms) has wreaked significant transformation on diplomatic practice.[6] One consequence of this has been that inter-state diplomacy now necessitates speaking directly to other societies, to their governments, and requires projecting narratives at home in the knowledge that official messages are rapidly disseminated and reprocessed through new media platforms. Diplomats now ordinarily conduct their business through communications with highly responsive domestic and foreign audiences, targeting state-actors and civil society actors simultaneously.[7]

As a consequence, collaborative, competitive or conflictual interactions between state-to-state and state-to-non-state actors on the world stage are increasingly recognised as heavily, and in some cases exclusively, mediated through new communication technologies. This suggests that a good deal has changed since the characteristic ideological struggles of the Cold War era. Furthermore, new technologies have meant that foreign states and non-state actors, large and small, are able much more easily to participate clandestinely in the internal politics of other states (meddling in their electoral and party political processes, for example). The implications of these transformations for international relations are significant, not least because the proliferation of strategic communicators leads to considerable information overload and uncertainty, and renders official messages insecure. In an attempt to gain control of their messages, governments and other actors have increasingly turned to 'expert' private consultants.[8] As the scope for private, secret, and un-attributable strategic communicators of various kinds has increased in recent years, the problem of accountability has become acute. In both democratic and authoritarian states, in global civil society within which corporations operate, and in communications between individual members of civil society, it has become difficult to determine who is using various forms of communication to do what, to whom, and for what reason.

As opportunities for (legitimate and illegitimate) intervention in the communicative field have proliferated at the global level, and have become available to a wide range of actors, a sense of confusion has arisen about what strategic communications is, and, in particular, about its place within international normative regimes. The rise of debates around 'hybrid warfare' or 'information war' has been accompanied by calls for new, integrated responses from Western states and international organisations like NATO.[9] However, what might be involved in such responses has tended to be conceptualised under frames that assume that we are entering a new Cold War-like clash between ideological or communicative formations, deemed to lack a common

[6] Castells, *Communication power.*

[7] Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*; Fletcher, T., *Naked Diplomacy: Power and statecraft in the Digital Age*, (William Collins, London, 2016).

[8] For example, nation branding consultants provide support to both highly developed and developing states. For a range of examples, see Dinnie, Keith, *Nation branding: concepts, issues, practice*, (Routledge, 2015).

[9] Arquilla, John, and David Ronfeldt (Eds.), *Networks and netwars: The future of terror, crime, and militancy*, (Rand Corporation, 2001); Hallahan et al., 2009; Murphy, 2009; Peters, Severin, 'Strategic Communication for Crisis Management Operations of International Organisations: ISAF Afghanistan and EULEX Kosovo, *EU Diplomacy Paper 1/2010*, January 2010', EU Diplomacy Papers (2010): 34; Betz, David, 'Communication breakdown: strategic communications and defeat in Afghanistan', *Orbis* 55.4 (2011): 613-630.

register that might facilitate adjudication between their contrasting claims about the world. The suggestion here is that strategic communications success is simply a matter of mastery over techniques of narrative construction, or mastery over the material networks that govern communication flows.[10]

Given the sense of crisis that surrounds contemporary debates around Russia's hybrid warfare or propaganda, and the inherently covert nature of much strategic communications practice, it is perhaps unsurprising that there have been no efforts to develop global ethical frameworks by which to give sense to the full range of strategic communications actors and their actions.[11] We contend that we should not come to the conclusion that 'anything that works, goes' in the arena of strategic communications in international relations, and that strategic communications is therefore best understood purely as a question of competitive mastery over the techniques of international storytelling. All strategic communications actors and the strategic communications actions they carry out are constitutively embedded in a set of ethical norms that characterise the international meta-practices in which we are all participants. A greater understanding of this constitutive architecture will provide critical insights for strategic communications practitioners and will shed light on the ethical puzzles arising from technological advances in this field.

Our central claim here may be re-stated quite simply: All actors and their actions get their meaning, point, and purpose from the social practices within which they are located. For example, consider the diplomat from state X who presents her credentials in state Y. We can only understand what a diplomat is and what 'presenting credentials' involves (what it means), once we know a substantial amount about the practice of diplomacy as a whole. Analogously, we can only understand a move in a game (chess) once we understand the game as a whole. Included in what we have to know about practices in order to understand actors and their actions, are the ethical values embedded in them. In the practice of diplomacy, for example, one of the core values is the value of open channels of communication. In the practice of chess one of the values involved is that of not cheating. In like vein in the international arena, strategic communications actors and the acts of communication they perform can only be understood as constituents of the global practices within which they operate. The actors, their actions, and the global practices are all internally related to one another.[12] Crucial to understanding these global practices is the requirement that we understand their ethical dimensions. Participants in these practices (and we all are participants) interpret one another's actions, including their strategic communications, in the light of these ethical values.

Let us analyse strategic communications in greater detail. From within our global practices one of the first things we understand is that there is something ethically suspect about them. What distinguishes an act of strategic communications from

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[10] Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives,*.

[11] Kroenig, Matthew, 'Facing reality: getting NATO ready for a new Cold War', *Survival* 57.1 (2015): 49-70; Archetti, Cristina. 'Terrorism, communication and new media: explaining radicalization in the digital age', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9.1 (2015).

[12] Frost, Mervyn, and Silviya Lechner, 'Understanding international practices from the internal point of view', *Journal of International Political Theory* (2015): 1755088215596765.

other kinds of communication, such as an academic paper in a journal, is that we assume the academic paper is in accordance with and seeks to uphold the fundamental values of academic practice, especially those to do with truth-telling and building sound arguments, whereas, the former does not always do these things. An identifying feature of strategic communications is that it seeks a way around at least some of these ethical constraints. In academic papers we do not expect, accept, or tolerate tampering with the evidence, leaving out relevant counter-examples, *ad hominem* arguments, attempts to gild the lily, plagiarism, 'spinning' the facts, and so on. Such tools are assumed to be indicators of weak scholarship, which the process of external peer review in academia is supposed to test for, placing the burden of proof on the reviewers and their capacity to test and substantiate the logic of the arguments presented. In contrast, we understand that such tools are the stock in trade of strategic communications—that it involves priming the audience, framing events, and 'spinning the narrative' to suit the purposes of the user. Because of the assumption that there is an element of ethical turpitude in strategic communications, those who use it more often than not seek to disguise the fact that what they are doing is an act of strategic communications. Instead they seek to portray it as a *bona fide* act of communication. Modern communication technology makes it increasingly easy to act in such clandestine ways.

Rhetoric is central to all strategic communications, indeed, it is central in all political practices. The arguments used in social practices to support one interpretation of an action, or of many actions that together constitute the 'state of play' within a practice, are rhetorical arguments rather than formal proofs. Rhetorical argument makes an appeal to what is accepted and settled within a given practice, including the ethical values intrinsic to it. The planks of such arguments taken together either support (or not) a given conclusion. Strategic communications in international relations is always a special form of rhetorical argument. A feature of this is that the planks of the argument are manipulated in specific ways. For example, they might rely upon appeals to emotions that are relevant to a given narrative, but which may highlight part of a story rather than the whole, or, which may hide the implications of a given narrative, or which may effectively silence other relevant arguments that ought to have been aired. In some cases they rely on photographs or videos that carry an emotional charge. There is a panoply of rhetorical devices used by strategic communicators to support the narrative storyline or framing of events. Clearly, this use of devices might potentially lead to the imputation that all strategic communication is nothing but propaganda, a clash of situated truths, where no final determination is possible. In this view the clash of strategic communications is simply a clash of voices between opposed groups (states or communities) who have no agreed way of determining the truth of an act of communication. The clash of strategic communications should then be understood simply as an aspect of the general struggle for power in the international arena. Strategic communications, here, dissolves international political 'dialogue' into a form of discursive coercion.

There is no formal procedure, analogous to an academic peer review, by which to test the logic or substantiate international actors' claims, so the burden of proof seems to be lifted, allowing the persuasiveness of the argument to rest merely/insecurely

upon rhetorical skill and audience receptiveness. However, we contend that to communicate in international relations, whether strategically or not, is nonetheless to make claims with an ethical dimension arising within an existing global architecture of intelligibility. A global architecture (of norms) determines the conditions under which the rhetorical claims put forward by strategic communicators in international relations are received as persuasive or not. Ethical judgement is thus at the very heart of success and failure in strategic communications. That is to say, to practice strategic communication is always to propose judgements about other actor-communicators, often to claim that they are unethical, in that they are engaged in manipulation, supply disinformation, or are otherwise engaged in ethical wrongdoing. For example, the 'dodgy dossier', which Tony Blair relied on as a reason for going to war in Iraq, made allegations of legal and ethical wrongdoing by Saddam Hussein. It, like all strategic communications, was constitutively bound to the ethical norms of the practice in which it was made. A central value in this practice is truth-telling. The audience understood the statements provided in the dossier to be true. After the event, it turned out that they were false. Tony Blair's standing as an ethical international actor suffered accordingly. His reputation has never recovered. We shall return to this illuminating case of an initially successful, yet ultimately flawed strategic communications campaign below.

Ethical terms are transparently central to the justifications, rationales, narratives, and explanations that make up all strategic communications actions. For those terms to make sense to interlocutors, whether states or publics, they must be rooted in common or shared architectures of meaningfulness. Of course, for both foreign and domestic consumers of strategic communications, effective strategic communications seeks to persuade audiences that its account is the most legitimate, vis-à-vis those of its competitors, and it necessarily does so by reference to a set of already existing settled normative formations that give structure to contesting ethical claims and interpretations. As such, the fact that strategic communications seeks to intervene, rhetorically, in the ethical interpretation of an act or event, provides considerable guidance towards making sense of this phenomenon as it relates to world politics. It reveals, put simply, that strategic communications is tightly bound up with the settled norms that are already contained in international meta-practices. We take it to be self-evident that *all* actions are constitutively related to the ethical components of the practices within which actors are participants. This is true of micro-practices like family life and also global practices. To be an actor in international relations, to be a state for example, is to be an entity that makes certain ethical claims for itself and recognises such claims that come from others. Thus to be a state is to claim sovereignty for oneself and one's citizens, which is an ethical claim for a certain kind of autonomy. To make the claim is to hold that those who infringe one's sovereignty are guilty of ethical wrongdoing. *A fortiori,* to claim this is to recognise that other states have a right to a similar ethical standing. In the practice of sovereign states, there are many other ethical requirements besides sovereignty that states are required to uphold. These include, amongst others, the upholding of the value of communication between sovereign states by respecting the elaborate rules of diplomacy (key amongst these, of course, is the requirement to be truthful in one's dealings with other states), upholding the values protected by international

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law, upholding the values protected by the International Law of Armed Conflict and also International Humanitarian Law, respecting the value of *pacta sunt servanda* (the assumption that treaties or agreements between states will be honoured*)*, and many others. Respecting and protecting these values is a fundamental requirement of what is involved in being a state in the practice of sovereign states. Wrongdoing erodes a state's standing in this practice, just as being caught cheating in a game undermines a player's standing or, at the limit, results in his or her expulsion from the sport altogether.[13]

It follows from the above that states, in all that they do, which includes their SC actions, must have regard to the ethical constraints operative on them by virtue of their standing as states in the international Society of Sovereign States. Individual citizens in states are similarly constrained by the requirements of citizenship. To make matters more complicated, states and individuals are also actors in Global Civil Society, a key component of which is the global market. As such, they have to pay attention to the constraints operative on them in GCS. These include ethical constraints. The strategic communications of actors in GCS (whether they be states, corporations, or individual men and women) only have traction when they appeal to the ethical norms that are constituted and settled in that practice. In GCS, once again, a key requirement of all actors is that they be truth-tellers. If it becomes known that they are consistently untruthful, then their standing in the practice will be seriously eroded. This is particularly important in GCS because core to all activity in this practice is contract making. For a state, corporation, or individual to flourish in GCS it is important that the other participants are able to 'take their word' that they will honour their contracts. Once this standing is eroded, their future in the practice will be a dim one. Ethical standing is crucial for all participants in this practice.

As indicated, the two social practices in which strategic communication is carried out are the International Society of Sovereign States and Global Civil Society. These practices are identifiable as social arrangements within which agents of a certain kind are constituted. In the former, the key agents are sovereign states and in the latter they are individual rights holders. These practices determine who the actors are, what claims they may make for themselves, what claims from others they have to respect, what actions are available to them (what 'moves' they can make), and what would count as a case of ethical wrongdoing (what would count as a 'foul'). These, taken together, are, one might say, 'the rules of the game'. Without these there would no players or participants—in global affairs there would be no sovereign states or individual rights holders. These rules of the game are constituted historically, so display a degree of flexibility, openness to contestation, and may change, just as the 'off side rule' was introduced in professional football to remove an action allowed under the previous rules that resulted in regular interruptions to the flow of the game. But *the rules must hang together in a more or less coherent way for the game to exist at all, and for there to be identifiable players in it.* This limits the degree to which the rules of any given practice are vulnerable to incremental erosion through repeated infringements by individual participants.

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[13] As those like Lance Armstrong, who was caught cheating in professional cycling, have discovered.

We have already mentioned the core values intrinsic to the practice of states as understood from the point of view of its participants. Values such as sovereignty (understood as the fundamental freedom of a state within the practice of states), free communication between states through the institutions of diplomacy, international law, the laws of armed conflict, and *pacta sunt servanda*. Beyond these, we should also mention the value attached to the diversity that exists between states, the value of order and peace between states, and the prohibition against empire and colonialism. In the contemporary states' practice there is a commitment to democracy within states, although it is clearly not always fully realised and, where it is not, elaborate justifications tend to be offered for the states' failure in this regard. In this practice, states justify their actions in terms of these values and criticise those who do not honour them. Like all actions within this practice, the subcategory of action known as 'strategic communications' can only be read as meaningful in the context of this practice and the ethical values embodied in it.

While the society of sovereign states has existed for several centuries now, Global Civil Society is a practice that has only formed comparatively recently. As outlined earlier, GCS may be defined as that society within which individuals recognise one another as holders of first generation rights. It is a borderless practice. Participant rights holders in it do not regard their rights to be determined by the states in which they find themselves. They claim their rights wherever they happen to be. They also do not regard the rights they claim as having been granted to them by one or another state. Indeed, they often make claims against the states they find themselves in. Rights holders are aware that states can protect or abuse their rights. GCS is an anarchical society in which there is no government in authority over it. The core values constituted and protected within GCS are that of freedom of the individual and the overall accommodation of diversity in GCS as a whole. Amongst the rights protected within the GCS are the rights of the person not to be killed or tortured, the right to free speech, association, freedom of conscience, and the right to own property. The list of rights is not static, but under constant review within the practice itself. The role of non-governmental strategic communicators in this process of review has been well documented.[14]

Strategic communications within GCS always appeals in one way or another to these core values. For example, communications from ISIS often depict the USA and its allies as guilty of military action that kills innocent civilians (thus not respecting their right to life); while strategic communications from the USA and its allies often depicts ISIS as flagrantly abusing the human rights of its victims. Similar allegations about torture are issued from both sides. Non-governmental organisations also mount strategic communications campaigns that hinge on claims about human rights abuses committed by a number of parties involved in conflicts like that taking place in Syria.

The SOSS and GCS are both multi-actor practices and both are what we might call 'super practices' in that they contain within them a host of other social practices. These are highly interdependent. Most people, wherever they happen to be, are

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[14] Finnemore and Sikkink, 'International norm dynamics'; Epstein, *The Power of Words*.

participants in the overarching practices as citizens of sovereign states or as rights holders in GCS. In these practices most actors make regular use of SC. One such use relates to attempts to shift the emphasis upon which certain norms are prioritised within international practices. For example, Chinese public diplomacy has, in recent years, sought to emphasise some international norms (free trade and sovereignty) whilst de-emphasising others (human rights, self-determination, citizenship).[15] Similarly, a number of African states have publicly withdrawn from the International Criminal Court, appealing to arguments regarding anti-imperialism, and to the value of sovereignty—both settled international ethical norms. International actors often seek to establish the primacy of one norm or set of norms at the expense of others in their strategic communications. Contestation over the relative significance of international norms is ongoing within the two practices we have outlined, and shows how they have become highly interdependent over time. For example, a state seeking to give priority to 'free trade' in its relations with other states implicitly commits itself to endorsing within those states the establishment of conditions that would allow business representatives to conduct themselves as rights holders within an effective legal architecture, that is to say, it assumes their recognition as actors within GCS. Whilst the international practices we have described are clearly not immune to dissolution, and their rules can and do change over time, the architecture of interdependent norms they constitute is highly elastic. This is exploited by strategic communicators in international relations so as to frame their actions as more in line with international norms than the actions of their peers, but such norm contestation does not itself offer evidence for an incremental breakdown in the architecture of international ethical norms.[16] What we see, rather, is analogous to the mechanism by which case law develops in response to disagreements within a legal system. Hard cases are resolved through highly sophisticated debates between jurists who make their cases before learned judges.[17]

There is regularly an element of competition involved in international strategic communications. Actor X seeks to communicate a message that is significantly at odds with the message actor Y is advancing, with respect to the significance attached to one or other settled international norm (say, an individual's accepted right to be free from torture, and a state's accepted right to self-defence). This is the world of 'spin'. What we wish to highlight in this article is that the spinners cannot escape the ethical criteria that constrain action in the practice in which they are doing their spinning. In spinning a message, the risk of discovery is always present. There is one particular manoeuvre central to competitive spinning that we wish to highlight. We refer here to the activity of *ethical trapping*.

The meta-practices we have described, like all social practices, include a certain category of action, which we shall call 'ethical fouls'. Such fouls include a wide range

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[15] We thank one of our anonymous reviewers for this example.

[16] The interdependent architecture of norms carries significant, though not unlimited, resilience. Just as pulling on a metal spring and then releasing it will result in a return to its initial form until a certain limit of force is reached, at which point the spring will lose this capacity to return to its original state.

[17] See Dworkin, R, 'Justice for Hedgehogs', *Boston University Law Review*, Vol 90 Nr. 2, 2010, p. 473. Indeed, law is thus, for Dworkin, a 'branch of morality', or interpretative moral reasoning.

of actions that are not permitted by the 'rules of the game'. In football, players are not permitted to punch the referee or commit a handball infringement. Any player who infringes the rule is penalised, and repeated infringements result in the player being sent to the 'sin bin' or, at the limit, excluded from the game altogether. Similarly, in Olympic sport, to take certain performance-enhancing drugs is to violate settled ethical norms within the practice of Olympic competition. To be caught doping would result in exclusion. Perhaps the defining foul in international relations is to be caught out lying. This is particularly clear in the act of declaring war. Whilst it may be, as Sun Tzu argued, that 'all war is deception', if a state is recognised to have embarked upon a war for reasons other than the declared reason, they are likely to be suffer considerable damage to their standing in world politics.

The UK experience of strategically communicating the rationale for the Second Gulf War, already mentioned above, provides a useful illustration of the commission of a foul and of the consequences that follow from such an action. Whereas Tony Blair was successful in strategically communicating to parliament that Saddam Hussein represented a clear and present danger to the United Kingdom, over time widespread scepticism developed. Indeed, many came to believe that the communicators had deliberately fabricated a story about the severity of the threat. What followed was that British government suffered a loss of credibility. This in turn has constrained subsequent governments seeking to frame British foreign policy as ethical. For example, it has had specific implications for the credibility of UK appeals to humanitarian values as a justification for military interventions abroad. The UK's credibility as an upholder of human rights has been discredited in the eyes of both domestic and international publics. Here we see clearly a successful (short-term) strategic communications campaign resulting in a major (long-term) cost to UK credibility as a strategic communicator in certain contexts. The costs of a perceived foul here have thus been significant for Britain's claim to an ethical role in both the SOSS and GCS. What we see here is that strategic communications actions imply an appeal to the architecture of settled ethical norms, because they hope to convince others of their validity. To engage in a strategic communications action is always to make a case with such an ethical dimension. The case makes a rhetorical appeal to certain shared assumptions about what constitutes ethical and unethical action. To be viewed as having lied or mislead audiences in the past makes future exercises of strategic communications more difficult, or even impossible, as it damages an actor's credibility as a communicator within the confines of the broader practice. In IR, there are severe costs associated with being found out as the author of duplicitous communications. Potentially, such exposure inflicts fatal harm on an actor's capacity *strategically* to communicate in the future.

Strategic communicators recognise the truth of the above. For this reason, no strategic communications actor in IR admits to lying, deception, or indeed to 'spinning' the truth. Indeed, strategic communications actors *of all kinds,* state and non-state, go to elaborate lengths to conceal or deny lying. This is true of weak states and non-state actors, like ISIS or Al Qaeda, and of strong states such as the US or UK. There is a further point worth noting, which is that there are sometimes greater costs to the credibility of liars that are strong, than there are to liars that are relatively weak.

Clearly states as well as non-state actors (like terrorist groups) can and do lie in their strategic communications. Their duplicity often goes undiscovered and they succeed in securing their goals. Here their actions may be seen as analogous to what often happens in football where it is possible to get away with a foul, perhaps even score a goal using a shoulder or hand, or by pretending to have been fouled to get a penalty, and by doing so one may win a particular contest. These, one might say, are tactical fouls. But, in the long run, gaining a reputation as a serial fouler carries a cost to a player's standing in the game. If a pattern of cheating were sustained, it is likely that a player (or team) would no longer be recognised as a player in the game (by suffering a ban from Olympic competition, for example). In international relations, the crucial cost would be a loss of credibility and, at the limit, being pushed into pariah statehood. From such a position, the strategic communications of a state would no longer be given any credence whatsoever—this is a position in which North Korea currently finds itself. Because one's appraisal by others as deceitful carries the high cost of incredulity with respect to all future statements about one's own actions, it is the first principle of competitive strategic communications practice to seek to identify the points of empirical weakness or ethical flaws in the accounts one is seeking to oppose.[18] Actors possessing high levels of credibility have the most to lose, but settled norms against lying tend, over time, to reassert themselves amongst strategic communicators of all kinds. For both weak and strong actors in IR, there are benefits to being recognised as a reliable communicator—that is, as a legitimate and reliable participant in the strategic communications game. There is no mileage in becoming the Lance Armstrong of international politics. Indeed, for weak actors, like Al Qaeda or ISIS, seeking recognition as a credible enunciator of statements of fact about world politics is a foundational aim. These groups seek credibility as strategic communicators. The central role of appeals to justice and attempts to draw attention to Western duplicity in their public diplomacy and propaganda effort, show that appeals to a shared regulatory architecture for ethical dispute are recognised as of great value on the road to achieving such status.

Truth-telling, as an ethical norm, is a fundamental requirement for the mutual constitution of participants in any given social practice. It is only as truth-tellers that they are able to make sense of themselves to relevant audiences, as practitioners within the two most important and interconnected international practices: Global Civil Society and the Society of Sovereign States. Strategic communications, which might be effective in the short-term, but which is not truthful, and thus not ethical, always creates ethical traps for the user. They become permanent hostages to fortune. They become traps, which other actors can spring, and it is here, we argue, that the practical ethical puzzles for strategic communicators reside. Recognition as a truth-teller is a constitutive feature of the architecture of participation in the two international meta-practices. This establishes the basic condition of possibility for successful strategic communications actions. Where this is not recognised, even highly effective strategic communications campaigns (in the short-term) create opportunities that empower even very weak hostile actors and undermine the basic structural conditions on which even the strongest actors' credibility is rooted.

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[18] Farwell, *Persuasion and power*, pg. 6.

Strategic Communications and Ethical Traps

Having argued that recognition as a truth-teller is not established solely through one's technical mastery of storytelling methods (such as priming, framing, or narrative mode), within an open global discursive field, but rather may be established only by reference to the ethical architecture of the two international meta-practices, we may now move forward to illuminate some contemporary puzzles arising within the field of contemporary strategic communication. As noted above, the peculiar challenge, which has arisen in recent years, is derived from the proliferation of new strategic communications actors as a direct consequence of new communications technologies. In most cases new actors remain bound by the standard constraints inherent in the global practices in which they operate. However, there is one factor that greatly complicates the overall picture—the non-attributable nature of many communications via the new media. It is often not possible for ordinary members of the public to determine who the authors of a particular communication are. There are huge difficulties in determining who authored an item on social media, or who is responsible for a leak. In such cases, although one can determine in the normal way that a given communication is partial, biased, spun, or even false (and thus unethical), it is not clear whose ethical standing in the practice is damaged by such discoveries. The anonymous authors seem to be immune to the normal consequences of such conduct. Revealing the flaws in a message leaves the author untarnished because the identity of the author is not known. One potential implication of this is communicated in the claim that the very currency of truth-telling is being eroded within contemporary international practices and in national politics.[19] This sense of impunity from loss of standing is only apparent. For the author of such cases of strategic communications, even if only known as 'Anon.', will still be perceived as an actor, as the source of the message, whose ethical standing in the practice can go up and go down following good or bad ethical conduct. Such sources will soon be branded as reliable or not.[20] Anonymity does not shield a voice from judgement; it only hides the identity of the speaker. Huge effort will be directed to uncovering the real identities of states and other actors who seek to hide their real identities with a view to bringing them to the bar of international ethical judgement. A good recent example of such an endeavour has been the tracking down of hackers who hacked the files of the Democratic Party in the US presidential election campaign and published some of the stolen material in order to embarrass Hillary Clinton. Once Russia was revealed as the source, ethical blame for meddling in the sovereign affairs of a foreign state could be allocated.

There are some new actors in international relations whose identities are known, groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS, who, on the face of the matter, do not face the same sanctions as those applied to established international actors, state or non-state, for lying or otherwise committing ethical fouls. Such actors are, from the outset, seen to be illegitimate players in the global practices of sovereign states and GCS.

[19] Tallis, Benjamin, 'Living in Post-truth', *New Perspectives. Interdisciplinary Journal of Central & East European Politics and International Relations* 24.1 (2016): 7-18.

[20] The anonymous source of information to Woodward and Bernstein in the Watergate Scandal soon earned very high standing for the truthful quality of his communications.

In a sense they are widely construed as 'outlaws', unconcerned by the judgement of other actors. An implication, which has been drawn from this is that such actors also contribute to a generalised devaluation of truth-telling, in that this status would seem to give them a free hand to flout the ethical requirements of the global practices. It would seem to allow them *carte blanche* to use all of the devices used in strategic communication, including spinning, playing on emotion, giving biased interpretations of action, fabricating 'facts', and presenting outright lies as 'truths'. Such *carte blanche* would surely be infectious and, if perceived as creating an uneven playing field, it might lead to the corruption of other competitors in the strategic communications game. This is analogous to what those caught cheating in cycling argued had occurred in their sport.

This view of some actors as unconstrained by the ethics of the global practices, and thus a source of structural risk, is misconceived. To make the case, we invite the reader to consider the role ethical trapping plays in the search for power by such groups. In the formation of such groups the following trajectory of action is common: Prior to the establishment of groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS, the people involved—citizens of some state and rights holders in civil society—are participants in the global practice in the normal way. By establishing Al Qaeda and ISIS they become wrongdoers and violators of the norms internal to the global practices. Their activities, such as suicide bombings, public executions, and other 'terrorist' deeds reinforce their status as unethical actors. Subsequently, though, such groups start making use of a different and more reliable source of power. They find this in the reactions of other global actors to their unethical deeds. This happens when great powers are provoked by Al Qaeda and ISIS to respond in particularly brutal ways, which themselves flout the ethical basis of the global practices. Flout, that is, some of the following norms: human rights, state sovereignty, the laws of armed conflict, and international law more generally. By doing these things the international actors fall into an ethical trap. They have acted in ways that can be criticised by Al Qaeda and ISIS in the conventional way. These maverick groups are then able to use strategic communications to present themselves as substantially less bad than the major international actors. Indeed, this opens the way for them to recruit people widely to their cause on the grounds that they are legitimate actors, far less ethically suspect that the superpower and its allies. Subsequently a pattern of conduct emerges, which starts with the commission and communication of a bad deed by a terrorist group with a view to provoking a worse one by the target state and the international community more generally. Part of the ethically obnoxious response sought, might be to have foreign great powers put boots on the ground in a sovereign state in an act that could be portrayed as aggression, to make widespread use of assassination methods that commonly result in collateral damage, or to have them start using intelligence gathering methods that include the use of torture, and so on. These transgressions can then be advertised through the use of strategic communications to recruit more people to the side of Al Qaeda and ISIS and also to shore up its legitimacy at home. This ethical trapping soon becomes the major source of power for such groups, far outstripping the power directly exercised through terror.

What we wish to stress, though, first, is that such ethical trapping can only be carried out within the global practices within which all participants understand the ethical game being played, and, second, that such ethical trapping also, in the long run, traps the trapper. This comes about in the battle of strategic communications. In order to realise the power available to them from ethical traps, the outlaw group has to use strategic communications to communicate the turpitude of the major actors to the international community. In response, states and international organisations ramp up their strategic communications portraying, and drawing attention to, the evil deeds of the terrorists. What inevitably develops is a fight for the ethical high ground. For ethical trapping to work, the terrorist groups have to appeal to the normal ethical bases of the global practices. In order not to undermine their own strategic communications it then becomes important for such groups themselves to be seen to be upholding the ethical standards to which they appeal when springing the ethical trap. This requires that future actions be more closely aligned with the core values of the global practices. Indeed, this is precisely what has transpired in the conduct of both Al Qaeda and ISIS. After their initial savagery and the strategic communications that made use of it, this aspect of their conduct has been toned down. ISIS, for example, have sought to show how they provide welfare services to those over whom they rule and how they keep order where others fail, and so on. The longer the group has held territory, the greater the emphasis ISIS has sought to give to the ethicality of their actions. This suggests limits to the widespread assumption that ISIS are beyond the pale of any comprehensible ethic. Our point is that when strategically communicating, actors of any kind (even the most violent) will seek in the long run to acquire and hold rhetorically stronger positions within common structures of ethical intelligibility established by global meta-practices. In 2005, Al Qaeda's Ayman Al Zawahiri, amongst others, very publically criticised Abu Musab Al Zarqawi for his attacks on Shia civilians in Iraq, explicitly referencing mounting reputational costs for the group in the judgement of wider Muslim populations. What we see in this competitive strategic communications is the attempt by a participant in international relations to acquire communicative authority by displaying their actions as more in line with the ethical standards of the global practices than those of their opponents. A key implication of the above is that powerful states making use of strategic communications must be careful not to fall into what we have termed 'ethical traps', which are laid by hostile strategic communications actors.

Ethical traps appear for powerful international strategic communications actors even without their deliberately making statements known to be untrue. In the complex practices of world politics, telling 'the whole truth', as any actor understands it, is always difficult, for any given state of play is always complex; there are ambiguities in any interpretation and there are things that might accidently have been overlooked. Strategic communications is driven by the urge to persuade others of one's ethical status. It is, as such, a form of political rhetoric. The essential nature of strategic communications requires events to be packaged in narrative or other forms so as to be convincing—simplifying the matters of fact as they are perceived by the strategic communicator. In this article we hope we have demonstrated that there are significant costs to being recognised as 'spinning' or 'fudging the truth' for political ends, since the aim of strategic communications is to present oneself as a participant

in the global practices who is in good ethical standing, and to present the opponent in a dark ethical light. There is always a risk associated with using the methods of strategic communications, 'spinning' for example, for if they are discovered they may undermine this very standing.

For this reason, parsimony is a core feature of successful strategic communications campaigns, in the attempt to anchor the sense of a strategic communications action as unambiguously as possible in relationship to the settled norms of international meta-practices. Successful strategic communications campaigns in international relations often seek to tap into the settled norms of international meta-practices through symbolic images or actions, as much as through narrative. Russia's hosting of a classical music concert in the ruins of Palmyra in Syria after its recapture from ISIS forces provides an example of such a strategic communications action. In that case, an attempt was made to establish the validity of an ethical interpretation of the Russian intervention in Syria. This account represented the intervention as an action in defence of global cultural resources. Combined with the Russian highlighting of their intervention as authorised by the sovereign government of Syria (and so legitimate under International Law), a powerful strategic communication of Russia legitimacy as an actor in this conflict was effected, which appeals to the ethical structures of both the International Society of States and Global Civil Society. In appealing to the settled norms of the two international meta-practices, the action constructed an ethical trap for Western strategic communicators in the Syrian conflict, as any attempt to re-frame the concert as an example of Russian propaganda would likely incur the inverse perception. Likewise, groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS, seek to articulate ethical diagnoses of the contemporary world that are credible and plausible by publicising evocative images of 'collateral damage' from Western drone strikes. They do so by appealing in the process to the settled architecture of international ethics, which Western states claim to uphold. A core claim propounded by Al Qaeda has been that many Muslim individuals live with significant injustice, that Western states have simultaneously failed to respect the sovereignty of Islamic majority states in conducting such strikes, and have failed to realise a cosmopolitan global order able to protect the rights of individual victims.[21] These actors thus appeal directly, in their strategic communications, to ethical claims that are constitutive of International meta-practices, and seek to justify their actions as legitimate by reference to these same shared norms, in the light of an accusation of Western hypocrisy.

This is not, of course, to suggest that such strategic communications campaigns are necessarily persuasive (though they clearly have purchase with some audiences). Nor is it to imply that what is called for here is simply a better or more efficacious narrative contestation, as if the better or more technically accomplished storyteller will carry the day by producing more effective 'counter-narratives'. Rather, the role of existing settled norms, in governing the legibility of certain ethical claims, shows that even those actors who are widely deemed illegitimate or non-players in the game are in fact *operating within it*. The appeal to the common structures of intelligibility embedded in international meta-practices shows that strategic communications is best understood as a global forum for international ethical argument.

[21] Devji, Faisal, *The terrorist in search of humanity: militant Islam and global politics*, (Columbia University Press, 2008).

Strategic communications actors are participants in a practice defined by putting the truth claims of others to test. Strategic communications interlocutors hope to present the other as hypocrite, liar, or disseminator of half-truths. Strategic communications is thus a global dialogue between or contest between truth claims, which may (though also may not) take narrative form, but in which both sides are constitutively appealing to mutually acknowledged rhetorical grounds for legitimacy. The evaluation of claims made by international strategic communications actors is thus a question of claiming alignment with core values of SOSS and GCS, when there is no agreement on facts. Strategic communications actors seek to provide an ethical gloss, which will be appraised by relation to the settled rules of the game of international practices, indeed, by reference to the coherence of these actors' actions with those practices. All international strategic communications actors attempt to persuade other international actors, by reference to parameters of core practices in IR within which they are constituted. This applies no less to those trying to change the rules of the game like Al Qaeda or ISIS.[22]

A further concern, emerging from new technologies and the consequent proliferation of effective strategic communications actors, is that the scope for international ethical discourse and appraisal might be increasingly constrained by the complexity of the new media ecology. In this environment, surely what an actor argues is less important than their ability to establish their authority in the cacophony of voices that proliferate online. This is supported by the manner in which a self-selective 'electronic autism' characterises online media consumption patterns.[23] We have argued that authority can only spring from a track record of telling the truth. This has traditionally been the strength of established media organisations like the BBC, but such established platforms are increasingly vulnerable to the imputation of partiality or bias. In the case of the BBC, such arguments are often attached to state funding, but a trend toward decline of faith in established platforms is also directly consequent to the rapid proliferation of alternative outlets.[24]

A newly available option to strategic communications actors is that of drenching the diverse online media space with conflicting accounts, narratives, and interpretations, rendering it highly difficult to identify sources, or adjudicate the matters of fact. This is facilitated by the manner in which user-content driven news sites borrow content from each other, and thus appear to provide multi-source corroboration for claims. An argument has been promoted by new media outlets, including RT (a Russian state-funded body), that there are multiple truths, and that giving air to this multiplicity, regardless of content,[25] is an act establishing conditions for open dialogue. There is clearly potential, within this democratising process, for strategic communications

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[22] It is worth noting that, just as precedent can be overruled through legal challenge, changes to settled international norms can occur, as they did regarding the acceptability of colonial rule. Our claim is not that international norms are essentially stable, only that they change in a procedural manner through deliberation within international practices. See Waldron, Jeremy, 'The rule of law as a theatre of debate', in Dworkin and his critics: with replies from Dworkin (ed. Burnley, Justine), (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, UK, 2004), p. 326.

[23] Castells, *Communication power*, pg. 154.

[24] Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*, pg. 164.

[25] Yablokov, Ilya, 'Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT)', *Politics* 35.3-4 (2015): 301-315

actions that do not 'make a rhetorical argument' that can be ethically disputed, or proven credible or not, but which operate by relation to the communicative field in general, aiming to create an atmosphere of distrust of specific official messaging, or introduce sufficient grounds for withholding credence with respect to them (by disseminating multiple, contradictory, stories).

Strategic communications actions of this variety put enormous pressure on targeted governments, and construct their own ethical traps for their victims. The ethical traps that arise here relate to how states respond to conditions of pervasive distrust with regards to their official messaging, which often serves to accord credibility to, sometimes bizarre, alternative messages. It is a constitutive feature of all strategic communications that one seeks to have influence without the influenced knowing they are being influenced. It is, in other words, central to the efficacy of strategic communications actions that they are not interpreted as explicit propaganda, yet nonetheless inform the conditions of possibility for audience interpretations (engage in covert world-forming). As a wide range of new actors (including private companies) engage in strategic communications, this world-forming power largely operates outside traditional structures of democratic accountability and attribution. The difficulty of attributing accountability with regards to the complex weaves of narrative, facts, or interpretations that circulate online, plays into this condition and fosters public distrust in official messaging in most national contexts. The complexity apparent in the mediation of architectures of interpretation online has thus resulted in classical mechanisms for the assessment of public enunciations or strategic communications (reputation or political status/role) losing their purchase, precisely where and when they are most needed. One important consequence of the proliferation of new media platforms is that a process requiring the filtering of messages through a limited number of reputable hosts or platforms has shifted to a process whereby political communicators can directly access their target audiences.[26] Diplomats leverage this development by speaking directly to foreign publics. This same opportunity space also, however, clearly carries with it the potential for covert manipulation of interpretations on a global scale through acts of communicative disruption (such as the anonymous dissemination of multiple, contradictory, and deliberately false stories, or comment board stuffing).

It should be clear that democratic states, which are strategic communications actors with a particular stake in the sustainability of the meta-practices of international order, must ensure their strategic communications actions do not contribute to eroding their own conditions of possibility. In this area, new technologies, combined with a new set of market dynamics associated with the field of professional strategic communications contractors, might impart a corrosive seduction to leverage communicative disorder for strategic ends. This danger should not be overstated. Actors who engage in this kind of ethical foul will continue to incur long-term costs. For example, Russia's communications around the Syrian conflict are seen to have been very effective in supporting its strategic aims. These successes have precisely centred on diversion, disruption, and confusion, rendering it difficult to attribute responsibility for particular acts, such as air strikes, before news cycles have moved on.

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[26] Castells, *Communication power;* Fletcher, *Naked Diplomacy.*

While these actions have led to short-term successes in winning tactical contests around the Syrian negotiations, such successes have clearly resulted in real costs to Russian credibility. Its standing in international practices has been damaged. For much the same reasons as the Iraq War damaged Western states' capacity strategically to communicate, Russia's credibility as a player in negotiations has been degraded.

Whilst strategic communication is a necessary feature of all political and diplomatic practice, repackaging events, in narrative and other forms, by caveating, obfuscating, and simplifying the matters of fact, it cannot function effectively without a strategic sensitivity to the ethical rules that determine one's standing in international meta-practices. Obfuscatory narratives, or other rhetorical ploys, which may have tactical value within a particular contest, are subject to the criteria pertaining to truth that we have set out. State and non-state actors' leveraging of new technologies for the purpose of disruption (within particular operational contexts) presents little threat to the maintenance and sustainability of international meta-practices, since such ethical fouls will result in longer-term costs for the actors' standing. But consideration is called for how failure to distinguish the task of 'strategic communications' from the various methods or tactics of rhetorical contestation by the agents of democratic states can erode public trust in those democratic institutions and their representatives, with potentially serious consequences.[27]

Conclusion

Strategic communications are actions that are fundamentally linked to claims and counter-claims about ethical conduct in international relations. By using strategic communications, states clearly can hide things from the citizens from whom they draw their legitimacy. This potentially allows them to cover up their own (short-term) failures, or to put a positive 'spin' on these failures. Private strategic communications companies contracted by states are happy to provide such services because it is lucrative. For example, members of the Assad family in Syria have hired a number of professional contractors to manage its international public image. To offer further examples, the British government hired leading Public Relations contractors to provide 'on the ground' management of press coverage of its withdrawal from Mosul and President Zuma in South Africa has hired another well-known British firm to counteract media that portray him as corrupt. But none of the above diminishes the central role of ethical claim-making in all strategic communications actions. States have always engaged in, and indeed often had a monopoly on the means of SC in the past. What has changed is simply that now there are more voices or actors in the game. This is a democratic moment, but it is also one filled with the perception of danger.

A central concern that we have dealt with in this article is that an emerging condition might be marked by a generalised debasement of public international discourse. One of the puzzles that has been posed in this context has been how should states respond to the strategic communications of a state or non-state actor who suffers

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[27] For example, the proliferation of demagoguery.

lower costs for lying or disseminating half-truths, either because they are anonymous or are already assumed to be 'outlaws'. Here, we noted, the challenge would appear to be that in avoiding the ethical traps that follow from responding in kind, states risk continual misrepresentation by plural hostile communicators. We have argued that such concerns are overstated. Even rogue strategic communicators like ISIS suffer costs from lying or other kinds of ethical wrongdoing. This is because all strategic communicators must seek to establish ethical validity for their claims by reference to existing shared rhetorical architectures of intelligibility. As an actor within international practices, they can only establish their credibility, and engage in competitive rhetorical contestation, by aligning words and deeds to the ethical norms that are internal to the two international meta-practices, the International Society of Sovereign States and Global Society of Individuals.

This does not, of course, remove the potentially corrosive effects of *the perception* of an uneven playing field amongst strategic communications actors in international relations. The solution to this issue resides in clearly articulating the difference between 'communicative tactics' (including rhetorical tools like narratives) and 'strategic communications'. The only communication which may be properly termed strategic is one which establishes its rhetorical validity by reference to the identifiable rules of the game constituted within international practices, and seeks to align an actor's actions and words so as to support its preferential standing as a player within those international practices. Communications that do not align with a strategic sensitivity to an actor's long-term standing, and seek only tactically to 'counter' hostile communications or narratives in the short term, will invariably carry long term costs to that actor's standing within international practices. An implication here is that widespread anxieties regarding the potential for an incremental unravelling of the international normative regime constructed during the last century, in the face of recurrent 'tactical' ethical fouling by state and non-state actors (such as lying or hacking), are not warranted.

This connects to a final concern, which arises from the proliferation of strategic communications actors in recent years, upon which we shall close our argument. A challenge for states today is to ensure that the strategic communications actions of private actors, particularly strategic communications contractors hired by those states, do not undermine or contradict the settled norms that underpin International Order. Because they are contracted by individual actors (such as states) for specific operational tasks, they may not be aware of, or may be uninterested in, the difference we have outlined between proper strategic communications in international relations (that is to say, communications that appeal to the settled ethical architecture of international meta-practices), and tactical narrative contestation within the complex media environment. Such concerns may no doubt be overstated, but any confusion between tactical and strategic communications carries particular risks for democratic states. This has bearing upon the question: When, if ever, might it be ethically acceptable for a government to use strategic communications to manipulate its own citizens? Governments are supposed to be accountable to the citizens they govern. If they manipulate the understanding of their citizens about what is going on, and about the conduct of the government itself, then the government is undermining

the accountability structure, which is at the heart of democratic politics. Here, it is setting a trap for itself. Where this happens the citizens cannot properly hold the government to account because they have been manipulated—for they do not know what has been done to them. The allocation of praise and blame is part of what is required of citizens, particularly when considering war and peace. Where governments, or government contracted communicators, thwart citizens' ability properly to do this, we shall see the corrosion of the basic conditions of political life and accountability in democratic societies. Where this happens it will undermine the communicators' capacity strategically to communicate in international relations.

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'HACKING' INTO THE WEST: RUSSIA'S 'ANTI-HEGEMONIC' DRIVE AND THE STRATEGIC NARRATIVE OFFENSIVE

James Rogers, Andriy Tyushka

Abstract

Contrary to the narrative in much of politics and academia, Russia's alienation from the West did not start in 2014—it is a lasting and inherent phenomenon. Since the mid-1990s, Moscow's attempts to 'capture' the narrative of Europe or even portray itself later on as a 'better Europe', transcended in 2014 into a more overt and *antithetical* approach of strategically juxtaposing Russia *versus* Europe, or placing 'Russia being not (declinist and decadent) Europe', a part of the likewise allegedly declining 'West'. Russia's appeal for European 'self-denial' does not only find its supporters in Europe, predominantly populist and radical parties, but also contributes to a more general frustration among Europeans regarding their own self-perception, as well provokes Western ambiguity and uncertainty about its responsibility for regional security affairs, particularly in the European neighbourhood.

This article argues that, by destabilising the immediate vicinity and regional security order, the Russian leadership does not pursue a policy of balancing the Western hegemonic formation, thus strategising a *positive* competing (*counter*-hegemonic) framework. Rather, it engages in an *anti*-hegemonic strategy through a deeply *negative* spoiler offensive. The article conceptualises Russia's anti-hegemonic drive as a three-pronged strategic narrative offensive that operationally seeks to 1) 'desynchronise' political developments in the European Neighbourhood to 'distort' European perceptions of reality; 2) 'de-articulate' the West, i.e., splitting the Atlantic democracies from the European mainland; and 3) 'saturate' the vacuum with false and fictitious narratives, to sow confusion and maintain manageable disorder.

Keywords: Russia, Western 'equivalential chain', Ukraine, strategic narrative offensive, anti-hegemony, spoiler politics

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Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it; so that when Men come to be undeceiv'd, it is too late; the Jest is over, and the Tale has had its Effect...

– Jonathan Swift, 1710

Introduction: Russia's anti-Western agenda—sketching the minefield

It took the Kremlin two years after the launch of its campaign in Ukraine to extend its operational theatre beyond the post-Soviet space in the pursuit of what it considers a legitimate gambit for justice and respect in international relations. Seeking to undermine one of the main European power centres—which has grown increasingly combative in relation to Russian revisionism—Moscow staged as early as January 2016 a narrative offensive against Chancellor Angela Merkel's government with the notorious 'Our Lisa' disinformation and sabotage operation. Although the forged story was soon proven false, the falsehood flew and the tale had its effect: the damage was done, and, since then, the chancellor has had to divert her attention, to yet another challenge, namely a drop in popular support to a five-year low, including for her favoured migration policy.[1] While not attributing this development to the Kremlin's opportunistic policies *alone*, the sequence, precision, and persistency of Russia's political efforts cannot be ignored. Indeed, Moscow has been active almost everywhere: whether cheerleading for the 'Brexit' campaign; stirring up radical movements and supporting the network of far-rightist and far-leftist anti-establishment forces across Europe; devastating Syria's urban spaces, not least the city of Aleppo (thus facilitating further flows of migrants to Europe to stir up discord); meddling in the United States' (US) electoral process; conducting cyber-attacks on the OSCE; or preparing the ground for the distortion of the upcoming 2017 elections in Germany, France, and the Netherlands, the Kremlin's 'anti-hegemonic' approach has become—since 2014—more overt and detectable. As it has become bolder, Russia's actions are no longer invisible; indeed, a growing number of national and international authorities have started to reveal and condemn them.

The findings of the Dutch-led Joint Investigation Team (JIT) on the MH17 crash revealed in September 2016 the clear trail from/to Russia of the BUK missile that

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[1] Scholz, Kay-Alexander, 'Nationwide German poll: Merkel's popularity dips to five-year low', *Deutsche Welle*, 1 September 2016.

shot down the aeroplane.[2] In its preliminary examination report, the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague dispelled the cosy narrative of a 'civil war' in Ukraine—actively nurtured by the Kremlin—and posited that Russia's engagement in the Crimea and Donbas territories of Ukraine is a 'crime' that falls within the court's jurisdiction.[3] One month later, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly officially recognised Russia as an 'occupying power' in Crimea.[4] Meanwhile, the US National Intelligence Agency, in relation to the recent US presidential election, claimed it had credible evidence that 'the Russian government directed the recent compromises of e-mails from US citizens and institutions, including from US political organisations' and other information thefts and disclosures that 'are intended to interfere with the US election process', which later led to the expulsion of 35 Russian diplomats.[5] Likewise, several indications have been cast, not least from the *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (BfV),* Germany's domestic intelligence service, that Russia is now trying to spoil the upcoming German elections, something that looks quite credible given the Kremlin's earlier cyber-attacks against the *Bundestag* in 2015.[6] Finally, repeated British warnings about Russia's subtle information warfare, including cyber-attacks, espionage and fake news—just as RT, i.e. *Russia Today*, has extended its service to France in 2017[7]—raise serious concerns regarding the launch of a systemic and truly strategic campaign aiming to 'spoil' the very foundation of the liberal democratic order, i.e. free and fair elections. For the Kremlin, the specific outcome of these operations does not necessarily matter: what matters is that the West's democratic institutions are gradually discredited and dislocated, ultimately depriving it of its claim to normative superiority.

Russia's agenda has been pursued by stealth. The Kremlin's offensive has been mainly waged to distract other states' and actors' attention and perception of its engagements—from America, past Europe, and on to Syria—to delay and distort an effective response, as well as to consolidate (by false and/or threatening narratives) the established *fait accomplis*. Consequently, Moscow's international counterparts are frequently left grappling with a *fait accompli* here and there, failing to deter and deny the next one—as the holistic strategic vision would suggest. Russia's every next escalatory move has been designed to warrant 'forgiveness', or blatant acceptance, of the former achievement, ultimately attempting to distract attention from Moscow's next move. For example, in his infamous 'Crimea Speech' in 2014, just after his troops and auxiliaries—the so-called 'Little Green Men'—annexed Crimea, illegally, from Ukraine, a sovereign European country, Putin appealed to Europeans:

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[2] Joint Investigation Team, 'Presentation of preliminary results of the criminal investigation of MH17 airline crash', *Nieuwegein, Openbaar Ministerie*, 28 September 2016.

[3] The Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, 'Report on Preliminary Examination Activities (2016)' (Report No. ICC-CPI-20161114-PR1252), *The Hague*, 14 November 2016.

[4] UN General Assembly Third Committee Resolution No. A/C.3/71/L.26, 'Situation of Human Rights in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol (Ukraine)', 19 December 2016.

[5] 'Joint DHS and ODNI Election Security Statement', Washington DC, 7 October 2016.

[6] Anne Applebaum, 'Russia's Next Election Operation: Germany', *The Washington Post*, 12 December 2016.

[7] Papandina, Anastasia, Dmitriy Krykov, Georgiy Makarenko, and Ivan Tkachev, 'RT poluchit bolee 1 mlrd. Rub. na zapusk kanala na franzuzskom jazike', [RT to receive over 1 bln RUR for the launch of French-language channel service], *RBC.RU*, 7 December 2016.

I believe that the Europeans, first and foremost the Germans, will also understand me. Let me remind you that in the course of political consultations on the unification of East and West Germany… some nations that were then and are now Germany's allies did not support the idea of unification. Our nation, however, unequivocally supported the sincere, unstoppable desire of the Germans for national unity. I am confident that you have not forgotten this, and I expect that the citizens of Germany will also support the aspiration of the Russians, of historical Russia, to restore unity.[8]

The differences between the peaceful reunification of East and West Germany and the illegal and forceful annexation of Crimea by a foreign power could not be starker, yet many Europeans seem to have accepted the Russian narrative, or alternatively, have failed to come up with their own. Such narratives—'mutual' accusation, pledges for dialogue and understanding, virtual-reality construction, up to fact forgeries on the ground—help make Russia's bold and seemingly incontestable political moves a reality. This has left the Russians in the ascendancy, with Moscow directing affairs across increasingly large swathes of the European continent, stoking fear in Eastern Europe, and raising anxieties in Brussels, London, and Washington, as to what the future holds. This outcome is even more astonishing given that the Russian economy is around half the size of France's.[9] So is Mr Putin a master strategist? Or has Russia achieved so much in the Caucasus, Ukraine, and elsewhere because Western politicians are unable to accept that they face opposition, let alone an enemy, instead preferring cosy ideas like dialogue and cooperation or responses that depend on liberal statecraft, instead of hard-nosed strategy?[10]

This article argues that it is a combination of both, namely that the Kremlin's astute strategic thinking and the inability of Westerners to respond, let alone adopt proactive policies to regain the initiative, are intrinsically linked. Already, the West, and Europeans in particular, may be susceptible to a worldview that favours cooperative as opposed to competitive relations, but the Kremlin has enacted a very new and unique approach to compound this situation, bending it to Russia's advantage.[11] Moscow is trying to prevent Europeans from joining the dots and to encourage their deliberate misreading of Russia's (geo)strategic intentions and behaviour both in the

[8] Putin, Vladimir, 'Address by President of the Russian Federation to State Duma deputies, Federation Council members, heads of Russian regions and civil society representatives in the Kremlin', Moscow, the Kremlin, 18 March 2014.

[9] According to the International Monetary Fund, Russia's Gross Domestic Product was US$1.13 trillion in 2016, in comparison with France's US$2.46 trillion.

[10] Jakóbik, Woiciech, 'A Return to Business as Usual', *New Eastern Europe*, 29 October 2015; Windheim, Ivar, 'EU-Russia Gas Relations: Back to 'Business as Usual?', *Norsk Utenrikspolitisk Institutt* [Norwegian Institute of International Affairs], 8 February 2016; Troianovski, Anton, Laurence Norman, and Julian Barnes, 'Europe Pushes for Diplomatic Solution in Ukraine Amid Calls for Arming Kiev', *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 February 2015; Chrétien, Jean, 'Firmness and Dialogue: How Best to Respond to Russia's Challenges in Ukraine, Europe and the West', InterAction Council, Chairman's Report on the High-Level Expert Group Meeting, Ottawa, 20 April 2015; Kuchins, Andrew C., 'Could 2016 See the Normalisation of Russia's Relations with the West?', *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik*, [German Council on Foreign Relations], Working Paper Series *Forging Western Consensus on Eastern Policy'*, 25 February 2016.

[11] For a good take on the differences between European statecraft and Russian strategic thinking, see Milevski, Lukas, 'Strategy Versus Statecraft in Crimea', *Parameters* 44, no.2 (Summer 2014): 23-33.

