

STVA22 Essay (12 hp)

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The state of media

An analysis of strategic narratives in CNN and RT's reporting on the Syrian crisis

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Abstract

The Syrian civil war began in 2011 after wide-spread protests were met with violence from the government, and since then both Russia and the U.S. have gotten involved in the conflict. Strategic narratives regarding the conflict and the involved nation's actions and motives have been told, constructed to benefit the interests of these states. The purpose of this paper is to answer to what extent CNN and RT support their respective state's strategic narratives when reporting on the Syrian war. By applying a narrative analysis on a combined 27 articles by the two news outlets we reached the conclusion that RT, to a higher degree and in more explicit fashion than CNN, supported Russian strategic narratives. While this was the case, CNN was also revealed to have a significant tendency of supporting U.S. narratives, though in a more implicit manner, while including more counter-narratives than their Russian counterpart.

Keywords: Strategic narratives, narrative analysis, Syria, CNN, RT, media

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1. Introduction

Facts, and how we should interpret them, are presented to us in different ways and by different people, groups and institutions. Some facts we are inclined to be sceptical about, when these seem unlikely, while other facts we are sceptical of because of who is doing the reporting. We might be inclined to believe reports that come from authorities, but sometimes politicians and political leaders describe events with a purpose of persuading, rather than informing, members of the general public. This is sometimes done by formulating what is known as *strategic narratives*, a concept we will explain in more detail in section 2, but one that for now can be described as a narrative told with a strategic interest in mind.

This paper will examine to what degree two media outlets, either implicitly or explicitly, support state-created strategic narratives in their reporting. This is interesting, since it could provide greater insight into the complicated relationship between state and media. Our object of analysis will therefore be articles, consisting of both “neutral” news reporting as well as opinion pieces (op-eds) selected from CNN and RT (formerly Russia Today). These will be analysed using a narrative analysis method with the aim of identifying narratives that relate to strategic narratives told by the U.S and Russia respectively. The aim is then to evaluate to what degree these strategic narratives are supported by the news outlets. To effectively do this we will limit our scope to a single case - namely the Syrian war - as the focus point of our investigation.

Next we will clarify our research question and our purpose of asking it, which will be presented in section 1.1. Following this is a brief description of the Syrian conflict in section 1.2, as well as a short summary of some earlier research in section 1.3.

1.1 Research question & purpose

The research question we seek to answer in this essay is:

To what extent does CNN and RT support strategic narratives formulated by the U.S. and Russian states respectively when reporting on the Syrian conflict?

The purpose of answering the question would be to investigate whether or not CNN and RT can be understood to report in an unbiased way in relation to their state’s interests, or if the news outlets can be looked at as an extension of national interests by supporting their state driven narratives uncritically. It is our preconception that RT, more so than CNN, will apply their state's strategic narratives within their reporting, mainly since Russia is lacking when it comes to free and independent media (Freedom House, 2020).

The question can be asked why our research question is relevant, both within the field of international relations and to the general public. To answer the former we would say that there has been a lack of research done on the subject of the relation between strategic narratives and mainstream media reporting, an evaluation we base on our inability to locate any such study. Our approach could serve as a starting point for future research aiming at investigating this relationship, where other conflicts, countries and news outlets, could be examined.

We also think our essay is of interest to the general public, as the relationship between state and media could be understood as being more relevant than ever since we believe there's been an increase of media-scepticism with narratives of “fake news” on the rise. Furthermore we would argue that our focus on Syria is relevant since it's an ongoing conflict, and illuminating different narratives concerning it could be informing for people only presented with one side of the argument.

1.2 Background

The conflict in Syria began as a civil war between the Assad-led regime and different groups of dissidents in 2011, following anti-government demonstrations. Since then a lot has happened in the area with ISIS occupying large areas of territory in both Syria and neighbouring countries, such as Turkey and Iran, as well as larger powers, namely the U.S and Russia, getting involved. The U.S took part in the conflict with a mission to defeat ISIS, doing this by assisting the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) who were one of the dissident groups opposing Assad (McGurk, 2019, p. 71). Russia also expressed their intention of defeating ISIS, and made it clear that they did not want the U.S. to behave similarly in Syria as in Libya (Kofman & Rojansky, 2018, p. 8). In contrast to the U.S, Russia worked closely with the Assad regime to achieve this goal (ibid.). Russia and the U.S. therefore found each other on opposite sides of the ongoing civil war, in what some have called a “proxy conflict” between the two (Stent, 2016, p. 106).

One way this conflict can be understood is as a war of information, rather than of arms. Engaging in “information warfare” is something that Russia has been accused of doing in Ukraine, and this in part by pushing their own strategic narratives “with little regard for accuracy” (Szostek, 2018b, p 118).

There has been speculation about what Russia's actual interests are in Syria, with a few different answers given. Russia's “Syrian gambit”, as Stent (2016, p. 109) refers to it, mainly serves as a way back to the negotiation table from which Russia's been excluded following the western reaction to the Russian annexation of Crimea. By becoming an undeniable actor in Syria, Russia could strongarm those wanting to resolve the conflict to include Russia. This interest has been lifted by others as well (se Notte, 2016; Kofman & Rojansky, 2018), who furthermore interpret Russia as having an interests in preventing a West driven regime change in Syria and an interest of being perceived as an equal to the U.S (Notte, 2016, pp. 65-66; Kofman & Rojansky, 2018, p. 10). It has also been speculated that this interest not only has a direction to outside eyes, but also toward the domestic population (Kofman & Rojansky, 2018, p. 10).

1.3 Previous research

There has been plenty of previous research done on the topic of state (and state interests) relation to the media. According to a 2007 paper, U.S media were shown to “support U.S. policies on foreign affairs and framed foreign countries [sic] images accordingly to government’s interests” (Saleem, 2007, pp. 153-154), and while some media did act as opposition towards the state at times, this was deemed to be “marginal” (Saleem, 2007, p. 154). While this study might show some tendency of the media to frame their reporting in ways which aligns with state interests, it does not touch upon how media aligns themselves with wider state driven narratives, which we aim to do.

