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FOREWORD

What are we to make of competing approaches to strategic communications today? Do they help or confuse our attempts to find common ground when trying to say what we mean?

Driven out of terrain that until recently they had held, yet far from defeated, ISIS (Daesh) sought to squeeze out ambiguity from the world they surveyed. Their communications were uncompromisingly binary. An embryonic state (as scholars of order and governance interpret the emergence of states), its communicators chose to occupy a world where right and wrong, good and evil were counterpoised to force an unambiguous choice on observers. Daesh with their take on Islam, good: everyone else, evil. For all the West's desire to discourage further recruits from succumbing to their appeals, its response shaped a rhetoric of rebuttal—the countering of one right with a superior right. Although latterly discredit and disdain (counter-narratives) have given way to reasserting values of freedom and justice (alternative narratives). Nevertheless, such a black-versus-white confrontation appears almost manageable when compared to what would soon claim its place in the media spotlight.

Almost in the blink of an eye, Western attention and government funding have switched to Russian disinformation. Substantial evidence supports the view that agencies in Moscow and St Petersburg are engaged in systematic subversion of Western publics by disseminating erroneous and divisive information. The strat-

egy, according to a consensus of experts, is being pursued on an industrial scale with the aim of exploiting fractures that recently have become all too apparent in democratic polities. 'Subversive confusion' best captures Russia's strategy, rooted in flooding media outlets with a stream of stories containing multiple versions of the 'truth', from the absurd to the mildly credible. From conspiracy theories to staring down the truth, evidence-based truth telling is being worn away at the edges. Unfortunately, a populist lexicon of 'alternative facts' and 'fake news' echoing throughout Western capitals only serves to legitimise this process. Targeting vulnerable electorates in the West may be argued away as fair game in a geopolitical landscape that has witnessed a return to Great Power politics in the last decade. Russian scholarship and policy thinking may not have a direct translation for the term 'strategic communications', preferring to call it simply 'foreign policy'. But *dezinformacija* is all too familiar. Sitting within an historical trajectory that dates back at least a century to the Bolshevik Revolution, it speaks to how nation-states should mobilise ideas and information to destabilise and defeat their opponents. Strategic opportunism that exploits social, political, and economic fissures across NATO and European Union states by employing the subversive confusion of multiple messages will continue as long as those populations show themselves to be vulnerable and short on natural resilience.

There's a third trend strategic communicators struggle to see through. It is wrapped up in parallel conversations around economic stimulus and currency stabilisation, as China's President Xi chooses to frame it. China's Belt and Road Initiative, he says, will embrace 'close to 3 billion people and represents the biggest market in the world with unparalleled potential'. On the surface, it displays all the hallmarks of soft power projected through trade and economics. To construct a global infrastructure of ports and resource-supply routes may yet prove to be nothing more than self interest; understandable in the context of China's dramatic rise from poverty and continued desire to enrich its nation. In 1990, 750 million Chinese lived in poverty. Today less than 10 million do. However, if China's Belt and Road Initiative is to become the 21st century's soft power equivalent of America's Marshall Plan in the 20th century, then its message must be unequivocal. That means resolving tensions on a number of fronts.

Purported cyber penetration of intellectual property, key technologies, and infrastructures by Chinese manufacturers divides opinion across states hungry for trade and investment in their declining economies. It goes further. Infiltration into politics, culture, and business has prompted one Australian observer

to write of China's 'silent invasion' into his country's institutions. At the same time, infringing on neighbouring states' sovereignty in the East and South China Seas, through frequent naval encounters and challenges to international legal rulings (Spratly Islands, Senkaku Islands, and the Nine-Dash Line) only encourages suspicions of expansionism and hegemonic ambitions, increasingly filtered through the discourse of the Thucydides Trap. All the while President Xi holds to a belief that Western democracy is no longer fit for purpose and that China's one-party political model is more suitable for export.

In this context should Belt and Road be viewed as a global platform for strategic ambitions? What is China attempting to say through its investment as an act of strategic communications? Are outside observers inferring too much or too little from the mixed messages emanating from Beijing? Perhaps the answer lies in our need to re-evaluate what we mean by strategic communications and the different forms it now takes in a multipolar 21st century and aggressively contested global politics.

It may be nothing more than coincidence. Or maybe it's a sign of the times. But several initiatives are running concurrently, variously seeking to standardise language across strategic communications: the British military's Joint Doctrine; Canada's Department for National Defense joint terminology panel; the Terminology Working Group at NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence; and separately NATO's Allied Joint Doctrine projects. A direct benefit will be more than one glossary of terms to which every user can turn in expectation of sharing a common understanding. Provided, of course, their editors come up with similar and compatible definitions.

Consensus around key words is long overdue in the NATO alliance made up of overlapping civilian and military language communities. The first group moves in and out of geopolitics amid the wider population of language users; the latter engages in technical and acronym-charged exchanges that exclude outsiders from engaging—a familiar accusation levelled against most expert scientific and bureaucratic groups in society. Using English, nevertheless, as a *lingua franca*, overlaying multiple national languages across NATO's 29 member states, only highlights the scope for confusion in today's turbulent politics. Underlying this discussion are the many incongruities between languages. Certain are rich in nuance, displaying many shades of grey in a range of synonyms, while others have no word that directly corresponds to an English term. This doesn't mean there is an absence of meaning, just not a direct translation. After all, the idea is to

translate meaning not words. Take the word ‘narrative’, perhaps one of the most used, if not abused, words in the political lexicon: what does it suggest? When strategic communicators speak of ‘narrative’, is their intention to position the term closer to a story? Or rather to an account or even a conversation? But if we replace ‘narrative’ with ‘story’, does the spirit of the term now convey something more or less bounded by time, with a beginning, middle, and end, something more resembling fiction not fact? A tension reigns between generalised definitions that can resonate with the wider public and technical specifications that specialist language groups require to go about their daily work. Unsurprisingly, therefore, dictionaries and glossaries of terminology offer multiple tiers of specialist meaning to supplement the more generalised one.

New words emerge with great speed across digital media today. Occasionally neologisms such as ‘post-truth’ achieve celebrity status in the pages of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a perpetual work-in-progress that builds on more than a century of lexical authority. These innovations can further complicate a world where politics appears already too complex. And these two trends come together when we think of how quickly our politicians and their electorates have adopted ‘fake news’. An ugly term in its conception and intent, few people have brought intellectual rigour to using it, let alone defining it. Within it, researchers have identified a number of concepts: disinformation (subversion using deliberately erroneous information), misinformation (accidental or unwitting spread of erroneous information), and a closure of debate (a rude expletive). More recently it has also come to embrace mal-information (private information revealed to injure individuals) and non-information (absence of information). For more on this see *Fake News: A Roadmap* (NATO StratCom COE/ KCSC, 2018).

An article in *The Economist* (17/11/2018) titled ‘Lost without Translation’ makes the point, claiming ‘language problems bedevil the international response to crises’. One unforeseen by-product of Burma’s Rohingya crisis is apparent in the way refugee women, now displaced into camps in Bangladesh, speak of their personal health. Rohingya women, with little education and isolated in a more conservative culture, have developed their own words to make more private or sensitive references to their bodies. ‘They avoid *baiṛ* (menstruation) and say *gusol* (shower). Diarrhoea, a common camp ailment, was routinely misdiagnosed in the first few months. Many Rohingyas reported, “My body is falling apart” (“*Gaa-lamani biaram*”), baffling health care workers.’ For a population reporting human rights abuses, including widespread rape by Burmese security forces,

precision with language is imperative. Yet sex is a guarded subject. Euphemisms abound, attached to ‘sex permissible by religion, or illegal sex and sex out of wedlock. Most of these terms are deliberately vague; they refer to “shameful spaces” and “secret places”.’ Shame around use of certain concepts and words may yet prevent violated women from appearing in court to make their allegations, let alone face their perpetrators.

Language matters. Agreeing on a standardised set of meanings matters too. Removing friction from the command and control process while shaping common institutional purpose is of paramount concern to decision makers. Yet we are still at a point where we struggle to define ‘strategic communications’. This emerges for various reasons. Ours is a nascent field of research, depending on where one identifies the start point in its current iteration. At the same time, we remain captives to various disciplinary lines of evolution. Underlying assumptions can vary depending on language community: soldiers, diplomats, and aid and development workers frequently see the world through different eyes. Some of their definitions seek to embrace all aspects of political life; others focus on war as its common denominator. Some see it as the projection of policy beyond sovereign borders; others argue that digital technologies increasingly merge domestic and foreign policy despite the best intentions of communicators. Some confine it to higher-level politics or grand strategy, while others universalise it to include lower-level brand and image repair.

What distinguishes strategic communications from other forms of political persuasion? From political marketing or even commercial marketing? Perhaps the market with its exchange of products is a misleading metaphor. And how should we differentiate strategic communications from the ambiguity of public relations or the purposeful deception of propaganda? Now suddenly hidden intentions and the ethics of the messenger attract the spotlight.

If strategic communications is to withstand rigorous critique as a research discipline other than an informed field of praxis, it should move beyond defining itself simply in opposition to other terms, however embedded in the public’s awareness. Familiarity does not necessarily breed confidence or clarity. Theorists and practitioners must say *what it is* rather than *what it is not*. To argue that it is not propaganda—a term overused and abused in the popular mind—is to seek to lock together two moving targets: the ambiguity of communication with the equally ambiguous concept of manipulation. Until there is a greater engagement with ethics and intent on the part of message creators, manipulation and subver-

sion, as opposed to attraction and persuasion, will always be laid at their door.

Meanwhile, attempts to define strategic communications in the abstract, devoid of context, can be a labour of love. After all, the blank canvas remains the Information Environment in which all our experiences, let alone politics, play out, and through which messages circulate. Both concepts are inextricably tied. Meetings of NATO terminologists over the last year in Riga, Latvia have produced welcome insights from heated debate. Following which the starting point, the Information Environment, is now to be understood as ‘dynamic physical and/or virtual settings interpreted by the mind’. Meaning that everything—the universe of human interpretation and exchange—is contained within it. Strategic communications, consequently, exists inside that Information Environment and is to be understood as ‘a holistic approach to communication based on values and interests, that encompass everything an actor does to achieve objectives in a contested environment’. Taken together these offer a sense of the universe in which communication (‘the successful exchange of meaning’, according to the Riga sessions) takes place bounded only by the limitations of our senses of cognition and emotion. The mind is seen as the processing mechanism for such communications that pass in an instant and repeatedly between the virtual and physical areas of our lives. Not forgetting that these messages—these parcels and flows of meaning—must compete against others in a contested environment.

Recent additions to the lexicon may be less daunting for the casual user. But for practitioners and policy makers, it’s different. Required to state their terms of reference, do they capture an essence of political communications to which commentators like James Farwell aspire? In the *Art of Strategic Communication*, he alludes to ‘the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives’. Farwell omits to mention a failure to act, whether deliberate or unintentional. And I would refine that further to include ‘the projection of foreign and security policies aimed at changing the attitudes and behaviour of targeted audiences to achieve strategic effects, using words, images, and actions and non-actions in the national interest or interest of a political community’. One important rider is the speed with which foreign policy can flip to domestic, and vice versa, in a world of instantly communicating media platforms. Still, the key ingredients to note here are policy projection; achieving change; selecting audiences; human output as a text that

communicates meaning; and the interest of the community. Strategic communications is indeed a form of political communication. What distinguishes it is its aim to shift and shape discourses well into the future.

President Barack Obama in the *National Framework for Strategic Communication 2009* appeared to lay claim to a higher moral standard by appealing to integrity and credibility as the foundations of good strategic communications emanating from the state. For him it's all about 'the synchronization of words and deeds and how they will be perceived by selected audiences'. Closing the so-called say-do gap became his *sine qua non* in pursuit of the national interest, a further prerequisite of his view of strategic communications. Even if events during his presidency went on to undermine the best intentions of his White House. Presciently he warned: 'what we do is often more important than what we say because actions have communicative value and send messages'. By the same token, so too does a failure to speak out or act.

Rosa Brooks, former Counselor to US Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, writes in *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything*, 'One of my early assignments at the Pentagon was to tackle a problem no one else wanted to touch: making sense of the can of worms known as "strategic communication". "Strategic communication is important but we feel like we're doing it really badly", Michele Flournoy [her new boss] told me. My task was to fix it—if it was fixable. But first I had to figure out what it was.' In *Whither Strategic Communication*, Christopher Paul at RAND highlighted this confusion several years before. He noted 'some experts use strategic communication and public diplomacy as synonyms, while some subordinate strategic communication to public diplomacy and others vice versa'.

Ambiguity reigns from Washington to Tokyo. This is largely a hangover from the world wars of the 20th century. Industrialised programmes of persuasion, at the time labelled propaganda, aimed to rally domestic populations and demoralise foreign audiences in ways that would subsequently be perceived as untruthful when weighed against the horrendous casualty toll of war. At the state level, and for that matter at the level of state challengers, such as ISIS, with its ambitions to being a state, and al-Qaeda, which disavows all ambition to statehood, strategic communications must balance persuasion and coercion as a way of achieving desired outcomes with identified audiences. At the negotiating table coercion may not be called upon but it must always provide the threat of action and underpin a state's credibility to act. In short, coercive diplomacy, as

the economist Thomas Schelling understood it some fifty years ago, remains close to our understanding of strategic communications.

His contemporary, reporter-turned-public-diplomat Ed Murrow, identified the ‘last three feet’ as the crucial persuasion space in a highly contested terrain. But it is not simply the one-way street often misinferred from Joseph Nye’s *Soft Power* (a society’s ability to win friends and influence people through attraction to its values), rather it goes deeper. There is a more subtle pull and push being played out, suggested by Sir Simon McDonald, Permanent Under-Secretary to the UK Foreign Office. ‘Diplomacy’, he declared in a recent television documentary (BBC: 15/11/2018), ‘is the art of letting other people have your way’. Mellifluous resolve nevertheless seems a far cry from the cajoling tactics employed by the White House incumbent towards various states over trade, expansionism, and nuclear proliferation. Yet this too is misleading. Persuasion and coercion are not sharply counterpoised. They are more fluid than architectural. Strategic communications demands to be seen as organic. It is as much intuitive as it is cognitive. What it can never be is an IKEA user manual. A world of fast-moving parts doesn’t lend itself to flat pack assembly.

In Volume 5 of *Defence Strategic Communications*, a number of authors attempt to pin down clearer definitions for this complex field. At the same time, they seek to enrich it with greater intellectual inquiry. Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar examines the relationship between journalism, strategic communications, and public relations in the Boko Haram conflict in Nigeria. For him the thorny interaction of gatekeeping, information subsidies, and disinformation sits at the heart of a better understanding. Gulizar Hacıyakupoglu moves beyond defining ‘fake news’ and charts how Malaysia’s Anti-Fake News Act has been used to distort the country’s political environment, particularly during the most recent general elections in 2018. Her call for fundamental reforms extends to include politicians, political parties, and media organisations. Media practitioner Kitty Lovegrove reminds us that strategic communications, far from being driven simply by the calculus of rational actors, is intimately woven into our emotional responses and motivations. She offers music and musicology, and their influence on human psychology and physiology, as more radical ways of enhancing strategic communications thinking. Matthew Beale, meanwhile, explores what it means to talk of ‘Brand Putin’ by applying brand personality theory to interrogate existing scholarship and original source material. He proposes a more nuanced way of reading images projected by Russia’s leader to enrich an unduly mono-dimen-

sional interpretation held outside his country. Francesca Granelli sees trust at the root of all political communications. However, her research shows that trust is more complex than governments and electorates are encouraged to believe in the anxious reporting of daily news amid government fears of a ‘crisis in trust’. Nicholas Michelsen and Jonathan Woodier take stock of the first part of a longer-term research project into how North Korea used the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in 2018 to its strategic advantage. They suggest how the process of influencing conversations in the media space prepared the ground for change in international politics leading to meetings between North Korea’s supreme leader Kim Jong-un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, and US President Donald Trump. Each author brings to our continuing discussion a fresh perspective that informs strategic communications by clarifying the terms we so often use without a second thought.

Dr Neville Bolt, Editor-in-Chief
Autumn 2018

THE ACOUSTIC WORLD OF INFLUENCE: HOW MUSICOLOGY ILLUMINATES STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

Kitty Lovegrove

Abstract

Governments using strategic communications to influence an audience should continue to reassess the intellectual grounds of the discipline. Current thinking on how best to construct a campaign and influence an audience is mixed, sparse, and incomplete. Insights from musicology present an opportunity for a refreshed perspective. Music, as a social text, a practice, and an ecology, provides a powerful means of communication from which lessons of influence can be learnt. This article serves as a study into the parallels between two interconnected topics. It proposes that insight from musicology has the ability to improve strategic communications practice on two levels—constructing a compelling narrative and best influencing an audience. Two case studies are compared to illustrate the benefits of persuading through emotionally-based strategic communications—a Daesh nasheed with music and a counter-narrative campaign without. This article highlights how communicating through a rational-actor model is outdated; to best affect the physiological and emotional state of the audience, musicology must be incorporated.

Keywords— *musicology, strategic communications, emotion, rational-actor, influence*

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Introduction

'Winning over hearts and minds' is a phrase synonymous with military failure, political hubris, and information warfare. In a post 9/11 context, Western governments adopted the metaphor to convey publicly an intent to influence a target audience in a friendly, non-Orwellian, way.¹ Numerous realisations were encountered; specifically, that countering terrorism on the tactical and strategic level involves activity beyond a material or military dimension, in the realm of communication, persuasion, and perception.² Mastering a narrative to influence behaviours and attitudes, to achieve a targeted outcome, and to communicate with more effect than a counterpart, became a key necessity for states.³ Despite persuasive communication being partnered with warfare throughout history, strategic communications as a field of study, discourse, and practice is considered to be in its infancy. As governments strive to speak through the maelstrom of the information age, they must continue to seek radical approaches to strategic communications.

Musicology offers a plethora of insights for strategic communications practitioners. Integrating an alternative discipline that has numerous intersections with related fields inspires academic rigour and a new starting point for strategic communications as a field of study. The current understanding of strategic communications has yet to absorb the complexities of the global communications environment, and the nuance and idiosyncrasies of an individual's interpretation of a series of messages. An intellectual excursion is required to recalibrate academic thinking on the topic, and to incorporate more of the fundamentals in influencing human behaviour. Musicology serves as a platform of knowledge because music crosses epistemological boundaries as language, science, and art. Its ubiquity and prominence as a medium of communication is powerful, and

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1 Henry A. Giroux, 'Totalitarian Paranoia in the Post-Orwellian Surveillance State', *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 29 (2015): 108.

2 Cristina Archetti, *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 218.

3 H. J. Ingram, 'Lessons from History for Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications' (The Hague: International Centre for Counter Terrorism, 2016), p. 3.

undeniable in producing affect.⁴ Strategic communications discourse and practice have the capability to utilise insight from musicology to establish a holistic approach and a more creative mindset regarding the fundamentals and potential of communicating to influence an audience.

This article seeks to answer the question of how musicology can improve governments' understanding of strategic communications. To delineate the relationship between subjects, it will draw on bodies of theory to show how strategic communications and music can both be conceptualised as social systems which shape meaningful experiences. Physicist Fritjof Capra argues for a 'systems view of life', a holistic approach to studying the interconnectivity of a phenomenon through looking at the totality of its mutual interactions.⁵ This systemic understanding is based upon the assumption that 'there is a fundamental unity to life, that different living systems exhibit similar patterns of organization'.⁶ The systems approach helps to understand the mutually constitutive relations of communication, materiality and technology.⁷ Capra extends this to the social domain accordingly:

Integrating the four perspectives means recognizing that each contributes significantly to the understanding of a social phenomenon. For example, culture is created and sustained by a network (*form*) of communications (*processes*) in which *meaning* is generated. The culture's material embodiments (*matter*) include artifacts and written texts, through which meaning is passed on from generation to generation.⁸

This perspective informs the analysis and comparison of the case studies in this article when also applying the concept of mediation. Mediation is an object of discourse that allows for the characteristics of cultural and socio-technical experience to be addressed through one another. This concept facilitates an intertextual reading of theory and an ability to extend our explanations of human sociality with technology.⁹ It recognises the role of materials in mediating and forming cultural worlds, and how meaning is collectively and relationally

4 Marie Thompson, Ian Biddle, *Sound, Music, Affect* (Bloomsbury: London, 2013), pp. 1–26.

5 Fritjof Capra, Pier Luigi Luisi, *The Systems View of Life* (Cambridge: University Press, 2016): 30.

6 Fritjof Capra, *The Hidden Connections* (Harper Collins: United Kingdom, 2002): 70.

7 See Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge* (Shambhala: Boston, 1987); Niklas Luhmann 'The Autopoiesis of Social Systems,' in Niklas Luhmann, *Essays on Self-Reference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind* (Chicago: University Press, 1987)

8 Capra, *The Systems View of Life*, 304.

9 Nick Prior, *Popular Music Digital Technology and Society* (SAGE Publishing: London, 2018): 19.

constructed through such materials. It is useful to understand music and the information environment through these paradigms, to create a nexus by which ideas from musicology can inform strategic communications praxis. As a result, practitioners can be informed on the most persuasive ways to influence an audience.

Part 1: Strategic Communications—the Conceptual Issues

With discourse on strategic communications covering a range of topic areas, authors differ in defining its exact function and scope. This article understands strategic communications to be a range of activities designed with an intent to shape the behaviour, knowledge, or attitudes of a target audience. These activities can alter the prevailing narrative for a group of individuals.¹⁰ As such, social realities might be shaped through inducing a particular interpretation of a given event or narrative in a target audience. Bruner suggests that the construction of reality then encourages an individual to establish ‘relational positions’ in reaction to a message or activity.¹¹ Strategic communications can be thought of as a process involving lines of effort and techniques or as a mindset.

Strategic Communications as a Process

In *Strategic Communication*, Christopher Paul presents a thorough review of the evolution and future considerations for strategic communications practices in the US government.¹² His arguments and recommendations for improvements are underpinned by his idea of *synchronization*. He states that establishing co-ordination mechanisms between all relevant government departments will significantly ‘improve the government’s ability to deliberately communicate and engage with intended audiences’.¹³ National objectives can then be ‘realized through influence or persuasion’.¹⁴ His conception of strategic communications envisages a process that is strategic, where action flows in the attainment of policy goals.¹⁵ He suggests that through this unification, a whole-of-government approach can be adopted, improving the ability to deliver strategic communication campaigns with impact.¹⁶

10 J. Bruner, ‘The Narrative Construction of Reality’, *Critical Inquiry* (1991): 1–21.

11 Ibid.

12 Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011)

13 Ibid., p. 206.

14 Ibid., p. 174.

15 Ibid., p. 5.

16 Ibid.

James Farwell argues that strategic communications consist of ‘operational design’, whereby conditions can be engineered to produce a desired end state.¹⁷ In addition to Paul’s recommendations for improving the process of strategic communications, Farwell suggests that problems lie in failing to conceive of the practice as an art.¹⁸ He defines it as ‘the use of words, actions, images, or symbols to influence the attitudes and opinions of target audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives’.¹⁹ Strategic communications can also be conceptualised as a series of tools and techniques, which in scaling the size of the operation up or down,²⁰ can persuade an individual to support and adopt a given way of thinking.²¹ For the defence community, the strategic narrative serves as a framework by which creating, opposing, or reinforcing opinions might translate into beliefs that instigate collective action.²² Farwell’s recommendations call for a developed understanding of cultural nuance in formulating effective campaigns, describing how television and radio serve as weapons of communication by projecting strategic narratives.²³ From al-Qaeda’s notoriously violent video footage to President Lyndon B. Johnson’s dramatic and emotional 1964 ‘daisy girl’ election advert,²⁴ both insurgents and state actors utilise media to disseminate ideas.²⁵ The advantages of utilising channels of media in strategic communications is obvious; nevertheless, a holistic assessment of the full spectrum of available opportunities has yet to be formed.

This topic requires further discussion for governments to enhance their understanding of the complexities of message reception and audience interpretation. Farwell concludes that ‘words matter’, and that ‘different cultures use languages in different ways to elicit emotional responses’. He cites Taliban poetry as a non-standard use of language that attempts to engender patriotism and loyalty in actual or potential supporters.²⁶ Yet, comprehending how varieties of media and the arts affect human experience requires constant evaluation and consideration in regards to modernising frameworks for strategic communications.

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17 James Farwell, *Persuasion and Power* (Georgetown: University Press, 2013), p. xix.

18 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*, p. 219.

19 *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

20 Brett Boudreau, *We Have Met The Enemy And He Is Us* (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016):250–52.