European Neighbourhood—an area Moscow considers to be its *own* 'near abroad' —and beyond.[12] This encourages the mistaken perception among European leaders that every Russian move, such as the annexation of Crimea in Ukraine, for example, is merely an 'isolated problem' or, even more disturbingly, a kind of *Stunde Null* or 'zero hour' in Russian belligerence, which will eventually subside. While Russia has purposely sought to frame its interventions in such a way, Ukraine—just like Georgia before it, or the more recent meddling in Germany, Syria, the UK, or the US—is no *Stunde Null*, but part of a wider Russian strategy deliberately designed to 'freeze' and 'unfreeze' regional conflicts and spread disinformation for geopolitical objectives. Consequently, this article will show why and how Russia's offensive against the West is a lasting and deeply *negative* foreign policy agenda (*spoiler politics*) within an overall *anti*-hegemonic strategy, which warrants the most serious attention, not least because it is designed to 'hack' into and shatter the Western liberal narrative to crack European cohesion and resolve.[13] As such, it will show how Russia's *anti*-hegemonic drive translates into a three-pronged *strategic narrative offensive* which seeks: *firstly*, to 'desynchronise' political developments in the European Neighbourhood to 'distort' European perceptions of reality; *secondly*, to 'de-articulate' the West, i.e. splitting the Atlantic democracies from the European mainland as well as undermining the very foundational ideas that constitute the Western liberal democratic order; and *finally*, to 'saturate' the vacuum with false and fictitious narratives, to sow confusion and maintain manageable disorder.[14] This article will therefore re-appraise recent Western policy, with a concentration on the (inadequate) response to Russia's *anti*-hegemonic drive.

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[12] By 'European Neighbourhood', we mean those countries that form part of the European Union's Neighbourhood Policy in Eastern Europe, such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine.

[13] This article draws on the earlier published study into the nature of Russia's *anti*-hegemonic strategy by the current authors, cf. Rogers, James and Andriy Tyushka, 'Russia's Anti-Hegemonic Offensive: A New Strategy in Action', *Diplomaatia*, No. 160 (December 2016).

[14] In this article, 'strategic narratives' are understood in the framework of the earlier cited Freedman's original take (2006) and the most recent and comprehensive elaboration by Miskimmon et al. (2013), cf. Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013). The latter define 'strategic narratives' as 'representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors—usually elites—attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future to achieve political objectives. Critically, strategic narratives integrate interests and goals—they articulate end states and suggest how to get there'. 'Strategic', therefore, does not point to the narratives meta-political nature alone, but encompasses what is regarded as ntended, calculated and goal-seeking political action. Hereto, Freedman (2006: 22) denotes that '[n]arratives are designed or nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events', and as such '[t]hey are strategic because they do not arise spontaneously but are deliberately constructed or reinforced out of the ideas and thoughts that are already current'.

Moscow identifies an enemy: 'Western' hegemony

In July 2014, at the Conference of Russian Federation Ambassadors and Permanent Representatives, President Putin hastily declared that:

> There is hardly any doubt that the unipolar world order did not come to be. Peoples and countries are raising their voices in favour of self-determination and civilisational and cultural identity, which conflicts with the attempts by certain countries to maintain their domination in the military sphere, in politics, finance, the economy, and in ideology.[15]

In a June 2016 speech to Russian diplomats, he again complained that certain Western states—Russia's 'partners'—'continue stubborn attempts to maintain their monopoly on geopolitical domination.'[16] The notion that Russia should resist Western power —hardly new—has continued to grow as a major theme during Mr Putin's time as Russia's leader, to such an extent that it seems to have come to preoccupy Moscow's mind and drive its revisionist behaviour, both in the European neighbourhood but also, increasingly, in the West itself.

Whereas there are indeed different normative views of hegemony, there is something the various strands of thinking in political theory tend to agree on: hegemony is a historical outcome[17] of a particular political programme.[18] Not least, hegemony is the *positive* result of the success of a particular political narrative, whereby a number of theories, concepts, objects, and practices are articulated together in a *'chain of equivalence'*, leading to the repression of alternative perspectives.[19] Since the early eighteenth century the UK (joined later by the US) has formed a hegemonic framework arranged firstly under liberalism, and eventually—once it had acquired geopolitical traction—under the entity of 'the West'. Constitutional government, representative, multi-party democracy, freedom of association and communication, the maritime economic order—captured and institutionalised in the modern nation-state, but extended through the concept of the international community within the Euro-Atlantic area—and the English language have all been linked together to form a potent 'equivalential chain'.

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[15] Putin, Vladimir, 'Speech at the Conference of Russian Federation ambassadors and permanent representatives', Moscow, 1 July 2014.

[16] Putin, Vladimir, 'Speech at the Meeting of Russian Federation ambassadors and permanent envoys', Moscow, 30 June 2016.

[17] On the once and future hegemonic orders, cf., e.g. Black, Jeremy, *Great Powers and the Quest for Hegemony: The World Order Since 1500,* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008); Keohane, Robert O., *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Autonomy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984); Agnew, John, *Hegemony: The New Shape of Global Order,* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005); Mazarr, Michael J., 'The Once and Future Order: What Comes After Hegemony?', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 96 no.1 (January/February 2017), pp. 25-32.

[18] In this article, we adopt the Gramscian perspective on hegemony—by way of Laclau and Mouffe—thus seeing it as a subtle form of international authority and political power that relies not only on coercion, but— more importantly—on consent. Cf., e.g. Fontana, Benedetto, *Hegemony and Power: On the Relation between Gramsci and Machiavelli,* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

[19] This concept is borrowed from the 'Essex School of discourse analysis': a 'chain of equivalence' is formed when a number of different theories, concepts, objects, and practices are articulated together in a discursive formation. Each component becomes synonymous with the next to the extent that the meaning of all components within the chain are modified in consequence, often leading to political hegemony. See Laclau, Ernesto, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 129-132.

The result is a successful hegemonic formation, which provides those countries embracing and practicing it with inordinate power and influence. And insofar as power generates envy and hatred—as Thucydides realised in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*—Western nations have continued to acquire and face down determined opponents. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they were confronted by the *counter-hegemonic* 'ideologies of the extremes', in the form of absolutism, fascism, and communism. But these ideologies confronted Western liberalism symmetrically: like the British and Americans with their 'Western' ideology, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo, and Moscow promised—once realised—the 'good life' for their followers, whether in the form of a rational French absolutism or an ethnic German *Großraum* ('grand area') lording over continental Europe, a 'militarist' Japanese order directing East Asia, or a Russian communist 'utopia' stretching from East Berlin to Vladivostok. The extremists each sought to smash the West and replace it with their own peculiar hegemonic formation, either through force of arms and/or through *counter-*hegemonic political warfare (see Figure 1 for the example of Western-Soviet counter-hegemonic warfare).

Figure 1. Counter-hegemonic warfare
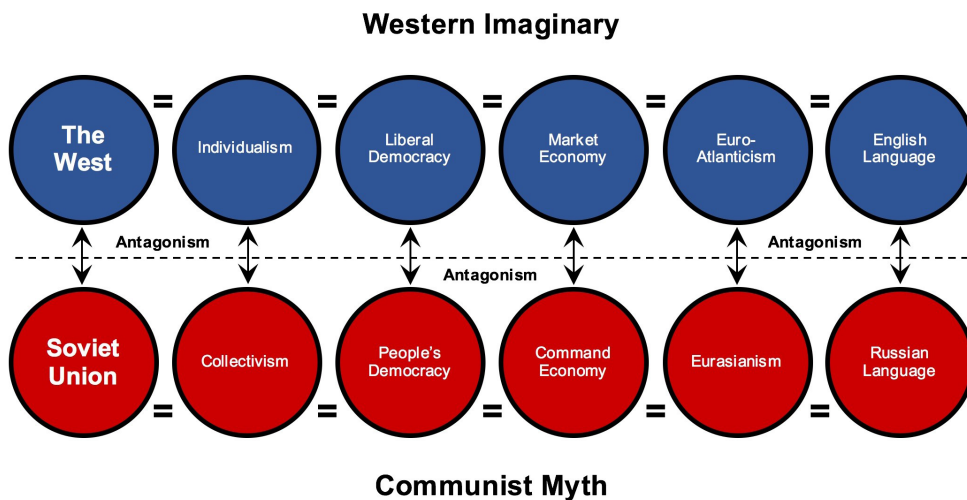
Source: Authors' own compilation

Like these former empires, Mr Putin also wants power. He wants power to protect his regime from being overthrown from within *and* from without. However, unlike the French absolutists, the German and Japanese fascists and Soviet communists before them, today's leaders in Russia have nothing 'positive' to project beyond their country to maintain their power. In the ideological vacuum of modern Russia, Mr Putin does not have a universal panacea of potentially mass international appeal or even the desire to articulate such a philosophy around the world.

While Russian ethnic nationalism—which Mr Putin has done much to boost his popularity—may be attractive to many *within* Russia, the Kremlin knows it is hardly an ideology with global application, meaning it will be very hard to promulgate beyond Russia's immediate borders. So, despite Moscow's bluster, Mr Putin and associates are not fools: as a continental country with an economy almost entirely dependent on the export of gas and oil, they know that Russia lacks strategic resources, either material strength or ideological scope, to counter—*comprehensively*—the Western 'equivalential chain'. The Russian state simply lacks the resources and the political architecture for the challenges, namely to confront the West globally.

As Figure 2 shows, the Kremlin has therefore invested heavily in a very different strategy, a profoundly *negative anti-hegemonic* strategy, applied in a primarily regional context, where it has the ability to escalate towards dominance, even against the West. This form of political offensive, albeit with a military component,[20] is unique because of its sheer cynicism: while a counter-hegemonic strategy seeks to replace an existing political order with another, an anti-hegemonic approach seeks to 'spoil' or 'ruin', by spreading *negativity* within an existing formation (in this case, the Western hegemonic chain). As such, a counter-hegemonic strategy is still a *positive* strategy, because it seeks only to replace an established order with a new formation, while an anti-hegemonic approach is *negative*, for it seeks to replace the existing order only with disorder.[21] In other words, this kind of strategy aims to break down opposition

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[20] Given the size of Russia in relation to the Baltic States in particular, which, collectively, have a smaller population than some of Russia's larger cities, and NATO's potential difficulty or the difficulty of the largest Western powers, such as the US, the UK, and France, to get past Russia's anti-access and area-denial (A2/AD) systems in Kaliningrad, Moscow may be able to circumvent Western military power in a regional context. The RAND's recent report on reinforcing deterrence on NATO's eastern flank is exceptionally unequivocal in this matter: Russia has the capabilities 'to reach the outskirts of Tallinn and Riga in 60 hours' (pg. 1), cf. Shlapak, David A., and Michael Johnson, 'Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics' (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016). Such analyses should not be deemed, however, 'absolute power' assessments dooming the West's impotence against the backdrop of Russian excessive regional military potence. Ultimately, any power assessment is and should be framed in relative terms and tailored to specific situations. On the 'deceptively weak' Russian military in the context of the aforementioned, cf. Bowen, Andrew, 'Russia's Deceptively Weak Military', *The National Interest*, 7 June 2015. Furthermore, in our analysis, we focus only partially on Russia's military warfare capabilities—political and discursive warfare potentials are the centerpiece of our analytical approach. Scoped this way, the article advances the idea of a Russian negative international-political agenda and the various mechanisms of destructive engagement being exactly sourced by Russian self-perceived capability misfit and well-documented inferiority of sorts (soft and hard power inferiority, general country attractiveness and respect as a 'great power', etc.). On these matters, cf., eg. Medvedev, Dmitri, 'Rossiya Vpered! [Russia, Go Ahead!]', *The Kremlin*, 10 September 2009; Tsygankov, Andrei, *Honor in International Relations: Russia and the West from Alexander to Putin* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Nye, Joseph S., 'What China and Russia Don't Get About Soft Power', *Foreign Policy*, 29 April 2013; Koshkin, Pavel, 'How Russia's Soft Power Failed Shortly After It Started', *Russia Direct*, 31 July 2015. The opinion polls carried out by the Russian Levada Centre in late April 2015 also show that 60% of the Russian public feels threatened (not sufficiently protected) by the 'West': Levada Centre, "Ugroza dlia Rossii so Storony SSHA [The US Threat to Russia]", 17-20 April 2015 Opinion Poll, 12 May 2015. On the perception-reality gap in Russia's capabilities perception and role expectations, the so-called 'Weimar syndrome', cf. Karaganov, Sergei, 'Evropa: Okonchit' Kholodnuiu Voinu [Time to End the Cold War in Europe]', *Rossiia v Globalnoi Politike*, 8 April 2014; 'Pervaia Razvilka: Mirovaia Voina i Kompleks Nepolnotsennosti'. [The First Crossroad: The World War and the Inferiority Complex], *Institut Sovremennoi Rossii*, 3 August 2011; Gudkov, Lev, 'Mechti o Proshlom: Pochemu Krizisy Privodiat k Reanimatsii Sovetsikikh Predstavlienii' [Dreams of the Past: Why Crises Lead to the Reanimation of Soviet Perceptions], *Slon.ru*, 19 April 2016; Black, Conrad, 'Russia's Weimar Syndrome', *The National Review*, 9 July 2015.

[21] To be clear, although a counter-hegemonic approach is 'positive', this does not mean it is ethical or moral.

by forcing an opponent into depression, i.e. feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, and self-destruction. The Kremlin's objective is simple: to corrupt and undermine the West's hegemonic position by shattering Western, particularly European, self-confidence, removing potential opposition to Mr Putin's regime's standing and durability.[22]

Figure 2. Anti-hegemonic warfare
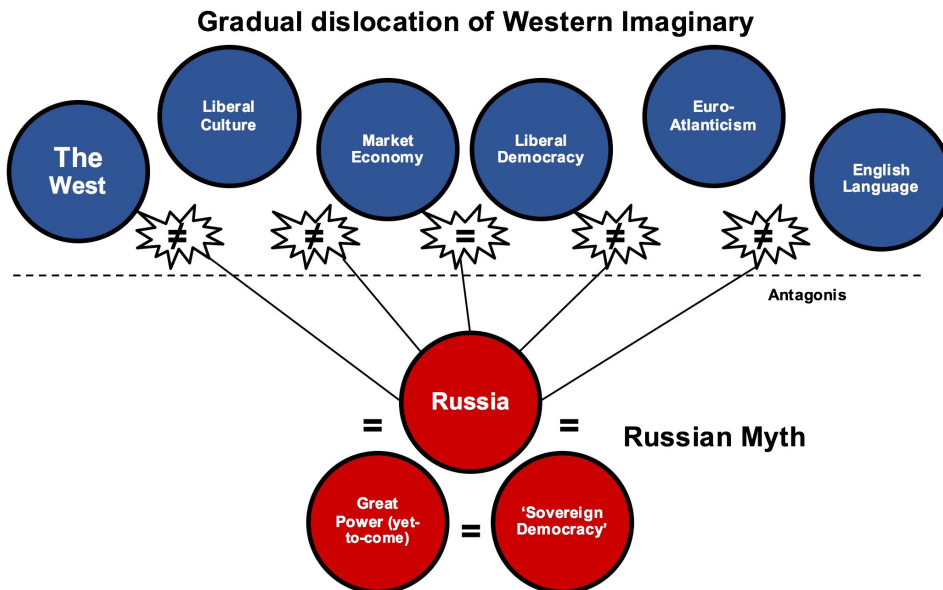
Source: Authors' own compilation

This approach was recently revealed by Sergey Lavrov in an article in the Russian periodical, *Russia in Global Affairs*. The Russian Foreign Minister exposes Moscow's ultimate game plan in one— line: 'Not a single cannon in Europe could be fired without our consent.'[23] Put simply, the Kremlin craves Russia's re-establishment as a great power, but only in the sense of being able to defend the Kremlin's interests.

That is to say, Moscow wants a veto over how the European continent is run in order to maintain the power of the Kremlin. To be clear, in light of its own limitations, Russia does not necessarily want to construct a new empire or reorder the continent in such a way that it is linked to Moscow, for this would require a *positive* vision, which would be cost-prohibitive. Rather, what the Kremlin wants is to be able to *prevent* developments that it perceives to be inimical to its own interests, through the construction of a Russian 'near abroad' devoid of outside interference. Moscow must therefore thwart countries surrounding Russia from embracing the values of

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[22] Self-trapped in the framework of ideological hollowness, and thus being unable to offer a competing idea to Western ideological hegemony, the Kremlin seems to have nonetheless invented another way to challenge the latter—through all-permeating corruption promotion, a sort of an Ersatz-communism: Whitmore, Brian, 'Corruption is the New Communism', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 12 April 2016.

[23] Lavrov, Sergey, 'Russia's Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 30 March 2016.

the Western hegemonic chain and *deny* the further enlargement of the Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Here, there should be no illusions: the kind of geopolitical order Russia seeks to create is entirely antithetical to European values and interests. This is because Russia wants a return to great power politics, where a handful of nations get to decide the European mainland's future, irrespective of the smaller powers located around and between them. This is utterly incompatible with the relatively open, transparent, and consultative system London and Washington have sought to generate since the end of the Second World War, i.e. the component of Western hegemony on the European mainland, where the use of brute force to revise national borders or annex sovereign territory is rendered obsolete.[24] The Atlantic democracies have therefore continued to undergird the security of small and medium-sized countries, actively supporting their integration into institutions like the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union, which are ultimately under Anglo-American nuclear protection. Of course, this strategy is not entirely altruistic: in reality, London and Washington favour it primarily because they know it will prevent the re-emergence of a powerful continental competitor, which would undoubtedly threaten their own interests. But it also suits smaller and medium-sized countries' interests—nations like the Low Countries, France and West Germany during the Cold War, and the Baltic States, Poland, Romania, and the Nordics today—because they know that with the resources and determination of the Atlantic democracies behind them, aggressors will be deterred from changing their systems of government by political pressure or by force of arms.

How has it come to this? After all, in some ways, it is surprising that there is not a meeting of minds between London, Washington, and Moscow. Indeed, given that powerful armies from the European mainland have marched on the Kremlin, laying waste to much of Russia en-route at least three times in the past two centuries, Moscow fears the re-emergence of a European overlord as much as the Atlantic democracies. The only problem is that Russia has come to dread British and American influence—and the Western hegemony they uphold—as much as it fears the re-emergence of a mainland European behemoth, and perhaps more so. This is because the Kremlin fears that Russia could be 'besmirched' from within by liberal values, shattering the authoritarian regime Mr Putin and his henchmen have done so much to construct and install. Indeed, frustrating the ability of Western cultural and research institutions to function in Russia was one of the first things that Mr Putin did after becoming Russia's leader.[25] Attempting to stymie 'colour revolutions' in surrounding countries has also been an ongoing Russian concern, for fear that

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[24] This order was strongly alluded to by both President Barack Obama and Prime Minister David Cameron in their recent press conference in London in relation to the future role of the United Kingdom in European integration. See 'Barack Obama is right: Britain could lead Europe if it wanted to', *The Economist,* 22 April 2016.

[25] Following up the 2012 'Foreign agents law', on 23 May 2015, Russia adopted its notorious piece of legislation known as 'Russian undesirable organisations law' (Federal Law of 23.05.2015 N 129-FZ 'On amendments of some legislative acts of the Russian Federation') that allows Russian prosecutors to extrajudicially declare foreign and international organisations 'undesirable' in Russia, thus banning their activity. For a comprehensive and updated listing of banned NGOs, see RFE/RL's survey: 'Crackdown on NGOs in Russia', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 20 April 2016. See also Luhn, Alec, 'Russia bans 'undesirable' international organisations ahead of 2016 elections', *The Guardian*, 19 May 2015.

pro-Western political forces in Russia may be emboldened by their success.[26] And by asserting the concept of 'sovereign' or 'managed' democracy, the Kremlin has sought not only to seal Russia off from Western influence, but also, and relatedly, to assist in drawing harmful linkages between pro-liberal reformists within Russia and the West.[27]

Moscow has thus come to frame Western hegemony as a decisive *opponent* or even an *enemy*, an adversary with the means to compel the Kremlin into courses of action it might not otherwise take, a development further compounded by the decline in support for liberal principles, itself a consequence of the corruption and failures during Russia's de-communisation programme during the 1990s. It is for this reason that Russia has been, at first, so indifferent to Western overtures, and later, particularly from the late 2000s, even overtly hostile to them.

Disentangling Moscow's anti-hegemonic strategic narrative offensive

Russia's anti-hegemonic approach is a synthetic mix of Soviet methods (such as '*dezinformatsiya*', or more specifically 'reflexive control') and seemingly replicated contemporary toolkits (such as 'information warfare', 'memetic warfare', 'narrative warfare'). It seems quite apparent that Russia's modern *anti*-hegemonic approach involves a significant exercise of *'reflexive control'*. This approach is of Soviet vintage, but has been dusted down and re-contextualised in recent years, dressed up to appear modern and revolutionary.[28] In reality, it is predicated on the understanding that it is possible, by modulating the flow and form of information, to deliberately engineer a political situation whereby an opponent can be enticed down a path they might not otherwise take, but in such a way that they opt to take it anyway, *believing it even to be in their own interests*. This approach is being actively exploited by the

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[26] The threat from 'colour revolutions' has been a recurrent topic in political debates in Russia since the 2000s, and the Kremlin has clearly sought to prevent them, not least in Russia itself. Indeed, President Putin's order to Russian security and defence institutions was crystal-clear in late 2014: 'colour revolutions' will not be tolerated, either around Russia or within. See Oliphant, Roland, 'Vladimir Putin: We Must Stop a Ukraine-Style 'Colour Revolution' in Russia', *The Telegraph*, 20 November 2014. However, Russia did not formally identify 'colour revolutions' as a threat until 2015, where they were inserted into the updated version of the Military Doctrine (late 2014) and Security Strategy (late 2015). In addition to that, following the Chief of the General Staff General Gerasimov's directive, the Russian Academy of Military Science has been working, since late February 2016, on finding 'scientific' solutions to the security challenge allegedly posed to Russia by 'colour revolutions', a 'covert aggression against Russia' in Kremlin's ruling elite understanding. On 'new colours of war' and the alleged 'self-prompted chaos', see Mikriukov, Vasily, 'Sredstvo ot Nenaviashchivoi Agressii: Rossiya Dolzhna Bit' Gotova Podavit' Smutu', [A Remedy Against Unobtrusive Aggression: Russia Must be Ready to Suppress Turmoil], *Voenno-Promishlenniy Kurier* 7, no.622 (24 February 2016) The Russian Gorchakov Fund has produced a book-long study on the 'technologies of covert regime change operations by means of "colour revolutions"'. See Griniaev, Serguei N., (ed.), *Irreguliarnie Konflikty: 'Tsvetnie Revolutsii'. Analiz i Otsenka Form, Priemov i Sposobov Vedenia Operatsiy po Smene Rezhymov v Suverenikh Gosudarstvakh* [Irregular Conflicts: 'Colour Revolutions'. Analysis and Evaluation of Forms, Methods and Techniques of Regime Change Operations in Sovereign States] (Moscow: ANO 'CSOiP',2015).

[27] See Okara, Andrei, 'Sovereign Democracy: A New Russian Idea or a PR Project?', *Russia in Global Affairs* 5, no.3 (2007): 8-20.

[28] For further explanations of 'reflexive control', see Thomas, Timothy L., 'Russia's Reflexive Control Theory and the Military', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, no.17 (2004): 237-256; Makhnin, Valery L., 'Reflexive Processes in Military Art: The Historico-Gnoseological Aspect', *Military Thought* 22, no.1 (2013): 31-46; Snegovaya, Maria, 'Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine', *Institute for the Study of War*, Washington, DC, September 2015

Russian regime, and to considerable effect. At the operational level, this is pursued through an integrated three-layered movement (*strategic narrative offensive*): firstly, to 'desynchronise' political developments in the European Neighbourhood to 'distort' European perceptions of reality; secondly, to 'de-articulate' the West, i.e. splitting the Atlantic democracies from the European mainland; and finally, to 'saturate' the vacuum with false and fictitious narratives, to sow confusion and maintain disorder. This approach is deliberately calibrated to mute the West entirely and render it ineffective as a geopolitical actor.[29] Thus, the Kremlin is afforded the opportunity to act with impunity within the European Neighbourhood. Critically, as a form of political warfare, this three-pronged anti-hegemonic approach is predicated on dislocating the Western 'equivalential chain' *from within*.

'Zero hour': Desynchronising events and distorting (the perception of) reality

To be successful, an anti-hegemonic drive requires, no less than a counter-hegemonic strategy, or even a military offensive, the will and ability to seize the initiative and modulate the frequency of force. Time, after all, is politics[30]—as are narrative, discourse, and other forms of non-visible agency in pursuit of state policies. The temporalisation of politics does not only allow for the generation of time-specific insights and retrospective understandings, but it also enables the pursuit of a future-oriented ideational (re)construction—all seeking to generate meanings, legitimise or delegitimise the agency and action in question. Therefore, controlling the reference point, or 'zero hour', within the context of a conflict is central to success. But Russia has sought to do this in a new and *negative* way: by *desynchronising* events and political timing, to prevent the enemy—the West—from establishing its own points of reference from which to form its own understanding of the situation. Whether in Georgia in 2008, or in Ukraine in 2014, Russia framed its approach not as a military offensive but as 'transient moments' in its own neighbourhood.[31] The aim was to deny the major European powers the time and ability to see the conflicts for what they were and to encourage them to adopt disjointed and tactical approaches to the crisis.[32] In sending mixed messages about past and present, substituting legality with legitimacy—not least in the context of the widely used 'historical justice' argument —Moscow has attempted to confuse Europeans and *distort* their perception of both the sequence of events and the time available for articulating an effective response.

[29] On how such a 'self-imposed powerlessness' of the West looks like, see Dempsey, Judy, 'The West's Self-Imposed Powerlessness', *Carnegie Europe*, 15 February 2016.

[30] Hom, Andrew, Christopher Mcintosh, Alasdair McKay, and Liam Stockdale, (eds.), *Time, Temporality and Global Politics* (Bristol: e-IR Publishing, 2016).

[31] Portraying both the 2008 war against Georgia as an abrupt 'response' to supposedly unmotivated Georgian provocations and the 2014 'crisis in Ukraine' as yet another unplanned 'response' to the West-provoked domestic Ukrainian crisis or even a 'civil war', Russia masked its deliberate direct interventions with R2P 'obligations' vis-a-vis compatriots abroad, thereby denying its actual involvement just as a preceding decades-long policy of negative assertiveness in the region. See Samolovov, Ivan, 'Responsibility to Protect and Russia: From Georgia to Crimea', *Intersection*, 2 July 2015; Allison, Roy, 'Russian 'deniable' intervention in Ukraine: How and Why Russia Broke the Rules', *International Affairs* 90, no.6 (2014): 1255-1297.

[32] On how the Kremlin uses deception as 'a tactics to delay and distract' both Kyiv's response actions and the Western perception of developments in Ukraine, see NATO StratCom COE, 'Analysis of Russia's Information Campaign Against Ukraine: Examining Non-Military Aspects of the Crisis in Ukraine from a Strategic Communications Perspective', *NATO StratCom COE Report*, 12 July 2015, pp. 27-28.

This is particularly important as it allows Russia to seize the point of reference in the assessment of political developments and frame responses to these (both in a temporal and substantial scope). In this sense, '[n]arratives are designed or nurtured with the intention of structuring the responses of others to developing events'.[33] The distortion of reality thus shapes Europeans' time and event perception, forcing them onto the defensive.

Unfortunately, many Europeans were hoodwinked into accepting Russia's aggression in Ukraine exactly as the Kremlin wanted: as a 'zero hour'. In reality, the Russian offensive revealed *continuity* rather than *change* in the Kremlin's approach towards neighbouring countries.[34] Aside from the fact that the tools are always the same—energy cut-offs and trade wars; the covert capture of business and political elites; economic, information and cyber warfare; as well as the subversion of Russian-speaking minorities; and military attack. Moscow's tactics have also been the same, namely generating 'manageable chaos' in surrounding nations.[35] From Moldova, Georgia and, more recently, in Ukraine and Azerbaijan, the objective has remained to maintain territorial disputes in those countries, ultimately denying them access ('anti-access') to the Euro-Atlantic structures, insofar as territorial contiguity is a prerequisite for accession. A more recent development—revealed in Syria—is to exacerbate 'cross-sector' threats such as migrant flows, organised crime, and extremism, which the Russians know will cause pandemonium in the wealthy European democracies, forcing Western governments to concentrate on mitigating the symptoms of those conflicts, instead of the causes.[36] Moscow's reinforcement of its information warfare capabilities and military modernisation programmes have contributed immeasurably to its effort by consolidating its existing footing, as well as establishing new strategic footholds—no matter what it takes.

Insofar as Russia cannot fight the West symmetrically, what it takes is 'modulated warfare', that is, an offensive involving conventional and unconventional means and overt and covert methods across different frequencies, combined with 'reflexive control'.[37] Moscow has sought deliberately to *modulate* its political and military instruments in response to the West's own indifference or opposition to its geopolitical designs. Here, Vladimir Lenin's ghost walks in the Kremlin.

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[33] Freedman, Lawrence, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* (London: Routledge, 2006), pg. 22.

[34] On the continuity of Russia's negative drive in the European Neighbourhood, as well as the pitfalls of diffusing such power projection beyond the so-called 'near abroad', see Tyushka, Andriy, 'Russia's Resurgence and 'Coarse Power': An Evolution in 'Near Abroad' Policy or a Revolution in Power Politics?', Paper presented at the BASEES 2016 Annual Conference, 2-4 April 2016, Fitzwilliam College—Churchill College, Cambridge, United Kingdom.

[35] For more on 'manageable chaos', see Rogers, James and Andra Martinescu, 'After Crimea: Time for a New British Geostrategy for Eastern Europe?', *The Henry Jackson Society*, September 2015.

[36] 'NATO Commander: Russia Uses Syrian Refugees as 'Weapon' Against West', *Deutsche Welle*, 2 March 2016. Higgins, Andrew, 'EU Suspects Russian Agenda in Migrants' Shifting Arctic Route', *The New York Times*, 2 April 2016; de Carbonnel, Alissa, 'A (Very) Cold War on the Russia-Norway Border', *Foreign Policy*, 20 November 2015.

[37] Many terms have been used to capture the essence of Russia's approach, including 'hybrid', 'multi-modal', and 'non-linear' warfare. For a discussion of these terms and their applicability, see Rogers, James and Andra Martinescu, op. cit., pp. 14-15 and Thomas, Timothy, 'Russia's Military Strategy and Ukraine: Indirect, Asymmetric—and Putin-Led', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 28, no.3 (2015): 445-461.

As the old Bolshevik infamously declared: 'Probe with a bayonet: if you meet steel, stop. If you meet mush, then push.' When the West is pre-occupied with other issues, or has lost interest, the Russians thrust the bayonet firmly in, seeking to maximise any window of opportunity they are afforded. When the attitudes of certain European elites towards Russia begin to harden in response, the Russians pull their bayonet out again and seek a more deferential stance. This tactic has been used to substantial effect in all Moscow's 'anti-access' geopolitical struggles, such as in Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria. By pulling back, Moscow's aim is to give those European countries favouring a more deferential policy towards Russia ammunition to use to frustrate those advocating a firmer and more permanent response to Russia, thus 'short-circuiting' the Euro-Atlantic structures' ability to respond.

Since the 2014 Russian dismemberment of Ukraine, the major European powers have finally begun to wake up to this threat,[38] even as they have indulged in political platitudes about its undesirability.[39] What is surprising is that they only recognised Russia's generation of 'manageable chaos' and 'modulated warfare' once Moscow had begun—both figuratively and literally—to 'bomb its way' to a 'new normal' in international relations with an unbounded use of force, something that the Western democracies have found hard to comprehend. Unfortunately, several European capitals are *still* hesitant to accept the full implications of being identified as an enemy by Moscow. The increasingly vocal calls from certain European chancelleries for 'avoiding a new cold war' appear at best to point to *asynchronicity in political timing*, if not self-deluded blindness (or *Lebenslüge*) and thus self-imposed powerlessness in the face of a destructive offensive waged by another party.[40] Here, the old military adage that 'you may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you', becomes pertinent.

The comments of Russia's Prime Minister, Dmitri Medvedev, should act as a wake-up call to those who continue, stubbornly, if not naively, to refuse to accept that Moscow is fully engaging in political warfare against the West. He clarified his government's intent—mentioning 'war' twelve times in his speech—during this year's Munich Security Conference, stating that 'the first cold war ended 25 years ago. […] Speaking bluntly, we are rapidly rolling into a period of a new cold war'.[41] A re-inspired focus on warfare has actually fed the development of Russian security and military strategy since Mr Putin's second term as president. Moreover, within Russia's domestic political discourse, the theme of 'war' completely saturates popular and strategic communications. Not only has the Soviet victory in the Second World War been revamped and re-glorified—ignoring the brutality meted out to countries like the Baltic States during the Soviet occupation, it has also become a cornerstone of the new Russian 'patriotism', particularly since the *Valdai Discussion Club*'s 11th session in 2014. This helps Mr Putin to dampen domestic disquiet and maintain his regime's own power.

[38] Soros, George, 'Putin is a bigger threat to Europe's existence than ISIS', *The Guardian*, 11 February 2016.

[39] On the plausibility versus platitude in the debates on 'deep-rooted evil of the Russo-Western antagonism', see Tyushka, Andriy, 'Trust, Truth and Truce Trapped in Hybridity of Modern Inter-State Conflicts: An Early Assessment of the Russo-Western Proxy War in Ukraine', *The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies* 1, no.7 (2015): 7-29.

[40] Monaghan, Andrew, 'The 'War' in Russia's 'Hybrid Warfare'', *Parameters* 45, no.4 (Winter 2015-16): 65-74.

[41] Medvedev, Dmitry, 'Speech at the Munich Security Conference 2016 Panel Discussion', Munich Security Conference, Munich, 13 February 2016.

A richly conspired, political, and especially public debate in Russia about the 'fascist West' and 'liberationist Russia' carries the waters of the Kremlin's mainstream narrative even further. Thus popular, political, and strategic cultures in Russia are overwhelmingly saturated with 'warfare narratives' that further help Moscow secure internal obedience while mobilising support for military adventurism abroad. And, they simultaneously cowi short-term 'war-shy' and reality-denying Europe into accepting Moscow's remit.[42]

De-articulating the Western hegemonic chain: Spoiler narratives and politics

Unlike counter-hegemonic operations, like those waged by the Soviet Union, an anti-hegemonic offensive, based on pure *negativity*, has the reverse aim—to de-articulate an adversary's narrative, muting or silencing them and rendering them a disorientated confusion. Russia's *negative* offensive hinges on its ability to shatter positive European and/or Western narratives. The easiest way to disarm an opponent's ideological arsenal is to deny them the advantage of accessing their own arsenal, while simultaneously ensuring continuous and unimpeded access to it yourself. This is reminiscent of the aim of contemporary cyber warfare. Both Russia's direct and/or proxy anti-hegemonic action is to be thought of in this context, with the latter meaning essentially the establishment of, or lending support to, local 'spoilers' on the ground. These spoilers can take the form of marginalised radical right and left parties but also corrupt and captured business and political elites as well as 'expert' communities (e.g. the *Russlandversteher* ['Russia understanders'] in Germany, or 'useful idiots' elsewhere in the Euro-Atlantic area), thus helping proxy spoilers exploit local discontents. More aggressive forms of anti-hegemonic offensive include official anti-narratives in Russia's domestic and international political discourses, and covert strategic communication means, such as 'hybrid trolling', i.e. the use of online spoilers to generate *negative* narratives to pollute an adversary's own hegemonic chain.[43] Russia's 'anti-Helsinki narrative'—propagated in distinct international forums focusing on human rights and freedoms, especially those held to be sacrosanct by Europeans, like the United Nations, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe,

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[42] Although both deeply rooted in historical experiences, European and Russian perceptions of war and the use of force in foreign policy drastically differ, with Europe's tabooed approach to the issue and Russia's explicitly 'normal' treatment of war as a continuation of policy, much in the Clausewitzian sense. By contrast to Russia's domestic and international discourses that flourish with the theme, European discourses shyly hesitate using the term 'war' even in blatantly evident circumstances, like Russia's (political, but as well military!) aggression in Ukraine. A single official attempt to break the silence and 'name the beast' when speaking of Russian belligerent involvement in Ukraine was made by the Press Attaché of the European Union's Delegation in Ukraine, David Stulik, back in August 2014. This effort was however promptly reverted and refuted by Brussels' official message —its press attaché would apparently have been expressing 'a personal opinion', cf.: UNIAN, 'ES nazval zayalenie svoego spikera o rossiyskom vtorzhenii v Ukrainu ego lichnym mneniem', [EU called the statement on Russian invasion of Ukraine a personal opinion of its speaker], UNIAN, 28 August 2014. At the same time, Russian political-military and academic elites overtly refer to the Kremlin's seizure of Crimea as a war campaign—a 'war with no expiry date', as put in Army General Gareev's 2015 piece in Russian 'Military-Industrial Courier': Makhmut Gareev, 'Voina bez Sroka Davnosti: Opyt Velikoi Otechestvennoi Pomog v Vozvrashchenii Kryma', [A War with No Expiry Date: The Experience of the Great Patriotic War Helping to Get Crimea Back], Voenno-Promishlenniy Kurier,17, no.583, 13 May 2015.

[43] The term 'hybrid trolling' is defined by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (COE) as aggressive and anonymous strategic communication supporting the agenda of the Russian leadership. Its operational goal is diminishing the value of the truth and faking reality, thereby negating the image of the West, rather than building up positively the image of Russia. See: NATO StratCom COE, 'Internet trolling as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare: The Case of Latvia', NATO Strategic Communications COE, 25 January 2016.

or the Council of Europe—can be understood in this regard. Such narratives seek to undermine the validity of universal human rights. Further compounding the confusion, the Kremlin has consistently advocated 'traditional' or 'spiritual values' (*dukhovnie skrepy*), or 'managed democracy' and 'managed values', which are simply articulated with no other purpose than to capture, confuse and corrupt the Western 'equivalential chain'.[44]

Like *Ersatz*-communism, deception has also become part of Russia's anti-hegemonic toolkit. The main operational goal of such 'weapons of mass deception' is not to improve or justify Russia's own image, but simply to diminish or destroy the West's. Everything feeds this narrative, from eternal 'strategic encirclement' and Russophobia to international interventions, not least in Iraq, Libya, or Syria. 'Nothing is true…' and 'everyone lies' reads the slogan of Russia's mass deception campaign. 'Panamagate' in April 2016 is the epitome of the entire movement: a couple of days after the investigative report on Putin's deeply-rooted and large-scale corruption was published, another 'lucky' moment lent itself to 'unsay' the story: the leakage of colossal data on international money-laundering through corporate offshore services, the 'Panama Papers'.[45] Surprisingly (or not…), the 11.5 million confidential documents' leak revealed 'universal corruption', thus transcending the narrative of Putin's own corruption and facilitating the state of *uravnilovka* (a sort of moral-political egalitarianism, an effort to devalue the West's image and to valourise the Kremlin's own).

By disarming Europeans through a complex of such anti-hegemonic *negativity*, Russia has sought to corner and coerce the West into strategic silence, by propelling it into thinking it is faulty and powerless.[46] In such a shaped environment, *negative* Russian narratives furthermore amplify spoiler politics (the politics of 'undoing', of 'de-articulation'), which, following the same logic, transcend discursive spaces and saturate policymaking realms in the form of multi-dimensional destructive engagements. In the words of Russian Chief of the General Staff, it is a kind of '21st century *Blitzkrieg*', which Russia successfully tested in Ukraine and Syria.[47] Both interventions involve a 'Four D' approach that builds on *distorting* facts, *distracting* from the key point, *disorienting* the audience, and *dismissing* critics. In fact, Russia's broader anti-hegemonic strategy involves many more D-components, deftly tailored to regional and national audiences.

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[44] For the first time, President Putin's appeal for a comprehensive domestic and international policy of Russia's 'traditional values' [*dukhovnie skrepy*] promotion was voiced in his 2012 annual address to the Federal Assembly, cf. Putin, Vladimir, 'Poslanie Presidenta Federalnomu Sobraniyu' [President's Address to the Federal Assembly], Moscow, the Kremlin, 12 December 2012.

[45] On the possibility of Russian involvement in leaking 'Panama Papers', see a quite reasoned opinion by Taylor, Adam, 'The Not-Completely-Crazy Theory that Russia Leaked the Panama Papers', *The Independent*, 10 April 2016.

[46] In the context of the West's self-imposed faultiness and powerlessness thesis, Lilia Shevtsova makes an excellent case in explaining why the West is so easily trapped—Russia's 'Weimar Syndrome', told through the story of 'strategic encirclement', is actually promoted and justified by some of the Western pundits themselves. In a way, such nearly jibing 'Western-grown' narratives amplify the Kremlin's strategic narrative offensive, cf. Shevtsova, Lilia, 'Humiliation as a Tool of Blackmail', *The Brookings Institution*, 2 June 2015.

[47] Gerasimov, Valery, 'Po Opytu Sirii...' [Based on the Experience of Syria…], *Voenno-Promyshlenniy Kurier* 9, no.624, 8 March 2016.

These include:

- The *denial* of the sovereignty and autonomy of countries surrounding Russia

- The *detachment* of the European Neighbourhood from the West

- The *discrediting* of neighbouring governments (and Western elites and their democratisation efforts, but also collective defence assurances)

- The *disconnection* of the Atlantic democracies—Canada, the United Kingdom and United States—from mainland European countries

- The *disintegration* of the European Union and the Atlantic Alliance, both from one another and from within

- The *disorientation* and *demotivation* of both American and European political elite

- The *devaluation* of the current international order, as well as the norms and values that underpin it

- The *denial* of Russia's involvement and *deflection* from Russia's own responsibility in destroying the fundamentals of international relations on the European mainland since 1945

There have been many instances where the effects of this 'multi-D' anti-hegemonic approach have been apparent: from the lacking European response to the Ukraine crisis to the Russian intervention in support of Mr Assad's decrepit tyranny in Syria. In this way, Moscow's negative strategy attempts to deny, or deprive, the West access to its own positive narratives, many of which get partially or fully 'de-articulated'— and thus deactivated—forming a momentary vacuum.

Saturating the silence: Sowing false and fictitious narratives

Cleansing the West's competing narrative space, not least through the most recent 'Panamisation' of international politics (i.e. representing corruption as an all-permeating and normal rather than a phenomenon typical only of the Kremlin), opens up for Moscow a moment of European strategic silence and feelings of powerlessness. Having cultivated European discontent with official Western narratives, Russia's efforts turn to 'saturating' the momentary strategic silence with false and fictitious narratives, first and foremost the 'narrative of faultiness'. The ability to capture 'zero hour' during any conflict is central to this point. Hardwired in Russia's own domestic popular and political culture, two questions, put in Herzen-Chernyshevsky style, shape the 'zero hour' story: '*Kto vinovat i chto delat?*' [Who is at fault and what should be done?]. Russia's articulation of the 'expansionism' of, at first the Atlantic Alliance, and later, the European Union, points to the 'faulty powers'—the Western countries—and not Russian intransigence and paranoia as Moscow's preferred reference points. Much of these waters are carried subtly and indirectly, through the loose but powerful network of local proxy spoilers, such as

the *Russlandversteher* and 'useful idiots' as well as more pragmatic actors involved in what has been called 'reputation laundering'.[48] These more pragmatic actors include Western lobbying firms, Public Relations agencies, and other 'reputation launderers' (including individual representatives of Western political elites) that have been hired by the Kremlin in a semi-clandestine manner.

Thus, by playing on European anxieties and traumas, especially exploiting the European inclination towards self-reflection and deliberation, the Kremlin's anti-hegemonic offensive also seeks to saturate the Euro-Atlantic space with self-deluding 'faultiness by expansion' (in the case of the Atlantic Alliance) or 'faultiness by association' (in the case of the European Union), which amplifies Europeans' self-imposed powerlessness. That some Europeans continue to lend an ear to Russia's appeals to 'historical justice' as it attempts to transform the European Neighbourhood into a 'sphere of geopolitical denial' is evidence of European reflexivity, particularly as Russia's 'historical justice' fits uneasily with the fact that the sovereignty of the countries within Moscow's prospective sphere would be greatly impeded. Deludedly, the Kremlin's Syrian and alleged anti-terrorist gambits help construct fictitious narratives of Russia, not as the troublemaker it actually is, but as a problem-solver. Meanwhile, the West is depicted as 'faulty', 'decadent', 'hypocritical', 'incrementally nationalist and xenophobic (read: Russophobic)', and 'neo-fascist' to name just a few fictitious roles that have been attributed to European nations. The moment of Western liberal self-reflection, and the strategic silence that it stirs up, is then skilfully filled with false and fictitious stories, including the stories on the 'proper democracies' as allegedly embodied by illiberal states—contrary to the 'failing democracies' of the liberal West.[49]

Consequently, the strategic displacement of the genuinely epiphenomenal unity and narrative of European integration occurs through falsely shaped radicalism and chauvinism and similar weaponised stories.[50] The Dutch—at the centre of the European project—recently revealed just how potent Russia's 'multi-D spoiler strategy' and leverage in Europe has become, and how it deftly saturates reality perception with false and fictitious narratives.[51] In the Dutch referendum held on the Ukrainian association deal in April 2016, public distortion and dismay were skilfully orchestrated from the Kremlin to deceptively link a range of issues, thus 'guiding' Dutch voters to incorrectly connect rising security threats, immigration,

[48] On Russlandversteher, see Umland, Andreas' "Was die Putinversteher missverstehen', *Zeit Online*, 27 December 2015. On 'useful idiots', see Sierakowski, Slawomir, 'Putin's Useful Idiots', *The New York Times*, 28 April 2014; Pomerantsev, Peter, 'We're All Putin's 'Useful Idiots'', *Politico*, 22 July 2015. On 'reputation laundering', see Van Herpen, Marcel H., *Putin's Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy* (Lanham, Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pg. 47.

[49] 'Authoritarians Explain Democracy', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 20 October 2016.

[50] In her 2016 piece in Foreign Policy, Alina Polyakova puts it bluntly: 'The Kremlin's Support for Right-Wing Parties is No Game. It's Trying to Subvert the European Idea'. Cf. Polyakova, Alina, 'Why Europe is Right to Fear Putin's Useful Idiots', *Foreign Policy*, 23 February 2016.

[51] Applebaum, Anne, 'The Dutch Just Showed the World How Russia Influences Western Elections', *The Washington Post*, 8 April 2016. For a broader perspective on Russia's leverage on European elections beyond Netherlands (as e.g. in Germany, France, UK), see Delfs, Arne, and Henry Meyer, 'Putin's Propaganda Machine is Meddling with European Elections', *Bloomberg*, 20 April 2016.

and unemployment in the European Union with a commercial treaty with Ukraine, in no way antithetical to Dutch interests, and with an aspiring European country.

Ultimately, the Kremlin's political warfare and framing and linking tactics, emboldened by the favourable moment of growing irredentism in international politics, attempts to construct a situation whereby Europeans are left with a limited choice between bad and worse options only. It, moreover, effectively constructs a deceptive image of Russia as a 'problem-solver' in those political moments that have essentially occurred due to Russian troublemaking. Indeed, the Kremlin's anti-hegemonic 'spoiler effort' —be it to target Ukraine's westward move[52] or discredit and deny Western power elsewhere[53]—seeks to communicate a simple but brutal strategic axiom, namely that the only option for the West is to co-exist with Russia. For decades to come nothing can be achieved *without* Russia, but nothing can be achieved *with* the country either. Self-evidently, the European Union and the rest of the collective West are being outplayed as they jump into *predictable* and, to Russia, both politically and strategically *desirable* (re)actions. The Kremlin's nuclear threats, invoked all too cavalierly since the start of its anti-hegemonic campaign, compounds Europeans' frustration and confusion, thus leaving Russia in an increasingly commanding position, particularly in the European Neighbourhood. By shaping Europeans' perception of reality, Moscow's anti-hegemonic drive against the West not only amplifies Russia's ability to deny the West access to the European Neighbourhood, but incrementally seeks to challenge and then alter the very unity, cohesion, and even the existence of an integrated Euro-Atlantic region. Thus, it would be hard to disagree with the contention that '[t]he best way for Russia to avoid collapse is by making the EU implode first'.[54]

Europeans: Facing Russia without Clausewitz?

The Kremlin's successes may go further still, not only because of its ability to 'undo' the West, but also because European politicians have 'forgotten' the character of the political. In reality, it is not that European leaders misunderstand political dynamics; witness the ruthlessness with which they deal with their domestic opponents. What Europeans are unable to comprehend is they they—and the West—are now face increasingly determined opposition, which denies the West's own legitimacy to act, function, and/or even exist. In this sense, European politicians have misunderstood the teachings of Carl von Clausewitz. The dead Prussian is often cited as having said that war 'is the continuation of politics *by* other means'.[55] This statement is all the more enticing because it chimes well with modern moral sensibilities. For many European statesmen, war—understood as the application of *military* power to compel an opponent into an alternative, and preferentially, more conducive course of action—is seen at best as a tool of last resort, even the antithesis of the modern

[52] Delcour, Laure and Kataryna Wolczuk, 'Spoiler or Facilitator of Democratisation? Russia's Role in Georgia and Ukraine', *Democratisation* 22, no.3 (2015): 459-478.

[53] Baev, Pavel K., 'Russia as Opportunist or Spoiler in the Middle East?', *The International Spectator 50*, no.2 (2015): 8-21.

[54] Soros, George, op. cit. Fn.22.

[55] Holmes, James R., 'Everything You Know About Clausewitz is Wrong', *The Diplomat*, 14 November 2014.

European order.[56] Even though he deployed British forces more times than any other British Prime Minister in recent history, Tony Blair underlined this fact in 1999 when he declared during his famous 'Doctrine of the International Community' speech: 'Have we exhausted all diplomatic options? We should always give peace every chance'.[57] The idea being that war – or the application of military force – should only be threatened once all other means have been exhausted. Therefore, dissimilarly to the Russian conception, war, or military force, is thought to be part of a *continuum*, following other forms of ostensibly 'peaceful' action applied occasionally by European countries to achieve their political aims.

Yet the dead Prussian's actual statement was very different: 'War is the continuation of politics *with* other means.'[58] This distinction transforms the meaning of Clausewitz's point, namely that every national instrument of power, particularly for the purposes of deterring and dissuading opponents, should be applied *simultaneously*, and that the military is just part of a wider political warfare, which is perpetual, ostensibly against an opponent. Back in the twentieth century, Western statesmen eventually came to realise this fact when dealing with the counter-hegemonic ideologies of the extremes. Once a number of alternatives—such as isolation and appeasement—had been tried and exhausted, and once the level of threat was apparent, London and Washington hit back at their opponents with *overwhelming* force, utilising a fully *comprehensive* package, which harmonised geographic, military, diplomatic, economic, and ideological components. In the same vein, until Europeans identify Russia as the opponent it actually is, and until European intellectual resources are fully mobilised to confront the Kremlin's *negativity*, Moscow's anti-hegemonic drive will bear further fruit. This will continue to caste misery and chaos in its wake, prevent the reunification of Europe from being realised, and hobble the West as a *positive* geopolitical actor. Which is precisely what the Russian leadership wants.

Conclusion

As Moscow knows it cannot match the West's overwhelming material and ideological capabilities, its efforts are increasingly taking the form of '*bolshaia spetzoperatsiia*', in other words, a grand and special operation. Russia has embarked on what might be described as an *anti*-hegemonic political offensive. If left misunderstood, this approach will have profound consequences both for Western political ideology and European countries alike. Consequently, this article has tried to reveal that the Russian leadership does not want to *counter* the Western hegemonic formation with a *positive* competing message. Rather, it wants to engage in an anti-hegemonic strategy through a deeply *negative* spoiler agenda. Prompting the West into a distorted self-perception and 'self-denial' while stealthily desynchronising political developments in regional and global frameworks, the Kremlin's anti-hegemonic strategy aims for the ultimate *de-articulation* of the West. This is to be understood as a double-spoiler effort to: 1) 'dissect' the West by detaching

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[56] See van Ham, Peter, 'The Power of War—Why Europe Needs It', Clingendael—Netherlands Institute of International Relations, December 2008.

[57] Blair, Tony, 'The Blair Doctrine', PBS Newshour, 22 April 1999.

[58] Holmes, James R., op. cit. Fn.38.

the Atlantic democracies (i.e. the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States) from the European mainland and 2) 'disintegrate' the European Union. In this sense, Moscow began by trying to 'capture' the narrative of Europe, fabricating a *competing* idea of Russia as 'another Europe', even portraying it as a 'better Europe', to divide the continent by stealth. This approach was transcended in 2014 with the launch of a more overt and *antithetical* strategy: positioning Russia *versus* Europe, placing 'Russia being not (declinist and decadent) Europe'. Russia's appeal for European 'self-denial' does not only find its supporters in Europe, i.e. predominantly populist and radical parties, but also contributes to a more general frustration among Europeans regarding their own self-perception, thus damaging the credibility of many underlying Euro-Atlantic values and norms. No less important in this regard is provoking Western ambiguity and uncertainty about its responsibility towards the European Neighbourhood, i.e. by nurturing the perception of 'faultiness' for pushing too far into Russia's 'near abroad'.

Indeed, Russian strategy and 'warcraft' are now predicated on ruining the entire Western-backed geopolitical architecture. This entails 'fighting neo-fascism' in Ukraine; nurturing the notion of 'Russophobia as state policy' on Baltic terrains; or promoting the idea of Euro-Atlantic 'decadence'. Russia's anti-hegemonic strategy is not only penetrating European socio-political spaces unhindered but is also finding, not least through funding, its way to capture Western business and political elites. As such, the Western narrative itself gets captured, riling European anxieties, traumas, and political phobias. Consequently, what the Russian anti-hegemonic offensive meets on the European mainland is 'strategic silence' that denies the reality of war and encourages a deeply damaging European self-reflexivity, which places blame on the West rather than on Russia for the geopolitical situation. A deep feeling of frustration and paralysis is what Western societies feel when facing Russia's well-oiled anti-hegemonic machine. The internal erosion of European readiness, political will, and values, rather than physical destruction in an open war, is what constitutes the foundation of Russia's anti-hegemonic drive against the West today. Unless Europeans regain the initiative, understand they now face an *opponent*, and ditch '"dialogue" with Russia' for an integrated strategy to constrain and open Mr Putin's *negativity*, their Neighbourhood—especially to the East—will be steadily and permanently poisoned, while their ability to realise their own interests will be progressively paralysed, as their values slide into a perverted void.