A more recent paper, focused on American media’s reporting of the Syrian war in 2013, compared CNN with an alternative news outlet called Antiwar.com, inspecting how the outlets aligned themselves with the states framing of events. The conclusion was that the alternative website in a higher degree took an opposite stance from the state, while CNN more generally adapted the states framing, most notably in the negative depiction of Assad. With this said, CNN’s articles also did contain (what we consider to be more than marginal) counter-framing, for example by criticizing president Obama and highlighting the negative consequences of war (Alitavoli, 2020, pp. 501-502).

This paper does resemble what we are attempting to do since it focuses on the same case while also comparing CNNs framing with the U.S states’, but it also differs in some relevant aspects. One difference is that Alitavoli (2020) only included opinion pieces, while we aim to look at both op-eds as well as “neutral” news reports. A second difference is that Alitavoli (2020) compared specific frames pushed by the state without looking at the wider narratives of which these frames might be a part of. Finally there is a third difference: Alitavoli’s study is focused on state interests, where interests can be understood as ends, while we are interested in strategic narratives, which are better understood as means, something we will explain in more depth in section 2.

2. Theory

In this section we will present some theoretical background and this about strategic narratives in section 2.1, on the relation between media and warfare in section 2.2 and on media's relation to the state in section 2.3.

2.1 Strategic narratives

An approach which is gaining popularity within the field of international relations is the study of *strategic narratives*. The question can be asked what strategic narratives are and how they differ

from other discursive practises, and an answer has recently been given by Coticchia & Catanzaro (2020) who lift two key components which separates strategic narratives from frames, these being *emplotment*, and *intentionality* (Coticchia & Catanzaro, 2020, pp. 9-10). Emplotment is the act of connecting multiple events (frames) in space, time and causality to form one cohesive narrative of events. Strategic narratives therefore consist of “frames”, which can be summarized as being facts looked at, or presented in, a different light, leading to a new interpretation of the information (Coticchia & Catanzaro, 2020, p. 9). What frames themselves lack is the ability to influence, for this to be the case the frames need to be connected with an overarching story (the plot).

Emplotment then, i.e the connecting of frames to construct a narrative, is an action, and when this action is *intended* with a purpose of influencing an audience in order to reach some pre-set goal the narrative becomes strategic (ibid.). A quote shared by Miskimmon & O’Loughlin (2017) captures the essence of strategic narratives in a clear way, describing these as ‘a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors’ (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, & Roselle, as cited in Miskimmon & O’loughlin, 2017, p. 112).

A distinction made in the literature is between narratives of nation (identity), the international system and of policy (Rosselle et al, 2014, p. 76). While this distinction isn’t of direct interest, it shows the wide range of levels that can be subject to topic within a strategic narrative. Regardless of what the narratives are about, it has been argued “that any strategic narrative has the potential to affect not only the conscious appraisal of different arguments, but also the subconscious, longer-term formation of interests” (Szostek, 2017, p. 575).

A concrete example showcasing the influencing potential of strategic narratives is Szostek’s (2018a) study focused on the relationship between media (in this case where people got their information from) and strategic narratives, which concluded that internalisation of (some) Russian strategic narratives were frequent even in Russians who approached the Russian state and state owned media with high levels of scepticism (Szostek, 2018a, p. 80).

2.2 Media and warfare

To better understand the media's relation to (modern) warfare Hoskins & O’Loughlin (2020) have conceptualized three different paradigms in the modern era, of which we currently reside within the third, i.e. the “arrested war” paradigm. Mainstream media in this third paradigm, Hoskins & O’Loughlin (2020, p. 1329) claim, have the job of *verifying* rather than *creating* news content, when comparing it to how media operated in the earlier paradigms, and this because of how easy it has become for civilians to capture and report events themselves using the internet and social media. During the second paradigm this plurality came to be, but it’s not until recently that mainstream media incorporated these third parties as sources within their own reporting, marking the paradigm shift (Hoskins & O’Loughlin, 2020, p. 1322).

A consequence of (atleast western) mainstream media's new role as fact checker is their vulnerability to large scale (dis)information attacks, which Russia has been quick to identify and

adapt to (Hoskins & O'Loughlin, 2020, p. 1329-1334). Since it's harder than ever to prove what information is accurate, a conflict now can be understood through multiple and conflicting interpretations, not at least the conflict in Syria, as we will see when we look closer at U.S and Russian narratives. While Russia has been accused of being aggressors with regards to information warfare, we in this essay won't take any normative stance if this is the case or not in Syria, since this falls outside the scope of our research question.

2.3 Media and state

There have been debates on the direction of influence between state and media, and how this influence works. In his own theory which builds on the school of thought known as "consent manufacturing", Robinson (2001, p 531) argues that the media rarely criticizes the state when there is a consensus among the political elite, and in these cases instead acts the role of so called "consent manufacturers", seeking to gain public support of the states policies. The more critical media instead thrives and appears during "elite dissensus" (ibid.)

While we won't test Robinsons model on our own analysis to see if elite consensus and dissensus affect the media's support in regards to strategic narratives, we do believe that it's of relevance since the relationship between state and media is present in our research question. It is also possible that political elite consensus act as a condition for when states formulate strategic narratives (since this minimizes risk of multiple conflicting narratives stemming from within the same state) but this is not something we will investigate further.

3. Method & material

Our aim will be to try and identify narratives which CNN and RT apply when reporting, using what's known as *narrative analysis* to examine articles by these news outlets. This approach will be explained in more detail in section 3.1. In Section 3.2 we will explain our material, and our reasoning behind the selection process. Lastly we will share some of our methodological reflections concerning our selection of material and method of analysis in section 3.3.

3.1 Narrative analysis

As previously mentioned our approach of analysis will be a narrative analysis, but before we explain this approach, a more clear view of narratives themselves can be given.

Narratives can be understood as consisting of two key elements, a story and a discourse (Robertson, 2018, p. 224). To tie back to our earlier description of narratives, the story can be understood as the different events or frames, which then are tied together and given meaning (as well as the ability to influence behavior) through the discourse.

The story concerns the events, time, place, actors and in general the descriptive answer to a question of “what”, i.e the question *what* actors or *which* events are included and reported on. The discourse on the other hand is normative, and concerns the “how”, i.e *how* the story is told and structured. Since there is no given way to tell a story, looking at how a story is told can give valuable insight on social structures, norms and practises which are manifestations of the narratives discourses (ibid.).

