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News and Syria: Creating key media moments in the conflict

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Abstract: Mass media play a critical role through the production of news in influencing how citizens have their perceptions and opinions shaped. This article intends to delve into the role of news production in creating knowledge and shaping public perception and opinion within the Syrian case and demonstrates that news is not an accidental occurrence, neither in terms of subject or timing. Articles on specific issues, such as the reaction to the chemical weapons attack of August 2013 and the allegations of "industrial killings" by the Syrian government, appearing in the mass media, are subjected to analysis based on the theoretical notions outlined in the paper. These two cases hint that the timing and nature of these specific news events are not as "random" and coincidental as would seem at first glance.

1. Introduction

Prior to the approximation of armed conflict, there is often a flurry of informational activity that tries to establish the storyline of the event. A good example of this was the establishment of the Committee of Public Information in the United States prior to entry in the First World War. A dominant storyline is established and contrary information is often scarce. There is a need to take a critical stance towards information and "evidence" that creates the emotional context for war. This does not necessarily mean rejecting the information, but rather the need to probe more deeply into possible underlying motives and interests in the nature and timing of the content, therefore corresponding to an attempt to minimise the chances of repeating past failures (such as using weapons of mass destruction and links to terrorism as a pretext for war, similarly to what happened in Iraq in 2003). The current Syrian conflict has been referred to as a proxy war, with the United States and its allies

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper is intended to explore the different ways and means through which mass media coverage, via news, can manipulate public perception and, therefore, opinion of an event. An underlying reason for this manipulation is to engineer public consent for a certain line of policy that would be potentially unpopular and hence encounter resistance. In the framework of this paper, two key moments in the Syrian conflict are chosen so as to test this concept of engineering consent.

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seeking to topple the regime of Bashar Assad (Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA), 2012). The political leadership of the United States and the United Kingdom has been a very vocal proponent of regime change in Syria and has engaged in covert military action and support to realise this goal (supplying weapons, intelligence, finance, training and so forth).

The pursuit of peace by some countries, within the context of their foreign policy toolkits, has in fact proved to be a thinly disguised effort to promote certain national foreign policy interests (Eriksson & Kostic, 2013; Holland & Aaronson, 2014). The recent case of Libya, where Gaddafi was overthrown under the given pretext of protecting civilians from warring sides, illustrates this approach. An open war between the United States-led allies and the Syrian government of al Assad seemed almost inevitable when the "red line" on the use of chemical weapons in the Syrian war imposed by Obama was conveniently broken. This was used as a cue to put the use of military means on the table again. Naturally, these actions were quickly blamed on Assad as "irrefutable" and "undeniable" by those same countries that had been consistently advocating a military "solution" to end the conflict. However, a combination of a deep-rooted public aversion to another war and the Russian proposal on securing the chemical weapons and avoiding a military conflict, for now, ultimately prevailed. This does not change the ultimate goal of the US-led allies (UK, France, Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, for example), although it does momentarily close one window on how to achieve regime change (Dreyfuss, 2012).

Various media (TV, radio and Internet), either deliberately [as in Rupert Murdoch's admission that he used his media assets to gain public support for Iraq (Greenslade, 2003)] or inadvertently (through the acceptance without question or double checking of information or statements given by parties with vested interests), have been at the forefront of masking national interests of the US-led coalition in regime change from global audiences. The make-up and content of news are crucial for a political elite's ability to pursue potentially unpopular policy, such as foreign military intervention. There is a lot of literature on the issue of the media being used to manipulate public opinion within the context of armed conflict (Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006; Snow, 2003; Willcox, 2005; Zelizer & Allan, 2002). Many discuss the use of media frames and narratives in guiding the nature of the debate (DiMaggio, 2009; Nacos, 2007; Tuman, 2010). A number of academic articles on the Arab Spring, including those that take a less than positive appraisal of the situation, emphasise the negative nature of the outcome or uncover foreign power involvement. These often adopt the point of view of ethics, law or political science (Friedman, 2011; Siebens & Case, 2012; Springborg, 2011). Increasingly more articles are appearing from a communication perspective on the issue of the Arab Spring, focusing on how information is managed (Campbell & Hawk, 2012; Comunello & Anzera, 2012; Karagiannopoulos, 2012; Khondker, 2011; Simons, 2012, 2013; Stepanova, 2011; Wollenberg & Pack, 2013). The present article shall tackle the subject of understanding what happens when the goal of regime change stays the same, but the means of achieving this change have altered owing to events and public opinion in Syria post-August 2013. Both of the media events covered demonstrate the use of atrocity stories to serve either as a primer for public opinion to support military operations against Syria or as a means of detracting support and perceived legitimacy from the Syrian government on the eve of crucial peace talks.

The task of this paper is to explore some of the possible means and mechanisms to engineer public consent for a distinct (and probably unpopular) line of foreign policy via news content in the mass media. An idealised role of news is the first subject to be analysed: news should serve as an objective means of enlightening the public so as to facilitate the making of informed decisions. This is tempered by the manipulation of news, such as explained by Bernays and Lippmann, which provides subjective information on the basis of which the public reaches a certain pre-determined conclusion, such as support for military intervention. There is a need to take a look at the role of motivation (priming an audience) and propaganda in the news. In order to explore how these two particular aspects are managed for the originator of the manipulated message to realise specific goals and objectives, this article will focus on two media events, namely the chemical weapons attack, which

was coordinated by Turkey and the United States, and the "industrial killing" story that was supported by Qatar.