21 Jan Hanska, ‘From Narrated Strategy to Strategic Narratives’, *Critical Studies on Security* (2015): 323.

22 Miranda Holmstrom, ‘The Narrative and Social Media’, *Defence Strategic Communications*. NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (2015): 123.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 199.

24 The LBJ Library, [‘Daisy Ad \(LBJ 1964 Presidential campaign commercial\)’](#), 14 May 2012.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 185.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

Currently, measuring effect is considered the primary factor for deducing the success of a campaign. However, this perspective is premised on an outdated model that depicts communication as a two-way exchange with directly correlated output.²⁷ Strategic communications praxis must adjust to the non-linearity of the information environment by understanding affect and emotion as a driving force in culture and contemporary society.²⁸ As music has the capability to penetrate this ambiguity and induce meaningful experience, insight from musicology should be integrated within strategic communications discourse.²⁹

Strategic Communications as a Mind-set

A second approach to strategic communications is to interpret the information domain through a specific mind-set. ‘Mind-set’ is about ‘inculcating a culture in which the value of communicating an action is an instinctive part of the deliberation, planning and decision-making process from the start’.³⁰ A strategic communications mind-set and process differ in the context of how practitioners formulate and perceive their chosen lines of effort. Mind-set requires an ongoing 24/7 awareness of how and what activities communicate to the target audience. Process, focuses narrowly on the most efficient method to achieve a policy goal. On the practical level, Paul Cornish suggests that this would foster a shared culture in which the necessary changes to current practice could be easily promoted, and a self-sustaining model would emerge.³¹ A fixed, centralised structure thus far has proved cumbersome in dealing with crises: alternatively, an ‘interactive system of information and exchange,’ involving the numerous participants, would encourage a ‘dynamic, versatile and responsible approach to policy’.³²

With the expansion of strategic communications as a field of study, and the growing complexities of the information age, ideas from innovative social commentators are being applied to this field of discussion and practice. Sociologist Manuel Castells produced a number of key works documenting how technological advances in society have impacted theories of power and influence. The global networks formed as a result of changes in communication technologies

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27 See the discussion section of this article for further clarification of this point.

28 Margreth Lunenberg, Tanja Maier, ‘The Turn to Affect and Emotion in Media Studies’, *Media and Communication* (2018): 1–4

29 See chapter two for insight from musicology.

30 Boudreau, *We Have Met The Enemy And He Is Us* 276.

31 Paul Cornish, Julian Lindley-French, Claire Yorke, ‘Strategic Communications and the National Strategy’, Royal Institute of International Affairs (2011): 9.

32 *Ibid.*

are determining the nature of production, experience, power, and culture in modern capitalist societies.³³ Castells names this ‘the network society’, whereby its ‘social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies’.³⁴ The network is a set of interconnected nodes which communicate with and form around each other. He argues that this constitutes a new social morphology of the information age.³⁵

This article will discuss Castells’ theories and the media ecology perspective in greater detail in the discussion section. However, it is worth noting the conceptual approach upon which Castells grounds his theory. If governments focused to a greater extent on the interconnectivity of systems, they could begin to address the challenges facing strategic communicators. How might they improve the impact of their communications, and then ensure their messages remain consistent amongst the competing narratives of the borderless information environment?³⁶ A strategic communications mind-set is essential. Therefore, to achieve competitive advantage strategic leaders must think in communications terms, becoming more intelligent practitioners of relevant industries and mediums capable of supporting communications objectives. At present, activity has been limited to disseminating messages through words, images, and actions. But what can we learn from music?

Part 2: Musical Communication—the Power of Organised Sound

Musiology is concerned with the academic study of music, distinct from compositional or performance-related factors.³⁷ To understand how music communicates across a conceptual and physical level, the discussion must be interdisciplinary and examine multiple perspectives. Because there is an abundance of research on the ‘power’ of music, this article provides a synthesis of core research from two of the sub-disciplines of musicology—the sociology and psychology of music.

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33 Manuel Castells, *The Rise of The Network Society* 2000, p. 50

34 Manuel Castells, *The Network Society: A Cross-cultural Perspective* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2004), p. 3.

35 Castells, *Communication Power*, p. 4.

36 Cornish, ‘Strategic Communications’, p. 6.

37 Percy A. Scholes, *The Oxford Companion to Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 668.

The Sociology of Music

How do music's ubiquity and status in cultural life transfer to social life? The predominant socio-musicological research seeks to answer questions about how music is created, received, and used in everyday life, employing an interdisciplinary perspective to demonstrate the ways in which music is meaningful within human agency.³⁸ A sociological analysis of relationships and the construction of meaning offer an essential perspective from which to view the potential strategic agency of music. Key texts in the sociology of music cover numerous subjects, such as music and the self,³⁹ music as a social technology,⁴⁰ the influence of gender, class, race, and sexuality,⁴¹ genre and subcultures,⁴² and music in political and social movements.⁴³ This section will provide a concise overview of the relevant literature and research presented by influential authors in the sociology of music. It will highlight how music acts as a medium for self-constitution, and how it serves as a mechanism to inspire collective action.

Music and Identity

Tia DeNora's research on music as a technology of self presents music as a device for ordering the self as an agent.⁴⁴ Individuals use music 'to fill out and fill in, to themselves and to others, modes of aesthetic agency and, with it, subjective stances and identities'.⁴⁵ In this article, self-identity is understood as the production of a continuous set of individual activity, rather than a fixed or observable set of traits. This argument is closely associated with the work of Anthony Giddens; he proposed that the self is a reflexive project in which individuals actively shape, reflect on, and construct, through forming their own biological narratives.⁴⁶ Simon Frith's theory on music and identity extends this idea further. He claims that due to the emotional function of music being prevalent throughout adolescence to adulthood, the similarities between emotional experiences of music and certain kinds of identification make it possible to place ourselves in formulated cultural narratives.⁴⁷

38 William G. Roy, Timothy J. Dowd, 'What is Sociological about Music?' *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 36 (2010): 184.

39 T. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)

40 Nick Prior, *Popular Music Digital Technology and Society* (London: SAGE Publishing, 2018), p. 33.

41 David Hesmondhalgh, *Why Music Matters* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2013)

42 Peter J. Martin, *Sounds and Society: Themes in the Sociology of Music* (Manchester: University Press, 1995)

43 A. Ross, *The Rest is Noise* (New York: Faurer, 2007)

44 'Agency' refers to the thoughts, actions and ability of an individual to behave in a way that expresses their individual power. Mustafa Emirbayer, Ann Mische, 'What Is Agency?', *American Journal of Sociology* 103 (1998): 962-1023.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

46 A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991)

47 Simon Frith, 'Music and Everyday Life', *Critical Quarterly* (2002)

Drawing on interviews and ethnography, DeNora's work showcases music's role in everyday life. She finds that music enhances experience in multiple ways.⁴⁸ Whether it serves to re-energise or relax an individual, part of music's affective power is its co-presence with other things, such as people, events, or scenes. Thus, its emblematic capacity has a conditional presence, which in turn affects an individual's construction of meaning. DeNora explains that in such cases 'the link, or articulation, that is made—and which is so often biographically indelible—is initially arbitrary but is rendered symbolic'.⁴⁹ Music is paired or associated with aspects of an experience. Therefore its semiotic power is also related to our construction of memory. Music does not simply act upon individuals; meaning is constructed through relevant affect and extra-musical connections, such as occasions, circumstances of use, and personal associations.⁵⁰

Music and Belief

Music's capacity to evoke nostalgia and affect memory in an individual is primarily studied through the lens of music psychology. However, it can also be understood through its relationship to social memory, as mental images and nostalgia can form political and cultural profiles. If memory serves as the medium by which individual and collective identity is constituted, and music contains the capacity to evoke emotional memories, then music also serves as a powerful means for manipulating our frames of reference and perception of the world. Understanding music's role in connection to social movements is therefore intimately connected to memory, tradition, and cultural formation.⁵¹

Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison contend that music acts as part of a 'cognitive praxis' of social movements, and as a resource in the transformation of culture.⁵² They use examples from political movements across history, such as the 1960s rock 'n' roll era and black music in the civil rights movement, to represent how music helps reconstitute 'the structures of feeling, the cognitive codes, and the collective dispositions to act, that are culture'.⁵³ The term 'structures of feeling' describes the thoughts and emotions that can be accessed through

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48 DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life*, p. 47.

49 Ibid., p. 66.

50 Ibid., p. 61.

51 Ron Eyerman, Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 42.

52 Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*, p. 173.

53 Ibid., p. 173.

music.⁵⁴ However, these structures are not merely emotive; such construction of meaning also contains a rational, logical core and truth-bearing significance. In social movements, structures of feeling can be preserved in and through music. Whilst this experience may only be temporary, it is still recorded and enters into the memory of an individual or collective group.⁵⁵

David Hesmondhalgh's work also contributes significantly to understanding music's place in society. Through his theory of society and critique of cultural industries, he explores how music enhances the lives of both individuals and groups, and discusses the obstacles that may prevent it from doing so. He asserts that 'social publicness' is a virtue promulgated by musical culture.⁵⁶ Musical culture develops identities and values that have the potential to sustain political ideals and serve as a binding force for communities.⁵⁷ Whilst his argument is similar to that of Eyerman and Jamison—that music has the potential to influence our constructions of identity and attachments to extra-musical experiences—his ideas also present an alternative perspective.

Hesmondhalgh suggests that music's role in social and political movements needs to be understood beyond the standard interpretation, which commonly conceives of music as either a vehicle of expression and sentiment, e.g. protest songs, national anthems, and political campaigns,⁵⁸ or as a response to society through political thought in action.⁵⁹ Punk, rave, rock, hip hop, and reggae are depicted as rebellions against the prevailing conditions of their time, yet also as a site for 'pompous, self-aggrandizing pseudo-revolt'.⁶⁰ Hesmondhalgh claims these topics are too often mythologised. Instead, he describes music's ability to influence collective flourishing through its relationship with politics and the 'social publicness' of the communication it inspires.⁶¹ It enhances and co-presents interactions between people in different social places.

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54 Ibid., p. 161.

55 Ibid., p. 162.

56 David Hesmondhalgh, *Why Music Matters* (Blackwell Publishing: Oxford, 2013), p. 146.

57 Hesmondhalgh, *Why Music Matters*, p. 171.

58 D. Lynskey, *Thirty-Three Revolutions Per Minute: A History of Protest Songs* (London: Faber, 2010); R. Garofalo, *Rockin' the Boat* (Cambridge, MA: Beacon Press, 1992); K. A. Ceerulo, 'Symbols and the world system', *Social Forum* (1993): 243.

59 J. Street, *Music and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012)

60 Hesmondhalgh, *Why Music Matters*, p. 143.

61 Ibid., p. 144.

The Psychology of Music

Music psychology is an interdisciplinary research domain that seeks to understand how the underlying mechanisms involved in creating, processing, and enjoying music, influence listeners and performers. Humans are intrinsically musical beings due to our tendency to seek patterns, solve clues, unravel sensory data, and communicate through story-telling.⁶² Failing to address the plethora of cognitive functions involved in a musical experience would result in an incomplete understanding of music's capabilities; however, different theoretical approaches, methods, and samples have left a heterogeneous picture regarding the number and nature of musical functions.

A process of perceiving and constructing meaning is essential to the formation of musical experience.⁶³ Thomas Schäfer's research suggests three distinct underlying dimensions in our motivation to listen to music—to regulate arousal and mood, to achieve self-awareness, and to express social relatedness.⁶⁴ The way we integrate musical experiences into our lives depends on these dimensions. Psychologist Patrick N. Juslin is a pioneer in the field of music and emotion who has contributed significantly to prevailing thought in the subject. His research findings draw on multiple disciplines, including ethnomusicology, neuroscience, and experimental psychology, to create the *BRECVEM model*, which serves as a framework for understanding how mechanisms in music induce emotional states.⁶⁵

The BRECVEM model provides a framework for understanding music's potential to induce emotion through seven mechanisms or information-processing devices at different levels of the brain. Each mechanism utilises a distinct type of information to guide future behaviour. The key feature of all seven is 'the psychological mechanism that mediates between the musical event and the listener experiencing the music'.⁶⁶

62 Philip Ball, *The Music Instinct: How Music Works and Why We Can't Do Without It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) p. 409.

63 Siu-Lan Tan et al., *Psychology of Music: From Sound to Significance* (Routledge Press, 2017), p. 2.

64 Thomas Schäfer et al., 'The Psychological Functions of Music Listening', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4 (2013): 511.

65 Patrick N. Juslin, 'From Everyday Emotions to Aesthetic Emotions: Towards a Unified Theory of Musical Emotions', *Physics Life Review*, 10:3 (2013): 235–66.

66 Juslin, 'From Everyday Emotions to Aesthetic Emotions', p. 238.

1. *Brain stem reflex* refers to ‘a process whereby an emotion is induced by music because one or more fundamental acoustic characteristics of the music are taken by the brain stem to signal a potentially important and urgent event that needs attention’.⁶⁷ This could involve sounds that are sudden, loud, or dissonant, or that feature accelerating patterns, quick attack, or sharp timbre. As such, brain stem reflexes may evoke feelings of surprise in the listener by increasing arousal.⁶⁸
2. *Rhythmic entrainment* refers to ‘a process whereby an emotion is evoked by a piece of music because a powerful, external rhythm in the music influences an internal bodily rhythm in the listener (e.g. heart rate), such that the latter rhythm adjusts toward and eventually ‘locks in’ to a common periodicity’.⁶⁹ This feeling of entrainment, evident in certain genres such as techno music and film music, can increase arousal and feelings of communication.⁷⁰
3. *Evaluative conditioning* refers to ‘a process whereby an emotion is induced by a piece of music simply because this stimulus has often been paired with other positive or negative stimuli’.⁷¹ A piece of music played at a particular event may become synonymous with the emotions experienced at that event, so that the music arouses the same emotions in future. Juslin argues that this mechanism is most interesting since it ‘involves subconscious, unintentional, and effortless processes that can be subtly affected by a mundane musical event’.⁷²
4. *Emotional contagion* refers to a ‘process whereby an emotion is induced by a piece of music because the listener perceives the emotional expression of the music, and then “mimics” this expression internally’.⁷³ Feelings arise from the voice-like features of the music due to a ‘brain module’ responding automatically to certain musical features—as if they were coming from a human voice expressing emotions.⁷⁴

67 P.N. Juslin, ‘Music and Emotion: Seven Questions, Seven Answers’, in I. Deliège, J. Davidson (eds), *Music and the mind: essays in honour of John Sloboda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 113–35.

68 Juslin, ‘From Everyday Emotions to Aesthetic Emotions’, p. 244.

69 M. Clayton, R. Sager, U. Will, ‘In Time with the Music: The Concept of Entrainment and its Significance for Ethnomusicology’, *European Meetings in Ethnomusicology*, 11 (2005): 3–75.

70 A.P. Demos et al., ‘Rocking to the Beat: Effects of Music and Partners’ Movements on Spontaneous Interpersonal Coordination’, *Journal of Experimental Psychology* (2012): 49–53.

71 Juslin, ‘From Everyday Emotion to Aesthetic Emotion’, p. 246.

72 *Ibid.*

73 *Ibid.*

74 Juslin, *Handbook of Music and Emotion*, 310.

5. *Visual imagery* refers to ‘a process whereby an emotion is evoked in the listener because he or she conjures up inner images (e.g. of a beautiful landscape) while listening to the music’.⁷⁵ The listener is conceptualising the musical structure in terms of non-verbal mapping between the metaphorical ‘affordances’ of the music and ‘image-schemata’, grounded in bodily experience.⁷⁶ This may evoke feelings of pleasure and deep relaxation, which could have far-reaching implications in clinical applications.⁷⁷
6. *Episodic memory* refers to ‘a process whereby an emotion is induced in a listener activated by a salient melodic theme associated with emotionally charged events in the listener’s memory’.⁷⁸ This is often referred to as the ‘Darling, they’re playing our tune...’ phenomenon. When the memory is evoked, the corresponding emotion is too. Multiple studies have also shown episodic memories can be linked to the arousal of emotions such as nostalgia, pride, a sense of self-identity, and belonging.⁷⁹
7. *Musical expectancy* refers to ‘a process whereby an emotion is induced in a listener because a specific feature of the music violates, delays, or confirms the listener’s expectations about the continuation of the music’.⁸⁰ This theory was pioneered by Leonard Meyer, and has since been rigorously investigated by other prominent music psychologists such as John Sloboda and Jaak Panksepp.⁸¹ Musical emotions related to violation of expectancy might include surprise, thrills, and anxiety.

This summary of the core findings from Music Psychology shows why and how music affects a listener’s physiology and emotions. The evidence-based theories outlined in the *BRECVEM model* act as a framework for the musical analysis in the following case study.

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75 Juslin, ‘From Everyday Emotion to Aesthetic Emotion’, p. 348.

76 Z. Kövecses, *Metaphor and Emotion* (Cambridge: University Press, 2000)

77 Juslin et al., ‘An experience sampling study of emotional reactions to music: listener, music, and situation’, *Emotion* (2008): 668–83.

78 J.B. Davies, *The Psychology of Music* (London: Hutchinson, 1978)

79 P. Janata et al., ‘Characterization of Music-evoked Autobiographical Memories’, *Memory*, 15 (2007)

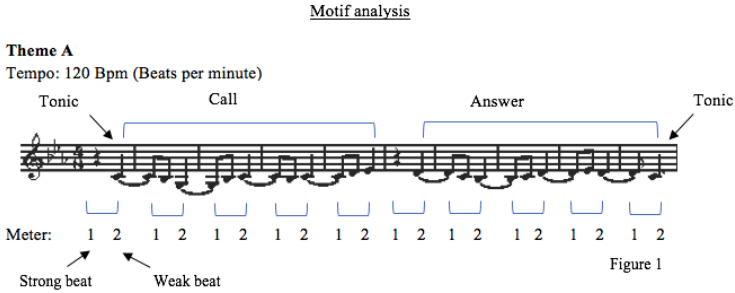
80 Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music*, 1956.

81 John Anthony Sloboda, ‘Empirical Studies of Emotional Response to Music’, in M. Riess-Jones, S. Holleran (eds) ‘Cognitive bases of musical communication’, *American Psychological Association* (1992): 33–46; Jaak Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1998)

Part 3: Case Study One—‘My Ummah, Dawn Has Appeared’

‘My Ummah, Dawn Has Appeared’ is a Daesh *nasheed* that was published online by the Ajnad Media Foundation in December 2013.⁸² *Nasheeds*, or *anashid* in Arabic, are militant Islamist hymns Daesh use as tools for disseminating messages to a global audience. They most commonly are used to accompany visuals in propaganda videos, but are also distributed online through audio files.⁸³ The jihadi nasheeds originated in the 1970s and 80s during the Islamic revival in the Middle East.⁸⁴ Famous Islamic poems are used as the textual base for these hymns to influence public opinion and arouse nostalgia. Arab nasheeds are a capella in accordance with the fundamentalist Wahhabi and Salafist interpretation of music and Islam, which forbids musical instruments owing to their potential for distraction from the study and recitation of the Quran.⁸⁵ ‘My Ummah’ represents a departure from the traditional modes of production that pre-date the digital revolution in music. Whilst Daesh adhere to the strict interpretation of no instruments, the nasheed features post-production editing and techniques associated with contemporary popular music.

Musical Analysis



By deconstructing the musical elements in this nasheed, it becomes easier to understand how it arouses emotion and acts like a force multiplier, mobilising support for Daesh recruitment campaigns. The immeasurable complexity and

82 Alex Marshall, ‘How ISIS got its anthem’, *Guardian*, 9 Nov 2014.
83 Vimeo, ‘My Ummah, Dawn Has Appeared Nasheed’ (2016)
84 Behnam Said, ‘Hymns (Nasheeds): A Contribution to the Study of the Jihadist Culture’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol 12 (2012): 865.
85 Jonathan J. Lee, ‘The ISIS Aesthetic and the Imagined Islamic State’, Masters dissertation, University of Exeter (2015), p. 135.

depth of music’s ability to affect cognitive experience can be analysed through the multiple perspectives of musicology’s sub-disciplines. The interconnected relationship between the nasheed’s compositional features and their subsequent physiological effects are outlined below to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the music affects a listener on a spectrum of levels.⁸⁶ Although this paper does not explore the neuroscience research in depth, the arguments presented here presume that the causal relationship between music and its physiological effects is a result of neural activity in the brain.⁸⁷

Theme:	Structure analysis		Repetitions:
	Call	Answer	
A	My Ummah, dawn has appeared (loomed), so await the expected victory	The Islamic State has arisen by the blood of the righteous	x 2
B	The Islamic State has arisen by jihad of the pious	They have offered their lives rightly with steadiness and certainty	x 2
B1	So that the religion may be initiated in it, the law of the Lord of the Worlds		x 1
A	My Ummah accept the good news, don't despair, victory is near	The Islamic State has arisen and begun imposing its might	x 2
B	It has arisen, drawing out glory, and the era of the sunset is ended	By faithful men who are unafraid of war	x 2
B1	They have drafted immortal glory that will not perish or disappear		x 1
A	My Ummah, God is our Lord so grant your blood	Victory will not return except with the blood of the martyrs	x 2
B	Who have spent their time, hoping for their Lord in the House of the Prophets	They have offered their lives for God, and the religion of redemption	x 2
B1	They are the people of sacrifice and giving, the people of generosity and dignity		x 1
A	My Ummah accept the good news: the sun of steadfastness has risen	We have marched in masses to my lord: the honoured glory	x 2
B	That we may return the light, faith and glorious might (splendour)	By men who have forsaken the material world and have won immortality	x 2
B1	And they have returned the Ummah of glory and the certain victory		x 1
A	My Ummah, dawn has appeared (loomed), so await the expected victory	The Islamic State has arisen by the blood of the righteous	x 2

Figure 2

⁸⁶ Listening to the nasheed is recommended to contextualise the musical analysis presented. Please note the following reference for the musical source. See, Vimeo, *My Ummah, Dawn Has Appeared - Nasheed* (2016)

⁸⁷ Daniel Levitin, *This Is Your Brain On Music* (Atlantic Books: Great Britain, 2008): 83–111.

Instrumentation

As noted above, ‘My Ummah’ adheres to the Salafist fundamentalist teachings on music and so features male voices singing unaccompanied (a capella). One male voice becomes a group through applying post-production edits; the techniques of *layering* and *reverb* add resonance to the leading voice, making it sound as if it were accompanied. The voices are *layered* octaves apart to create a full, powerful sound. The use of *reverb* makes the voices sound as if they were close to the listener. When Theme A repeats, voices can be heard harmonising in the background, which gives additional support to the re-emergence of the main theme. The choral effect of men seemingly singing together enhances one of the central messages of this nasheed—a call to the *ummah*, or collective community of Islamic peoples.⁸⁸ An individual susceptible to Daesh propaganda might hear the multiple male voices as an audio representation of the virtual Caliphate.⁸⁹

Melody

In music theory, *melody* is the main theme of a musical piece, a *motif* is a shorter musical idea, and *inversion* refers to the technique of composing an original melody backwards. As presented in Figure 1, Theme A dominates the entirety of the nasheed—it is repeated, inverted, or slightly modified in every line. Theme B is the inverted melody, and theme B1 is a modified version of B. Inverting a melody gives the listener a sense of both familiarity and newness; the listener is familiar with the pitch intervals between notes and surprised at the manipulation of the melody. This technique stimulates attentiveness whilst embedding the melody into the memory.⁹⁰ Consistent repetition of similar motifs adds to the meditative quality of the nasheed and deepens a listener’s attention to the words being sung.

The motif is ten bars long and is experienced as two mini phrases. These are labelled *call* and *answer* because the melody is unfinished after the first *call* phrase—it fails to end on the note with which it began, and there is a rest between phrases. The *tonic* is the first note of the motif and acts as the ‘home’ note of the melody; in this case its corresponding key is C minor. In order for a

88 Fawaz Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist* (Harcourt: Florida, 2008), p. 287.

89 Charlie Winter, ‘The Virtual “Caliphate”’: Understanding Islamic State’s Propaganda Strategy’, Quilliam Foundation (2015): 22–28.

90 See Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (1956)

melody to ‘feel finished’, composers often use the tonic as the final note, which occurs at the end of the *answer* phrase. This call and answer technique is found throughout musical history—it is most effective in combination with lyrics as it compliments their delivery and creates a pattern listeners easily attune to.⁹¹ The call and answer technique creates a kind of musical hyperbole, adding further emphasis to the words of the nasheed. The verbal structure of the nasheed is shown in Figure 2—each line is divisible into two mini phrases.