A narrative analysis is a method of analysis which seeks to find and reconstruct narratives in texts, doing this by asking and answering the “what” and “how” questions. In this way of analyzing, different ways of organizing and approaching the material can lead to different questions and answers. In our approach we are going to focus on individual linguistic and stylistic choices regarding the relevant actors and events in the articles, an approach which Robertson (2018, p. 230), calls a “categorical-form” approach (our translation).

To better understand we can for example ask how an actor's actions are being told and if the action was followed with a caveat or explanation. For example, writing that “Assad acted”, and “Assad acted, *as a forced response*” are two ways of depicting an event with very different sentiments, since the caveat can be seen as both an explanation and as a defence of the action, painting this as more defensive reaction.

3.2 Material

Our material, as previously stated, will consist of both news articles and op-eds on the topic of the Syrian war, published by CNN and RT.

The reason for focusing on Syria is twofold since we believe that both Russia and USA have interests there, and that these interests, in our opinion, exist without being too close a proximity for obvious biases to exist, as might be the case if we looked at Russian reporting regarding the annexation of Crimea for example.

We are aware that our choice to only investigate reporting of one conflict limits the generalizability of the paper’s potential findings and that any conclusions regarding CNN and RT more generally must be seen as preliminary. We do not believe that this is detrimental to our stated aim, since we still can say something interesting regarding trends of the reporting on the Syrian war, and since our results can be part of future research that enable broader generalizations.

The choice to use CNN for this study was made for two reasons. The first one being that CNN is one of the largest American media outlets, which we believe make it a relevant object of study. The other reason is derived from the previously mentioned study by Alitavoli, where CNN was chosen since “Amongst the mainstream websites, cnn.com was chosen as it is known as a centrist website in comparison to foxnews.com and msnbc.com” (Alitavoli, 2020, p. 488). We believe that if this assumption of centrism is correct it lessens the risk that we misidentify political partisanship in reporting with the construction of strategic narratives.

RT was chosen because it is the arguably most prolific English-speaking Russian news outlet, which both allows us as English-speakers to comprehend it while its large audience and sheer amount of articles on Syria made it an attractive object of study.

The analysis of RT consisted of 16 articles, 5 which were op-ed and 11 classified as news articles. The articles were collected using Google's search function, typing "site/RT.com" followed by "Syria" and keywords concerning the narratives such as "moderate opposition", "terrorism", "West", "U.S", "Assad" and "Obama". The selection was then done by selecting articles which seemingly related to the Strategic narratives of interest.

The articles used for the analysis of CNN were also gathered by using Google's search function, typing in "Syria" and keywords such as "Assad", "intervention", "rebels", "Arab Spring", etc. The selection of the articles was based on relevance to the strategic narratives we chose to include in our analysis. Relevance in this context means that the topic of the article is connected to the strategic narrative in terms of subject matter, rather than basing the selection on whether or not a particular article reflects any strategic narrative that we are hoping to identify. A material consisting of 7 news articles, referred to as reports, and 4 op-eds were used for the analysis of CNN.

Any articles that were looked at without ending up in this paper have neither been used for the analysis nor the following conclusions of this paper. Our method for selecting the empirical material was therefore essentially a strategic one, and a drawback of choosing a few articles this way out of a much larger pool is that the articles chosen might not be representative of how the two media outlets generally report. This, however, we don't see as a large issue, as the main objective of this paper is not to make an exhaustive analysis of the "method of reporting" of these two outlets, but rather a focused study on their support of the strategic narratives themselves.

Regarding our time-frame, the chosen articles date of publication stretch from around the start of the conflict until recent times, as at least some of the narratives, such as the Russian anti-Western narratives, can be looked at as relevant during the entire period.

3.3 Methodological reflections

A comment can be made about how there is a significant difference between RT and CNN, considering RT is state-owned while CNN isn't. While this is true it's not something we view as problematic since we seek to describe rather than explain or formulate any causal hypothesis regarding the potential findings. We also won't take a normative stance regarding the narratives, since we consider this to be beyond the scope of this paper and not essential to our goal. Doing so would also risk reaffirming our own believed narratives, since researchers and observers, in our view, both construct and supply meaning to the world since meaning doesn't exist "out there" (Robertson, 2018, p. 219).

Something can also be said about the choice to both include news articles and op-eds, as one aims to be objective while the other is argumentative, and therefore meant to be less constricted. The reason for including both is because the reporting of these two outlets consist of

both types of articles, and because we believe that patterns found in one might echo in the other and that the outlet's support of the narratives might transcend these two categories.

Criticism can be lifted regarding how the strategic narratives have been identified by other researchers and not by us, and that we uncritically assume these to be accurate. Our defence of such criticism is that the papers used as reference have been published in credible publications and most of them written by field experts.

Lastly something can be said about the drawbacks of doing an interpretative approach in (social) science. A criteria that some have argued to be the one of, if not the most, important criteria to strive after while doing scientific research is the ability to reproduce a study to reach the same conclusions (for example Boström & Uhrwig, 1999, p. 315). This criteria has been called the criteria of “intersubjectivity” (ibid.). By using an analysis method focused on interpretation this criteria is much harder to reach, since interpretations, at least according to hermeneutic traditions, can be understood as the merging of interpreter and material (Bergström & Boréus, 2018, p. 31-32), meaning we cannot remove ourselves, nor our preconceptions, from the analysis process. What we can do is to try to be as transparent as possible when analysing and interpreting the material, as transparency and being open with our preconceptions lowers the risk of tainting the results without anyone knowing (Robertson, 2018, p. 242).

4. Analysis

In this section we will do our analysis of the material, starting with an analysis of CNN in section 4.1 followed by an analysis of RT in section 4.2.

4.1 CNN

4.1.1 Narrative one: Responsibility to protect (R2P)

Docherty et al (2020) have identified two narratives regarding Syria which were put forward by members of the U.S political elite during the period of March 2011 and December 2013. While the authors don't explicitly state that these narratives were strategic, we will make this assumption. The interpretation is in our opinion not far-fetched, since the narratives in question do benefit U.S interests while also being retold by multiple actors of the US political elite, indicating a congruence¹.