2. Theoretical role of news

News is something that saturates the information environment and can come in many different shapes and forms from many different kinds of media. So what is news exactly? Denis McQuail provides a concise definition:

> The main form in which current information about public events is carried by media of all kinds. There is a great diversity of types and formats as well as cross-cultural differences, but defining characteristics are generally held to be timeliness, relevance and reliability (truth value) (McQuail, 2010, p. 564).

Despite the fact that news can be found in many different shapes and forms, there are a number of common underlying conceptual commonalities.

One of the basic underlying assumptions and duties of journalism is to separate "facts" from "values", a separation that inheres in the objectivity of reporting, for example. Having said this, rather than being found in absolute terms, objectivity and subjectivity should be viewed as essentially relativistic. News has traditionally been seen as needing to be factual and non-partisan (Allan, 1999, p. 18). Therefore, there is an inherent commitment to the truth in news reporting. "The news frame's tacit claim to comprehensiveness dictates that it must be seen as 'balanced' and 'fair' in its treatment of counter-positions" (Ibid., p. 64). There are thus many different automatic assumptions and claims when the word news is evoked.

However, the format in which the news is told has been changing. In response to changes in the information environment, news is being presented in a more simplified, trivial and entertaining manner. Infotainment, the name given to this process, creates a much more descriptive rather than analytical approach to news reporting (Thussu, 2009). Armed conflict is one of those subjects in particular, which can be subjected to the infotainment format. "Covering wars is inevitably a difficult journalistic endeavour but the demand for live 24/7 news, as well as competition among news providers, can lead to the sensationalisation and trivialisation of often complex situations and a temptation to highlight the entertainment value of news" (Ibid., p. 113). Little is done by mass media in trying to adequately explain actual or proposed foreign policy, especially when the element of military conflict is present; instead there is a tendency to entertain or promote a certain policy path (Andersen, 2006, p. 82). This manifests as a propensity to make news a marketable product (to attract customers and revenue), rather than something that informs and enlightens an audience.

The infotainment format of news lends itself well to support a policy position in an armed conflict. On the superficial level, news implies being objective and telling the truth, which can legitimise journalism as an informative and enlightening activity. On the applied level, infotainment brings a level of shallowness to the news due to its very descriptive (and therefore insufficiently analytic) character, which has the tendency to leave the event out of context. Under these circumstances, it is known that a war is in fact about to start or has already started. However, the underlying reasons for the conflict are not revealed as the coverage is superficial and/or incomplete. Infotainment also has a tendency to assign values to the different parties of a story, which includes identifying the "good" and "bad" sides of a conflict.

Related to the issue of infotainment, although not coincidental, is the problem of spin entering the news sphere. Spin is a means and form of rhetorical-based deception:

> Spinners mislead by means that range from subtle omissions to outright lies. Spin paints a false picture of reality by bending facts, mischaracterising the words of others, ignoring or denying crucial evidence, or just 'spinning a yarn' – by making things up (Jackson & Jamieson, 2007, p. vii).

Implicated in with this problem is the subjective understanding and judging of what is the "truth". As noted by academics, such as McQuail, truth, objectivity and verification are all essential elements of the news. The contrary has, however, also been observed: "... perhaps, ... in the new information age reality is simply a matter of belief, not anything objective or verified" (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2010, p. 6). Ultimately, when applied to the news industry, such a situation as the one described above leaves the public at risk from interest groups seeking to manipulate and exploit public perception and opinion. Fox News, as one news media outlet, provides two good cases of leaving information out or providing false information. The incident of leaving information out involved interviewing an ethnic Georgian girl (resident in the US) who was in South Ossetia at the time; when she blamed Georgia's President Saakashvili for the conflict, different mechanisms were used to try and get the narrative "back on track" (*12 Year old girl tells the truth about Georgia-Russia War*, 2008). The other involved the use of false or misleading presentation concerning a news item on protests against the parliamentary elections in Russia, when scenes from Athens were used and the viewer told that the event was occurring in Moscow (Russia: Riot wrong—fox fakes Moscow protests with Athens clashes, 2011).

3. Manipulating the news: How and why

There are seemingly two different sets of arguments on the relationship between mass media and foreign policy. One set proposes that news media have the ability to drive foreign policy (Robinson, 1999). Another argument is that the manipulation of news content is used by policy-makers in order to legitimise predetermined foreign policy (Bernays, 1947). This paper shall focus on the second given argument and try to test and see how this may appear in the real world of foreign policy and plans.

If one is able to control the ideas to which the public is exposed and hence concentrate and direct perception and opinion, this amounts to a tremendous exercise of power over the public. The United States' Committee for Public Information, which was the propaganda institution that was used to cultivate domestic public opinion support for entry into the First World War and create favourable views of the US among foreign audiences, laid the foundations for the way news is manipulated in the contemporary era. One of the means was to establish international news agencies or services that supplied the mainstream mass media with material that was likely to attain such objectives (Creel, 1920, pp. 70–83). This is a matter of getting a message into the mainstream information flow in order to gain some kind of effect.

> Primarily, however, the engineer of consent must create news. News is not an inanimate thing. It is the overt act that makes news, and news in turn shapes the attitudes and actions of people. A good criterion as to whether something is or is not news is whether the event juts out of the pattern of routine. The developing of events and circumstances that are not routine is one of the basic functions of the engineer of consent. [...] Newsworthy events, involving people, usually do not happen by accident. They are planned deliberately to accomplish a purpose, to influence our ideas and actions (Bernays, 1947, p. 119).