Rhythm

Rhythm refers to the length of musical notes and how they group together into units of time. melody can be described as having a *swung rhythm* due to the combination of long and short notes in sequence, as depicted in Figure 1. Swung rhythms are most commonly used in jazz music (think of the familiar snare drum intro ‘taa—ta—ta—taa’). Whilst this nasheed can not be likened to jazz, the melody uses a modified swung rhythm to create a particular groove, or propulsive rhythmic feeling (‘taa—ta—taa—ta—taa’). This rhythm etches a pattern into the listener’s memory through ‘swinging’ around the strict metre.⁹² In addition, a rule in the classical form of Arabic poetry includes ‘the application of a monometer with lines divided into two hemistichs (half lines) and a monorhyme’.⁹³ The English translation in Figure 2 fails to portray the Arabic rhymes; however they can be heard when listening. This rhyme scheme corresponds to the melodic *call* and *answer* as previously described in the melody section.

Metre

Metre refers to the way strong and weak beats are grouped together. The metre is a critical compositional feature in this nasheed as it creates momentum for the text. A particularly interesting point here is that the notes with a longer duration (i.e. two notes at the same pitch, tied together with a slur—the curved line—underneath) land on the weak second beat of the metre (labelled as 2 in Figure 1). This effect compliments the swung rhythm and allows it to be repeated in a cycle. The rhythmic pattern together with the melodic pattern enhance the meditative quality of the nasheed, tending to induce a trance-like state in the listener.

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⁹¹ Levitin, *The Organized Mind*, p. 62.

⁹² Philip Ball, *The Music Instinct* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 328.

⁹³ Henrik Gratrud, ‘Islamic State Nasheeds As Messaging Tools’, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 39:12 (2016): 1051.

Tempo

Tempo refers to the pace of a piece of music and is a significant compositional feature. It is strongly related to the rhythm and metre of a phrase—determining how fast or slow the music appears to flow. The mechanics of music perception are exceedingly sensitive to the rate at which musical structures are presented to the brain.⁹⁴ This nasheed has a tempo of 120 bpm, which is considered a moderate pace. The resonance theory of tempo perception asserts that tempo perception and production are closely related to the natural movement of humans.⁹⁵ Numerous studies have found that 120 bpm is a ‘preferred’ tempo; it has a significant physiological effect that encourages listeners to have an emotional response to the music.⁹⁶ A tempo of 120 bpm is fast enough to increase the heart rate and respiration rate of listeners, which have been linked to feelings of excitement and anxiety.⁹⁷ In ‘My Ummah’, the rhythm of each thematic repetition fluctuates slightly, but the tempo remains constant throughout.

Text

The text of ‘My Ummah’ is sung in Arabic, although Daesh produce nasheeds in a variety of languages.⁹⁸ The English translation (see Figure 2) reveals the central themes and poetic origin of the nasheed.⁹⁹ Extensive research has shown that Daesh’s messaging focuses on six interconnected themes—brutality, victimhood, mercy, war, belonging, and apocalyptic utopianism.¹⁰⁰ The frequency of these topics in ‘My Ummah’ is revealed through narrative analysis. The text centers around and promotes the following messages—jihad is the solution, fighters are role models, martyrdom reaps rewards, the Islamic state is established, there will be war and brutality for all, Daesh is the leader and protector of Islam.¹⁰¹ Lines such as ‘the Islamic state has arisen by the blood of the righteous’ and ‘the sun of steadfastness has arisen’ are used figuratively to increase the religious credibility of the text. Metaphors serve as a linguistic and conceptual tool of persuasion, and are an integral technique for inspiring political action.¹⁰² This

94 Robert Jourdain, *Music, The Brain, and Ecstasy* (Harper Collins: New York, 1997): 142.

95 L. Van Noorden, D. Moelants, ‘Resonance in the perception of musical pulse’, *Journal of New Music Research*, 28 (1999): 43–66.

96 A. Fernández-Sotos et al, ‘Influence of Tempo and Rhythmic Unit in Musical Emotion Regulation’, *Frontiers in Computational Neuroscience* (2016): 80.

97 Fernández-Sotos et al, ‘Influence of Tempo’, p. 80.

98 Gratrud, ‘Islamic State Nasheeds As Messaging Tools’, p. 1051.

99 Translation sourced from Lee, ‘The ISIS Aesthetic’, 68–71.

100 Winter, ‘The Virtual Caliphate’, p. 25.

101 Gratrud, ‘Islamic State Nasheeds As Messaging Tools’, p. 1055.

102 Elena Semino, *Metaphors in Discourse* (Cambridge: University Press, 2008), p. 85.

symbolism correlates with the Salafi belief system to exploit an individual's unconscious emotional associations. The technique encourages listeners to build a conceptual structure of the message presented, heightening their interpretation of the nasheed by constructing a particular meaning.¹⁰³

Structure

Structure refers to the overall layout of a composition's musical form. Figure 2 presents a structural breakdown of 'My Ummah'; it can be summarised as A—B—B1—A (which in Western music theory is called *modified ternary form*). This is also significant for a listener's experience of music. The structure of most popular music creates a familiar pattern, e.g. verse—chorus—verse—chorus. A previously-heard structure is recognised by the cognitive schema in a listener's brain, encouraging a greater level of attention.¹⁰⁴ Theme B1, as a modified version of Theme B, also draws the listener's attention: the text of B1 repeats only once, adding significance to the line. The *instrumentation, melody, rhythm, metre, tempo*, and *text* all contribute to the perception of *structure* over time as they manipulate the listener's expectation and memory.¹⁰⁵

Strategic Intent

Nasheeds serve as a tool to mobilise supporters, to recruit aspiring jihadis, and to encourage a higher level of cognitive involvement in understanding and relating to Daesh. Each individual musical element contributes towards stimulating an emotional response from the listener. More broadly, they form an integral part of jihadist culture as an expression of their ideology and goals.¹⁰⁶ The memorable melody and rhythmic pattern of 'My Ummah' engages listeners, encouraging them to receive the message of the nasheed in a heightened state of awareness. Music with aggressive and violent lyrics can increase the potential for experiencing aggressive thoughts and feelings.¹⁰⁷ Listening to such music can lead to violent behaviour, giving greater power to the 'call to take up arms'. Music can be used by both producers and listeners to motivate intent and action. This becomes extremely powerful when embedded in a social movement, as the social publicness of a musical culture develops identities and values that

103 George Lakoff, Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University Press, 2000), p. 146.

104 Levitin, *This Is Your Brain On Music*, 237.

105 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

106 Said, 'Hymns (Nasheeds)', p. 864.

107 C. A. Anderson et al, 'Exposure to Violent Media: The effects of songs with violent lyrics on aggressive thoughts and feelings', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84 (2003): 960–71.

have the potential to sustain political ideals, suffusing an individual's beliefs with purpose and strengthening a sense of community.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the nasheed's message is preserved in an online audio file, and therefore, can be played repeatedly and rehearsed. This form of distribution is leveraged by jihadis and provides an extremely powerful way to build community at a distance. This case study has highlighted how Daesh nasheeds conjure a meaningful experience for their target audience; by appealing to listeners at the emotional level, they 'instrumentalise the truth to suit their strategic objectives'.¹⁰⁹

Case Study Two: 'Abdullah-X'

In comparison, this case study will evaluate a behavioural change campaign aimed at countering the emotive pulls of Daesh's recruitment efforts. It highlights how the rational-actor approach commonly found in strategic communications campaigns is less effective at influencing a target audience. Music is notably absent from this campaign. I suggest to its detriment. Little attention is paid to non-discursive factors, emotional appeal, positive sense of communal identity, or encouraging a pro-active, non-violent response to legitimate grievances.

'Abdullah-X' is a counter-narrative campaign produced by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue in collaboration with a former anonymous extremist.¹¹⁰ Using an animated character as the narrator and protagonist, its content centres around the thoughts of a conflicted Muslim boy searching for his identity in British society. The project aims to 'radically challenge online extremist messaging using hard-hitting, robust, specialist, subject-based knowledge'.¹¹¹ As a counter-narrative, it adheres to the definition through directly challenging, deconstructing, discrediting, and demystifying the violent extremist narrative.¹¹² The multimedia online campaign launched in January 2012 disseminates content across social networking channels including YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Offline, the campaign presents its message through graphic novels distributed to schools and other education facilities. The appearance of 'Abdullah-X' changes between videos with the intent of spreading the message that 'the character could be anyone'.¹¹³ The project's slogan is: 'Abdullah-X: Mind of a Scholar, Heart of a

108 Eyermann, Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*.

109 Kierat Ranautta-Sambhi & Erin Duffy, 'Daesh and Its Single Truth', in *Fake News: A Roadmap*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (2018): 52.

110 Radicalisation Network, 'Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism', p. 10.

111 Abdullah-X, '[Abdullah-X](#)', Accessed 10 July 2018.

112 A.S. Hemmingsen, K.I. Castro, 'The Trouble with Counter-Narratives', Danish Institute for International Studies (2017): 5.

113 Sky News, '[Abdullah-X Cartoon Aims To Deter Jihadists](#)', (July 2014) Accessed 10 July 2018.

Warrior'.¹¹⁴ The project's YouTube channel was its most active platform with a total of 22 videos and 1,538 subscribers when last accessed.¹¹⁵ Two videos are used as examples in this analysis—the first has the highest number of views and the second is the most recently published video to date on the channel.

YouTube Video 1: 'Five Considerations for a Muslim on Syria'

Metrics

Publish date: 7 March 2014

Views: 35, 960

Likes/Dislikes: Disabled

Stills from the video



Original source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tKKbydB4scA>

YouTube Video 2: 'Knowing your place'

Metrics

Publish date: 12 Oct 2016

Views: 1,761 views

Likes/Dislikes: 46 / 4

¹¹⁴ YouTube, '[Abdullah-X](#)', Accessed 10 July 2018.

¹¹⁵ These metrics are publicly available information and subject to change. Measures of engagement for the campaign were unavailable due to access being restricted to non-account holders.

Stills from the video



Original source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3QsAiBqtEr0&t=20s>

Narrative Framing

The greatest strength of ‘Abdullah-X’ as a behaviour change campaign is also its greatest weakness. Primarily, it seeks to re-frame the narrative propagated by Islamist extremist groups.¹¹⁶ In ‘Five Considerations for a Muslim on Syria’ it directly confronts the audience, asking, ‘Have you actually thought about the needs of the people?’ and describes the militant activity in Syria as a ‘manufactured jihad’. This could be judged as successful because it acknowledges and takes seriously the concerns of the intended audience, whilst admonishing the turn to violence as a solution to their grievances. It addresses what is influencing the target audience but seeks to redirect their behaviour through challenging preconceived beliefs. Additionally, it undermines the promises of utopia promoted in much of the content published by Daesh.¹¹⁷

Conversely, in questioning the audience and appealing to their rationality, the campaign fails to communicate its message as effectively as it might by using more emotionally manipulative tactics. It presumes the target audience will respond to argument-based logic, instead of addressing the emotional factors involved in making a decision to join a terrorist organisation.¹¹⁸ Asking the audience to weigh up the pros and cons of travelling to Syria is equivalent to adopting a rational choice model (based on a cost-benefit analysis of options),

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116 This can be assumed to be Daesh due to the rhetoric used in numerous videos.

117 Winter, ‘The Virtual Caliphate’, p. 22.

118 F. M. Moghaddam, ‘The Staircase to Terrorism: A psychological exploration’, *American Psychologist* 60 (2005):161–69.

with the inherent limitations of that model.¹¹⁹ It fails to account for variance in the target audiences' beliefs, or to consider where they might be found along the radicalisation spectrum. On the other hand, research has shown that emotions are key to connecting with a group's perceptions and motivations.¹²⁰ Exposing an audience to positive emotionally-framed messages effectively mitigates potential cognitive dissonance. *Cognitive dissonance*, or the psychological state of having conflicting beliefs, is considered a significant barrier counter-radicalisation practices must overcome.¹²¹

The Target Audience

The issues raised in the section above are symptomatic of some of the wider issues in using counter-narrative campaigns to change the behaviour of a target audience. Part of the problem is ensuring the message communicates effectively with its intended audience, rather than being a generalised counter-statement.¹²² In strategic communications, identifying the correct target audience involves a deep understanding of behavioural and attitudinal criteria.¹²³ A multi-tiered assessment should be performed to establish the strategic and technical literacy of a campaign, to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of using different mediums to deploy a message. The Institute of Strategic Dialogue collaborated with Jigsaw, a project created by Google, to ensure the video 'Five Considerations for a Muslim on Syria' appeared as the top link for an individual searching for related content online.¹²⁴ The intended purpose of the 'redirect method' was to provide those browsing the Internet with specific questions with answers from voices debunking Daesh recruitment narratives.

However, whilst this video may have enjoyed some success in reaching its target audience, it failed to provide information about the success of the campaign in preventing or deterring an individual from radicalisation. If in fact the campaign was successful and some young people were swayed to not join Daesh, providing evidence for a 'non-event' and incorporating it into a measure of success is extremely challenging. A longer timescale for evaluation has been suggested

119 Raymond Boudon, 'Beyond Rational Choice Theory', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 29 (2003): 18.

120 Krešimir Čosić et al., 'Emotionally Based Strategic Communications in the Process of Societal Deradicalization', *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 12 (2018): 209

121 Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, 'Promoting Exit from Violent Extremism: Themes and Approaches', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 26 (2013): 100.

122 Radicalisation Awareness Network, 'Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism', p. 9.

123 European Parliament, 'Countering Terrorist Narratives', p. 42.

124 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

to mitigate this problem.¹²⁵ Yet, the sporadic posting of ‘Abdullah-X’ videos on YouTube over the project’s two years of activity was neither sufficient nor sustained.

Mixed Messages

The main criticism of this campaign is the copious number of mixed messages it presents to the audience. In numerous videos it describes Muslims as victims of an unfair system and as targets of Islamophobia. Whilst this may be addressing the legitimate grievances of the target audience, it also supports the ‘in-group vs. out-group’ divide. This strategy emphasising a division between Muslims and non-Muslims is evident in numerous videos. The ‘Knowing Your Place’ video tells the story of a Muslim experiencing prejudice as a result of the Brexit referendum. The character says ‘don’t worry about those haters, they’re blaming us for their own system’s failures’. But if Abdullah-X is meant to be a British citizen, then by saying ‘their system’ he is excluding himself from belonging to Britain, thereby exacerbating the us-and-them divide. In the video ‘A Message to Muslim Youth’ the character expresses a feeling of angst and the opinion that Muslims are undermined in the mainstream media. It directly addresses Muslim youth saying ‘none of these latte-drinking, fashion-beard-growing and skinny-jean-wearing crowd, have a clue about the amount of strength and will-power we Muslim youth show every day’.¹²⁶

Daesh regularly capitalise upon the identity conflicts of vulnerable individuals to promote their ideology and ‘superior’ way of life.¹²⁷ The campaign fails to address Muslims positively, as part of a wider community and a valued group in British society. A disenfranchised individual is more open to manipulation and to recruitment by a violent extremist organisation that can leverage his need to belong. The ‘Abdullah-X’ project fails to create a powerful message or theme and to promote it consistently across its videos. The overarching message of the campaign is that an individual at risk of radicalisation should ‘think more’. However, it provides no alternative narrative young Muslims can ‘think’ about, and no positive inclusive movement they can belong to.

125 Tanya Silverman et al., ‘The Impact of Counter-Narratives’, Institute of Strategic Dialogue (2016): 50.

126 Abdullah-X, ‘A Message to Muslim Youth’, 27 Oct 2015.

127 Charlie Winter, ‘Apocalypse, later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand’, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 35 (2018): 103.

Moreover, the project does not consistently adhere to the principles it promotes. The video 'Freedom of Speech vs. Responsibility #CharlieHebdo', posted five days after the terrorist attack on the French newspaper, speaks about the importance of freedom of expression and the acceptance of diverse opinions.¹²⁸ Yet the comments section is disabled on numerous videos, including 'Five Considerations for a Muslim on Syria'. In 'Knowing Your Place' the character criticises the Brexit referendum, labelling it as 'bull' and claiming that the prejudices of the older generation can be compared to the behaviour of terrorists. The hypocrisy here is twofold: First, disabling comments prevents viewers from expressing their thoughts and responding to the content. Pro-Daesh accounts and violent extremist organisations can use this as an easy counter-attack to support their argument that Western liberal democracies do not 'practice what they preach'.¹²⁹ Second, it describes itself as a political account, however, it only discusses current affairs in two videos. These inconsistencies limit the success of 'Abdullah-X' as a behavioural change campaign.

More importantly, the rational-actor model upon which many counter-narrative campaigns are founded, fails to compete against the emotive pull of Daesh recruitment techniques. The absence of any appeal to emotion, physiology, memory, and sense of identity, which might be supplied by, for example, a musical component, makes this campaign much less effective than it might otherwise have been.

Part 4: Discussion

This section will utilise the analysis from the two case studies and introduce hybrid communication theories to assess the parallels between musicology and strategic communications, covering two critical factors—the audience and their environment.

The Audience

Strategic communications discourse has yet to assimilate completely the concept of the 'active audience' into its practice. This idea proposes that individuals modify the information they receive by interpreting it through the lens of their own cultural experience.¹³⁰ Communication is a multi-modal process: it is

128 Abdullah-X, 'Abdullah-X: Freedom of Speech vs Responsibility #CharlieHebdo', 13 Jan 2015.

129 H. J. Ingram, 'Three Traits of the Islamic State's Information Warfare', *RUSI Journal*, 159 (2014): 5–8.

130 Castells, *Communication Power*, p. 127.

not linear nor consumed passively. Regardless of how successfully a message is propagated, the notion that a change in behaviour might be solely attributable to the impactful delivery of a strategic message is an outdated concept. Audiences are not merely receivers, they are also producers of information; the audience ‘carves out its meaning by contrasting its experience with the one-directional flows of information it receives’.¹³¹ In communication studies, Castells’ theory of ‘the network society’ focuses on the centres of power in social networks, and on the empowerment of individuals through their connection to the network.¹³² These nodes and links make a difference to the delivery and reception of a message or narrative. As communications recur in multiple feedback loops, they create self-generating networks and produce a dual effect¹³³—coordinated behaviours and mental activity that generate images, thoughts, and meanings.¹³⁴

This matters in the context of persuading a target audience through narrative. Firm assumptions cannot be made in predicting the kind of information an individual might be exposed to, how they perceive it, and the meaning they take from it. Cristina Archetti asserts that narratives are ‘socially and relationally constructed rather than scripted messages’.¹³⁵ Individuals reflexively constitute their own narratives through myriad factors including, but not limited to, their social relationships, a fluid world view, their perspective resulting from their position in the social space at any given time, and their account of and reasoning about their behaviour.¹³⁶ This dynamic relationship between individual agency and socio-structural conditions, means that understanding how a narrative is appropriated and filtered by each individual is critical to communicating effectively.

On the other hand, musicological discourse embraces the idea of an active and reciprocal audience. Musical communication occurs at the interface of the personal, musical, and situational variables which give rise to a musical performance, and the response to the piece of music in a specific situation.¹³⁷ The performance context of music goes beyond the typical image of a concert and an obedient audience. With the development of mass media and global digital communications, music can be consumed in numerous ways and settings, e.g. through the use of mobile app, at a festival, or through a viral meme. Not only

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131 Ibid., p. 132.

132 Ibid., p. 4.

133 Ibid., p. 26.

134 Capra, *The Hidden Connections*, p. 72.

135 Archetti, *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media*, p. 220.

136 Ibid., p. 221.

137 North and Hargreaves, *The Social and Applied Psychology of Music*, p. 7.

do people listen to music in a wide variety of settings, their reasons for doing so also vary; a listener might use music for specific arousal-state goals.¹³⁸ As the research around social connections, emotions, and music show, the old linear model of a communicator using a channel to send information to a receiver is insufficient for describing the process of musical communications. Moreover, musical communication can be understood as interactive, and predicated on the listener's assessment of meaning and extra-musical associations.

In addition, musicologists also accommodate for the variance in the way an audience listens to music. The modes of listening can be segregated into three types—listening in search, listening in readiness, and background listening.¹³⁹ Mode one, *listening in search*, describes a listener actively searching the acoustic environment for cues, with an ability to focus and analyse specific details. Mode two, *listening in readiness*, depends on the associations a listener has built up over time. Familiar sounds are more easily identifiable than others; when a piece of music is new to a listener, their perceptual system is ready to pick up new acoustics if they encounter some familiar elements. Mode three, *background listening*, refers to the process of hearing all sound where the listener is not attempting to pick out a particular acoustic event. Listeners have the ability to switch modes and evaluate the music or sound they are hearing. Listeners are likely to engage more deeply when the instruments, rhythms, melodies they are hearing, or the topics represented in the music are familiar.¹⁴⁰ This correlates with Archetti's argument; specifically, the importance of understanding that individuals filter narratives through internal social and emotional structures.¹⁴¹

The Environment

Since the advent of the Internet and digital services such as YouTube, Spotify, and Facebook, the conditions in which an individual consumes information have rapidly changed. Castells notes three prominent changes in how individuals interact with Internet-based media, including but not limited to the simultaneity of communicative practices i.e. combining attention to different wireless devices; dissolution of 'prime-time' in favour of 'my time'; time substitution of Internet-based communication for incompatible activities.¹⁴² This section will not investigate

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138 Ibid., p. 11.

139 B. Traux, *Acoustic Communication* (Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing; 2001).

140 Anthony Lemieux and Robert Nill, 'The Role and Impact of Music in Promoting (and Countering) Violent Extremism', (2011): 147.

141 Archetti, *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media*, 224.

142 Castells, *Communication Power*, 134.

digital cultures in depth due to the scope and research objectives of this article; however, it is critical for governments to understand these changes within the theories of media ecology, in order to have a progressive mind-set and approach to strategic communications. Media ecology is the study of communication technologies as cultural environments.¹⁴³ This perspective reflects the attempt to unveil media as a complex set of message systems and to understand the resulting impact on human perception, understanding, and feeling.¹⁴⁴ It is critical to consider this perspective within the strategic communications field in order to build a comprehensive understanding of how a medium affects the delivery of a message, or how it might be studied to influence a target audience.

This ecological concern is central to McLuhan's work and to the expression he coined—"the medium is the message".¹⁴⁵ He sought to convey that the importance of any communication technology is not the message it transmits, but the effect of introducing that message into human affairs using that specific technology. The means used to communicate affect any message communicated by those means: today's technology has radically changed the form, quantity, speed, distribution, and direction of the information we consume, which also seems to be affecting our values and attitudes. The musical analysis of the nasheed in Case Study One demonstrates this point. The nasheed is accessible partially because of the familiar traditional musical forms it is based on, but the technological manipulation creating resonance and layering voices exemplify the message of the hymn in a way that could not be done before, and thanks to the reach of modern technology, this community strengthening device can be deployed at a great distance.

As outlined in the opening sections, theories from the sociology of music highlight music's capability to perform multiple social functions. Research from DeNora, Hesmondhalgh, Eyermann, and Jamerson all converge on the notion that music is an active medium; through music individuals engage with their own consciousness and with their social identity. Music has the capability to deliver messages with impact because it influences an individual's physiology, emotions, and memory. Its role and consumption in society, place in culture, and utility as a flexible, communicative medium, are built upon myriad interconnected patterns and relationships. Understanding music through the aggregate of its heterogeneous elements allows for an interpretation that is active, emergent, open, and hybrid.

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143 W. J. Ong, 'Ecology and some of its future', *Explorations in Media Ecology*, 1 (2002): 6.

144 C. M. K. Lum, *Perspectives on culture, technology and communication: The media ecology tradition*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2006): 28.

145 McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 13.

Conclusion

This article has shown that strategic communications as a field of study can benefit from the perspectives of musicology. The research has supported the original hypothesis suggesting that these insights have the ability to improve an understanding of how strategic communications should best construct a compelling narrative and influence an audience. Both domains seek to understand how the meaning of a message is depicted through a medium, interpreted by an audience, and affected by the environment in which it is received. Both music and strategic communications share the purpose and intent of influencing an individual's behaviour, knowledge, or attitude.