The first of these two narratives was presented in the shape of a norm known as the responsibility to protect, or “R2P”. The main point of R2P is that states have a duty to protect

¹ Docherty et al (2020, p. 258-269) shows that the sentiment of the R2P narrative was being shared by president Obama, vice president Biden, secretary Clinton, and furthermore “repeated by various other administration officials as well as in Congress”.

their citizens from harm, and failing to do this can justify third party intervention. By using R2P as a backdrop, criticism of Assad as failing to live up to R2P was raised, which led to the further framing of him as a tyrant dictator. The remedy proposed within this narrative was the necessity of the Assad regime's departure (Docherty et al, 2020, p. 257).

A 2012 report writes:

“while there have been some changes during his rule, many say al-Assad's promises have largely not been delivered” (Wilkinson, 2012).

While the inclusion of the caveat “many say” would suggest a neutral stance, our conclusion is that the title of the article itself, “Bashar al-Assad: President defined by violence”, suggests an implicit support of the R2P narrative. Furthermore, the authors write that:

“shortly after the Arab Spring started in early 2011, al-Assad made apparent moves toward change in Syria (...) but they were far too little and, by the time they came about, too late” (ibid).

The fact that this is a normative statement, enforced by the word “far”, strengthens our conclusion that this article supports the narrative that Assad has failed in the responsibilities he has toward his population, and therefore reflects the R2P strategic narrative. Similar descriptions can be seen in more recent reports, like in this one from 2020:

“Fear of Syrian regime abounds (...) the nightmare scenario is for the Syrian government to take back control and reimpose its brutal regime of massacres and mass detentions” (Tuysuz, 2020).

This statement is more overtly critical of Assad, and further strengthens the argument that CNN generally portrays Assad as someone who is not protecting his population, even in “neutral” reporting, made apparent by the term “nightmare scenario”. The report does not explicitly call for third-party intervention, but the following line could perhaps be understood as implicit support:

“There is plenty of international condemnation, but little action to relieve the situation in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib and the surrounding areas” (ibid).

The implication here being that the amount of international condemnation should warrant some intervention. This interpretation however is not entirely apparent.

Another report attempts to answer the question of why the world isn't intervening in

Syria, and in the article's formulations an implicit support for the R2P strategic narrative can also be seen. The author writes:

“As the death toll grows in Syria, so do the desperate pleas for help. ‘What is the world waiting for?’ asked one Syrian woman this week (...) ‘For us to die of hunger and fear?’” (Almond, 2012).

The choice to include this quote signals two points to the reader: The Syrian population is suffering, and is waiting for the world to intervene. This framing is in our view clearly in line with the R2P strategic narrative.

Later the author writes:

“ (...) the council is not unified on Syria. China and Russia, two Syrian allies, vetoed a resolution that would have condemned the Syrian regime and provided legitimacy for a Libya-like intervention” (ibid).

This could be seen as a counter-argument to the R2P narrative, which would be that any intervention that lacked the support of the (UN security) council would be illegitimate. However, we believe that because the author made the choice to specify that China and Russia are Syrian allies, another interpretation can be made where the only reason the vote did not pass was because Assad's allies are providing him with an undeserved cover of legitimacy.

One op-ed discusses R2P explicitly. The article begins with a quote from the UN regarding R2P:

“The duty to prevent and halt genocide and mass atrocities lies first and foremost with the State, but the international community has a role that cannot be blocked by the invocation of the sovereignty” (Tzemach, 2016).

Tzemach continues:

“Sustained months of Russian air strikes and Syrian regime barrel bombs appear to have done their work (...) left moms and dads and children seeking shelter and safety that still has not yet showed up (...) And how has the international community responded? They have talked, spread blame and talked some more (...) That ‘responsibility to protect’ has been shown to be three words that mean precious little.” (ibid).

Our interpretation is that the author is here making an argument that the conditions for third-party intervention under the R2P-framework were present in the case of Syria. The author never explicitly states that an intervention should have taken place, but we believe that the way

the situation in Syria is framed in this article, presented together with the quote from the UN, is inviting the reader to draw that conclusion.

4.1.2 Narrative two: The Arab Spring narrative

The second narrative presented by Docherty et al (2020, p. 262) is called “the Arab spring narrative”. This narrative tells the story of inevitable democratization, which seemingly had been the case in the middle east during the Arab spring. The narrative depicted Assad’s regime as a dying one, bound to get overthrown in democratic revolution, and furthermore that (sustainable) democratic change had to be implemented endogenously.

A 2012 report describes the beginning process and origins of the Arab Spring protests in Syria. This article does not overtly refer to the protests as democratic, but we believe that they are implicitly framed as such. Democratic is understood in the context of this analysis as the end-goal of the protests, rather than a description of the protesting itself. The article begins with the text:

“Syria is burning (...) a merciless security crackdown and cries for democracy”
(Sterling, 2012).

Immediately the protesters are framed as having democracy as their goal. Furthermore, the protestors are framed as unified in this article, which in our view supports the narrative of inevitable regime change:

“Mass arrests unfolded and tales of torture spread across the country. The protest movement grew and solidified into an opposition” (ibid).

These last two quotes together frame a narrative that is in line with the Arab Spring narrative, in terms of framing the protestors as unified and having democracy as their goal. The point of unity among the protestors is further strengthened by the article’s description of Assad’s supporters. The quote in the following section is from Peter Harling from the International Crisis Group:

“Al-Assad addressed the Daraa unrest (...) ‘That speech had a catastrophic impact (...) People who wanted to support the regime at the time were shocked by the speech.’ The dismissiveness of Al-assad (...) awakened many Syrian people”
(ibid).

Using the term ‘awakened’, and framing Assad’s supporters as a uniform group that is becoming more discontent with Assad, further adds to the themes of unity among the protestors. The term ‘awakened’ can be seen as indicating a previously unknown reality, which the Syrian population

now share together, furthering the narrative of unity (ibid).