As noted by Bernays, news is not something that is somehow random, it appears with a sense and a purpose. News helps to frame and shape public perception and opinion, to inform on what issues are important and in what particular manner one should think about them. Bernays once stated that "it is not surprising that the man who is outside the current of prevailing public opinion should regard the press as a coercive force" (Bernays, 1923, p. 94). There are some similarities between Bernays's concept of engineering consent with Herman and Chomsky's concept of manufacturing consent (Herman & Chomsky, 2002), especially with regard to the mass media acting as a filter and the massaging of news generating a narrative that aids in promoting a specific policy agenda. However, the authors of these works approach the issue from different angles—Bernays from a public relations point of view, Herman and Chomsky from the perspective of propaganda. With regard to understanding the underlying motivations for manipulating news, the need to mould public opinion so as to appear to be working on the basis of public consent is fundamental.

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> For they [opinions] are derived, not necessarily by reason, to be sure, but somehow, from the stream of news that reaches the public, and the protection of that stream is the critical interest of the modern state. In going behind opinion to the information which it exploits, and in making the validity of the news our ideal, we shall be fighting the battle where it is really being fought (Lippmann, 1920, p. 70).

Here, Lippmann illustrates the importance and significance of news in shaping public opinion. However, Bernays takes the process one step further by highlighting the need to instrumentalise news as a means of shaping that same public opinion in order to bring about the appearance of public consent.

> This … quite simply means the use of an engineering approach – that is, action based only on thorough knowledge of the situation and on the application of scientific principles and tried practices to the task of getting people to support ideas and programmes. Any person or organisation depends ultimately on public approval, and is therefore faced with the problem of engineering the public's consent to a programme or goal (Bernays, 1947, p. 114).

The above-mentioned quote builds upon the notion that the news production process is not something that is done by "accident", but rather consists in a very deliberate and well-planned executed approach with the purpose of directing and harnessing public opinion and sentiment through the manipulation of perception of selected events and people. This is performed within democratic settings, consisting in the projection of a façade necessary for government plans and policies to be seen as following public opinion, even if that opinion—and therefore consent— has been engineered. Although these theories are reasonably old, they still carry significant weight to explore the subject of the use of news and public opinion to generate compliance and consent. Technological and communication innovations, such as social media and information communication technologies, are a double-edged sword, for they can be used either to aid in manipulation or to expose such manipulation. The next section shall seek to connect newsmaking and propaganda.

4. Factors motivating propaganda in news

For the purpose of this paper, the term propaganda will be used according to the late Philip Taylor's definition and understanding of the term.

> The deliberate attempt to persuade people to think and behave in a desired way. Although I recognise that much of propaganda is accidental or unconscious, here I am discussing the conscious, methodical and planned decisions to employ techniques of persuasion designed to achieve the specific goals that are intended to benefit those organising the process (Taylor, 2003, p. 6).

It is important to emphasise that propaganda is a deliberate and planned exercise that is intended to elicit a response from the targeted audience in a manner that benefits the messenger. Within the context of this article, propaganda is an essentially passive form of mass communication originating in a messenger that seeks to gain some measure of influence on a target audience. The target audience may have difficulty in giving direct feedback in a symmetrical manner as these mass communication means are managed informational assets. For the latter to be successful in persuading and influencing audiences, a variety of factors need to be taken into account, including that of adaptability.

> Successful propaganda depends on the adroit use of means under favourable conditions. A means is anything that a propagandist can manipulate; a condition is anything to which he must adapt. A propagandist can alter the organisation of his activities, modify the streams of suggestion which he releases, and substitute one device of communication for another, but he must adjust himself to traditional prejudices, to certain objective facts of international life, and to the general tension level of the community (Lasswell, 1927, p. 185).

As Lasswell notes, a lot of what is needed in terms of mental cues, stereotypes and prejudices, the raw material to manipulate the information environment already exist. However, there is an acute need for awareness concerning which tactics and mechanisms work and those that do not have an effect. In the event of an emerging informational threat, these are often managed in a specific time-tested manner. When confronted with inconvenient information, there have been numerous attempts to use the strategy to nullify rather than conceal the unwanted ideas or information (Ibid., p. 202). Thus adaptability and knowing which mechanisms to employ are key considerations.

Bernays stresses that in order to be successful, the communicated "… themes must appeal to the motives of the public. Motives are the activation of both conscious and sub-conscious pressures created by the force of desires" (Bernays, 1947, p. 118). However, a significant problem that was identified by Walter Lippmann in the *Phantom Public* is that a mobilised and primed audience does not stay that way for very long (Lippmann, 1927, p. 103). Therefore, once an audience has been successfully mobilised, it is necessary to act swiftly and before the same audience demobilises.

In a very frank book on the role and nature of communication in democracy, Bernays states that one of the cherished presumptions is that every individual citizen makes up their mind on questions of public concern. However, he claims that this is in fact a façade, with the public instead being steered towards certain opinions and attitudes by a mixture of leadership and communication (propaganda).

From our leaders and the media they use to reach the public, we accept the evidence and the demarcation of issues bearing upon public question […] (Bernays, 1928, p. 38).