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THE RUSSIAN PERSPECTIVE ON INFORMATION WARFARE: CONCEPTUAL ROOTS AND POLITICISATION IN RUSSIAN ACADEMIC, POLITICAL, AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Ofer Fridman

Abstract

During the last decade, 'information warfare' has become a much-politicised term in Russian domestic and foreign affairs. This article sheds light on the conceptual roots that have been shaping this idea in the Russian academic, political, and public discourse. Moreover, the article points to the major actors leading the politicisation of this idea by promoting narratives describing the so-called 'Western information war against Russia'. In the context of Russia's contemporary attempts to re-establish itself as a global power and Western fear and distress associated with Russian activities in the information domain, a grounded understanding of the major conceptual narratives influencing Russian thinking about information warfare, as well as perspectives on how these narratives have been politicised, is of paramount importance.

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An analysis of the vast scope of Russian conceptual and analytical literature on 'information warfare' published over the last decades, shows that the main ideas can be divided into two general groups. One group of writing focuses on information warfare as a set of methods and techniques used to achieve power, capital, and public influence. This body of literature analyses the different methods by which information is used for political or economic goals, generally claiming that:

> 'The methods of Information War [...] are neutral, just like nuclear energy. Similar to nuclear technologies, the techniques of Information War have a dual purpose: they can be used for good or for evil, offensive or defensive. [...] We meet them everywhere—in politics, economy and business, in the workplace and in everyday life.'[1]

Proponents of this approach see information warfare as a very old phenomenon—the manipulation of information for achieving certain political, economic, or other goals. However, they claim that due to the processes of globalisation and integration and the information revolution that have been taking place over recent decades, information wars have become a more prevalent and preferable way of achieving political goals in international relations. By integrating various methods and techniques developed for use in politics and business, and combining the fields of psychology, sociology, politics, marketing, and others, these scholars are attempting to develop a more clearly defined conceptual understanding of information warfare in the 21st century as a general phenomenon prevalent in the political, social, and economic realities.[2]

The second body of literature takes a more ideological stance, claiming that information warfare is a method explicitly used by the West to undermine Russia.[3] On the one hand, proponents of this approach agree with the general definition of information warfare as a non-military method used to achieve political goals: 'during the whole of human history, Information Warfare has been the main tool of global politics to achieve spiritual, political, financial and economic power in the world'.[4] On the other, they claim that information warfare is a 'subversive Western political technique' that not only 'allowed the West to destroy the Soviet Union' but also 'puts the dissolution of

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[1] Tsyganov, V. and S. Bukharin, *Informatsionnyye voyny v biznese i politike : Teoriya i metodologiya*, (Moscow: Akademicheskiy Proyekt, 2007), pg. 11.

[2] See Bukharin, S., *Metody i tekhnologii informatsionnykh voyn*, (Moscow: Akademicheskiy proyekt, 2007); Vlasenko, I. and M. Kir'yanov, *Informatsionnaya voyna: iskazheniye real'nosti*, (Moscow: Kantsler, 2011); Rastorguyev, S., *Informatsionnaya voyna. Problemy i modeli. Ekzistentsial'naya matematika*, (Moscow: Akademicheskiy proyekt, 2006); Raskin, A. and I. Tarasov, 'Informatsionnoe protivoborstvo v sovremennoy voyne', *Informatsionnye voyny*, Vol. 4(32), 2014, pp. 2–6; Malkov, S. and S. Bilyuga, 'Model ustoychivosti/destabilizatsii politiheskih sistem', *Informatsionnye voyny*, Vol. 1(33), 2015, pp. 7–18; Tsyganov, V. and S. Bukharin, *Informatsionnyye voyny v biznese i politike.*

[3] See Panarin, I., *Informatsionnaya Voyna I kommunikatsii*, (Moscow: Goryachaya Liniya-Telekom, 2015); Filimonov, G., *Kulturno-informatsionnie mekhanizmi vnewnei politiki SSHA*, (Moscow: People's Friendship University of Russia (RUDN), 2012); Filimonov, G., N. Danyuk, and M. Urakov, *Perevorot*, (Saint Petersburg: Piter, 2016); Pertsev, A., 'Osobennosti informatsionnogo protivoborstva v sovremennikh usloviyakh', *Informatsionnye voyny*, Vol. 2(34), 2015, pp. 33–37; Orlov, A., 'Sistemnyi analis amrikanskogo kapitalizma kak factor vliyaniya na informatsionnuyu bezopasnost ssha i rossiiskoi federatsii na primere sobitii na Ukraine v 2013–2015gg', *Informatsionnye voyny*, Vol. 1(37), 2016, pp. 74–77.

[4] Panarin, I., *Informatsionnaya Voyna I kommunikatsii*, pg. 6.

the Russian Federation on the [Western] agenda'.[5] Analysing this body of literature it is possible to identify three major theories that provide the main conceptual narratives for this approach to understanding information warfare: 'subversion-war' developed by Evgeny Messner, 'net-centric war' developed by Aleksandr Dugin, and 'information warfare' developed by Igor Panarin.

These three independently developed, yet similar theories have successfully coexisted within Russian academic and analytical discourses since the late 1990s, politicising information warfare as a Western technique to subvert its adversaries. By conducting an in-depth empirical analysis of academic and political discourses about information warfare in Russia, this article seeks to answer two main questions. The first question is concerned with the conceptual roots of information warfare. The first part of this article will describe the three main theories that have been used to politicise the concept of information warfare in Russia. The second question is concerned with the politicisation process itself. By analysing various actions taken by the Russian political establishment in the context of the alleged information war waged by the West against Russia, and the reaction of the Russian public to these actions, this article will argue that the politicisation of information warfare has not been led explicitly by the Kremlin; it is, rather, a complicated and synergetic process involving the Russian government, Russian scholars, and the Russian public in general.

Information Warfare in Russian Academic Discourse

Three concepts have dominated the Russian academic discourse on information warfare since the mid-1990s: Evgeny Messner's 'subversion-war', Aleksandr Dugin's 'net-centric war', and Igor Panarin's 'information war'. While these concepts were independently developed and promoted, each of them essentially describes the same phenomenon—the process of undermining a legitimate government by manipulating the information domain in order to influence political elites and instil political dissent, separatism, and social strife within a given system.

Evgeny Messner—Subversion-War (Myatezhevoyna)[6]

Evgeny Eduardovich Messner was born on 3 September 1891 in the Kherson Governorate in the Southern Ukrainian region of the Russian Empire. In 1912, after

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[5] Prokhvatilov, V., 'Ataka myslyashchey pautiny- metaprogrammirovaniye - organizatsionnoye oruzhiye 21 veka', *Informatsionnye voyny*, Vol. 1(13), 2010, pg. 73.

[6] Before starting analysis of the Messner's concept of *myatezhevoyna*, it is important to make several translation clarifications. Some Western (mainly East European) scholars have been translating *myatezhevoyna* as 'mutiny-war'. This translation, however, is incorrect, as 'mutiny' is an open rebellion against the authorities, especially by soldiers or sailors against their officers, and its Russian equivalent is *bunt*. The direct translation of *myatezh'* is 'insurgency', and therefore the direct translation of *myatezhevoyna* from Russian to English is 'a war by insurgency' or 'insurgency-war'. These translations, however, are also misleading for two main reasons. The first was given by Messner himself, who noticeably argued that there is a difference between *myatezhevoyna* and 'guerrilla war' (i.e. 'insurgency-war'), as it describes a much wider phenomenon, and, in fact, 'guerrilla war' is only one possible way to wage *myatezhevoyna*. (Messner, 1971:8). The second reason *myatezhevoyna* cannot be translated as 'insurgency-war' is that from the analysis of Messner's works it becomes clear that by conceptualising *myatezhevoyna*, he implied an activity that intends to erode the adversary's socio-cultural-military cohesion—something that better suits the definition of 'subversion' [*podryvnaya deyatel'nost'*] rather than 'insurgency'. For these reasons, in the following translations, Myatezh' will be translated as 'insurgency', but *myatezhevoyna* as 'subversion-war'.

passing his final examinations at the Mikhailovsky Artillery School as an external student, Messner was stationed in his hometown Odessa and assigned to the 5th Battery of the 15th Artillery Brigade as a *Podporuchik* [Second Lieutenant]. During the First World War, Messner swiftly climbed the military ladder, proving himself to be a talented and daring officer. On 23 October 1916, already *Stabs-Kapitan* [Senior Lieutenant], Messner was sent to the Academic Courses at the Imperial Nicholas Military Academy . He successfully completed his courses among the top ten in his class. During the Russian Civil War he joined the White movement taking an active role in the fighting against the Red Army, most notably he was the last Chief of Staff of the Kornilov Division of General Wrangel's Army. In November 1920, General Staff Colonel Evgeny Messner left Russia with the last of the ships that evacuated the defeated White forces from Crimea.[7]

After leaving Russia, Messner moved to Belgrade where he took active part in the social and military-academic life of the Russian émigrés there. His writings on military theory and tactics were widely published in several military periodicals by Russian communities abroad. After the beginning of the Second World War, Messner continued to lecture at the Higher Military Courses in Belgrade, preparing officers for the Russian Corps, an armed force composed of anti-Communist Russian émigrés in the Territory of the Military Commander in Serbia.[8] Until the spring of 1945 Messner served in the military-propaganda department of the Wehrmacht 'South East', where he led the Russian section and was an active supporter of the establishment of the Russian Liberation Army, also called the Vlasov Army—a group of predominantly Russian forces that fought under German command. In March 1945 Messner became head of the propaganda department in the First Russian National Army established under the command of Russian-émigré General Boris Alexeyevich Smyslovsky-Holmston. The army capitulated in Lichtenstein in May 1945 and Messner emigrated to Argentina with his wife in the autumn of 1947.[9]

In Argentina, Messner continued his earlier work as a journalist, author, publisher, and military theorist. One of his most prominent achievements was the establishment of the South-American branch of the Institute for the Research of War and Peace in Buenos-Aires, named after General Professor Golovin. Until his death in 1974, Messner continued to publish works on political and security matters, as well as modern military history. While most of his publications emphasised his interpretations of ongoing political and military developments within the context of the Cold War, three of his most prominent books—*Lik Soveremennoy Voyni* [The Face of Contemporary *War*]; *Myatezh—Imya Tret'yey Vseminoy* [Subversion—The Name

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[7] Messner, E., *Posluzhnoy Spisok*. Buenos Aires, 1972. First published as: Tereshchuk, A. (ed.), Yevgeniy Eduardovich Messner: *Sud'ba Russkogo Ofitsera*, (Saint-Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta, 1997); Domnin, I., 'Ot Pervoy mirovoy do "Tret'yey Vsemirnoy", Zhiznennyy put' General'nogo shtaba polkovnika E. E. Messnera', in Savinkin, A. (ed.) *Khochesh' mira, pobedi myatezhevoynu!—Tvorcheskoye naslediye E. Messnera*, *Rossiyskiy Voyennyy Sbornik*, Issue 21, (Moscow: Voyennyy Universitet, Russkiy Put', 2005).

[8] The Territory of the Military Commander in Serbia was the official title of the area of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia that was placed under a military government of occupation by the Wehrmacht following the invasion, occupation and dismantling of Yugoslavia in April 1941.

[9] Alexanrov, K., *Armia Generala Vlasova*, 1944–1945, (Moscow: Yauza Eskimo, 2006), pp. 182–184; Domnin, I., 'Ot Pervoy mirovoy do "Tret'yey Vsemirnoy"...'.

of the Third World War]; and *Vseminaya Myatezhevoyna* [The Worldwide Subversion-War]—focused on the conceptualisation of the next generation of war, based on his personal experience and his interpretation of the struggle between the West and Communism (the Soviet Union and China).[10]

Messner's understanding of political-military international affairs was highly influenced by the developing struggle between the post-World War Two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union. Conceptualising this new situation in the context of an extreme clash of ideologies on the one hand, and the possibility of mutually assured destruction on the other, he argued that Trotsky's description of the 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk—'neither war nor peace'—could be said to apply globally after 1945. At the conference in Potsdam, Messner argued that:

> '[T]he international situation was initially crafted by the formula "neither peace, nor war", its most characteristic feature came from the extremely intense diplomatic struggle punctuated by outbreaks of armed unrests and uprisings. It was called the "cold war". It could equally have been foolishly called "hot diplomacy". In this "neither war, nor peace" there were also rather "hot" military operations.'[11]

Messner tended to interpret what are commonly known as 'proxy wars' during the Cold War as a part of a much bigger picture:

> 'We have to stop thinking that war is when somebody is fighting and peace is when there is no fighting. The U.S.A., Australia, New Zealand, Philippines and Thailand are not in a state of war against North Vietnam, but they are fighting against it. There is an armistice between North and South Koreas; however, they fight each other due to the initiative of the North, through partisans on the demarcation line and violent students in Seoul. Israelis and Arabs are considered to be in an armistice, but they quite intensively fight each other. [...] It is possible [for the USSR and the USA] to negotiate about non-aggression or disarmament and simultaneously to fight: the U.S.S.R. fights against the U.S.A. by supplying weapons, instructors, money, [and] supplies to those who feud with America; and by subverting Americans within the United States.'[12]

[10] Messner, E., *Lik sovremennoy voyny*, (Buenos Aires: South American Division of the Institute for the Study of the Problems of War and Peace named after Prof. General N.N. Golovin, 1959); Messner, E., *Myatezh—Imya Tret'yey Vseminoy*, (Buenos Aires: South American Division of the Institute for the Study of the Problems of War and Peace named after Prof. General N.N. Golovin, 1960); Messner, E., *Vseminaya Myatezhevoyna*, (Buenos Aires: South American Division of the Institute for the Study of the Problems of War and Peace named after Prof General N.N. Golovin, 1971).

[11] Messner, *Vseminaya Myatezhevoyna*, p. 12.

[12] Ibid., pg. 10.

Such "half-wars" are waged by partisans, "volunteers", underground fighters, terrorists, saboteurs, wreckers and propagandists in the enemy country, and radio-propagandists [from the outside].'[17]

This characteristic, according to Messner, had become even more prominent:

'People have stopped being passive observers and silent victims of military struggles [...] A citizen of a free country has gotten used to widespread opposition to the government. [...] This predisposes him to oppose the occupying power together with his own military, or [equally] to rise against the authority of his country in union with another fighting party.'[18]

The total involvement of a population, according to Messner, has led to an even more radical transformation of war—a fourth informational/psychological dimension has been introduced. Since war has begun to include the whole of society:

'The soul of the enemy's society has become the most important strategic objective. [...] Degrading the spirit of the enemy and saving your own spirit from degradation—this is the meaning of the struggle in the fourth dimension, which has become more important than the three other dimensions.'[19]

In other words, according to Messner, the increasing involvement of the masses in political and military affairs has made them a primary target, but in the psychological-informational dimension rather than the physical dimension. With the rising importance of the psychological-informational dimension, the main aim of war is not to capture one's enemy's physical territory, but to conquer his spirit to 'knock him down from his ideological positions, to bring confusion and discomfiture into his soul'. And the main tools for doing so are propaganda and agitation.[20] Analysing the rise of this phenomenon, Messner focused on two main characteristics: 'propaganda by word' vs. 'propaganda by deed' and 'offensive propaganda' vs. 'defensive propaganda'.

'The war of the 20th century is not a clear military affair: it consists of politics no less than tactics, the space in this war should be conquered by military, as well as by propaganda. Today nations can deny physical conquest and continue spiritual resistance, even after military capitulation. Through the use of propaganda, one should pour the elixir of life into one's own masses and poison into the enemy's, and, by using [positive] propaganda as an antidote, [one] should save [one's own people] from the enemy's poison.'[21]

[17] Messner, *Myatezh - Imya Tret'yey Vseminoy*, pg. 43.

[18] Messner, *Lik sovremennoy voyny*, pg. 37.

[19] Ibid, pg. 5.

[20] Messner, *Myatezh - Imya Tret'yey Vseminoy*, pg. 95.

[21] Messner, *Lik sovremennoy voyny*, pg. 29.

Discussing the role of propaganda, Messner differentiated between 'propaganda by word' and 'propaganda by deed'. While the first includes radio, official speeches, publications, theatre, movies, exhibitions, the latter includes successful and timely actions—'an idea gains credibility when supported by military, political, social, diplomatic, [and] economic achievements'.[22] In other words, Messner argued that propaganda is not only what is said, written, published, broadcast, but also what is done; 'in times of psychological war, neither victory in battle, nor territorial gains, are the goals themselves: their main value is in their psychological effects'.[23] Moreover, 'propaganda by deed' is not limited to military activities, it also includes successful political, economic, and social actions that can be used to influence the psyche of the masses: 'a successful general strike increases the self-confidence of the working class, [and] the stabilisation of the national currency increases the authority of the government'.[24]

Discussing the differences between 'offensive' and 'defensive' propaganda and agitation, Messner argued that while the former is meant to weaken the enemy, the latter is meant to improve morale at home, but 'it should not be defensive, apologetic, [or] justifying; instead it should actively galvanise the emotions and thoughts of our soldiers, warriors and non-warriors'.[25] Moreover, 'the tone of propaganda should be chosen in accordance with the taste [and] psyche of each nation', as 'both defensive and offensive propaganda are doomed to fail if they look like propaganda'.[26] Therefore, according to Messner, successful propaganda should be both multifaceted—one half true for one's own masses, the other for the enemy's—and suitable:

> '[F]or each level of consciousness, for each category of mores, predispositions, [and] interests [employing] special logic, sincerity or duplicity, mind-set or sentimentality.'[27]

According to Messner, the rising importance of the psychological/informational dimension has transformed the nature of conflict, creating an entirely new type of confrontation that he calls subversion-war. Messner defines the main features of this new type of warfare:

> 'When war was a tournament—army against army—it was relatively easy: find a large field and fight to destroy the enemy's formation, try to break force with force. Today, in the era of psychological warfare, neither victory in battle, nor territorial gains, are the goals in themselves: their main value is in their psychological effects. One should not think of destroying an enemy's manpower, but of crushing his psychological power. This is the surest way to victory in subversion-war.'[28]

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[22] Messner, *Myatezh - Imya Tret'yey Vseminoy*, pg. 95; Messner, *Lik sovremennoy voyny*, p. 30.

[23] Messner, *Myatezh - Imya Tret'yey Vseminoy,* pg. 91.

[24] Ibid., pg. 96.

[25] Ibid., pg. 97.

[26] Messner, Lik sovremennoy voyny, p. 29.

[27] Mesaner, Myatezh - Imya Tret'yey Vseminoy, p. 97.

[28] Ibid., pp. 90–91.

He continues:

> 'Waging war is an art. Waging an insurgency (revolution) is also an art. Today, a new art is developing—waging a subversion-war. Strategists almost always face difficult choices in defining the purpose of their actions (interim and final). In a subversion-war the choice is especially difficult due to the abundance of goals and the differences in their significance (either purely psychological, or material with a psychological side effect, or purely material).'[29]

He also defined the hierarchy of these goals:

> '1) the dissolution of the spirit of the enemy public; 2) the defeat of the enemy's active part (the military, partisan organisations, and violent popular movements); 3) the seizure or destruction of objects of a psychological value; 4) the seizure or destruction of objects of material value; 5) the creation of an impression of order to acquire new allies and crush the spirit of the enemy's allies.'[30]

Similar to the works of other Russian émigré authors published abroad, Messner's books and articles reached the USSR—the Russian State Library has all his books in original publication—but access to them was definitely restricted to a small number of high level officials and professionals. Only after the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Communist system has there been a growing revival of Messner's concept of subversion-war among Russian military thinkers. His works have been widely republished since the 1990s as separate books or as articles included in edited compilations.[31] His anti-Soviet and pro-Western views have been reconceptualised for contemporary audiences. From reading Messner's works, it becomes clear that Messner held very conservative views and was an ardent anti-communist, who truly believed that 'Red-Moscow' and 'Red-Peking' were plotting to disintegrate the socio-cultural and moral fabric of Western society, which was too weak to fight back. Interestingly enough, in their interpretations of the anti-communist foundations of subversion-war in the mid-2000s, some Russian scholars argued:

> 'At the end, the Free World, as if it were listening to the theory and recommendations of Messner and other analysts, understood the danger of the Communist Subversion-War and started to "fight back", ultimately achieving victory.'[32]

[29] Ibid., pg. 94.

[30] Ibid.

[31] See Savinkin, A. (ed.) 'Khochesh' mira, pobedi myatezhevoynu! – Tvorcheskoye naslediye E. Messnera', *Rossiyskiy Voyennyy Sbornik*, Issue 21, (Moscow: Voyennyy Universitet, Russkiy Put', 2005); Messner, Evgeny, *Vsemirnaya Myatezhvoyna,* (Moscow: Zhukovskoye Pole, 2004); Savinkin, A. (ed.), 'Russkoye zarubezh'ye: gosudarstvenno-patrioticheskaya i voyennaya mysl'', *Voyennyy Sbornik*, Issue 6, (Moscow: Gumanitarnaya akademiya Vooruzhennykh sil, 1994); Savinkin, A. (ed.), 'Dusha armii: Russkaya voyennaya emigratsiya o moral'no-psikhologicheskikh osnovakh rossiyskoy vooruzhennoy sily', *Voyennyy Sbornik*, Issue 13, (Moscow: Voyennyy universitet, Nezavisimyy voyenno-nauchnyy tsentr «Otechestvo i Voin», Russkiy put', 1997); Savinkin, A. (ed.), 'Voyennaya mysl' v izgnanii: Tvorchestvo russkoy voyennoy emigratsii', *Voyennyy Sbornik*, Issue 16, (Moscow: Voyennyy universitet, Russkiy put', 1999).

[32] Savinkin, A., 'Groznaya Opasnost' Vsemirnoy Myatezhevoyny', in A. Savinkin, (ed.) *Khochesh' mira, pobedi myatezhevoynu!...*

Or, as one scholar put it: 'the Messner formula got it right, but in the exact opposite way'.[33]

Due to his anti-communist views and alliance with the White Movement and later with Nazi Germany, Messner remained generally unknown in the Soviet Union. Only after the end of the Cold War and the following dissolution of the Communist system has there been a growing revival of Messner's concept of subversion-war within the circles of Russian military thinkers. His books were widely republished, and his ideas were adapted to the outcomes of the Cold War.[34] This adaptation allowed Russian contemporary thinkers to claim that the West mastered subversion-war (i.e. psychological/informational warfare) during the Cold War. In other words, an analysis of the contemporary geopolitical situation and ongoing political, military, and economic confrontations (e.g. the conflict in the Balkans, the rise of terrorist organisations, the Arab Spring, the Ukrainian Crisis) through the prism of subversion-war, has allowed Russian scholars to accuse the West (specifically the US) of waging psychological/informational wars as one of the main methods of achieving its political goals in general, and in its relations with Russia in particular.[35]

Aleksandr Dugin—Net-Centric War

Aleksandr Gelyevich Dugin is a Russian political scientist, philosopher of geopolitics, religious historian, and Slavophile. He began publishing in the late 1980s and has proven himself to be a talented writer and speaker. Since then he has established himself as a prolific author, publishing almost one book per year, as well as hundreds of articles, commentaries, and interviews, some of which have been translated into English and other languages. In addition, Dugin has held several senior advisory positions in the Russian political establishment and served as Head of the Department of Sociology of International Relations of the Lomonosov Moscow State University from 2009 to 2014.[36]

It is not possible to discuss the entire spectrum of Dugin's work here, therefore this article will highlight several ideas that have contributed to the politicisation

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[33] Morozov, E., 'Predisloviye kommentatora', in *Evgeny Messner, V semirnaya Myatezhvoyna*, (Moscow: Zhukovskoye Pole, 2004), pg. 8.

[34] See Savinkin, A. (ed.), *Dusha armii: Russkaya voyennaya emigratsiya o moral'no-psikhologicheskikh osnovakh rossiyskoy vooruzhennoy sily*, (Moscow: Voyennyy universitet, Nezavisimyy voyenno-nauchnyy tsentr 'Otechestvo i Voin', Russkiy put', 1997); Savinkin, A. (ed.), *Russkoye zarubezh'ye: gosudarstvenno-patrioticheskaya i voyennaya mysl*, (Moscow: Gumanitarnaya akademiya Vooruzhennykh sil, 1994); Messner, *V semirnaya Myatezhvoyna*, (Moscow: Zhukovskoye Pole, 2004); Savinkin, A. (ed.), *Khochesh' mira, pobedi myatezhevoynu!...*

[35] See Domnin, I. and A. Savinkin, 'Assimetrichnoe Voevanie', *Otechestvennyye Zapiski*, No. 5, 2005; Pavlushenko, M. et al., 'Myatezhevoyna kak forma tsivilizatsionnogo stolknoveniya Zapad-Vostok', *Obozrevatel'-Observer,* No.5, 2007, pp. 13–19; Biryukov, S. and A. Davydov, 'Konfliktnaya model' formirovaniya natsional'noy politicheskoy identichnosti kontseptsiya "matezhevoyny" E. Messnera (na primere Bosnii)', *Politicheskiye Instituty i Protsessy* No. 2, 2014, pp.132–145; Nesterov, A., 'Netraditsionnyye ugrozy voyennoy bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii v ramkakh modernizatsii NATO', *Vlast',* No. 5, 2013, pp. 186–188; Morozov, E., 'Predisloviye kommentatora'; Savinkin, A., 'Groznaya Opasnost' Vsemirnoy Myatezhevoyny'.

[36] Nekrasov, S., 'A. G. Dugin: Nastoyashchiy Postmodern', *Diskurs-Pi* 1(1), 2001, pp. 43–52; Darczewska, J., *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare: The Crimean Operation, A Case Study.* Point of View. Vol. 42. (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, 2014), pg. 14.

of the concept of information warfare in Russian academic discourse. Dugin has always been one of the most prominent advocates of the idea of a Russian Eurasian civilisation that has unique socio-cultural characteristics, history, and role on the global arena.[37] For example, Dugin argues that:

> 'Russian society is Eurasian, that is partly European and partly non-European, and, [therefore] it is generally a unique and distinctive phenomenon. [...] It is no accident that we live on this land, within these boundaries. It is no accident that these borders were inhabited and settled by us. Between them and us there is a direct sociological, cultural, genetic, causal, conceptual, [and] morphological relationship.'[38]

This leads to the second aspect of Dugin's conceptualisation—the permanent offensive by Western civilization, primarily represented by the US, against the Russian Eurasian civilisation. For Dugin: 'the U.S.A [is] the sum of the West, its political, religious and ideological vanguard [...] the incarnation of the West, of Western capitalism, its centre and axis, its essence'.[39] According to Dugin, Russia has always been one of the most intense enemies of the West; the struggle between Western Protestant civilisation, led initially by the British Empire and then by the US, and Russian Orthodox Eurasian civilisation, can be traced throughout hundreds of years of confrontation, as far back as ancient times:

> '... from the mid-20th century the geopolitical duel, which has been traced by geo-politicians down to the ancient conflicts between Athens and Sparta, Rome and Carthage, etc., finally crystallised into the collision between the Western world (the U.S.A. and Western Europe) and the U.S.S.R., with satellites in Europe and Asia.'[40]

The third aspect of Dugin's ideas, most relevant to the idea of information warfare, is how, in his opinion, the West (mainly the US) has been waging an offensive against Russia throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries. In 2007, Dugin published his book *Geopolitika Postmoderna*, in which he presented his interpretation of the concept of network-centric warfare.[41] Following the publication of this book, Dugin continued to refine his ideas in a series of articles[42] and other books,[43] introducing the term 'net-centric wars' into Russian academic and political discourse. According to Dugin, due to the natural evolution of human civilisation from the agrarian to the industrial periods, and on into the Information Age, the American military establishment developed a

[37] Dugin, A., *Russkaya Veshch'*, (Moscow: Arktogeya, 2001); Dugin, A., *Filosofiya voyny*, (Moscow: Yauza, Eksmo, 2004); Dugin, A., *Geopolitika Postmoderna*, (Saint-Petersburg: Amfora, 2007); Dugin, A., *Sotsiologiya geopoliticheskikh protsessov Rossii*, (Moscow: Lomonosov Moscow State University, 2010); Dugin, A., *Russkaya voyna*, (Moscow: Algoritm, 2015); Dugin, A., *Voyna kontinentov—sovremennyy mir v geopoliticheskoy sisteme koordinat*, (Moscow: Akademicheskiy Proyekt, 2015).

[38] Dugin, A., *Sotsiologiya geopoliticheskikh protsessov Rossii*, pp. 31–32.

[39] Dugin, A., *Filosofiya voyny*, pp. 155–156.

[40] Dugin, A., *Geopolitika Postmoderna*, pg. 16.

[41] Ibid., pp. 651–700.

[42] See Dugin, A., 'Teoreticheskiye osnovy setevykh voyn', *Informatsionnye voyny*, Vol. 1(5), 2008, pp. 2–9; Dugin, A., 'Setetsentricheskiye voyny', *Informatsionnye voyny*, Vol. 1(5), 2008, pp. 10–16.

[43] See Dugin, A., *Voyna kontinentov - sovremennyy mir v geopoliticheskoy sisteme koordinat*, pp. 240–258.

new military strategy—net-centric war, which 'occurs in four interconnected areas of human activity: physical, informational, cognitive, and social'.[44] Dugin defines the network as the 'informational dimension, in which major strategic operations are developed, as well as their media, diplomatic, economic, and technical support'. Dugin claims that the main purpose of the US is to establish and control such a network in an attempt to obtain 'full and absolute control over all participants of actual and possible military activities, and their total manipulation in all situations—while war is waged, when it matures, or when there is peace'.[45]

According to Dugin, control is first and foremost achieved by absolute superiority in the informational dimension, and the main purpose of the American net-centric war is to impress upon the minds of the populations the idea that military competition with the US is pointless and should be avoided. Dugin claims that through the informational dimension, Washington attempts to:

> 'build a system of global domination of the U.S.A. over the whole world, i.e. the postmodern analogy of colonialism and submission, executed under new conditions, in new forms and by new means. There is no need for direct occupation, a massive deployment of forces or territorial conquest. [...] Network is a much more flexible weapon, it manipulates with violence and military power only in extreme cases, [while] the major results are achieved by contextual influence in a wide aggregation of factors: informational, social, cognitive, etc.'[46]

Moreover, Dugin claims that the information dimension has a 'highly important, if not central, role' in net-centric wars, as it is 'the most prevalent environment of network wars that has evolved into an independent category—the 'info-sphere', which stands separately and equal to physical means'.[47]

Summarising Dugin's ideas on net-centric wars, it is important to state that, according to him, the US has been waging a persistent and carefully planned offensive against Russia in the informational domain as a part of its net-centric strategy to dominate the world in the postmodern Informational Age. This net-centric war, waged against Russia by a carefully crafted network, includes:

> '…a Pro-American lobby of experts, political scientists, analysts, [and political] technicians that closely surround [Russian] authorities. A vast number of American foundations actively [co]operate, connecting intellectual elites to their network. The representatives of Russian capital and senior officialdom are naturally integrated into the Western world, where their savings are kept. The means of mass communication [that] irradiate readers and viewers with flows of visual and semantic information, are built according to Western patterns.'[48]

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[44] Ibid., pg. 246.

[45] Ibid., pp. 241–244.

[46] Ibid., pp. 248–249.

[47] Ibid., pg. 247.

[48] Ibid., pg. 250.

To withstand this attack, Dugin argues that Russia has to adopt the 'Eurasian model', which should be in symmetric opposition to the 'Atlantic-American model', and will create its own network, oriented in precisely the opposite direction. This Eurasian network would offer a symmetric response within the informational dimension and would be based on:

> 'Special groups that would include senior officials, the most passionate cadre of different special services, intellectuals, scientists, engineers, political scientists, [and] the corps of patriotically-oriented journalists and culture activists.'[49]

In other words, according to Dugin, the purpose of information warfare is to influence a network of people, instructions, foundations, organisations, etc. that intuitively (or not) promote a certain set of ideas to achieve certain political goals.

The US was the first to master this new type of warfare, and wages net-centric wars against all other countries and nations by manipulating their social processes from the inside, thus winning physical confrontations before they even begin. Therefore, if Russia does not 'postmodernise' its military, secret services, political institutions, information, and communication systems to suit this net-centric struggle, it is doomed to lose this war.[50]

Dugin's politicisation of information warfare as a net-centric war waged by the US against Russia has been adopted by a large group of Russian political scientists, who find his interpretation of the historical East-West struggle appealing. Since its introduction in 2007, Dugin's concept of net-centric war has been used to interpret different geopolitical events in the post-Soviet space, claiming that they are all part of the net-centric war waged by the US against Russia, first and foremost in the informational domain.[51]

Igor Panarin—Information Warfare and the Fall of the USSR

Igor Nikolaevich Panarin holds a higher doctoral degree in political science and a PhD in psychology; he is a full member of the Military Academy of Science of the Russian Federation, and holds numerous senior advisory and coordinating positions within the Russian political establishment. Since the mid-1990s, Panarin has published more than 20 books and hundreds of articles, commentaries, and interviews, the vast majority of which focus on the psychological facets of warfare in general, and on information warfare in particular. While Dugin focuses on the

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[49] Ibid., pg. 252.

[50] Ibid., pp. 250–258.

[51] See Zariffulin, P., 'Setevaya voyna na Severnom Kavkaze', *Informatsionnye voyny*, Vol. 2(6), 2008, pp. 37–41; Korovin, V., 'Setevaya voyna Ameriki protiv Rossii na primere Chechni', *Informatsionnye voyny,* Vol. 2(6), 2008, pp. 42–46; Bovdunov, A., 'Nepravitel'stvennye organizatsii - setevaya voyna protiv Rossii', *Informatsionnye voyny*, Vol. 3(7), 2008, pp. 30–39; Savin, L., 'Ukraina v setevoy voyne', *Informatsionnye voyny*, Vol. 3(7), 2008, pp. 42–51; Kanishchev, P., 'Setevaya voyna SSHA protiv Rossii - pole boya – Gruziya', *Informatsionnye voyny,* Vol. 3(7), 2008, pp. 52-56; Korovin, V., *Glavnaya voyennaya tayna SSHA. Setevyye voyny : 'tsvetnyye revolyutsii', taynyye zagovory i spetsoperatsii, podryvnaya propaganda, 'promyvaniye mozgov', voyny 21 veka,* (Moscow: Yauza, Eksmo, 2009); Filimonov, *Kulturno-informatsionnie mekhanizmi vnewnei politiki SSHA*, pp.189–206.

struggle between the West and Russia from the perspective of political philosophy, Panarin has been implicitly focusing on information warfare as the major domain of this struggle, claiming that:

> 'Since antiquity, the stability of the political system of any country has been relying on how quickly and completely the political elites receive information (e.g. about [possible] danger), and how quickly they respond... Political activity [by its definition] is an informational struggle over the control of the minds of the elites and [other] social groups.'[52]

Analysing the long history of war, Panarin argues that the informational dimension has always played one of the most decisive roles in human conflict.[53] According to him, an informational confrontation is:

> 'A type of confrontation between parties, represented by the use of special (political, economic, diplomatic, military and other) methods [based on different] ways and means that influence the informational environment of the opposing party [while] protecting their own [environment], in order to achieve clearly defined goals. [Therefore, t]he major dimensions for waging informational-psychological confrontations [are] political, diplomatic, financial-economic, [and] military.'[54]

It is important to note that when Panarin mentions these dimensions, he does not refer to political, diplomatic, financial-economic, or military activities themselves, but rather to the manipulation of their informational images in order to achieve intentional control of the targeted public opinion so that certain political benefits can be gained. According to Panarin, control can be achieved by information manipulation, disinformation, fabrication of information, lobbying, blackmail, or any other possible way of extracting the desired information; or by the mere denial of information from the adversary. Thus, when an information war is waged by one state against another, Panarin states, it 'aims to interrupt the balance of power and achieve superiority in the global informational dimension' targeting 'the decision-making processes of the adversary' by manipulating international and domestic public opinion.[55]

Panarin defines three main stages of information warfare. The first stage is strategic political analysis, which includes the 'collection, aggregation, and exchange of information about adversaries and allies for the purpose of conducting active actions'. The second stage, informational influence, is based on 'infiltration of negative comments and disinformation into the informational domain of the adversary, as well as the suppression of the adversary's attempts to get the information that he requires'. And the third stage, informational defence, is 'blocking the disinformation dispersed and infiltrated by the adversary'.[56]

[52] Panarin, I., *Informatsionnaya voyna i geopolitika*, (Moscow: Pokolenie, 2006), p. 165.

[53] See Panarin, I., *Pervaya mirovaya informatsionnaya voyna: razval SSSR*, (Saint-Petersburg: Piter, 2010); I. Panarin, *Informatsionnyye voyna I kommunikatsii*, (Moscow: Goryachaya Liniya-Telekom, 2015); Panarin, I. and L. Panarina, *Informatsionnaya voyna i mir,* (Moscow: OLMA-PRESS, 2003).

[54] Panarin, I. and L. Panarina, *Informatsionnaya voyna i mir,* pp. 20-21.

[55] Panarin, I., *Pervaya mirovaya informatsionnaya voyna: razval SSSR*, pg. 24.

[56] Ibid., pg. 25.

As Panarin sees it, one of the most important aspects of information warfare is the fact that it targets the minds of the political elite and the general population, creating favourable public opinion and, therefore, affecting the whole political decision-making process of the opposing side. Similar to Dugin, Panarin suggests that, for the last several centuries, geopolitics have been dominated by a struggle between two main civilisations—the sea-oriented, i.e. the British Empire and the US, and the continent-oriented, i.e. Eurasia—Germany and Russia. While this struggle has often been expressed in the form of physical clashes (i.e. wars), these have always been accompanied by information warfare before, during, and after the wars.[57] Moreover, Panarin claims that, during the 20th century, the West—first the British Empire and then the US—mastered information warfare, ultimately leading to the dissolution of the Soviet Union as the 'main cause of the geopolitical catastrophe of 1991 was a defeat in the informational war, which lasted for 48 years'.[58] According to Panarin's interpretation of the Cold War, the main informational offence of the US was carried out to compromise and destabilise the Soviet political elite, targeting the weakest element of the Soviet political establishment—the transfer of power.[59]

On the one hand, Panarin highlights the fact that the main reason for the defeat of the Soviet Union in this information war (i.e. the Cold War) was the systematic failure of the Soviet political and military establishments, rather than the skilful exploitation of the information domain by the US. On the other, he argues that the war is not over; the struggle between the political elites of the West and Russia did not end in 1991, and 'in the 21st century information war is the major tool of contemporary world politics, [and] the dominant way to achieve political and economic power' – Russia continues to be the target of Western Informational Warfare.[60]

To avoid the repetition of the detrimental defeat of the USSR in the information war against the West, Panarin suggests that 'the existence of Russia depends on whether a new political elite will be formed—a passionate Russian political elite capable of an adequate response to the global challenges of the 21st century'. This elite, according to him, should be based on intellectuals from the liberal arts and sciences, the senior leadership of the security services and military, and the representatives of big and medium capital. The strategic purpose of this elite should be 'the formation of a positive global public opinion of Russia', since:

> 'Only a new Russian political elite, capable of skilfully conducting the geopolitical information confrontation, can create favourable conditions for the prosperity and development of the individual, society and the state, [and] to achieve its national and economic interests in the international arena.'[61]

Similarly to Dugin, Panarin's politicisation of information warfare as the historical offense of the West against Russia that led Russian people to destroy their country

[57] See: Panarin, I., *Pervaya mirovaya informatsionnaya voyna: razval SSSR*; I. Panarin, *Informatsionnaya voyna i geopolitika*; I. Panarin, *Informatsionnyye voyna I kommunikatsii*.

[58] Panarin, I., *Pervaya mirovaya informatsionnaya voyna: razval SSSR*, pg. 10.

[59] See: Panarin, I., *Pervaya mirovaya informatsionnaya voyna: razval SSSR*; I. Panarin, *Informatsionnyye voyna I kommunikatsii*.

[60] Panarin, I., and L. Panarina, *Informatsionnaya voyna i mir*, pg. 4.

[61] Panarin, I., *Informatsionnaya voyna i geopolitika*, pp. 244–245.

twice in the 20th century (the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917 and the fall of the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991)[62] has found fruitful ground in the Russian academic community. During the last decade, numerous articles and books have been using Panarin's concepts and ideas to interpret the deteriorating relations between Russia and the West, claiming that Russia has to defend itself against the informational offensive waged by the West.[63]

Summarising both Dugin's and Panarin's politicisations on information warfare, it is important to highlight their four common aspects. First, both claim that the West (first the British Empire, then the US) has been continuously and purposefully attempting to intervene and undermine the Russian political establishment before, during, and after the Cold War (i.e. as a part of inter-civilisations struggle for dominance). Secondly, the West's major strategy has been information warfare, influencing both Russian and international public opinions against the Russian political elite by manipulating the flow of information on political, diplomatic, financial-economic, and military affairs. The third aspect is the claim of both scholars that, in addition to the manipulation of information from the outside, Western strategy is aimed at creating a 'fifth column' within Russia in an attempt to destabilise Russia from the inside. And finally, as an answer to these old-new threats, both scholars argue that Russia should nurture its new political elite, which will be patriotic and passionate enough to overcome the Western net-centric/information war, making Russia the political, cultural, economic, and military centre of Eurasian civilisation.

The Politicisation of Information Warfare in Russia

The political idea expressed by the proponents of subversion, net-centric or information wars waged by the West against Russia to indirectly undermine the legitimacy of the Kremlin through the informational dimension, has spread like a bush fire through Russian scholarly circles, and among political analysts and commentators. Called by different titles—Hybrid Warfare, Controlled Chaos, Colour Revolutions—this idea has been widely discussed and promoted by academics, the political elite, and military professionals.[64]

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[62] Panarin, I., *Pervaya mirovaya informatsionnaya voyna: razval SSSR*; I. Panarin, *Informatsionnaya voyna i geopolitika.*

[63] Kovalev, V. and S. Malkov, 'Chto delat', chtoby ne raspast'sya kak SSSR?', *Informatsionnye voyny,* Vol. 3(35), 2015, pp. 52–57; Yu. Grigor'yev, 'Antirossiyskiye Informatsionnyye Voyny', *Informatsionnye voyny,* Vol. 4(36), 2015, pp. 5–11; S. Tkachenko, *Informatsionnaya voyna protiv Rossii*, (Saint Petersburg: Piter, 2011); Lisichkin, V., L. Shelepin, *Tret'ya mirovaya informatsionno-psikhologicheskaya voyna,* (Moscow: Eskimo-Algoritm, 2003); Novikov, V., *Informatsionnoye oruzhiye—oruzhiye sovremennykh i budushchikh voyn,* (Moscow: Goryachaya Liniya-Telekom, 2011); Belyayev, D., *Razrukha v golovakh. Informatsionnaya voyna protiv Rossii,* (Saint Petersburg: Piter, 2015).

[64] See Tsygankov, P., *'Gibridnyye Voyny' v khaotiziruyushchemsya mire XXI veka,* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 2015); Korybko, A., *Hybrid Wars: The Indirect Adaptive Approach to Regime Change,* (Moscow: People's Friendship University of Russia, 2015); Bocharnikov, I., (ed.), *Evolyutsiya form, metodov i instrumentov protivoborstva v sovremennykh konfliktakh*, (Moscow: Ekon-Inform, 2015); Vladimirov, A., 'Gosudarstvo, voyna i natsional'naya bezopasnost' Rossii', *Prostranstvo i vremya,* No. 1, 2011, pp.26-38; Vladimirov, A., 'Strategiya "organizovannogo khaosa"', *Prostranstvo i vremya,* No. 1, 2010, pp.53–57; Manoylo, A., 'Ukrainskiy Krizis i "Upravlyayemyy Khaos": sled "Tsvetnykh Revolyutsiy" Arabskoy Vesny', *Vlast',* No. 4, 2014, pp. 24–28.

Evaluating the political impact of this large body of literature it is difficult to disagree with Russian professor Gregory Tulchinsky, who claimed that:

> 'The specific feature of "information warfare" is the implicitness of their actors. Who is the organiser of these actions? Against whom are they really directed? The ambiguity, regardless their actors, creates a mythicisation of "information wars" and their demonisation. If one wishes, [he] can trace a motivational chain, a "cunning plan", behind any news [story or] any event that can be attributed to some "enemies". This, of course, does not deny the fact of developing or implemented plans and projects done by various political and social forces— both foreign and domestic [...] However, the actors in "information wars" have largely become the product of interpretations and discursive practices, which, in turn, can also be regarded as "information warfare".'[65]

Conceptualising ongoing discourse about information warfare in Russia, as information warfare itself, Tulchinsky stated that 'it is a conflict, represented in the informational dimension, intended to activate some influential group, some institution, people who make decisions'.[66] Taking into consideration the fact that this discourse has been occurring in Russian, it seems right to conclude that the main target of this politicised information war, the Western offensive to destabilise Russia internally, has been Russia's domestic audience—the political elite and the general public. Therefore, to understand the level of this politicisation, it is important to analyse the way in which the 'Western information war against Russia' is expressed in Russian official political discourse and in public opinion.

A brief analysis of the contemporary Russian official political discourse shows that this narrative of a 'Western information war against Russia' is clearly and openly expressed by the Russian leadership. For example, President Vladimir Putin openly claims that:

> 'Our diplomats understand, of course, how important the battle to influence public opinion and shape the public mood is these days. We have given these issues much attention over recent years. However, today, as we face a growing barrage of information attacks unleashed against Russia by some of our so-called partners, we need to make even greater efforts in this direction.'[67]

Another example is Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, who, elaborating on the nature of these attacks, claimed:

> 'The destructive [political] line related to the events in Ukraine, the introduction of illegitimate sanctions against Russia, the attempts to punish our country for upholding truth and justice, for speaking in defense of [our] compatriots [in Ukraine] ... [all these] led to a serious crisis in our relations with the West.

[65] Tulchinsky, G., 'Informatsionnyye voyny kak konflikt interpretatsiy, aktiviziruyushchikh "tret'yego", in O. Malinova, (ed.), *Simvolicheskaya politika, Vol.1: Konstruirovaniye predstavleniy o proshlom kak vlastnyy resurs,* (Moscow: INION RAN, 2012), pp. 251–262; S. Glazunova, G. Tulchinsky, 'Paradoksal'nost' "informatsionnykh voyn" kak reprezentatsii konfliktov v sovremennom obshchestve: v poiskakh "postinformatsionnogo Tret'yego", in *Modernizatsiya kak upravlyayemyy konflikt*, (Moscow: Izdatel'skii .Dom "Klyuch-S", 2012), pp. 333–338.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Putin (2016) Speech at the Meeting of Russian Federation ambassadors and permanent envoys, Moscow, 30 June 2016.

We are faced with a large-scale information war.'[68]

The adaptation of these narratives, shaped by the proponents of the Western information offensive, has not simply ended with political speeches made by the Kremlin's leadership. The very same language can be easily found in the Russian doctrinal documents that have been amended in recent years. For example, the Russian Nation Security Strategy, amended in 2015, states that:

'The growing confrontation in the global information space has an increasing influence on the character of the international situation, as an outcome of the desire of some countries to achieve their geopolitical objectives by using information and communication technologies, including the manipulation of public consciousness and the falsification of history.'[69]

Another example is the new version of the Doctrine of the Information Security of the Russian Federation, proposed by the Russian Security Council, according to which one of the main threats to Russia is the fact that:

'The scale of the use of information-psychological influences by the special services of certain states is expanding. [These influences] are aimed at destabilising the political and social situation in various regions of the world, undermining the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of other states...The informational influence on the Russian population, primarily young people, is increasing. [This influence] is aimed at blurring cultural and spiritual values, undermining the moral foundations, historical foundations, and patriotic traditions of [Russia's] multinational people.'[70]

Moreover, as an outcome of these changes in doctrinal documents, the Russian government successfully passed several laws intended to counteract the alleged Western information offensive and protect Russian information space, such as the 2012 Federal Law № 121-FZ that restricted the activity of NGOs that receive foreign funding,[71] the 2013 Federal Law № 398-FZ that simplified the procedures required to block extremist websites, the 2014 Federal Law № 97-FZ that enforced governmental supervision on successful websites and blogs, the 2016 Federal Law № 374-FZ that forced websites to store data concerning their Russian clients within the

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[68] 'Sergey Lavrov: Rossiya stolknulas' s bespretsedentnoy informatsionnoy voynoy', *Russia Today* in Russian, 10 April 2015.

[69] Presidential Decree N 683, On the Russian Federation National Security Strategy, Moscow, 31 December 2015

[70] The Security Council of the Russian Federation, Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation (draft), Moscow.

[71] The State Duma, Federal Law N 121-FZ - On Amendments to Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the regulation of the activities of non-profit organizations that perform the functions of a foreign agent, Moscow, 20 July 2012.

territory of Russia,[72] the 2014 Federal Law № 305-FZ that limits foreign investment in Russian media outlets.[73] While this new legislation was followed by a wave of critical reactions from international and Russian domestic communities,[74] it seems that this criticism has had limited consequences and has not been picked up by the general public.

While it seems that the politicisation of information warfare was successfully adopted by the Russian government to implement these laws, it is also important to examine the level of influence of this politicisation on the Russian public. According to the public opinion survey done by Levada Center in December 2014, 87% of responders said that the West is hostile towards Russia, and 42% of them claimed that this hostility is expressed in the form of information war. In October 2015, these numbers remained similarly high, with 82% believing that the West bears a hostile attitude towards Russia, and 44% of them accusing the West of waging an information war. Interestingly enough, answering the question 'What does the West try to achieve by toughening the sanctions against Russia' the vast majority answered 'To weaken and humiliate Russia', 71% in September 2014 and 69% in October 2015, in contrast to only 4% in 2014, and 6% in 2015 who believed that by tightening the sanction the West is trying 'to stop the war, destruction, and people's deaths in Eastern Ukraine'.[75] In other words, it seems that Russian people truly believe in the narrative that tells the story of a Western offensive to undermine Russia, either by information war, or by sanction, which, according to the proponents of the 'Western subversion/net-centric/information war against Russia' scenario, are also elements of a general informational offensive. Moreover, the majority of the Russian population believes that the main Russian TV channels are censored by the government (69% in February 2014 and 58% in May 2016)[76] and in November 2015 only 41% trusted Russian TV channels as their main source of domestic and international news (down from 79% in August 2009).[77] Frequently it seems right to argue that the academic community played an equal if not more powerful role, together with the official line of the political elites, politicising the idea of information war in the eyes of the Russian public.

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[72] The State Duma, Federal Law N 398-FZ - On Amendments to the Federal Law, "On Information, Information Technologies and Protection of Information", Moscow, 28 December 2013; Federal Law N 97-FZ - On Amendments to the Federal Law "On Information, Information Technologies and Protection of Information" and Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation on the regulation of the exchange of information using information-telecommunication networks, Moscow, 21 July 2014; Federal Law 374-FZ - On Amendments to the Federal Law "On Combating Terrorism" and Certain Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation to establish additional measures to counter terrorism and ensure public safety, Moscow, 6 July 2016.

73 The State Duma, Federal Law N 305-FZ - On Amendments to the Law of the Russian Federation "On Mass Media", Moscow, 14 October 2014.

[74] See 'Internet-kompanii kritikuyut antipiratskiy zakonoproyekt deputatov GD', *Ria-Novosti,* 13 June 2013; Surnacheva, Y., 'Ogranichennyye Dumoy', *Kommersant.ru*, 29 September 2014; 'Russian MPs back law on internet data storage', *BBCNews*, 5 July 2014; 'Russia: Writers and Academics Speak Out Against Law on Foreign Agents', *PEN American Center*, 5 February 2016; Dyomkin, D., 'Council of Europe tells Putin of concern over Russian NGO law', *Reuters*, 20 May 2013.

[75] Levada Center, *Reaktsiya Zapada na politiku Rossii: kritika, vrazhdebnost', sanktsii,* 2 December 2015.

[76] Levada Center, *SMI: vnimaniye i tsenzura,* 6 June 2016.

[77] Levada Center, *Novostnyye istochniki i doveriye k nim,* 16 December 2015.

To conclude this analysis of the politicisation of information warfare in Russia, it seems right to point to the three main groups involved in the process—the academic community, the Russian political establishment, and the Russian general public. The most interesting question, however, is who has been influencing whom in this process?

Conclusions

Interestingly, when we look at all three aspects of the process—the politicisation of information warfare directed by its scholarly proponents, the adaptation of these narratives by the Russian government and their translation into legal actions favourable to the Kremlin, as well as Russian public opinion that generally absorbed these ideas and legislation without significant criticism—it is very difficult to separate actors and targets. On the one hand, it is possible to assume, as some Western analysts propose,[78] that Panarin, Dugin, and other scholars who vocally politicise the narrative of the Western information war against Russia, go hand in hand with the Russian political establishment, alienating Russian public opinion against the West, thus allowing the Kremlin to enforce its grip on power. On the other, the assumption that the Kremlin uses these scholars seems to be flawed, as Panarin, Dugin, and the revivers of Messner began promoting their ideas in the 1990s, well before Putin's accession to power. Therefore, it seems right to assume that the politicisation of Western Information Warfare against Russia has been directed by these schools of thought, and adopted *de facto* by the political establishment.

There is, however, another possible explanation. History suggests that the Russian people are very proud nation, and in times of trouble they expect their leaders to stand firm and lead them to victory. The Tsarist government during the First World War, or the Soviet leaders during the Afghanistan War, did not prove to be a strong leadership that deserved to be followed. Witness, Nikolas II was the last Tsar and Mikhail Gorbachev—the last Soviet leader.[79] Over the last decade, Vladimir Putin has proven himself a student of history and a very good reader of Russian cultural predispositions. As Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Centre and one of the most outspoken critics of Putin's regime, put it: 'Putin's main recipe for staying in power is to stay in close touch with the bulk of the people, and anticipate emerging trends'.[80] From the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the present day, the vast majority of the Russian population has been lamenting their loss of power (66% in 1992, peaking in 2000 with 75%, and 56% in 2016), with as much as a third of the population believing that the fall of the USSR could have been avoided (with highest percentages of 33% in 2011 and 2016).[81] In other words, this sorrow for the lost

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[78] See J. Darczewska, *The Anatomy of Russian Information Warfare: The Crimean Operation, A Case Study, Point of View*, Vol. 42, (Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies, 2014); U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), *'Little Green Men': a Primer on Modern Russian unconventional Warfare, 2013-2014*, An unclassified version of the original document, (Fort Bragg, 2016).

[79] Trenin, Dmitri, 'Putin's Biggest Challenge Is Public Support', Carnegie Moscow Center, 15 January 2015.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Levada Center, *Bol'she poloviny rossiyan sozhaleyut o raspade SSSR*, 19 April 2016.

pride might explain the thirst of the Russian public for a sound justification of their defeat in the Cold War to Russia's traditional enemy—the West. Maybe the Kremlin does not, in fact, brainwash the Russian people, but simply follows their hearts and minds.