Music can communicate meaning more effectively than a strategic communications behaviour change campaign because it has the capability to address the audience on deeper levels. Music targets emotion, physiology, memory, and sense of identity. The findings from Case Study One in the analysis section demonstrated why and how a Daesh nasheed is more likely to change an individual's behaviour and attitude. The arousal of emotion in music can be targeted through its compositional elements: a catchy song has the ability to serve as a force multiplier in a social movement or in an individual's personal narrative.¹⁴⁶ Music also affects an individual's physiology and perceptual system.¹⁴⁷ An alteration in the temporal change of a compositional element, or disrupting a familiar musical pattern, manipulates the listener's attention.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, due to this interactivity, the message of a piece of music can be delivered with impact both during and after a musical experience.

Strategic communications doctrine should conceptualise how to deliver powerful messages in a similar manner and construct emotionally-based behavioural change campaigns.¹⁴⁹ Findings from Case Study Two indicate that the rational-actor model upon which many counter-narrative campaigns are founded, fails to compete against the emotive pull of Daesh recruitment techniques. Designing targeted activities that can shape an individual's interpretation of meaning should be a primary focus in conducting strategic communications. Communicating meaning, therefore, becomes a source of social power through framing

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146 Eyerman and Jamison, *Music and Social Movements*, 160.

147 Levitin, *This Is Your Brain On Music*, 83–111.

148 *Ibid.*, 169–83.

149 Čosić et al., 'Emotionally Based Strategic Communication', 196–214.

the mind to interpret a message in an intended way.¹⁵⁰ Utilising music as a tool to induce emotional response, means the potential to deliver a message to a target audience with more impact.

This article presents a hybrid conceptual framework of integrated theories, to understand how music and strategic communications can be compared as ecological networks. These insights should contribute towards evolving strategic communications discourse and practice. The infamous phrase—‘winning over hearts and minds’—is a hollow sentiment if only the rational mind is considered and the social emotional heart is neglected. As a result of this study, further research should be conducted to understand how the aforementioned ideas could be leveraged by governments conducting strategic communications. Additional studies might include assessing music socially as a broader reflection of attitudes, or the processes by which a piece of music, or a music-related message, goes viral online. Strategic communications practitioners might be inspired by the holistic musicological approach of seeing communication as social ecology and community in practice.

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150 Castells, *Communication Power*, 136.

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HOSTILE GATEKEEPING: THE STRATEGY OF ENGAGING WITH JOURNALISTS IN EXTREMISM REPORTING

Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar

Abstract

This article broadly examines the relationship between strategic communications and journalism with specific reference to the issue of violent extremism. Using a case study of reporting on the Boko Haram conflict in Nigeria, it analyses the nature and consequences of engagement among the various communicators involved. The primary data were drawn from focus groups and individual interviews with thirty-two journalists and strategic communicators, and from analysis of Boko Haram videos and Nigerian security forces' press releases. The findings suggest that journalists have a tense but interdependent relationship with strategic communicators that is characterised by conflict and cooperation, harassment and intimidation. Strategic communicators' control of the conflict theatre and use of the Internet to reach audiences directly give them leverage in the relationship. They, however, rely on journalists to help enhance the reach and credibility of their narratives, while journalists depend significantly on their media releases.

Keywords— *gatekeeping, journalism, news values, Boko Haram, violent extremism, strategic communications*

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Introduction and Background

Journalism is in crisis,¹ and the art of strategic communications is in the ascendancy.² Neither is accidental. A combination of technological changes, economic upheaval, and audiences' distrust in news media has thrown much of the traditional media and professional journalism into turmoil.³ Conversely, the transformation of the media landscape and the growing interest of state and of non-state actors in the battles for the hearts and minds of the public have raised the art of strategic communications to new heights.⁴ The consequences are wide ranging. The rapid spread of disinformation (deliberate spread of erroneous information), misinformation (accidental or unwitting spread of erroneous information), and hate speech is the most obvious. 'Powerful new technology makes the manipulation and fabrication of content simple, and social networks dramatically amplify falsehoods peddled by States, populist politicians, and dishonest corporate entities, as they are shared by uncritical publics.'⁵ Journalism 'loses ground' and becomes a subject of 'existential attack'.⁶

While strategic communicators reap benefits from the open-access nature of the Internet and the unfettered opportunities it offers them to reach and influence audiences, professional journalism is groaning under considerable strain.⁷ Its business models are becoming increasingly unviable—epitomised by the collapse of many outlets, plummeting revenues, and staff cutbacks.⁸ It faces severe criticisms from both the Right, who accuse it 'of peddling "fake news"', and the

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1 Scholarship has touched on journalism's crisis from differing perspectives. John Russial, Peter Laufer and Janet Wasko, 'Journalism in Crisis?', *Javnost—The Public* 22(4), (2015): 299–312; Robert McChesney, 'Farewell to Journalism? Time for a Rethinking', *Journalism Practice* 13(5-6), (2012): 682–94; Núria Almiron, *Journalism in Crisis: Corporate Media and Financialization* (New York: Hampton Press, 2010).

2 Monroe Price, *Free Expression, Globalism and New Strategic Communication* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

3 Alberto Ardèvol-Abreu and Homero Gil de Zúñiga, 'Effects of Editorial Media Bias Perception and Media Trust on the Use of Traditional, Citizen, and Social Media News', *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 94(3), (2017): 703–24.

4 Price, *Free Expression*.

5 Cherilyn Iretton and Julie Posetti (eds.), *Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training* (Paris: UNESCO, 2018), p. 15.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

7 McChesney, 'Farewell to Journalism?.'

8 Russial, 'Journalism in Crisis?.'

Left, who blame it ‘for failing to play a robust monitorial role’.⁹ Although the industry is fighting back by adopting digital production practices and developing new business models,¹⁰ it still has a long way to go. Technological and economic changes play a role in this.

Digital giants such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter are increasingly usurping the resources of news organisations, depriving them of advertising revenues, and reaping the benefits of the journalism content news media create without paying for them and without facing the regulatory requirements applied to news organisations. They have developed a business model that aligns their economic interests with those of advertisers and made fortunes from it.¹¹ While this has helped spread new ideas, enhance creativity, expand commerce, boost businesses, and bring economic prosperity to many, it has also created room for the weaponisation of personal data¹² and the manipulation of vulnerable minds. As Dipayan Ghosh and Ben Scott argue, in the current marketplace enhanced by technology firms, all advertisers—‘whether they are pushing retail products, news stories, political candidates, or disinformation’—are basically alike: they all want to use the most ‘persuasive’ tools at their disposal.¹³ ‘The problem is that when disinformation operators leverage this system for precision propaganda, the harm to the public interest, the political culture, and the integrity of democracy is substantial and distinct from any other type of advertiser.’¹⁴

The impacts from disinformation frequently appear to manifest themselves in the rise of hate politics, extremist ideologies, and identity-related violence. An aspect of this can be seen in the way violent extremists, such as the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and al-Shabaab, easily exploit web technology to recruit new adherents, intimidate their adversar-

9 Des Freedman, “‘Public Service’ and the Journalism Crisis: Is the BBC the Answer?,” *Television & New Media* (2018): 1–16, p. 1.

10 Mark Deuze and Tamara Wutschge, ‘Beyond Journalism: Theorizing the Transformation of Journalism’, *Journalism* 9(2), (2018): 165–85; Barbie Zelizer, *What Journalism Could Be* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2017); Jeffrey Alexander, ‘The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered: Cultural Power’, *Erindale Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 8(1), (2015): 9–31.

11 Dipayan Ghosh and Ben Scott, *Digital Deceit: The Technologies Behind Precision Propaganda on the Internet* (Cambridge, MA: Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School, January 2018).

12 Mark Bridge, ‘Tech Firms Have “Weaponised” Personal Data, Says Apple Chief Tim Cook’, *The Times* (24 October 2018). [accessed 24 October 2018].

13 Ghosh, *Digital Deceit*, p. 3.

14 Ibid.

ies, and terrorise the citizenry.¹⁵ This is particularly problematic because, unlike most conventional online advertisers who buy space and slots to market their products, extremist groups operate surreptitiously, slipping in their messages on the Internet and social media and executing their deadly plans. Although technology companies and governments now use various cyber-policing techniques to contain them (and security services exploit terror groups' cyber activity to counter such operations),¹⁶ extremist groups often evade these measures. And it is their ability to surprise—enhanced by the affordances of new technology—that strengthens their capability and sharpens their strategic communications efficacy.

Boko Haram has demonstrated its dexterity in this. Formed in Nigeria's north-east around 2002 as a youth Muslim movement aimed at establishing a Salafist state, the ISIS-linked group turned to terror campaigns after a series of clashes with security forces.¹⁷ They have since become the deadliest insurgent group in Africa, blamed for the death of over 30,000 people and the displacement of three million others in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon over the last decade.¹⁸ 'Although it was their abduction of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok in Borno State in April 2014 that gave them global notoriety, Boko Haram militants committed far worse atrocities, such as beheadings and mass executions.'¹⁹ They staged those attacks to attract media attention. It is a component of their strategic communications campaign, which they carry out relentlessly, although an intense military onslaught by the Nigerian armed forces has managed to curtail part of it.²⁰ Both the insurgents and the security forces are engaged in a bitter media war. They both use traditional media, the Internet, and social media

15 Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence: The Media Strategies of Boko Haram', in M. Bunce, S. Franks and C. Paterson (eds), *Africa's Media Image in the 21st Century: From The 'Heart of Darkness' to 'Africa Rising* (Oxford: Routledge, 2016, pp. 200–210); Robyn Kriel, 'TV, Twitter, and Telegram: Al-Shabaab's Attempts to Influence Mass Media', *Defence Strategic Communications*, 4(Spring), 2018, 11–48; James Farwell, 'The Media Strategy of ISIS', *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, 56(6), (2014), 49–55; Marc Lynch, 'Al-Qaeda's Media Strategies', *National Interest* 83, (2006): 50–56.

16 Rafal Zgryziewicz, *Violent Extremism and Communications* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2018).

17 Alexander Thurston, *Boko Haram: The History of an African Jihadist Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'; Smith, Mike, *Boko Haram: Inside Nigeria's Unholy War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

18 Umaru Pate and Hamza Idris, 'How Journalists Survived to Report: Professionalism and Risk Management in the Reporting of Terror Groups and Violent Extremism in North East Nigeria', in U. Carlsson and R. Poyhtari (eds.), *The Assault on Journalism: Building Knowledge to Protect Freedom of Expression* (Goteborg: Nordicom, University of Gothenburg, 2017, pp. 159–71); United Nations, 'Security Council Briefing on the Situation in the Lake Chad Basin, Under-Secretary-General Jeffrey Feltman', 13 September 2017. [Accessed 12 October 2017].

19 Abdullahi Tasiu Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications, Boko Haram and Counter-insurgency', *Defence Strategic Communications* 3(Autumn), (2017): p. 147.

20 Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.

platforms to advance their causes.²¹ They both court and repel journalists as part of their communication strategies.²²

This article investigates the relationship between these strategic communicators and journalists. It uses the case of the media coverage of the conflict to examine the nature of the relationship. It sheds light on how journalists relate with both Boko Haram and security agencies' strategic communicators, and how this impacts their work. It also attempts to provide insights into how the strategic communicators themselves interact with journalists, and how they use their control of information flow and access to conflict zones as leverage in their interactions.

While scholarship has dealt extensively with the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners (many PR specialists work as strategic communicators),²³ it dwells mainly on their engagement in covering the affairs of corporations, governments, and non-profit organisations.²⁴ Empirical studies in the field point to a relationship that is marked by cooperation and negotiation,²⁵ but also by conflict, mutual suspicion, and divergent perceptions.²⁶ However, despite the high number of such studies—over 200 from the 1960s to 2017, according to Thomas Koch and his colleagues²⁷—there is still no 'coherent picture of this complex interaction'.²⁸ Specifically, insufficient attention has been given to journalists' interface with strategic communicators regarding the reporting of violent extremism. This study attempts to fill this gap. Primary data were obtained from individual interviews, focus groups, and content analysis. The theo-

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21 Ibid.

22 Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'.

23 Kirk Hallahan, Derina Holtzhausen, Betteke van Ruler, Dejan Verčič and Krishnamurthy Sriramesh, 'Defining Strategic Communication', *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 1(1), (2007): 3–35.

24 There is vast literature on this. For details see Thomas Koch, Magdalena Obermaier and Claudia Riesmeyer, 'Powered by Public Relations? Mutual Perceptions of PR Practitioners' Bases of Power over Journalism', *Journalism*, (2017): 1–17; Hallahan, 'Defining Strategic Communication'; Justin Lewis, Andrew Williams and Bob Franklin, 'A Compromised Fourth Estate? UK News Journalism, Public Relations and News Sources', *Journalism Studies* 9(1), (2008): 1–20; Meron Medzini, 'The Constants and Variables in Israel's Information Strategies: Memories of a Practitioner', *Journal of Applied Journalism and Media Studies*, 1(1), (2012): 115–21; Oscar Gandy, *Beyond Agenda Setting: Information Subsidies and Public Policy* (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1982).

25 Ansgar Zerfass, Dejan Verčič and Markus Wiesenberg, 'The Dawn of a New Golden Age for Media Relations? How PR Professionals Interact with the Mass Media and Use New Collaboration Practices', *Public Relations Review* 42(4), (2016) 499–508; Ana Verčič and Violeta Colić, 'Journalists and Public Relations Specialists: A Coorientational Analysis', *Public Relations Review* 42, (2016): 522–29; Richard Walters, Natalie Tindall and Timothy Morton, 'Media Catching and the Journalist-Public Relations Practitioner Relationship: How Social Media are Changing the Practice of Media Relations', *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 22(3), (2010): 241–64.

26 Jim Macnamara, *Journalism and PR: Unpacking 'Spin', Stereotypes & Media Myths* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014); Koch, 'Powered by Public Relations?'; Jean Charron, 'Relations between Journalists and Public Relations Practitioners: Cooperation, Conflict and Negotiation', *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 14(2) (1989): 41–54.

27 Koch, 'Powered by Public Relations?', p. 3.

28 Ibid.

retical framework was drawn from gatekeeping theory,²⁹ which helps explain the relationship between strategic communicators and journalists. But the study also draws from news values theory to understand journalists' interest in covering violent extremism,³⁰ and from agenda-setting theory to help comprehend why strategic communicators crave relationships with the news media.³¹ It utilises strategic communications literature both from the military/security perspective (which this study focuses on) and from a public relations research perspective, where the term 'strategic communications' is increasingly being used as many PR professionals tend to see themselves—and often work—as strategic communicators.³²

Strategic communications

As a subject of scholarly inquiry, strategic communications—originally singular but now mostly plural—is a relatively 'new academic field'.³³ But as a human practice, the art of strategic communications could be traced back to the fourth century BC when the famous Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu declared that 'to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting'.³⁴ This suggests that strategic communications has a military origin but has been appropriated by a variety of other disciplines. Peter Pomerantsev argues that strategic communications is a contested term, 'derided by some as a more palatable substitute for "propaganda", dismissed by others as glamorised public relations'.³⁵ A comprehensive definition—which this article draws from—was provided by Steve Tatham. He defines it as a 'systematic series of sustained and coherent activities, conducted across strategic, operational and tactical levels, that enables understanding of target audiences, identifies effective conduits, and develops

29 Pamela Shoemaker and Timothy Vos, *Gatekeeping Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Jane Singer, 'User-generated Visibility: Secondary Gatekeeping in a Shared Media Space', *New Media & Society* 16(1), (2014): 55–73; Peter Bro and Filip Wallberg, Gatekeeping in a Digital Era, *Journalism Practice* 9(1), (2015): 92–105; David Manning White, 'The "Gate Keeper": A Case Study in the Selection of News', *Journalism Quarterly* 27(4), (1950): 383–90; Kurt Lewin, 'Frontiers in Group Dynamics II: Channels of Group Life; Social Planning and Action Research', *Human Relations* 1, (1947): 143–53.

30 Tony Harcup and Deirdre O'Neill, 'What is News? News Values Revisited (Again)', *Journalism Studies* 18(12), (2017): 1470–88; Johan Galtung and Mari Ruge, 'The Structure of Foreign News: The Presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus Crises in Four Norwegian Newspapers', *Journal of Peace Research* 2(1), (1965): 64–91.

31 Maxwell McCombs, 'A Look of Agenda-setting: Past, Present and Future', *Journalism Studies* 6(4), (2005): 543–57.

32 Hallahan, 'Defining Strategic Communication'.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

34 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Translated by Lionel Giles and originally published in 1910) (Chapter 3, verse 2), [accessed 17 June 2016].

35 Peter Pomerantsev, Introduction to *Information at War: From China's Three Warfares to NATO's Narratives* by Transition Forums (London: Legatum Institute, 2015), p. 4.

and promotes ideas and opinions through those conduits to promote and sustain particular types of behaviour'.³⁶ It puts strategic communications back to its military origin and is flexible enough to contain different forms of strategic communications campaigns—waged either by the military or by militants—and to accommodate a range of people as strategic communicators, be they government spin doctors, military spokespersons, or violent insurgents.

For many, strategic communications is an essential part of governance and a key 'component of national strategy'.³⁷ James Farwell sees it from a political and national security angle, and maintains that its goal is to influence the attitudes of target audiences.³⁸ Paul Cornish, Julian Lindley-French, and Claire Yorke identify four key components of strategic communications: information operations, psychological operations, public diplomacy, and public affairs.³⁹ There are elements of both closeness and divergence among these components. While public diplomacy primarily focuses on a government's communicating with foreign publics to influence foreign governments,⁴⁰ public affairs focuses mainly on informing domestic audiences of a government's (and related agencies') affairs.⁴¹ However, Psychological Operations (PSYOP)—defined by the US military as '[p]lanned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals'⁴²—is seen as a component of Information Operations (IO). The same military defines Information Operations as 'the employment of the core capabilities of electronic warfare, computer network operations, Psychological Operations, military deception, and operations security, in concert with specified supporting and related capabilities, to affect or defend information and information systems, and to influence decision-making'.⁴³ Clearly, these components have common elements: 'to inform, influence and persuade audiences at home

36 Steve Tatham, *Strategic Communications: A Primer*, ARAG Special Series 8/28, Defence Academy of the United Kingdom (2008), p. 3.

37 Paul Cornish, Julian Lindley-French and Claire Yorke, *Strategic Communications and National Strategy* (A Chatham House Report, The Royal Institute of International Affairs, London: September 2011), p. v; Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*.

38 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*.

39 Cornish, *Strategic Communications and National Strategy*.

40 For detail analysis on public diplomacy see Eytan Gilboa, 'Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy', *Annals of the American Academy* 616, (2008): 55–77.

41 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*.

42 Department of the Army, Psychological Operations (Field Manual, 3-05.30: Washington, DC, 15 April 2005), Glossary-16.

43 *Ibid.*, Chapter 7, p. 1.

and abroad, whether friendly, adversarial or merely a member of the public'.⁴⁴ And, as Farwell argues, this is what distinguishes strategic communications from other forms of communication and makes it a vital tool for dealing with political and national security issues.⁴⁵

The use of strategic communications to pursue organisational missions is, however, not an exclusive preserve of security services or governments; non-state actors, especially insurgent groups, have equally noted its relevance. Al-Qaeda,⁴⁶ ISIS,⁴⁷ Boko Haram,⁴⁸ and al-Shabaab⁴⁹ have all employed strategic communications campaigns skilfully to advance their causes. Although they are all violent extremist groups with different approaches and techniques in pursuing their goals, they all seem to understand the significance of communicating strategically. Effective use of new technologies and clarity of narratives boost their campaigns.⁵⁰ The level at which extremist groups were leveraging strategic communications prompted some scholars to raise the alarm and suggest that the field was in crisis.⁵¹ Neville Bolt argued that the speed at which the terrain was changing under the contemporary 'communications maelstrom' made it difficult for states to cope well.⁵² 'Speed, reach and iconic images have become a toxic brew for which states currently have no antidote.'⁵³ New developments such as governments' ability to employ cyber technology to detect the activities of extremist groups and to subvert terror attacks,⁵⁴ however, suggest that states are now overcoming these hurdles, even though non-state actors are equally raising their game.

New technologies have widened the space for non-state and rough-state disinformation operators, and disingenuous corporate bodies, to engage not only in disinformation campaigns but also in what Ghosh and Scott call 'automated' and 'precision propaganda', using various technologies including bots, data

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44 Cornish, *Strategic Communications and National Strategy*, p. 4.

45 Farwell, *Persuasion and Power*.

46 Lynch, 'Al-Qaeda's Media Strategies'.

47 Farwell, 'The Media Strategy of ISIS'.

48 Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.

49 Kriel, 'TV, Twitter, and Telegram'.

50 David Betz and Vaughan Phillips, 'Putting the Strategy Back into Strategic Communications', *Defence Strategic Communications* 3(Autumn), (2017): 41–69; and Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.

51 Neville Bolt, 'Strategic Communications in Crisis', *The RUSI Journal* 156(4), (2011): 44–53; and Betz, 'Putting the Strategy Back into Strategic Communications'.

52 Bolt, 'Strategic Communications in Crisis', p. 54.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

54 Zgrzywicz, *Violent Extremism and Communications*.

analytics, and audiences' personal data.⁵⁵ Reports of the alleged use of digital propaganda devices by Russia to influence the outcome of the 2016 US election suggest that states, too, engage in such acts.⁵⁶ New studies⁵⁷ commissioned by the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence have found that Russian agents (through the state-supported Internet Research Agency) used many social media platforms—particularly Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Google+ and YouTube—in a bid to influence the 2016 US presidential election. 'Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) launched an extended attack on the United States by using computational propaganda to misinform and polarize US voters', says one of the reports.⁵⁸ But even more significantly the activities were carried out with industry-standard tools,⁵⁹ suggesting that states have since turned the corner in digital strategic communications. States are also doing better in countering violent insurgents by exploiting the insurgents' own digital strategic communications activity. Security services now use electronic warfare devices to impede the spread of certain messages promoted by terror groups.⁶⁰ They also monitor and infiltrate insurgents' social media accounts to gain insight into their strengths and weaknesses, and to detect their activities with a view to countering them.⁶¹ All this suggests that the art of strategic communications is enjoying a boom.⁶² But Monroe Price has warned that the massive investments in strategic communications by states, corporations, religious institutions, and non-governmental organisations have elevated it to a status that is detrimental to the public good.⁶³ 'The growth of strategic communications—heavily subsidized, usually transnational, engineered and often deceptive—can wreak havoc on traditional ideas of community realization and self-determination.'⁶⁴ He asserts that 'in a media system pervaded by strategic communicators, persuasion, not truth, is often the most prized quality'.⁶⁵ Journalism is meant to act as a check on this, but the profession is facing difficulties.⁶⁶

55 Ireton, *Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation*; Ghosh, *Digital Deceit*; Bridge, 'Tech Firms Have "Weaponised" Personal Data'.

56 Ibid.

57 Philip N. Howard, Bharath Ganesh, Dimitra Liotsiou, John Kelly and Camille Francois, *The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012–2018* (Working Paper 2018.2. Oxford UK: [Project on Computational Propaganda](#)); Renee DiResta, Kris Shaffer, Becky Ruppel, David Sullivan, Robert Matney, Ryan Fox, Jonathan Albright, and Ben Johnson, *The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency* (A report by Knowledge, commissioned by the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Washington, DC, released on 17 December 2018), [accessed 18 December 2018].

58 Howard, *The IRA*, p.3.

59 Ibid.; Ghosh, *Digital Deceit*.

60 Zgryziewicz, *Violent Extremism and Communications*.

61 Ibid.

62 Ghosh, *Digital Deceit*.

63 Price, *Free Expression, Globalism and New Strategic Communication*.

64 Ibid., p. 7.

65 Ibid., p. 22.

66 Russial, 'Journalism in Crisis?'; McChesney, 'Farewell to Journalism?'

Journalism and public relations

Described as essentially ‘the business or practice of producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs of general public interest and importance’,⁶⁷ journalism is currently ‘transitioning from a more or less coherent industry to a highly varied and diverse range of practices’.⁶⁸ To underscore the diversified nature of the profession, Barbie Zelizer identifies twelve metaphors for understanding journalism.⁶⁹ Seven of those metaphors, she states, are provided by journalists themselves—a sixth sense, container, mirror, story, child (news seen as a child requiring nurturing), service, and engagement. The remaining five, she notes, come from journalism scholars—a profession, institution, text, people, and practice.⁷⁰ Whatever transformation it is undergoing, journalism is generally seen as a profession whose remit has gone beyond the realm of news reporting.⁷¹ It is often linked with democracy and freedom. Michael Schudson,⁷² for instance, has highlighted the role of journalism in sustaining and extending democracy. And there are numerous accounts of journalists making sacrifices to defend democratic values.⁷³

But journalism is also considered from other perspectives ‘as a form of social control rather than the means of political emancipation’.⁷⁴ This view aligns with Antonio Gramsci’s broad conception of the media as an ideological apparatus of the state.⁷⁵ Here journalism is seen as an instrument used by the dominant class to extend their power and retain privileges. But an even more critical description of the profession was presented a century ago by Upton Sinclair, himself a journalist. He defines American journalism ‘as the business and practice of presenting the news of the day in the interest of economic privilege’.⁷⁶ Sinclair did not really have disdain for his colleagues, the majority of whom he describes as decent people merely carrying out orders from their greedy employers, but he had contempt for the way the profession was being practiced. ‘Journalism,’ he says, ‘is one of the devices whereby industrial autocracy keeps its control over

67 Michael Schudson, *The Sociology of News* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), p. 11.

68 Deuze, ‘Beyond Journalism’, p. 166.

69 Zelizer, *What Journalism Could Be*.

70 Ibid.

71 McChesney, ‘Farewell to Journalism?’.

72 Michael Schudson, *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008).

73 Ulla Carlsson and Reeta Pöyhätari (eds), *The Assault on Journalism: Building Knowledge to Protect Freedom of Expression* (Göteborg: Nordicom, University of Gothenburg, 2017).