The quote in the following section is from Paul Salem, director of the Carnegie Middle East Center:

“But the deep-seated political and economic reasons underlying Syrian discontent was an omen. Protest in Syria ‘was going to happen’ at some point. So, out of Daraa, a spark. And a year later, the uprisings blaze on” (ibid).

Although the inevitability of protests in Syria is presented through the words of Paul Salem, who is unaffiliated with CNN, the fact that the report presents that quote uncritically, and how clearly it connects to the previous points made in the article, leads us to the conclusion that this report is framing the protests in Syria as inevitable. This could be seen as in line with the component of the Arab Spring strategic narrative which argues that Assad’s regime was bound to be overthrown, although the article does not explicitly state that the protests would be successful, or that they would result in democracy.

An op-ed from 2012 shares the view of the previous report that the Assad regime is a dying one:

“The government’s violence against peaceful protestors and innocent civilians has been manifestly self-defeating. Al-Assad has failed to kill his way to victory. Day by day (...) the regime is losing legitimacy and control of Syria and its people” (Lynch, 2012).

However, the argument of the necessity of strictly endogenous democratization is countered in this article. The author writes:

“When al-Assad falls, the Syrian opposition will urgently need to unite Syria (...) The U.S. should help prepare the Syrian opposition (...) The hopes of a soft landing in Syria have been destroyed by the regime’s violence” (ibid).

The point that any hope of a soft landing has been destroyed can also be understood as a counter-narrative to the narrative of inevitable democratization in Syria. This statement argues that in order to resolve the Syrian crisis the U.S has to intervene in Syria. The form of intervention argued for in this article is however of a very light variant:

“What the U.S. should do is focus on its efforts on maintaining international pressure and sanctions on al-Assad while preparing for a transition (...) It could send a small U.N. stabilization force to Syria to [act] as a monitor” (ibid).

Whether or not this is aligned with the Arab Spring narrative as described by Docherty is not entirely clear. While the author does not believe that Syria could effectively transition its political system without assistance from the U.S., the form of intervention argued for is not one of “boots on the ground”. This op-ed constructs a partial counter-argument to the narrative of inevitable and endogenous democratization, while still framing the Assad regime as one that will eventually fall. The article can therefore not be said to be strictly in line with, or run counter to, the Arab Spring narrative.

4.1.3 Narrative three: Surrogate warfare

Thomas Waldman argues that the case of the U.S. trying to mobilise and arm anti-Assad rebels in the Syrian civil war can be understood as a case of surrogate warfare (Waldman, 2019 p. 161). Waldman defines surrogate warfare as something that “encompasses the delegation of core aspects of war-related activities to external state and nonstate actors in order to actively influence the course of an ongoing conflict” (Waldman, 2019, p. 162). In regards to strategic narratives in support of surrogate warfare, we found that three of the core elements identified by Waldman are relevant to our analysis:

1: Interest alignment, control and loyalty (Waldman, 2019 p. 168). This narrative assumes a convergence of interests between the proxies and the US, as well as loyalty on the part of the proxy toward the US. Additionally the narrative claims that the US is able to efficiently control these proxies (ibid). According to Waldman, this narrative “theoretically justifies delegation of war-making authority and action to such groups” (ibid).

2: Effectiveness. Surrogate groups can provide valuable local knowledge, force density and may constitute a symbol of legitimacy (Waldman, 2019 p. 170). The effectiveness narrative is according to Waldman based on these factors, and claims that the proxy will “significantly enhance progress toward attainment of strategic or operational objectives” (ibid).

3: Cost saving and risk mitigation. Waldman writes that “prevailing US delegation narratives suggest that employing proxies allows objectives to be achieved efficiently and at little cost” (Waldman, 2019 p. 172). This is connected according to Waldman to the war fatigue and the casualty aversion that has risen in the US following the costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (ibid).

One report from 2012 discusses the Syrian rebels:

“For months, rebels fighting the Syrian regime haven’t been able to come up with a cogent, comprehensive plan to oust President Bashar al-Assad, nor have they decided how Syria would be ruled if and when he goes. Now there are signs that might be changing. Some of those rebels (...) say they are making a concerted effort to unify, according to insiders who have spoken with CNN” (Fantz, 2012).

Although the author does not explicitly support or somehow attempt to verify this claim, it is not challenged in the article. Describing the opposition as unified could strengthen any argument relating to the legitimacy these groups could provide, and how efficiently they could be controlled.

Another 2015 report discusses the U.S. training of Syrian rebels:

“The plan is for them to return to their towns and (...) defend them against ISIS. However, U.S. officials are aware (...) of the risk that some of the trained fighters could decide to take their weapons and fight the Assad regime, which is not the goal of the training ” (Sciutto, 2015).

Whether or not the rebels would follow their directive of defending their towns against ISIS or not relates to the narrative of interest alignment and control. However, the article cannot be said to support or be counter to the narrative, as it does not take a clear stance on whether or not that risk is substantial.

A report from 2016 presents differing views of the rebels held by U.S. politicians:

“President-elect Donald Trump will be less inclined to support moderate rebel groups (...) Of moderate rebels, he has said: ‘We have no idea who these people are’ (...) US. Rep. Adam Schiff (...) told the Washington Post: ‘There will be significant reputational costs with our allies in the region if we abandon support of the moderate opposition’ ” (Lister, 2016).

The article does not give any clear support for either of these framings of the Syrian rebels. This, together with the fact that these differing views were presented, means that this report overall does not support or go against any of the identified strategic narratives. A slight support for the strategic narrative in terms of interest alignment can perhaps be seen though, as the article itself refers to the groups as moderate.

The reports we found that related to the narrative did not frame the Syrian rebels in such a way that the articles were clearly in line with, or against, the surrogate narrative. Regarding the op-eds that related to the narrative however, a clearer connection could be observed. The first of the op-eds analyzed in this section is arguing for why the U.S. must intervene in Syria, and while doing so is quite clearly in line with the surrogate warfare strategic narrative, as defined by Waldman. The author writes:

“Americans have no appetite for another military campaign in a foreign land (...) Inaction is more dangerous (...) than smart limited intervention” (Ghitis, 2013).