Unfortunately, it seems that none of these explanations is completely right or entirely wrong; the eventual truth seems to be somewhere in the middle. Summarising his idea of the politicisation of information war as information war itself, Tulchinsky concluded: 'sometimes the information war [just] repositions a well-known fact, encouraging the decision-making process or demonstrating that the decision is maturing or has even been made'.[82] In other words, the political success of the narrative of the Western information war against Russia within Russian academic, political, and public spheres seems to be the outcome of many actors who inter-influence one another, participating in the same play but for different reasons. Academics want to promote their ideas, politicians want to enforce their power, and the general public wants to regain a sense of national pride—rather than a result of a carefully planned and staged plot of Putin's regime, as it is frequently presented in the West.

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[82] Tulchinsky, G., 'Informatsionnyye voyny kak konflikt interpretatsiy, aktiviziruyushchikh "tret'yego".

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EXAMINING THE USE OF BOTNETS AND THEIR EVOLUTION IN PROPAGANDA DISSEMINATION

Nitin Agarwal, Samer Al-khateeb, Rick Galeano, Rebecca Goolsby

Abstract

Social media is increasingly used to communicate strategic information during crises and to enable authorities to act tactfully. Numerous journalistic accounts have highlighted the prolific and disturbing use of social media by deviant groups among state and non-state actors to influence public opinion and provoke hysteria among citizens through disseminating misinformation or propaganda about various influential events such as the 2014 Crimean Water Crisis or the 2015 Dragoon Ride Exercise. We study the strategic communication used by deviant groups within the social media ecosystem, especially examining the cross-influence between blogs and Twitter. We have collected and analysed data from blogs and Twitter during the two aforementioned events. Our study shows that networked computers running automated and coordinated programs to perform specific tasks, or 'botnets' have been extensively used during the two events, greatly increasing the dissemination of propaganda. Furthermore, the behaviours of these botnets are becoming increasingly sophisticated over time, both from the perspective of information dissemination as well as coordination. The evolving behaviours of botnets make them elusive, even to state-of-the-art detection techniques, warranting more sophisticated botnet detection methodologies. In this study, we present methodologies informed by social science and computational network analysis to study the information dissemination and coordination behaviours of botnets and to aid the development of detection tools ready for deployment in cyber operations.

Keywords: information warfare, cyber operations, social media, Twitter, blogs, strategic communications, botnets, propaganda, disinformation campaigns, social network analysis, focal structures.

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Introduction

The use of social media has exploded in the last few years and continues to grow rapidly. A recent report by Smith et al.[1] shows that there are about 1,3 billion users on Twitter with an average of 100 million active daily users, including 65 million users in the United States alone. In addition to Twitter, Facebook—the largest social media site in the world—has about 1,65 billion users, with about 167 million active daily users in the United States and Canada who spend an average of 20 minutes per day on Facebook.[2] Once primarily used for entertainment and communicating with friends and acquaintances, social media platforms are increasingly used to influence others, spread [mis]information, disseminate propaganda, and invite people to protests and revolutions. Social media has helped facilitate change in many countries. For example, when Mr Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old Tunisian fruit vendor, set himself on fire on 18 December 2010 in front of a government building, social media helped unify the socio-political unrest and shaped the narrative for the protest movement, which ultimately caused President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to step down. As reported by the US National Public Radio,[3] that act was captured on camera, disseminated through social media, and broadcast on many national and international TV channels. This encouraged activists in many other countries to protest against their authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and collectively gave rise to what is called the 'Arab Spring'.

[1] Smith, Craig, 'By The Numbers: 170+ Amazing Twitter Statistics', *Digital Marketing Ramblings*, 30 April 2016.

[2] Ibid; Smith, Craig, 'By The Numbers: 200 Surprising Facebook Statistics (April 2016)',*Digital Marketing Ramblings*, 1 June 2016

[3] 'The Arab Spring: A Year Of Revolution', *National Public Radio*, 17 December 2011, All Things Considered.

Several journalistic accounts provide empirical evidence that deviant groups perform strategic and tactical manoeuvres of information using social media to exploit local grievances, steer public opinion, polarise communities, and incite crowd violence. We define a 'deviant group' (DG) as a group of individuals that organises a harmful activity affecting cyberspace, physical space, or both, i.e. the 'cybernetic space'.[4] There are many examples of very well known deviant groups, such as the so-called the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/Levant, also known as ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh. Also, the cyber criminals or hacker networks that use social media as a platform to coordinate cyber attacks,[5] sell various programs/software that can capture sensitive financial data,[6] or sell those financial data using online forums to make a profit are considered to be deviant groups.[7] Another example of deviant groups can be found in the recent Ukraine-Russia conflict, where sites like VKontakte—a Russian social media platform, LiveJournal, Twitter, YouTube, and other blogging platforms (e.g. Tumblr, etc.) have been used as propaganda machines, justifying the Kremlin's policies and actions.[8] According to *Interpret Magazine*, the Kremlin recruited over 250 'trolls', people hired to disseminate false information, rumours, or propaganda on popular blogs with large audiences, and paid each of them $917 per month to work around the clock producing posts on social and mainstream media. The trolls would create a stream of invective against pro-Ukrainian media and Western news sources writing unflatteringly about Russia, and by posting numerous comments and blog posts each day using multiple 'sock puppet' accounts, clone accounts, and by working in small groups, e.g. triads (a group of three individuals). Such 'troll armies' (or 'web brigades') piggyback on the popularity of social media to disseminate fake pictures and videos, coordinating effective disinformation campaigns to which even legitimate news organisation sometimes fall prey.[9] To stem the tide of fakery, or at least to increase awareness of the problem, online crowdsourcing-based efforts like StopFake.org, the European External Action Service (EEAS), the East Strategic Communication Task Force and its program to fight disinformation (@EUvsDisInfo), and the Estonian organisation PropaStop.Org have been created to identify and debunk fake imagery and stories about the war in Ukraine. However, such efforts are severely limited and easily outnumbered by the troll armies.

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[4] Samer Al-khateeb and Nitin Agarwal, 'Analyzing Flash Mobs in Cybernetic Space and the Imminent Security Threats A Collective Action Based Theoretical Perspective on Emerging Sociotechnical Behaviors', in *2015 AAAI Spring Symposium Series*, 2015.

[5] Samer Al-khateeb et al., 'Exploring Deviant Hacker Networks (DHN) On Social Media Platforms', *The Journal of Digital Forensics, Security and Law:* 11, no. 2 (2016): 7–20.

[6] Holt, Thomas J., 'Examining the Forces Shaping Cybercrime Markets Online', *Social Science Computer Review* 31, no. 2 (2013): 165–77.

[7] Holt, Thomas J., 'Exploring the Social Organisation and Structure of Stolen Data Markets', *Global Crime* 14, no. 2–3 (2013): 155–74.

[8] Allen, Michael, 'Kremlin's 'Social Media Takeover': Cold War Tactics Fuel Ukraine Crisis', *Democracy Digest, National Endowment for Democracy*, 10 March 2014; Bohlen, Celestine, 'Cold War Media Tactics Fuel Ukraine Crisis', *The Times*, 10 March 2014

[9] Sindelar, Daisy, 'The Kremlin's Troll Army: Moscow Is Financing Legions of pro-Russia Internet Commenters. But How Much Do They Matter?', *The Atlantic*, 12 August 2014.

With the growth of easy-to-use technology, mobile devices, and the wide availability of programming tools and hacks, the dissemination of propaganda on social media is becoming easier. Research shows that most Internet traffic, especially on social media, is generated by 'botnets',[10] or computer programs coordinated across numerous computers that can be scheduled to perform various tasks on the behalf of the user. In addition to botnets, individuals are hired to troll social media sites, primarily blogs, to help in disseminating propaganda, especially during times of crisis.[11] Throughout this article, we will use the term 'bots' to refer to a collection of bots that are not necessary connected, while we will use the terms 'botnet' and 'automated social actors/agents' (ASAs) to refer to networks of connected and coordinated bots.

The fragmented and diverse nature of Internet discourse and news distribution creates a gap-filled territory for exploitation by social bots and hybrid human/bot collaborations that engage in information conflicts, or 'trolling', and in the dissemination of messages. Nowhere is this more evident than in the strange byroads of Twitter. Social bots carrying *Russian Times* stories and topics have been running rampant in Twitter feeds. So much so that these bots can even be identified in studies that only look at the 1% of the Twitter feeds one can access via Twitter's most widely used APIs, i.e. the REST API. The output generated by these botnets is often strange and it is difficult to see their interference as compelling, or even interesting, but their presence crowds out legitimate voices in the stream, even if bot messages are spouting nonsense. Hordes of bots and hybrid human/bot posts flooded Twitter's algorithms with fabricated and manipulated information. By occupying these channels, bots were able to halt a global outpouring of concern by the people before it gained momentum.

Bot-controlled information dissemination can move a given message into the answer stream suggested for the keywords given by people using Twitter or other search engines. There is a definite art to this process. If done well, such methods can bump a topic up into 'top trends'—showing the world that a topic is popular on the world stage of public interest. Conversely, sending too many messages will trigger Twitter or other search engines' spam prevention algorithms, resulting in detecting the manipulation and suspending the accounts.

Botnet and hybrid human/bot campaigns also have other objectives. They can drive up the Google PageRank scores for articles, expanding the reach of Russian spin on news stories. For example, a Google search on 'MH17 and deception' pulls up, as first and second posts, attacks on the West as having been the perpetrators of deception, rather than the Russians. [Dis]information was widely propagated by the anti-Western websites *21st Century Wire*[12] and *Global Research*,[13] which promoted the

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[10] Cheng, Alex and Mark Evans, 'Inside Twitter An In-Depth Look at the 5% of Most Active Users', (Sysomos Inc., 2009).

[11] Sindelar, 'The Kremlin's Troll Army'.

[12] Helton, Shawn, 'Flight MH17 Conjures MH370, Exposing Western Deception, Leading To More Questions', *21st Century Wire*, 19 July 2014.

[13] Helton, Shawn, 'Flight MH17 Conjures MH370, Exposing Western Deception, Was It a Staged Event?', Blog, *Global Research,* 19 July 2014.

story that the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over Ukraine was a staged event and alleged widespread Western manipulation of media; these sites achieved page ranks over and above the popular mainstream article from *The Economist*.[14] *The Economist* has a print circulation of over 1m and monthly page views over 34m.[15] This indicates that manipulation of PageRank scores is possible, although the influence of other conspiracy sites, forums, mailing lists, and the like should not be discounted as 'push factors' in building PageRank scores. Wild, tantalising rumours can energise global social networks of conspiracy theorists, throwing gasoline on the fire of speculation among rabid anti-Western ideologues. Certainly, this firestorm was kindled and initiated from the postings and reportage of *RT* and *PressTV*, as well as other Russian-owned news organisations. *The Guardian*,[16] the *BBC*,[17] and the *Washington Post*[18] catalogued that conspiracy theorists around the world had a field day with the MH17 tragedy.

Social media has undoubtedly helped facilitate change.[19] There are several examples, where social media has helped transform the socio-political landscape of a country or an entire region (e.g. Arab Spring),[20] helped coordinate humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations (e.g. the humanitarian crisis during the Nepal earthquake),[21] and shaped people's decisions, plans, behaviours, or beliefs (e.g. during the spread of an infectious disease).[22] The powerful ability of social media platforms to connect with the masses and influence their behaviour has attracted many groups and organisations.[23] In some cases, groups or organisations harness the power of social media to provoke hysteria and influence public opinion to encourage the destabilisation of a region through the dissemination of propaganda about global or local events.[24]

The deviant practices conducted over modern information and communication technologies (ICTs), especially social media, call for an in-depth study to better understand the new strategic communication and its evolution over time.

[14] 'Russia, MH17 and the West A Web of Lies', Blog, *The Economist*, 26 July 2014.

[15] Moore, Sue, 'The Economist - Worldwide Brand Report', *The Economist*, 8 November 2016.

[16] Reidy, Padraig, 'MH17: Five of the Most Bizarre Conspiracy Theories', *The Guardian*, 22 July 2014.

[17] De Castella, Tom, 'Malaysia Airlines MH370: The Persistence of Conspiracy Theories', *BBC News*, 8 September 2014.

[18] Dewey, Caitlin, 'A Comprehensive Guide to the Web's Many MH17 Conspiracy Theories', *The Washington Post*, 18 July 2014.

[19] Lutz, Catherine, 'Is Social Media a Dangerous Force Against Democracy?', *The Aspen Idea Blog,* 6 August 2014; Shirky, Clay, 'The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change', *Council on Foreign Relations* 90, no. 1 (February 2011): 28–41; Brooking, T. Emerson and P.W Singer, 'War Goes Viral: How Social Media Is Being Weaponized across the World', *The Atlantic*, November 2016.

[20] Howard, Philip N. et al., 'Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media during the Arab Spring?', *Social Science Research Networks*, 17 April 2015.

[21] Preiss, Danielle, 'How Social Media Is Helping Nepal Rebuild after Two Big Earthquakes', *Quartz India,* 19 May 2015.

[22] Schmidt, Charles W., 'Trending Now: Using Social Media to Predict and Track Disease Outbreaks', *Environmental Health Perspectives* 120, no. 1 (2012): 30–33.

[23] Tatham, S. A., *Strategic Communication: A Primer*, (Shrivenham: Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, Advanced Research and Assessment Group, 2008).

[24] Lutz, 'Is Social Media a Dangerous Force?'; Tatham, *Strategic Communication: A Primer*.

This study aims to provide a systematic analysis of botnets, their evolution, and their exploitation for disseminating propaganda through social media. We anticipate that this study will help authorities assess the state of propaganda dissemination and disinformation campaigns conducted on social media, develop strategies to counter such strategic communications, and enhance overall cyber operations.

In this study, we focus on two events, the 2014 Crimean Water Crisis[25] and the 2015 Dragoon Ride exercise[26] to investigate such strategic communications, especially the role of botnets in propaganda dissemination campaigns. We collected data from social media, including blogs and Twitter, during the two events mentioned above. Using socio-computational methodologies, we are able to identify the 'seeders of information' (nodes that work as sources of information, i.e. a node that supplies content to the bot) to the botnets, and the communication and coordination strategies used in each event. A striking observation was made in the case studies, i.e. **the botnets deployed for propaganda dissemination have evolved tremendously by becoming increasingly deceptive and well coordinated.** More specifically, we sought answers to the following research questions:

- Who is responsible for propaganda dissemination in the 2014 Crimean Water Crisis and 2015 Dragoon Ride exercise events?

- What role do botnets play in propaganda dissemination campaigns for these events?

- What strategies are used in each case?

- How did botnets evolve over 2014–2015? And what can be learned from their evolution trajectory?

- Is there an organisational structure among bots, i.e. who is responsible for seeding the information (or rather, misinformation) to these bots? Are these bots working in collusion? Are there other more sophisticated roles played by specific bots to effectively and efficiently coordinate propaganda campaigns in social media? For example, do bots act as brokers to bridge different bot network groups? Can we identify such roles and/or positions?

- What are other structural communication and/or coordination patterns characteristic to botnet propaganda dissemination networks?

- Can we develop predictive models and tools that are able to detect botnet behaviours?

[25] 'Russia Fears Crimea Water Shortage as Supply Drops', *BBC News*, 25 April 2014.

[26] Defense Media Activity DoD News, 'Operation Atlantic Resolve Exercises Begin in Eastern Europe', 24 March 2015.

We are making the following contributions toward answering these questions:

- We study a phenomenon commonly used to disseminate propaganda on social media.
- We propose step-by-step methodologies that can be used to analyse propaganda dissemination.
- We document coordination strategies among bots that enhance the reachability of their propaganda messages.
- We have identified an organisational structure among bots, where a real-person feeds misinformation to a network of bots. Further, a number of bots are programmed to act as brokers, feeding this information to bots in other network groups.
- We identify sophisticated coordination structures among bots corresponding to collective behaviours to disseminate propaganda.
- The findings will inform the development of predictive models and eventually result in tools that can assist in the detection of bots.

The rest of the article is organised as follows. The next section reviews the literature summarising key research studies conducted in the domain of identifying bots in social media. The third section provides a brief description of the data that was collected for the two events, the 2014 Crimean Water Crisis and the 2015 Dragoon Ride exercise, the methodologies that were used to study the botnets, our analysis, and our findings. We outline our conclusions with implications of the research in the fourth section. And in the final section, we shed light on this evolving research area, especially propaganda analysis in the modern ICT and social information system space, and envision the next phase of work.

Literature Review

Bots are not a new phenomenon. They have been studied previously in literature in a variety of domains, such as Internet Relay Chat,[27] online gaming e.g. World of Warcraft (WoW),[28] and more recently behavioural steering through misinformation dissemination on social media.[29]

[27] Anestis, Karasaridis, Brian Rexroad, and David Hoeflin, 'Wide-Scale Botnet Detection and Characterization', in Proceedings of the First Conference on First Workshop on Hot Topics in Understanding Botnets, vol. 7 (Cambridge, MA, 2007); Rodríguez-Gómez, Rafael A., Gabriel Maciá-Fernández, and Pedro García-Teodoro, 'Survey and Taxonomy of Botnet Research through Life-Cycle', *ACM Computing Surveys (CSUR)* 45, no. 4 (2013): 45.

[28] Ackerman, Mark S., Jack Muramatsu, and David W. McDonald, 'Social Regulation in an Online Game: Uncovering the Problematics of Code', in Proceedings of the 16th ACM International Conference on Supporting Group Work (ACM, 2010), 173–182; Karasaridis, Rexroad, and Hoeflin, 'Wide-Scale Botnet Detection and Characterization'.

[29] Protalinski, Emil, 'Facebook: 5-6% of Accounts Are Fake, *ZDNet*, 8 March 2012; Hegelich, Simon and Dietmar Janetzko, 'Are Social Bots on Twitter Political Actors? Empirical Evidence from a Ukrainian Social Botnet', in Tenth International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media (International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media (ICWSM-16), Cologne, Germany: AAAI, 2016), 579–82.

One of the earliest bots emerged in 1993 in an Internet Relay Chat (IRC)—an Internet protocol that allows people to communicate with each other by text in real time—called Eggdrop. This bot had very simple tasks—to welcome new participants and warn them about the actions of other users.[30] Shortly thereafter, the use of bots in IRC became very popular due to the simplicity of implementation and their ability to scale IRCs.[31] The bots evolved over time (gained functionality), and the tasks these bots were assigned became more complicated and sophisticated.[32] Botnets were used in the Multi-User-Domains (MUDs) and Massive Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs). The emergence of Multi User Domains emphasised the need for Automated Social Actors (ASAs) to enhance the playing experience. As the online gaming market grew, the need for more advanced bots increased. In MMOGs, such as the World of Warcraft (WoW) unauthorised game bots emerged. These unauthorised bots enhance and trigger mechanisms for the players, often by sitting between the players' client application and the game server. Some of these bots were also able to play the game autonomously in the absence of the real player. In addition, some bots were also able to damage the game ecologies, i.e. amass experience points or game currency (virtual gold, etc.).[33]

Social media has emerged over the last fifteen years, and the use of bots in this context has only recently been observed. In a study conducted by Facebook in 2012, 5–6% of all Facebook user accounts are fake accounts. This means that there are about 50 million user accounts on Facebook that do not belong to real people.[34] Some of these bots are very sophisticated and some even try to mimic human behaviour, which makes discovering, detecting, or capturing them a challenging task.[35]

Abokhodair et al. studied the use of social botnets regarding the conflict in Syria in 2012.[36] The Abokhodair et al. study focused on one botnet that lived for six months before Twitter detected and suspended it.[37] The study analysed the life and the activities of that botnet. Focus was placed on the content of tweets, i.e. they classified the content of the tweets into 12 categories: news, opinion, spam/phishing, testimonial, conversation, breaking news, mobilisation of resistance/support, mobilisation for assistance, solicitation of information, information provisioning, pop culture, and other. Through their research, the authors were able to answer the question on how the content of a bot tweeting in Arabic or English differed from a non-bot or legitimate user tweeting in Arabic or English. For example, bots tend to share more news articles, fewer opinion tweets, no testimonial tweets, and fewer conversational

[30] Rodríguez-Gómez, Maciá-Fernández, and García-Teodoro, 'Survey and Taxonomy of Botnet Research'.

[31] Karasaridis, Rexroad, and Hoeflin, 'Wide-Scale Botnet Detection and Characterization'.

[32] Abokhodair, Norah, Daisy Yoo, and David W. McDonald, 'Dissecting a Social Botnet: Growth, Content and Influence in Twitter', in Proceedings of the 18th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing (ACM, 2015), 839–851.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Protalinski, 'Facebook: 5-6% of Accounts Are Fake'.

[35] Yazan Boshmaf et al., 'Key Challenges in Defending against Malicious Socialbots', in Proceedings of the 5th USENIX Conference on Large-Scale Exploits and Emergent Threats (USENIX Association, 2012), 12–12.

[36] Abokhodair, Yoo, and McDonald, 'Dissecting a Social Botnet'.

[37] Ibid.

tweets than any legitimate Arabic or English Twitter user. They also classified bots based on the content they posted, the length of time before the bot was suspended, and the type of activity the bot engaged in (tweet or retweet) into the following categories:

- **Core Bots:** have three sub-categories:

    1. **Generator Bots:** tweet often, but seldom retweet anything.

    2. **Short-Lived Bots** tweet seldom, but retweet often and last for fewer than six weeks before Twitter suspends the account.

    3. **Long-Lived Bots** tweet seldom, but retweet often and last for more than 25 weeks before Twitter suspends the account.

- **Peripheral Bots:** are Twitter accounts lured into participation in the dissemination process. Their task is to retweet one or more tweets generated by the core bots.

The difference between their study and ours is that we are focusing on the evolution and sophistication of botnets exploited for conducting propaganda campaigns. Further, we show methodologies that help detect such behaviours and try to understand the roles and positions assumed by the bots within their group (such as brokers who serve as bridges between different parts of the network or sub-networks) for affecting various information manoeuvres.

In the article, entitled 'The Rise of Social Bots',[38] Emilio et al. did a literature review of more than 43 articles that mainly discussed bot detection methods. The authors talked about the effects of bots on society and the economy, and how bots can amplify the visibility of misinformation. The authors also categorised bot identification approaches into three classes:

- Detection systems based on 'social network information'

- Detection systems based on 'crowdsourcing and leveraging human intelligence'

- Detection systems based on 'machine learning methods'

The authors discuss pros and cons for each method. Then they conclude with a call to understand bot coordination strategies and identify the 'puppet masters' (what we call the 'seeders of information') as bots are continuously changing and evolving. They also mention the need to develop tools that combine the three categories for better bot detection. Our work here addresses the needs identified by the research community. We are studying and documenting bot behaviour and the strategies bots use to disseminate propaganda, which will enhance existing models analysing information actors and their behaviours in social media spaces.

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[38] Emilio Ferrara et al., 'The Rise of Social Bots', *Communications of the ACM 59*, no. 7 (24 June 2016): 96–104.

ISIL is another example of a deviant group using botnets on social media to disseminate propaganda. They used botnets to disseminate videos of their beheadings to the hostages they captured (e.g. the beheading of Egyptian Copts on 15 February 2015 in Libya,[39] the beheading of the Arab-Israeli 'spy' in on 10 March 2015 Syria,[40] and the beheading of an Ethiopian Christian on 19 April 2015 in Libya).[41] In that work, we studied the 'bipartite network'[42] of ISIL's communication network (i.e. tweets, retweets, and mentions network) to understand how ISIL propaganda videos and images of the beheading of hostages in orange jumpsuits swept across social media at the time of each event. We collected data for the aforementioned events and found out that the majority of the data consisted of retweets, indicating that Core Bots, both Short-Lived and Long-Lived, and Peripheral Bots were very active in retweeting the messages posted by ISIL accounts. We also found out that the tweets contained an unusually high number of URLs in their content, and many of them contained characters that would not be published by real-humans, i.e. rubbish or code characters. In addition, we found that the accounts posted many tweets in a short period of time and the account names differed only by a single character, such as a number added to the end or beginning of the account name, etc.[43]

The Evolution of Botnets

In this section, we consider the 2014 Crimean Water Crisis and the 2015 Dragoon Ride Exercise as case studies for our investigation into the role bots play in propaganda dissemination and the evolution of bot behaviour. The details of each case study, along with a description of the data, the methodology, and our findings are presented here.

Case Study 1: The 2014 Crimean Water Crises

The Nature of the Propaganda

Russia's annexation of the Crimean peninsula on 16 March 2014 met with international discontent. Both the United Nations and the NATO Secretary General have condemned this expansion of the Russian sphere of influence. Civil unrest and political instabilities in both Russian-annexed Crimea and in Ukraine resulted in significant humanitarian crises due to economic impacts, changes in civil authority, and deep uncertainties about shifting political and economic relationships. Grievances, requests for help, and on-the-ground reports on the developing conflict

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[39] CNN Staff, 'ISIS Video Appears to Show Beheadings of Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya', *CNN*, 16 February 2015.

[40] 'ISIL Executes an Israeli Arab after Accusing Him of Been an Israeli Spy', *TV7 Israel News*, 11 March 2015.

[41] Shaheen, Kareem, 'Isis Video Purports to Show Massacre of Two Groups of Ethiopian Christians', *The Guardian*, 19 April 2015; Al-khateebm Samer and Nitin Agarwal, 'Examining Botnet Behaviors for Propaganda Dissemination: A Case Study of ISIL's Beheading Videos-Based Propaganda', (Data Mining Workshop (ICDMW), 2015 IEEE International Conference on, IEEE, 2015), 51–57.

[42] Bipartite network - a network containing two types of nodes that are connected through edges/relationships, i.e. a network of Twitter User-Text and a network of Twitter User-URL is considered a bipartite network because the Twitter user is one type of node and the URLs or Text itself is another type of node

[43] Ibid.

were reported on a variety of open source platforms including blogs, news websites, Twitter, Facebook, and other open source channels such as YouTube.

The economic impact of the annexation dominated online media coverage. Several stories published by Russian news agencies, including *ITAR-TASS*, claimed that Ukraine's government had ceased work on the North Crimean Canal that carries water from the Dnepr to Crimea.[44] *RT* reported that satellite images showed Ukraine deliberately trying to cut off the Crimean peninsula's water supply by building a dam, while Russian scientists were trying to find ways to supply Crimea with fresh water in the meantime.[45] A *New York Times* article reported that quality of life was deteriorating in Russian-annexed Crimea—a water shortage was observed, Crimean farms were drying, food supplies were inadequate, and price of basic goods, such as milk and gas, had doubled.[46] The article further stated that the tourism economy was also suffering and was down by one third from the previous year; few banks were operating—Ukrainian banks had closed, Russian banks were barely open, and Western banks feared sanctions for continuing to operate in Crimea; only Russian channels were providing television and cable services; and telecommunications were erratic as carriers shifted from Ukrainian to Russian providers. The Russian media largely blamed Ukraine government officials for these problems. Several social media outlets, including blogs, picked up the pro-Russian narrative and amplified it further suggesting that Ukraine was colluding with the West in direct conflict with Russia against the will of Crimean citizens.[47] The propaganda from pro-Russian mainstream media and social media sources was further intensified by bots on Twitter. Botnets effectively disseminated thousands of messages in relation to the Crimean water crisis. These bots were disseminating anti-West and pro-Russia news articles in a bid to provoke hysteria. Numerous bots were simply tweeting the same article after copying it to various websites and blogs, making it appear as if the article were independently posted on different URLs. In other words, bots were cloning the [mis]information, creating an echo chamber, and misleading the public.

Data Description

We used an integrated data collection strategy from disparate publicly available online sources that were identified as relevant for the crises. Often content (reports, images, videos, articles, etc.) originated on one social media site and was diffused to many other sites without attribution. It was therefore imperative to track multiple social media sites to identify implicit interconnections. Using hyperlinks, a snowball data collection approach was used. We used the following keywords 'Ukraine', 'Ukraine Crisis', 'Euromaidan', 'Automaidan', and 'Ukraine's Automaidan Protestors' to collect data about the crisis. Initially the dictionary of keywords for crises/events are manually seeded, but evolve automatically. We identified the popular blog posts for the Ukraine-Russia conflict and, by cross-referencing with Twitter data, we found

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[44] Pavlishak, Alexel, 'Water Supply Problem in Crimea to Cost $247- 417 Million - Kremlin Aide', *TASS Russian News Agency*, 28 April 2014.

[45] 'Ukraine Builds Dam Cutting off Crimea Water Supply', *RT Question More*, 10 May 2014.

[46] Macfarguhar, Neil, 'Aid Elusive, Crimea Farms Face Hurdles', *The New York Times,* 7 July 2014.

[47] Jerome, Sara, 'Ukraine-Russia Conflict Results In 'Water War'', *Water Online*, 4 August 2014.

which posts were diffused most often on Twitter. We used the tools TweetTracker,[48] and NodeXL[49] to collect Twitter data for the period between 29 April 2014 8:40:32 PM and 21 July 2014 10:40:06 PM UTC. This resulted in 1,361 unique tweets, 588 unique Twitter users, and 118,601 relations between the Twitter users. There are four basic types of relations in the Twitter data: *follows*, *mentions*, *replies*, and *tweets*.

Methodology to Identify Botnets

During the research period (April 2014–July 2014) Ukrainian, Russian, and global attention shifted away from Crimea to the active conflict in Southeast Ukraine. Local or regional information can often be found by searching under hashtags in the local language, rather than in English. #crimea, in both Russian and Ukrainian forms, had erratic results from day to day using the same filtering algorithm, as topics such as the end of the ceasefire and the advance of troops into Southeast Ukraine began to take precedence.

There are 'natural social rules and principles' on Twitter that people adhere to in order to increase their followers, e.g. making the choice to follow everyone who follows a user, or by asking those you follow to follow you back in reciprocity. In the last several years, a new artificial means of amplifying followerships has emerged in the form of 'social bots'—scripted codes that mimic human users and serve as super-spreaders of information, opinion, malware, self-promotion, promotion of news stories, or advertisement through fake Twitter accounts. Social bots that serve no purpose other than to move specially-crafted messages through the Twitter environment. These artificial methods can be used to promote particular points of view/purported facts, and can serve as a means to amplify these points of view in the promotion of blogs and other content, far beyond the reach that the quality or representativeness of said viewpoint would achieve by non-artificial means.

By analysing the tweets and their content we observed the following anomalous behaviours:

1. Many tweets were identical, i.e. different Twitter users posted same tweets. Note that identical tweets are not the same thing as retweets.
2. The frequency of the tweets was unusually high, i.e. a large number of tweets were posted within a very short space of time—a behaviour that is humanly impossible.
3. All tweets contained 'short' links, pointing to the same article on a specific website.
4. All of the tweets were bracketed within a pair of hashtags, i.e. there is a hashtag at the beginning and end of every tweet.

[48] Kumar, Shamanth et al., 'TweetTracker: An Analysis Tool for Humanitarian and Disaster Relief', in ICWSM, 2011.

[49] Smith, Marc A. et al., 'Analyzing (Social Media) Networks with NodeXL', in Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Communities and Technologies (ACM, 2009), 255–264.

5. These hashtags are not related to the content of the tweet. This indicates the presence of 'misdirection' and 'smoke screening' strategies.[50] More specifically, the hashtags correspond to the names of cities, states, and countries around world, completely unrelated to the content of the tweet or to the linked website. A possible explanation for using such a behaviour, also known as 'hashtag latching', could be to achieve greater exposure for the messages.

6. Precise repetitive patterns and correlations were observed, e.g. users with Arabic names did not provide location information, while users with non-Arabic names provided locations in the Arab/Middle-East regions.

Such anomalous behaviour is characteristic of a computer software program, or of a bot that can operate on Twitter autonomously.

Figure 1. Three sub-networks with unusual structural characteristics in S1 are observed, then the Girvan-Newman clustering algorithm is applied to the network. On the left are the expanded clusters and on the right is the collapsed view of the clusters. Five clusters are identified.
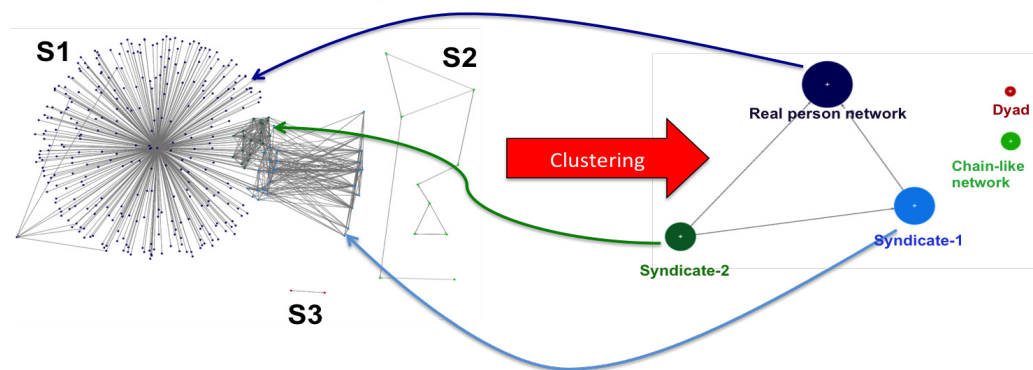
By analysing the friends/followers network (social network) of the accounts related to the data we collected, we found that it had three sub-networks: S1, S2, and S3 (see Figure 1). The sub-network S1 exhibited unusual structural characteristics. The other two sub-networks, the 'chain-like' S2 and 'dyadic' S3 sub-networks, were ignored due to their relatively small size and lack of anomalous behaviours. We applied the Girvan-Newman clustering algorithm[51]—an algorithm that detects communities in a network based on how closely the nodes are connected—to the S1 network and found that the network had five clusters (communities or groups of nodes), as shown in Figure 1. Our analysis showed that S1 had one star-shaped and two clique-style groups of nodes. The centre of the star-shaped network belonged to a 'real-person'[52] node, or Twitter account, which was connected to 345 bots out of 588 twitter handles in this network (see Figure 2). This real-person is the owner/operator of the specific webpage that all the other bots were referring to with different shortened links.

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[50] Abokhodair, Yoo, and McDonald, 'Dissecting a Social Botnet'; Ferrara et al., 'The Rise of Social Bots'.

[51] M. Girvan and M. E. J. Newman, 'Community Structure in Social and Biological Networks', Proceedings of the National Academy of Science of the United States of America 99, no. 12 (6 April 2002): 7821–26.

[52] The term 'real-person' is used so as not to disclose the identity of this node.

Un-collapsing the 'real-person' network revealed its star-shaped structure, where 'real-person' is the central node. It also shows the connections to the other two-syndicate groups, viz. syndicate-1 and syndicate-2. Close examination of these ties revealed that the members of the syndicate followed the 'real-person' node, and not the other way. **We thus concluded that 'real-person' is the most central node of this entire bot network and the one feeding information to the bots.**

While un-collapsing the syndicate-1 and syndicate-2 networks revealed dense connections among their members and inter-group connections with the other groups, the 'real person' network and 'syndicate-2', closer examination of the intra-group ties revealed mutually reciprocated relationships, suggesting use of **the principles 'Follow Me and I Follow You' (FMIFY) and 'I Follow You, Follow Me' (IFYFM)**—a well known practice used by Twitter spammers for 'link farming', or quickly gaining followers.[53]

Figure 2. The real person network is connected to broker bots that coordinate the dissemination of propaganda through the bots in their respective syndicates.
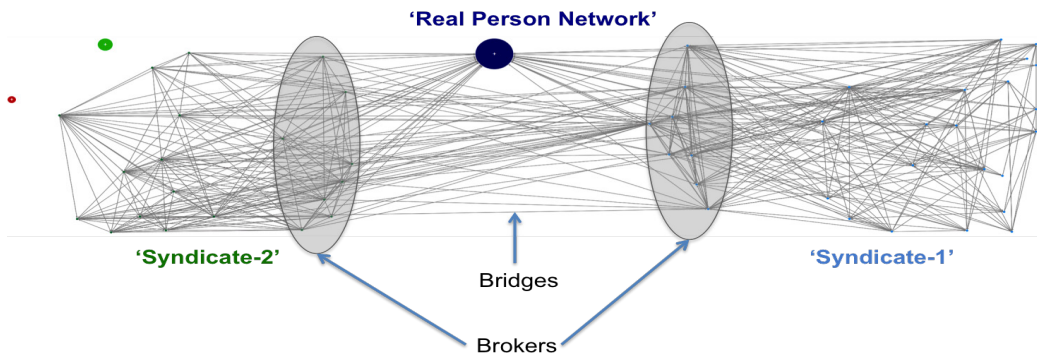
Unlike the 'real person' network, there is no single most central node in these networks, indicating an absence of a hierarchical organisation structure in the 'syndicate-1' and 'syndicate-2' networks. Further analysis showed that the broker nodes act as interfaces between the group members and other groups. The broker nodes of the two syndicates established bridges that facilitated tweet diffusion across the syndicates. The broker nodes were primarily responsible in connecting with the 'real person' network, specifically the 'real person' node, which is also the most influential node. This indicates that **the bot network was using a sophisticated coordination strategy,** as can be seen in Figure 2.

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[53] Ghosh, Saptarshi et al., 'Understanding and Combating Link Farming in the Twitter Social Network', in Proceedings of the 21st International Conference on World Wide Web (ACM, 2012), 61–70; Labatut, Vincent, Nicolas Dugue, and Anthony Perez, 'Identifying the Community Roles of Social Capitalists in the Twitter Network' (IEEE/ACM International Conference on Advances in Social Network Analysis and Mining (ASONAM), China, 2014), 8.

Case Study 2: The 2015 Dragoon Ride Exercise

What was the Propaganda?

On 21 March 2015, US soldiers assigned to the 3rd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry Regiment in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland as part of Operation Atlantic Resolve began Operation Dragoon Ride. The US troops, nicknamed 'Dragoons', were sent on a transfer mission crossing five international borders and covering more than 1,100 miles to exercise the unit's maintenance and leadership capabilities, and to demonstrate the freedom of movement that exists within NATO.[54]

Many opponent groups launched campaigns to protest the exercise, e.g. 'Tanks? No Thanks!',[55] which appeared on Facebook and other social media sites, promising large and numerous demonstrations against the US convoy.[56] Czech President Miloš Zeman expressed sympathy with Russia; his statements were echoed in the pro-Russian English language media and the Kremlin financed media, i.e. *Sputnik* news.[57] The *RT* website also reported that the Czechs were not happy with the procession of the 'U.S. Army hardware'.[58] However, thousands of people from the Czech Republic welcomed the US convoy as it passed through their towns, waving US and NATO flags, while the protesters were not seen.

Figure 3: Two sub-networks, S1 and S2. S1 is un-collapsed while S2 is collapsed. Edges in red denote mutually reciprocal relations (bidirectional edges) while edges in blue colour denote non-reciprocal relations (unidirectional edges).
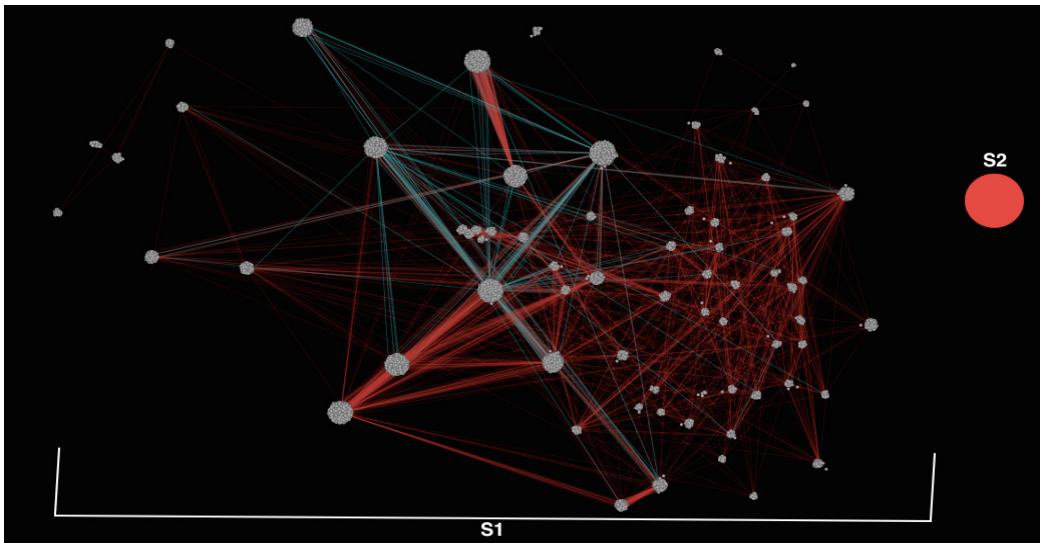
[54] DoD News, 'Operation Atlantic Resolve Exercises Begin in Eastern Europe'.

[55] '"Tanks? No Thanks!": Czechs Unhappy about US Military Convoy Crossing Country', *RT Question More,* 22 March 2015.

[56] Sindelar, Daisy, 'U.S. Convoy: In Czech Republic, Real-Life Supporters Outnumber Virtual Opponents', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 30 March 2015.

[57] 'Czechs Plan Multiple Protests Of US Army's Operation Dragoon Ride', *Sputnik News*, 2 March 2015.

[58] 'Tanks? No Thanks!', *RT.*

During that time many bots were disseminating propaganda, asking people to protest and conduct violent acts against the US convoy. A group of these bots was identified using Scraawl, an online social media analysis tool available at www.scraawl.com. We collected data on this network of bots and studied its structure in an attempt to understand how they operated and to compare them to the Crimean water crisis bots. Here we provide a description of the dataset and our findings.

Data Description

We collected data for the period between 8 May 2015 8:09:02 PM and 3 June 2015 11:27:31 PM UTC of 90 Twitter accounts that were identified as bots known to disseminate propaganda during the Dragoon Ride Exercise. Out of the 90 Twitter accounts we were able to collect data from 73 accounts. We were not able to collect data for 17 Twitter accounts because the accounts had been either *suspended*, *did not exist*, or were *set to private*. Data was collected using NodeXl (a tool for social media data collection and analysis) that included friend-follower relations and tweet-mention-reply relations. This resulted in 24,446 unique nodes and 31,352 unique edges. An 'edge' is a 'relationship', which can be a tweet, retweet, mention, reply, or friendship between two nodes/Twitter accounts. We obtained 50,058 non-unique edges with 35,197 friends and followers edges, 14,428 tweet edges, 358 mention edges, and 75 reply edges.

Data Analysis & Findings

We analysed the friend/follower networks (social network) of the bot accounts. We applied the Girvan-Newman clustering algorithm[59] to this network and found that the network had two clusters, S1 and S2, as shown in Figure 3. The clusters are the same as the components in this graph. The smaller S2 cluster, containing only a triad of nodes, was rejected from further analysis, as it did not contribute much to the information diffusion. Since the larger S1 cluster contained the majority of nodes, we examined this sub-network further.

Closer examination of the S1 cluster revealed that the members of that network were more akin to the syndicate network of the Crimean Water Wrisis botnets. Further examination of the within-group ties, revealed a mutually reciprocated relationship (the nodes followed each other), suggesting that the principles of FMIFY and IFYFM were in practice—a behaviour that was also observed among the Crimean Water Crisis botnet.

Unlike the previous case, this network had no central node (i.e. there was no single node feeding information to the other bots, or seeder of information). This indicated the absence of a hierarchical organisational structure in the S1 network, in other words no seeder was identified/observed. In cases where the seeder is not easily identifiable, other, more sophisticated methods are warranted to verify if this behaviour truly does not exist. Although there might not be a single most influential

[59] Girvan and Newman, 'Community Structure in Social and Biological Networks'.

node, a group of bots may be coordinating to make an influential group. To study this behaviour further, we applied the Focal Structures Analysis (FSA) approach to find if any influential group of bots existed.[60]

Focal Structure is an algorithm that was implemented by Sen et al.[61] to discover an influential group of individuals in a large network. These individuals need not to be strongly connected and may not be the most influential actors on their own, but by acting together they form a compelling power. FSA is a recursive modularity-based algorithm. Modularity is a network structural measure that evaluates the cohesiveness of a network.[62] FSA uses a network-partitioning approach to identify sub-structures or sub-graphs. FSA consists of two parts: the first part is a top-down division, where the algorithm identifies the candidate focal structures in the complex network by applying the Louvain method of computing modularity.[63] The second part is a bottom-up agglomeration, where the algorithm stitches the candidate focal structures, i.e. the highly interconnected focal structures, or the focal structures that have the highest similarity values, are stitched together and then the process iterates until the highest similarity of all sibling pairs is less than a given threshold value. Similarity between two structures is measured using Jaccard's Coefficient[64] which results in a value between 0 and 1, where 1 means the two networks are identical, while zero means the two networks are not similar at all. The stitching of the candidate focal structures was done to extract the structures with low densities i.e. structures contain nodes that are not connected densely.[65]

FSA has been tested on many real world cases such as the Saudi Arabian Women's Right to Drive campaign on Twitter [66] and the 2014 Ukraine Crisis when President Viktor Yanukovych rejected a deal for greater integration with the European Union and three big events followed—Yanukovych was run out of the country in February, Russia invaded and annexed Crimea in March, and pro-Russian separatist rebels in eastern Ukraine brought the relationship between Russia and the West to its lowest point since the Cold War.

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[60] Sen, Fatih et al., 'Focal Structure Analysis in Large Biological Networks', in IPCBEE, vol. 70, 1 (2014 3rd International Conference on Environment Energy and Biotechnology, Singapore: IACSIT Press, 2014). doi:10.7763; Sen, Fatih et al., 'Focal Structures Analysis: Identifying Influential Sets of Individuals in a Social Network', *Social Networks Analysis and Mining* 6 (2016): 1–22.

[61] Sen et al., 'Focal Structure Analysis in Large Biological Networks'; Sen et al., 'Focal Structures Analysis: Identifying Influential Sets of Individuals in a Social Network'.

[62] Girvan and Newman, 'Community Structure in Social and Biological Networks'.

[63] Blondel, Vincent D. et al., 'Fast Unfolding of Communities in Large Networks', Journal of Statistical Mechanics: Theory and Experiment 2008, no. 10 (2008): P10008.

[64] Sen et al., 'Focal Structures Analysis: Identifying Influential Sets of Individuals in a Social Network'; Jaccard, Paul, 'The Distribution of the Flora in the Alpine Zone', *New Phytologist 11*, no. 2 (1912): 37–50.

[65] Sen et al., 'Focal Structures Analysis: Identifying Influential Sets of Individuals in a Social Network'.

[66] Serpil Yuce et al., 'Studying the Evolution of Online Collective Action: Saudi Arabian Women's 'Oct26Driving' Twitter Campaign', in Social Computing, Behavioral-Cultural Modeling and Prediction (Springer, 2014), 413–20.

Applying focal structures during the two aforementioned examples revealed interesting findings. It was proven that during the Saudi Arabian Women's Right to Drive Twitter campaign on 26 October 2013 the **focal structures were more interactive than average individuals** in the evolution of a mass protest, i.e. the interaction rate of the focal structures was significantly higher than the average interaction rate of random sets of individuals. It was also proven that **focal structures were more interactive than communities** in the evolution of a mass protest, i.e. the number of retweets, mentions, and replies increases proportionally with respect to the followers of the individuals in communities.[67]

Applying the FSA approach to the Ukraine-Russia conflict also revealed an interesting finding. By applying FSA to a blog-to-blog network, Graham W. Phillips[68]—a 35-year-old British journalist and blogger—was found to be involved in the only focal structure of the entire network along with *ITAR-TASS*, the Russian News Agency, and *Voice of Russia*, the Russian government's international radio broadcasting service. Even though other central and well-known news resources, such as the *Washington Post* and *The Guardian*, were covering the events, Phillips was actively involved in the crisis as a blogger and maintained a single-author blog with huge influence that compared with some of the active mainstream media blogs. Phillips covered the 2014 Ukraine crisis and became a growing star on Kremlin-owned media. He set out to investigate in a way that made him a cult micro-celebrity during the crisis—by interviewing angry people on the street for 90 seconds at a time.[69]

We ran the FSA approach on the Dragoon Ride data to discover the most influential set of bots or the seeders of information in the S1 community. By applying FSA to the social network of these bots we obtained one focal structure containing two nodes [see Figure 4]. These two nodes form the most influential set of bots in the network, i.e. by working together those two bots had a profound impact on the dissemination of propaganda.

We further applied FSA to the bots' communication network, i.e. tweets, mentions, and replies network to identify who are the most communicative nodes in this network [see Figure 5]. We obtained one focal structure containing 12 nodes. Ten nodes were 'real people nodes', i.e. nodes that communicated the most with bots (potential seeders of information), while the other two nodes were the bots identified as the most influential nodes in the friends and followers network.

Although botnets were used to disseminate propaganda during the events of both case studies, the network structure of the botnets in the latter case is much more complex than in the former. Botnets in the Dragoon Ride exercise case required a

[67] Sen et al., 'Focal Structures Analysis: Identifying Influential Sets of Individuals in a Social Network'.

[68] Graham Phillips is a British national contracted as a stringer by the Russian Times (RT). He has produced numerous videos, blogs, and stories in/around eastern Ukraine. He speaks and writes in Russian and English in his reports. He recently spent time covering the World Cup in Brazil for RT and has re-entered Eastern Ukraine as of July 2014. 25 July 2014 RT reported on that Phillips was deported from Ukraine because he works for RT. He will not be allowed to re-enter Ukraine for 3 years.

[69] Seddon, Max, 'How A British Blogger Became An Unlikely Star Of The Ukraine Conflict — And Russia Today', *BuzzFeed News*, 20 May 2014.

more sophisticated approach to identify the organisers or seeders of information, i.e. it required applying FSA to both the social network (friends/followers network) and the communication network (tweets, replies, and mentions network). The evolution of complexity in the bots' network structures confirms the need for a systematic study of botnet behaviour to develop sophisticated approaches/techniques or tools that can deal with predictive modelling of botnets.

Figure 4. The social network (friends/followers network) of the botnets. The focal structure analysis approach helped in identifying a highly sophisticated coordinating structure, which is marked inside the red circle in the figure on left. Upon zooming-in on this structure (displayed on the right), two bots were identified as the seeders in this focal structure. The seeder bots are depicted in red.
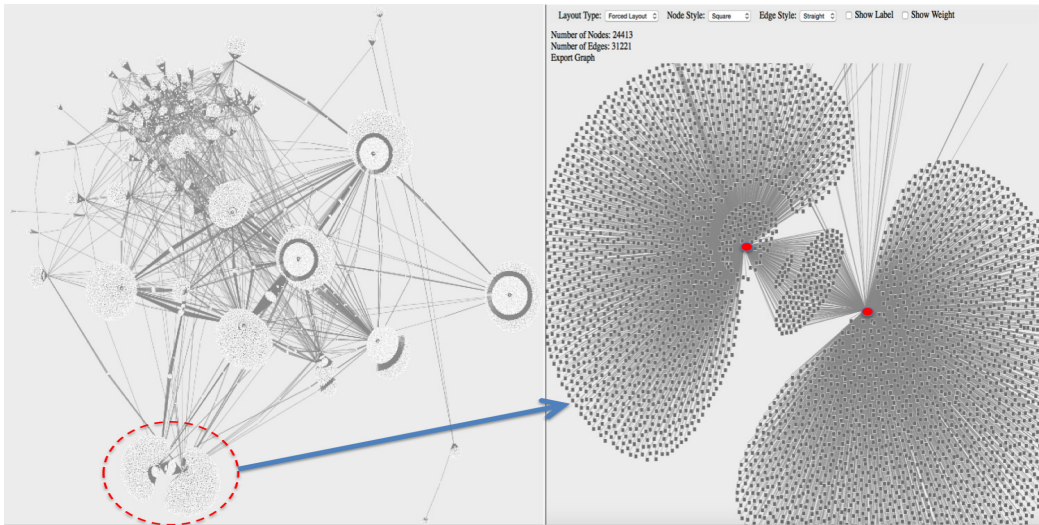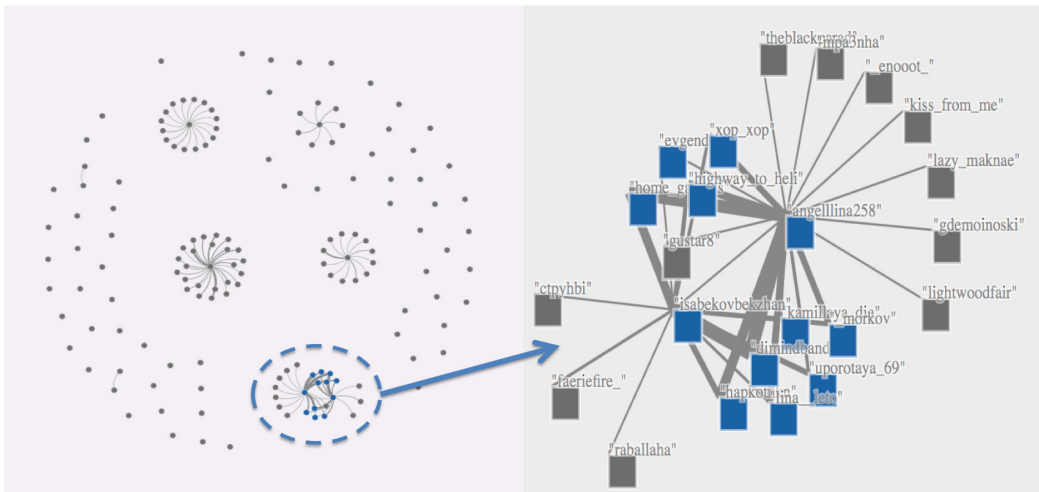

Figure 5. Communication network (tweets, mentions, and replies network) of the botnets. Ten nodes were communicating the most with the two most influential bots in the network.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the affordability and easy-to-use nature of social media has made it a popular choice for communication and seeking information among many people around the world. Social media use has been shifting from entertainment to public discourse, thereby making it a preferred tool for influencing group opinions or achieving political goals by disseminating propaganda or misinformation about various events. This study has observed and analysed the behaviour of botnets during two events, i.e. the 2014 Crimean Water Crises and the 2015 Dragoon Ride exercise. During these two events botnets were used to disseminate pro-Russian, anti-Western, and anti-NATO propaganda. The study shows the complexity of the bot networks that are deployed to disseminate propaganda. The 2014 Crimean Water Crises case study shows an example of an easy-to-capture botnet, while the 2015 Dragoon Ride exercise case study shows a more complex bot network, where sophisticated methods were required to identify dissemination behaviour. In the former case, the seeders of information to the bots were easily identified along with the organisational structure of the bot network, such as the brokers, central bots, communication strategy, etc. Conversely, in the latter case, the seeders of information to the bots were not easily identified. Instead a small number of bots were coordinated to seed the information; individually they were not very influential but collectively they profoundly impacted the dissemination of propaganda. Furthermore, both social networks and communication networks of the bots were examined to identify the organisational structure of the propaganda dissemination process. Sophisticated approaches to network analysis, such as the focal structure analysis approach, were used in the latter case. These findings are strongly indicative of the evolution of botnets deployed for propaganda dissemination. This suggests a need for more intelligent bot detection techniques—techniques that can evolve together with the bot behaviours. The development of such techniques is in line with the need identified by the research community.