74 Martin Conboy, *Journalism Studies: The Basics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 52.

75 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971).

76 Upton Sinclair, *The Brass Check: A Study of American Journalism* (1st Ed., California: Pasadena, 1919), p. 222.

political democracy; it is the day-by-day, between-elections propaganda'.⁷⁷

Many of the issues Sinclair raised have since been addressed with the development of journalism ethics. And the profession is seen by many as 'a watchdog operating on behalf of the public' whose contributions to societal wellbeing and progress earn it the name 'Fourth Estate of the realm'.⁷⁸ Brian McNair's *Journalism and Democracy*, which uses the specific case of British society, highlights journalism's role in expanding democratic possibilities and checking the excesses of the powerful.⁷⁹ The ongoing struggle by journalists to hold the leader of the world's most powerful nation, US President Donald Trump, to account, and his continuing reference to their stories as 'fake news' is an illustration of this.⁸⁰ As a means of public expression and a link between the government and the governed, Denis McQuail argues, journalism plays an essential part in the collective life of a society.⁸¹

Despite this societal role, though, the journalism industry is facing hard times: falling revenues, closure of news outlets, continuing job losses, and fierce competition from tech giants.⁸² New technologies, economic changes, and the rise of the public relations industry are some of the factors blamed for this. But many journalism scholars and practitioners do not regard new technology as a threat to the profession; they see it as a vital tool of transforming it.⁸³ *Financial Times* editor Lionel Barber argues that journalism benefits from new technologies, as digital revolution has 'led to an explosion of creativity and new forms of rich storytelling'. What is problematic to journalism, he asserts, is 'the growing power of the public relations industry', which uses its muscles to muzzle the press.⁸⁴ 'The army of public relations advisers employed by individuals and companies with thin skins and deep pockets', and the 'rising power of private markets versus public markets' make 'it far harder for journalists to access information'.⁸⁵

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77 Ibid.

78 Conboy, *Journalism Studies*, p. 72.

79 McNair, Brian, *Journalism and Democracy: An Evaluation of the Political Public Sphere* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

80 BBC, 'White House suspends credentials for CNN's Jim Acosta', BBC Online (8 November 2018). [accessed 8 November 2018].

81 Denis McQuail, *Journalism and Society* (London and Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2013).

82 Ireton, *Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation*; Russial, 'Journalism in Crisis?'; McChesney, 'Farewell to Journalism?'; Almiron, *Journalism in Crisis*.

83 Deuze, 'Beyond Journalism'; Lionel Barber, 'Too Big to Fail: The Future of Financial Journalism', Paper presented at James Cameron Memorial Lecture (City, University of London, 22 November 2018).

84 Barber, 'Too Big to Fail'.

85 Ibid.

His argument indicates the complex relationship between journalism and public relations, a term some equate with strategic communications. But although public relations is closely related to strategic communications, as both focus on communicating to influence audiences, the two terms are not synonymous. As seen in the definition provided by Tatham and adopted by this article,⁸⁶ strategic communications is a much more encompassing concept, with public relations being just one of its main components.⁸⁷ Public relations has been subjected to varied definitions, but Lee Edwards provides an apt description that gives it a broad perspective.⁸⁸ She defines it as ‘the flow of purposive communication produced on behalf of individuals, formally constituted and informally constituted groups, through their continuous transactions with other social entities’.⁸⁹

Given this remit of establishing and sustaining continuous interactions with other entities, public relations is constantly engaged with—and even encroaches on—journalism, as practices such as commissioning brand journalism to promote marketing campaigns and embedding journalists with military units during armed conflicts continue to grow.⁹⁰ The way many journalists are also relying on information subsidies⁹¹ from public relations professionals in their work highlights the interdependent nature of their relationship. Defined as ‘the efforts of news sources to intentionally shape the news agenda by reducing journalists’ costs of gathering information’,⁹² information subsidies, which mainly come in the form of press releases, have been identified as an effective tool used by public relations professionals to secure favourable media coverage for their clients.⁹³ They use it effectively to enhance the growth of their profession.

The PR industry is indeed expanding rapidly while journalism is contracting. The situation in the United States illustrates this vividly. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, the number of journalists in the United States in 2016 was

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86 Tatham, *Strategic Communications*.

87 Cornish, *Strategic Communications and National Strategy*; Hallahan, ‘Defining Strategic Communication’.

88 Ralph Tench and Liz Yeomans, *Exploring Public Relations* (3rd ed., Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2014).

89 Lee Edwards, ‘Defining the Object of Public Relations: A New Starting Point’, *Public Relations Inquiry* 1(1), (2012): 1–24, p. 15.

90 There have been discussions about the blurring of lines between public relations and journalism, details of which is contained in Macnamara, *Journalism and PR*.

91 These are mainly news releases by organisations and there are many works on it. See Gandy, *Beyond Agenda Setting*; Dan Berkowitz and Douglas Adams, ‘Information Subsidy and Agenda-Building in Local Television News’, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 67(4), (1990): 723–31.

92 Berkowitz, ‘Information Subsidy’, p. 723.

93 Berkowitz, ‘Information Subsidy’; Lewis, ‘A Compromised Fourth Estate?’.

50,400, which is projected to decline by 9% in the next decade.⁹⁴ This is in contrast to what obtains in the public relations industry, whose practitioners numbered 259,600 in the same year, and is projected to rise by 9% in the coming decade.⁹⁵ What is more, despite the swell in their number, PR specialists still earn much higher salaries than journalists. According to the Bureau's figures, the median annual pay for a PR specialist in 2017 is \$59,300, compared to journalist's \$40,910 in the same year.⁹⁶ However, Barber argues, it is not actually the increase in the number of public relations professionals that is problematic—many of them do offer valuable services to journalism and to other spheres of human endeavours—it is the 'Black PR' (using PR for smear campaigns) that is the source of concern.⁹⁷ 'Black PR—sometimes pushed by ex-spooks—[...] uses social media platforms to attack and undermine reputations and independent journalism', he notes.⁹⁸ Similar concerns have equally been raised about violent extremists using social media and even traditional media platforms to pursue their objectives, as will be seen later in the case of Boko Haram's use of media in Nigeria.

Gatekeeping

As a country, Nigeria has a reputation for sustaining a robust journalism industry, among the freest in Africa, with its media landscape described as 'vibrant and varied'.⁹⁹ The print and online media are independent and effectively controlled by the private sector, while the broadcast sector is largely dominated by the state but with an increasing presence of private ownership.¹⁰⁰ Journalists, especially those working in the print and online media, generally have strong editorial independence, exercising judgement on what stories to publish and what to ignore. But government, corporate, and non-profit bodies also exert influence on what the media publish,¹⁰¹ using patronage, placement of advertisements, and information subsidies. This is the area where the issue of gatekeeping becomes relevant.

94 US Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, Reporters, Correspondents, and Broadcast News Analysts, 13 April 2018. [accessed 23 November 2018].

95 US Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, Public Relations Specialists, 2 July 2018. [accessed 23 November 2018].

96 Ibid.; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Occupational Outlook Handbook*, Reporters, Correspondents, and Broadcast News Analysts.

97 Barber, 'Too Big to Fail'.

98 Ibid.

99 Freedom House, 'Freedom of the Press 2017—Nigeria', Freedom House (15 May 2017). [accessed 19 December 2017].

100 Ibid.

101 For detail on this see Yusha'u, Muhammad, 'Investigative Journalism and Scandal Reporting in the Nigerian press', *ECQUID NOVI* 30(2), (2009): 155–74.

Gatekeeping theory originated from the work of German-American social psychologist Kurt Lewin in his analysis of housewives' gatekeeping role 'in determining food habits'—with his brief mention of the existence of a similar process in news production.¹⁰² But it was David Manning White who pioneered the application of the theory in mass communication research with his seminal 'Gate Keeper' study in 1950.¹⁰³ The original idea of gatekeeping, though, is traceable to the work of American journalist and intellectual Walter Lippmann—although he did not specifically use that term. His *Public Opinion*,¹⁰⁴ which is equally credited with providing the foundations of the framing and agenda-setting theories, makes clear references to an editor's role in the rigorous process of rejection and selection of materials in news production. 'Without standardization, without stereotypes, without routine judgments, without a fairly ruthless disregard of subtlety, the editor would soon die of excitement', he writes.¹⁰⁵

Every newspaper when it reaches the reader is the result of a whole series of selections as to what items shall be printed, in what position they shall be printed, how much space each shall occupy, and what emphasis each shall have.¹⁰⁶

So, the idea of gatekeeping has been around for nearly a century, but it was White's research on how a wire editor he named 'Mr Gates' performed a gatekeeping role to determine the content of his newspaper that gave us an insight into the application of the theory—at least as obtained in early 20th century American journalism. The theory has since been developed by many communication scholars to fit into the fast-changing nature of the 21st century media landscape.¹⁰⁷ An outstanding contribution comes from Pamela Shoemaker and Timothy Vos who describe gatekeeping as 'the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day'.¹⁰⁸ They highlight its centrality in the role of the media in public life. Gatekeeping 'determines not only which information is selected, but also what the content and nature of messages, such as news, will be'.¹⁰⁹

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102 See, in particular, Lewin, 'Frontiers in Group Dynamics II', p. 143. The first volume of the work is Lewin, Kurt, 'Frontiers in Group Dynamics I: Concept, Method and Reality in Social Science; Social Equilibria', *Human Relations* 1, (1947a): 5–40.

103 White, 'The "Gate Keeper"'.
104 Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922).

105 *Ibid.*, p. 352.
106 *Ibid.*, p. 354.

107 Shoemaker, *Gatekeeping Theory*; Singer, 'User-generated Visibility'; Bro, 'Gatekeeping in a Digital Era'.
108 Shoemaker, *Gatekeeping Theory*, p. 1.

109 *Ibid.*

Jane Singer focuses on digital era journalism where she identifies ‘a two-step gatekeeping process’ in which users act as secondary gatekeepers.¹¹⁰ ‘Users are choosing news not only for their own consumption but also for the consumption of others’.¹¹¹ Peter Bro and Filip Wallberg dwell on the changes ‘new technologies and new ideologies’ have brought to gatekeeping practices, with audiences becoming more empowered.¹¹² They reinforce Shoemaker and Vos’s earlier proposition about the audience-empowering role played by the Internet. ‘Compared to other mass media, the internet provides much more opportunity for an audience member to interact with news makers, news creators, and each other. This high level of interactivity turns audience members into gatekeepers.’¹¹³ It is the ability to highlight the relevance of gatekeepers in the changing media environment and its close relationship with the theories of agenda-setting and news value that affirm the applicability of gatekeeping theory in this research. It is gatekeeping—whether practiced by journalists, strategic communicators, or violent extremists—that determine which content (be it from insurgents or from counter-insurgents) reaches the audience and which doesn’t (more on this later).

Violent extremism and news values

Often equated with terrorism, the term violent extremism is increasingly being used in reference to identity-related violence. Rafal Zgryziewicz says it ‘includes all actions in which identity-motivated violence, from hate crimes to genocide, are used as tools to achieve desired objectives’.¹¹⁴ In this article violent extremism is seen as a process of deliberate and illegitimate use of violence, including terrorist attacks, in pursuit of ideological, political, religious, or racial goals. It can be used to describe the actions of violent extremist groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram or the violence perpetrated by racist and right-wing extremists. As the United Nations Development Programme notes, violent extremism ‘is neither new nor exclusive to any region, nationality or system of belief’.¹¹⁵

Boko Haram has engaged in violent extremism since 2009, causing indescribable suffering and devastation in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon.¹¹⁶ Rough

110 Singer, ‘User-generated Visibility’, p. 55.

111 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

112 Bro, ‘Gatekeeping in a Digital Era’, p. 93.

113 Shoemaker, *Gatekeeping Theory*, p. 6.

114 Zgryziewicz, *Violent Extremism and Communications*.

115 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Journey to Extremism in Africa: Drivers, Incentives and the Tipping Point for Recruitment* (New York: UNDP, 2017), p. 19.

116 Thurston, *Boko Haram*; Abubakar, ‘Communicating Violence’; Smith, *Boko Haram*.

estimates of the impact of their insurgency range from 30,000 to 40,000 lives lost; and also include three million displaced, \$9 billion in economic losses in Nigeria's northeast alone, and about 11 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.¹¹⁷ At one time (between mid-2014 to early 2015) the insurgents controlled an area estimated to be the size of Belgium, but the military has since retaken most of it, with only a part of the Sambisa Forest and the Lake Chad basin (the size of which has never been disclosed to the public) still believed to be under their control. Boko Haram militants derive their power primarily through armed violence, but they also use media 'to spread their ideology, extend their brutality, intimidate their enemies and recruit new adherents'.¹¹⁸ They recognised the centrality of media in advancing their cause right from their early days, and set up a unit for it known as the 'Public Awareness Department', headed by their spokesmen with direct guidance from the group's supreme leader Abubakar Shekau.¹¹⁹ Their strategy is based on the assumption that violence generates hard power and media attention.¹²⁰ They saw this in the case of their abductions of the 276 Chibok schoolgirls in 2014, which put them in the global spotlight, and which they used to secure the release of some of their commanders while gaining concessions from the government. This was followed by new rounds of kidnappings, killings, and negotiations—all of which continue to generate media coverage.¹²¹

The recognition of the agenda-setting function of the media has its basis in journalism scholarship,¹²² and strategic communicators have never lost sight of this. Described as 'the transfer of salience from the media agenda to the public agenda',¹²³ agenda-setting theory helps explain how some state and non-state actors crave publicity, and why they devote considerable energy and resources to use, control or manipulate the news media. The way Boko Haram insurgents employed the media to pursue their objectives has been well explained in works that highlight their communications strategies.¹²⁴ But it is the newsworthiness of some of their actions that also helps generate the media attention they get, and

117 Pate, 'How Journalists Survived to Report'; United Nations, 'Security Council Briefing on the Situation in the Lake Chad Basin'; Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'.

118 Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications', p. 148.

119 Initially it was the group's founder Muhammad Yusuf, but after his death Shekau became the supreme leader; and when the group split into two, Shekau led his own faction while Abu Mus'ab al-Barnawi (Muhammad Yusuf's son) led the other faction. See Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'; Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'.

120 Ibid.

121 Ibid.; Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'.

122 McCombs, 'A Look of Agenda-setting'; and Lippmann, *Public Opinion*.

123 McCombs, 'A Look of Agenda-setting', p. 543.

124 Abubakar, 'Communicating Violence'; Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'.

this can be explained through the lens of another theory. News values theory has detailed numerous criteria that make events newsworthy,¹²⁵ and previous studies have shown that many actions of the Boko Haram insurgents do meet many of those criteria.¹²⁶ ‘Whether it was the kidnapping of schoolgirls, the bombing of markets, or the beheading of innocent civilians, each major action carried out by Boko Haram militants has intense negative consequences and is therefore deemed newsworthy.’¹²⁷ This and the militants’ media savviness enhance the media presence of the group.

The Nigerian security forces, too, receive media coverage in their campaign to dislodge the insurgents, partly on account of the newsworthiness of their operations and partly due to their own media output.¹²⁸ Each of the forces involved in the campaign—the Nigerian Army, the Nigerian Air Force, and the Nigeria Police Force—has its own formal communications structure, which it uses for its day-to-day media activity. These structures are used in the strategic communications campaign with additional resources such as employment of public relations consultants and coordination of the various units to work as a team. This led to the formation of the Forum of Spokespersons of Security and Response Agencies (FOSSRA), comprising representatives of the military, paramilitary, intelligence, and response agencies, to help in the long-running campaign¹²⁹—though FOSSRA ceased operations in 2015. The Directorate of Defence Information in Abuja or the Directorate of Army Public Relations in Abuja, often headed by a General, leads the overall strategic communications campaign, with various army public relations units in different parts of the country assisting. The police have a similar structure, with the main Force Public Relations Officer based at police headquarters in Abuja and state commands having their own public relations officers. They all interact with journalists, though the army retains overall control over matters related to countering the Boko Haram insurgency.

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125 Galtung, ‘The Structure of Foreign News’; Paul Brighton and Dennis Foy, *News Values* (London: Sage, 2007); Harcup, ‘What is News?’.

126 Abubakar, ‘Strategic Communications’; Abubakar, ‘Communicating Violence’.

127 Abubakar, ‘Strategic Communications’, p. 162.

128 Abubakar, ‘Strategic Communications’.

129 Yushau Shuaib, *Boko Haram Media War: An Encounter with the Spymaster*, (Abuja: Image Merchants Promotions, 2017), p. 275.

Methodology

This study specifically examines the relationship between journalists and strategic communicators with reference to the coverage of the Boko Haram conflict. The primary data were drawn from focus groups and individual interviews with thirty-two journalists and strategic communicators in Nigeria as well as analysis of Boko Haram videos and press releases from the Nigerian security forces. Thirty-three press releases from both the police and army public relations units—fifteen of them downloaded directly from the army’s website (www.army.mil.ng), the rest, hard copies sourced from police and army public relations officers and journalists—and ten Boko Haram videos (obtained from online sources and journalists) were studied. Following Klaus Krippendorff’s guidance,¹³⁰ a qualitative content analysis method aimed at identifying the nature and meanings of the messages contained in the press releases and videos was used to analyse them. This was primarily to complement and provide context to the data obtained from the main methods used for the study: individual interviews and focus groups. Purposeful sampling technique was used to select all the participants: only journalists who have covered the Boko Haram conflict and strategic communicators who have dealt with journalists during the crisis were interviewed for the study. Two focus groups—one in the north-eastern Nigerian city of Yola containing six journalists (named the Yola Group for easy identification in the analysis) and the other in the capital Abuja (the Abuja Group), also with six journalists—were conducted in August and September 2017. Individual interviews were conducted with fourteen journalists in both Yola and Abuja in the months of July and August 2017, as well as in August and September 2018. The journalists comprise two editors (one from a national newspaper and the other from a television station in north-eastern Nigeria), five correspondents of national newspapers (*Daily Trust*, *Guardian*, *Peoples Daily*, *ThisDay*, and *Punch*) who have worked in the northeast, two defence correspondents, two television reporters, and three freelance journalists working for both Nigerian and foreign news media outlets. Six strategic communicators—four of them are still serving in the Nigeria Police Force and the Nigerian Army while the remaining two have retired but still offer public relations consultancies—were interviewed during the same period (July–August 2017 and August–September 2018). They are all security forces’ public relations specialists who have worked as part of the overall strategic communications campaign and are therefore regarded here as

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130 Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2004).

strategic communicators. There were no interviews with Boko Haram strategic communicators, as the researcher did not have access to them (they are operating underground as their group has long been banned), but the content of their videos and the interviews with journalists who had interacted with them provide insight into their work. All the participants were guaranteed anonymity both to help elicit candid responses from them and to abide by the research code of confidentiality. Richard Krueger's framework of analysis was used to analyse the focus groups,¹³¹ while Matthew Miles and Michael Huberman's guidance was followed in analysing the individual interviews.¹³² The findings and discussions are presented under three broad themes below.

A tense but interdependent relationship

Analysis of the data reveals that journalists had tense but symbiotic relationships with both security forces' (army and police) public relations officers and Boko Haram spokesmen/operatives. There was clear recognition from the journalists that they needed sources to carry out their duty, and there was a desire from both the insurgents and the security personnel for their sides to be heard. This was what made the relationships mutually beneficial, and it was to become a key characteristic of their engagement in the early days of the insurgency. 'Before they went underground, Boko Haram members talked to us openly. They organised press conferences, often to complain about police harassment or to tell us what the objectives of their group were, and we attended them (the press conferences),' said a national newspaper journalist who covered the insurgency for nearly a decade.¹³³ 'We would also speak to police, and later the army, to hear their own sides and balance our stories. We talked to all sides to do our job. They equally needed us to tell their stories.' Another journalist who works both for a Nigerian news outlet and an international news agency gave a similar account but added: 'It was initially a cordial relationship, even though there was a sense of tension, which kept increasing as the clashes between the police and Boko Haram escalated.'¹³⁴ A former police public relations officer who had worked with journalists on the Boko Haram conflict for three years acknowledged a tension in the relationship.¹³⁵ 'There's too much pestering from journalists', he

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131 Richard Krueger, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994).

132 Matthew Miles and Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook* (2nd ed., London: Sage, 1994).

133 Interviewed in Abuja on 1 August 2017.

134 Interviewed in Yola on 22 July 2017.

135 Interviewed on 11 August 2018.

said. ‘They would always want to get details about the crisis, which is fine. But they focused on the negative part, not on what we’re doing to maintain peace’, he added. ‘At times I just wouldn’t answer calls from journalists because I knew they were going to seek reaction about Boko Haram’s ridiculous claims.’ A serving police spokesman who has four years’ experience of dealing with the Boko Haram issue echoed the same points and said he preferred issuing press releases to using question-and-answer sessions.¹³⁶ ‘I found it easier to just issue a press release stating what happened and what police did’, he said. Three samples of the releases he issued (shown to the researcher) were all about Boko Haram attacks: two in a market and one at a mosque. They mainly contain the times the attacks took place, how they were carried out, the casualty figures, and how the police responded to them.

The use of ‘information subsidies’ such as press releases by PR professionals to enhance engagement with journalists is well explored in public relations literature.¹³⁷ And it seems here that the Nigerian security services also found it effective in their handling of the Boko Haram crisis (more on this later). ‘This approach [issuing press releases] is better for us, and possibly for journalists as well, because it somehow reduces the pressure we constantly get from them’, the police spokesman said. ‘But even with this, it wasn’t really a positive experience relating with journalists on [the] Boko Haram issue. That was why I felt a big relief when most of this work was transferred to the military’. The police’s role was significantly reduced when the military took full control of the counter-insurgency campaigns, including media relations work, following the escalation of the insurgency from 2012 onward.¹³⁸ The police are still part of the counter-insurgency work and they continue to communicate with journalists regularly about the issue but at a much lower scale than between 2009–12.

Around the same time, Boko Haram leaders and spokesmen were in regular contact with journalists. This took the form of direct contact when they were organising press briefings and granting face-to-face interviews.¹³⁹ It happened mostly prior to and during the group’s mass uprising and its suppression at the end of July 2009, events that claimed the lives of about 800 people including the group’s founder, Muhammad Yusuf, who was killed while in police custody.¹⁴⁰

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136 Interviewed on 25 July 2017.

137 Gandy, *Beyond Agenda Setting*; Lewis, ‘A Compromised Fourth Estate?’; Macnamara, *Journalism and PR*.

138 Abubakar, ‘Strategic Communications’.

139 Abubakar, ‘Communicating Violence’.

140 Ibid.

‘The relationship with them at that period was not very difficult’, a reporter who was in contact with them at that time said.¹⁴¹ ‘We would cover their press briefings and do our stories without any problem with them or the police. They’re not banned then. They did have clashes with police, but they’re not killing people like they do now.’ This changed when the group went underground after the suppression of the July 2009 uprising. They no longer had face-to-face contact with journalists but their spokesmen, using the pseudonyms Abul Qaqa or Abu Darda or Abu Zaid, would call journalists on mobile phones and organise a teleconference.¹⁴² ‘He would call us and deliver the group’s message, usually issuing denials of police and army claims or explanation about the group’s activity’, said a correspondent of a national newspaper who had participated in some of the teleconferences.¹⁴³ ‘It was going on well before security operatives dealt with them.’ Boko Haram terminated the teleconferencing technique after the security services detected and killed the spokesmen.¹⁴⁴ ‘But before that they were maintaining a good relationship with journalists, so to say, even though there was a degree of mistrust between us’, the correspondent added.