The acknowledgment that Americans have no appetite for another military campaign is in line with the war fatigue narrative. The proposed solution for how to deal with military conflicts, while experiencing war fatigue, in the surrogate warfare strategic narrative is the same as the one that the author suggests, intervention through proxies:

“Without sending any U.S. troops into Syria, the United States and its allies should find and strengthen the more moderate members of the opposition so they will gain the upper hand against extremists within opposition ranks. Then they can remove al-Assad from power by winning what is, most assuredly, their war, the Syrians’ war, but one that is of great consequence to America and the rest of the world” (ibid).

Observing these two statements by the author, this article can be said to be quite clearly in line with all the elements of the surrogate warfare strategic narrative identified earlier. Stating that the fight against Assad is primarily the Syrian’s war, but also of great consequence to America and the rest of the world, assumes interest alignment between the rebels and the U.S. While the author is not stating explicitly that the U.S. can efficiently control these groups, the article does not discuss the previously mentioned risk of U.S. support in the form of weapons falling into the hands of more extreme groups. This can be understood as implicit support of the narrative that these groups can be controlled. The effectiveness narrative is also clearly present, as the author is arguing that by providing support to the rebel groups they will be able to remove Assad from power.

While this op-ed is quite clearly in line with the surrogate warfare narrative, another op-ed published around the same time frames the Syrian rebels and potential U.S. intervention in Syria markedly differently, and argues against U.S. intervention:

“Syria’s civil war is not America’s problem (...) Make no mistake about it: al Assad is a war criminal, having had his own civilians and soldiers slaughtered in a war to keep his family in power. The sectarian, ethnic, and religious dimensions of the war have kept the Obama administration (rightly in my view) away from direct military involvement in the conflict” (Husain, 2013).

Stating that Syria’s civil war isn’t America’s problem clearly runs counter to the narrative of interest alignment. Although this article does not discuss the pros and cons of supporting the Syrian rebels, discussing intervention only in the form of direct military engagement, the author frames the rebels differently from the other op-ed:

“The Syrian opposition is not a government in waiting. It is too fragmented ideologically, overwrought by al Qaeda affiliates (...) deeply anti-American” (ibid).

Framing the Syrian opposition in this way would make it hard to argue for the strategic narratives of interest alignment, and would make arguing in favor of any of the narratives surrounding the use of proxies essentially impossible. Based on these two op-eds, we can see that while CNN features op-ed's that reflect the surrogate warfare strategic narrative quite clearly, at least one op-ed that presents countering views has also been featured.

4.2 RT

4.2.1 Narrative one: The counter-terrorist narrative

The first narrative is what we will refer to as “the counter-terrorist narrative”. According to this narrative, Russia's primary interest in Syria is to fight a war on terror, a strategic narrative that mainly serves Russia in terms of good PR. This is the case since certain types of narratives use discourses that reduce complicated events down to binary relations of “good” and “evil”, an example being narratives about genocide (Douglas Irvin-Erickson, 2017). The same is the case with terrorism. By setting out to defeat the so-called evil, Russia frames themselves as the good guys, in a “holy fight” (Notte, 2017, p. 62).

When analysing the articles explicit support for the counter-terrorist narrative were discovered, both within the op-eds and the “neutral” news reports. In one of these news articles the author included their own opinion while reporting on statements made by then U.S president Obama, in doing so explicitly supported the strategic narrative of counter-terrorism, speaking of Russias anti-terrorist ambition in Syria as a given truth:

”Obama reiterated, refusing to recognize the anti-terrorist nature of Russian military operation in Syria.” (“Obama in wonderland?”, 2016)

Explicit support for the narrative was also found in in a second news article, where the author framed Russia as peace-striving and on a mission of battling terror, simultaneously framing the West as having different priorities, implying that they aren't striving for these things, at least not to the same degree:

“While Russia is focused on defeating IS and paving the way for a peaceful solution to the conflict, Washington and its Western allies accuse Moscow of targeting “moderate” opposition who are fighting the embattled government of Syrian President Bashar Assad.” (“Pentagon discreetly”, 2016)

In a more implicit way RT can be interpreted as supporting the narrative, this in the shape of nonexistent opposition, since no RT writers challenged it and since no “anti-narrative” voices were raised without facing critique.

The same can not be said when looking at the” pro-narrative” side. Statements that align with the narrative are printed with no accompanying comments by the reporters. A case of this is in one of the news articles that report on Assad. In this, Assad criticises the West's anti-terror intentions, while framing Russia as ‘defending Europe directly’ (“Assad: Syria”, 2015). This is not the case with Obama, which in another article gets questioned by the RT authors commenting and critiquing Obama with phrases such as “He also failed to acknowledge that”, “He only mentioned”, “That, too, went unacknowledged” (“Ceasefire”, 2016).

Clark (2016), one of the op-ed authors, regarded the narrative that Russia is acting out of self interests as one of many “Western lies”. And while this can be interpreted as implicit support of the narrative, since the stated reason for Russia being in Syria is in the shape of counter-terrorism, it’s very weak at best.

The analysis therefore found prevalent support of the counter-terrorist narrative within the “neutral” news articles, both explicitly by RT’s writers and implicitly following the lack of counter-narratives. While the narrative remained unmentioned by the analyzed op-eds .

4.2.2 Narrative two: The denial of “moderate” opposition narrative

The second narrative is the denial of “moderate” opposition narrative (Notte, 2017). This narrative denies the distinction between “hardline” and “moderate” rebels, and in doing so frames the Syrian, Western backed dissidents, as extremists and terrorists. The narrative serves to paint both the opposition, and in extension the West, in a negative light. The former since terrorism has negative connotations attached to it, and the latter since this means that the West and the U.S are guilty of supporting terrorism. The narrative also narrows down the conflict to “Assad vs. IS” (Notte, 2017, p. 66) which legitimizes the regime, making Assad easier to support, benefitting Russia's interest in hindering a U.S led regime change (ibid.).

Support of the narrative was found most prevalent within the analyzed op-eds, but not exclusively. In similar fashion to our reasoning of implicit support in 4.2.1, we argue that lending a platform to one side of an argument while neglecting the other can be understood as implicitly supporting the opinions of the former (even when these are in the form of op-eds).