Further Discussion and Future Work

In this section we shed light on the evolving research area of propaganda analysis in modern ICTs and the social information system space, envisioning future tasks. We add our voices to the research community calling for developing bot detection tools that can evolve as bot behaviours evolve and change. The cases mentioned in this article, and numerous others, demonstrate strategic and tactical information manoeuvres by adversarial information actors. We are working on a three-step action plan to rigorously study, document, and model such manoeuvres. First, we will systematically categorise bots, based on the published research and on our own empirical observations of the role of information actors (e.g. botnets, trolls) in Russian strategic communications. Second, we will identify and document the various strategies exhibited by independant information actors and coordinated information actors. This will help to enhance state-of-the-art analysis models for information actors and their behaviours in social media spaces. And third, we have observed that many bots disseminate links to blog sites where an individual or a group frames the narrative for disseminating propaganda around various issues. A likely reason

for using blogs to frame narratives is the freedom they afford for writing as much as an author wants and for embedding multimedia (e.g. images, audio bytes, videos) and links to other social media objects, such as tweets, etc. By presenting half-truths, contorted facts, manipulated images, and videos in a cogent manner substantiated by links to other propaganda riddled websites, it is not very challenging to mislead the average reader. To do so effectively one does not need much more than 140 characters. This is where blogs are most helpful—i.e. to develop a story. Bots are used to steer attention to these blogs. The goal of the bots is to bring the propaganda-riddled content to as many eyeballs as possible by employing crafty strategies. We plan to conduct an in-depth analysis of this orchestrated use of social media in propaganda campaigns. More specifically:

A. We plan to conduct cyber forensic analysis by using cyber forensic techniques to find blogs sites or other groups connected to our 'seed' of blogs (the initial set of the URLs we will extract). Cyber forensics is 'the process of acquisition, authentication, analysis, and documentation of evidence extracted from and/ or contained in a computer system, computer network, and digital media' [70]. One technique that can be used is to find blogs owned by a single owner or managed by the same unique identifier or 'UA' number, e.g. Google Analytics ID. Google Analytics ID is an online analytics tool that allows a website owner to gather some statistics about their website visitors such as their browser, operating system, and country they are from, along with other metadata. ID numbers are embedded in the website HTML code for each user. Such information and other metadata can be obtained from many cyber forensics tools, e.g. Maltego,[71] which is an open source cyber forensics application. This tool and technique was cited in the book title *Open Source Intelligence Techniques* by Michael Bazzell, an FBI cyber crime expert[72] and also reported by *Wired* in 2011.[73] This part of a blog's identification and blog's data collection/crawling will be leveraged in part (b) where we will use and analyse this data.

B. We plan to crawl the data of the blog sites that has propaganda against some of the events and store it in the database of our developed Blogtrackers[74] tool (available at: www.blogtrackers.host.ualr.edu). Blogtrackers is a tool that has the ability to analyse blog data. Blogtrackers has many analysis capabilities, e.g. to identify blog activity patterns, keywords patterns/trends, the influence a blog or a blogger has on a given online community, and to analyse sentiment diffusion in such communities.

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[70] Digambar Povar and V.K. Bhadran, 'Forensic Data Carving', in *Digital Forensics and Cyber Crime*, vol. 53, Lecture Notes of the Institute for Computer Sciences, Social Informatics and Telecommunications Engineering (Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2011), 137–48.

[71] 'Maltego', Paterva, *A New Train of Thought*.

[72] Bazzell, Michael, *Open Source Intelligence Techniques: Resources for Searching and Analyzing Online Information*, 4th ed. (CCI Publishing, 2014).

[73] Alexander, Lawrence, 'Open-Source Information Reveals Pro-Kremlin Web Campaign', *Global Voices*, 13 July 2015.

[74] Agarwal, Nitin et al., 'BlogTrackers: A Tool for Sociologists to Track and Analyze Blogosphere'. (ICWSM, Citeseer, 2009).

This study can inform research conducted in the realm of 'antisocial computing'. Our findings will help counter the use of bots for propaganda: 1) by developing more efficient bot detection tools through continuously studying their evolving behaviours, so that these behaviours could be reported to Twitter in a timely fashion 2) by developing bots that target the same audience as our adversaries' bots do, study their narratives, and develop and massively disseminate counter-narratives to bury the messages of the adversary and 3) most importantly, by advancing our understanding of the information actors and their tactics in the new strategic communications environment.

Acknowledgments

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PUTIN, XI, AND HITLER— PROPAGANDA AND THE PATERNITY OF PSEUDO DEMOCRACY

Nicholas O'Shaughnessy

Abstract

This article poses an unsettling question. Was Hitler's regime not so much a historical accident as a prototype—a creation of modernity and a response to the conditions precipitated by modernity? It constructs an answer via the exploration of the interdependency of a number of constructs. Through the building blocks of symbolism the propagandist constructs an imaginary world that is neither true nor false, but a pseudo-reality energised by the emotion of fear and both defined and constricted by ideology and beliefs. The article highlights significant differences between this Nazi prototype and modern practice to be taken into account. For example the Nazis had no theory of soft power; however, they were much more aware of the value of entertainment as propaganda than contemporary populist autocracies. The article promotes a rigorous examination of the evidence for the 'impact' of propaganda—How effective is it really?—and the need for a more sophisticated understanding of its effects and purpose.

About the author

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Introduction: A Nazi Prototype?

Pseudo-democracy: The world seems to be embracing not democracy but a kind of propaganda-augmented neo-democracy, as China will surely become and Russia is now. This was not of course supposed to be the script outlined in *The End of History*.[1] One comparator is Mussolini's Italy, i.e. a facsimile of democracy surrounded by a nimbus of nationalistic propaganda. But another is Nazi Germany.

Was Hitler's regime not so much a historical accident as a prototype: a creation of modernity and a response to the conditions precipitated by modernity? A society of rootless, atomised individuals, produced by the modern workplace's need for mobility of labour and micro-specification of task, is a fearful society, and out of that fear emerges the need for solidarity. The 'modern' era of mass electorates was vulnerable to vividly dramatized messages that evoke a binary world good and evil, and the corruption of political discourse by 'terrible simplifiers'. One might term such appeals regressive, yet they were sold with the latest techniques and both embrace and excoriate modernity, as Paxton describes in *The Anatomy of Fascism*.[2] I have elsewhere argued: *There was the influence of Americanisation, for the Reich played with and structurally incorporated its antithesis. It was a series of contradictions—progressive and reactionary, modern and anti-modern, American and anti-American.*[3]

But an apparatus of authoritarian control legitimated by a massive propaganda apparatus is ostensibly the direction some countries have gone and some are trending. Mussolini observed 'the fascist state organises the nation, but leaves a sufficient margin of liberty to the individual'; 'sovereign democracy' was the exquisite phrase chosen to evoke the Putin Raj: 'They are taking Russia to task for failing to implement the Western model of democracy: but the point of sovereign democracy is to deny the relevance of that model'.[4] So our assumptions about Russia were wrong; it was not going to be a democracy but rather a plebiscitary autocracy based on opinion management. All of these regimes seek to manipulate; they offer no unvarnished truth, and any notion of objectivity is missing. The purpose of government is to tell people that they live in a Panglossian best in the best of all possible worlds. So, a great edifice of perception is constructed that is ultimately neither truly true nor fully false, but hangs somewhere in the no man's land between truth and falsehood. The public cannot be exposed to too much truth; and no truth fully exists in the sense in which the objectivist would claim. Moreover, the lie, or duplicitous statement, serves the elevated purpose, the goal of national solidarity and national greatness: they see virtue in what they do. The lower lie serves the higher truth. The West in contrast had simply forgotten (or never absorbed) the idea of propaganda, the lessons of the Nazi and Soviet eras and what a powerful tool it could be in terms of disrupting global politics and sabotaging the civic order.

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[1] Fukuyama, Francis, *The End of History And The Last Man*, (New York: The Free Press 1992).

[2] Paxton, Robert O., *The Anatomy of Fascism*, (London: Allen Lane, 2004).

[3] O'Shaughnessy, Nicholas, *Selling Hitler: Propaganda and the Nazi Brand*, (London: Hurst, 2016).

[4] Cottrell, Robert, 'Death Under The Tsar' (review of Anna Politkoyavska, A Russian Diary), *New York Review of Books*, 14 June 2007.

1. Pseudo-Reality: External

The article first looks at persuasion directed to the outer world, a kind of propaganda -augmented foreign policy.

But the pseudo-democratic authoritarian state is all about the creation of parallel reality. The pseudo-real therefore is consciously produced, it is manufactured using the expertise of those experienced in the area. Goebbels hired the American publications guru Ivy Lee in the 1930s,[5] the Putin regime has used the resources of Ketchum, an American public relations firm, as well as various other Western firms. The appearance of Putin as Times Person of the year in 2007 was the result of Ketchum lobbying.[6] But for such an investment to be made there has to be a deeply held conviction that it is in fact effective: 'Dmitry Kiselyov is quite open about the Russian media strategy for the millenium: to "apply the correct political technology", then 'bring it to the point of overheating' and bring to bear 'the magnifying glass of TV and the Internet"'.[7]

Under these propaganda regimes events often do not exist in their own right but rather they are faked. One famous example of this is a Nazi fabrication during the Saar referendum (1935) where Goebbels broadcast the lie that Max Braun, the leader of the anti-German unity faction, had in fact fled the country (Goebbels had freely distributed radio transmitters which broadcast this message).[8] Realities do not arise naturally in the pseudo democratic entity. Events do not occur, they must be manufactured. This is the essence of the KGB ethos, the milieu from which Putin and his henchmen emerged: 'It is not by accident that Putin and his colleagues all share the KGB's belief in the power of the state to control the life of the nation [...] In the course of their training, they learned that events cannot be allowed to just happen, they must be controlled and manipulated; that markets cannot be genuinely open, they must be managed from behind the scenes; that elections cannot be unpredictable, they must be planned in advance—as, indeed, Russia's now are.'[9] But the director of the Isvetsia publishing house once suggested 'image is not reality, but, rather, its reflection, which can be made positive'.[10]

Disinformation: The Nazis of course were experts at disinformation and the creative use of communication to disseminate it. They had groups to spread rumours,[11] fake horoscopes,[12] and groups to spread graffiti.[13] The role of organised lying is important because, paradoxically, it indicates what the regime is really thinking.

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[5] Manvell, Roger and Heinrich Fraenkel, *Doctor Goebbels: His Life And Death*, (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2010).

[6] Institute of Modern Russia, 'The Propaganda Of The Putin Era (Part Two): The Kremlin's Tentacles', 5 Dec 2012.

[7] Snyder, Timothy, 'Fascism, Russia, and Ukraine', *New York Review of Books*, 20 March 2014.

[8] Wiskemann, Elizabeth, *Europe Of The Dictators 1919-1945*, (London: Fontana, 1975).

[9] Applebaum, Anne, 'Vladimir's Tale', *New York Review of Books*, 29 March 2012.

[10] Institute of Modern Russia, 'The Propaganda Of The Putin Era'.

[11] Herzstein, Robert Edwin, *The War That Hitler Won*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979).

[12] Speer, Albert, *Inside The Third Reich*, (London: Macmillan, 1970).

[13] Beevor, Anthony, *Berlin: The Downfall 1945*, (London: Penguin, 2003).

So, lying becomes a form of truth, or at least a truth about the regime. The forms of disinformation embraced by the Nazis were extensive—for example the clandestine radio stations targeted at the British such as the Christian People's Station or the Workers Challenge Station or Radio Caledonia or Radio Cymru.[14]

Russian disinformation, or *dezinformatsiya*, is designed to sabotage the notion of objective truth and paralyse action.[15] After the destruction of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 over Ukraine, Russia 'pumped out a dizzying array of theories' about the shooting down of Flight 17 and blame was at various stages placed on the CIA and Ukrainian fighter pilots, etc.[16] When Swedes debated a NATO affiliation, there was a sudden barrage of claims, for example, that NATO would locate nuclear missiles in Sweden or independently attack Russia or that its soldiers could rape Swedish women without criminal sanction; thus 'The flow of misleading and inaccurate stories is so strong that both NATO and the European Union have established special offices to identify and refute disinformation, particularly claims emanating from Russia'.[17]

Russian lies included claims such as the story about a Colombian chemicals factory in Louisiana that was blown up by ISIS terrorists in 2014 on September 11, later revealed in the New York Times.[18] Such stories appear in social media and they are planted by a Russian propaganda organisation named the Internet Research Agency and created by Putin. They create hoaxes via Twitter accounts and Arabic commentary—for example the fake Louisiana television images that appeared on You Tube.[19] The employees of these so-called troll farms compose imaginary stories and propaganda against America and the Ukraine, and also engage in online harassment and protracted argumentation in the comment sections of websites. A British journalist 'described Russia's actions as an attempt to undermine the concept of objective reality itself' before the US House Foreign Affairs Committee in April 2015.[20] Other examples of Russian disinformation include for example the assertion that Ebola is the fault of the US government.

Current propaganda practices represent the heritage of the Soviet Union, a lineal continuity adjusted to cyberspace. In the old days, the Kremlin also engaged in disinformation, e.g. its claim that AIDS was an invention of the CIA.[21] During the cold war the Soviets injected disinformation via stories placed in Indian newspapers. Subsidy of antagonistic groups was another Soviet trick, of anti-nuclear groups for example; and this continues: in 2014 the Kremlin offered an $11.7 million loan to the French National Front.[22] A disinformation campaign was also synchronised with the

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[14] West, W. J., *Truth Betrayed*, (London: Duckworth and Co., 1987).

[15] MacFarquhar, Neil, 'Russia's Powerful Weapon To Weaken Rivals: Spread Of False Stories', *New York Times*, 29 August 2016.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Dale, Helle, 'Putin's Propaganda Machine Pumps Out Lies', *Newsweek*, 13 June 2015.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] MaxFarquhar, Neil, 'How Russians Pay To Play In Other Countries', *New York Times*, 31 December 2016.

Ukraine attack, according to Tim Snyder: 'the Russian media continually make the claim that the Ukrainians protesting are Nazis'.[23] Claims included the one that gay marriage will be forced on Ukraine as the price of a closer relationship with Europe.

Information: There is disinformation and then there is information—the 'true' facts gained from hacking and used/abused propagandistically. But this is conceptually distinct from disinformation even if it comes from the same stable. The truths emerging may well be correct and that is why they are also very damaging. Thus 'Fancy Bears', a Russian cyberspace proxy, persuaded the German newspaper Spiegel to reveal that US athletes had been gaining medical permissions to take restricted substances;[24] this was revenge for the stories about Russian athletics doping.[25] Analysts believe that it was Fancy Bears that hacked the Democratic National Committee accounts revealing the Clinton emails.[26] One reporter claimed that Fancy Bears apparently operated 'almost more like a PR firm' and were 'very business-like'.[27] Moreover, the distinction between information and disinformation is not clear-cut. The agenda to sabotage the 2016 US Presidential election was implemented by the GRU, Russian military intelligence, via front organisations.[28] Fronts had, of course, been a favourite resource of the old USSR, but this time they tenanted cyberspace: specifically two that appeared in the summer of 2016, Guccifer 2.0 and the DC leaks. The latter claimed to be 'launched by American hacktivists who respect and appreciate freedom of speech'[29] and lubricated the social media attacks on Hilary Clinton, sometimes via Russian websites such as the Putin-aligned Katehon (e.g. 'Bloody Hilary: mysterious murders linked to Clinton').[30]

Sow Confusion: The aim is not so much to create belief as to sow confusion and doubt. One is reminded of Mark Twain's aphorism, that a lie can travel halfway round the world while truth is still tying up its shoes. This creation of confusion, this sowing of doubt, is matched on the internal domestic front by the seeking of a passive and compliant public. But this is not the same as a believing public: 'By eroding the very idea of a shared reality, and by spreading apathy and confusion among a public that learns to distrust leaders and institutions alike, *kompromat* undermines society's ability to hold the powerful to account and ensure the proper functioning of government'.[31]

All of them of course seek to generate division among their antagonists—to disunite their enemies, and this is a very tangible achievement of their propaganda, Putin

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[23] Snyder, 'Fascism, Russia, and Ukraine'

[24] Fischer, Max, 'Prizing Speed and Scoops, Media Became Ready Bullhorns For Russian Hackers', New York Times, 9 January 2017.

[25] Kramer, Andrew E., 'How The Kremlin Recruited An Army Of Specialists To Wage Its Cyber War', *New York Times*, 30 December 2016.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Fischer, 'Prizing Speed and Scoops'.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] McIntire, Mike, 'How A Putin Fan Overseas Pushed Pro-Trump Propaganda To Americans', *New York Times*, 18 December 2016.

[31] Taub, Amanda, 'Kompromat And The Danger Of Doubt And Confusion In A Democracy', *New York Times*, 16 January 2017.

alternately threatening Europeans and speaking softly to them, and seeking internal discord as well by attempting to find favour with political groupings within those societies—from Donald Trump in America to Nigel Farage, former leader of the UK Independence party, Beppe Grillo in Italy, to Victor Orban in Hungary. The Czech President Milos Zeman has been a consistent friend, defending Russian engagement in Syria for example. Bulgaria now has a new pro-Russian Prime Minister;[32] the leader of a pro-Russian party has been nominated as Estonian Prime Minister;[33] and Angela Merkel has voiced fears of a Russian cyber-attack during the German elections.[34] Interventions on behalf of sympathetic politicians or public actors is part of the Russian propaganda manual: 'useful idiots' were prized also by the Soviets and the Bolsheviks before them.

Plausibility: There is of course a tendency to represent these public fictions as testament to the credulity of its targets, the people. We believe that it is more accurately characterised as a co-production rather than a naive or hypodermic stimulus-response model. The target is invited to share a fantasy; the fiction is co-created rather than imposed. So, this model is a participative one.

And furthermore, it does not rest on fiction alone, or even primarily fiction, but on effective advocacy whose premises can be made to seem rational even if they are not. The arguments advanced are given an objective veneer. Thus, the Third Reich was adept at producing a rationale for invasion at every turn: for example that the Poles were preparing for war against Germany, that Russia was plotting to attack Germany; so that all violence became pre-emptive. And this is pre-eminently true of Russia today. It has constructed an elaborate edifice of public self-defence both for internal and for international consumption. The representation of NATO and the EU as aggressive and expansionary powers that threaten Russia destroy the former implicit and explicit understandings of Russia's 'legitimate' sphere of influence. Believable as an argument: but it denies to other much smaller nations those very rights, the right to choose which, if any, power block they might elect to belong to. Plausibility is also enhanced by scattering truths amid falsehoods, a Goebbels technique, and similarly Russian disinformation campaigns have 'often deliberately blended accurate and forged details'.[35]

2. Pseudo-Reality: Internal and External

Here we further look at how symbol manipulation is used both externally and internally to construct pseudo-realities

Foreign Policy as Symbolism: Foreign policy objectives are also propaganda ones. Under the Nazis foreign policy events, everything from the re-militarisation

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[32] Oliphant, Roland, 'Pro-Russian candidates win presidential votes in Bulgaria and Moldova', *Daily Telegraph*. 14 November 2016.

[33] Mardiste, David, 'Centre-left leader nominated as Estonia's next PM', *Reuters*, 20 November 2016.

[34] 'Russian cyber-attacks could influence German election, says Merkel', *Guardian*, 8 November 2016.

[35] Thomas Read, cited in Taub, 'Kompromat And The Danger Of Doubt'.

of the Rhine (1936) to the Sudeten crisis (1938) to the Anschluss (1938) etc., all of these were international crises which Hitler managed to perfection and set out as a theatre producer would.[36] Putin is an effective manager of such tensions at the symbolic level. His wars, in Chechnya, in Georgia, in Ukraine, and in Syria are carefully calibrated so as not to force the West into fighting Russia while at the same time representing the West as weak and Russia as strong. There have been the set piece essays in symbolic theatre such as the Winter Olympics at Sochi (2014). And again with China, foreign policy serves the need of national self-assertion and the mobilisation of public opinion and more generally national solidarity. In other words, it serves a propagandist imperative. And similarly, with the symbolism of Chinese resolution: its refusal to allow any compromise on Tibet and its continued insistence that Taiwan is part of the China mainland.

One language used by the Russian government is the international language of propaganda as articulated through symbols. Putin's presentation of an Alsatian puppy dog to French security forces after one of their own was killed in a shootout with terrorists is one example.[37] This one gesture reveals all we need to know about the Russian understanding of symbolism. In China, by contrast, symbolism would appear more muted: every international act of Chinese gift-giving, an airport here, a highway there, and so forth is a symbol. And that symbol is of a China that is friendly. Soft power is moreover the official doctrine of China and it is therefore a doctrine governed by symbolism and a recognition of the power of symbolic strategies; and these have included 24-hour global television channels, the opening of Confucius Institutes across the globe and the Olympic Games (2008) and the Expo (2010).

Then we examine internally directed persuasion strategies, towards the domestic constituency.

Management of the symbolic realm: Symbols and the construction of the symbolic realm was of course the supreme feature of the Third Reich itself. The Nazis embodied in this everything from public art, to the theatre of foreign policy, to the ritual performances of the auditorium,[38] even to the conduct of warfare itself. Thus, symbolism can be included among the reasons behind the battle of Stalingrad. Less universally understood perhaps is the extent of the recourse to symbolism of the Russian and Chinese governments. The importance of symbolism can be succinctly stated: a way of reaching the non-political nation and those who would not be prepared to follow a complex argument. Symbols are multi-valent. Symbols condense meaning, they resonate, offering multiple possibilities of interpretation; there is a body of literature which suggests that the mind itself works by hosting symbolic representations.[39] In other words, symbols represent a language that lies deeper than language, they are an independent linguistic form more powerful than mere words.

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[36] Hoffman, Heinrich, *Hitler In Seiner Heimat* [photo-journal], (Berlin: Zeitgeschichte-Verlag, 1938).

[37] Lomas, Claire, 'Russia gives France puppy to replace dog killed in St Denis Raid', *Daily Telegraph*, 8 December 2015.

38 Spotts, Frederic, *Hitler And The Power Of Aesthetics*, (Woodstock: Overlook Press, 2004).

[39] Geertz, Clifford, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays In Interpretative Anthropology*, (Basic Books, 1984).

The regime of Vladimir Putin is intensely invested in symbols and symbolic strategies. Putin himself as a symbol embodies the persona of the state and the idea of the state. He is certainly a charismatic leader in the Weberian sense and he deploys charismatic authority in many different ways, as manifest in serial role-play he is a judo champion, a country and western singer, a muscleman fly-fishing half- naked, and much else. But he is also well capable of suggesting a soft side, a more nuanced portrait, as with his 'Blueberry Hills' manoeuvre where he sang the well-known US country song before amazed onlookers (it went viral over social media).[40] Before her murder, the journalist Anna Politkovskaya described Putin's shameless role playing and in particular his ability to symbolise values that were exactly the reverse of those which actually animated his Russian state. Mimicry, she thought, is the essence of the facsimile: 'on cattle breeders day [Putin] is our most illustrious cattle breeder; on Builder's day he is our foremost brickie. It is bizarre, of course, but Stalin played the same game. 'Today, as luck would have it, is International Human Rights Day, so Putin summoned our foremost champions of human rights [...] For the most part, Putin listened to what was being said and, when he did speak, presented himself as being on their side. He mimicked being a human rights champion [...].He is an excellent imitator. When need be, he is one of you; when that is not necessary, he is your enemy'.[41] And the connection with the serial role enactments by Hitler himself needs no comment, for the essence of the Hitler act is that he was many things, statesman, frontline soldier, street fighter, and folk comrade.[42]

Perception Management: History and Myth: In all these cases—China, Russia, Nazi Germany, and other cases as well—we see the invention of the past. The past is there to sustain the present and to sustain the political regime which exists in this present. History, or at least publicly narrated history, in other words is exclusively a theatre of propaganda and nothing else. Likewise, with Russia, it does not so much forget as never remember or selectively remember so that perception is manipulated via the misrepresentation of the past in order to promulgate a distorted idea of the present. There is thus the retro-configuring of history—and in the Nazi case the posthumous 'baptising' of so many of the great figures in German culture and history like Nietzsche or Frederick Schiller as proto-Nazis.[43] And they 'sold' their confections via their great film industry centred on Babelsberg, with costume drama films like The Great King, The Dismissal, Kolberg, Rite of Sacrifice.[44] We do, in other words, retrieve figures from the past to fit the new narrative, as China does in continuing to represent Chairman Mao as the icon of the state even though the practice of the state is the opposite of everything Mao ever believed in.

For Russia and for Putin however there is a problem since the Russian past is two regimes, the Tsarist, and the Bolshevik, the one being the enemy of the other. It has been an achievement of political imagination on Putin's part to reconcile this primordial antagonism embossed on Russia's history: to take both the symbols of

[40] 'Sing-along-Vlad: now Putin is Blueberry Hill crooner of the Kremlin', 12 December 2010.

[41] Cottrell, 'Death Under The Tsar'.

[42] Kershaw, Ian, The 'Hitler Myth', (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[43] Gitlis, Baruch, and Norman Berdichevsky, Cinema of Hate, (Bnei Brak, Israel: Alpha Communication, 1996).

[44] Renstshler, Eric, The Ministry of Illusion, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

Sovietism and the symbols of Tsarism and shamelessly use both to perpetuate his regime, creating a kind of unitary past, or reconciled narrative, out of the murderous chaos of Russia's 20th century. Thus, while retaining Bolshevist symbols and signs, such as the retro-Soviet celebration of the anniversary of the end of World War Two on 9 May 2015, May Day parades, and so forth, and the rituals, some Tsarist symbols have also been disinterred. In 1998 Tsar Nicholas had been re-entombed under Boris Yeltsin; but General Denikin, the most prominent of the white Russian military leaders, who died in exile in Michigan in 1947, was reburied in Moscow by a fond Putin.[45] And Admiral Kolchak, the leader of the White Russians in the East, has been elevated now to the pantheon of Russian heroes and placed within the grand narrative by a movie honouring his achievements.[46]

Celestial Pseudo-Mysticism: Another feature is pseudo-mysticism. The Nazis preserved the form of religion and politicised it into a civic religion, while rejecting its existential content. Putin's Russia has not needed to do this, the Orthodox Church, rejected and then rehabilitated by Stalin, has always been a devout ancillary of the Russian leadership. God, therefore, is on the side of Russia: and he is moreover the Christian God rather than the abstract Providence or pagan ersatz Valhalla evoked by the Nazis. This servicing of the existential needs of a dictatorship must be regarded as one of the great achievements of the pseudo-democracy. If the state possesses this aura, if it has divine sanction, then that exists independently of democratically derived authority as an alternative source of authority. Little Father Tsar, there by divine right, has transformed into Vladimir Putin, a Tsar for our times. In this the Russian regime has an advantage over China. This lack of an existential claim is a real problem for the Chinese regime since people suffer from a spiritual deficit.

In China, this is more problematic since, far from a clean break and repudiation of the Communist regime, the current government is the continuity of that regime. Therefore its symbolic and ritual heritage cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, this is still a remarkable act of symbolism and political prestidigitation. For the continuity regime is in economic terms the antithesis of the founder regime even though it is paradoxically the same regime. While this contradiction is apparent to every Chinese person it cannot be publicly admitted and the political uses of the past in this case are to sustain a bizarre and gigantic public falsehood. So Chairman Mao remains honoured, not merely in a political sense but in a neo-mystical sense as well, as the father of the nation and founder of the Communist state.

The Material—Consumption: Consumption is another component of the symbolic realm and the symbols of consumerism are propaganda, even though they do not overtly articulate a political meaning, for that meaning is implicit—symbols of consumerism are symbols of affluence and plenty. The world of goods on offer proclaims the regime's identity as a benevolent provider. China has sought to solve many of the problems of internal discontent by the energising of a consumer economy. In other words, consumerism is being used to solve political problems and also symbolises the competence and efficiency of the Chinese regime—the

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[45] Robinson, Paul, 'The Return of White Russia', *The Spectator*, 29 October 2005.

[46] The Admiral, 2008, Russia, directed by Andrei Kravchuk

Communist Party—in delivering on its promises. The poetry of consumption, this evangelical materialism, characterises modern China: the regime is unthinkable without the consumerist cornucopia that it has engendered. This was also true of the Nazis who sought to blind people to the deficiencies of the regime by offering them the glories of consumption.[47] The Strength-Through-Joy car (transformed post-war into the volkswagen Beatle), although no one ever received one under the Reich, is a case in point: it is a symbol of consumer promise, the promise of enhanced mobility.

Pseudo-Democracy: Democracy itself becomes part of this pseudo-reality. If other aspects of reality can be invented, so can the idea of democracy. Pseudo-democracy is a facsimile of democracy which both adopts some of its rhetoric and some of its accountability procedures at the purely symbolic level. Pseudo-democracies may even have some basis in real democracy in that there are ostensibly genuine 'elections', but in these elections, the opposition is intimidated and denied publicity opportunities and air-time. It is constrained by violence and this is as true of Putin's Russia as it is true of contemporary Venezuela under the Chavistas. The creation of alternative reality is a common property of such regimes, who find a formula for self-perpetuity embodied in the notion of pseudo-democracy.

And so, all of them create a pastiche of democratic process, and pay homage to the idea. The Chinese probably least of all, as they publicly invest truth in the idea of the party and the party as all-knowing, but even the Chinese have to entertain some elements of pseudo-democracy. For example, there does in fact exist a right-wing in China which is ultranationalist and for the Communist Party is both a resource and an embarrassment: they don't want it to get out of hand. And yet this right-wing is authentic, the party neither created it nor controls it entirely. Thus, one aspect of pseudo-democratic states is that they are not really totalitarian and engage residual aspects of democratic practice. In a recent incident, a prominent group of chauvinist cyber-activists spammed the Facebook page of Taiwan's new president.[48] Pseudo-democracy in China therefore allows a certain amount of dissent, unlicensed contrariness. The expression of grievance is protected at the individual level but prevented from merging with other critical voices into a movement or coalition of criticism.[49]

The Nazis were keen to continue with the democratic pretence that the press was in fact free: as in permitting the so-called bourgeois press to continue its existence.[50] And the Nazis were very concerned to make it look as if they had a popular mandate as expressed through the five pre-war 'referenda' and through an alternative paradigm of democracy—the concept of Hitler as, in some way, diviner of the public will, a kind of seer able to read the public mood and respond—so that he was not in fact a dictator at all but a kind of maven or mystic with an intuitive understanding of what

[47] Ross, Corey, *Media and the Making of Modern Germany*, (Oxford University Press, 2008).

[48] Sonnad, Nikhil, 'China's Internet Propaganda Is More Subtle And Sophisticated Than It Has Ever Been', *Quartz*, 23 May 2016.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Hale, Orin, *The Captive Press In The Third Reich*, (Princeton University Press, 1964).

people sought.[51] So mass rallies were presented as a form of acclamatory democracy where the speeches of the leadership cadre, and particularly of Hitler, were endorsed by the masses in auditoria throughout the nation.

3. Coercion

At this stage the article turns from persuasion to look at coercion and coercive strategies employed in several formats—emotional (mobilisation of fear), physical, and ideological.

Fear: Propaganda seeks out and exploits the most powerful emotions, and these almost invariably relate to questions of our own survival. There are of course many other kinds of appeal. But it is primarily in the negative emotions that propaganda activities reside. In psychological terms, we understand what we hate better than ~~what~~ we like.[52] Because the fear appeal is supercharged with emotion and easy to dramatise, easy to rhetoricise, easy to symbolise, and easy to mythologise, it is the ones which dominates. Fear is a very effective appeal because public opinion is often tentative. Where there is ambiguity, a rhetorical assertion of the possibility of threat can clarify opinion. Moreover the psychology of this is well attested, the thesis of Tversky and Kahneman suggests that the anguish of loss is greater than an equivelancy of gain.[53]

Existential Threat: Then there is the existential threat. For Putin the extrenal threat lies in the West with its armies on the border of Russia, while the internal threat eminates from fanatical Islamists thirsting to destroy Christendom and the Russian state. And this is very convenient as a source of authority. To Hitler, of course, this threat was embodied in the English and later the Americans; international plutocracy and, more specifically, the Jews who were the enemy behind all enemies so that in a very real sense the Nazis saw all of their enemies as part of the Jewish conspiracy and, for them, all in fact became Jews, e.g. propaganda referring to Roosevelt as 'the Grand Rabbi'.[54] Similarly today, migration creates the existential threat-crises Putin needs to legitimate his regime/coercive methods, e.g. the Russian state TV story about how the daughter of a Russian resident of Germany was raped by a migrant. This was, in fact, a complete fabrication, but no matter, it gained traction and currency.[55] But propaganda as we have said works because it does not commit the error of asking for belief: it wears a sly smile. It is perhaps really a case of lies being a deeper form of 'truth'. Propaganda is, in fact, primarily a solidarity-enhancing vehicle and once that solidarity is established much else follows. The ability to sustain war, for example.

There is also a vast ecology of right-wing websites that pose as truth-tellers with the explicit message that they are revealing what the conventional media are concealing.

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[51] Kershaw, *The 'Hitler Myth'*; Schulze Wechsungen, Walther, 'Political Propaganda', *Unser Wille und Weg 4*, 1934; Calvin College German Propaganda Archive.

[52] Douglas, Mary, *Natural Symbols*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

[53] Tversky, Amos and Daniel Kahneman, 'Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Making Under Risk', *Econometrica* 47 (2), 1978.

[54] Herf, Geoffrey, *Nazi Propaganda For The Arab World*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[55] MacFarquhar, 'Russia's Powerful Weapon'.

Such highly partisan websites are used to publish stories that may or may not be true; they are hostile to the liberal west and favour a very right wing and also a Russian narrative.[56] Thus, about forty pro-Russian websites operate in the Czech Republic and foment an anti-EU climate, such that less than one third of Czechs view the EU positively.[57] Their claims carry sufficient credibility to be listened to because of their resonance, in Schwartz's terms, that effective political persuasion should surface feelings already latent within the minds of the target.[58]

There is another improbable comparison between Goebbels and Putin where both specifically posed as the defenders of European civilisation: simultaneously threatening/executing the scourge of invasion while also posing as the saviour of Europe. Thus, Goebbels's great mid-war campaign, Fortress Europe or Festung Europa – Germany as the shield against the mongrelised Bolshevik hordes.[59] And Putin simultaneously is exploiting the West's, specifically Europe's, new-found sense of extreme vulnerability. He could pose as defender of Christendom against Islamism as with his mention of the rape of a child by a migrant in Austria (the case is set for re-trial) and the perversity of the West: 'a society that can't defend its children has no to-morrow'.[60] Imagery of vengeful Russian jets contrasted with the remembrance of Isis atrocities, and the Isis theatre of sadism made it easier to accept Russian bombing of civilians. In doing this Putin creates many admirers, part of a peculiar inclusion now of Russia into the Western rightist's narrative. Trump, notoriously, invited the Russian government to hack into Hilary Clinton's emails.[61] Kremlin techniques are seeking to divide eastern Europe between those with a deep hostility to Russia (Ukraine and Poland) and those with a greater fear of immigration/militant Islam (Hungary, etc). The Russians have created a luminous narrative, powerful, comprehensive, and bitterly partisan, that helps trigger a polarisation effect in public opinion, exaggerating existing political division.

Physical coercion: There is a calculus as to how much force to use in relation to alternative methods of influence, so what we see is the parallel functioning of both coercion and persuasion as indeed in all authoritarian societies. There is no real rule of law as such, but rather the operation of power unconstrained by either law or the traditions of a civic state. The use of murder in Russia to silence public critics, China's stifling and imprisonment of dissidents, or the true homicidal nihilism of Russia's foreign engagements—everything from the desolation of Chechnya to the bombing of Aleppo—are only points on a continuum and do moreover offer legitimate comparison to Germany *before* the Second World War and the start of the genocide. The deaths of critical journalists are consistent with the nature of fascism, i.e. organised violence either foregrounded or at the margin; for example the

[56] McIntire, 'How A Putin Fan'.

[57] MaxFarquhar, 'How Russians Pay To Play'.

[58] Schwartz, Tony, *Media the Second God*, (New York: Doubleday, 1983).

[59] Klemperer, Victor, *The Language of the Third Reich* (London: Athlone, 2000).

[60] Newton, Jennifer, 'A society that cannot defend its children has no to-morrow...', *Daily Mail*, 3 November 2016.

[61] Ackerman, Spencer and Sam Thielman, 'Trump's comments on Russia denounced as 'shocking and dangerous'', *Guardian*, 27 July 2016.

murder of Anna Politkoyavska on 7 October 2006.[62] This both restricts the supply of hostile information by eliminating its sources, and deters others. The dark side of the regime is so very public, as with the plutonium-facilitated murder of the ex-KGB critic Litvinenko in London. Such extrajudicial killings were characteristic of the Third Reich where the SS was the bearer of sovereignty and existed beyond the legal state.[63] Propaganda, in other words, is an agent of repression. Its aim is to cast light elsewhere, away from the dark side.

Ideology: It is difficult to imagine a propaganda actually devoid of ideology. Ideology is a way of answering all questions from a state's own internal resources; propaganda imposes a coherent meaning, resolves all uncertainty. One cannot of course have pseudo-democracy without an ideology, since coercion needs the legitimation which a set of didactic principles can bestow. Schulze-Wechsungen had claimed that: 'Our propaganda had to shake the foundations of the core of the Marxist idea in the minds and hearts of the masses, the theory of class struggle. Then we had to replace it with a new theory […]'.[64] Hence Putinism found a new ideology to give it a fig leaf of dignity, i.e. National Bolshevism, and the Eurasianism of the political scientist Alexander Dugin, which is a direct derivative of fascism: 'it proposes the realisation of National Bolshevism. Rather than rejecting totalitarian ideologies, Eurasianism calls upon the politicians of the 21st century to draw what is useful from both Fascism and Stalinism. Julian's major work, The Foundations of Geopolitics, published in 1997, follows closely the ideas of Carl Schmitt, the leading Nazi political theorist'.[65] So a function of propaganda is to create and sell this ideology, i.e. the aim is self-legitimation since no appeal can be based on the supremacy of might alone: 'The ethnic purification of the Communist legacy is precisely the logic of National Bolshevism, which is the foundation ideology of Eurasianism to-day. Putin himself is an admirer of the philosopher Ivan Ilin, who wanted Russia to be a nationalist dictatorship.'[66]

Chauvinism: The stress on patriotism, its symbols and rituals, are another feature these regimes share. Cottrell remarked after re-reading Anna Polytskova's diary that our assumption had been that 'its imperial ambitions were spent. It could be trusted to keep its problems to itself. Now, politically if not yet militarily, the Russian state is moving in a direction which is terrifying for its neighbours and dismaying for its friends—much as if Putin were preparing the ground for a crisis or a confrontation which would justify staying in power beyond the end of his second presidential term next year'.[67] Russia wants to regain what it has lost, power over its neighbourhood. The retrieval of a lost pride also explains much of what China does and much of their propaganda is directed to that end. But manifestly they are playing a different kind of power game to other states, not seeking global military projection/involvement in world conflicts. While the nature of Chinese engagement overseas is transactional, it ostensibly carries no baggage of cultural dominance or militaristic hegemony.

[62] Cottrell, 'Death Under The Tsar'.

[63] Gellately Robert, *Backing Hitler: Consent and Coercion in Nazi Germany*, (Oxford University Press, 2001).

[64] Schulze Wechsungen, Walther, 'Political Propaganda'.

[65] Snyder, 'Fascism, Russia, and Ukraine'.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Cottrell, 'Death Under The Tsar'.

Anti-West: In fact, such regimes exist in a curious and contradictory relationship to capitalism and plutocracy, simultaneously exploiting anti-plutocratic rhetoric as a public language that defines them, that evokes a sense of cause and mission and a differentiation from the capitalist West, while also being essentially plutocracies themselves with tiny elites. There is a cultivated paranoia which chooses to see all criticism as malign and externally imposed. Thus Putin declared (2007) 'there are still those people in our country who act like jackals of foreign embassies'.[68] Russia sees a Manichean world of friends and enemies and those enemies are the liberal politicians and parties and international institutions hostile to Russia such as the EU and NATO. America and Europe are portrayed in Russian media such as RT and Sputnik in hyperbolic terms; the United States is a crime-ridden dystopia and Europe is collapsing under the weight of terrorism and mass migration.

The new trends in Chinese propaganda have been an intensification of that paranoid anti-Western rhetoric, such as a video warning of the West's 'devilish claws'.[69] One recent video was described as a 'seven-and-a-half-minute phantasmagoria of the Communist Party's nightmares of western subversion'.[70] The Party apparently really believes that it confronts not fragmented foes but a Washington-led international conspiracy to subvert it: 'this conspiratorial worldview is more than bombast'; another film, 'Silent Contest', made by China's National Defence University in 2014, 'was even more breathless in its depiction of Western threats'.[71]

4. Soft Power

Next, the article reviews crucial differences in the ethos and conduct of propaganda then and now.

A Theory of Evangelism: These then were all states in which propaganda was the operational doctrine—in the case of China and Russia in fact an inherited one, since this tool was a paradigm mechanism of the states which preceded them and to which they are the legatees. But what they did was ad hoc. It was guided by a tradition of persuasion and less so by a coherent ideology and theory of persuasion, whatever the language they choose to dress it up in e.g. 'public diplomacy'.[72] Only the Nazis really possessed a more fully developed theory of propaganda to understand and explain and direct what they did. So, there is a distinction:

> 'What made the Nazis special was their pursuit of propaganda not just as a tool, an instrument of government—which had in fact often been the case in history before—but as the totality, the idea through which government itself governed. They saw public opinion as something that could be created, commodified and re-made. Nor was there really a distinction between policy and propaganda[…]'.[73]

[68] Applebaum, 'Vladimir's Tale'.

[69] Hernandez, Javier, 'Propaganda With a Millenial Twist Pops Up in China', *New York Times*, 1 January 2017.

[70] Buckley, Chris, 'Chinese Propaganda Video Warns of West's 'Devilish Claws'', *New York Times*, 23 December 2016.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Link, Perry, 'China: Capitulate Or Things Will Get Worse', *New York Review of Books*, 24 October 2013.

[73] O'Shaughnessy, *Selling Hitler*.

But this is changing. Propaganda is now a major part of Russia's strategic arsenal and an instrument of war by other means. General Valery V. Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed forces, published:

> 'what became known as the Gerasimov doctrine. It posits that in the world today, the lines between war and peace are blurred and that covert tactics, such as working through proxies or otherwise in the shadows, would rise in importance'.[74]

He called it non-linear warfare. His critics call it 'guerilla geopolitics'.[75] Gerasimov has explained that 'the role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness' (2013).[76]

A Philosophy of Soft Power: There is also the relationship between hard and what today we call soft power. It is more difficult to see the Nazis as embracing soft power, but in certain ways they did in relation to those states they wanted on their side or whose neutrality they sought, such as Finland or Spain. Where necessary, Hitler would indeed swallow his pride if an alliance was sought or an emollient or submissive posture was the necessity of the moment. So, the Nazis did fitfully practice this, as with the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the 1938 Paris Expo.[77]

For China, their exercises in hard power, such as their territorial claims to the Spratly Islands in the China Sea, are thought through in relation to the broader context of soft power. Indeed, they use the methods of soft power to pursue them. Thus, a film articulating the Chinese case in a South China Sea conflict was showing 120 times a day in Times Square; it was a propaganda response to the judicial ruling of the Hague Tribunal.[78] Increasingly, their propaganda speaks with modern accents, imagery is drawn unapologetically from the world of consumption: 'the video boasts the production values and soaring music of a multinational firm's big brand advertising campaign'.[79] The promise of a consumption utopia and a political utopia are interdependent and the stylisation hints at this. Alongside this is the attempt to humanize President Xi and to move away from the bureaucratic imagery of previous Chinese leaderships: 'the two-minute cartoon opens with a folksy jingle and a smiling bobblehead of President Xi Jinping, dimpled and cherubic'.[80] Xi himself is behind the supercharged propaganda renewal, complaining (as Goebbels did) about lacklustre and formulaic messaging constructed by party hacks; this is potentially being subverted by a more self-consciously modern approach making messages go viral on social media. The stylization is contemporary: 'hip-hop songs pay homage to party history'; for example, via the rap group CD REV—'its patriotic music videos

[74] Kramer, 'How The Kremlin Recruited'.

[75] Ibid.

[76] MacFarquhar, 'Russia's Powerful Weapon'

[77] Walters, Guy, *Berlin Games: How Hitler Stole The Olympic Dream*, (London: John Murray, 2006).

[78] Doland, Angela, 'Watch the Chinese Propaganda Ad Playing 120 Times A Day In Time Square', *Advertising Age* (Global News), 25 August 2016.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Hernandez, 'Propaganda With a Millenial Twist'.

mostly in English featuring songs about China's claims in the South China Sea and Mao's legacy'.[81]

Under Putin, the evolution of a formal and conscious soft power strategy occurred over a number of years. In 2000 he approved 'creating a positive perception of Russia abroad'; but the New Gazette explains that 'on the external front, inside the enemy trenches, it is television, not radio, aimed at foreign at a foreign audience that is important' (note the choice of metaphor: enemy trenches).[82] Thus, RT (launched in 2005) is propaganda: not merely the news from the Russian perspective, it communicates or obfuscates a regime worldview.[83] This of course is in the tradition of the old Bolshevik Radio Moscow. In Russia television thus transmits 'continuous propaganda glorifying their leaders'.[84] Yet it is a subtle form of propaganda as it resembles other Western news channels and has familiar stage props. Other proselytising agencies include the Russian Gazette, the Valdai International Discussion Club, and International Cultural Cooperation (*Rossotrudnichestvo*, which was established by Presidential decree in 2008 and is under the auspices of the Russian Foreign Ministry).

New Media: The success—for that it is what it is—of Russian propaganda today is governed by two particular kinds of related media evolution. The first is the maturity of cyberspace use as an information network replete with free but partisan media where objectivity has simply ceased to be the aim—a metamorphosis into an echo chamber with a corresponding decline of scrutiny. The second and parallel evolution is the demise of mainstream media—mainstream news channels, but specifically of the large local and national newspapers. The rise of new media in all cases has a deterministic effect on propaganda, since it is capable of transmitting messages on a scale never previously seen.

China to-day fights a vigorous online campaign via armies of emailers and social media scribes and this is centrally managed by the Party. In one investigation, analysis of hacked e-mails included instructions. The most common was that of cheerleading, that is to say great satisfaction with the party or with life for example 'Way to go Ganzhou!' Or 'Party Secretary Shi is an exemplary Party Secretary!' Hardly any of the posts could be categorised as 'taunting foreign countries' or 'argumentative praise or criticism'.[85] But cyberspace is a liability as well as a utility and is easily sabotaged, conscripted into counter-propaganda as with the ridiculing of Putin via satirical memes such as the one of him half naked riding a bear; although this may also reinforce rather than undermine him.

Their method is saturation—not simply a few slogans or a few stage-managed events, rather it is the manufacture of partisan meaning on an industrial scale. The Nazis were also very good at this, since, even though they expired long before the rise of

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[81] Ibid.

[82] Institute of Modern Russia, 'The Propaganda Of The Putin Era'.

[83] Knight, Amy, 'The Truth About Putin and Medvedev', *New York Review of Books*, 15 May 2008.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Sonnad, 'China's Internet Propaganda'.

the Internet, their radio transmissions could hit the entire globe including Australia.[86] The message of the Indian nationalist Subhas Chander Bose, residing then in Berlin, could target all and any Indian who had access to radio.[87] Unlike modern regimes, of course the Reich did not possess cyberspace; though the reach of its six transmitters at Zeesen was enormous.[88] And such propaganda can indeed be noticed (if nothing more); the wartime radio broadcasts from Berlin of William Joyce, 'Lord Haw Haw', were getting up to 70% of British radio listeners at weekends.[89]

Entertainment: One curious aspect is the comparative failure of China and Russia to use film and entertainment as propaganda, and in this sense their methodology is very different from that of Nazi Germany, since their propaganda is publicly stamped as such. even in the case of RT even though it mimics an entertainment form. Goebbels however regarded all propaganda perceived as such to be bad propaganda.[90] So his extensive film output resembled much more the structural propaganda as embodied in the Frankfurt School critique of popular entertainment.

5. Impact

The objective is acquiescence, not belief: However, the object of that propaganda is not necessarily to persuade, or to create true believers: rather it is to ensure passive acquiescence; this is an important distinction. One Chinese dissident, Han Han, 'argues that, to ordinary Chinese, the "news" in the official media, even if it is true, always seems phoney after its official packaging, because of its official packaging'.[91] But this doesn't matter because the regime does not ask for belief—only the facsimile of belief. The same was true of the Nazis, they had to settle for external compliance not internal fervour. Han even argues that the party doesn't want people to be too sincere in their love for it.[92] Such regimes are asking their citizens not so much to deny as to selectively see. And so, in the end, the peoples of these nations have to accept a duality of vision, a binary life with a public and private sphere and they must learn never to confuse the two. The party's goal 'is not to inspire deep love of China or hatred of its enemies. It instead aims to prevent, or at least break-up, any widespread anti-party consensus among the public'.[93] This is revealing: for example the party emerges as subtly manipulative in its approach to online dialogue, which is of course from-many-to-many rather than, as in the case of classic government propaganda, from-one-to-many. This is a strategy of distraction. What works is the sheer saturation level of noise which manages to frustrate discussion of significant issues.

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[86] West, *Truth Betrayed.*

[87] Hayes, Romain, *Subhas Chandra Bose In Nazi Germany*, (London: C. Hurst and Co., 2011).

[88] Walters, *Berlin Games.*

[89] Farndale, Nigel, *Haw Haw: The Tragedy of William and Margaret Joyce,* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2004).

[90] Renstshler, Eric, *The Ministry of Illusion.*

[91] Link, 'China: Capitulate'.

[92] Ibid.

[93] Sonnad, 'China's Internet Propaganda'.

Subsequently we look at the evidence for the impact of propaganda in several senses.

Dysfunctionality of Propaganda?: Despite the attempts at reform and reinvention, what remains distinctive in China and Russia is the extent to which they represent the continuity of Communist propaganda methods. And yet the old monopoly-transmitter/multiple-receivers model is no longer so powerful given the rise of the Internet. Official party messages are often mocked online.[94] All of these regimes have giant propaganda bureaucracies. But the product remains often moribund, lacking the freewheeling creativity of commercial campaigns and constrained by the atrophy of the critical faculty which is inherent in the authoritarian state: 'Along the way, the video issues a torrent of inspirational platitudes. "On the road chasing our dreams, we walked side-by-side" viewers are told, "transcending differences in shaping the future together".'[95] Chinese propaganda is often clumsy, for example, the English-language music videos praising the 13th Five-Year Plan or claiming that Americans love working for a Chinese boss.[96] And, the old Soviet mentality 'is still at the core of Russian propaganda' and its method evokes the earlier Soviet propaganda.[97]

In this of course they exhibit very well the limitations of propaganda as a genre, its evangelising properties are not great: it does not create converts so much as conformists. Internally there is also a dissonance between claim and practice, the propaganda projects a utopia, the reality is mediocrity. Moreover, while there is the formal (state) propaganda effort, to-day the informal unofficial (citizen) propaganda thrust may be more important—thousands are empowered by cyberspace. They produce the viral memes that subvert authority with cruel wit.

Conclusion

The article concludes by suggesting that a propaganda-augmented pseudo democracy is, if not the coming form of world government, a significant genre for years to come.

For both China and Russia, their internal (national) and external (global) propaganda campaigns are formed, in the last analysis, via five elements. They are:

1) *Consolidation*: The objective is power. The party wants something specific to conserve its power, which is not necessarily the same thing as supporting aggressive assertions of national greatness or the elimination of all hostile comment.

2) *Contradiction*: The monopoly of power is directed to its preservation and the management of the basic existential contradiction of an ex-communist or even 'communist' government of a capitalist country, so the regime is essentially an organised hypocrisy.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Beech, Hannah, 'This Is What Communist Propaganda Looks Like These Days', *Time*, 9 February 2015.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Institute of Modern Russia, 'The Propaganda Of The Putin Era'.

3) *Coercion:* The roles of coercion is to cut off the information flow via intimidation, even including, as in the case of Russia, the murder of journalists and the imprisonment of critics. The message is clear—don't rock the boat. Crucially, criticism is equated with subversion as one observer, the Marquis de Custine, wrote in 1839: 'Russia is a nation of mutes; some magician has changed sixty million men into automatons'.[98]

4) *Coherence*: The regime offers a worldview that is simple, coherent, and easily communicated. It is authoritarian, and this is an effective way to arouse the mob, given the wide appeal of coercive force against a nation's enemies.

5) *Calculation*: There is (even in the case of Nazi Germany) a calculus underlying coercion/persuasion, an understanding that they are both parts of the same idea. Chinese aggression is however carefully tabulated and controlled via rhetorical/symbolic assertion over minor targets. It is sufficient to appeal to the internal constituency and tell foreigners China is no push-over, without actually taking any real risk of war against people who are in fact China's major markets and trading partners.

Anticipatory account: Adolf Hitler represents an archetype and an anticipatory account of what came to be, plagiarised by others either consciously or rather unaware of the derivation of their methods. I have argued:

> Hitler was merely the most vivid in a by now long line of public image makers. And the German people themselves were the targets of the most vigorous, lucid and sophisticated public relations campaign ever conjured in all of history, and one which both anticipated and surpassed the public opinion sorcery of the twenty-first century.[99]

The methodologies that he established entered the global bloodstream, to be copied half consciously by other kinds of demagogues and aspirational autocrats. These strictures of course do not apply only or merely to Putin's Russia and Xi's China: they are part in fact of a broader movement, where democracy is used not to establish government parties of either the right or the left, but to entrench visionary regimes founded on some idea of a nationalist utopia. This can of course have a left-wing as well as right-wing aspect: famously that of the Chavistas and their successor Nicholas Maduro in Venezuela who have manipulated the forms rather than the reality of democracy, and have used classic propaganda techniques to do so—not least the attribution of blame, and the displacement of responsibility to external forces who have a malign and irrational desire to crush the government of Venezuela.