Therefore propaganda acts as a mechanism that negotiates between government and the people in a democratic society, seeking to make management easier by 'guiding' citizens into making certain decisions and choices (Ellul, 1973, pp. 121–132). The tendencies illustrated in the historical context of the 1930s have been detected and observed in more recent research concerning Western countries (Sproule, 2005). The act of communication with the intention to bring about change in a target audience requires that a certain sequence be followed in order to achieve an effect on that audience. "In supreme crises the dilemma is presented absolutely. Possibly a war can be fought for democracy; it cannot be fought democratically […] In the presence of danger, where swift and concerted action is required, the methods of democracy cannot be employed" (Lippmann, 1927, p. 180).

Creating and shaping the environment of public opinion in such a manner as to benefit the agenda of a political actor involves the process of assuming a common will. To bring about a common will involves the transfer of interest. Non-contentious issues are the target of a great deal of detailed and clear information. However, as regards contentious issues or aspects, it is very unclear how this is to be achieved (Lippmann, 1922, pp. 125–140). The State-level actor is far from being the only user of propaganda, especially in the current age of mobile communication technologies, where almost anyone can engage in communication with user-generated content (Welch, 2013, p. 198). This does have the effect of multiplying the deluge of unverified opinion and misinformation that is posing as news and analysis. In the contemporary context, manipulations are often based upon projected norm and value-based "violations" of international standard (read best) practice. This is intended to prime an audience by eliciting an emotional response—disgust, demand for justice, fear or hope (to name a few). Indeed, the time period between getting the desired response and beginning to implement the policy can be short as emotions are not long lasting and stable.

There needs to be some kind of motivating factor for the public to be directed towards consenting to the desired course of action. One must remember that Syria is not Iraq from 2003, where the motivating factor that was used to gain public consent to what would otherwise have been inconceivable was the use of fear (Snow, 2003, pp. 73–83). When a sense of fear is instilled in a target audience, their ability to think logically and rationally is severely hampered. But after the deceit of the 2003 Iraq War was uncovered, the public has become less inclined to fall for the same trick.

Differences between target audiences are also discernible, with the US audience having been more easily primed (9/11 was fresh in their memory) than the British audience, who stood strongly against military intervention (perhaps owing to a lack of direct threat perception). I argue that in the Syrian context the motivating idea revolves around the concept of universal values (democracy, human rights, rule of law, etc.) and the feeling of revulsion at the alleged levels of barbarity of the al-Assad regime leads to the conclusion that no negotiation is possible with someone so inhumane.

The non-contentious issue is thus clearly defined by the West and those supporting the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad as a change in the Syrian political regime. Justifications for this revolve around various atrocities allegedly committed by the Syrian armed forces in the current war. There are parallels and similarities with Holland and Aaronson's (2014) article concerning US and British strategies employed to justify intervention in Afghanistan (2001) and Libya (2011). Defining the contentious issue, however, is much less clear. How should al-Assad be removed? There has indeed been support for various armed factions and degrees of interference in Syria, up to the abortive attempt to begin an open military action in the Summer of 2013.

5. Method and approach to news on Syria post-August 2013

The United States and United Kingdom are among the most vocal advocates of regime change in Syria, with their policy being reflected in official statements disseminated in the mass media and in the production of information by closely linked NGOs and think tanks. This section draws upon mass media articles and material that has been reported by the mainstream press in the US and UK, such as the *New York Times*, *Financial Times* and *Washington Times*, amongst others. Empirical material sought for analysis in this paper derives from open source material, especially in the form of news items. The latter were selected through news being emailed directly, such as *The Washington Times* or through news aggregates (such as Space War and Yahoo) that are emailed to the author as well as by internet searches of some emerging news stories (using key words such as "industrial killings" and "Syria chemical weapons attack", for example). The time frame for news story selection spanned August 2013 to January 2014, coinciding with the aftermath of the chemical weapons attack near Damascus in August 2013 and the "industrial killing" story that appeared immediately before the Syria peace talks that were held in Switzerland. Following the procedures of qualitative textual analysis, news stories were sorted on a daily basis, by manual means. The aim was to locate and analyse news stories that contained elements of lobbying or favoured a set position, such as openly advocating military means or creating an emotional state receptive to this proposition.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) also served as an orientation for analysis of the empirical material collected in this research. As noted by Wodak, "CDA is not a homogeneous theory with a set of clear and defined tools; rather, it is a research programme with many facets and numerous different theoretical and methodological approaches" (Wodak, 1999, p. 186). This provides the flexibility and necessary means with which to analyse the complexity of the overt and covert production of political power relationships, authority and manipulation that is to be found in text (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Fairclough, 1993; Janks, 1997). Wodak stresses that "critical means distinguishing complexity and denying easy, dichotomous explanations. It means making contradictions transparent" (1999, p. 186). In addition, Janks argues that "the strength of CDA is that the different dimensions of analysis that it offers provide the means both for producing research questions and for analysing data" (1997, p. 341). Stories were thus analysed for the position(s) offered by the journalist and the nature of the language used (rhetorical basis—logos, ethos or pathos).

Owing to the sheer breadth and width of the material that is available, the subjects/events of specific interest shall be narrowed down to two. The first deals with the issue and the consequences of the war that was on the verge of being openly waged after the chemical weapons attack near Damascus, but was averted at the last minute. As news of the attack broke, the US, without any substantiated evidence from an objective investigation into the incident, blamed al-Assad and threatened military action. However, public opinion was strongly opposed to this option. This had the effect of temporarily narrowing the available choices, including the then preferred military option,

which has meant that new means for achieving the goal of regime change need to be manufactured. A second theme to analyse is the "revelation" of the so-called industrial killing taking place in Syria by the al-Assad regime. In the latter case, the Qatar government (an actor actively pursuing regime change in Syria) created evidence via an alleged inside informer of mass and systematic torture and killing by the Syrian government. Both these moments provided a "perfect" opportunity to pursue a more hard line policy (including military options) in Syria, due to involving atrocities that can heighten emotions and reduce the space for a calm and logical evaluation of the situation.