The contradictory mix of cooperation and distrust seen in these journalists’ engagements with spokesmen from both the security forces and Boko Haram is a well-known feature of this kind of relationship. Jim Macnamara¹⁴⁵ and Jean Charron¹⁴⁶ have highlighted this in their respective works, citing cases of relationships between public relations practitioners and journalists. Charron argues that the two are ‘mutually dependent on one another, a situation which demands cooperation, while their divergent control interests cause distrust and opposition’.¹⁴⁷ From the findings here, it seems that the level of distrust in this case is even higher, as the subject matter itself—violent extremism—is a national security issue that demands a high degree of sensitivity.

Cordiality, intimidation, and harassment

When the military took full control of the communications strategy in 2012 the dynamics of the relationship between them and journalists and insurgents changed. Broadly, both the military personnel and Boko Haram insurgents

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141 Interviewed in Abuja on 31 August 2018

142 Abubakar, ‘Strategic Communications’.

143 Interviewed in Abuja on 30 August 2018

144 Ibid.

145 Macnamara, *Journalism and PR*.

146 Charron, ‘Relations between Journalists and Public Relations Practitioners’.

147 Ibid., p. 43.

would court and cajole journalists when they wanted their versions of stories published, but they would also intimidate and harass them and their news outlets when unfavourable reports were published. ‘Once they are interested in seeing something published, they will look for us or send their statements to us. You will hear some nice words from them’, a defence correspondent who participated in the Abuja Group discussion said of his experience in relating with the military over his Boko Haram reporting.¹⁴⁸ Other members of the group unanimously endorsed his view, citing instances when their colleagues were harassed or intimidated by the military on account of their coverage of the insurgency. One such instance was the army’s detention of Aljazeera journalists (Nigerian citizens working for the broadcaster in the country) when they went to Maiduguri to report on the insurgency in 2015.¹⁴⁹

Journalists who participated in the Yola Group discussion¹⁵⁰ spoke of experiencing a relationship with the military that they said was a mixture of cordiality, intimidation, and harassment. ‘They are unpredictable; they could be nice in one moment and antagonistic in another’, one television reporter said of the army public relations officers. ‘It depends on what their superiors want. If their commanders had interest in pushing a story, the army PRO [Public Relations Officer] would look for us; if not, they would avoid us.’ Other members in the group agreed. ‘When they [the army] retook Mubi [a town in the north-eastern state of Adamawa] from Boko Haram, they organised a big tour for us and treated us very well’, said one freelance reporter in the Yola Group discussion. ‘When we were there, we saw the destruction, we got many stories. But after that, it was hard to get even a single-line comment from them on other stories.’ Another television reporter spoke of how he was promised by the army to be allowed to cover their campaigns to retake another town from the insurgents only to be let down at the last minute. ‘Everything was set and I was ready to go. I called the army public relations officer. He said, okay, I should call him later. Lo and behold, he stopped taking my calls.’

However, an army public relations officer offered a possible explanation on what might have prompted this fundamental kind of gatekeeping.¹⁵¹ He said the military tends to refrain from taking journalists to counter-terror operations due

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148 Conducted in Abuja on 14 September 2017.

149 *The Guardian*, ‘[Al-Jazeera Calls for Release of Two Journalists Held in Nigeria](#)’, *The Guardian* (31 March 2015), [accessed 4 April 2015].

150 Conducted in Yola on 19 August 2017.

151 Interviewed on 29 August 2018.

to safety concerns. ‘We only take journalists to safe places, where their safety and the operations wouldn’t be compromised. I personally wouldn’t promise to take them to counter-terrorism operations’, he said. ‘And, frankly, I never have any conflict with any journalist. Yes, I do ignore their calls sometimes and even get irritated by them, but we generally work well.’ A former army spokesman also spoke of having a cordial relationship with journalists, but admitted that there were ‘many instances’ when he had to ‘warn them against spreading Boko Haram lies’.¹⁵² There were ‘frictions’, he said, but most of them were not between the ‘Army PR team and journalists but between journalists and soldiers on other duties’. One newspaper correspondent said he had had an unpleasant experience in one such encounter.¹⁵³ ‘I was harassed and intimidated by soldiers when I went to Chibok to cover the return of the kidnapped Chibok girls’, he said. ‘They [the soldiers] seized my camera and only returned it after a senior officer intervened. They were very hostile.’ A different hostile engagement was witnessed in June 2014 when armed soldiers seized and destroyed copies of several editions of newspapers from about ten media houses in the country. According to a Freedom House report, the ‘soldiers impounded newspaper delivery vehicles, searched employees, blocked printing and distribution centers, and seized copies of at least 10 newspapers’. The papers were the leading dailies in the country, the most prominent of which were: *The Guardian*, *Punch*, *Daily Trust*, *ThisDay*, and *Leadership*. ‘A military spokesman described the measures as a “routine security action” to search for alleged contraband, but they were widely interpreted as reprisals for coverage of the military’s faltering efforts against Boko Haram’, the Freedom House report adds.¹⁵⁴

Boko Haram’s hostility towards journalists over perceived unfavourable reporting is even more severe. ‘Before his death, Abul Qaqa always complained about negative reports’, a former senior correspondent who is now a newspaper editor said.¹⁵⁵ ‘One day he called and threatened me with death when my paper published a story based on an army statement that they’d killed some Boko Haram commanders.’ Two freelance journalists said they too had received similar death threats from other Boko Haram operatives.¹⁵⁶ They said they were so frightened, they relocated their families to safer places because the insurgents have

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152 Interviewed in Abuja on 4 September 2017.

153 Interviewed in Yola on 25 July 2018.

154 Freedom House, ‘[Freedom of the Press 2015—Nigeria](#)’, Freedom House (28 April 2015). [accessed 28 April 2015].

155 Interviewed in Abuja on 29 August 2018.

156 Both interviewed in Abuja on 30 August 2018.

a reputation for carrying out their threats. Indeed, the militants do not always issue empty threats to journalists: they had killed at least two in the past and attacked offices for many newspapers following perceived negative coverage.¹⁵⁷ A cameraman of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Zakariyya Isa, was murdered in October 2011 after he was accused of providing ‘security officials with information about their activities’.¹⁵⁸ And in January 2012 Enenche Akogwu, a correspondent from Nigeria’s Channels Television, was killed when the insurgents attacked a major police station in the city of Kano. It was unclear whether they deliberately targeted him or whether he was caught in the crossfire, but they were responsible for his death. In April 2012 they bombed the offices of the newspaper *ThisDay* in Kaduna and Abuja, killing an employee of the company and three passers-by. ‘*ThisDay* Director, Eniola Bello said, “one of the reasons Boko Haram gave to justify their attack on our Abuja office was that we were not giving their activities front page prominence. They wanted to create panic”’.¹⁵⁹

Gatekeeping and avoidance strategies

It is not just threat and violence—or enticement and persuasion—that Boko Haram strategic communicators use in relating with journalists; they also employ gatekeeping and avoidance strategies. Even during the group’s early days, its leaders always kept effective control of information flowing from the group to the public. This was strengthened as the power of the group grew. ‘Most of the important information we have about Boko Haram is actually the information they supply to us themselves,’ said one senior correspondent who has covered the insurgency for nearly a decade.¹⁶⁰ ‘It’s a very secretive organisation. They release their information selectively and effectively, as seen in the way they handled the information about the Chibok girls: releasing it in bits when it suited their interests.’ The newspaper editor concurred.¹⁶¹ ‘They send their video and audio messages to those journalists they have confidence in and avoid those they dislike. The internet too helps them to reach the public directly’, he said. ‘And the public does pay attention to what they say because the information the military often releases about them is not always accurate.’ The insurgents tend to release their messages when they sense a public desire for them, such as at the peak of

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157 Pate, ‘How Journalists Survived to Report’.

158 *Ibid.*, p. 163.

159 *Ibid.*, p. 164.

160 Interviewed in Yola on 20 August 2017.

161 The editor interviewed on 29 August 2018 quoted earlier.

the Chibok girls' saga, or when the government makes claims about defeating them, or the army claims to have rescued kidnap victims from them, or when news about the purported killing of their leader is spread.

An analysis of a sample of ten Boko Haram videos released from April 2014 to October 2018 shows that the group focused on each of these issues at the time when each was attracting public attention, making their contents attractive to journalists. All the videos contain speeches of Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau, with him talking to the camera as if delivering his messages directly to the public. Another common feature of the videos is the rebuttal of claims by the government or security forces, which strengthens their appeal to journalists as a means of balancing one-sided official claims. All the journalists interviewed admitted sourcing stories directly from Boko Haram video or audio messages. 'There is virtually no other way of getting information from the group now', said an editor from a television station.¹⁶² 'Their videos contain newsworthy material and they often have more accurate information than the stuff we get from the government.' So, clearly, a lack of direct access to Boko Haram (and to the area it controls) and the newsworthiness of the material it dishes out compel journalists to rely on the insurgents' information subsidies—highlighting the relevance of both the concept of information subsidies¹⁶³ and that of news values theory.¹⁶⁴

The security forces' strategic communicators also use gatekeeping and avoidance strategies in their relationship with the journalists. As noted earlier in comments by army and police public relations officers, where they admitted ignoring journalists' phone calls, strategic communicators employ avoidance tactics to block access to certain information, discourage the publication of unfavourable stories, and reduce pressure from journalists. 'We could not respond to every interview request; the best option was to issue press releases to reach every journalist at the same time', said a senior army officer who had worked in their public relations department for many years.¹⁶⁵ 'It enabled us to control the information we're releasing. With the availability of the Internet and social media now, the army is reaching the public directly, without any hindrance.' Journalists are aware of this strategy and have apparently learnt to live with it. 'The military strictly controls access to the conflict zone. Only they, Boko Haram and the

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162 Interviewed on 26 July 2017.

163 Gandy, *Beyond Agenda Setting*.

164 Galtung, 'The Structure of Foreign News'; Brighton, *News Values*; and Harcup, 'What is News?'.

165 Interviewed on 24 July 2017.

victims trapped there know what is happening’, the editor from the television station said. ‘They control the flow of information and we rely heavily on them. They hardly come to us these days, they just email press releases to us after uploading them on their website and social media.’

A national newspaper correspondent concurred, adding that the only time army spokespersons showed keenness in looking for journalists was when they were caught lying.¹⁶⁶ ‘That’s when you will see them desperately looking for journalists to publish their stories with claims of how mistakes were made’, he said, citing instances when the army made false claims about rescuing kidnap victims or issued inaccurate casualty figures and then sought journalists’ assistance for damage limitation after public outrage. If they were not looking for such help, he said, the military would just email press statements to journalists ‘sometimes directly, sometimes via PR Nigeria’ (a public relations firm employed by the military). ‘And there is little we can do, other than to use them because we can’t go to the actual conflict zone to get the stories ourselves’, he added.

The security forces’ use of information subsidies in their media campaign against Boko Haram is extensive. From mid-2013 to mid-2015 alone they ‘issued over 3000 media contents including newsworthy items and publications’.¹⁶⁷ The figure is much higher now (no updated statistics because the military no longer releases them) as the security forces have continued to produce and distribute such materials. These are mostly press statements providing information about the military’s ‘counter-insurgency operations’ and the ‘successes’ they recorded. Many of them were also uploaded on the official websites and social media pages of the Army and the Defence Headquarters. An analysis of thirty of those releases show they are largely army promotional materials; but they contain news elements attractive to journalists and are written as news stories. They include stories about troops disarming teenage suicide bombers, how the ‘Army neutralizes Boko Haram terrorists’, how ‘troops rescue hostages used as sex slaves’, how they ‘kill 15 Boko Haram insurgents’, how they retake towns once controlled by Boko Haram, and how they ‘recover arms’ and ‘restore normalcy’. The public relations firm PR Nigeria was involved in carrying out the ‘extensive activities involving editorial works, event management, media production

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¹⁶⁶ Interviewed in Abuja 14 September 2017.

¹⁶⁷ This information is contained in Shuaib, *Boko Haram Media War*, p. 10, in a Foreword for the book by former National Security Adviser Retired Colonel Sambo Dasuki. The book details part of the media relations work done by the military from mid-2013 to mid-2015.

and placements in print, electronic and online media' required by the military.¹⁶⁸ They often liaise with news organisations to help facilitate the publication of the press releases.¹⁶⁹ It was partly due to the high volume of media publications resulting from these releases that the military admitted that, despite difficulties encountered, some of the media outlets have 'played very strategic roles' in their strategic communications campaigns.¹⁷⁰

Public relations scholarship has highlighted the significance of information subsidies in image building and agenda setting in government affairs and in the corporate world.¹⁷¹ It is clear that this also applies to security and military matters. What is more, the evidence in this study suggests that the use of this strategy in reference to the issue of violent extremism reaches beyond image building and agenda setting;¹⁷² it extends to the area of gatekeeping.¹⁷³ Mass communication scholars have identified layers of gatekeeping from newsgathering through to news consumption, even in the current digital era: news sources, journalists, users, and audiences all play the role of gatekeeper.¹⁷⁴ And it is evident here that strategic communicators (both Boko Haram and security forces) have managed to turn themselves into major gatekeepers, regularly using the Internet and social media, and their control of the conflict zone, to appropriate a significant part of the journalists' gatekeeping powers.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that journalists have an increasingly complicated but interdependent relationship with strategic communicators in conflict reporting. The relationship is characterised by cooperation, conflict, and confrontation—with journalists sometimes being subjected to harassment and intimidation. They rely heavily on strategic communicators for information because the level of violence in the Boko Haram conflict prevents them from accessing the conflict zone. Unlike the reporting of corporate and government affairs, which usually takes place in a peaceful environment, covering violent insurgency involves serious risk-taking (such as going to the scene of violence),

168 Shuaib, *Boko Haram Media War*, p. 15.

169 Shuaib, *Boko Haram Media War*.

170 Ibid., p. 9; Abubakar, 'Strategic Communications'.

171 Gandy, *Beyond Agenda Setting*; Charron, 'Relations between Journalists and Public Relations Practitioners'; Lewis, 'A Compromised Fourth Estate?'; Macnamara, *Journalism and PR*.

172 Lippmann, *Public Opinion*; and McCombs, 'A Look of Agenda-setting'.

173 White, 'The "Gate Keeper"'; Shoemaker, *Gatekeeping Theory*; Singer, 'User-generated Visibility'; Bro, 'Gatekeeping in a Digital Era'.

174 Ibid.

which strategic communicators here exploit fully to the detriment of journalists. Strategic communicators' control of the conflict theatre and use of the Internet and social media enabled them to transform themselves into major gatekeepers. This control notwithstanding, the findings show that strategic communicators still court journalists to help enhance the reach and credibility of their narratives, suggesting that the more the public uncovers strategic communicators' false claims, the stronger the influence of journalists. Conversely, the more the gatekeeping role of journalists diminishes, the greater the power of strategic communicators becomes.

This research has provided some insight into the dynamic nature of the relationship between journalism and strategic communications practitioners, shedding light on how it is affected by new technologies, and how this impacts their works. However, the research throws up new questions: How much does strategic communicators' use of information subsidies influence media coverage of the Boko Haram insurgency? And to what extent has the media's lack of access to the actual conflict zones affected our understanding of the crisis? These are areas for future research. But importantly, this study does point to the continuing relevance of gatekeeping theory in mass communication research, even in the current radically changing media landscape. It also shows that its applicability reaches beyond corporate and political communications to critical areas of security and military strategic communications. And even more significantly, this research highlights the power dynamics between journalists and strategic communicators in their gatekeeping roles in conflict reporting, indicating an apparent shift of power from the former to the latter. The power shift, however, does not end strategic communicators' reliance on journalists in their bid to enhance the credibility of their narratives—a testimony of the value journalists have to them and a sign that their relationship may nevertheless survive.

Acknowledgements

Fieldwork was funded by a pump-priming grant from City, University of London. The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments.

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THE ‘FAKE NEWS’ LABEL AND POLITICISATION OF MALAYSIA’S ELECTIONS

Gulizar Hacıyakupoglu

Abstract

This article analyses the information garboil caused by the politicisation of disinformation and the term ‘fake news’, and interruptions in the flow of information during the 14th General Elections in Malaysia. It pays particular attention to the distortion of the information environment by politicians and political parties, the control of the media (traditional and new), and the mobilisation of cyber troops and bots by political agents. The Anti-Fake News Act is central to the discussion as a law passed before and submitted for repeal after the elections. The article also looks into the subsidiary debate on foreign intervention and the supporting measures, such as cyber attacks and legal actions, that interrupted the information flow. An examination of these activities suggests a need for reform in the conduct of politicians and political parties, and of the media, as well as a closer look at other measures employed to disturb the information sphere. An evaluation of the problem and the introduction of a new approach are very timely, given the political changes the country is currently experiencing.

Keywords— *Malaysia, Anti-Fake News Act, fake news, disinformation, elections, cyber troops, strategic communications*

About the Author

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Glossary of Political Actors and Coalition Parties Mentioned in the Article



Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim (Left) and Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad (Right). Photo: EPA

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak (Left) and Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad (Right). Photo: AFP

Political figures mentioned in the article

Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad. Current Prime Minister of Malaysia, previously in power for 22 years (1981–2003). He was succeeded by Tun Dato' Seri Haji Abdullah bin Haji Ahmad Badawi (2003–2009). While Mahathir had been a leading figure in UMNO, he fell out with UMNO before GE14 and ran for his current position under the flag of the Malaysian United Indigenous Party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, (PPBM), which is a member of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition.

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak. Former Prime Minister of Malaysia, who was also the president of UMNO and former chairman of the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition. He is currently under investigation for the 1MDB case.

Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim. President of the People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat – PKR). Anwar was the Deputy Prime Minister under Mahathir until he was dismissed 'amid investigation for alleged corruption and sodomy' in 1998.ⁱ¹ Anwar was charged and jailed for five years, freed in 2004, and later charged again for another sodomy allegation,ⁱ² and freed after GE14. He is currently a member of the parliament for Port Dickson.

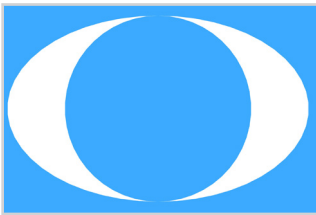
Lim Guan Eng. Current Finance Minister and the Secretary-General of the Democratic Action Party (DAP).

Mohd Rafizi Ramli. Vice-President of the People's Justice Party (PKR).

Datuk Zaid Ibrahim. Former Law Minister from UMNO who joined DAP in 2017.

Datuk Seri Dr. Ahmad Zahid Hamidi. New president of UMNO and BN and former Deputy Prime Minister.

GE14 Coalition Parties Mentioned in the Article



PAKATAN HARAPAN (PH)
Alliance of Hope

* The coalition in power

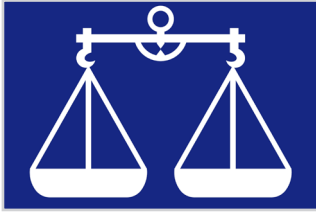
Lead Figures:

Tun Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad (PPBM)
Dato' Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim (PKR)

Parties in the Alliance:

Democratic Action Party, Parti Tindakan Demokratik (DAP); People's Justice Party, Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR); Malaysian United Indigenous Party, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia, (PPBM); National Trust Party, Parti Amanah Negara, (Amanah).

i1 The Straits Times, '[Anwar Ibrahim's sodomy cases: What you need to know](#)', 28 October 2014.
ii The Straits Times, '[Anwar Ibrahim's sodomy cases](#)'.



BARISAN NASIONAL (BN)

National Front

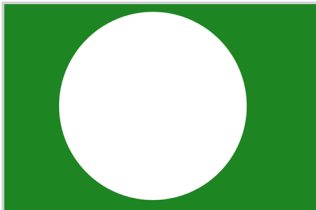
* Ruled the country from independence to GE14

Lead Figures:

Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak (UMNO)
Datuk Seri Dr. Ahmad Zahid Hamidi (UMNO)

Parties in the Alliance during the GE14:

United Malays National Organisation, Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu (UMNO); Malaysian Chinese Association, Persatuan Cina Malaysia (MCA); Malaysian Indian Congress, Kongres India Malaysia (MIC); United Traditional Bumiputera Party, Parti Pesaka Bumiputera Bersatu (PBB); United Sabah Party (PBS); People's Progressive Party, MyPPP (under Kayveas faction); Malaysian People's Movement Party; Parti Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Gerakan); Sarawak People's Party, Parti Rakyat Sarawak (PRS); Progressive Democratic Party (PDP); Sarawak United People's Party (SUPP); United Pasokmomogun Kadazandusun Murut Organisation (UPKO); United Sabah People's Party (PBRS); Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)



**Gagasan Sejahtera (Gagasan)
Movement of Harmony**

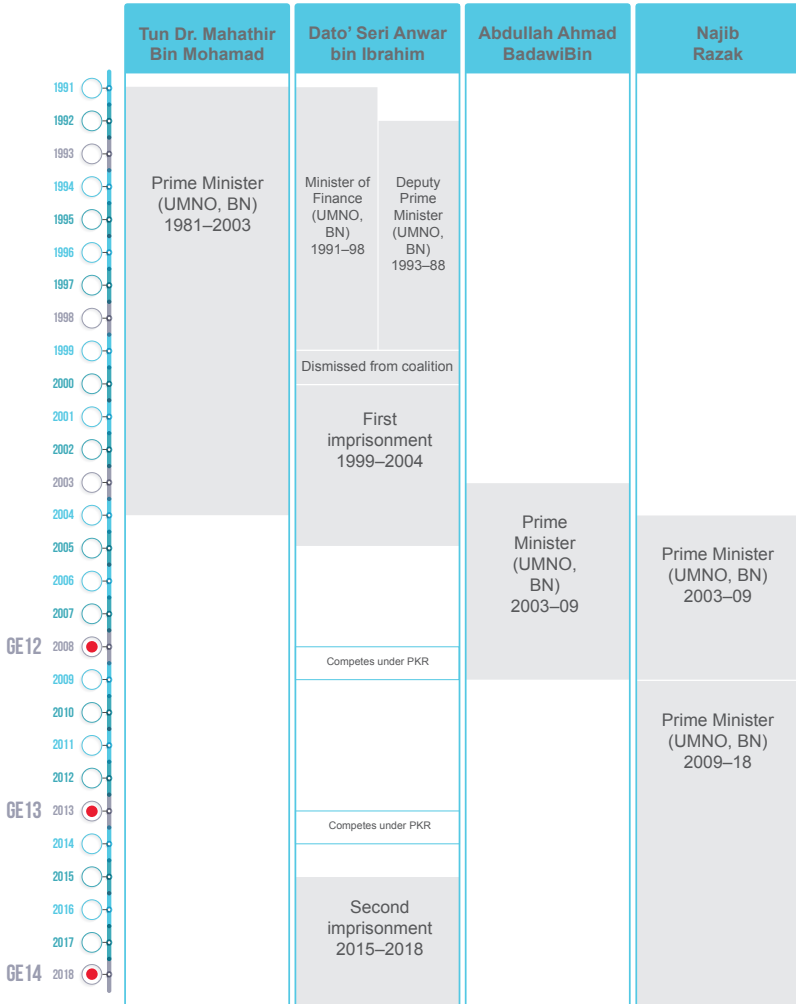
Lead Figures:

Abdul Hadi Awang (PAS)

Parties in the Alliance during the GE14:

Malaysian Islamic Party, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia PAS; Malaysia National Alliance Party, Parti Ikatan Bangsa Malaysia (IKATAN); Pan-Malaysian Islamic Front (BERJASA)

Timeline of events discussed in the article



Introduction

In March 2018, Jailani Johari, Deputy Minister of Communications and Multimedia at the time, urged the foreign press to stop circulating ‘fake news’ aiming to damage Prime Minister Najib Razak’s image before the 14th General Elections (GE14) by entangling him in allegations against 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB).¹ 1MDB, a government-owned investment fund, became embroiled in a scandal when claims emerged that millions of misappropriated USD dollar deposits had gone into Najib Razak’s personal account.² The post-election interrogation into the 1MDB case revealed that some of the accusations that had been dismissed as ‘fake news’ by Johari and other officials might have been accurate. This is just one example of the use of the ‘fake news’ label as a political tool in the run-up to the election.