Niel Clark (op-ed) accuses the Western supported “moderate rebels” of committing acts of terror, implying a derivation that we therefore should regard them as terrorists:

“By any objective standard, ‘ moderate rebels’ supported by the US, the UK and their allies, have been guilty of appalling crimes which would definitely be classed as ‘terrorism’ if they were committed in a western country or in a country which was an ally of the West.” (Clark, 2016)

Clark furthermore reduces the conflict to “Assad vs ISIS” (in this case Assad vs jihadists), defending Assad as the better of the two:

“Should we really be surprised that millions of Syrians prefer his secular rule – in which the rights of women and all religious minorities are respected – to that of the medieval head-choppers of ISIS and fanatical jihadists?” (Clark, 2016)

By framing the choice as a dichotomy between Assad and jihadist fanatics, Clark implicitly eliminates the third option of “moderate” opposition, thereby benefiting Russia in regards of supporting the then sole legitimate actor, namely Assad.

A second op-ed writer claimed that the opposition in reality are Western-veiled terrorists:

“a mendacious campaign in the West to paint said forces of hell – murderous extremist groups whose brutality has been of medieval stripe – in the romantic colors of resistance and rebellion” (Wight, 2018)

A statement which, true or false, denies the “moderate” opposition while also framing the West as terrorist supportive liars.

According to a third op-ed reporter, speaking of “moderates” is “misleading” since:

“There is also enough evidence to show that the Free Syrian Army, Al-Nusra, the ISIL, and the other insurgent forces are also collaborating and trading fighters” (Nazemroaya, 2014).

This account supports the Russian narrative, not by classifying the “moderates” as terrorists per se, but by maintaining that they instead sustain a cooperative relationship with these, which hardly can be perceived as “moderate” conduct.

Two other op-ed authors used expressive language when referring to military groups which they claim were supported by the West, one in referring them as “armed gangs”, speaking of a “Western-orchestrated wave of terrorism” (Beeley, 2019). And another who used the phrase “Western-supported death squads” (Barlett, 2016). While neither Beesley nor Bartett explicitly refer to the “moderate” opposition with these derogatory descriptions, it can be interpreted as such. Either way it does support the frame of the narrative that the West indeed are promoting terrorism.

Turning our eyes away from the op-eds, pro-narrative voices were also raised within the news reports, facing zero push back from RT’s writers. For example were an interview with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov titled “West starting to realize they are aiding terrorists in Syria - Lavrov to RT” (2013) which frames the West as terrorist supporting. Another pro-voice was president Assad, whose been given a lot of space to express his believes that ‘the US, the UK and France have supported terrorists in Syria and are responsible for the bloodshed in the country’

(“West supported terrorists”, 2018) in one article, and attributed with having said that “the West tries to present armed gangs as grassroots political opposition” (“Syria”, 2015) in another, statements that frame the West as terrorist supporters and the Syrian opposition as a Western construct.

A third pro voice lifted in the news articles came from a political editor who argues that the West can’t be sure on what ideologies the groups they support have, stating that: “You support people who, perhaps, are not the greatest defenders or advocates of human rights themselves” (“Who is”, 2012), and while this isn’t the same as stating that “moderates” *are* terrorists, he does imply that they might be.

While these voices aren’t RT’s own, the sentiment they share is overwhelmingly present. When looking at how RT writers themselves wrote about the “moderate” opposition, the majority simply referred to the “moderates” as such, using quotation marks, aiming to stay objective (for example in “British special forces”, 2016; “UK military”, 2015), but not all of the writers took this path. One wrote that:

“the West backed the so-called “moderate opposition” units in Syria, that, on many occasions, were almost impossible to distinguish from the jihadist groups” (“West supported terrorists”, 2018).

By claiming a difficulty in separating “moderates” from jihadist groups the author implies that there is but a little difference (if any at all) between the two, further implying that the “moderates” themselves might be jihadists, implicitly reaffirming the strategic narrative.

On the other side of the spectrum one RT writer did use the distinction between moderates and hardline rebels while describing events in Syria, writing that

“The first batch of trained “*moderates*” was promptly attacked by hardline rebels upon crossing the border” (“British special forces”, 2016).

By uncritically affirming the existence of the theoretical group “hardline rebels”, the author in a way implies the existence of the group “moderates”, since these groups are opposites, meaning that speaking of one while not acknowledging the other makes little sense. Other than this one example no further counter-narratives made themselves present in the material.

The analysis therefore shows that there was prevalent and explicit support of the no “moderates” narrative in the op-eds, and while many narrative-supporters voices were raised in the news articles, these almost exclusively were voices of interviewees and third parties. Only in one instance did we identify support for the narrative given explicitly by one of the RT writers, and only one instance of implicit counter-narrative support.

4.2.3 Narrative three: The anti-west (anti-U.S) narrative(s)

A more general strategic narrative told by Russia is an “anti-West narrative”, a narrative that can be looked at as the collection of multiple smaller narratives, or “plotlines” as Szostek (2017) refers to them. The narrative(s) seeks to paint the West (mainly the US) in a negative light, while raising a better image of Russia. These “plotlines” are: 1.) that the West are striving after global dominance (Szostek, 2017, p. 582), 2.) that the U.S are immoral and hypocritical (Szostek, 2017 p. 578-582) and 3.) that the West are mistreating and excluding Russia, while Russia seek to cooperate (Miskimmon & O’Loughlin, 2017, p. 117).

The plotline of the West as striving for global dominance had minimal explicit support in the analyzed articles, with one single case found, and this in one of the op-eds. In this article Wight (2018) claims that the West has an “appetite for domination” which is “unsatiated”, and argues that the West are seeking to “destroy” that which it is “unable to control by other means” (ibid.). A formulation of the West that explicitly retells the first plotline of the strategic narrative. The depiction of the West furthermore supports the second plotline of immorality, since Wight seems to be implying that the turbulent events in Syria can be understood as Western-instigated, stemming from the West’s inability “to control” Syria.

Further support for the plotline is given by Assad, who in an interview claims that the U.S main reason for intervening is to remove him from power to then implement a ‘puppet’ regime, and in doing so would increase their own power:

‘Their aim is to change the government, to topple the government, and to bring their puppets instead, so they will do everything, for them the end justifies the means, no values, no morals at all, anything could happen’ (“Western media”, 2017)

This statement can also be seen as supportive of the second plotline, since it frames the U.S as explicitly having ‘no morals’.