Journalism should act as an objective lens that provides arguments for and against a particular political position, conferring a more analytic viewpoint to statements provided. Therefore, an examination of the nature of news texts in terms of the positions offered, the actors quoted, and whether or not those quotes are verbatim or offer additional analysis by the journalist is important. Mass media and journalism are indeed part of the problem, insofar as they should contribute to generating a balanced and logical debate on the Syrian issue. An opinion article published in the *Washington Times* highlights a number of these issues. The article alleged that "… the media failed to provide a coherent understanding of what the United States should do and why. Columnists and commentators have used some of the most twisted logic to justify or oppose an active American role in Syria, including a diplomatic one. The media have become almost useless in helping their readers peer through the fog of discussion". (Harper, 2013).

The issue of media serving political interests by their coverage of the Syrian conflict is apparent. One instance was the use of the media by Obama to influence public opinion in favour of the war using images of victims of a chemical weapons attack: "I'd ask every member of Congress and those of you watching at home to view those videos of the attack and then ask, what kind of world would we live in if the United States of America sees a dictator brazenly violate international law with poison gas and we choose to look the other way?" (Wolfgang, 2013). Here, Obama uses the infotainment value of the photos rather than any logical and rational argument to persuade the public to go to war. This statement was made without any open and transparent international investigation of the chemical weapons attack; therefore, Obama was relying on both the power of emotion and his reputation/credibility for a response from the public.

Another story demonstrates the ease with which attempts at manipulation under the form of propaganda pass through the media, without their being either challenged or the target of any signs of contrition from the media outlet concerned. Elizabeth O'Bagy did work at the think tank, Institute for War and Peace,[1] specialising in Syria. Her work and advice was read and listened to by those in the Obama administration. In an op-ed published in the *Wall Street Journal*, she did not declare her interest insofar as the think tank was a client of Syrian rebels. Her op-ed focused on the level of infiltration by extremists in the Syrian opposition forces, thus constituting a clear breach of ethics. A short note was later added by the *Wall Street Journal* to this effect. O'Bagy was ultimately fired from the think tank; the reason given was that she falsely claimed to have a doctorate from Georgetown University (Taylor & Dinan, 2013). This is one more case in which there was no attempt at either verifying or publishing objective information. However, such information, lacking in credibility, can remain in circulation. Indeed, it remains of potential value due to allowing for the confirmation of the pursuit of hidden political interests.

Similar professional "mistakes" on the part of journalists occur repeatedly with some acknowledgement from the media, but rarely accompanied by any form of public contrition or apology. For example, the *Mail Online* covered the confessions of the BBC as regards poor level of coverage of events within the context of the Arab Spring: Helen Boaden, the Head of News at the BBC, confirmed that journalists "got carried away with events and produced over-excited reports", further adding that reporters embedded within Libyan rebels failed to explore both sides of the story properly; likewise, BBC's Middle East editor, Jeremy Bowen, was criticised for sometimes allowing excitement to "infect the reporting, which some viewers described as too emotive and veering into opinion".

Moreover, some two thirds of mobile footage and other user-generated content was broadcast without any caveats (Revoir, 2012).

6. Cases in focus: Chemical weapons and "industrial killing"

6.1. A war that almost was

The hegemonic script for the Syrian conflict in the news items analysed is that it is a "spontaneous" and popular local rebellion by moderates seeking to establish a democratic and free state. A notion of regime change is implicitly defended. There are many parallels here with other Arab Spring events, both in terms of the script and the reality of events. However, the number of foreign jihadists are greatly increasing in Syria, with a minimum of 5,000–10,000 already present in that context, thus far exceeding the rate of the flow of rebels into Afghanistan in the 1980s (Wong, 2013). The aims of some of these jihadist groups are also far from the prevalent vision of democracy and freedom. This has become clearer to many with the rapid rise to infamy of the group Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. In September 2013, an alliance of 11 of the rebel groups publicly declared that they seek to create a "clear Islamic framework" in the Syrian state (Sen, 2013). In an interview on the CBS 60 Minutes programme, the former deputy director of the CIA, Mike Morell, made a clear and chilling statement: "I fear the break-up of the state of Syria, collapse of the central government, sectarian warfare, opportunity for al-Qaeda to have a safe haven in Syria that is not too dissimilar to the safe haven that it once enjoyed in Afghanistan". (Assad overthrow in Syria risky for US – Ex-CIA official, 2013). Such commentary is rare and often attempts to nullify the information that takes the form of reporting an alleged atrocity committed by the object of demonisation. Given this recent background, the chemical weapons attack near Damascus on 21 August 2013 provided what the US-led supporters for military intervention saw as the "perfect" pretext to bring an end to the war in Syria and topple al-Assad.