GE14 will go down in Malaysian history as an election full of surprises. The information sphere was highly politicised throughout the tight race between prominent political figures. Among other developments, GE14 (a) ended the rule of the Barisan Nasional coalition, which had been in power since independence; (b) then incumbent Prime Minister Najib Razak faced off against Tun Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad, who had served as Prime Minister for 22 years; and (c) Mahathir joined forces with Dato’ Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim, his ‘one-time deputy’ who later became his rival, in an effort to topple Najib.³ Amidst the complex dynamics of this election, reaching audiences with desired information and shaping the information space to one’s advantage was an important concern for the political figures and parties.

This article analyses the deterioration of the information space during GE14. In the run-up to the elections, politicians and parties sporadically used disinformation to dispel criticism, discredit the opposition, and manipulate information flow and public opinion. In examining these attempts, I pay special attention to cases linked with Malaysia’s front-running political camps—the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition and the opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan (PH). I examine their use of the ‘fake news’ label and other disinformation methods to achieve a discursive edge.

1 *The Straits Times*, ‘[Malaysia’s deputy minister warns foreign media about spreading “fake news” about 1MDB](#)’, 11 March 2018.

2 *Guardian*, ‘[Malaysian task force investigates allegations \\$700m paid to PM Najib](#)’, 6 July 2015; see also Channel News Asia, ‘[1MDB scandal: A timeline](#)’, 22 May 2018; see also *The Straits Times*, ‘[1MDB: Malaysia’s extraordinary financial scandal](#)’, 3 July 2018.

3 Liz Lee and Rozanna Latiff, ‘[Mahathir, 92, sworn in as Malaysia’s seventh prime minister](#)’, Reuters, 10 May 2018.

The attempts of politicians and political parties were aided by control of the media (traditional and new) and the mobilisation of cyber troops and bots, often by political agents. The information sphere was further muddled by occasional interruptions in the flow of information, mainly by way of cyber attacks and legal restrictions, the most noteworthy being the Anti-Fake News Act⁴, a legal action instituted by the ruling party in the midst of the campaigning period. The bill to repeal the act was submitted soon after the victory of the opposition coalition. Foreign intervention on the other hand, an issue that has been high on the agendas of various countries, especially since the 2016 American elections, emerged as a subsidiary concern during the elections. Leading political figures accused rival party members of inviting foreign influence, but these debates were more about discrediting rivals than about investigating foreign influence.

The practices mentioned above raise questions about the expanding boundaries of 'ethical' political communication, especially in times of critical decision-making. The drivers and measures discussed in this article promoted particular truths at the expense of others and interrupted the 'healthy' consumption and exchange of information necessary for democratic elections. This is especially alarming considering the population's unease about disinformation practices. According to a recent survey, a significant part of the Malaysian population is concerned about the adverse effects of disinformation, and more than half the population has difficulty identifying 'good journalism'.⁵ This, together with the conditions discussed in the article, show the need for reform in the conduct of politicians and political parties, and of the media.

This article is based on an examination of relevant English news articles published during the campaigning period and in the immediate aftermath of the elections,⁶ and on a review of scholarly literature on the issue. The analysis provided here is timely, given the changes the country is going through after the

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4 The act was submitted for repeal by PH. During the review process of this article, repeal of the act was stalled by the BN.

5 According to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, 63% of respondents fail to 'distinguish between rumours and good journalism', and 73% are uneasy about the adverse effects of disinformation in Malaysia (Zin, March 7, 2018). These insights expose the population's vulnerability to the politicisation of the term 'fake news' and to disinformation that is manufactured for political gains. Mazuin Zin, [Malaysia: The Changing Face of Trust](#), *Edelman*, 7 March 2018.

6 Interviews and surveys could have provided greater insight into the issue. However, given the short period between the announcement of the election date, the enforcement of the Anti-Fake News Act, and the elections, and the time required to receive Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I could not conduct such interviews or surveys. Hence, the article is founded on the available scholarly literature. It draws from news articles produced within the given timeline and aspires to identify the clashes on the ground, which can be further explored by empirical studies in the future.

end of BN's 60-year rule.⁷ While the focus of this article is on the 14th General Elections, historical accounts and references to past events are occasionally mentioned to provide context and substantiate arguments. Here it should be noted that I do not delve into the reception dimension of the issue,⁸ nor do I attempt to measure the impact of disinformation on voters' choices and on election results.⁹

In the following section I define the terms 'fake news' and 'disinformation', and describe the intricate network of relations in Malaysia's political environment. In the main body of the paper, 'Key Disinformation Drivers During GE14', I discuss each driver in turn. The nature of the problem of disinformation is multi-faceted and pervasive. There is a need for reform in the conduct of politicians and political parties, and of the media. In the concluding section I propose the adoption of a multi-pronged approach to counter the problem, and conclude with some practical recommendations for the future.

7 BBC, ['Malaysia election: Opposition scores historic victory'](#), 10 May 2018.

8 Questions regarding audiences' reception of and reaction to disinformation disseminated during GE14, including the influence of cognitive biases in information consumption behaviours, and audiences' investment of trust in different media, information, and sources, do not fall within the scope of this article. Akin to this, media, messages and sources used to target different audience groups, and disinformation as well as political communication targeted at different language circles and ethnic communities are not discussed in this article.

9 It is troublesome to assess the impact of disinformation, the 'fake news' label, and the Anti-Fake News Act on audiences' perceptions and decisions, and to calculate the reach of disinformation, for a number of reasons. These include the diversity of factors that contributed to the surprise election results (e.g. concerns about corruption and the economy), the multiplicity of agents involved in producing and circulating disinformation, manipulation of online likes, followers, and conversations, and the possible gap between concerns on the ground and issues raised online. It is worth clarifying the problem of measurement. Multiple agents were involved in disinformation production and circulation and they used diverse mediums, thus the problem grows in a complex ecosystem. To name a few: (a) a variety of interacting factors contributed to the surprise in the election results, including concerns about the situation of the economy and corruption cases; (b) online conversations are not always 'indicative of ground sentiment' (Leong, 2015, p. 55); (c) social media are not always a good indicator of the popularity of a party or a candidate, as the number of followers and likes are easily manipulated and conversations can be swayed by trolls. This list can be expanded. With regards to the influence of the Anti-Fake News Act on the election results, the law was only one of the major topics and concerns during the campaigning period, and the short-lived act did not lead to significant material changes. (a) Although one Danish citizen was sentenced under the act, the cases against opposition were not concluded. (b) Neither the law nor the sentencing of the Danish citizen deterred the circulation of fake news. For instance, a false viral message claiming Johor's Crown Prince would pay for people's groceries at a supermarket (*The Straits Times*, 12 April 2018), and supposedly 'fake' viral messages on voting-related problems in GE14 (*The Straits Times*, 9 May 2018) went into circulation after the enforcement of the law. (c) The law did not necessarily silence the opposition. Indeed, its enactment sparked new criticism. And (d) the law was not adequate to obfuscate the concerns (e.g. the economy) that potentially contributed to the loss of BN. For citations see: Pauline P. Y. Leong, ['Political Communication in Malaysia: A Study on the Use of New Media in Politics'](#), *Journal of e Democracy and Open Government*, 7(1), (2015): 55; *The Straits Times*, ['Fake news of Johor Crown Prince appearing at Pontian supermarket causes pandemonium'](#), 12 April 2018;

The Straits Times, ['Malaysia election: Najib slams viral messages about voting issues as fake news'](#), 9 May 2018.

Fake News, Disinformation, and Malaysia's Political Environment

'Fake news' is an ambiguous term that has been exploited by politicians and other authorities as a political tool to defame an opponent, discredit an argument, or deflect criticism. Donald Trump popularised the term 'fake news' as a mechanism to circumvent undesired media coverage or criticism,¹⁰ and various politicians, *including some in Malaysia*, have hopped on the bandwagon.¹¹ The term 'fake news' is used to refer to episodic 'falsehood and confusion'.¹² 'Disinformation', on the other hand, designates the deliberate dissemination of a 'wide range' of falsehoods (e.g. inaccurate information, rumours, politically biased information), at times for political or monetary gain.¹³ It refers to 'systematic disruptions of authoritative information flow due to strategic deceptions that may appear very credible to those consuming them'.¹⁴ This article explores a broad range of politically motivated disinformation and related material (e.g. half-truths, propaganda, decontextualised information, partisan information).

In Malaysia, the meaning of 'fake news' is shaped by the dynamics of the political environment, while disinformation remains an under-defined problem. The term 'fake news' was given both a political definition and mission amidst the politicking of BN and its opposition in the GE14 campaign. The opposition equated fake news with 'regime propaganda',¹⁵ while the ruling coalition defined it as a 'weapon of the opposition',¹⁶ and occasionally leveraged the term to deflect 'questions and critiques' of news outlets such as '*Malaysiakini*, the London-based *Sarawak Report*, and even international news agencies'.¹⁷ Amidst the contested significations, the ruling party's Anti-Fake News Act defined the term as 'any news, information, data and reports, which is or are wholly or partly false, whether in the form of features, visuals, or audio recordings, or in any other form capable of suggesting words or ideas'.¹⁸

10 Gabbatt, Adam, '[How Trump's 'fake news' gave authoritarian leaders a new weapon](#)', *Guardian*, 25 January 2018.

11 Andy Yee, '[Post-Truth Politics and Fake News in Asia](#)', *Global Asia*, 12(2), (2017): 71. *Emphasis added*.

12 W. Lance Bennett and Steven Livingston, '[The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions](#)', *European Journal of Communication*, 33:2, (2018): 124.

13 Bennett and Livingston, 'The Disinformation Order', p. 124. See also Joshua A. Tucker, Andrew Guess, Pablo Barbera, Cristian Vaccari, Alexandra Siegel, Sergey Sanovich, Denis Stukal, and Brendan Nyhan, '[Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature](#)', *William & Flora Hewlett Foundation*, (2018): 2.

14 Bennett and Livingston, 'The Disinformation Order', p. 124.

15 *The Straits Times*, '[Barisan Nasional launches portal to combat "fake news"](#)', 5 January 2018.

16 *Ibid*.

17 Zaharom Nain, '[Digital News Report 2017: Malaysia](#)', In *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2017*, Nic Newman, Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, David A. L. Levy and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (eds), (2017): 121.

18 Laws of Malaysia, [Act 803 Anti-Fake News Act 2018](#), Part I, p. 5.

This partisan approach to the term ‘fake news’ comes against the backdrop of a political system governed for sixty years by the BN coalition (dominated by the United Malays National Organisation or UMNO party), yet ardently challenged by the opposition, especially in the 2008 and 2013 elections. In 2008, BN ‘lost its two-thirds majority control of parliament’¹⁹ to the Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition of three parties—the People’s Justice Party (PKR), united around Dato’ Seri Anwar bin Ibrahim (Anwar from here onwards);²⁰ the ‘largely ethnic-Chinese’ Democratic Action Party (DAP); and the Pan-Islamic Malaysian Party (PAS).²¹ The opposition’s success in the 2008 election was partially attributed to its mastering of the Internet.²² Although BN elevated its online campaigning efforts in the 2013 elections,²³ it lost seats in parliament due to myriad voter concerns including ‘corruption’, ‘racial-based policies’, ‘cronyism’, and ‘religious extremism’.²⁴ Later, BN claimed it was hit by ‘fake news’ in the 2013 elections.²⁵

GE14 was a particularly important election, as BN was competing against the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition formed by parties with different voter bases, namely PKR, DAP, Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (PPBM or Beratsu—the Malaysian United Indigenous Party), and Parti Amanah Negara (Amanah). More critical, Najib, the BN candidate, was running against two prominent political rivals—Tun Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad (Mahathir from here onwards)²⁶ and Anwar, who joined forces under PH against Najib. Mahathir holds the title of longest-serving Prime Minister, with 22 years of leadership under the UMNO (and BN) flag. He was elected Prime Minister of Malaysia for the second time in GE14, while leading the Pakatan Harapan coalition. Anwar was the Deputy Prime Minister during Mahathir’s first term in office (UMNO, BN),²⁷ until he

19 James Gomez, ‘Social Media Impact on Malaysia’s 13th General Elections’, *Asia Pacific Media Educator* 24, No 1 (2014): 96.

20 I refer to the former Prime Ministers and others in this article by name for convenience and because it is common journalistic style, no disrespect is intended.

21 Bridget Welsh, ‘Malaysia’s Elections: A Step Backward’, *Journal of Democracy* 24, No 4 (2013): 138.

22 Fischer, ‘We Shift the Channel’, p. 61; Welsh, ‘Malaysia’s Elections: A Step Backward’, p. 43.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 143.

24 Gomez, ‘Social Media Impact’, p. 101.

25 Anisah Shukry, ‘Malaysia Gears Up for Elections as Najib Targets “Fake News”’, *Bloomberg*, 5 January 2018.

26 Tun Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohamad is referred to as Mahathir for the rest of the article, due to the length of the name. There are many news and academic articles that refer to him as Mahathir (only). I refrain from using his PM title, as it could confuse the reader in terms of the timeline of events.

27 Anwar was expelled from UMNO with allegations of sodomy during Mahathir’s tenure and was later imprisoned. According to ‘human rights groups and his supporters’ the corruption and sodomy allegations that put him behind bars were ‘trumped-up at the behest of Mr. Mahathir’ (Austin Ramzy, ‘Now Free, Malaysia’s Anwar Ibrahim Attacks System That Jailed Him Twice’, *New York Times*, 15 May 2018). Anwar’s deportation and arrest sparked the Reformasi movement that comprised protests in support of Anwar. The movement drew spotlight for the online activism it generated. Anwar was imprisoned for a second time during Najib’s tenure and the Pakatan Harapan coalition argued that his imprisonment under Najib was ‘politically motivated’ (Trinna Leong, ‘Malaysia’s jailed political leader Anwar Ibrahim to be released on May 15’, *The Straits Times*, 12 May 2018).

was dismissed ‘amid investigation for alleged corruption and sodomy’ in 1998.²⁸ Anwar was later charged with corruption,²⁹ ‘sodomising his family’s former driver, and abusing his power to cover up his actions’;³⁰ he was sent to prison as a result. After being freed in 2004, Anwar was entangled in another allegation of sodomy in 2008, ‘sentenced to five years’ in prison in 2014,³¹ and imprisoned for a second time in 2015.³² Some argued that both arrests were politically motivated. Anwar had been Mahathir’s stern opponent until the two made peace to run together in GE14 with the ultimate goal of toppling Najib. The election victory was Anwar’s ticket to freedom, as he was still in prison when running for office. Winning the election was crucial for both coalitions, and so both were politicising information on candidates and other major issues to their best advantage.

The amount of disinformation in circulation increased as the election date drew near. The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission claimed that the ‘fake news’ identified by their fact-checking site *sebenarnya.my* ‘increased by almost 100 per cent’.³³ Within this context, the Anti-Fake News Act, which BN introduced about one month before GE14, stimulated discussions on informational advantage in the elections. Both parties used the topic to promote their positions during the campaign.

With this background in mind, the following section will delve into the prominent disinformation drivers during GE14.

Key Disinformation Drivers During GE14

There are multiple agents with intersecting motivations that help distort the information sphere and manufacture disinformation. Alexandra Siegel lists ‘trolls, bots, fake-news websites, conspiracy theorists, politicians, highly partisan media outlets, the mainstream media, and foreign governments’ as ‘disinformation producers’.³⁴ In the context of Malaysia, this list can be extended to include influential opinion and religious leaders. For the purposes of this article, I focus on politicians and their parties, take a closer look at the battle over control of the media (traditional and new), and consider the bots and cyber troops, some

28 *The Straits Times*, ‘Anwar Ibrahim’s sodomy cases: What you need to know’, 28 October 2014.

29 Channel News Asia, ‘No need for me to explain further on sodomy cases: Anwar Ibrahim’, 18 October 2018.

30 *Guardian*, ‘Anwar Ibrahim sodomy case is credible, judge rules’, 16 May 2011.

31 *The Straits Times*, ‘Anwar Ibrahim’s sodomy cases’.

32 Channel News Asia, ‘No need for me to explain further on sodomy cases: Anwar Ibrahim’, 18 October 2018.

33 Beatrice Nita Jay and Mohd Nasaruddin Parzi, ‘Fake news surging in GE14’, *New Straits Times*, 4 May 2018.

34 Alexandra Siegel, ‘Producers of Disinformation’, in Tucker et. al., ‘*Social Media, Political Polarization*’, p. 22.

of which are allegedly tied to political actors and agents of foreign influence. In addition to these interacting drivers, I will also discuss supportive measures, including legal actions and cyber attacks. I shy away from using the term ‘disinformation producers’ in the context of Malaysia, as the actors identified above do not always produce the disinformation they use. Sometimes they leverage the term ‘fake news’ to sway opinion and dispel criticism, or disseminate disinformation produced by other sources.³⁵

Malaysian politicians, their parties, and the Anti-Fake News Act

In the run-up to GE14, disinformation emerged as a strategy to conceal the truth and promote a political agenda,³⁶ and the term ‘fake news’ was exploited to dispel criticism. The scandal around 1MDB and the Anti-Fake News Act were also central to the debates on ‘fake news’ and disinformation.

A telling incident occurred during a speech delivered by ruling coalition leader Najib at the launch of the portal *Rakyat.com*. BN created the portal to provide ‘accurate’ GE14-related information amidst rising disinformation. Ironically, in his speech Najib accused the opposition of pushing ‘fake news’ (about 1MDB) while promoting a platform created to publish his coalition’s interpretation of the truth.³⁷

The ‘fake news’ label was also used to help create ‘alternative truths’ regarding the 1MDB case, and to discredit allegations against the fund. While Najib dismissed some of the accusations against 1MDB as fake news,³⁸ Johari³⁹ asserted that any information on 1MDB that had not been ‘verified by the Government’ would be ‘deemed as fake news’.⁴⁰ His statement signalled the BN government’s intention to control what is fake and what is accurate, and thus, what one can and cannot publicise on issues of importance.

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35 These drivers potentially refer to different (in some cases overlapping) audience groups, and they might have had a disparate impact on information consumers with diverse profiles. Their activities, alone or in conjunction with other agents, have served as a means for political parties or figures to achieve their ambitions. Regardless of their use in isolation or inclusion into an orchestrated effort that combines other agents, cumulatively they polluted the information environment before the elections. For instance, politicians had the option to leverage the term fake news to discredit criticism while they also benefited from cyber troops’ attempts to deflect it. In addition to these drivers, legal regulations and cyber attacks helped disrupt information flow and sway the course of political interaction.

36 Yee, ‘Post-Truth Politics’.

37 Ibid.

38 *Al Jazeera*, ‘How Asian leaders are riding “fake news” mantra’, 22 January 2018.

39 Datuk Jailani Johari was the Deputy Communications and Multimedia Minister of BN (Please see the Introduction).

40 Datuk Jailani Johari as cited in Sivanandam, Hemananthani, ‘Unverified info on 1MDB is fake news, says deputy minister’, *The Star Online*, 21 March 2018.

Fake news had clearly become a hot button issue. Barisan Nasional claimed to have been victimised by fake news in the previous elections. Just before GE14, in April of 2018, it introduced an Anti-Fake News Act ‘to curb false news that threatens public order and national security’.⁴¹ The act was passed with comparatively little debate, although it later became the target of intense criticism, including complaints that it was couched in much too general language and failed to define ‘fake news’ in any meaningful way.⁴² Muhyiddin Yassin, PPBM president, who had been ousted from UMNO in 2016, accused BN of leveraging of the ‘fake news’ label ‘as an excuse’.⁴³ Yassin called for Najib’s resignation soon after the 1MDB saga began to unfold.⁴⁴ Both DAP Parliamentary Leader Lim Kit Siang, and former law minister Datuk Zaid Ibrahim, who joined DAP in 2017,⁴⁵ claimed that a major objective of the Anti-Fake News Act was to defend Najib against the corruption allegations tied to 1MDB.⁴⁶ The 1MDB case potentially swayed the votes of some concerned Malaysians in support of the opposition, despite the ruling party’s efforts to sweep the allegations under the carpet. More importantly, the post-election discoveries of misconduct raised questions about the damage caused by dismissing the claims of corruption, and exposed BN’s attempts to control the flow of information regarding the issue.

In addition to its alleged role in side-lining diatribes against 1MDB, the Anti-Fake News Act granted BN greater control over the information sphere before the election. Steven Gan, editor-in-chief of the *Malaysiakini* news portal, and Zaid Ibrahim suggested that the bill was enacted to bolster BN in the elections.⁴⁷ The law was used against opposition figures Mahathir Mohamad and Mohd Rafizi Ramli (People’s Justice Party Vice-President)⁴⁸ days before the election. Mahathir was placed under investigation for claiming that his ‘plane was sabotaged’,⁴⁹ and Ramli was singled out for his comments on ‘social media about the filing of nomination papers for the election at a district in Negeri Sembilan state’.⁵⁰ If we take into account over 50% of Malaysians’ scepticism in deciding which

41 *The Star Online*, ‘Azalina: Media providers consulted over fake news laws’, 14 March 2018.

42 Gulizar Hacıyakupoğlu, ‘Malaysia’s Elections and the Anti-Fake News Act’, *The Diplomat*, 26 April 2018.

43 Mohamad Fadi, ‘Muhyiddin: Why no action on 1MDB “fake news” since 2016?’, *Free Malaysia Today*, 12 March 2018.

44 *The Straits Times*, ‘Malaysia’s Umno expels Muhyiddin and Mukhriz Mahathir, suspends Shafie Abdal’, 24 June 2016.

45 Trinna Leong, ‘Former Malaysian law minister Zaid Ibrahim joins DAP’, *The Straits Times*, 8 February 2017.

46 Zaid Ibrahim in Lourdes, ‘Malaysia’s anti-fake news law’; see also Siang, ‘The Anti-Fake News Bill’.

47 Lourdes, ‘Malaysia’s anti-fake news law’.

48 Jo Timbuong, ‘Terengganu and Kelantan (updated)’, *The Star*, 5 October 2018.

49 Emily Chow and Praveen Menon, ‘Go ahead, charge me over fake news, says Malaysia’s Mahathir of plane sabotage claim’, *Reuters*, 4 May 2018.

50 *Reuters*, ‘Malaysian opposition leader investigated under fake news law’, 5 May 2018.

‘politicians to trust’,⁵¹ it is likely that the effect of the two cases on different audiences was inconsistent. On the one hand, the investigations against Mahathir and Ramli may have discredited these candidates in the eyes of some voters. On the other hand, Najib’s politicisation of the term ‘fake news’ might have damaged BN’s image. Some voters might have interpreted the investigations as just another election trick, especially when certain parties were already criticising some of BN’s tactics, such as gerrymandering, as an election fix. Some voters, undecided, sceptical, or already sympathetic to PH, Anwar, or Mahathir, might have shifted their allegiance.⁵²

The impact of this law on the election results is hard to gauge, given the influence of multiple drivers of disinformation production and amplification, the brief lifespan of the Act, and the variety of interacting factors that may have contributed to the surprising election results, including concerns about the economy and political corruption. Besides, the short-lived law did not lead to any significant material changes, as can be seen in four failures of the law to achieve results: (a) Although one Danish citizen was sentenced under the Act, the cases against the opposition were not concluded. (b) Neither the law nor the sentencing of the Danish citizen deterred the circulation of fake news—several fake messages went viral after the law was enacted, including the claim that Johor’s Crown Prince would pay for people’s groceries at a supermarket,⁵³ the claim that ‘voters must wear government office attire’ at the polls,⁵⁴ and other voting-related problems in GE14.⁵⁵ (c) The law did not necessarily silence the opposition, but rather sparked new criticism. And (d) the law was not effective enough to obfuscate concerns that potentially contributed to BN’s defeat.

Disinformation tactics were also used to confuse voters to the disadvantage of BN’s ruling coalition. One such incident was a ‘story about Bangladeshis with blue caps seen entering the country to become phantom voters’ that went viral.⁵⁶ It built on similar stories from the 2013 elections, one of them being Mahathir’s allegation on a previous occasion of ‘the existence of [...] phantom voters in the country’s electoral roll’.⁵⁷ According to the newspapers, Mahathir claimed that

51 [2018 Edelman Trust Barometer Malaysia Launch](#), Slide Share, (2018): 17. According to the 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, 58% of the respondents ‘[d]id not know which politicians to trust’.

52 These suppositions are hard to substantiate due to lack of empirical studies and more important, the difficulty of assessing impact on this front.

53 *The Straits Times*, ‘Fake news of Johor Crown Prince’.

54 *The Star Online*, ‘[EC confirms no dress code on polling day](#)’, 30 April 2018.

55 *The Straits Times*, ‘[Malaysia election: Najib slams viral messages about voting issues as fake news](#)’, 9 May 2018.