But there are other candidates as well, such as the new government of the Philippines whose president Duterte has specifically claimed resemblances to Adolf Hitler, primarily in his decision to launch a 'holocaust' of drug dealers and drug addicts, cheerfully promising he will murder three million of them.[100]

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[98] Knight, 'The Truth About Putin'.

[99] O'Shaughnessy, Nicholas, *The Packaging of the Third Reich*, (Routledge, 2017); O'Shaughnessy, *Selling Hitler*, 2016.

[100] Lamb, Kate, 'Philippenes secret death squads...', *Guardian,* 1 October 2016.

An earlier word in political science for such charismatic-authoritarian regimes was 'populism', as for example embodied in the rule of the Perons in Argentina. In this new order, whether the government does actually remain a dictatorship or graduates into a kind of managed democracy, the form is always the same—propaganda is more than just an instrument of government, it is in many ways the central organising principle of the new nation state.

Such states, although in no other way comparable to Nazi Germany, nevertheless use an admixture of coercion, persuasion, and plebiscite. These populist appeals with managed outcomes are characteristic in fact of fascism, of which they are in so many ways a modern evolution: aggressive in their foreign policies and authoritarian at home, super-patriotic and intolerant of internal dissent. We might speculate on whether the coming form of national government globally is something similar to this: the triumph of the ballot box is not foreordained, universal brotherhood is a difficult product to sell. For example one cannot assume that Russia and China will evolve into Jeffersonian democracies. The common feature is, and will be, the use of propaganda as lubricant, augmented by the rituals of pseudo-democracy.

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THE SIGNIFICANCE AND LIMITATIONS OF EMPATHY IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

Claire Yorke

Abstract

In strategic communications, dominated by concerns about the use and meaning of words, messages, images, and symbols for strategic influence and effect, there is growing recognition of the importance of empathy, but a limited understanding of what it might look like. Defined in its simplest form as the attempt to understand the perspectives, experiences, and feelings of another, empathy is both a communicative and a performative act. Its value is dependent on its ability to be demonstrated and understood, and its power can be harnessed by governments to connect with a wider audience and develop more responsive policies.

This article examines the varied dynamics of empathy through the lens of American politics at domestic and international levels. It argues that empathy is a multifaceted and complex concept with transformative power, but also with practical and political limitations, which deserves far greater attention from strategic communications practitioners.

Keywords: empathy, politics, communication, United States, presidents, strategy

About the author

Claire Yorke is a doctoral researcher on empathy in diplomacy. She managed the International Security Research Department at Chatham House, and was a Parliamentary Researcher in the House of Commons, UK.

'If our democracy is to work in this increasingly diverse nation, each one of us must try to heed the advice of one of the great characters in American fiction, Atticus Finch, who said "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view…until you climb into his skin and walk around in it."'[1]

President Barack Obama

Introduction

In his farewell address as the forty-fourth President of the United States, Barack Obama spoke of the importance of empathy. The idea that politicians and citizens alike should do more to understand the manifold experiences, perspectives, and feelings of others as a means by which to improve politics and society has been a recurring theme throughout his political career.[2] More widely, the significance of the concept, and the potential perils of its absence, have returned to debates during the Presidential elections in 2016. Following the surprise win of Donald Trump some questioned whether there was a lack of empathy with Trump's supporters, and whether the Democrats had failed to understand the different lived experiences and various grievances of those who had been left-behind or marginalised by globalisation, free-markets, and the speed of technological and societal advances.[3] What the events of recent years, and electoral shocks of Donald Trump in the United States and Brexit in the United Kingdom during 2016, have illustrated is the critical role of emotions in the political sphere and the need for politicians, leaders, government officials, and communicators to take greater efforts to empathise with their audiences.

In the domain of strategic communications,[4] dominated by concerns about the use and meaning of words, narratives, images, actions, and symbols for strategic influence and effect, the idea of empathy is a central but often overlooked concept.[5] However, recognition of its value is growing. Its significance in strategic communications lies not only in reaching out to an audience but also understanding them, in a way that is both active and iterative. The act of listening and seeking to

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[1] Obama, Barack, 'Farewell Address', The White House, 11 January 2017

[2] As a Senator Barack Obama spoke about the value of empathy, and it is a theme in is autobiographical writing The Audacity of Hope.

[3] Itkowitz, Colby, 'What is this election missing? Empathy for Trump voters', *The Washington Post*, 2 November 2016.

[4] There are debates about whether the term is in the singular (strategic communication) as normally used in defence or plural (strategic communications). This article does not engage in this debate but uses it in its plural form to denote the importance of the concept to aall practitioners and policy-makers and not just the defence community.

[5] In his primer on Strategic Communications, Steve Tatham defined strategic communications as: 'A systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences, identifies effective conduits, and develops and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behaviour.' Steve Tatham, *Strategic Communication: A Primer*, (Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 2008), pg. 7. In 2011, a Chatham House report on Strategic Communications took this definition as their point of departure: Cornish, Paul, Julian Lindley-French, and Claire Yorke, *Strategic Communications and National Strategy*, (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2011), pg. 4.

understand another itself communicates the value you attribute to them, even if you do not agree or support them. Through the lens of American politics, this article examines what this might look like and highlights the varied dynamics of empathy. It acknowledges that the art and practice of strategic communications involves a wide and diverse range of activities depending on the context of diplomacy, warfare, election campaigns, and domestic politics, and the role of empathy across these different areas is therefore variable and manifold. Recognising this dynamic, this article argues that it is a multifaceted and complex concept, with transformative power but also practical and political limitations, which deserves far greater attention from strategic communications practitioners. Given the potential breadth of such a topic, it explores the concept by drawing on examples of the way in which presidents and politicians communicate with the American public and foreign audiences about domestic and foreign policy, rather than, for example, examining the way in which alliances are strengthened, or how efforts to build relations in countries such as Afghanistan or Iraq could have employed empathy more effectively. In so doing, it provides a broad conceptual overview, and examines how the idea of empathy might be better understood, though in the process it highlights areas for further debate. Empathy can be a subjective concept that lends itself to different interpretations and perspectives, and as a result this area offers a rich vein of future conceptual and comparative research to develop the depth, detail, and practical dimensions of the approach.

This article begins firstly by defining the concept of empathy and how it might be measured. It then examines the concept as a form of performative and communicative action through the case of the United States and the way in which different Presidents have communicated in domestic and foreign policy. Thirdly, it explores the constraints on empathy to develop an argument that irrespective of the value of the concept, it is dependent on a number of external factors including personal disposition, the political system, the wider context, and the affective landscape.[6] In so doing, it aims to set out the case for why empathy is worthy of greater attention and open up discussion of the concept within strategic communications.

1. Placing Empathy at the Heart of Strategic Communications

Strategic communications is a central feature of both military and civilian political environments, however, there are flaws in the way it is commonly understood. Ambiguity around the concept can result in it being confused with media messaging and engagement. Defined in this way, it becomes about mapping an environment, designing and articulating messages, and identifying the audience in order to 'hit send' and inform, influence, or persuade them. In this form, it is incorrectly viewed as a linear and transactional interaction, rather than an iterative process, within a complex and mutually reinforcing communications environment that defies neat definitions. Rosa Brooks points to changes in official approaches in the late 2000s

[6] The idea of affective landscape relates to the emotional mood and the predominant, often palpable, and yet unquantifiable mood or feeling of the time. This article avoids engaging in a debate about the difference between emotions and affect and employs both terms as a way by which to speak of emotions and feelings.

when awareness of the importance of not just speaking but listening was growing among defense policy-makers keen to reform the government's approach to strategic communications:

> 'By the beginning of the Obama Administration, Pentagon reformers were urging a more nuanced understanding of what strategic communication might mean. Ideally, they argued, it should be less about what the Defense Department had to say than about considering how others might interpret the words and actions of U.S. defense officials. It should be a process of engaging, listening, and recognising that *all* military activities, from speeches and meetings with local dignitaries to aircraft carrier movements and troop deployments, have "information effects". *Everything communicates something.*'[7] [emphasis added]

The idea that everything is a form of communication means that effective strategic communications should position the performative and communicative value of words, deeds, narratives, images, and symbols at the heart of the strategic process. It further requires recognition of the context and the narratives and themes used and the way they may be understood. From the outset, what is said and done, how it is communicated, and the context within which it is perceived and understood, has a direct effect on the ability of a government to achieve its strategic objectives.

Empathy can be an asset in this process. Defined in its simplest form as the attempt to understand the perspectives, experiences, and feelings of another, its power can be harnessed by governments to connect with a wider audience in order to inform or influence them, or champion a cause. The practice of empathy, and the process of stepping outside of one's own position is important for the light it sheds not only on the interests or thoughts of others, but also on the role that emotions and feelings play in shaping and driving people's different views of the world. As primatologist Frans de Waal states: 'Perspective-taking by itself is…hardly empathy: It is so only in combination with emotional engagement.'[8] It is this idea of emotional engagement, of the personal connection, particularly the relationship between the individual and the collective, which is significant in this instance. However, this article develops this concept to argue there are variants of empathy that can be more strategic and intellectual manifestations of considering the perspective of another.

Politics is an inherently human interaction involving the way in which people construct their societies and manage the development of communities. In participatory and representative democracies, it is people, both as individuals and collectives, who determine the course of state actions and inform the norms and values that shape the system. In contrast to the literature that argues humans are rational and dispassionate actors, this article argues that ideas of reason and emotion cannot, indeed should not, be easily or neatly separated. People are inherently emotional beings, responding not only to ideas of reason or logical interests, but to feelings such as pride, grief,

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[7] Brooks, Rosa, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything*, (Simon & Schuster, New York, 2016), pg. 88.

[8] De Waal, Frans, 'Putting the Altruism Back into Altruism: The Evolution of Empathy', *Annual Review of Psychology* 59 (2008): pg. 285.

shame, or hope, and to recognition by others of these experiences.[9] Emotions, such as fear or joy, tend to govern what it is one values and the decisions that follow.[10] As Lauren Berlant contends, the political space in the US (or anywhere) is not rational but a 'scene of emotional contestation'.[11] For those who believe politics is the preserve of rational thought and the pursuit of interests, work on emotions is too often seen as a soft and irrational component that defies requirements for quantifiable and demonstrable metrics. Yet such a belief can be both limiting and detrimental to the development of effective communications. Politics is not only about politicians and government articulating how they will meet the interests and needs of society, but about providing a vision and range of objectives that respond to the requirements and expectations of the public, mobilises people, and speaks to identities and affective forces.

Empathy as a *means* of communication helps to provide this form of connection. If a communicator can articulate in a convincing and credible way that they understand people, that they 'feel their pain' as President Bill Clinton once stated, they can be seen as a representative of their needs and interests. To some extent, Donald Trump was successful in this regard as he could read the emotions and experiences of a certain sector of the American population in order to galvanise support from them. An ability to speak to an audience in a way that resonates with their emotions and provokes popular appeal should not be conflated with empathy, however there are interesting areas of intersection between the two that pose further questions for the way in which empathy itself should be understood.

Beyond renewed interest in contemporary debate about the value of empathy, an established and growing body of academic literature explores the concept within international affairs and politics and develops understanding of its complexity. The work of Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler is instructive for its analysis of the role of empathy, and associated concepts of trust, in diplomatic transformations and the reduction of the security dilemma.[12] Neta Crawford writes of the integral and overlooked role that passions play within international relations, focusing on fear and

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[9] There is a growing literature on this topic, which unfortunately is beyond the bounds of the current article to explore. However, interesting and important works on this include: Lebow, Richard Ned, *A Cultural Theory of International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 2008); Mattern, Janice Bially 'A Practice Theory of Emotion for International Relations', *International practices* (2011); Ross, Andrew A.G., *Mixed Emotions: Beyond Fear and Hatred in International Conflict* (University of Chicago Press, 2013); Moisi, Dominique, *The Geopolitics of Emotion: How Cultures of Fear, Humiliation, and Hope Are Reshaping the World* (Anchor, 2010); Saurette, Paul, 'You Dissin Me? Humiliation and Post 9/11 Global Politics', *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 3 (2006); Hatemi, Peter K., and Rose McDermott, *Man Is by Nature a Political Animal: Evolution, Biology, and Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[10] It could be argued that the response to 9/11 in the USA was not dispassionate, but based on a genuine sense of threat, fear, and grief at the shock and horror of the event. The Iraq War in particular was not a logical or rational extension of the initial event.

[11] Berlant, Lauren, 'The Epistemology of State Emotion', in Austin Sarat (ed.), *Dissent in Dangerous Times*, (University of Michigan Press, 2005).

[12] Booth, Ken, and Nicholas Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation, and Trust in World Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Wheeler, Nicholas J., 'Investigating Diplomatic Transformations', *International Affairs* 89, no. 2 (2013).

empathy,[13] and the way in which they can be institutionalised within organisations, transcending the boundaries between individuals and groups.[14] Carolyn Pedwell has critiqued the liberal and neo-liberal approaches to the concept through the lenses of post-structuralist, gendered, and queer theory to illustrate its complex and multifaceted role in transatlantic relations.[15] Naomi Head examines the dimensions of the concept in her work on conflict, trust and empathy,[16] as well as the politics[17] and the costs that accompany it.[18] However, there is limited work on its valuable role within strategic communications and the political sphere and the practical implications of its application.

There are different forms of empathy and it can be understood as both an affective and a cognitive dimension of human interaction. The affective dimensions refer to the way in which empathy can be seen as a natural feeling, or an emotional impulse felt for another or a group of people. In this innate form, as de Waal articulates, it rests on an assumption that, with some exceptions and limitations, empathy is often an inherent trait of humans and animals.[19] Within the social sciences, however, greater attention is placed on cognitive empathy, an idea that assumes conscious deliberation and attempts to be empathetic. Recognising this distinction between the cognitive and affective, while further acknowledging the way that emotions inform and shape cognition, this research does not look at innate empathy but instead focuses on three forms of empathetic engagement: interpersonal empathy; strategic empathy; and manipulative empathy. These forms assume a greater role for cognition and intellectual reasoning in empathy, although emotions are not entirely absent.

Interpersonal empathy is one of the most visible forms of empathetic engagement. It generally relates to the direct relationship and rapport that exists between two people.[20] Interpersonal empathy can evolve through time and proximity with another, or through a sense of shared experience or common bonds. As Cameron notes, empathy can be both something that occurs *in* communication (during contact with another), and emerges *as a result of* communication.[21] It might be instantaneous, such as the way in which two politicians meet and feel an affinity or connection, or it may be a result of conscious practice. Within the context of strategic communications,

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[13] Crawford, Neta C., 'The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotion and Emotional Relationships', *International Security* 24, no. 4 (2000).

[14] Crawford, Neta C. 'Institutionalizing Passion in World Politics: Fear and Empathy', *International Theory* 6, no. 03 (2014).

[15] Pedwell, Carolyn, Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and 'Affective (Self-) Transformations: Empathy, Neoliberalism and International Development', *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (2012).

[16] Head, Naomi, 'Transforming Conflict: Trust, Empathy, and Dialogue', *International Journal of Peace Studies* 17, no. 2 (2012).

[17] 'A Politics of Empathy: Encounters with Empathy in Israel and Palestine', *Review of International Studies* (2015).

[18] 'Costly Encounters of the Empathic Kind: A Typology', *International Theory* 18, no. 1 (2016).

[19] De Waal, Frans, *The Age of Empathy*, (New York: Harmony, 2009).

[20] Ideas of proximity (spatial and ideological) and intimacy are integral to the way in which empathy is conceptualised. See for example: Pedwell, *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy*.

[21] Lynn Cameron cited in Head, Naomi, 'Transforming Conflict Trust, Empathy, and Dialogue', pg. 41.

however, it is also about the way in which a communicator can articulate their awareness of the feelings or perspectives of a collective. For the majority of the public, the appeal of any politician or public figure is rarely based on personal or intimate knowledge of them, but on an intangible (and perhaps unscientific) but palpable feeling that this is the best or most appropriate person for government and that they are closest to their beliefs and values.

In part, interpersonal empathy is due to disposition, and an ability to connect to people. Former Vice President Joe Biden was adept at and well-known for, this form of personal connection, and could use it to build relations across Congress. However, this capacity for connection does not mean it is necessarily innate, indeed it can be learned, developed, and consciously employed as part of communication. This can be seen in the response to an audience question on the economic crisis during the second Presidential debate in 1992. In a contrast of styles, George Bush Senior intellectualised the problem, asking the audience to understand what he saw and did in the White House. Whereas when Bill Clinton spoke he made it personal, and related it to the pains and difficulties people in his state had felt, and his first-hand understanding of their experiences.[22] Good communicators, however, may be perceived as credible and empathetic to some, but dishonest and misguided by their political opponents. The ability to connect is subjective and bound up with ideas of credibility, trust, legitimacy, and reputation.

Strategic empathy is a cognitive form of empathy that assumes it can be instrumental as a political or strategic asset in developing longer-term relations, or advancing a certain cause. It speaks to the tenet of the strategist Sun Tzu to 'know your enemy',[23] but expanded beyond the context of warfare means to know your audience.[24] As part of this, it can be, to varying degrees, consciously constructed and communicated to facilitate cooperation or build bridges with others. Matt Waldman speaks to this variation in his work on the failures of knowledge and understanding in the US policy towards Afghanistan. He argues it was an inability to really know who the Taliban were and understand their context, history, and motivations that led to difficulties for the Americans.[25] Indeed, work on misperceptions and a failure to grasp the motivations or intent of another has a long history in international relations scholarship, most notably in Robert Jervis' work *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* that points to people's inability to see the other, their inherent cognitive biases, and the way beliefs shape policy approaches.[26]

Strategic empathy is arguably the most relevant to strategic communications. It assumes a conscious effort to design policy approaches with the other side in mind, to consider the implications of one's actions, and to communicate certain messages.

[22] Clinton, Bill and George W. Bush, Second Presidential Debate, 1992 and for commentary on this see: Marc Ambinder, 'Feeling Your Pain', The Week, 5 October 2012

[23] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War.*

[24] The idea of audience is itself open to further definition, and it is used in its broadest sense in this instance.

[25] Waldman, Matt, *Strategic Empathy: The Afghanistan Intervention Shows Why the U.S. Must Empathize with Its Adversaries*, (New America Foundation, April 2014).

[26] Jervis, R., *Perception and misperception in international politics*, (Princeton University Press, 1976).

In this sense, empathy can have an instrumental function, as a means by which to realise an outcome. Implicit within the concept is the idea that it is conducive to long-term strategic objectives, and whilst it implies that the understanding gained of another should have certain mutual benefits, as through consideration of another more nuanced and tailored policy might emerge, these benefits may be asymmetrical. Moreover, although a more intellectualised approach, it should not deny the power of emotions in achieving the strategic objectives.[27]

In contrast, manipulative empathy hints at the darker side. In this form, through intimate knowledge of another, particularly of their weaknesses, vulnerabilities, and grievances, actors can pursue their own self-interests at the expense of another. Indeed, Booth and Wheeler point to the ability of empathy to undermine enemies as well as reconcile with them.[28] Empathy is used to exploit another, rather than to seek a better response to their needs, interests, or expectations. This assumes, however, that empathy is considered a morally neutral concept, rather than an idea imbued with expectations of positive intent.[29]

Although the terms are sometimes conflated, empathy is similar to, but not synonymous with, sympathy or compassion. As political philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues: 'a malevolent person who imagines the situation of another and takes pleasure in her distress may be empathetic, but surely will not be judged as sympathetic. Sympathy, like compassion, includes a judgement that the other person's distress is bad'.[30] Within the concepts of compassion and sympathy are certain moral compulsions to respond, whereas empathy does not necessarily require action. However, as De Waal argues, empathy can facilitate sympathetic feelings.[31] Both sympathy and compassion hold further communicative value beyond the scope of this research but nevertheless deserving of further study within strategic communications.

Empathy cannot yield perfect or accurate knowledge, but within these concepts of empathy is the importance of recognition. This does not imply that one must agree with or respond to the point of view of an individual or group, but that a conscious and deliberate effort is made to recognise their standpoint, their grievances, the history and narratives that have shaped their position, and to communicate that recognition. It involves acknowledging the validity of another.[32] As sociologist Thomas Lindemann argues: 'recognition is crucial for emotional reasons—not only for increasing an actor's self-esteem, but especially for avoiding shame (dishonour)

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[27] The idea of passion is integral to strategic thought, comprising one element of Clausewitz's trinity. Howard, Michael, Peter Paret and Rosalie West, Carl Von Clausewitz: *On War* (Princeton University Press, 1984); Waldman, Thomas, *War, Clausewitz and the Trinity* (Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2013).

[28] Booth and Wheeler, *The security dilemma: Fear, cooperation, and trust in world politics* .pg. 237

[29] This opens up broader and important debates about the moral components of empathy, and whether empathy is, or can be, morally neutral, which is beyond the scope of this article.

[30] Nussbaum, Martha C., *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pg. 302.

[31] De Waal, 'Putting the altruism back into altruism: the evolution of empathy', pg. 286.

[32] The related and interesting idea of respect is examined in Wolf, Reinhard, 'Respecting Foreign Peoples: The Limits of Moral Obligations', *Journal of International Relations and Development* 19, no. 1 (2016).

and humiliation'.[33] Empathy assumes a more active process of considering, and recognising, the existence and validity of diverse, contradictory, and unpalatable views. In this way it goes beyond the ability to have a message resonate with an audience.

Furthermore, empathy is about more than understanding the world from another person's perspectives or being aware of their feelings, it is an interactive act. It involves an ability to reflect on one's own role and the way in which one's words and actions have affected another. This element of the definition is critical to the concept of empathy as articulated by Booth and Wheeler in relation to the Security Dilemma. Defining a particular form of empathy they term the 'Security Dilemma Sensibility' they note it is:

> 'an actor's intention and capacity to perceive the motives behind, and to show responsiveness towards, the potential complexity of the military intentions of others. In particular, it refers to the ability to understand the role that fear might play in their attitudes and behaviour, including, crucially, the role that one's own actions may play in provoking that fear.'[34]

It is an idea echoed in Jervis's work on understanding state behaviour which advocates an approach that incorporates both the operational and psychological environment within which decisions are made. This includes the beliefs policy-makers have about the world and those in it.[35] This requirement for self-reflection and conscious consideration of one's own beliefs, and the nature of self in relation to other, whether individually or collectively, moves the idea of empathy beyond merely understanding another point of view. It is this mediating dynamic, the recognition of the potential past and future implications of one's own words and deeds that imbues the concept of empathy with more positive connotations: that through awareness of the effect of one's behavior, this behavior is moderated or adapted to take the thoughts and feelings of another into account, though this is not always the case. Had American policy-makers reflected more in 2003 on the historical experience of foreign interventions within the Middle East, and the distrust many in the region felt to interference from outside, would the Iraq War have still been considered the best way to bring stability to the region?

Empathy is not easily quantified, yet this should not disqualify it from analysis. There have been limited attempts to provide a methodology for analysing it.[36] However, as empathy is considered to be something that is communicated and transmitted through words and deeds, as well as personal reflections, some scholars of empathy have

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[33] Lindemann, Thomas, *Causes of War: The Struggle for Recognition* (ECPR Press, 2011), pg. 2.

[34] Booth and Wheeler, *The security dilemma: Fear, cooperation, and trust in world politics*, pg. 7.

[35] Jervis, Robert, *The Logic of the Images in International Relations* (Columbia University Press, 1989), pg. 4. For interesting and recent quantitative research on this see, for example: Yarhi-Milo, Keren, 'In the Eye of the Beholder: How Leaders and Intelligence Communities Assess the Intentions of Adversaries', *International Security* 38, no. 1 (2013).

[36] One exception is political psychologist Ralph K. White who addressed the lack of criteria in international affairs by developing his own. This informs the criteria employed here. See White, Ralph K., 'Empathizing with Saddam Hussein', *Political Psychology* 12, no. 2 (1991).

examined it through discourse analysis.[37] This research uses the same methodology, employing a light-touch discourse analysis to identify empathy according to a number of criteria:

- evidence of perspective taking, and seeking to understand different sections of society and their political, historical, structural, and social-economic context

- awareness of one's own words and actions and how this might be perceived

- evidence of discussions of the importance of understanding another point of view and acknowledgement of recognition

In contrast, the absence of empathy can be viewed through the following criteria: an inability or unwillingness to take the perspective or analyse the views and position of others; misrepresentations and lazy representations of others, in this instance political opponents and supporters of the other party, including stereotypes and images that reduce the other side to negative caricatures. It might include:

- de-humanising images and language

- asserting oneself and the group one represents as right with no regard for the other side

- refusing to acknowledge the interests or perspectives of the other side during interactions

Although this may be subjective, these criteria provide a useful guide by which to develop and test our understanding of the concept and through which to engage with the central ideas of strategic communications.

2. Of Policy, Politics, and Presidents

For governments, such as the United States, empathy has value both domestically and in foreign policy. This section turns to the way in which it has featured within these domains, and the variable role it has played. In a political context, empathy can connect an individual, such as a President or political representative, with a collective, such as a specific group, community, or section of the public. It is a means by which one can claim to speak for many and help one's image and message resonate with and attract its intended audience. This relationship between the individual and the collective is central to understanding the power of empathy and emotions more widely. Indeed, in this context empathy cannot be seen as a stand-alone tool but as part of a complex affective network of many competing and complementary emotions

[37] For examples of those who have used a discourse-based methodology see Cameron, Lynne J., *Metaphor and Reconciliation: The Discourse Dynamics of Empathy in Post-Conflict Conversations* (Routledge, 2012); Cameron, Lynne J., 'The Interactional Dynamics of Empathy', (2012); Head, 'Transforming Conflict: Trust, Empathy, and Dialogue', (2012).

within communications and human relations.[38] Challenging the dichotomy between the individual and the group in the study of emotions in international relations, Neta Crawford explores the 'institutionalising' of passions, and points to the way in which organizations, or in this instance collectives, incorporate passions into structure knowledge and practices.[39] Yet it leaves further questions about the way in which this is done in practice and does not address the relationship in a political sphere. Hutchison and Bleiker instead argue that it is the representation of emotions and understanding is key. Firstly, because the absence of direct and perfect knowledge of another means analysis is dependent on representations through words, sounds, images, actions, and other forms. Secondly because 'representation is the process through which individual emotions become collective and political'.[40] Sara Ahmed speaks of the stickiness of emotions, the way in which emotions give meaning to ideas and imbue actions or words with power based on the way in which they move us.[41] Indeed, the content of strategic communications may speak of interests and reasons, such as security and prosperity, and yet successful communication speaks to emotions and feelings, and the way they are represented. It is the ability of words to move people to act, or respond—whether through emotions such as fear, anger, hope, or pride—that gives them force and meaning. The way in which a message resonates with a public is therefore critical, as is awareness of the affective landscape within which such messages are transmitted and received. This is dependent on both the content of the message and the interests it addresses, as well as its tone and ability to rouse emotions.

The narrative of kinship with the 'common man' is one example of empathy as a strategic means that is not new to political rhetoric. Indeed, neuroscientist Drew Western argues that it is integral, as the art of political persuasion is based on (neural) 'networks and narratives'.[42] Through his contrast of the election campaigns of Bill Clinton and John Kerry he points to two key messages in politics—that a candidate is presidential, and that they can relate to the experiences and perspectives of their electorate. Where Clinton succeeded in his political narrative, he argues, Kerry failed to communicate to the electorate that he was like them, that he understood their backgrounds and their experiences.[43] A striking example of this strategic form of empathy can be found in the inaugural speech of President Richard Nixon on 20 January 1969 where he invoked similar images:

> 'I also know the people of the world.
>
> I have seen the hunger of a homeless child, the pain of a man wounded in battle, the grief of a mother who has lost her son. I know these have no ideology, no race.

....
[38] For an interesting exploration of 'circulations of affect', see Ross, *Mixed Emotions: Beyond Fear and Hatred in International Conflict.*

[39] Crawford, 'Institutionalizing passion in world politics: fear and empathy'.

[40] Hutchison, Emma and Roland Bleiker, 'Theorizing Emotions in World Politics', Ibid., no. 3.

[41] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion.*

[42] Westen, Drew, *Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (PublicAffairs, 2008), pg. 12.

[43] Ibid., pg. 10.

> I know America. I know the heart of America is good.
>
> I speak from my own heart, and the heart of my country, the deep concern we have for those who suffer and those who sorrow.'[44]

Nixon was not a man known for his affective or interpersonal empathy, indeed he often preferred solitude and was not considered a people-person, yet he intellectually understood the utility of shared experience as a means by which to connect to the American people.[45] Moreover, he understood the context, and the mood, speaking at a time of domestic unrest and frustration with the government. Other Presidents have used similar approaches. Although her work emphasises empathy as an affective rather than a cognitive trait, Colleen Shogan illustrates its varying yet consistent role in US presidents through a comparison of Abraham Lincoln, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama.[46] She points to empathy as a disposition, or character trait, that facilitates one's ability to connect with others, and she argues that where George W. Bush was at times lacking in overt displays of empathy, such as after Hurricane Katarina in New Orleans, Bill Clinton could be seen to demonstrate an excess of understanding, to the detriment of his reputation.[47]

This idea of disposition is important for how empathy is conveyed and how an individual is perceived, as the credibility of the communicator is integral to the significance and meaning attributed to the message. Once again this can prove problematic as the idea of how one's disposition is perceived depends, in part, on the standpoint of the listener or audience. President Barack Obama cites empathy as a fundamental principle that his mother had instilled in him from a young age.[48] It is part of his personal ethos and originates in part from his background and own personal experience.[49] As Ta Nehisi Coates points out, Obama in many ways made a conscious choice to be Black and yet as a President of mixed race, he was simultaneously able to speak with ease to multiple communities as one of them,[50] an attribute Terrill refers to as 'double consciousness'.[51] In June 2006, when still a Senator, he spoke to graduates at a Commencement Address at Northwestern University about the need for greater empathy: 'There's a lot of talk in this country about the federal deficit. But I think we should talk more about our empathy deficit— the ability to put ourselves in someone else's shoes; to see the world through those who are different from us—the child who's hungry, the laid-off steelworker, the

[44] President Nixon, Inaugural Address, 20 January 1969.

[45] Nixon spoke from first-hand experience here. He had grown up in relative poverty in California and lost two brothers by the age of twenty-one, as well as experiencing conflict during the Second World War.

[46] Shogan, Colleen J., 'The Contemporary Presidency: The Political Utility of Empathy in Presidential Leadership', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2009).

[47] Ibid.

[48] Obama, Barack, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (Canongate Books, 2007).

[49] Recent research on empathy often cites Obama because of the emphasis he placed on the concept within his approach to politics and society, see, for example: Carolyn Pedwell, 'Economies of Empathy: Obama, Neoliberalism, and Social Justice', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30, no. 2 (2012); Shogan.

[50] Coates, Ta-Nehisi, 'My President Was Black', *The Atlantic*, Jan/Feb 2017.

[51] Terrill, Robert E., 'Unity and Duality in Barack Obama's 'A More Perfect Union', *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95, no. 4 (2009).

immigrant woman cleaning your dorm room.'[52] His belief in the power of empathy, did not necessarily always translate into good interpersonal relationships however, and he was not always able to bridge difficult interpersonal relations on Capitol Hill or develop a rapport with leaders such as Russian leader Vladimir Putin. As a counter point, might it be that the greater knowledge one has of certain people, the less inclined one might be to work with them as a result of increased awareness of their interests and objectives and the incompatibility with one's own beliefs and values?[53]

In contrast to Obama, Donald Trump has made no claims that empathy is a part of his ethos, nor indicated a public disposition towards it. His personal style involves an impression of plain-talking, avoiding political correctness, and calling out perceived failures in the system. He has succeeded nonetheless in tapping into a mood and into emotions of fear, distrust, and pride among certain sectors of the population to galvanise support. At a time of a perceived diminution of trust in the establishment, Donald Trump's message is reinforced by a cultivated image that he is a maverick and a political outsider, and therefore knows the grievances of the average citizen outside of the political bubble.[54] Although, interestingly, his calls to support blue-collar workers and veterans and represent them in government come from limited, if any, experience of that world.[55] That some people feel he listens to, and understands them and their experiences and perspectives, poses interesting questions for how empathy is conceived.

Indeed, having an understanding of the strategic utility of empathy in political discourses does not by extension make one empathetic. Referring back to the difference between emotional resonance and empathy, although Donald Trump may be able to articulate and reflect an understanding of the grievances and the aspirations of those who voted for him, demonstrating his use of strategic empathy, it is difficult to argue that he is empathetic or believes empathy to be as significant a principle as does Barack Obama. If empathy, as defined above, involves the ability to reflect on the influence of one's own words and actions on others, Trump has shown little understanding of the implications of his rhetoric when he referred to Mexicans as rapists, or demeaned women and people with disabilities at his rallies,[56] even though through this he tapped into and reflected the feelings of fear or distrust within some of his target voters. Instead this is evidence of dehumanising language, and an assertion of being right at the expense of others: thus demonstrating an absence of empathy. Yet, this perhaps reveals a subjective bias: is it empathy only if it conforms to one's own sense, as an observer or analyst, of what is appropriate, or just, or moral, or palatable? In many ways empathy is meant to bridge uncomfortable

[52] Obama, Barack, 'Obama to Graduates: Cultivate Empathy', Speech at Northwestern University, 19 June 2006.

[53] This is an interesting example as it points to the boundaries of empathy, and the intersection of empathy and ideas of interests and values.

[54] For an example of a critique of the Washington Post article see Willingham, Emily, 'Yes, Donald Trump is a Master of Empathy', *Forbes*, 3 November 2016.

[55] President Obama has also not served in the military, though he gained experience working with the working-class during his time as Senator in Chicago.

[56] J. A. 'Donald Trump Boasts of Groping Women', *The Economist*, 8 October 2016; David A Graham, 'How Donald Trump Speaks to—and About—Minorities', *The Atlantic*, 3 May 2016.

divides and to shed light on the different lived experiences of others in order to inform perspectives and generate greater understanding, irrespective of what might be done with such awareness. For example, one can seek to understand another point of view, but still disregard that knowledge or use it for manipulative ends. Therefore, for the concept to have definitional integrity, does the disposition and character and intent of the primary actor matter? One could argue it does in interpersonal empathy, and yet perhaps in the context of strategic empathy the successful pursuit of an objective is the priority. Addressing the parameters of this is important to the way empathy should be understood, and how the term is used.

In foreign policy, strategic empathy can provide a means by which to develop cooperation with other countries and cultures through both public statements and private meetings. When President Nixon went to China in 1972, breaking decades of animosity between the two countries, he used rhetorical claims about the importance of understanding one another in his public speeches, despite his intellectual pragmatism throughout the discussions. In a banquet held to thank the Chinese for their hospitality he reflected on the history of China, and the symbolism of the Great Wall for the Chinese people in a speech that sought to illustrate his understanding of the Chinese people and his hope for the future:

> 'I thought of what it showed about the determination of the Chinese people to retain their independence throughout their long history. I thought about the fact that the Wall tells us that China has a great history and that the people who built this Wonder of the World also have a great future. The Great Wall is no longer a wall dividing China from the rest of the world. But it is a reminder of the fact that there are many walls still existing in the world, which divide nations and peoples. The Great Wall is also a reminder that for almost a generation there has been a wall between the People's Republic of China and the United States. In these past four days, we have begun the long process of removing that wall between us.'

He spoke of the common interests that united the two countries, and the importance of their distinct beliefs and differences, and the significance of independence and security for them each.[57] The idea of understanding, however strategic, was built in to the Shanghai Communique. Nixon sought to find ways to build the relationship with the Chinese leadership through the private discussions while maintaining the compatibility of their different world views. This should be seen predominantly as an intellectual and strategic approach to the idea of empathy and its role in messaging.

Obama used empathy in his public efforts to build bridges with those to whom the United States had maintained lengthy antagonisms. In his Cairo Speech in June 2009, President Obama eloquently articulated a vision for the Middle East and the relationships between the West and the region. It was a speech designed to repair damage done by the dominant narratives of the War on Terror that had

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[57] President Richard Nixon's Address at the Reciprocal Dinner in Peking, Box SFSM PPF 073, President's Speech File 1969-74, Presidential Personal File, President's Speech File, 25 February 1972, Peking, China – Reciprocal Dinner

created a monolith of Islam and led to further tensions in the region.[58] Moreover, it incorporated recognition of the rich cultural and scientific history of the Islamic world and its wider contribution to the world. As the unrest, violence, and instability that followed the Arab Spring demonstrated, however, a commitment to such a vision is harder to deliver in practice.

In foreign policy interpersonal empathy is also important, as is finding common ground; seeking to understand a diplomatic counterpart can yield strategic rewards and help bring about diplomatic transformations. In December 1984, British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, met Mikhail Gorbachev in the UK before he became General Secretary of the USSR. In an interview after their meeting she stated:

> 'I like Mr. Gorbachev. We can do business together. We both believe in our own political systems. He firmly believes in his; I firmly believe in mine. We are never going to change one another. So that is not in doubt, but we have two great interests in common: that we should both do everything we can to see that war never starts again, and therefore we go into the disarmament talks determined to make them succeed. And secondly, I think we both believe that they are the more likely to succeed if we can build up confidence in one another and trust in one another about each other's approach, and therefore, we believe in cooperating on trade matters, on cultural matters, on quite a lot of contacts between politicians from the two sides of the divide.'[59]

Her famous statement captures this power of interpersonal relations in contributing to significant shifts in international relations. Moreover, the approaches of Nixon and Thatcher above highlights a fundamental element of empathetic engagement: that one can seek to understand without acquiescing to, or agreeing with, the other. Such efforts involve careful management, however, that recognises the symbolism of such rapprochements and the potential reticence of a domestic population to do business with another state after periods of hostility. In this regard, the public and private expressions may differ, or be mediated by political considerations.

3. The Contours and Limitations of Empathy

Empathy does not have the power to deliver strategic objectives or a political victory on its own, yet understanding its value and leveraging its potential requires that one equally recognises its limitations. This section points to how, irrespective of the way in which empathy can contribute to more effective communications, there are natural constraints on more empathetic communication and limitations to its potential. Indeed, in spite of its value, empathy is no panacea, nor is it, on its own, transformative. Psychologist Paul Bloom has written extensively about the perils of empathy and the way in which it can make people more tribal, can distort judgement, and pervert morality. By identifying with a certain group, or being moved by the emotional story of an individual, he points to the way in which people can overlook

[58] Obama, Barack, 'Remarks by the President at Cairo University', 4 June 2009, The White House.

[59] Margaret Thatcher speaks to BBC, Thatcher Archive: COI transcript, 17 December 1984.

the bigger picture or disadvantage those outside of the empathetic narrative.[60] Instead of empathy, enmity can serve political purposes. It can be in the interest of different sides of a political debate domestically, or for two states internationally, to demonise one another.[61] A clear delineation of 'them' and 'us' can help to develop support and strengthen political or national identities around a set of values and ideas. This was evident in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States when George W. Bush characterised America's political enemies Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, as the 'axis of evil'. This was part of the dominant narrative for his strategic objectives.

Fostering empathetic engagement in strategic communications, therefore, requires potentially uncomfortable efforts to consciously imagine the perspectives, thoughts, and feelings of foreign actors for whom government officials and publics may feel strong animosity. In December 2014 Hillary Clinton spoke at Georgetown University about the importance for American 'smart power' of respecting and empathizing with America's enemies:

> 'This is what we call smart power, using every possible tool and partner to advance peace and security, leaving no one in the sidelines, showing respect even for one's enemies, trying to understand and in so far as psychological possible empathize with their perspective and point of view.'[62]

Such a call provoked further questions about the wisdom and morality of such a move, particularly as it related to groups such as the Islamic State (IS). One week later, during a Foreign Relations Select Committee hearing, Secretary John Kerry was questioned about this assertion by Senator John Barroso (Republican, Wyoming).[63] In his response he asserted his confidence that Clinton did not include IS in her call for empathy, yet it raises valid questions for strategic communications practitioners about the boundaries of empathy. If it is seen as conducive better to understand the Russian government, does the same hold true for terrorist organisations? If empathy is valuable as a strategic asset, where do the boundaries of such understanding lie? Empathetic engagement risks being perceived as weakness, or a soft option that compromises the national interest. The ability of a leader to be seen as empathetic and for it to contribute to strategic objectives can therefore be dependent upon whether they have an authoritative voice and strong leadership. Such important philosophical and political questions about the boundaries of empathy are deserving of far greater attention, but it should be emphasised that the act of empathising does not mean condoning acts of terror or atrocities. Empathy is not agreement or support. Instead by engaging with such points of view, however unpalatable, it may

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[60] Bloom, Paul, 'Against Empathy', *The Boston Review* (2014); 'The Baby in the Well', New Yorker 20 (2013); 'The Peril's of Empathy', *Wall Street Journal* (2016).

[61] For an interesting account of this in conflict situations see, for example: Jabri, Vivienne, *Discourses on Violence: Conflict Analysis Reconsidered* (Manchester University Press, 1996); Hedges, Chris, *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (Anchor, 2002).

[62] Clinton, Hillary R., 'Hillary Rodham Clinton Speaks on Security, Inclusive Leadership', *Georgetown University*, 3 December 2014

[63] Testimony from Secretary of State John Kerry, 'Authorization For The Use of Military Force Against ISIL', United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, December 9, 201

yield alternative and creative solutions that provide insights into the root causes of their actions, and generate awareness of the weaknesses in the official response, so as to reduce the potential of such groups to do harm.[64]

The use of empathy as a means by which to achieve strategic objectives is, in part, dependent on an alignment of words and deeds. Whether an election campaign, a diplomatic transformation, or a business deal, strategic communications is not just the articulation and dissemination of a message to a targeted audience. There is a consensus within the literature that strategic communications is the effective communication and alignment of words, images, and actions in their manifold forms, in the pursuit of strategic objectives.[65] Political promises and talk of understanding the concerns of different groups must therefore be supported by corresponding actions and practices in order for these to remain credible claims. Moreover, as the modern media environment makes it hard to segment an audience and deliver different targeted messages to specific groups, the coherence of any communication, in words and deeds, is therefore vital. If empathy is about recognizing the value of others, and alternative perspectives or experiences of the world, the communication of that recognition must simultaneously reach the principle target group, while equally articulating to other groups the value of such understanding. This is not easily achieved.

In spite of a President's articulated vision for his Administration, no one individual can realise or deliver on their promises alone. A President is situated at the centre of a complex network of simultaneously competing and mutually interacting audiences. They must speak and respond to the expectations, demands, and requirements of their immediate sabinet, of their political party, of their chosen constituencies (the dominant groups whose causes they have chosen to represent), of the wider electorate that includes both supporters and opponents, to their opposition, and to their foreign allies and adversaries. Their ability to empathise is therefore predicated on important questions of with whom should they empathise, and why? This question is central to the application of the concept to the real-world. Such efforts are not without costs and compromises. Whereas Trump's identification with the predominantly white working class of industrial areas has been seen to have alienated certain minorities and the liberal left, as Johnson neatly articulates: 'Obama's own politics of empathy and hope inevitably prioritised some forms of social exclusion and marginalisation, and downplayed or dismissed others.'[66]

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[64] This area is deserving of greater development. However, interesting work has been done on the idea of 'Red Teaming' and considering how groups such as ISIS might think and how governments might therefore respond. See, for example: Zenko, Micah, *Red Team: How to Succeed by Thinking Like the Enemy*, (Council on Foreign Relations, Washington DC, Nov 2015); The UK Ministry of Defence has produced work on Red Teaming, HMG Ministry of Defence (DCDC), *Red Teaming Guide: Second Edition*, January 2013.

[65] See Cornish, Paul, Julian Lindley-French, and Claire Yorke, 'Strategic Communications and National Strategy', (2011); Farwell, James P., *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication* (Georgetown University Press, 2012); Paul, Christopher, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates* (e-Book: Praeger, 2011).pg. 3. See also: Ingram, H. J. T., 'A Brief History of Propaganda During Conflict: Lessons for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications', (The Hague 7: The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2016). No 6.

[66] Johnson, Carol, 'The Politics of Affective Citizenship: From Blair to Obama', *Citizenship Studies* 14, no. 5 (2010): pg. 505.

Naomi Head constructively develops a typology of the costs of empathetic encounters (epistemological, cognitive, emotional, material, and embodied). [67] In addition to this are the loyalties and relationships that are put at risk by attempting to understand an adversary, political outsider, or unpopular group.

For President Obama, despite his consistent public advocacy of empathy in politics, there have been structural, political, and societal constraints that have contributed to an inability to deliver fully on his vision. The inability, or unwillingness, to respond sooner to the crisis in Syria is one example where compassion for suffering was not met by political action for a number of reasons. Indeed, the imperatives of political office require prioritisation and a decision over which battles should be fought with Congress and other influential constituencies. In attempting to reach out to the Iranians, for example, to develop negotiations on their nuclear capabilities, Obama was unable to win over sections of Congress who felt the deal undermined American power and security. It would become a part of Donald Trump's platform that the Iranian deal was bad for America and a sign of weakness, reflecting the concerns of many Republicans. Tensions were further increased with the Israeli government who perceived his actions as betraying a long-standing American loyalty to the country. For any leader, empathy is balanced by the variety of competing public and private expectations, and the need for political popularity and consensus to push through legislation. It is mediated by the requirements for strong leadership and compromise on policy priorities.

A further problem highlighted by the recent American elections, and the divisions in American politics more generally, is that the difficulties lie not only in an individual's ability to connect with a collective, but for multiple collectives (such as Republicans and Democrats and the different camps within those two umbrella groups) to empathise and connect with one another. In her work on affective citizenship, Johnson points to the way in which emotions can unite individuals into collectives in society to develop forms of citizenship. [68] For her, 'Obama's politics of empathy… is an attempt to develop a citizen identity that is more compassionate and socially connected than extreme neo-liberal forms of the abstract, self-reliant citizen.'[69] Yet such ideas will fail to unify citizens who have very different political logics, or alternative conceptions of the role of the state, the individual within the state, and their individual and shared obligations and responsibilities to society.

Finally, empathy, as already outlined, is a communicative and performative act. Its value is dependent on its ability to be demonstrated and understood. As a message it is neither transmitted nor received in a linear direction. Instead, it is an interactive process that forms part of a broader and complex message in a communications environment. Within this environment, communications are transactional and simultaneous, being sent and received, mediated, and interpreted through multiple channels and imbued with varying meanings according to the sender, the receiver, and the broader context. The changing media environment has both helped and hindered the capacity of politicians to connect to people.

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[67] Head, 'Costly Encounters of the Empathic Kind: A Typology'.

[68] Johnson.'The politics of affective citizenship: From Blair to Obama'

[69] Ibid., pg. 504.

The growth of social media and technology facilitates a greater plurality of voices within political discourse. Its accessibility lowers the entry-point for people to engage with contemporary debates and to share information across a wide network of friends, acquaintances, or interested followers. The evolution of this media environment, and the growth of social media, has made it possible not only to connect directly and instantaneously with the public at a domestic level, but for politicians and others to reach out and engage with people in other countries.[70] However, the instantaneous and ubiquitous nature of modern media can simultaneously make it harder for politicians to be heard and understood, and it requires coherence between words and deeds across multiple audiences. In 2009 Nik Gowing articulated challenges posed to governments by advances in technology and the media. He argued that the pace of change and proliferation of new forms of media was outstripping the ability of political and business leaders to respond effectively. As a result it makes leadership more fragile, undermines the processes of democratic governance, and calls into question the credibility and reputation of traditional sources of information.[71] As McLuhan presciently observed, 'The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance.'[72] Renewed discussions about a 'post-truth' or 'post-fact world' appear to point to an important shift in the nature of trust in official information and the ability for political messages to be undermined by different alternative sources.[73] This will have implications for the ability of leaders, policy-makers, and politicians to connect with their audience, and to be trusted as official representatives.[74]

Conclusion

Recognition of the power of the media to shape public opinion and gain popularity or achieve strategic objectives, has at times led to strategic communications focusing too much on the construction and dissemination of a message at the expense of thinking about what it signifies, and how it reflects the central workings and objectives of government. One consequence is that, in the development of strategy and policy, a seemingly good solution is found and then messages and communications are shaped to fit as a secondary part of the process.

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[70] Shirky, Clay, 'The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change', *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (2011).

[71] Nik Gowing, 'Skyful of Lies and Black Swans', (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford 2009).

[72] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (Corte Madera: Gingko Press, 2013), pg. 33.

[73] This is an emerging discussion within news media and there is currently limited work on the implications of recent political developments for truth in the academic literature. See for example: Fallows, James, 'Paul Ryan and the Post-Truth Convention Speech', *The Atlantic* (2012); Davies, William ,'The Age of Post-Truth Politics', *New York Times,* 24 (2016).

[74] Trust is often discussed as an important component in relation to empathy. For insightful and useful work on this topic see Booth and Wheeler, *The security dilemma: Fear, cooperation, and trust in world politics*; Head, 'Transforming Conflict Trust, Empathy, and Dialogue'.

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. As Tatham argued: 'when conveying information we must consider not just technology—but of greater importance—the culture, history and traditions of our intended audiences'.[75] Indeed, through considering a situation through the eyes of another, through taking into account the context, the affective landscape, and the implications of one's prior words and actions, empathy should contribute to more reflective and responsive communications, which are more sensitive to different audiences and can foster greater connection to people. Reason and emotion do not need to be viewed as distinct areas, but as mutually reinforcing and overlapping to various degrees according to the circumstances.

Empathy is no panacea, nor is it possible to convey one's efforts to understand everyone simultaneously successfully without diluting the authority and credibility of the core message. Nonetheless, it is a means by which to develop communications that are more self-reflective and attuned to the experiences and perceptions of different audiences. It is something that can be learned, cultivated, and practised, but practitioners and officials need to be more comfortable with the ambiguity and intuitions that accompany it. It should be expected that benefits of more empathetic communications will take time to accrue. Empathetic discourses and practices are, as has been outlined above, dependent on the credibility of the communicator and evidence of attempts to understand another, and this is not instantaneous.

Although the ability to connect with an audience, or to be able to read and work a room, can yield great political effect, for empathy to have integrity and meaning as a concept, and for it be effective within communications and politics, it is worth considering it in relation to the Aristolean trinity of rhetoric: ethos, pathos, and logos. That is to say, it has to be seen to be a part of the character and disposition of the communicator for it to be perceived as sincere by the widest possible audience; there are no guarantees empathy will be perceived as credible or trusted by everyone. In order to move necessary crowds and galvanise support for a campaign or governing administration, the understanding and recognition of grievances and emotions, as well as interests, must form a part of official communications and the public rhetoric of politicians and their team. Finally, it must be articulated in a way to reflect simultaneously the logic of different audiences, speaking to their concerns and their worldview, and making sense as a means by which to achieve strategic objectives, build bridges, and allay concerns.

This article has sought to highlight the value and limitations to the field of strategic communications through a broader sweep of the concept of empathy and its application. There are inherent limitations of depth and detail to such an approach, and it is, in many ways, a starting point for a much broader discussion. Further research is needed to examine examples of successful and unsuccessful strategic communications efforts, and the way in which empathy varies in different interactions. For those who research empathy and are interested in its political and strategic

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[75] Steve Tatham, *Strategic Communication: A Primer*, (Defence Academy of the United Kingdom 2008), pg. 6.

implications, there are a number of important questions for further research: does it suffice for empathy to exist in discourse if it is not there in practice? How much does personal disposition matter in developing empathetic politics? To what extent does the intent of the communicator matter if it yields the intended result? Finally, there are useful discussions to be had about the interaction of reason and emotions, particularly in relation to different forms of strategic communications activities.

At a time of political change and unexpected developments, calls for greater empathy in politics provide a valuable occasion for the political establishment to move beyond its own echo chamber and engage more widely with sectors of society who have diverse experiences of a changing globalised world.

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BRITAIN'S PUBLIC WAR STORIES: PUNCHING ABOVE ITS WEIGHT OR VANISHING FORCE?

Thomas Colley

Abstract

Communications practitioners continue to see strategic narrative as vital to securing domestic support or opposition to war. Yet despite an extensive literature on the narratives states construct, the stories domestic citizens tell about war are rarely examined. Consequently, the formation of strategic narratives is only informed by the stories governments think citizens tell, rather than those they actually tell.

This paper presents a qualitative analysis of the stories the British public tell about their country's role in war. Focusing on genre—the general pattern of a given story—it reveals five narratives citizens use to interpret Britain's military role. These portray Britain as Punching Above its Weight; a Vanishing Force; Learning from its Mistakes; being Led Astray, or a Selfish Imperialist. At a time of uncertainty about Britain's international role following the 'Brexit' vote, it provides an in-depth perspective on a state where military intervention is commonplace but understanding of public interpretations of war remains limited.

Keywords: strategic narratives, stories, military interventionism, British imperialism, Islamic State

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Introduction

Over a decade has passed since the strategic studies literature embraced the concept of narrative. In that time, research on the subject has grown considerably. At its peak, narrative has been venerated as the 'foundation of all strategy', considered as important if not more important than physical actions.[1] Authors have theorised enthusiastically that the right strategic narrative might win wars, sustain alliances, prevent radicalisation, project soft power, secure domestic support, shape the identity, and alter the behaviour of other international actors.[2] The appeal of narrative as supposedly the most natural form of human communication has made it seem the ideal solution to the West's strategic challenges.[3] This has spawned a growing literature trying to discern the ideal strategic narratives for states to project.[4]

Optimism at the supposedly 'startling power of story' has since been tempered in several ways.[5] Critics have questioned whether some theorists have overstepped the mark in assuming that a compelling narrative can be a substitute for actual strategy.[6] Also, as coalition strategic communication efforts in Afghanistan showed, coordinating multiple actors with diverse constituencies has proven exceptionally difficult unless the overall message is so vague as to have little meaning.[7] A combination of cynical Western publics and an intricately networked media ecology make coherence and consistency hard to achieve.[8] Furthermore, the prevailing assumption in the West of the need to be 'first with the truth' now struggles against a formidable communications challenge from Russia.[9] It seeks to undermine the notion

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[1] Nissen, Thomas Elkjer, 'Narrative Led Operations: Put the Narrative First', *Small Wars Journal,* 2012; Simpson, Emile, *War from the Ground up: Twenty-First Century Combat as Politics,* (London: Hurst, 2012); Vlahos, Michael, 'The Long War: A Self-Fulfilling Prophecy of Protracted Conflict and Defeat'.