Obama and Kerry labelled the chemical weapons incident as "definitive" evidence of al-Assad's guilt, in spite of launching substantial information identifying precisely who was responsible for the attack. This spinning of the facts fitted very conveniently with Obama's red line narrative on the use of chemical weapons, representing a chance to get directly involved in the armed conflict. A CBS News report highlighted the similar attitudes of the US and UK leadership: "… Cameron asserted that 'from all the evidence we have,' his government, along with the Obama administration, had made the 'judgment' that 'the [Syrian] regime is responsible and should be held to account.' Also just like the Obama administration, Cameron's government has yet to explain exactly what the evidence of al-Assad's culpability is, or where it came from". (Reals, 2013).

This news spin also ties in with Bernays's notion that news is not accidental in terms of its content or timing, such as the arrival of a UN chemical weapons inspection team in the very district attacked and at precisely the same time the incident took place. The UN produced a report on the attack[2] that was selectively used and interpreted by the US, France and Britain. For example, it indicated the type of rocket system allegedly used as "proof" of the Syrian government's guilt. The Syrian insurgent groups then based themselves on this report as a means to try and give the US-led coalition the opportunity to get directly involved in the fighting. Different media accounts echoed the selectively picked and interpreted information from the UN report in order to try and build a solid case for war. For instance, The Washington Times, claimed that "the UN report offered damning and irrefutable evidence and clearly shows that only the Syrian regime could have carried out this attack". (Aji & Karam, 2013). In fact, although it did prove that chemical weapons were used, the UN report never assigned blame to any one party (Gladstone & Chivers, 2013; Sanger & Schmitt, 2013). The language used to try and convey the guilt of the al-Assad government was hence somewhat ambalent, relying on innuendo and suggestion in order to get this message across.

This in turn fed into a narrative that discussed what level of military action should be taken in the West, led by the US, France and Britain. Initially, there was discussion of limited strikes as retaliation for the chemical weapons attack, in what corresponds to a shift from the tactic of "degrade" to

"deter and degrade". The original target list had included some 50 or so primary targets (Sanger, 2013; US could increase scale of Syria strikes: Official, 2013). However, once a war begins it is always much easier to expand the originally stated parameters to something more significant and more ambitious. The exact means and nature of military "punishment" were kept vague in order to gain greater leeway in the planned military strikes. Some signs of dissent began to quickly appear. The former Commander of the USS Cole, Kirk Lippold, which was attacked by terrorists while docked in Aden, Yemen in 2001, was firmly against involvement:

> I think the first option we need to look at … is to not get involved in this conflict. While chemical weapons use is a moral outrage, that doesn't define that our national security is in fact threatened to the point that we should take military action and get involved. […] We haven't defined what the objectives are going to be in this conflict. […] We clearly have not been presented with the proof as the American people that the Assad regime has in fact launched those weapons. We need to see what the proof is so that we are not having a repeat like Iraq. We have no standing under international law to conduct these strikes right now (Snyder, 2013).

According to Seymour Hersh's article in the *London Review of Books*, the Obama administration "cherry picked intelligence to justify a strike against al-Assad".[3] The article alleged that some aspects of the intelligence report were highlighted and others omitted in order to create a suitable scenario for public opinion acceptance of another war. Among the vital information omitted was the fact that actors other than solely the Syrian government have access to chemical weapons, such as Al-Nursa (Calderone, 2013; Lee, 2013; US 'cherry-picked' Syria chemical weapon Intel: Report, 2013). The intelligence report started with the assumption of al-Assad's guilt and then tried to find and manufacture evidence to support this claim (Kotsev, 2013). There were many inconsistencies in the intelligence report, a lot of which rested upon circumstantial evidence. For instance, the claims that the traces of a gas attack disappear very quickly and that the UN inspection team had arrived too late were quickly proven false by experts in the field. Very precise casualty numbers of the attack also raised suspicion—1,429 dead, including 426 children. Another point that attracted attention was the claim that US intelligence had intercepted traffic from military signals intelligence several days before the attack, concerning the intention to use chemical weapons (Allam & Seibel, 2013). If this was so, why were no efforts made to warn civilians?

The Obama administration intelligence report relied on the use of emotion, employing ambiguous language tactics comparable with those used for manufacturing a war pretext in Iraq some 10 years earlier. The deceptive phrasing meant that different interpretations were possible, and meanings do not appear what they seem to be at first glance (Porter, 2013). According to *Consortium News*, a dozen former military and intelligence officials took the time to tell Obama that the information that they had on this case contradicted the official version of the story: "There is a growing body of evidence from numerous sources in the Middle East – mostly affiliated with the Syrian opposition and its supporters – providing a strong circumstantial case that the August 21 chemical incident was a pre-planned provocation by the Syrian opposition and its Saudi and Turkish supporters". (*Obama warned on Syrian Intel*, 2013). One final piece of the puzzle, which adds to the already significant inconsistencies, is the fact that the Syrian government had invited UN inspectors to the area in order to check on allegations and claims of previous chemical weapons attacks on 18 August (three days before the attack) (Parry, 2013). Why would they then launch a full-scale chemical weapons attack knowing both that the inspection team was close and of Obama's warnings of the red line on the use of chemical weapons?