Another frame that is told multiple times is how the U.S are acting illegally when interfering in Syria, and this frame can also be understood as both part of the first and second plotline. The first since the disregarding of international law can be attributed to a supposed “American exceptionalism” which Szostek (2018a, p. 75) describes as being a backdrop of the first plotline regarding global dominance. The frame can also be seen as part of the second plotline, since having an exceptionalist attitude could be considered hypocritical behavior (Szostek, 2018a, p. 75-76) implying a “rules for me and not for thee” attitude and because breaking of international law itself can be viewed as immoral.

One example of the frame is put forward by op-ed author Nazemroaya:

“The US also disregarded the border and international law when it began to illegally bomb Syria” (Nazemroaya, 2014)

This way of describing the U.S paints them as an actor that stands above the law of others which implies the idea of American exceptionalism.

One of RT’s writers also put this forward while reporting, writing that:

“Russia continues fighting IS near Aleppo on its own. Fighting along pro-government forces at Assad’s invitation, Russia has been repeatedly accused of hitting rebels by the US and its coalition members, none of which have received an official request to engage.” (“Obama orders”, 2016)

While it may be true that the U.S haven’t received “an official request”, the question can be asked why the author in this statement chose to include this information, and why this was presented right after the accusations of Russian military action. One interpretation is that the second statement can be understood as a defence of the previous stated accusations, implying that the forces who were allegedly hit are at least somewhat at fault since they shouldn’t have been there in the first place. Even if this isn’t done intentionally, bringing it up serves a purpose of delegitimizing the U.S’s presence in Syria.

Another voice lifting the same sentiment was Assad, who referred to the U.S involvement as an ‘invasion’ which “violate Syrian sovereignty” (“Western media” 2017)

By including the moral aspect of the allegations that the West are “supporting terrorism” from section 4.2.2, the plotline gains further support, For example did one op-ed writer claim that the West “Care more about terror on western soil than in Syria” (Bartlett, 2016) pointing to “Western hypocrisy”.

The analysis did not find any relevant material regarding the third plotline.

5. Conclusions

Referring back to our research question - *To what extent does CNN and RT support strategic narratives formulated by the U.S. and Russian states respectively when reporting on the Syrian conflict* - we found that RT showed considerable support for the Russian strategic narratives, with a few examples of striking explicitness of RTs own staff and a clear lack of opposition overall, while the writing of CNN showed more of an implicit support of the strategic narratives in their reporting. This implicit support was found most strongly in relation to the R2P and Arab Spring narratives, in both the op-ed’s and the reports, although the Arab Spring narrative faced moderate opposition in an op-ed. The reports connected to the surrogate warfare narrative deviated from the other two, and featured both implicit support and significant opposition. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Matrix of strategic narrative support shown in CNN and RT, divided by genre

	CNN	RT
News / Reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevalent implicit support for the R2P narrative (facing no opposition) • General implicit support for parts of the Arab Spring narrative, protests framed as democratic and inevitable (facing no opposition) • Some indirect support for the surrogate warfare narrative (facing moderate opposition) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevalent explicit support for the anti-terrorist narrative (facing no opposition) • Some implicit support for the no moderates narrative (facing scarce opposition) • Some implicit support for the anti-West narratives first and second plotline (facing no opposition)
Op-ed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong implicit support for the R2P narrative (facing no opposition) • Partial support for the Arab Spring narrative (facing moderate opposition) • Mixed result for the surrogate warfare narrative, one finding of strong explicit support, and one finding of significant implicit opposition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The anti-terrorist narrative was hardly mentioned, with one case of weak implicit support (facing no opposition) • Prevalent explicit support for the “no moderates” narrative (facing no opposition) • Some explicit support for the anti-West narratives first and second plotline (facing no opposition)

As the figure shows, our analysis revealed a trend in RT of excluding voices who criticise or contradict the narrative told by the Russian state, most prevalent in the lack of opposing op-eds. Referring back to 4.1, we could also see that anti-narrative voices, when reported on, were treated differently compared to those affirming the strategic narratives. While we expected the “neutral” news to be implicit in the potential support shown to the strategic narratives the analysis found that explicit support occurred even in these, showing itself in the “neutral” news reporting most blatantly in regards to the anti-terrorist narrative.

One theme of the CNN reporting, that transcended the genres of articles and the division of narratives, was the framing of Assad as a brutal dictator that had to be deposed. As this can be considered a main component of the R2P strategic narrative, we can conclude that at least one aspect of a strategic narrative had ubiquitous support in the CNN reporting.

We believe that further research can be done to better explain the findings, and one way to go about this could be to apply Robinson’s (2001) theory (section 2.3), to see if elite consensus is playing a part in when a strategic narrative finds support, and when it gets opposed, in media reporting. One first indication of this made itself known in the analysis, since the U.S. narrative that faced the greatest opposition, the surrogate warfare narrative, was the only

narrative that we could connect to an elite dissensus, as Donald Trump and Adam Schiff framed the moderate rebels significantly differently.

Another explanation, not for the shown support itself, but for the lack of opposition found in RT when comparing with CNN, could lie in the difference of autonomy from their respective states, considering RT is state-controlled while CNN is not, and further research on this difference could potentially prove fruitful.

Our expectation when beginning our research was that we might identify drastic differences in the reporting of CNN and RT in terms of to what extent they reflected strategic narratives, and that RT would be the one doing this to a greater extent. While it is our conclusion that strategic narratives do feature more apparently and uncritically in the reporting of RT, we have found that CNN has a tendency to support, rather than criticize, U.S. strategic narratives. While this is perhaps to be expected, it does contrast with the view of modern media as fact checkers presented in section 2.2. We are not making any claim of unfactual reporting on the part of CNN, but rather highlighting the fact that their “neutral” reporting features normative statements that, more often than not, align with U.S. strategic narratives.

The findings of this paper are not sufficient to state whether or not our conclusions hold true for the reporting of CNN and RT in general. To develop and further test our findings, more research on the topic would be beneficial.

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