[2] Archetti, Cristina, *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media: A Communication Approach*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); De Graaf, Beatrice, George Dimitriu, and Jens Ringsmose (eds.), *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015); Freedman, Lawrence, 'The Transformation of Strategic Affairs', *Adelphi Papers,* No. 379, (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2006); Miskimmon, Alister, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*, (New York: Routledge, 2013); Ringsmose, Jens and Berit Kaja Børgesen, 'Shaping Public Attitudes towards the Deployment of Military Power: NATO, Afghanistan and the Use of Strategic Narratives', *European Security* 20, no. 4 (2011): 505–28; Roselle, Laura, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin, 'Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power', *Media, War and Conflict* 7, no. 1 (2014): 70–84.

[3] Fisher, Walter, 'Narration as a Human Communication Paradigm: The Case of Public Moral Argument', *Communications Monographs* 51, no. 1 (1984): 1–22.

[4] For early examples, see Kaldor, Mary et al., 'Human Security: A New Strategic Narrative for Europe', *International Affairs* 83: no. 2 (2007): 273–288; Porter, Wayne and Mykleby, Mark [Mr. Y], *A National Strategic Narrative*, (Woodrow Wilson Centre for International Scholars, 2011).

[5] Haven, Kendall, *Story Proof: The Science Behind The Startling Power Of Story*, (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007).

[6] Cawkwell, Thomas, *UK Communication Strategies for Afghanistan, 2001–2014,* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2015); Porter, Patrick, 'Why Britain Doesn't Do Grand Strategy', *The Royal United Services Institute Journal* 155, no. 4 (2010): 6–12.

[7] Betz, David, 'Searching for El Dorado: the legendary golden narrative of the Afghanistan War', in De Graaf et al., *Strategic Narratives.*

[8] Betz, David, *Carnage and Connectivity: Landmarks in the Decline of Conventional Military Power*, (London: Hurst & Co, 2015); Miskimmon et al., Strategic Narratives.

[9] Petraeus, David, 'Counterinsurgency Concepts: What We Learned in Iraq', *Global Policy* 1, no. 1 (2010): 116–17.

of truth by saturating the information environment with multiple claims of varying levels of veracity, understanding quite accurately that sceptical Western publics increasingly distrust anything political elites tell them, and cannot pick out what is plausible from what is not.[10] This approach simultaneously suggests the power of story over rational argument, while showing how hard it is for the West to get its narratives to resonate with its citizens.

Throughout the rise and fall of strategic narratives, one area has been persistently under-researched: the narratives of the citizens governments are trying to persuade. Theoretically, strategic narratives persuade through 'resonance' with audience understandings of the world; their individual and collective beliefs, values, history, and culture.[11] Since it is currently assumed that humans understand the world through stories, effective strategic communication should logically require a comprehensive grasp of the existing narratives within a given culture, ideally down to the individual level.[12]

Nevertheless, the stories citizens tell about war are rarely examined. Scarcely any research has investigated how publics interpret the stories governments tell them, or how they construct their own. Studies of strategic narrative reception have attempted to correlate a given narrative with its effects on public opinion polls over time.[13] However, rarely do researchers study the war stories actually told by 'ordinary people'.[14] Moreover, these have not yet been used to inform the initial process of strategic narrative construction when a new conflict arises. Consequently, when explaining why the country should or should not go to war, governments are only informed by the stories they think citizens tell, rather than detailed analysis of those they actually tell.

This paper seeks to address the void by providing a ground-up perspective on how a diverse range of British citizens use narratives to interpret Britain's role in war. In doing so it complements Steve Tatham's argument that strategic communication requires a shift to bottom-up approaches to better understand target audiences.[15] Narrative can be analysed at different levels. Here the focus is on genre: the general patterns of the stories British people tell. In doing so, it provides an in-depth, qualitative perspective on a state where military intervention is commonplace, but understanding of public interpretations of war remains relatively limited.[16]

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[10] Betz, David, 'The Virtual Dimension of Contemporary Insurgency and Counterinsurgency', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19, no. 4 (2008): 510-540.

[11] Archetti, *Understanding Terrorism;* Freedman, 'The Transformation'.

[12] Archetti, Understanding Terrorism.

[13] De Graaf et al., *Strategic Narratives; Ringsmose and Børgesen*, "Shaping Public Attitudes".

[14] Smith, Philip, *Why War? The Cultural Logic of Iraq, the Gulf War, and Suez,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pg. 19.

[15] Mackay, Andrew and Steve Tatham, *Behavioural Conflict: Why Understanding People and Their Motives Will Prove Decisive in Future Conflict,* (Saffron Waldon, UK: Military Studies Press, 2011); Tatham, Steve, 'Target Audience Analysis', *Three Swords Magazine* 28 (2015): 50–53.

[16] Hines, Lindsey, Rachael Gribble, Simon Wessely, Christopher Dandeker, and Nicola Fear, 'Are the Armed Forces Understood and Supported by the Public? A View from the United Kingdom', *Armed Forces & Society* 41, no. 4 (2014): 688-713.

The article first addresses conceptual issues regarding narrative and genre. Second, the methodology of investigation is briefly explained. Thereafter, a typology of five narratives is presented that represent a comprehensive spectrum of the general stories British citizens tell about war. Each casts Britain's national identity differently, based on shared memories of Britain's military past. Britain is portrayed respectively as Punching Above its Weight; a Vanishing Force; Learning from its Mistakes; being Led Astray, or a Selfish Imperialist. The stories offer competing visions of how Britain should act in the present and in the future, and are supported by different events, metaphors, and analogies. These narratives will then be validated by demonstrating their applicability to new conflicts as they arise, using the example of Britain's decision to extend airstrikes against the Islamic State (ISIL) into Syria in 2015. In the wake of the turbulence affecting Britain following the 'Brexit' vote, the article also considers what these narratives might reveal about Britain's future military role in the world. The paper will conclude by considering the benefit of directly seeking the narratives citizens tell, particularly at a time of concern over pollsters struggling to gauge public opinion, and when mainstream and social media are thought either too artificially balanced or too partisan to provide a reliable reflection of the views of a diverse and fragmented public.

Narrative, Genre, and War

Like the concept of strategic communication, definitions of narrative are heavily contested, particularly the distinction between narrative and story.[17] Authors such as Bal argue that story is a subordinate feature of narrative.[18] Conversely, Czarniawska and Selbin argue that stories are more complex than narratives.[19] In strategic communication, scale has often been used to differentiate the two, with narrative thought to represent a system of stories told and retold over time.[20]

This paper adopts a different position, consistent with authors such as Krebs, Snyder, and Riessman: it deliberately conflates story and narrative.[21] It does this because as a type of text, they contain the same fundamental features. Most crucially, these features distinguish both from argument or explanation. At a basic level, both story and narrative consist of a temporally and causally connected sequence of events, selected and evaluated as meaningful for a

[17] The thorny issue of the difference between strategic communication and strategic communications is not addressed in this paper, since it is parenthetical to the overall argument, which concerns narrative. For convenience, it is referred to as strategic communication hereafter.

[18] Bal, Mieke, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

[19] Czarniawska, Barbara, *Narratives in Social Science Research*, (London: SAGE Publications, 2004); Selbin, Eric, *Revolution, Rebellion, Resistance: The Power of Story*, (New York: Zed Books Ltd, 2010).

[20] Archetti, *Understanding Terrorism*; Halverson, Jeffry R., Steven R. Corman, and H. L. Goodall, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

[21] Krebs, Ronald R., *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Riessman, Catherine Kohler, *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, (London: Sage, 2008); Snyder, Jack, 'Dueling Security Stories: Wilson and Lodge Talk Strategy', *Security Studies* 24, no. 1 (2015): 171–97.

particular audience.[22] Their typical features include actors, setting, and plot.[23] Plots vary in complexity, typically consisting of a beginning, middle, and end based on representations of the past, present, and the future.[24] These often revolve around the resolution of conflict, starting with an initial situation, a problem that disrupts it, and a resolution that re-establishes order.[25] These features persist whether the storyteller (or narrator) is the state or the individual.

The distinction between narrative text and other modes of discourse, such as argumentation, is vital because it is the conceptual basis of the utility of strategic narrative in the first place: that persuasion through narrative is superior because humans understand the world through stories.[26] It is this assumption that has spawned the extensive literature on the purportedly unique power of storytelling, even though empirical evidence for this is not as clear cut as is often suggested.[27]

In strategic communication circles, however, narrative has evolved into something quite different. Theorists continue to emphasise that it is a superior way of communicating. However, it is less commonly treated as a particular mode of discourse, such as an argument or frame; it is taken to represent all discourse concerning a particular issue. Tatham, for example, explains that 'the narrative' encompasses 'not just the entire corpus of texts and speeches dealing with a specific event, but all the supporting symbolism and imagery'.[28] This blurs the distinction between narrative and discourse. 'Strategic narration' becomes about the projection of what could be described as an overarching 'mission statement' or 'vision' that ties all this discourse together, explaining what an actor is doing and why. Depending on how loosely one defines 'strategic', it also encompasses ongoing attempts to ensure that actions and words are congruent with the 'mission statement' at operational or tactical levels.

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[22] This section draws heavily from previous work in Colley, Thomas, 'Is Britain a Force for Good? Investigating British Citizens' Narrative Understanding of War', *Defence Studies* (2016): 1–22; See also Riessman, *Narrative Methods*, 3.

[23] Bernardi, Daniel et al., *Narrative Landmines: Rumors, Islamist Extremism, and the Struggle for Strategic Influence*, (Rutgers University Press, 2012); Burke, Kenneth, *A Grammar of Motives*, (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1969); Corman, Steven (ed.), *Narrating the Exit from Afghanistan*, (Center for Strategic Communication, 2013); Miskimmon et al., Strategic Narratives; ÓTuathail, Gearóid, 'Theorizing Practical Geopolitical Reasoning: The Case of the United States' Response to the War in Bosnia', *Political Geography* 21, no. 5 (2002): 601–28.

[24] Aristotle, *Poetics*, (New York: Penguin Classics, 1996); Davis, Joseph (ed.), *Stories of Change: Narrative and Social Movements*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

[25] Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*; Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Poetics of Prose*, (Paris: Ithaca, 1977).

[26] Bruner, Jerome, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986); Fisher, 'Narration'; Krebs, *Narrative and the Making*; Taleb, Nassim Nicholas, *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*, (London: Penguin, 2008).

[27] See Allen, Mike, and Raymond W. Preiss, 'Comparing the Persuasiveness of Narrative and Statistical Evidence Using Meta-Analysis', *Communication Research Reports* 14, no. 2 (1997): 125–131; Feeley, Thomas, Heather M. Marshall, and Amber M. Reinhart, 'Reactions to Narrative and Statistical Written Messages Promoting Organ Donation', *Communication Reports* 19, no. 2 (2006): 89–100.

[28] Tatham, Steve, *Strategic Communication: A Primer*, Advanced Research and Assessment Group Special Series 08/28, (UK Defence Academy, 2008), pg. 9.

It can be argued that because the 'mission statement' should still be structured in narrative form—in terms of past, present, and future—it is still a distinctly story-based mode of communication. However, there are two reasons to doubt that such a statement will be in any way uniquely persuasive because of this. Firstly, as Holmstrom explains in the previous issue of this journal, the emphasis in strategic communication is on making the strategic narrative as 'minimalist' and 'streamlined' as possible.[29] Clarity of purpose is the intent, but this eliminates the aspects of storytelling that are thought to make it more persuasive, such as developed characters with whom one can identify and a dramatic plot that engages the audience.[30] A statement that 'Britain should intervene against ISIL to reduce the future threat of terrorism' is a clear message, but it can hardly be said to contain the elements of narrative that are thought to make it particularly persuasive. Indeed some would consider it argument rather than narrative.

Secondly, if all one has to do to make something 'narrative' is ensure reference to past, present, and future, one could reasonably consider all political discourse to be narrative in nature. Whatever the issue, political rhetoric typically involves identifying past failures, blaming opposition actors for them, and explaining what one is doing in the present or would do in future to make things better.[31] But if all discourse is narrative, it makes little sense to assume that narrative is uniquely persuasive; discourse cannot all be uniquely persuasive. The implication that there is something particularly compelling about 'strategic narrative' thus loses its value. It could be called 'strategic argument', 'strategic explanation', or 'strategic discourse' without any notable shift in what communicators are trying to do with the words, images, and actions they choose: to coordinate the communication of diverse actors involved in a political/military project and ensure attitudinal and behavioural support for it over time. This is undoubtedly a vital undertaking. It is simply argued here that that the importance of communication being structured as 'narrative' has become less significant in the practice of strategic communication.

To determine the utility of strategic narratives, it is necessary to focus on the features that distinguish narrative from other forms of communication. Practically this is a difficult task, because modes of communication overlap in everyday discourse. Indeed the very idea of strategic narrative is based on the notion that stories can support an argument about what a political actor should do.

There is a difference, though, between narrative and formal argumentation. Formal argument involves deductive inference from general principles; narrative uses plot to create a framework of meaning into which events make sense as a whole, populated by characters with which audiences can emotionally identify. Emplotment selects and orders events to create a coherent story around an overall message, moral, or endpoint.[32]

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[29] Holmstrom, Miranda, 'The Narrative and Social Media', *Defence Strategic Communications* 1, no. 1 (2015): 120.

[30] Green, Melanie C., and Timothy C. Brock, 'The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 5 (2000), 701-721; Haven, *Story Proof*.

[31] Stone, Deborah A., 'Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas', *Political Science Quarterly* 104, no. 2 (1989): 282.

[32] Polkinghorne, Donald, *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

This unfolding of events over time is what differentiates narrative from other modes of communication. Studying it is, therefore, the key to understanding what narratives are and what they do.

Emplotment can be analysed at different levels. At the micro level, researchers can examine the building blocks of plot through studying the events, metaphors, and analogies used to construct narratives.[33] A more common approach has been to examine the general patterns or overall stories that the emplotment process creates. This is narrative genre. When people narrate the past to make sense of the present and visualise the future, they tend to do so in broad, culturally familiar patterns. These overall impressions can simplify entire epochs into formulaic narratives of progress, decline, or continuity.[34] In the process they pour 'the cascading and infinite detritus of history into generic forms', even though reality is invariably more complex.[35]

Classic examples include Frye's idea of four universal stories of romance, tragedy, comedy, or satire; Zerubavel's claim that all narrations of history are either stories of progress, decline, zigzags, or cycles; along with various authors who claim the existence of anything between seven and twenty universal plots.[36]

Whichever framework is preferred, studying narrative genre has important benefits for strategic communication, understood here as coordinated communication activities to advance an organisation's aims, which for a state can include the articulation of national strategy, the justification of a given military operation, or the tactical persuasion of individuals.[37] This is because generic understandings of patterns of history shape how governments communicate their intent and purpose, as well as shaping how target audiences interpret the present and anticipate the future. For example, Ringmar argues that international disagreements about the 2003 Iraq war were because the US told a romantic, heroic narrative about its motives; the EU narrated a comedy in which mishaps would be overcome through hard work; and opponents narrated tragedies and satires borne out of American hubris and neo-imperialism.[38] Using Zerubavel's framework, Corman advises that the key to a successful withdrawal from Afghanistan is to project a narrative of progress and concern for the future, rather than a cyclical narrative that would reinforce to Afghans that once again hostile foreign invaders had been defeated.[39]

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[33] See Colley, 'Is Britain'.

[34] Gergen, Kenneth, and Mary Gergen, 'Narratives of the Self', In Theodore Sarbin and Karl Scheibe, (eds.), *Studies in Social Identity*, (New York: Praeger, 1983), pp. 254–73; Zerubavel, Eviatar, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[35] Smith, *Why War,* 19.

[36] Booker, Christopher, *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, (London: Continuum, 2004); Frye, Northrup, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Tobias, Ronald B., *20 Master Plots: And How to Build Them*, (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2012); White, Hayden, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

[37] Hallahan, Kirk et al., 'Defining Strategic Communication', *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 1, no. 1 (2007): 3–35; Tatham, *Strategic Communication*, 3.

[38] Ringmar, Erik, 'Inter-Textual Relations The Quarrel Over the Iraq War as a Conflict between Narrative Types', *Cooperation and Conflict* 41, no. 4 (2006): 403–21.

[39] Corman, *Narrating the Exit.*

Smith goes further, arguing that genres politicians choose can affect whether countries decide to go to war.[40] According to his framework, the more apocalyptic the genre used to describe a given situation, the more likely a country will see war as an appropriate response.[41]

The genres the British people use to describe their country's role in war are important because they reflect their interpretations of the utility of military force, their beliefs about Britain's international identity, and their memories of particular conflicts. A call to 'make a country great again', or to 'put the Great back into Great Britain' presupposes that an audience sees recent national history through the genre of decline. Part of this concerns the strength of the military and how they should be used. The question is, what general stories do individual citizens tell about Britain's military history, and how many variations of these shared stories are there?

Methodology

Public stories were derived from narrative interviews with a diverse sample of 67 British citizens resident in England from non-military families. The aim was to identify as fully as possible the range of stories citizens told about Britain's role in war. Sampling was therefore purposive, based on the core qualitative research principles of range and saturation.[42] In other words, the broadest possible variety of participants was interviewed, and interviews continued until it was clear that no new stories were emerging.[43]

Participants were recruited in rural and urban populations across England, including London, Birmingham, suburban Liverpool, a small market town in Dorset, and villages in rural Worcestershire and Oxfordshire. Having initially estimated that 40 to 50 participants might be enough to reach saturation, 66 participants were eventually interviewed, with two retrospectively omitted for being active servicemen.[44] The eventual sample was both extremely diverse (age range 18–92) but also representative in terms of gender (n = 33 male, 33 female) and socio-economic classification.[45]

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[40] Smith, *Why War*.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Miles, Matthew, and Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook*, 2nd ed., (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1994); Teddlie, Charles, and Fen Yu, 'Mixed Methods Sampling a Typology with Examples', *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* 1, no. 1 (2007): 77–100.

[43] Glaser, Barney and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1967).

[44] For more detail on the sampling process, see Colley, 'Is Britain'.

[45] Note that the small sample size precluded statistical representativeness, but the sample was nevertheless proportional to the broader population in these areas. Socio-economic classification was obtained using National Readership Survey ABC1/C2DE criteria.

Amongst a range of open-ended questions designed to elicit storytelling, the main focus here concerns participant responses to questions which asked firstly 'What do you see as Britain's military role in the world and how far has this changed in your experience?' and secondly, 'If you were asked to tell the story of Britain's historical role in war and conflict, what story would you tell?'. Participants were then asked probe questions to encourage them to elaborate on areas where their accounts were more limited. This might have included asking them to expand on their views of the wars they had named, their memories of how a particular conflict began, or why a certain war was important to them. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, then coded inductively into categories using NVivo 10 software based on the overall pattern of each narrative and the way people characterised Britain and its military. Consistent with grounded theory, painstaking field notes were kept to record the thought process through which theory was generated, as well as noting the potential influence of the researcher and contemporaneous events. For this reason, interviews took place as quickly as possible, between mid-October 2014 and mid-January 2015.

Two further points warrant consideration. First, the narratives presented below are simplifications. As Frank notes, typologies are rough theoretical constructions 'designed to describe some empirical tendency'.[46] Reality is invariably more nuanced and crossover between narrative types is inevitable.[47] Secondly, due to the limits of a single article, some of the stories have involved stitching together narrative fragments from different points during an interview. These exemplars have been selected to reflect the broader sample of which they are a part, carefully constructed to ensure that their meaning is as close to the original representation as possible.

A Typology of Narratives of Britain and War

Inductive analysis revealed that there are five narratives which capture a comprehensive range of public interpretations of Britain's past, present, and future role in war. Each characterises Britain, as the protagonist of the story, differently. Each also incorporates multiple storylines, depending on whether the focus is, for example, moral, military, or economic. However, it was also observed that two underlying storylines provided a shared foundation for each narrative in the typology. These story threads were almost universal across the sample; a base of common-sense assumptions about Britain's tendency and capability of going to war. The first is that Britain's history is a story of Continuous War, and the second is that Britain is undergoing Material Decline.

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[46] Frank, Arthur, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), pg. 29 [Frank's emphasis].

[47] Ibid.

Continuous War

There was almost total agreement that the overall pattern of British history is one of Continuous War. This generalised understanding is patently a simplification, since Britain has at certain times been involved in more wars than others. Its level of participation has also varied, from the 'total wars' of the First and Second World Wars to recent conflicts such as Ukraine, where Britain has merely sent a few dozen military advisors. Nevertheless, given that since 1914 there has not been a single year when the British military has not seen combat,[48] and only one year since 1660 without a British military casualty,[49] it is unsurprising that public accounts of Britain's military role are narrated as a story of continuous war.

> Dennis (55-64, Worcsestershire): I think that Britain has taken on the role that comes from history of being involved in all the conflicts and major events, and I still think that whenever something happens Britain expects to be involved.

> Nigel (35-44, Yorkshire): We've been there. Where have we not been? In every… most conflicts throughout time we've had a role to play in it, rightly or wrongly. But in most instances we've been there.

> Isobel (45-54, Wales): I think, worryingly, that we seem to have been involved in so many conflicts. Thinking of trying to build a British Empire, as it were, and that again involves going into other people's countries, like in India and other places over the years. I think that's the worrying thing about British history. We seem to have been involved in a lot of conflicts over so many years, you know. We always do seem to be involved. And I don't know whether that's good or bad.

People's views clearly vary on whether Britain should participate in war so much, but across the sample it was almost universally taken for granted that military intervention is just 'something Britain does'. So however positively or negatively people judge Britain's wars, they take for granted that Britain always seems to be fighting them.

> Dennis (55-64, Worcsestershire): I think the truth of the matter is, you know, in my lifetime it's been what Britain does, and I've never really questioned it. You just expect Britain to be involved in all sorts of things that are happening.

Material Decline

The second underlying narrative shared across the sample is that Britain is declining materially over time, as reflected in the reduced size and strength of its armed forces. The essential plot is that since the peak of its imperial power, Britain has become economically weaker, lost its empire, and with this decline has come a reduced ability to sustain a global military presence. Today, Britain's ability to fight wars effectively has diminished to the extent that it is reliant on allies.

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[48] 'Britain's 100 Years of Conflict', *Guardian*, 11 February 2014.

[49] Forster, Anthony, *Armed Forces and Society in Europe*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

In most cases participants narrated a linear story, in which Britain starts from a position of world dominance and declines progressively over time. This is again a simplification of British history: decline was far from linear, considering that Britain was more active in its colonies in the decade after the Second World War, saw unprecedented economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s, and became more militarily prominent under the Thatcher government in the 1980s than the decade before.[50] But as mentioned previously, people tend to reduce the past to simplified plotlines rather than complex narratives.[51] Moreover, these simplified public stories appear to be grounded more in myth than detailed historical analysis. They are often short on detail, with general statements describing Britain as 'not the force we were', 'almost insignificant now', with powers that are 'fading', 'sadly reduced', leaving the country 'emasculated' or as 'weaklings' who are 'not big players' with 'not a lot of say', who are 'not listened to' any more. What Britain has actually lost was often similarly vague, including 'power', 'prestige', 'influence', 'clout', 'weight', 'force', 'dominance', 'credibility', and 'respect'. Taken together, these terms reflect the common-sense assumption that Britain is weaker than in the past and consequently less able to get other international actors to do what it wants them to do. Whether this is true or not is less important than the widespread public perception that it is.

> Mary (35-44, Dorset): I think we think we're important. I don't know how important we are. Obviously we have been important once. You know, we ruled the Empire. I think we're probably a country with fading powers. We're a tiny little island. I don't know economically how important we are on the world stage.

> Sebastian (65+, Worcestershire): The prevailing view from the government in power at the moment is that we are a formative influence on world policy, and you know, we can stand up in the United Nations and say 'Great Britain thinks this' and people take notice… but I'm not sure many people do these days.
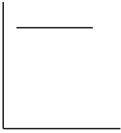
Five British War Stories

While people across the sample agreed on Britain's tendency and capability of going to war, they disagreed on their moral evaluations of Britain's wars, and who they saw Britain as being in the international system. These disagreements coalesced into five different stories, summarised in Figure 1 on the next page.

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[50] Sanders, David, *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role: British Foreign Policy Since 1945*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990); Reynolds, David, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2000); Tomlinson, Jim, 'The Decline of the Empire and the Economic "Decline" of Britain', *Twentieth Century British History* 14, no. 3 (2003): 201–21.

[51] Zerubavel, *Time Maps*.

Table 1: Typology of Narrative Genres British Citizens Use to Describe its Role in War

Britain's Identity	Punching above its weight	Vanishing Force	Learning from its mistakes	Led Astray	Selfish Imperialist
Frequency* (out of 67)	23 (34%)	14 (21%)	26 (39%)	8 (12%)	9 (13%)
Narrative trajectory					
Plot	Continuous	Decline	Progress	Interrupted Progress	Continuous
Moral Evaluation	Force for Good	Force for Good	Becoming a force for good	Becoming a force for good then led astray	Force for Ill
Tendency to go to war	Continuously at war				
Capability of going to war	Material Decline				

* These figures add up to more than the total number of participants (n=67) because some told more than one story.

1. Britain Punching Above its Weight

The first narrative portrays Britain as Punching Above its Weight. Since the metaphor was coined by former foreign secretary Douglas Hurd in 1993,[52] it has become the basis of one of the most common British defence policy narratives told by politicians, the media, and academics.[53] Imbued with nationalist sentiment, it is a story of continuity in which Britain is portrayed as exceptional for achieving significantly more than other countries of equivalent physical size or economic strength. The plot begins with Britain at the height of Empire, with unparalleled influence on world affairs. A series of unavoidable events then causes Britain's relative material decline, as other states inevitably catch up with its early technological advantages. Despite this decline, Britain always manages to exert disproportionate influence on world affairs due to

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[52] See 'UK's World Role: Punching Above Our Weight', *BBC News*, 2001.

[53] For a small sample of this, see Assinder, Nick, 'British Forces: Still Punching Above Their Weight?', *Time*, 19 October 2010; Cockburn, Patrick, 'Why must Britain always try to 'punch above her weight'?', *Independent*, 17 July 2011; 'David Cameron: EU helps Britain punch above its weight', 25 July 2014; For academic examples see Cornish, Paul, 'United Kingdom', in Biehl, Heiko, Bastian Giegerich, and Alexandra Jonas, (eds.), *Strategic Cultures in Europe: Security and Defence Policies Across the Continent*, (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013), pp. 371-386.; Edgerton, David, 'Tony Blair's Warfare State', *New Left Review* 1 (1998): 123-130.; Krahmann, Elke, 'United Kingdom: Punching Above its Weight', in Kirchner, Emil and James Sperling, (eds.), *Global Security Governance: Competing Perceptions of Security in the Twenty-First Century*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 93-112.

its superior historical experience, liberal democratic values, culture, and the inherent ingenuity and moral fortitude of its people. One way it does this is by maintaining a disproportionately strong military and being seen as more willing to use it to uphold the international order than others. This is one reason it is continually at war.

> Nathan (45-54, Dorset): I think we probably punch above our weight, because with the cuts that have happened recently we don't have that many soldiers, in all honesty. But we do go hand in hand with normally America, the superpowers, the NATOs, the UN, we're always there. We're not hanging back, we're always there. I like that. Our role in the world… I think maybe because of the Empire, a lot of the developing world does look to Britain, and I think they maybe give us more importance than we necessarily deserve these days. But what we do have is a 100 per cent volunteer, professionally trained and mostly well-equipped army, professional army, which an awful lot of these other countries don't have. They have conscription, or they're just bands of bandits, banded together loosely under an idea.
>
> I think we still perceive ourselves as having a voice militarily in the world certainly. Economically, if America wants to do a trade deal with Japan and China that doesn't involve us, they're not interested. We're not relevant. But militarily if America wants to do something it will consult with us. Firstly, because we've got a better army than them, be it vastly smaller, and secondly because they know it gives them international credibility. Because out of the UN it's pretty much always in my lifetime been America, it's been us, the French send a few nurses… I'm joking, but you know what I mean. We'll go and do it, and we'll do it well, as a rule.

Morally, the Punching Above its Weight narrative is underpinned by the idea that Britain has always been a Force for Good in the world in the way that others are not. Britain's material strength may have waned, but it nonetheless retains 'enormous residual respect', is 'highly regarded' as a 'role model… for democracy', a 'voice of reason', with a 'patriarchal role' through its 'incredible legacy', 'extraordinary history' and 'amazing heritage'. Militarily, Britain's forces are assumed to be both technically and ethically superior to others. By implication, it is vital that Britain spearheads any military intervention deemed in the interests of the international community. This need not necessarily involve ground troops though; more limited deployments of special forces, air power, and military advisors might be preferable.

> Felicity (45-54, Dorset): I think the only way that we can have an effective role is to specialise, to become the advisors more than the fighters. Our military is very well trained, very well disciplined, in comparison to everyone else's. It still has its faults, but in comparison I think the discipline shown by our military is exceptionally good. And we would be best to be the advisors I think.

2. Britain the Vanishing Force

The Punching Above its Weight narrative is attractive because it perpetuates the belief that Britain remains special despite decline. Nonetheless, more strongly militaristic citizens dismiss this as rhetoric rather than reality. For them, Britain's military story is one of a Vanishing Force. This is a tragedian, nostalgic tale of moral and material decline. Of the 14 participants telling this story, all but one was over 55. The story again begins with the Empire, which is portrayed as fundamentally liberal and benevolent. After the Second World War however, it has unnecessarily surrendered its dominant position due to inept political leadership, societal malaise, and, for some, mass immigration. Due to these villains of the story, Britain is steadily vanishing into international obscurity. Whereas the Punching Above its Weight narrative minimises Britain's decline, the Vanishing Force narrative exaggerates it, emphasising how great the country once was and the parlous state into which it has apparently fallen.

Britain's continuous involvement in war is once more seen as natural and positive, based on the self-perception that heroic Britain, above all others, has the resilience and trustworthiness to counter the illiberal powers of the world. The underlying assumption is that Britain is inherently a Force for Good, but this is tied to its material strength. In other words, the less force Britain has, the less good it can do. Not being the force it once was, it is unable to exert moral leadership on world affairs, to its detriment and that of humanity in general.

> Daisy (65+, Worcsestershire): I think we've lost an awful lot in the last 30 years. When you think what we achieved after the wars, and we were a force to be reckoned with, but I don't think we are any more. I think we've been too complacent. I think we're pushed around quite a bit as a country. We are just a little island and we've got to learn that we aren't the big players any more.

> Beatrice (65+, Lancashire): Well [Britain] used to be great didn't it. I think the great has been taken out of Great Britain now. It's erm… multicultural.

> Terry (55-64, Worcestershire): If the Falklands kicked off again we would need massive help. We wouldn't be able to do it on our own any more. We haven't got enough firepower.

> Samuel (65+, Dorset): Well I think in the back of most people's minds we will say upfront we know Britain's not a major world power any more, you know, it's all over, the Commonwealth's gone, our powers are gone, you know, we're not what we were, but at the back of your mind you probably haven't given up completely on that idea.

According to this narrative, in future Britain's decline is not to be accepted or managed. Instead what is needed is a return to greatness through an increase in hard power to match the inherent superiority of the British people. Economically, Eurosceptics assume this could be done through leaving the European Union and returning to being a dominant global trader, as Britain was during Empire. But military reinvestment is particularly vital to ensure that once more Britain has

'real power' to influence world affairs, based on the realist assumption that military strength confers influence, 'weight', and 'clout'. Otherwise it risks becoming nothing more than 'Belgium with nukes'.[54]

> Vincent (65+, Lancashire): I think we should get out of Europe, and I think we should go back to what we were… global traders. You know, God almighty, we're a nation full of inventiveness, we're industrious. The ideas socially and industrially, technological-wise, we really are, we're leaders.

> Shaun (55-64, Dorset): I think we've become too small. And the trouble is, because we're so small, at NATO we're not being listened to because we can't put our money where our mouth is. And that goes back again to what I said, we need to have a strong military presence because if there is a time where conflict is there, if we've got the power and the strength and the weight to do it, I think we would be listened to more.

3. Britain Learning from Its Mistakes

If the first two narratives might be described as nationalist and militarist, the third and fourth might be described as liberal, in that they focus on Britain's progress in building a more civilised and peaceful world after its violent imperial past. The third narrative, and the most common across the sample, portrays Britain as Learning from its Mistakes. The plot is simple. Britain continuously participates in wars throughout its history, but the nature of those wars changes. Starting with the Empire, Britain's wars are exploitative and oppressive, fought for the wrong reasons. Imperial Britain is described as 'arrogant', 'aggressive', 'dominating', 'subjugating', 'bullying', and 'exploiting' others in pursuit of material gain and cultural domination. Over time though, Britain learns from these mistakes and becomes more circumspect, increasingly using its military for the wider benefit of humanity. Rather than only seeking to advance selfish national interests, the country has moved towards working for the good of the world and those in need. The story is grounded in liberal internationalist ideology, set in a world in which liberal values are assumed to be universally desirable. It portrays a future of ever-increasing freedom, peace, and prosperity.

On the one hand, Britain's material decline is evaluated negatively as it means Britain cannot so easily perform a global humanitarian role. It is also perceived positively though, since it has required Britain to consider how to use its military more judiciously. Having not been a force for good during its aggressive imperial past, the two world wars were formative experiences where Britain learnt to use its military to benefit the world. In future, it is hoped that Britain will use its historical experience to mediate or arbitrate international conflict and be a 'peacemaker', rather than intervene aggressively for its own interests.

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[54] Lindley-French, Julian, *Little Britain? Twenty-First Century Strategy for a Middling European Power*, (Marston Gate: Amazon, 2015), pg. 7.

Irene (55-64, Worcestershire): I suppose [Britain was] a bit of an aggressor for a very long period of time. A nation who didn't really consider other nations to have any rights or… powers. And then perhaps that did change to a nation who was trying to do what was right in the twentieth century, as well as protecting itself, and not always getting that right but… well definitely not always getting that right, but trying to improve things. And I'd like to see it now as working for… world peace and a world that people can live in safely for the future.

Kyle (18-24, London): [Britain has changed] from the pillaging outlaw and highwayman of the past to possibly the silver knight. We've made our fair share from war in the past, we've solidified our place at the table as it is. I'd say we still are a superpower now, because of what we've done in the past. We've made our influence known, the way we used to be the power. But now we don't have that, and I'm glad of that. We're not an enforcer any more. We're just mainly there to defend, I hope. I hope that's the case. Sometimes we're a little bit misguided, but generally we're trying our best, I hope.

The causal logic of this narrative is that the protagonist, Britain, is portrayed as always having good intentions in going to war, even though its interventions sometimes have destructive consequences. Framing British military history in this way has obvious appeal. It renders Britain less accountable for its past wars, which are seen as 'blunders' rather than being 'calculated' (Lily, 18-24, London).

In future, it is hoped that Britain will continue to be more cautious and humanitarian in its approach to war. However, military intervention remains a viable policy option, but it should be used to 'make things better'; although this seems idealistic to some telling this story:

Danielle (35-44, London): I would like to think we remain very important … even in mediation. I'd like to see us less of a ground troops going in there bombing left, right and centre. I'd like to think of us more as a kind of… protection rather than attacking, so being in an unstable country and trying to protect citizens. It's very airy-fairy, silly, unachievable I'm sure.

4. Britain Led Astray

The plot of the fourth narrative, in which Britain is Led Astray, begins the same as the third. Britain follows a violent imperial past by steadily learning to use military force more discriminately, to help others rather than just itself. But rather than a narrative of moral progress, this story involves a moral rise and fall. Empire, once more, is evaluated negatively. The Second World War is the peak of Britain's global moral role as a 'defender of freedom'. Thereafter, Britain is led astray, interfering in conflicts it shouldn't and doing more harm than good. This is most powerfully exemplified by the twenty-first century wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Britain being led astray is partly a function of material decline, which has forced it to ally closely with America, a more gung-ho, selfish power that is allegedly less

discriminate than Britain in using military force. America is a villain in the story, while Britain is characterised as an overly passive, dependent ally that is 'dragged into things that maybe we shouldn't be' (Olive, 65+, Oxfordshire). These wars have been ineffective militarily, offered little humanitarian benefit, and damaged Britain's credibility as an ethical international actor. This leaves Britain less willing and able to play a leading role in international conflict, whether as a combatant, peacekeeper or mediator.

> Deborah (35-44, Wales): I'd probably tell a story of how we did the right thing twice, how in the First World War we, you know, joined in to help, and in the Second World War we fiercely defended people's human rights and borders and countries, and how good triumphed over evil. And then I think in the story Britain would lose its way slightly. We've tried to help people on other occasions but the people didn't really want our help or didn't need our help, and perhaps we left things worse than we found them.

> Robert (35-44, Dorset): I think we've got a fairly proud history from back to the Second World War, and First World War. Maybe not so much before that, with the likes of Crimea and obviously building the Empire. I don't totally think we were great… doing those things. But again it's money, power, and wealth. But after the Second World War, and in my time, we seem to be constantly getting into squabbles and wars that don't seem to really finish and tend to go anywhere. They don't tend to achieve anything.

Those that see Britain as being Led Astray take no issue with Britain's continuous military interventionism per se. Instead they express concern that following the US into conflicts undermines Britain's moral credibility, even if the 'special relationship' is a useful source of influence. They consider the US to be morally inferior, a country that hasn't 'got everybody's interests at heart' (Fatima 35-44, Oxfordshire), is 'very self-interested and looks after number one' (Samuel, 65+, Dorset). Britain, in comparison, possesses 'a better understanding of the world' (Stuart, 35-44, London), is more 'sensible' and less 'aggressive', and its credibility is undermined by following the US into war. The hope for the future is that Britain will distance itself from America and become more of a mediator and peacekeeper than an aggressor. This would provide resolution to the narrative and return Britain to the liberal path of using military force for the good of the world. Once more though, this does not mean an end to military intervention. Indeed Grace expresses the opposite concern: that Britain's damaged credibility may mean it fails to intervene when it should:

> Grace (55-64, Worcsestershire): I think we've… to some extent at least learnt from our mistakes. I think my biggest concern now is that the pendulum has swung again. Because we made a complete mess of the Iraq situation, and that and Afghanistan have really sickened public opinion, I think now that we're possibly in a situation where we won't do something where maybe we ought to.

5. Britain the Selfish Imperialist

The previous four stories are based on the assumptions that military force can be positive, and that Britain has always been a Force for Good at least in its intentions. However, a small minority (9 out of 67) told a different story: that of Britain the Selfish Imperialist: a violent, exploitative Force for Ill, using its military for selfish, typically economic purposes. This narrative combines elements of Marxist economic logic with a rejection of the civilising narrative of the White Man's Burden. Britain is characterised as colonial oppressor, plundering the wealth of other countries for the benefit of its capitalist system. Claims that its interventions protect human rights are just a new form of 'humanitarian imperialism' to impose putatively universal Western values on others.[55] These combine in an anti-imperialist story that applies to Britain's military past, present, and future.

As with the Punching Above its Weight narrative, it is a story of continuity, but this time all Britain's actions are assumed to be morally wrong. The plot is a continuous stream of imperialist violence throughout British history that is likely to continue as long as vested economic interests underpin decisions to use military force. Perhaps with the exception of the world wars, Britain's conflicts are fought for ulterior motives, be it land, money, oil, or the perpetuation of the arms trade.

> Dan (45-54, Dorset): When you actually look at the detail of it, [war is] about controlling situations in terms of oil, mineral resources, etcetera, etcetera. You see the whole argument for, say, Afghanistan, it's [apparently] about fighting against oppression of the people in that country… when we all know the routes for oil through Afghanistan are crucial for the West. … So yes, this idea that military intervention is all about freedom, it's not. It's not in my mind.

> Mary (35-44, Dorset): I think Britain's selectivity in where it intervenes is economic. We're probably strategically looking at where there are conflicts bubbling up all around the world and which ones do we actually want to keep a lid on and suppress, because they benefit us economically. I know everyone bangs on about it all the time but I do think we're interested in the Middle East because of oil.

> Lily (18-24, London): The things not to be proud of? The British Empire I suppose. I read something recently that there's 22 countries in the world that Britain's never invaded apparently. It's like they were given a massive handicap because we went there, colonised them, took natural resources, slaves at one point, financial resources. The consequences are that certain parts of the world are obviously incredibly disadvantaged. So we've got a lot to answer for I think, but none of it particularly good.

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[55] Bricmont, Jean, *Humanitarian Imperialism: Using Human Rights to Sell War*, translated by Diana Johnstone, (New York: NYU Press, 2007); Tomlinson, John, *Cultural Imperialism: A Critical Introduction*, (London: A&C Black, 2001).

The government's justification for extending airstrikes contained strong echoes of the Punching Above its Weight narrative. It specifically emphasised that Britain's allies had requested Britain's help because it possessed the Brimstone missile system, which is apparently technologically superior to any of their own. Cameron's memorandum to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee emphasised that the precision of the missile system was a capability 'even the US do not possess'.[60] Meanwhile, he described Britain's intelligence and surveillance as 'second to none'. Together these would give Britain an 'important and distinct role' in coalition efforts against ISIL.[61]

The other pillar of Cameron's argument was Britain's moral obligation to support its allies, particularly in the wake of the Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015.[62] By playing the role of 'reliable ally' there is also continuity in Britain being willing to step in when others might lack the same self-sacrificing attitude.[63] Taken together, the government's argument emphasised Britain's technological superiority in matters of war and moral fortitude in being more willing to help others. In other words, it was Punching Above its Weight.

The rhetorical trick in this narrative is that in focusing on Britain's apparent technological superiority, it obscures the remarkably small material contribution Britain actually made. After a month of the operation, only four sorties had been flown in Syria by British forces, and one of those was an unmanned drone strike.[64] As a result, the Syria intervention also fits the Vanishing Force narrative. It seems to be an obvious example of a country vanishing further from the world stage, especially when compared to the mythical days when Britain only needed to send a gunboat to get its way. Now though, it can only send a pathetic quantity of its decimated forces to a conflict upon which is has no real influence.

The smaller scale and more cautious targeting in the Syrian air campaign also fits the Learning from its Mistakes narrative though. From this perspective the use of more accurate Brimstone missiles and the limited scope of British military action fit into a story where Britain is learning to become more discriminate in the use of military force and more cautious about civilian casualties. Britain's warfighting, even if more limited in scope, has become more humanitarian. Again, the impression that Britain is more concerned about this than others further reinforces British moral exceptionalism.

The Syria intervention can also be framed to fit the Britain Led Astray narrative. For once more Britain is following the US into a conflict in the Middle East with no long term political objective; or at least no explicit roadmap for a political solution, and with the potential for mission creep to expand the scale of the operation. The intervention can actually fit both of these liberal interpretations simultaneously.

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[60] 'Prime Minister's Response to the Foreign Affairs Select Committee's Second Report of Session 2015-2016: The Extension of Offensive British Military Operations to Syria', *The Guardian*, 26 November 2015.

[61] Ibid.

[62] 'David Cameron's full statement'.

[63] Gaskarth, Jamie, 'Strategizing Britain's Role in the World', *International Affairs* 90, no. 3 (2014): 559–581.

[64] Gilligan, Andrew, 'RAF bomb raids in Syria dismissed as 'non-event'', *The Telegraph*, 2 January 2016.

Britain could be perceived as Learning from its Mistakes in minimising civilian casualties, but despite this is still being Led Astray into wars it should keep out of.

Finally, the Syrian intervention also fits the story of Britain the Selfish Imperialist. Through this interpretive lens, Syria is just another example of a Middle Eastern country that either has oil, or is next to Iraq that does, and so Britain's involvement is just a continuation of Western attempts to control strategic resources for its own ends. Moreover, the government's emphasis on Brimstone could be interpreted as reflecting the desire to perpetuate the arms trade. As with all these interpretations, whether this corresponds to reality is irrelevant; the idea that war is 'fought for oil' provides many with a common-sense explanation for Britain's involvement whether notable resources are at stake or not.

Despite the ease with which these narratives enable citizens to make sense of the Syrian intervention, it is not claimed that these stories are universally applicable to all wars Britain has ever fought. Like all narratives, they are a product of a particular time and place. The Led Astray narrative is particularly applicable to the conflicts related to the War on Terror. It is clearly less relevant to conflicts such as the Falklands, where Britain acted independently. Still, national stories rarely experience dramatic shifts. They can do in moments of crisis, but it is more likely that new events are incorporated into existing narratives rather than new ones being created from scratch.[65]

Brexit, Britain, and future war

The 'Brexit' vote is a sufficiently historic occurrence that it might engender a new narrative about Britain's role in the world, with direct implications for defence policy. Again though, the general stories identified here can help make sense of how British citizens interpret the past and anticipate the future. The rationale for Brexit is strongly underpinned by the exceptionalist assumption that Britain is better off alone, as evidenced by the fact that it has always Punched Above its Weight in comparison to others. Consequently, this is likely to remain a prominent lens through which British defence policy is understood. For those who see the EU as the cause of Britain becoming a Vanishing Force, leaving may well be seen as the country Learning from its Mistakes, particularly if it is accompanied by increased military investment. Conversely, those who currently see Britain as Learning from its Mistakes in leading the world towards peace may shift their perspective to that of the Vanishing Force narrative if diminished economic and diplomatic clout undermines Britain's ability to fulfil a peace-making role. If leaving the EU leads Britain closer to the US to compensate for an inevitable reduction in influence in Europe, then the Led Astray narrative may remain prominent. Meanwhile the Selfish Imperialist narrative is likely to persist whenever the government embarks on subsequent military interventions, not least because it is hard to prove that there are not ulterior economic motives for doing so.

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[65] Subotić, Jelena, 'Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12 (2015): 610-627.

Overall, military interventionism has been shown to be an important element of British national identity for both political elites and the public.[66] It would therefore be unsurprising if policymakers sought to compensate for any diminution in economic and diplomatic position with increased military activism. This suggests the enduring rhetorical appeal of the Punching Above its Weight narrative, even as the gap widens between Britain's intent and military capabilities.[67] As King suggests, Britain may no longer be able to punch above its weight, but it can still maintain its sense of identity by talking above it, however strategically unsound this may be.[68] Whatever happens, with British citizens still viewing the military as the country's greatest source of international influence,[69] it is a crucial element in Britain's future international role. Studying the stories the public tell about the military potentially provides valuable insights into the future that domestic citizens want or expect their country to have.

Qualitative narrative analysis: an additional Strategic Communications methodology

The second way this research is valuable for strategic communicators is that it demonstrates a ground-up, narrative-specific method to understand how different target audiences interpret war. Mackay and Tatham have recently emphasised the importance of Target Audience Analysis (TAA), which aims to provide a comprehensive, bottom-up understanding of specific population groups.[70] It does so using three levels: a third tier of remote, open source research on the target population; a second tier of primary research but which is 'scientifically unverified'; and a primary tier of deductive, hypothesis-tested research considered to be 'by far the most useful' aspect of the process.[71]

TAA's ground-up approach is undoubtedly a valuable means to understand audiences more directly. However, it is suggested here that its second tier of primary research may be more significant than its authors imply. This is particularly the case when dealing with narratives, which rest on interpretation and not verifiable fact. Hypotheses do not arise from nowhere; they rest on existing understanding derived inductively using more open-ended methods. The qualitative narrative analysis employed here may not, in Tatham's words, follow a 'scientifically verified deductive methodology'.[72] Nonetheless, it provides a systematic means to identify the range of stories told about a given issue across a certain population.

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[66] Ritchie, Nick, "A Citizen's View of 'National Interest'", in Edmunds, Timothy, Jamie Gaskarth, and Robin Porter (eds.), *British Foreign Policy and the National Interest : Identity, Strategy and Security*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 85-101.

[67] Fry, Robert, 'Smart Power and the Strategic Deficit', *The Royal United Services Institute Journal* 159, no. 6 (2014): 28–32.

[68] King, Anthony, *Who Governs Britain?*, (London: Penguin, 2015).

[69] According to the 2015 Chatham House-YouGov survey, a plurality (38%) of the public saw the military as doing most to serve British interests abroad. See Raines, Thomas, *Internationalism or Isolationism? The Chatham House-YouGov Survey: British Attitudes Towards the UK's International Priorities*, (London: Chatham House, 2015), pg. 25.

[70] Mackay and Tatham, *Behavioural Conflict*.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Tatham, 'Target Audience Analysis', pg. 53.

Doing so provides a greater depth of understanding of how people interpret the world than closed surveys or polls do.[73]

Undertaking narrative interviews among a target population is undoubtedly labour-intensive. Nonetheless, since the aim at this stage is to grasp the full range of narratives rather than statistically determine their prevalence among the population, the number of interviews can be kept relatively small by interviewing until the point of data saturation. Having elicited these stories, they can then be deployed in quantitative research on a much larger scale to see how factors such as age, gender, ethnicity or socio-economic classification affect which stories are most significant to a given population. Extending this study, it would be particularly interesting to compare how English, Welsh, Scottish, and Northern Irish citizens interpret Britain's wars. More generally though, the method is applicable for research into both domestic and foreign audiences on a variety of issues. If strategic communicators are genuinely interested in narrative as a specific form of communication, rather than simply coordinating messaging in any format, then understanding the stories told by target audiences is crucial, whatever the issue.

Concluding Remarks

Finally, this paper has investigated the narrative genres British citizens use to explain their country's role in war. In the process it has sought to demonstrate the benefits a ground-up, narrative-specific approach can provide to researchers in strategic communication. Such methods reflect the need for strategic communicators not just to understand civilian audiences in conflict theatres, but domestic populations too. Moreover, if it is assumed that humans understand the world using stories, then attempts to persuade should begin with the stories they already use to interpret the world.

Studying individual citizens' narratives directly does not only deepen our understanding of how people interpret war; it reduces the likelihood that citizens' views will be misread. As Kull and Destler explain, policymakers have frequently assumed that a reasonable indication of the public mood can be derived from a combination of media representations and opinion polls.[74] However, the utility of both as indicators of the views of the population has been thrown into question by recent events. The 2015 British general election, the 'Brexit' vote and the US presidential election all confounded pollsters' predictions. Meanwhile, each campaign generated concerns that some mainstream media organisations in Britain such as the BBC were overly neutral, while social media fosters echo-chambers in which people experience increasingly biased media coverage, making it harder to access them with alternative, and in some cases more truthful, perspectives. These make direct attempts to understand public views seem more pressing than ever.

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[73] Herbst, Susan, *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Democratic Process*, (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[74] Kull, Steven and Irving Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism*, (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

While the focus here has been on British public interpretations of war, useful insights would also be gained through comparisons with other countries. Stories are always likely to be culture-specific, particularly in the events, analogies, heroes, and villains people choose. Nevertheless, the discourses underpinning them, such as liberalism, Marxism, or nationalism, lend themselves to certain genres more than others. Different nations may therefore tell similar narratives, but the turning points in their plots may differ. A Learning from its Mistakes narrative in China might involve avoiding the 'century of humiliation' that the country suffered under imperialism. In Britain it may mean learning to use military force more judiciously; in Germany it might involve avoiding using military force at all.

This cross-cultural understanding is particularly important given that present and future military interventions are likely to be coalition based. As the ISAF campaign in Afghanistan showed, strategic narrative coordination across coalition members is exceptionally difficult. But as long as strategic communicators seek to use narratives to persuade, they will be better informed by direct study of the stories citizens already use to understand the world.

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A CLOSER LOOK AT YEMEN

A review essay by James P. Farwell

The Last Refuge: Yemen, Al-Qaeda, and America's War in Arabia by Gregory D. Johnsen.
Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company

Yemen: Revolution, Civil War, and Unification by Uzi Rabi.
Publisher: I.B. Tauris

Unfinished Revolutions: Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia after the Arab Spring by Ibrahim Fraihat.
Publisher: Yale University Press

Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East Edited by Uzi Rabi.
Publisher: Oxford University Press

About the author

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'I would never a trust a man who didn't steal', former Yemen President Ali Abdullah Saleh famously declared. No wonder people call Yemen a kleptocracy. The ex-President of South Yemen, Ali Salim al-Beidh, was less quotable but claimed bragging rights as an Omar Sharif look-alike. Sharif and al-Beidh shared a passion for gambling, a quality that epitomizes the risks that Yemeni political parties have taken in pushing their agendas. History shows such risks can be costly. Sharif lost a $6 million mansion in a single hand of cards. Al-Beidh lost his country after cutting a deal with Saleh to unite north and south Yemen.

Uzi Rabi is the director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Tel Aviv University. He has produced two exceptional books that all or partly deal with Yemen. As author of *Yemen: Revolution, Civil War and Unification*, he insightfully describes the unpredictable dynamics that enliven Yemen's modern political history. As editor of *Tribes and States in a Changing Middle East*, he provides an exceptional set of essays that describe and evaluate the dynamics and political impact of tribes on Middle East states.

This review essay focuses on Yemen. Analyses produced by Yoav Alon on Qatar, Andrea Rug on the United Arab Emirates, Rabi himself on Oman, Sarah Yizraeli on Saudi Arabia, Dawn Chatty on Bedouin tribes in Syria, Ronen Zeidel on Iraq, Anthony Toth on Bahrain, and essays by P.C. Salzman and Joseph Kostiner offer keen understanding into how tribal dynamics are unfolding. J.E. Peterson has authored a dozen books on the region. His concise, superbly stated analysis of Yemen here is an indispensable addition to discourse on its situation.

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Why do we care about this impoverished, heavily-armed nation that has become a failing state? Geography drives the importance of a stable Yemen for the United States and its allies. The Suez Canal-Red Sea-Bab al-Mandab passage is critically important to America's ability to shift military resources rapidly between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. Economically, approximately eight per cent of global trade, mostly between Europe and Asia, passes along Yemen's shores. Likewise, Yemen's long land borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman have been a source of regional instability. In the 1970s, Yemen was a refuge for rebels fighting to overthrow the Sultan of Oman, while smuggling across the Saudi border has long been an economic mainstay for many Yemenis.

Yemen has experienced upheavals since 1962, when military officers ousted the thousand-year old Imamate. In 1969, infighting caused the nation to divide between north and south. The National Liberation Front established the People's Republic of South Yemen. In 1969, radical Marxists seized control and transformed it into the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen. In 1978, northern Yemen's Parliament elected Saleh as President after unknown parties assassinated his predecessor, Ahmed bin Hussein al-Gashmi.

A turning point came in 1990, when Saleh persuaded Al-Beidh to join him in uniting north and south. Saleh felt unification would strengthen his regime's legitimacy. Al-Beidh [sometimes spelled al-Bayd or Al-Bid] felt it might strengthen the southern economy. As the Soviet Union collapsed, Russian aid had ended. The South needed new options. A common language, wide geographical expanse, oil exploration, and a common written tradition appealed to aspirations for unity on all sides. Unfortunately, northern and southern cultures did not easily mesh. Political elites found common ground mainly in their hostility to pluralist, multi-party systems.