When the scale of the public backlash against the idea of another military campaign in the Middle East and North African region to topple yet another dictator was known, it became very difficult to continue the course towards war as public opinion was becoming firmly entrenched against military intervention after a series of controversial military conflicts. There needs to be some kind of sense or façade of legitimacy to the venture, which Syria did not provide, especially after the results of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya came to fruition. Indeed, some form of extraordinary event needed to take

place in order to sway public opinion. The talk of war as the only option became rarer in face of such united opposition against the planned military intervention. Nevertheless, there were still some quips about an "opportunity" lost. The British Chief of Defence Staff, Sir Nicholas Houghton, gave a talk at the Royal United Services Institute, in London, where he warned that the United Kingdom was in danger of losing its "courageous instinct" in international affairs (Jones, 2013). Britain's Foreign Commonwealth Office also complained that the success of the negotiated settlement concerning Syria's chemical weapons, which averted increasing the complexity and intensity of the armed conflict through direct foreign military intervention, did not ease the suffering of the Syrian people (Britain says OPCW Syria success does little to help beleaguered people, 2013). However, the proposed logic of intensifying a war to help ease the suffering of ordinary Syrians seems to be somewhat counter-intuitive.

In contrast to his position before the Summer of 2013, President Obama also tried to present the option of backing down from waging war as a political solution, claiming "I am not haunted by my decision not to engage in another Middle Eastern war". (Errnst, 2014). Secretary of State John Kerry echoed Obama's call for focus on a political settlement: "There is no military solution in Syria. [...] There can be, there will be a political solution if everybody gets together and works for it." (*Kerry: No military solution in Syria*, 2013). British Foreign Secretary, William Hague, chimed in on this new message too: "No one should underestimate the difficulty of the negotiations ahead [...] But we will not give up on diplomacy as the route to stopping the appalling bloodshed". (*Syria war requires political solution, London says*, 2014). NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen stated that "there is no military solution to the conflict in Syria", thereby not anticipating "any further role" for the alliance in Syria. This contrasted with his statements after the 21 August 2013 chemical attack, when he called for "a firm international response" (including military options) (*NATO chief: 'No military solution' to Syria conflict*, 2013). With the originally favoured option of military strikes being unpopular and discredited, as can be seen above, leading political actors in the West came to adopt a political over a military solution.

6.2. Killing on an "industrial" scale

One of the recurrent themes that is played out it most occasions when international military interventions are proposed is that of atrocities or war crimes, with the "discovery" of evidence at some critical and symbolic juncture in time. These stories are meant to cause a great sense of revulsion and to generate the demand for some kind of action to be taken. Such alleged atrocities and war crimes often have strong connotations with the actions of Nazi Germany, only to emphasise how urgent and ethically and/or morally justifiable the subsequent proposals (often involving the use of military force) are. This type of news story contains the necessary elements, as outlined by Philip Taylor, to be classified as propaganda. It is a clear attempt to influence and persuade the public to behave in a desired way, namely to express outrage and a demand for justice based upon perception of the "facts". Indeed, this does not mean such stories should be ignored, but rather implies the necessity of carrying out an analysis of the source of the story and the agenda of that source (in case of vested interest).

A news story broke from 20–22 January 2014, concerning an alleged "industrial" killing that was being carried out by forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad. This story just so happened to break out on to the front pages of the international press immediately before the Geneva II peace talks that were scheduled to begin on 22 January 2014. Officials in the United States admitted that they had known about the photos of torture victims since November 2013, but had been trying to verify them. It is claimed that there are about 55,000 pictures that indicate the deaths of some 11,000 people (Landler & Hubbard, 2014). The story quickly circulated from the Guardian and CNN to other leading Western and international media, without adopting any critical approach.

The photos were supplied by a defector, allegedly employed by the Syrian Military Police, to photographically document each of the bodies. These photos were showing the scarred and emaciated corpses of those who had allegedly been victims of the Syrian government. Given the codename

Caesar, the defector was hailed as finally providing clear "direct evidence" of atrocities committed by Syrian government forces (Mackey, 2014). There was the predictable rhetorical reaction to the photos, mentioning the industrial-scale killing of the Nazi death camps (Miles & Baczynska, 2014). This particular manufactured crisis may be considered an attempt to try and bring back the open military option in Syria: "Mr. Assad's enemies say they hope the leak [...] will cause enough revulsion in the West to prevent any deal that might leave him in place, or perhaps prod the West into more muscular steps to remove him, just as the Serbian massacre at Srebrenica in 1995 moved NATO to launch airstrikes in the Balkans". (Hubbard & Kirkpatrick, 2014).

Analysing the language used, especially when it came to the issue of ascertaining and projecting levels of certainty and credibility of the photos, there is, on the surface, an element of certainty, which points to proof of al-Assad's guilt in atrocities committed. However, when subjected to more detailed analysis, the articles contain an embedded level of uncertainty, as illustrated in the following excerpts: "So far, only a few photographs have actually been released by lawyers commissioned by the Qatari government, an avowed opponent of Mr. Assad, and the claims about their origins could not be independently verified". (Hubbard & Kirkpatrick, 2014); "These photos – if authentic – suggest that we may have only scratched the surface of the horrific extent of torture in Syria's notorious dungeons". (Black, 2014). However, details tended to be very limited and were often buried under a much larger weighing of certainty on al-Assad's guilt. *The Independent* characterised the findings as a "smoking gun", indicative of evidence of "systematic killing". (Dutta, 2014). An article in *The World Post* almost solely quoted evidence that supported the validity of the claims of torture by al-Assad's security forces, relying on terms such as "clear evidence", "industrial scale killing" and "compelling" (Faulconbridge, 2014). *Spiegel Online* ran the headline "Syria's Bodies: 'the stench was unfathomable'". (Reuter & Scheurermann, 2014). The news reports were clearly biased and aimed at establishing the guilt of al-Assad, rather than seeking to engage in an objective investigation into the merits and validity of the information transmitted. One significant question that is not broached, let alone answered is why a regime engaging in crimes of such a nature would wish to fully and completely document the latter, thus allowing this information to be later used as a basis for condemnation?