Parliamentary elections took place in 1993. The outcome surprised al-Beidh. The majority of votes lay in the north. Yet the eccentric southerner had convinced himself that he could win. Rabi's excellent narrative details the slapdash union and

the instability it engendered. Loosely organised, the north was rooted in tribal society, dominated by the Hashid and Bakil tribal confederations. A structured, secular Marxist regime had governed the south. The south had its own divide. Aden was more cosmopolitan and secular. Its eastern governorates were more conservative and tribal.

The union fractured. Southerners fumed over exclusion from power, high unemployment, and price increases. In 1994, Al-Beidh declared independence and established the Democratic Yemeni Republic. Civil war erupted. Saleh crushed the south in a ruthless, two-month conflict that inflicted 10,000 casualties. Saleh's victory, spearheaded by Afghanistan war veterans, was pyrrhic.

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Peterson's robust, richly detailed assessment adds other insights. The war 'broke the back of the existing leadership in South Yemen—both the Yemeni Socialist Party and the broader coalition of exiles that were recruited to participate'. But what did Saleh achieve? His rule reinforced division in the south, which lacked new leadership to challenge his then rule. Yet the war and its aftermath intensified southern desires for secession, while strengthening the appeal of the Islamists. The persistent criticism that followed helped delegitimise Saleh's regime.

Rabi sees in Yemen the story of a decline in revolutionary ideas. Saleh tried to create state cohesion by cutting himself off from socialist ideology and emphasising the centrality of tribes. But while tribal ties matter more than national ones, in Yemen family matters most and provides the fabric that binds the key players. Peterson recognizes the centrality of tribes, but argues that tribe members have increasingly become individual political actors, while the role of shaykhs as tribal leaders has diminished.

Saleh was a master of playing off the tribes. Peterson reports that his authority depended on a 'small clique, not tribal alliance'. Tribesmen are well represented in Yemen's military. They comprise 70-80 per cent of it. But they joined for employment, not to express support for Saleh. Saleh partnered with key players to sustain his power. Unless needed, he tossed them aside.

Still, he conducted aggressive outreach to tribal notables, apparently putting 4,500 shaykhs on a monthly payroll. For decades, he maintained power by balancing competing interests. It was, he famously said, 'like dancing on the heads of snakes'. Saleh bought off anyone who caused trouble, rewarded important families, installed his own family members in key positions. 'In this sense', Rabi argues, 'the story of Yemen could serve as an example of the resilience and importance of tribal identities.' Saleh turned 'familial divisions into a legitimate characteristic of the regime'.

Inevitably, Saleh's iron-fist rule weakened. The key political parties, the General Peoples Congress, the Yemen Socialist Party, and Islah all drew financial aid from Saudi Arabia, affording a measure of independence. The tribes and radical Islamists presented challenges. The Islamists strengthened their hand by providing government services. In the meantime, instability deepened as Al Qaeda established a presence.

Saleh felt he had quelled challenges from the left. Increasingly, he feared Islah, Yemen's chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood. Its leader was the flamboyant Abdullah bin Hussain al-Ahmar. As Speaker of the National Assembly and paramount Shaykh of the al-Hashid tribal confederation, al-Ahmar was Yemen's second most powerful individual. Until his death in 2007, his considerable influence checked Saleh's power.

Yemen's political system was surprisingly stable despite its many, often violent problems. After al-Ahmar's death, it spiraled into today's current disaster. How has the death of this man affected Yemen? Al-Ahmar was a Zaydi and Saleh's tribal superior. Yet he founded a Muslim Brotherhood affiliated political party, led Parliament, and emerged as the fulcrum between relative stability and a disastrous multi-party civil war in which numerous foreign powers are intervening. Would understanding the inherent contradictions in al-Ahmar's roles provide useful clues into the reality of Yemen's political system? Greg Johnsen and Uzi Rabi recognise his importance, but one wants more analysis. Given the stakes, al-Ahmar merits serious study.

The rise of Islah pressured Saleh. It posed one of many crises. In June 2004, the first Houthi rebellion broke out in the northern governorate of Sa'dah, triggering successive conflicts. Saleh bungled matters when his henchman—from whom he distanced himself in 2015—General Ali Mohsen al-Ahmar (no relation to the Speaker) captured and murdered Houthi leader Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi.

The Houthi rebellion stemmed from the Houthi refusal to accept the legitimacy of Saleh's regime. The Houthi are members of the Zaydi sect (of which Saleh is a member), a branch of the Shi'i community. Many believe that its moderation qualifies it as the fifth school of Sunni Islam. Known as 'fivers', the key difference in Yemen is that Zaydis have an extra line in their call to prayer and hold their hands differently. Sunnis and Zaydis have intermarried and pray in each other's mosques.

The Houthis felt repressed by Saleh and hemmed in by the growing strength of Salafi Islamists. Peterson's view aligns with Rabi's on this point. Peterson emphasises that, since 1962, the Saudis have maintained a policy of keeping Yemen weak while funding tribes, who welcomed the largesse. The Saudis also created instability through their support of Salafi proselytisation in tribal areas, especially in the north. 'The perception in Yemen,' he reports, 'is that the Saudis are deliberately spreading Wahhabism across the country.'

One might have expected Saleh to discourage that. Instead he poured oil onto the Houthi fire by mobilising the support of Sunni-Salafi actors. His poor judgment dragged Yemen into Sunni-Shi'i divisions that were unsettling the region. Yemen found itself between a rock and a hard-place. The US depicted Yemen as backward and corrupt. Saleh's domestic opponents blasted him as appealing too heavily to 'the West and Global Zionism'.

The Arab Spring, Rabi argues, was a game-changer. It shifted alliances and exacerbated tensions beyond Saleh's ability to control events. Yemen, he concludes, 'is a state at risk—high risk'. His book ends before the outbreak of the current civil war, but his prognosis proved prescient.

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In *The Last Refuge,* Princeton professor Gregory D. Johnsen focuses on the US efforts against Al Qaeda through 2014. Johnsen conducted extensive on-the-ground research. Yemen sent scores of its best and brightest to Afghanistan. 'For an entire generation of young Yemenis', he notes, 'a trip to the front lines in Afghanistan became a rite of passage.'

The Soviets defeated, jihadists flooded back home. Saleh turned a blind eye until bombings in Aden raised questions as to what the Afghan Arabs were up to. During the first Gulf War, Saleh ignored warnings by US Secretary of State James Baker and stood by his friend Saddam Hussein. That proved expensive. Saudi Arabia ejected a million Yemeni migrant workers, whose remittances had provided a safety net at home, and terminated aid, inflicting a severe economic blow.

Towards Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Saleh maintained an ambivalent attitude. He provided the US with qualified cooperation in exchange for aid dollars. But he stiff-armed FBI efforts to investigate the USS *Cole* bombing and his top intelligence agency, the Political Security Organisation, enjoyed a long history with the jihadis. Johnsen offers a sharply observed, skeptical assessment of US strategy. Ambassador Edmund Hull and other diplomats prudently championed the use of non-lethal aid to improve health care, build hospitals, and help impoverished Yemenis looking for alternatives. Like Hull and Peterson, Johnsen believes a more positive narrative could slowly weaken Al Qaeda's appeal. Unfortunately, US leaders have resorted mostly to kinetic operations.

In 2002, the US caught a break. Johnsen writes that Americans intercepted a cell phone call to AQAP leader Abu Ali al-Harithi. Four hours later, a Predator drone armed with two Hellfire missiles locked on his car in the dunes east of Sana'a. The strike killed six people. The attack crushed Al Qaeda's ability to operate in Yemen.

Al Qaeda's strategy has been to appeal to tribal honour and a code of honour that supports providing assistance to an Islamist tribal member. Peterson stresses a key lesson that goes to the heart of countering terrorism by creating opportunity and fostering reform. Says Peterson: 'If the tribes can be co-opted then AQAP's future security is compromised—if they cannot then the West faces a longer-term threat from Al Qaeda.'

Johnsen finds US strategy misguided. He has even less respect for its execution. Saleh had authorised the al-Harithi strike on the condition that it remained secret. Instead Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz went on CNN and crowed about it. Saleh was furious. 'That is why we are reluctant to work closely with them,' fumed Yahya al-Mutawakkil, the deputy secretary general of Saleh's ruling party. 'They don't consider the internal circumstances in Yemen.'

All this raises a crucial point. The disconnect between how the US and the West perceive Yemeni dynamics and the way Yemenis perceive them has chilled Yemen's eagerness to cooperate. Yemenis accuse the US of ignoring civilian sensitivities.

Matters grew more complicated in April 2003 when ten prisoners drilled a hole in a bathroom wall and escaped from prison in Aden. The escapees included Jamal al-Badawi and Fahd al-Qusa, two Al Qaeda members involved in the USS *Cole* attack. Instead of cracking down, Saleh opted to work with clerics in creating a program for their re-entry into society. His idea appalled the US, but Saleh was determined.

Whether Saleh's instincts were correct was mooted as the US invaded Iraq. The war radicalised many Yemenis against the US. Released prisoners headed straight for Iraq. They invoked the **Quaranic** principle of defensive jihad. Johnsen states: 'It was a simple case of non-Muslim troops attacking Muslims in a Muslim country. Fighting the US wasn't simply permitted; it was required.' The only condition Saleh demanded was that Yemenis avoid targeting Yemen. The gambit worked—for a while.

Saleh viewed AQAP as a nuisance. He treated the Houthis as an existential threat. He quashed the first rebellion, but in March 2005 it re-ignited. Successive wars followed. Saleh broadened his attacks from Houthis to the powerful Zaydi families who formed the backbone of his state. That mushroomed into a contest between the Zaydis and the more numerous Sunnis. The strategy backfired, weakening Saleh and encouraging AQAP.

The US stepped up its counter-terrorism efforts by working with Central Security Forces under the command of Yahya Saleh, the President's nephew. Yet Saleh mostly ignored pleas to use aid for development. Continuing corruption and growing instability dampened American enthusiasm for Saleh. The Saudis, Yemen's biggest donors, cautioned the Americans that cash transferred into Yemen usually wound up in Swiss banks.

Rejoinders from the US angered and puzzled Saleh. He felt the US ought to be grateful. 'I respond to you immediately when you need something', he told the Americans. Shouldn't he be rewarded? Instead, frustrated by lack of reform and foolishly concluding that the AQAP threat had receded, the Bush administration cut its aid.

Johnsen argues that the US misjudged Yemeni political realities, costing it a unique opportunity for reform that might have helped stabilise Yemen. The window closed in 2006, when three new AQAP leaders emerged: Qasim al-Raymi, Hamza al-Quayti, and Nasir al-Wihayshi. Escaping from prison in January, they rebooted the terrorist organisation. Remarkably, the US let four years elapse—until 2009—before even designating AQAP a terrorist organisation.

Civilian deaths worsened relations. A US Navy ship fired cruise missiles into a Bedouin camp mistakenly identified as an AQAP base. The mishap illuminated an important disconnect in classifying casualties. 'Unless there was explicit intelligence exonerating specific individuals', Johnsen writes, 'the US counted all males of military age at a strike site as combatants.' Yemenis counted many of those as civilian tribesmen. The casualties enraged friends and relatives and provided a pool of new recruits for AQAP.

President Barack Obama wanted to dial down American efforts. 'We are not going to war with Yemen', he declared. Obama insisted on signing off individually on each missile or drone strike. Still, the US-Yemen disconnect persisted. After 2009, AQAP membership tripled from 300 to an estimated 1,000 or more. One tribal

leader echoed a familiar refrain: 'The US sees al-Qaeda as terrorism and we consider the drones terrorism.'

In May 2011, AQAP demonstrated its growing power by seizing Abyan's coastal capital, Zanjubar. It captured US-supplied tanks, heavy artillery, armoured transports and chemicals for bomb-making. Their success fueled an internal debate among the jihadis about identity. Should AQAP be a guerilla organisation that carries out attacks and de-stabilises the existing order, or should it evolve into an insurgent group that uses terrorism to take over and control territory and implement sharia law?

In Zanjubar, AQAP dug water wells and strung electrical lines. Its leaders talked about fixing day-to-day problems, such as sewerage. Recognising that the AQAP brand was unpopular, they toyed with adopting the name Ansar al Sharia to clean up their image. Unlike ISIS, which appeared on the scene in 2014, AQAP has tried to avoid killing civilians and has shown target discipline.[1]

Here emerges an important distinction with strategic implications. The US sees AQAP as a terrorist organisation. AQAP sees itself as a governing organisation that employs terrorism to achieve its goals. Their propaganda is rooted in that perception. Actions and strategic communication must address that issue. So far they haven't.

New US Secretary of Defense and former US Central Command commander General James Mattis watched AQAP's growth with alarm. He worried that Yemen might become the next Afghanistan. Hoping to stop it in its tracks, he proposed major strikes inside Zanjubar. President Obama rejected that counsel. He authorised only the resupply of Yemeni troops. Saudi Arabia was marshalled to stage bombing raids. It took the Yemeni army four months to force AQAP to evacuate the city. While Yemeni political players battled among themselves for power, AQAP set about taking root.

In spring 2011, the Arab Spring stirred street protests. In June, Saleh was badly wounded and barely escaped with his life after his palace was shelled.[2] As fireworks filled the sky, he fled to Saudi Arabia for treatment. People celebrated by sacrificing cows and goats in 'Change Square', an encampment that had been pressuring the President.[3] A year later, Houthis entered Sana'a. Evidently angling to increase his own stature, General Ali Moshen al-Ahmar announced he would protect anti-Saleh protestors and defected to them. His action forced Saleh to step down.[4]

Hardly feeling defeated, Saleh took the long view that big players will always find a way to fight another day. He quit the presidency as part of a heavily criticised deal brokered by the Gulf Cooperation Council that gave him immunity from prosecution.

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[1] Johnsen's book ends before ISIS makes its appearance, but does not share AQAP's perspective, and for that reason seems not to be gaining ground in Yemen. See: Joscelyn, Thomas, 'Islamic State defector in Yemen apologizes to Al Qaeda', *Long War Journal*, 23 January 2016. Joscelyn blasts ISIS for acting like Kharijites and that it 'has no respect for Muslim blood'. ISIS later denounced him as a fake but his statements comport with ISIS actions.

[2] 'Yemen's Saleh survives palace shelling', *CBS News*, 3 June 2011.

[3] Dunkel, G. 'Saleh forced to leave: What Next?', *International Action Center*, 11 June 2011.

[4] Naylor, Hugh 'A key player in Yemen's political chaos? A strongman ousted in 2012', *Washington Post*, 11 February 2015.

Saleh transferred power to his weak vice president, Abu Rabu Mansur Hadi, whom Yemenis then voted to give a two-year transition term. The machinations went for naught. Mansur Hadi achieved little. But lacking viable alternatives, the government and the international community extended Mansur Hadi's term for two more years.

Johnsen's book concludes prior to the current Saudi/United Arab Emirates-led intervention. Complementing Rabi's book, it is a well-researched, well argued study of how US policy fails. The book is highly recommended.

Johnsen's argument that the US should have pushed harder for reform and missed opportunities seems reasonable. The issue is whether the US could ever have substantially influenced Saleh or the key political players. Each had its own agenda and other regional support. None harbored love for the US, a nation whose successive leaders seem eternally in quest of friendships as much as the pursuit of national interests. The US would seem well advised to better heed Viscount Palmerston's distinction between the two notions.

By 2014, Yemen had descended into bloody conflict. An alliance of Houthis and militias loyal to Saleh launched an offensive that drove south to Aden. Forging what most view as a transactional alliance, Saleh resurfaced on the playing field as a Houthi fellow traveler. He had maintained strong ties with the Air Force and the Defense Reserve Forces, an elite unit that his son had commanded. In January 2015, these forces stood down as Houthis marched on Sana'a, seized the Presidential palace, and placed President Mansour Hadi under house arrest. Hadi managed to escape, first to Aden and on 25 March 2015, to Saudi Arabia.

Under the cover of UN Security Council Resolution 2216, the Saudis intervened at the head of a coalition of ten regional states, co-led by the United Arab Emirates. Framing the war as an effort to block Iranian influence, their stated goal has been to support Hadi and roll back the Houthis.[5]

The US supports the Saudis' Houthi-Iran narrative.[6] How well judged is that view? Experts like Peterson, Mohsen Milani,[7] Thomas Juneau, retired State Department diplomat Greg Hicks—who served in Yemen—and the late Yemen expert for Carnegie, Christopher Boucek, believe or believed that view is over-stated.[8] Who is correct? The media has cited US officials who claim that Iranian Islamic Revolutionary

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[5] Juneau, Thomas, 'No, Yemen's Houthis actually aren't Iranian puppets', *Washington Post*, 16 May 2016.

[6] The UAE, the Saudi's principal coalition partner, has put money into reconstruction but echoes the Saudi line. See Dr Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, Chairman, Arab Council for Social Sciences, *Gulf News*, 12 October 2015. ('The security and the stability of Saudi Arabia was at stake. Hence, the UAE had no choice but to stand by Saudi Arabia in its time of need. There was a collective Gulf need to stand up to expansionist Iran. Yemen was the place to draw the line.') Still, the UAE assesses the threat differently than Saudi Arabia and understands the need to address southern pro-separatist sensibilities and grievances. The Saudi emphasis is on defeating the Houtis and creating a unitary state under its control.

[7] Milani, Mohsen, 'Why Tehran Isn't to Blame for the Civil War', *Foreign Affairs*, April 2015. He argues that Iran's interest in the Houthis is opportunistic to create a political sphere of influence but that it has no vital economic or strategic interests in Yemen. He states bluntly: 'The nature and extent of Iranian involvement has been exaggerated and sometimes deliberately distorted.' See also: Juneau, 'No, Yemen's Houthis actually aren't Iranian puppets'.

[8] Boucek and the author were friends and had discussed this topic on numerous occasions.

Guard Corps personnel were training and equipping Houthi units.[9] The Houthis acknowledge Iran has furnished limited arms aid,[10] but stoutly reject any suggestion that they are anyone's proxy.

The view that Tehran is meddling in Yemen rests on the argument that Iran exploits instability to increase its influence in weak states, and to gain launching pads to pressure Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the U.S. No one doubts it opposes the status quo that Mansur Hadi represents, especially given his Saudi and Western backing. Even so, insists the University of Ottawa's Thomas Juneau, 'Iran's investment in Yemen has been limited…. It has therefore bought only limited influence' and lacks the ability to shape events in Yemen.[11]

What do the Houthis want? They posture themselves as populist reformers. Any rational reading of their actions translates into an effort to gain greater power. But what does that mean? As noted earlier, for over a thousand years, until the Egyptians invaded in 1962, a Zaydi Imam ruled the country. The Houthis see themselves as heirs to this tradition. Does that mean Houthis feel they should legitimately be leading the country and earning the economic rents from such status? Do they want to restore the imamate? Is the goal more autonomy?

Their agenda remains oblique. Uzi Rabi points out that conflicting alliances in Yemen make it hard to identify where the alliance lines are drawn or to ascertain their logic and motivation. That description fits the Houthis. One thing seems likely: Saleh wants his old job back.

The anti-Houthi Yemen coalition is united mainly in its hostility to a Houthi-dominated Yemen. Its stability is dubious. Its factions hold different visions for Yemen's future. Islah favors a united Yemen. In theory the nation had that in 1993. It failed. Southern separatists want to break away from the north. The challenge is whether the south is economically viable, and how well it could bridge internal cultural differences. Others argue for federation. That requires a reconciliation that's not in sight anytime soon.

Peterson is skeptical. He envisions two probable scenarios for Yemen's future. One posits Saleh reasserting his influence in a chaotic atmosphere, perhaps by pushing forward his son Ahmad. That Saleh maintains strong influence with the military and security apparatus makes this scenario plausible. Those elements may well most affect who becomes the next President and will not necessarily act according to tribal norms and solidarity. In this scenario, tribalism will remain an important identifier and component of many tribal members' lives. The other envisions neutralising Saleh and his family. But that scenario would likely produce political deadlock that produces weak government.

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[9] Strobel, Warren and Mark Hosenball, 'Elite Iranian guards training Yemen's Houthis: U.S. officials', *Reuters*, 27 March 2015. The story acknowledges that Houthis deny this and leans heavily upon Saudi sources like Saudi Ambassador to the US Abel al-Jubeir, who touts the official Saudi line.

[10] Landry, Carole, 'Iran arming Yemen's Houthi rebels since 2009: UN Report', *Middle East Eye*, 1 May 2015.

[11] Thomas, 'No, Yemen's Houthis actually'.

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Here Irbrahim Fraihat's *Unfinished Revolutions* offers interesting ideas. A Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution's Doha Center, he follows the story of Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia from the perspective of stabilisation and reconstruction. Fraihat champions achieving national reconciliation through a formal process.

Fraihat recommends 1) national dialogue, 2) truth seeking about the past, 3) holding past regime members accountable, 4) forging a consensus about what role past regime members may enjoy in the new government, 5) institutional reform, and (6) integrating the role of civil society organisations, women, and tribes into the new consensus.

The book is impressively organised. His analysis of Yemeni instability is concise. He sharply criticises the international community, especially the Gulf Cooperation Council, in giving Saleh immunity from prosecution in exchange for resigning. The flaw in this view is that the deal reflected ground realities. Saleh is savvy. He had retained substantial influence with security forces in Yemen. He had powerful leverage and used it adroitly. Conceivably a different compromise might have accorded immunity in exchange for exile. Whether Saleh would have accepted that is not clear.

Fraihat recognises the power that lies hidden in the 'deep state'—the power structure embedded in the security establishments of these nations and their ability to wage counter-revolution. He's less persuasive on how to address that problem in a state embroiled in civil war. A more peaceful Tunisia was a different story. It might have fallen apart. Instead prudent leaders have worked for stability. Their success well illustrates why Fraihat's approach is more workable in a peaceful political environment.

Yemen illustrates why war makes it less workable. He cites the ten-month, UN-sponsored National Dialogue Conference held in 2013-2014. It produced about 1,400 recommendations for reconciliation. The challenge lies in reconciling these with the political capacity to implement them. The 2014 war and the intervention of the coalition reflect deeply felt resentments.

The Saudi intervention has brutally worsened the situation. Its Air Force has indiscriminately bombed civilians, hospitals, schools, and factories and killed numerous civilians. The US bears a grave responsibility for what has transpired. It has sold the Saudis weapons and provided other support. It did so to mollify them after the Iran nuclear deal.[12] Keeping alliances together may seem pragmatic. But doing so at the expense of avoidable civilian carnage and endangering many Yemenis with famine is inexcusable. The strategy brings into focus a familiar challenge that has beset US security policy for decades: the inability to look over the horizon and think through the future consequences of today's actions.

The US would seem well advised to rethink its strategy for drone strikes and how and why it communicates the rationale for them. Alienating the civilian population, especially through its support for the Saudi-UAE intervention, is causing

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[12] See the Editorial, 'America Is Complicit in the Carnage in Yemen', *New York Times*, 17 August 2016.

near- and longer-term challenges. On a mil-to-mil basis, perhaps it could restrain Saudi violence against civilians and, if the US is providing targeting information, work to limit strikes to well-defined AQAP/ISIS targets.

There needs to be greater emphasis on persuading Gulf allies to provide economic aid. Diplomat Greg Hicks makes a prudent suggestion in arguing that the US move its Ambassador to Yemen out of Riyadh. '[Being in Saudi5465gfg is] the wrong symbol', he explains, 'and sends the wrong message to Yemenis, who already are unhappy over the extent of US alignment with Saudi Arabia.' Above all, we need to do whatever it takes to end this civil war. It is hampering US interests and undermining regional stability.

Until the key players in a fragmented strategic situation resolve their competing agendas, conflict not reconciliation will ensue, unless one of the parties emerges triumphant. So far, war has produced stalemate. The big loser has been Yemen and its population. The winner, so far? AQAP and, lately, ISIS, which has made its entrance into this troubled land.

Until the war ends, AQAP and ISIS will strengthen. Can it be resolved? Despite the Saudi skepticism about the Houthis, the two parties have a history that suggests one is plausible. The Saudis financed the Zaydi imam's resistance against the Egyptians until the 6-Day War in 1967, when they sold out the Zaydis to free up Nasser to pull his soldiers out of Yemen for use against Israel. Despite the double-cross, both sides have shown a transactional quality. They'll need a strong one to settle the current conflict.

Fraihat's analysis of Libya and Tunisia merit brief comment. His framework for national reconciliation is rational. But it's hard to see how his approach offers a realistic path to end the chaos in Libya anytime soon. The section makes its point, but he oversimplifies a complex situation. His analysis leaves the impression that two principal factors are competing for power. Actually, multiple factions are doing so, each pushing a distinct agenda.

In Tunisia, various parties have followed a framework consistent with Fraihat's views. One lesson perhaps is that once violence stops, Fraihat's framework can achieve positive political outcomes. A key difference between Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya is that education levels are vastly higher in the former. Tunisia is also more connected to the global community.

Fraihat is an idealist. His book is highly worth reading merely for that strength and the ideas that support why nations should work to adopt his or a similar framework.

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The four books offer different perspectives on Yemen. Each distinguishes itself through excellent scholarship, understanding, knowledge, and insight. Yemen has a storied history. The shifting alliances among tribes, parties, and leaders have given rise to competing, changing narratives. None of the parties has proven especially deft in communicating agendas, or framing them in ways that establish the common

ground required for national reconciliation and unity. For its part, US policy has ebbed and flowed, focusing transactionally on the only thing that Yemenis perceive matter to it: fighting AQAP, not enhancing their lives.

That is unfortunate, because the two goals complement one another. The achievement of the former is essential to fulfilling the latter. This will be a challenge President Donald Trump and his allies need to address prudently and decisively, keeping a firm eye on the horizon. Donald Trump brings to the White House a different perspective than President Barack Obama's. Obama was reticent about the Middle East. Obama summarised his approach in four words, which in the name of civility this review paraphrases: Don't do stupid stuff.[13] Journalist Jeffrey Goldberg has reported that Middle East leaders including Abu Dhabi crown prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, Jordan king Abdullah II, and the Saudis were 'already dismayed by what [Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak] saw as Obama's illogical desire to distance the US from its traditional Sunni Arab allies and create a new alliance with Iran….'[14]

At this writing, President Donald Trump's approach is unfolding. He has declared: 'I like to be unpredictable.'[15] He has indicated that the US should stay out of conflicts that pose no immediate threat to the nation's security. He advised Fox News host Bill O'Reilly in January 2016 that the US should avoid direct intervention in the Yemen conflict unless the US stood to benefit financially from Saudi Arabia's support.[16] The final configuration of his national security team seems likely to matter. Trump views himself as a pragmatist and despite criticism that he speaks off the cuff more than is prudent for national security, he's shown a willingness to listen to different points of view. That and unfolding developments seem most likely to determine US policy in the evolving Yemen debacle, in which Yemeni are increasingly faulting the US for facilitating Saudi attacks that are killing their countrymen.

Trump has confounded political observers. He punches back hard when he is attacked. He's not the type to accept fault for the military strategies or tactics carried out by others. The Saudis should be cautious about presuming that US policy in Yemen will remain unchanged or that US support for its operations will persist. Trump feels no obligation to follow Obama's policies or approaches. He will decide anew where US interests lie and he's made clear that these are paramount in his strategic thinking.

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[13] Goldberg, Jeffrey, 'The Obama Doctrine', *Atlantic,* April 2016

[14] Ibid.

[15] Statement of Donald Trump in the October 2015 Republican debate

[16] Baron, Adam and Peter Salisbury, 'Trump and the Yemen War', Sana Center for Strategic Studies, 2016; and Hanchett, Ian, 'Trump: I'm not going to tell what I'd do with the 'disaster' Iran deal, people don't have right to know how far I'd go', *Breibart*, 4 January 2016

WEAPONISED HONESTY: COMMUNICATION STRATEGY AND NATO VALUES

A review essay by John Williams

Naked Diplomacy: Power and Statecraft in the Digital Age, by Tom Fletcher.
Publisher: William Collins

The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin, by Steven Lee Myers.
Publisher: Vintage

Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East, by Simon Mabon.
Publisher: I.B. Tauris

Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising, by Gilbert Achcar.
Publisher: Stanford University Press

About the author

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The purpose of strategic communication is to have an impact on a situation by framing choices and shaping perceptions in a way that helps achieve strategic objectives. Strategic communication can either create or close down opportunities for diplomacy and conflict resolution. It can deter opponents and rally support, provide legitimacy and forge alliances or, when badly done, make national strategy impossible. If done well, it can transform obstacles into strategic openings.

Think of the way in which President Rouhani of Iran opened up the space for nuclear negotiations soon after his election in 2013. He went to the United Nations General Assembly determined to change not only perceptions but to change his country's strategic position. Within a few days, he seized the initiative with a series of friendly appearances for the media, exuding charm and reasonability. It was, in the

words of Financial Times columnist Philip Stephens, 'a masterclass in how to reframe world opinion […] The shift in tone is important insofar as it fosters confidence and provides space for compromise'.[1]

That last point is crucial. The strategic communicator can make room for changes in policy, sometimes of profound strategic importance, by words, images, and other signals, without taking any action at all. But action must then follow in the space created. One difference between propaganda, or spin, and strategic communication is a seriousness of intent to match changes in attitude with substance. The currency of strategic communication is credibility. Rouhani used his credibility as an independently minded, genuinely elected, non-ideological figure to influence US diplomacy in three ways that changed the strategic situation:

1) to convince policymakers at the White House and the State Department that that he had the genuine intent to deliver an agreement;

2) to persuade Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, to back him against his opponents within Iran's complex political environment, at least for long enough to test the potential for lifting international sanctions;

3) to generate enough support among commentators and in public opinion for rapprochement, at home and abroad, so that President Obama and Ayatollah Khamenei would feel safe in taking a diplomatic risk.

Rouhani's communication strategy was not sufficient to deliver a deal, but it was necessary to make a deal possible. Where there had been only obstacles, there were now openings.

This is a case of credible communication as a positive force in conflict avoidance and resolution. That is how strategic communication conventionally works, by building trust, using soft power to attract support, allaying suspicions through personal authenticity, and by credibility of word and deed.

The key word is 'conventionally'. But the conventions are now being challenged by the rise of 'post-truth' politics, to use the Oxford Dictionary's word of the year for 2016. Is it any longer possible to rely on facts and evidence as the basis of political communication when President Putin is achieving international goals by a strategy with disinformation at its heart, or when the US election has been won by Donald Trump? The implications are that objective realities and checkable facts are as old-fashioned as print newspapers in the iPhone age. If there are no truths, only opinions, if authenticity is no more than believing what you say at the time when you say it, if credibility is getting others to believe whatever they want to believe in the blizzard of aggressive tweeting and fake news on Facebook, then does strategic communication need to be defined as saying whatever works? No, not in international relations.

There is a difference between political campaigning in which the winner takes all and pays no penalties and confrontations between states in which the deterrence of opponents and the reliability of allies depend on straight dealing.

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[1] Stephens, Phillip, 'Talks are the only way to reset Iran's atomic clock', *The Financial Times*, 27 September 2013.

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As Tom Fletcher writes in *Naked Diplomacy: Power and Statecraft in the Digital Age*: 'Honesty is in fact central […] in negotiations you live or die by your reputation. The best negotiators recognise that trust is essential.'

Fletcher writes with engaging originality about the accelerating changes of modern communication, while grounding himself in the lasting verities of the diplomatic trade. He uses a wonderful pun on the biological nomenclature, *Phono sapiens*, to capture the effect of instant communication on negotiators and communicators, all of us in thrall to our devices. But *Phono sapiens* trades in the same commodity communicators have always used—authentic information. In almost all circumstances, attraction depends on respect and trust: only if people believe they can rely on what you say, can your words influence their thinking and their decisions. Strategic communications is not propaganda, nor psychological operations, nor information ops, nor spin—all of which involve an intention to mislead in some way. Strategic communications is about strategic impact through credible narrative. In complex situations, where reasonable people can hold different views or see the problem from different angles, strategic communication is an honest attempt—always honest—to frame the way people around the world understand what is at stake.

There is currently nothing as complex, nor so contested in terms of narrative, as the Syrian conflict. Fletcher makes this shrewd point: 'Syria been a grim example of the limits of global reach, stomach and compassion. Assad has been a fortunate man—his brutality coincided with a period of global economic weakness, inwardness and war-weariness.' But Fletcher is an optimist, writing with refreshing zeal about the new tools of the diplomatic trade: 'The overall effect of the Internet is positive, and will give more people the means to understand, engage and influence the world. It is better ultimately to have too much information than too little'. However, he cautions that 'the 24/7 news cycle destroys the ability to be strategic'.

The verb 'destroys' is too strong, in my opinion. The pace of news in the age of permanent immediacy sets challenges that strategic communicators must meet in order to alert the public to what matters in the moment's rush and to focus decision-makers on what is lastingly significant. The difficulty of doing this is skilfully exploited by the cynical, whose aim is to confuse public opinion and paralyse diplomacy. There is a battle for the truth around all conflicts and negotiations, and it is currently being fought at its hardest over Syria.

Tom Fletcher says we need diplomats more than ever, to do 'what diplomats do best: stopping people killing each other.' This is, sadly, so far unachieved in Geneva, where United Nations Envoy Staffan de Mistura has laboured in vain to make any progress in resolving the conflict. As an advisor on strategic communication to the Syrian Opposition I have seen this close up. De Mistura is a fine communicator, exuding tireless civility in pursuit of peace, a decent man pained by the dreadful facts on the ground. The UN diplomacy in Geneva and New York has become a maze without exits in which every initiative, breakthrough, and ceasefire gets lost amid confusing disputes over the complexities of this many-sided conflict.

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In *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* Gilbert Achcar is forthright in pinning 'primary responsibility in producing the worst of all possible outcomes' on the Obama administration, which did not give enough support to Syria's 'mainstream opposition'. Syria is caught between 'an increasingly murderous regime', Lebanese and Iraqi shi'ite 'proxies of Iran', and 'fanatical Sunni-fundamentalist anti-Assad regime forces'. In Achcar's trenchant and unflinching analysis: 'With the barbarism of the Assad regime fostering the emergence of ISIS, Syria has become a major theatre [… for] the clash of barbarisms.' Then came Russia's military intervention in September 2015, at which point 'the Obama administration did indulge in wishful thinking about Moscow and Tehran helping it out of its Syrian quandary by convincing Assad to step down.'

Achcar is surely right to say: 'In order for the regime to be willing to compromise, it needs to feel threatened in its very existence—or else to be put under pressure by its sponsors, who would do so only if they feared that the alternative was the regime's collapse.'

This scenario was briefly close to fulfilment in February and March of 2016, when Russia and Iran took part in the Munich meeting of the International Syria Support Group that agreed to a cessation of hostilities. After a delay, the cessation was imposed to the extent that hostilities were reduced by 90%, according to the UN envoy. It was only by working with Russia and Iran that the US and its European and Gulf allies were able to create the conditions for negotiation in Geneva. When President Putin marked the re-opening of the talks by announcing his partial withdrawal from Syria, he seemed to be signalling to all sides a serious intention to have the war ended through the UN process. But that moment was brief. Russia's, by then, six months of aerial engagement had strengthened Assad sufficiently to feel he could send his negotiators in to filibuster, and his sponsors in Moscow and Tehran did nothing to prevent them making the talks meaningless.

The paradox is that that there was—is?—no hope of a political solution being forced upon Assad unless Russia makes it happen; that it can happen only if Russia is in control of the situation; but if Russia is in control, it has no incentive to go for political transition. Russia is perfectly comfortable with Assad as the alternative to Daesh, as defined by the communication strategy. Much the same applies to Iran's influence, though it is President Putin, rather than Ayatollah Khamenei who has taken on the role of dictating the appalling rhythm of events. Repeatedly during 2016 the Russian President put himself into a position from which he could have orchestrated a solution through diplomacy, but each time reverted to supporting the Assad regime's military strategy.

And so we go round and round the maze. Whatever Russia's long-term objectives, the short-term impact is that all routes in the maze lead back to Assad remaining in power. The international community has yet to find an escape route from this unacceptable conclusion. This is what has lasting significance in the mesmerising media coverage of each round of diplomacy and breakdown.

Russia has, in my view, protected the Assad regime not only with aerial support, but with the firepower of President Putin's formidable strategic communication. Putin's international communication is doing something more difficult to deal with and more far-reaching in its effects than propaganda. When he is photographed bare-chested with a gun—that is propaganda, crudely obvious in its intended effect to polish Putin's image as he ages. It presumably has a certain appeal within Russia. But internationally, Putin's strategy is anything but crudely obvious in its effects. It goes deeper than distorting the facts. It is a challenge to facts themselves; a communication strategy which corrodes confidence that there are *any facts or evidence at all* to rely on. While the evidence is being neutralised, whether in Syria or Ukraine, diplomacy is sidelined and Russia makes its intended gains, whether in Aleppo or Crimea.

Putin's strategy is not based on the usual rules of attraction and accuracy. The Russian President has forged a different kind of strategic communication based on a different kind of credibility; credibility that relies on neither honesty nor trust, but on confrontation and sowing confusion. Again and again over the last year he has voted for United Nations Security Council Resolutions and made agreements as co-chair of the International Syria Support Group, which his government has immediately broken while talking earnestly of concern over humanitarian aid and the need for ceasefires. The communication strategy is to deny what seems obviously true, devaluing the whole idea of objective reality. In the end—are we there already?—there are no facts, only cynical relativism in which nobody can be believed about anything. Some call it 'weaponised relativism': combining military force with a scorched-earth policy toward evidence and accurate communication.

Take, for example, the press conference held by Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov on 4 October 2016, the day after the Americans broke off talks about Aleppo in protest of what seemed to be solid evidence of Russian complicity in the Assad regime's air assault on rebel-held areas of the city, and following the bombing of an aid convoy in which eye witness and photographic evidence pointed to Russian involvement.

Lavrov said: 'Unfortunately, from the beginning there were people who wished to break down the agreements [referring to a ceasefire and US-Russia co-operation on targeting the Nusra front], including within the US administration. Yesterday, to our deep regret, those who were against political settlement of the Syria crisis, who were against the fulfilment of the relevant UN resolutions, and who have clear plans for solving the situation by force, succeeded. We are not giving up. We will make efforts so that the UN Security Council Resolutions are fulfilled.'

Now, pause and play that clip again, but substitute *Russian government* for *US administration*: '(...)from the beginning there were people who wished to break down the agreements, including within the Russian government. Yesterday, to our deep regret, those who were against political settlement of the Syria crisis (…) succeeded.'

It is like stepping through a strategic looking glass: Lavrov is describing the situation in precisely the terms the US might use to blame those 'who have clear plans for solving the situation by force', pointing to the evidence that Russian aircraft were involved in the Assad regime's assault on Aleppo taking place at that very moment.

International broadcasters and global news agencies report such statements by Russia respectfully, because of their journalistic culture of balance, a culture that stems from Western values. Russia, which does not subscribe to such values, exploits balanced Western reporting to give itself cover for breaching the UN resolutions that its impressively plausible foreign minister meanwhile claims to uphold.

It is a policy not so much of creating the facts on the ground as of destroying them. The value of evidence—eyewitness accounts from doctors and rescue workers, photographs, and videos—is steadily undermined by the relentless plausibility of Russia's strategic communication. Plausibility and authenticity are different, but both are kinds of credibility. If the relevant evidence is neutralised, credible communicators can have real difficulty in dealing with skilled plausibility.

The technique is consistent with President Putin's handling of the confrontation with Ukraine in 2014. As Steven Lee Myers writes about Putin's strategy in Crimea in *The New Tsar: The Rise and Reign of Vladimir Putin*, Russia 'blended hard power with soft power, speed and stealth, obfuscation and relentless propaganda meant to deflect culpability until it was too late to do anything about it. By the time Putin acknowledged that Russian forces had, in fact, taken control of the entire peninsula before the referendum on its status, the annexation was already a *fait accompli*.' The fact that this description fits Syria as well as Ukraine suggests a deliberate, consistent strategy. You could call it Putin's 'strategy of *fait accompli*'. Strategic communication is at the heart of it. While Putin's representatives were tying up the international community in arguments over an Aleppo ceasefire in August 2016, Assad's forces, supported by Russia, captured Dayara—the besieged Damascus suburb that had been among the earliest places to rise against Assad. *Fait accompli*.

Looking back, Putin's approach to the Geneva talks feels like a strategy to use the negotiations to achieve his strategy of *fait accompli*. While he and Lavrov maintained the appearance of untiring diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict, Russian bombers continued to pound civilians. When the opposition's communication strategy started to gain some international traction in Geneva the bombing increased and the talks broke down, while Russia continued to insist that it supports diplomacy. They said that the bombers were targeting terrorists, while regularly hitting hospitals; that Russia was fighting Daesh, while bombing areas held by the opposition who were at the table with de Mistura in talks overseen by Russia and the US as co-chairs of the ISSG. It is a circular strategy, which continually takes diplomacy back to zero.

Take as an example the events of early September, when it seemed probable that painstaking diplomacy between Russia and the US was going to ease the conflict enough for the intra-Syrian talks to resume in Geneva.

A ceasefire agreement was reached on 9 September, but within days it was destroyed as much by what was said as by what happened. Two catastrophic events in quick succession were immediately subjected to a dispute over the facts: an attack by the US-led coalition against Daesh, which struck Syrian government forces rather than ISIS fighters; then an air attack on a United Nations aid convoy preparing to relieve areas of Aleppo besieged by the Syrian government. Russia and the regime suggested the aid convoy simply caught

fire or that it was attacked by the rebels themselves, destroying their own aid supplies. However bizarre the counter-accusation, it served to sow doubt and cause dispute, while the Assad regime declared the ceasefire over and Russia joined the air attacks while denying doing so. By disputing the evidence regarding both the destruction of the aid convoy, and the US's mistaken attack on Syrian forces a few days before [not a mistake, claimed Lavrov], Russia reduced both incidents to a non-factual, value-free equivalence. It then had no difficulty in riding out a UN Security Council meeting on 8 October, blocking France's ceasefire resolution under cover of counter-accusations against the US.

By now the technique is well practised and polished. In his well-informed and briskly readable account Lee Myers, a New York Times correspondent, writes that when Putin made his move in Crimea: 'Secrecy was essential, as was deniability. Putin could not be sure of the potential international response—from NATO, above all—and wanted to test the resolve of the world's leaders before he acknowledged the extent of his plan.'

Putin's unconventional, anti-factual communication seems to be part of a strategy to test resolve again and again, while achieving a series of *faits accomplis*. Amid the controversy and confusion over each move, Russia becomes more and more indispensable; without the Russians there can be no hope of resolving anything— even if each attempt to resolve things runs diplomacy back round the maze with no exits. My reading of President Putin's communication strategy is that his aim is to make Russia the 'Indispensible Power', and he has succeeded. The more he confuses and disguises, the greater his leverage. He has made the strategic impact he wanted.

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Sergei Lavrov recently wrote a long historical analysis in the Russian foreign ministry's house magazine, *Global Affairs,* which includes these revealing paragraphs about two of his country's greatest leaders:

> 'Relying on strong measures inside the country and decisive and successful foreign policy, the first Russian emperor [Peter the Great]: managed to put Russia among leading European states in slightly over two decades. Since then Russia could no longer be ignored, and no serious European issue could be solved without it. … Russia's size, strength and influence increased significantly under Catherine the Great and reached a level where, as then Chancellor Alexander Bezborodko observed, "Not a single cannon in Europe could be fired without our consent".[2]

This is similar to comments from one of the most influential thinkers in Russia's defence and foreign policy establishment, Sergei Karaganov. With regard to Syria he said: 'Russia wants to be a grand power. It is in our DNA for better or worse.' And on Ukraine: 'The main reason why we did what we did was to teach our partners a lesson in how to behave and how to respect Russian interests.'[3]

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[2] Lavrov, Sergei, 'Russia's Foreign Policy in a Historical Perspective', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 2016.

[3] Interview with Sergei Karaganov on World Policy Conference TV, 20 November 2015.

Sergei Karaganov is chairman of Russia's Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, which gives strategic advice to the President and Foreign Minister. He gave an interview recently to the German magazine Der Spiegel, in which he made the same point: 'We want the status of being a great power. We unfortunately cannot relinquish that. In the last 300 years, this status has become a part of our genetic makeup.'

Karaganov had this to say about Syria in his interview:

> **'SPIEGEL:** The partial Russian withdrawal from Syria was a surprise, for example. You intentionally left the West guessing how many troops you were withdrawing and whether you would secretly redeploy some of them. Such tactics don't exactly create trust. **Karaganov:** That was masterful, that was fantastic. We take advantage of our pre-eminence in this area. Russians aren't good at haggling, they aren't passionate about business. But they are outstanding fighters. In Europe, you have a different political system, one that is unable to adapt to the challenges of the new world. The German chancellor said that our president lives in a different world. I believe he lives in a very real world.'

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While diplomacy in Syria is dominated by the US and Russia, the conflict is of course many-sided, with Iran-Saudi Arabia being an important contest within the conflict. Simon Mabon's study, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Power and Rivalry in the Middle East*, provides deep roots for the Sunni-Shi'a rivalry. He tells us that Persia [the name changed to Iran in 1935] was a Sunni state until 1501, when a 14-year-old military leader called Esma'il declared that shi'ism was now the religion of his territories. For one so young, Esma'il left a lasting mark. As Mabon says, this 'would have severe repercussions for both regional and internal stability over the coming centuries.' Fast forward to the 1979 revolution and, says Mabon, 'Iran has become the most influential and vocal Shi'a state in the world.'

An event of similar importance for Saudi Arabia—and the region—happened in 1703 when Muhammed Ibn Saud invited a rebellious scholar, Muhammed Abd al Wahhab, to a meeting at an oasis. They formed an alliance in which Saud would support al Wahhab 'against unbelief and idolatry'. Thus began the alliance between Wahhabism and the House of Saud, or as Mabon puts it, 'between the religious zealot and political power'.

Mabon argues that understanding Iran's and Saudi Arabia's rival Islamic narratives helps us understand 'the values guiding behaviour within both states […] Given the importance of Islam, particularly as a legitimising tool for regimes to resolve internal security dilemmas and to demonstrate external legitimacy and vitality, it is easy to see how moves by either Riyadh or Tehran within an Islamic sphere have ramifications for the legitimacy and security of the other'. Mabon devotes a chapter to the role of narratives, saying that 'the necessity of deriving legitimacy for new regimes often results in leaders referring to myths and tales that evoke nationalist sentiment'.

He points to a 'serious contradiction' in current strategy between Saudi Arabia 'seeking to ensure its own internal stability and that of its allies' on the one hand, and on the other supporting groups trying to overthrow Assad. So 'geopolitical considerations outweigh ideological considerations'. Thus 'Riyadh's involvement in Iraq, Bahrain [both on the side of status quo] and Syria is increasing Iranian concerns' to the extent that, Mabon says, Iran feels Saudi Arabia is 'meddling in the Islamic Republic's internal security dilemma.' Meanwhile for the Saudis, 'the influence of Iran within Iraq has proved to be of great concern'. And at the same time the prominence of Al Qaida in Saudi Arabia means that Riyadh is 'engaged in a delicate balancing act between the burgeoning influence of Iran across the region and between the dangers posed by Al Qaida'.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in a battle of narratives—my phrase, not Mabon's—in which the Saudis 'export Wahhabi values across the Middle East and into Central Asia in an attempt to increase Saudi legitimacy; and Iran meets ideological threats with the doctrine known as *velayat-e faqih*. Mabon describes this as theological legitimacy, resting on the idea that 'loyalty to the revolution equates to loyalty to the Islamic Republic and God'. Mabon is good on Iran's 'incredibly complex' political structure, saying that it is based on the doctrine that only high-ranking clerics are 'able to rightly interpret and apply the Shari'a and, thus, rule.' The system is built around two pillars: unelected, around the Supreme Leader [Khamenei]; elected, around the President [Rouhani].

These two power centres do not always speak with one voice, setting problems of strategic interpretation for those dealing with Iran. There were points in the nuclear negotiation of 2015 when the Supreme Leader seemed to be fully behind the President and Foreign Minister in their negotiating strategy, and times when Khamenei seemed to be usefully applying pressure on US and European negotiators by hinting that he wouldn't accept what his foreign minister had agreed. Which was genuine? That was for the diplomats on the other side to guess or calculate. Such doubts are skilfully exploited by Iran, as the Foreign Secretaries of Britain, France, and Germany found in launching the nuclear diplomacy in 2003. My contribution as Jack Straw's press secretary was to ensure that the European Three jointly announced an agreement only if it contained the authentic language that underpinned a two-year suspension of the nuclear programme. Hassan Rouhani, then chief nuclear negotiator, wanted a fudged phrase, but Straw, Dominique de Villepin, and Joschka Fischer knew the importance of precise language in diplomacy—not only in the agreed document, but at the press conference. In fact their refusal, at my urging, to hold a press conference without precise, agreed language, was the moment when Rouhani conceded. He wanted the prestige of an agreement, and saw that it had to be genuine.

Since Rouhani became President, tensions have been unresolved, in reality and in strategic communication, between his use of attractive or soft power, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' (IRGC) use of hard power. Ayatollah Khamenei either veers genuinely between the two, or knows the value of keeping opponents wondering. This seems to me an exploitation of creative doubt that is entirely legitimate in conventional communication, making strategic use of what is authentic; in contrast to President Putin's unconventional communication, which seeks to destroy the very idea of authenticity. Negotiators are entitled to make opponents doubtful, but not to mislead them or world opinion.

Mabon makes an important point about where the real power lies in Iran: 'The commanders of both the IRGC and regular forces are appointed by and answerable solely to the Supreme Leader'—Ayatollah Khamenei, not President Rouhani. The book was published before the nuclear negotiation's fascinating climax, and in the early stages of the Syria war, so its value is in the roots and the context rather than in current events.

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Gilbert Achcar brings us up to date. He highlights a statement made by President Rouhani in an interview with Christiane Amanpour on CNN on 2 October 2015 concerning Iran's strategy:

> 'When in Syria, when our first objective is to drive out terrorists and combating terrorists to defeat them, we have no solution other than to strengthen the central authority and the central government of that country as a central seat of power. So I think today that everyone has accepted that President Assad must remain so that we can combat the terrorists.'

This is the heart of the narrative battle between the international supporters and opponents of the Assad regime, which is articulated more often and more aggressively by Russia than Iran, and by the US than Saudi Arabia (or Europe or Turkey). The war aim of Assad's supporters is framed as 'driving out the terrorists', which to Iran and Russia justifies their objective 'to strengthen the central authority', giving Assad a respectable platform on which to give interviews to international broadcasters in the guise of a national leader battling to rid his country of terrorists, which is how he defines anyone who opposes him. The public finds it hard to follow this argument, and to distinguish between the international fight against ISIS that is waged partly on Syrian territory, and Assad's battle for survival against moderate opponents who have fighters linked to Al Qaida alongside them. According to Staffan de Mistura at his press conference on 6 October 2016, in Aleppo, of 8,000 troops opposing Assad, approximately 900 were Nusra Front fighters connected with Al Qaida. Assad and Putin are happy to use confusion as cover for bombing hospitals and besieging civilians, claiming to be fighting terrorists. [I am sometimes asked why I am working for Al Qaida when I say I am advising the Syrian Opposition.]

Defining the complexities of this many-sided war as 'combating terrorists' makes it hard for the US to articulate its own anti-terrorist objective without further confusion. People are entitled to wonder—if they haven't, by this stage, switched off the news—why Russia and America are at loggerheads when they both say they are fighting terrorism, surely a good thing to be doing. This is how Russia's strategy of *fait accompli* works—by sowing confusion through strategic communication, and locking the US into a narrative straightjacket from which John Kerry struggled in vain to free himself.

Achcar's verdict that Obama and Kerry were guilty of 'wishful thinking' is a little harsh. The United States' engagement in Syria diplomacy with Russia was the rational choice when President Putin was prepared to sponsor the process through a UN resolution (2254) in December 2015. It is hard to see what Obama can have gained by refusing to co-operate diplomatically on the ground that Putin might not

be entirely sincere in his motives. Once you are engaged in joint diplomacy, it makes no sense to signal that you don't quite trust your partner. And once the diplomacy founders, the alternatives are to let it collapse or try to find ways of restraining the conflict by working for ceasefires. Working for restraint is not wishful, but rational thinking, up to a point. Where comes the point when you have to revolt against being played along? There is always a slight chance that you are not being played along, but are dealing with very difficult people in a very difficult situation, and may yourself be making some mistakes. So you keep trying. This is the bind in which the Kremlin has entangled the White House and State Department: work with Russia and risk being trapped in a process with little hope of success, or don't work with Russia, and be sure of no success. Opting for certainty of no success is poor strategy. It's the same choice that the democratic Syrian Opposition has faced at critical and desperate moments along the way. My view— not in theory, but in practice, advising Assad's opponents—is that it is better strategy to try a small chance of success than to go for the guarantee of no success.

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So how can we deal with Russia's onslaught against communication based on respect for evidence? Is the only answer to meet dishonesty with dishonesty? Do we have to surrender our values, which include a cultural faith in facts? Must we walk through the looking glass into that 'very real world' where Vladimir Putin rules by strength and subjectivity? No, emphatically we must not! It is tempting to read the excesses of Brexit rhetoric and the election of Donald Trump as evidence that facts hardly matter any more, even within democracies; it seems as if evidence were as quaint as red phone boxes in the age of *Phono sapiens*.

The reasons for renewing our faith in facts, and for reaffirming accuracy and authenticity as the foundations of strategic communication, are both moral and practical. Democratic governments have a duty to explain themselves reliably to their domestic audiences so that they can be held accountable. This can be done only if communication between governments remains an honest attempt to frame perceptions and influence decisions in the national interest. The national interest must never become an excuse for dishonesty in pursuit of diplomatic objectives, or even during conflict. Strategic communication must be weaponised honesty, not opportunistic relativism.

As Joseph Nye, originator of the concept of 'soft power', summarises: 'It's not only whose army wins, but whose story wins.'[4]

NATO's story could not win a contest of distortion and denial with Russia, even if NATO wanted to, because it must take a basic contempt for honesty to speak as plausibly as Sergei Lavrov does when saying what is manifestly not true. NATO's role is to defend values as well as territory, so challenging dishonesty with distortion would be a strategic defeat.

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[4] Megias, Mari, 'The Future of Power with Joseph Nye', Harvard Kennedy School website, 22 May 2012.