Although the photographic material was disseminated by an alleged defector given the code name Caesar, media outlets focused upon the report conducted by the British law firm Carter-Ruck and Co. as providing the basis for the legitimacy and proof of what the photographs seemed to show. The law firm's "investigation" (de Silva et al., 2014) was financed by Qatar, which has been actively working at overthrowing al-Assad, similarly to Libya's Gaddafi before him. Some media are aware that this situation can affect the perceived legitimacy of the report, which is why they have drawn attention to whitewash that connection:

> The investigation and report undertaken by the British law firm was financed by Qatar, which likely explains the fact that it was made public concurrently with last week's Syria conference in Geneva. Qatar backs the Syrian rebels, but the country's stance does little to take away from the power of the images provided (Reuter & Scheurermann, 2014).

This is an emotional, rather than logically based appeal, as the clashes of interest and lack of objectivity are clearly apparent. In fact the quote mentions the "power of the images" and not whether the report is objective and reliable, which has implications for the photos. Other media refer to the report as an "independent" study, something which it is clearly not. Thus, the issue of the not so hidden vested interests that inform the report remain ignored by a substantial part of the media (Edwards, 2014). The case of Caesar also has very strong parallels with that of Iraq in the lead-up to the 2003 war, when defectors gave the US government the "irrefutable" proof that it wanted to hear about the existence of weapons of mass destruction, an allegation which in hindsight was proven to be false. This came with a continuing disastrous cost, but the desired regime change was achieved; Saddam Hussein was gone and an American-installed regime was in. This news event was a hot topic for media outlets and fits in well with the infotainment approach to news, with the rush to

publish the breaking story first and the established narrative of al-Assad as the "bad guy" seemingly facilitating poor quality journalism.

7. Conclusion

The one consistent goal for the US-led coalition has been regime change—the overthrow of al-Assad in favour of a more US friendly regime. This has followed the "typical" Arab Spring scenario of the narrative of "peaceful" demonstrations by those seeking democracy and freedoms being violently broken up by a cruel dictator. Such events are characterised as grassroots and locally owned and run revolutions, by people seeking positive change, although the placards carried by the protestors were often in English. Revolutionaries are framed as being on the good side and the incumbent dictator and the political system as being on the bad side. Symbolic support is offered to the rebels by the US-led "international community". This follows the pattern that has been identified by Erikson and Kostic with regard to countries that use the rhetoric of peace building, but whose actions display signs of pursuing national interests (2013, pp. 156–166). The framing used in some political circles simply defies any reasonable response owing to the imposed level of oversimplification. Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott characterised the Syrian Civil War as being "goodies" versus "baddies" (*Tony Abbott reduces Syria civil war to 'goodies' against 'baddies'*, 2014). This characterisation is in keeping with the infotainment format of news, shaped in a specific way where the theme is designed to resonate with public sentiment.

News has certainly been used extensively in the Syrian conflict to try and prime public opinion in the direction of permitting "humanitarian intervention" in the shape of another military war. This depends on the perception held by the public as to who are the "good" guys, who are the "bad" guys, the inherent values of the conflict, thus masking the level of risk for Western countries that could get directly involved in the fighting. As noted by a number of media commentators, the media have failed the public in their moral duty and obligation as the fourth estate, due to conspicuous absence in this latest conflict. Journalists have indeed failed in their professional obligations to present fair and objective reporting that is in the public interest.

An additional observation is that news seems to be very well-timed with associated events that have a potential to influence how the issue is perceived and understood by the public. This paper has only covered a very small and narrow part of the Syrian war, but nonetheless has revealed a number of informational mechanisms and tactics that are designed to develop public consent for existing policy. In effect, this is the rhetorical coercion used by the US-led Western interventions, restricting their target regime's ability to respond, whilst setting the stage for "justified" intervention in the target country. The policy in this case is regime change, the primary question being how to set about achieving this in a practical sense. The military option was given a setback early on in the Syrian conflict, when the UN Security Council resolution that was identical to the one used on Libya, was vetoed. Thus the different ways of trying to create the "right" conditions for open and direct military action against Syria can be seen in those leading countries attempting to adapt to and manipulate the environment in order to create an atmosphere and public opinion that would support such policy.

A problem for the US and its allies is that the rebel factions are not united and not strong enough to topple al-Assad by themselves. This creates a situation not dissimilar to Libya, when NATO was required to use its airpower to achieve victory and finalise the regime change there. Syria is another matter, the military option being extremely difficult owing to its overuse and abuse through such mechanisms as "responsibility to protect" and "humanitarian intervention". A lot of the informational deceit from past experiences, such as those in Iraq and Libya, has made the public more wary. This does not mean that the West shall stop trying to create a pretext to enable direct military intervention in Syria, owing to the fact that the current military stalemate is unlikely to be overcome by the rebels alone. However, the international public is not primed or mobilised to support another war of choice, and the various negative consequences that this would bring.

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Notes
1. Not to be confused for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting.
2. The full name of the document was United Nations Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, *Report on the Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in the Ghouta Area of Damascus on 21 August 2013*.
3. The UN report assigned no blame for the chemical weapons attack, only confirming that one had taken place. There were attempts to pick out the damning information from this report (Taylor, 2013).

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