56 Beatrice Nita Jay and Mohd Nasaruddin Parzi, ‘[Fake news surging in GE14](#)’, *New Straits Times*, 4 May 2018.

57 *The Straits Times*, ‘[Mahathir alleges evidence of “phantom voters” in Malaysia’s electoral rolls](#)’, 15 January 2018.

900 people with the same birth date and name, Fatimah Ismail, were 'listed in the electoral roll'; he also pointed to registry entries with no proper address indicated.⁵⁸ In this context, the disinformation about phantom Bangladeshi voters arguably built on a suspicion that had been planted earlier. Whether this incident and other disinformation tactics targeted at BN obliquely benefited the opposition remains a question.

The debate around the Anti-Fake News Act, on the other hand, quickly emerged as a promising campaign discourse for opposition coalition Pakatan Harapan. PH leveraged the debate to create the image of the Barisan Nasional as a coalition intolerant of dissent and willing to curtail freedom of speech. Reinforcing the negative image of his opponents, Mahathir claimed that the Act was part of the ruling coalition's 'political agenda',⁵⁹ and called on BN not to 'use this law to cover up the truth'.⁶⁰ Similarly, Lim Guan Eng, current Finance Minister and the Secretary-General of the Democratic Action Party, argued that BN aspired to define 'what is true or false' and 'fake or not' with the Anti-Fake News Act.⁶¹

The opposition based some future promises on its criticism of the law and arguments about the 'fake news' saga. They promised to repeal the Anti-Fake News Act, presenting their coalition as keen to restore tolerance of dissent and variety of information. PH also defined its position on freedom of expression and of the press with its criticism of the Anti-Fake News Act and other laws curtailing these freedoms. For instance, Mahathir expressed the need to repeal several other laws that he 'deemed oppressive to people', including some of the laws pursued during his governance, such as the Sedition Act of 1948 and the Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1971.⁶²

After the elections, the parliament, led by the victorious PH, announced that it would abolish the Anti-Fake News Act.⁶³ PH kept its promise and submitted a bill to repeal the vaguely defined act, which could easily be exploited to curtail

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58 Ibid.

59 Tarrance Tan, '[Dr M: Even AGC officers are confused about Anti Fake News Bill](#)', *The Star Online*, 27 March 2018.

60 *Free Malaysia Today*, '[Don't use fake news to cover up truth, says Dr M](#)', 6 February 2018.

61 Lim Huey Teng, '[Guan Eng: Anti-fake news bill to cover up 1MDB scandal?](#)', *Malaysiakini*, 22 March 2018.

62 Terrance Tan, '[Dr M: Pakatan to repeal controversial laws, including fake news act](#)', *The Star Online*, 3 April 2018.

63 Hemananthani Sivanandam, Martin Carvalho, Rahimy Rahim, and Loshana K. Shagar, '[Parliament passes bill to repeal Anti-Fake News law](#)', *The Star Online*, 16 August 2018; The new government's decision to repeal the law was announced during the review period of this article. See Hemananthani Sivanandam, Martin Carvalho, Rahimy Rahim and Loshana K. Shagar, '[Bill to repeal controversial Anti-Fake News Act tabled in the Parliament](#)', *The Star Online*, 8 August, 2018.

freedom of speech for political gain. However, PH has not disclosed its agenda on combating disinformation, which will continue to be a problem if no further action is taken. We have yet to see how tolerant PH will be towards dissent now that they are in control, especially considering Mahathir's past policies (see the section on traditional media).

As a man who was allegedly suppressed as a dissident by Mahathir and Najib, Anwar may aspire to institute a fair playing field for the opposition. However, several questions create uncertainty on this front: How will Mahathir's past relationship with the opposition and his policies on the media influence his future steps? How will Mahathir and Anwar (and Lim) negotiate their different ambitions? In his first days as a free man, Anwar called on PH supporters and other Malaysians to act as watchdogs over the conduct of elected ministers.⁶⁴ Whether citizens will follow his advice and hold politicians accountable for their actions and their words remains to be seen.

Malaysia's media environment and the Internet

BN's stranglehold on some of the traditional media sources in Malaysia through ownership and legislation inculcated an unhealthy, partisan-leaning media culture in the country.⁶⁵ While some traditional media tend to support BN in controversial issues, independent websites and other online sources have come to be venues for questions and criticism.⁶⁶ Hence, the traditional media are not entirely immune to opposition rhetoric, and the Internet has not been completely safe from 'established political forces'.⁶⁷ Although the Internet remains relatively free as a platform for voicing dissent,⁶⁸ a number of attempts have been made to circumvent the promise of no online censorship, a promise delivered as a

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⁶⁴ Razak Ahmad, Martin Carvalho, Hemananthani Sivanandam, Vincent Tan, M. Kumar, and Tarrence Tan, '[Anwar to rally crowd: Monitor Pakatan's elected representatives](#)', *The Star Online*, 17 May 2018.

⁶⁵ The traditional media and the Internet accommodate various forms of disinformation, and both may be exploited to cause information interruption. The traditional media and the Internet are not necessarily independent spaces in the production and circulation of disinformation. Information is not imprisoned in online or offline locations; it travels from one medium to another. Thus, the Internet, social media in particular, and the mass media are not isolated pockets, and the issue of reforming the media to eliminate dissemination of deliberate falsehoods must be evaluated and tackled with attention to both online and offline information spaces. Here, I should also stress that that disinformation manufacturing and circulation are not the only mechanisms for swaying and constructing public opinion. Various means of control over information (e.g. hacking, blocking, banning) available to the public may obstruct people's access to accurate information, hamper information verification process and obliquely cause misinformation.

⁶⁶ Cherian George, '[Media in Malaysia: Zone of Contention](#)', *Democratization*, 14:5, (2007): 901.

⁶⁷ George, 'Media in Malaysia', p. 893.

⁶⁸ Liu Yangyue, '[Controlling Cyberspace in Malaysia: Motivations and Constraints](#)', *Asian Survey*, 54(4), (2014): 802.

part of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) policy from the mid-90s.⁶⁹ The Anti-Fake News Act is only one of a number of legal actions that provoked criticism for their potential to challenge the liberty of deliberations. Additionally, attempts have been made to censor dissent from all quarters and partisan content has found its way online. These circumstances contribute to curtailing the variety of information available to the public on the Internet.

The dynamics of the Malaysian media environment exhibit a vulnerability to the penetration of disinformation. I will first discuss the partisan condition of the traditional media and then elaborate on the Internet with a particular focus on legal actions and cyber attacks.

The traditional media

Newspaper circulation has been decreasing in recent years.⁷⁰ The prominent drivers of this fall include the media's pro-Najib propaganda, despite his enmeshment in the 1MDB scandal, and the public increasingly turning to digital sources for their news.⁷¹ While the impact of the traditional media's predominantly pro-BN stance on the rising consumption of news from digital spaces is a question, biased coverage by the press has long been a concern in Malaysia. The media ownership that favours BN, and the correspondingly partisan content of BN-lenient sources, have become a standard component of the Malaysian media environment.⁷² In addition, the content covered in the traditional media has been sporadically managed by legislation. I will first discuss the structure of media ownership and then expand on some of the legal enforcements over content and publication.

BN and the establishments under its influence own a significant portion of the mainstream media.⁷³ Media Prima, which operates four TV stations and three newspapers (*Harian Metro*, *Berita Harian*, *New Straits Times*) under its umbrella,⁷⁴

69 The MSC was introduced as part of the National Development Policy in the mid-90s with the intention to draw mainly 'IT-related tycoons' into Malaysia. MSC was followed by a 'Bill of Guarantees' which promised no-censorship on the Internet. See Yangyue, 'Controlling Cyberspace', p. 804; and Nain, 'Digital News Report 2017: Malaysia', p. 121.

70 Zaharom Nain, 'Digital News Report 2018: Malaysia', in *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018*, Newsman, N., Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., Levy, D. A. L. and Nielsen, R. K. (eds.), (2018): 13.

71 Nain, 'Digital News Report 2018: Malaysia', p. 131.

72 Kean Wong, 'Malaysia in the Grip of the Government', in *Losing Control: Freedom of the Press in Asia*, L. Williams and R. Rich (eds.), (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2013): 124.

73 Nain, 'Digital News Report 2017: Malaysia', p. 121.

74 Ibid.

is 'indirectly' controlled by BN.⁷⁵ UMNO (also under the influence of BN) holds up to 50% of shares in Utusan Melayu (Malaysia) Bhd. (UTUS.KL), which runs *Utusan Malaysia*, *Mingguan Malaysia*, *Kosmo!*, and *Kosmo! Abad*.⁷⁶ The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), another member of the BN coalition, owns the 'best-selling' English newspaper, *The Star*.⁷⁷

Legal restrictions have complemented this ownership dominance to bias the traditional media. Contested laws targeting the press (e.g. the Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1971) have long been in force, and existed during Mahathir's previous term as Prime Minister. During his tenure, licensing laws were passed,⁷⁸ the operations of three papers were suspended due to fears of racial tension,⁷⁹ and regulations such as the Internal Security Act (now repealed) and the Official Secrets Act were allegedly used to suppress dissent and political opposition.⁸⁰ Indeed, Mahathir was given a place on the Committee to Protect Journalists' 'list of the 10 Worst Enemies of the Press' more than once.⁸¹ Moreover, Lim Guan Eng, current Minister of Finance, faced a conviction during Mahathir's term in government. He lost his seat in the Parliament upon being found guilty of circulating false information.⁸² Lim's conviction came after he produced a pamphlet questioning the 'handling of a rape case involving a senior government leader and a young girl from his constituency'.⁸³ Conditions did not improve under Najib Razak. In 2015 and 2016, over 150 people, including a number of journalists, were detained under the Sedition Act of 1948.⁸⁴

This firm control over traditional media has created an atmosphere in which much of the mainstream press was politically slanted towards the government's political agenda. The 1MDB saga is a case in point. Partisan media sources mostly remained silent about the allegations of 1MDB-related corruption.⁸⁵ Additionally, the opposition struggled to receive equal representation in the mainstream media, and this partisanship resulted in the promotion of particular

75 Gomez as cited in Anand, Ram, '[Universiti Malaya academic says previous Umno assets now controlled by Putrajaya](#)', *Malay Mail*, 21 July 2016.

76 *The Star Online*, '[Boardroom changes at Utusan and Media Prima](#)', 16 May 2018; Nurul Izzah Anwar, '[Who controls the media? BN hypocrisy exposed](#)', *Malaysiakini*, 17 November 2016.

77 Wong, 'Malaysia in the Grip,' p. 126; Nain, 'Digital News Report 2017: Malaysia', p. 121

78 Wong, 'Malaysia in the Grip,' p. 118–20.

79 Crossette, 'Malaysia Shuts Down 3 Papers'.

80 Wong, 'Malaysia in the Grip,' p. 120–21.

81 Chong Yen Long, '[Mahathir in top ten enemies of press](#)', *Malaysiakini*, 20 April 2001.

82 Wong, 'Malaysia in the Grip,' p. 119.

83 Ibid.

84 Nain, 'Digital News Report 2017: Malaysia', p. 121.

85 Tom Westbrook and John Geddie, '[Telling truth to power still no easy task for Malaysia's revved up media](#)', *Reuters*, 25 May 2018.

truths at the expense of others. However, the capacity of such politically-motivated content to reach and sway the minds of Malaysians remains a question.

Moving forward, how the media controlled by BN will reform itself remains uncertain. The media also suffered from government control during Mahathir's previous term in office. However, he may be less stern towards the media this time around as the opposition's victory has shown that BN's restrictions on publicly available information did not guarantee them election success. Besides, amidst the low-level of trust in 'overall' news (30%) and social media (21%),⁸⁶ and the high level of concern about the effects of disinformation (73%),⁸⁷ it is clear that the Malaysian public is in dire need of a clean information environment and trustworthy media. The most optimistic scenario would be renewed media freedom on the part of the government, which would also refrain from abusing its power to control the media for political gain, and the media itself heeding criticism and embracing better journalistic practices.

The Internet

Against the backdrop of a highly-controlled traditional media space, the Internet, and social media in particular, emerged as a space for dissent and alternative views partly with the help of the MSC and the synergy created by the Reformasi movement. The Mahathir-led government introduced MSC as part of its National Development Policy in the mid-90s with the ambition of attracting businesses to Malaysia.⁸⁸ MSC was coupled with a bill of guarantees, which, among other pledges, promised no Internet censorship.⁸⁹ Alternative views thrived in cyberspace, and the Internet became a breeding ground for the opposition.⁹⁰ The Reformasi movement, a social movement kindled by Anwar's dismissal from UMNO and subsequent 'arrest and detention',⁹¹ was a milestone. The movement demanded the eradication of 'corruption, cronyism and nepotism'⁹² from government. Anwar's supporters congregated online to voice their opinions and online dissent flourished.⁹³

86 Nain, 'Digital News Report 2018: Malaysia', p. 132.

87 Mazuin Zin, '[Malaysia: The Changing Face of Trust](#)', *Edelman*, 7 March 2018.

88 Yangyue, 'Controlling Cyberspace', p. 804–05. See Also Nain, 'Digital News Report 2017: Malaysia', 121.

89 Ibid.

90 Yangyue; George, 'Media in Malaysia', p. 900.

91 Elvin Ong, '[Commentary: Beware the deep ironies of the Malaysian opposition coalition](#)', *Channel News Asia*, 18 April 2018.

92 Ong, 'Commentary: Beware'; BBC News, '[World: Asia-Pacific Japan concerned over Anwar Arrest](#)', 19 October 1998.

93 Yangyue, 'Controlling Cyberspace', p. 805–08.

The Internet has remained a relatively open space for alternative views, and has been regarded as an influential platform for electoral politics in Malaysia.⁹⁴ In the 2008 elections, the opposition's masterful use of online communication played an important role in the loss of BN's two-thirds parliamentary majority.⁹⁵ Recognising the growing importance of the Internet in electioneering, BN refocused its efforts there. While Pakatan Rakyat was experienced in online electioneering, BN elevated its online influence for the 2013 elections by capitalising on its 'deep-pocket resources' and reached broader crowds via online ads on Google and Facebook.⁹⁶ At the same time, BN claimed it was a 'victim of fake news' in the 2013 elections.⁹⁷ By GE14, BN had revamped its online presence and had acquired the capacity to 'overpower' the 'opposition on social media'.⁹⁸

The rising importance of the Internet for electioneering and of social media for receiving news might have motivated BN to increase its control over online content before GE14.⁹⁹ During GE14, legal procedures (e.g. the Anti-Fake News Act) were occasionally used to control online content. I will discuss this next.

Regulations imposed on online content and communications

The regulations that kept the traditional media under control, and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission's (MCMC) capacity to block websites, allowed for the sporadic interruption of online information flows. BN introduced the Anti-Fake News Act into an array of laws that permitted the control of information in cyberspace, claiming that existing regulations were not suited to respond to the developments brought about by technological changes.¹⁰⁰

The Malaysian Bar argued against the Anti-Fake News Act and asserted that the country had laws addressing 'false' information and news,¹⁰¹ including the Printing Press and Publications Act of 1984 and the Communications and Mul-

94 Yangyue; Johan Fischer, ['We Shift the Channel when Mahathir Appears: The Political Internet and Censorship in Malaysia'](#), *Akademika: Journal of Southeast Asia Social Sciences and Humanities*, 75(1), (2009): 43-63.

95 Yangyue, p. 801.

96, Pauline P. Y. Leong, ['Political Communication in Malaysia: A Study on the Use of New Media in Politics'](#), *Journal of e Democracy and Open Government*, 7(1), (2015): 54.

97 Anisah Shukry, ['Malaysia Gears Up for Elections as Najib Targets "Fake News"'](#), *Bloomberg*, 5 January 2018.

98 Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, ['Battle Royale on Social Media in the 2018 General Election in Malaysia'](#), *Asian Politics and Policy*, Vol. 10, Issue 3 (2018): 557.

99 Mazuin Zin, ['Malaysia: The Changing Face of Trust'](#), *Edelman*, 7 March 2018; Nain, 'Digital News Report 2018: Malaysia', 131-32.

100 Nazurah Ngah, ['FAQs: What you need to know about the Anti-Fake News Bill 2018'](#), *New Straits Times*, 26 March 2018.

101 George Varughese, ['Press Release | Withdraw the Anti-Fake News Bill 2018'](#), *Malaysian Bar*, 27 March 2018.

timedia Act of 1998.¹⁰² These laws, as well as the blocking of sites, were occasionally used to regulate online content. For instance, the MCMC investigated at approximately ‘1,500 fake accounts on social media’ between January and June 2017,¹⁰³ and blocked 1,375 websites in 2016 and 2017 for allegedly circulating ‘false content’.¹⁰⁴ The MCMC also evaluated 167 cases of ‘Internet and social media abuse’, some of which concerned the dissemination of ‘false content and information’ via platforms including WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter.¹⁰⁵

The continued blocking of opposition websites and other sites critical of BN showed further disregard for the policy of no online censorship, and claims of ‘false’ information were occasionally used to justify the bans. For instance, the *Medium* and *Asia Sentinel* were blocked for publishing an article from the *Sarawak Report* on ‘the graft charges against Najib’.¹⁰⁶ *The Malaysian Insider*, which ceased operations in 2016, was banned for sharing an “unverified” report about the corruption probe involving the prime minister.¹⁰⁷ BN also occasionally dismissed criticism on various topics from the *Sarawak Report*, *Malaysiakini*, and other international news agencies as ‘fake news’.¹⁰⁸ Once revelations regarding the 1MDB report emerged after the elections, MCMC revoked its ban on the *Sarawak Report* and the *Medium*.¹⁰⁹ This was a heartening development; however, the new government’s approach to freedom of speech and freedom of the press will be tested when new criticism challenges their power.

Restricting the flow of information on the Internet brought about the risk of the promotion of one particular version of the ‘truth’ at the expense of other perspectives. The regulation of online content might also have deterred some from voicing their criticism in the online spaces. Correspondingly, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018 revealed that 57% of respondents held reservations about sharing their political views in cyberspace due to the risk of coming into conflict with authorities.¹¹⁰ The report pointed to the growth of

102 Section 8A of the PPPA penalises the dissemination of false news, and Section 223(1) of the Communications and Multimedia Act forbids ‘false communication’. See Varughese, ‘Press Release’.

103 *The Star Online*, ‘[MCMC moves to curb fake news](#)’, 10 July 2017.

104 *Freedom House*, [Freedom on the Net 2017 Country Reports: Malaysia](#), 2017.

105 *Ibid.*; Most of these cases did not reach the stage of a ‘trial’. However, one person was imprisoned for his Facebook post, which was interpreted as an ‘insult’ to the Sultan of Johor. See the Freedom House report.

106 Mong Palatino, ‘[Malaysia Broadens Media Crackdown As Political Scandal Worsens](#)’, *The Diplomat*, 2 March 2016.

107 *Ibid.*

108 Nain, ‘Digital News Report 2017: Malaysia’, p. 121.

109 *The Star Online*, ‘[MCMC confirms lifting ban](#)’, 19 May 2018.

110 Nick Newman, ‘[Section 1: Executive Summary and Key Findings](#)’, in Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018, Newman, Nick, Richard Fletcher, Antonis Kalogeropoulos, David A. L. Levy, and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (eds.), (2018): 13.

messaging applications such as WhatsApp as a 'safe' venue for communication in Malaysia and in other countries with controlling regimes.¹¹¹

In Malaysia 54% of respondents receive news from WhatsApp.¹¹² While the popularity of encrypted messaging platforms continues to grow, the disinformation shared in these venues has come under the spotlight. For instance, WhatsApp has been exploited for the circulation of fictitious information such as the viral message claiming that Johor's Crown Prince would pay for shoppers' groceries.¹¹³ In the same way that people may invest greater trust in information received via 'interpersonal exchange' from their 'social networks' (e.g. friends and family),¹¹⁴ disinformation transferred by means of WhatsApp and other messaging platforms may be misjudged as accurate and internalised without much scrutiny if shared by one's close social network. As WhatsApp is also used for group chatting with clusters of people beyond one's inner circle, members of the cluster may transfer disinformation shared in such groups to the other group chats. Trust in social media is quite low in Malaysia (21%),¹¹⁵ and many Malaysians (63%)¹¹⁶ find it difficult to differentiate rumours from quality journalism. This indicates the population's vulnerability to misleading information.

Legal measures were only one of the supporting weapons in the battle for information supremacy. Cyber attacks complemented the efforts to manipulate information flow and public opinion as well.

Cyber attacks

Cyber attacks interrupt information exchange and curtail the breadth of information available to the public. Thus, they jeopardise the healthy information consumption and exchange necessary for verifying information and for conducting democratic elections. Furthermore, cyber attacks are often hard to attribute to a perpetrator, and their orchestrators may hire proxies to carry out the attacks on their behalf.

111 Ibid., 'Section 1: Executive Summary and Key Findings', p. 13.

112 Ibid., Kalogeropoulos, 'The Rise of Messaging Apps for News', p. 53.

113 *The Straits Times*, 'Fake news of Johor Crown Prince'.

114 Miriam J. Metzger, Andrew J. Flanagin, and Ryan B. Medders, ['Social and Heuristic Approaches to Credibility Evaluation Online'](#), *Journal of Communication*, 60, (2010): 425.

115 Nain, 'Digital News Report 2018: Malaysia', p. 132.

116 Mazuin Zin, ['Malaysia: The Changing Face of Trust'](#), *Edelman*, 7 March 2018.

During GE14 some candidates from both BN and its opposition—including the People’s Justice Party, and Democratic Action Party—claimed their phones had been hacked.¹¹⁷ They raised complaints about receiving ‘spam’ calls.¹¹⁸ Some candidates also experienced problems with their emails and social media accounts.¹¹⁹ In addition to cyber attacks, there were cyber manipulation efforts. MCMC allegedly ‘instructed at least 11 internet service providers to block *Malaysiakini*’s three election result websites on polling night’.¹²⁰ The cyber intrusions during GE14 interrupted information exchange, but the attacks carried out during GE13 also contained acts that aimed at misinforming the followers of some sites and accounts.

In the course of the 2013 elections, Human Rights Watch called on BN and its opposition to stop the ‘intimidation and violence’ that posed a danger to the elections. Cyber attacks committed in the run-up to the 2013 elections included a DDOS attack on *Malaysiakini* and ‘London-based radio web portals—*Radio Free Malaysia*, *Radio Free Sarawak*, and *Sarawak Report*’.¹²¹ Also, months before the election, Rafizi Ramli’s (Parti Keadilan Rakyat) Facebook page was hacked, and his status was updated with a fake apology to the Defence Minister.¹²² Ramli blamed pro-UMNO bloggers affiliated with the New Media Unit (Unit Media Baru) for the attack, and asserted that various PKR members had their social media sites or blogs hacked before.¹²³

Bots

Bots, ‘automated accounts that post based on algorithms’,¹²⁴ plague some of the online platforms (e.g. Twitter) used by Malaysians. Bots are used to gain political influence in various ways including artificially inflating numbers of followers or social media ‘likes’,¹²⁵ manipulating political discussions,¹²⁶ and influencing public opinion by artificial means.¹²⁷ Bradshaw and Howard’s recent study on

117 Jonathan Loh, ‘[‘GE14 candidates’ mobile phones and online platforms hit by apparent mass hacking attack on polling day](#)’, *Business Insider Singapore*, 9 May 2018.

118 Ibid.

119 Ibid.

120 The claim was based on MCMC’s Network Media Management Department’s emails. See *Malaysiakini*, ‘[MCMC ordered at least 11 ISPs to block M’kini GE14 sites](#)’, 19 May 2018.

121 *Human Rights Watch*, ‘[Malaysia: Violence, Cyber Attacks Threaten Elections: Party Workers, Activists, and Online News Portals Targeted](#)’, 1 May 2013.

122 *Malaysian Digest*, ‘[Rafizi on FB Hacking: Reporting to MCMC Would be “Pointless”](#)’, 29 January 2013.

123 Ibid.

124 Tucker et. al., ‘Social Media, Political Polarization’, p. 4.

125 Woolley (2017) as cited in Siegel, ‘Producers of Disinformation’, p. 24.

126 Forelle et al. (2015) as cited in Siegel, ‘Producers of Disinformation’, p. 24.

127 Wolley (2016) and Kollanyi et al. (2016) as cited in Siegel, ‘Producers of Disinformation’, p. 24.

‘organized media manipulation’,¹²⁸ identified bots as a type of fake account prevalent in Malaysia.¹²⁹ Their list of agents that may engage in social media manipulation in Malaysia include (a) government agencies, (b) politicians and parties, (c) private contractors, and (d) civil society organizations.¹³⁰ The examples cited below and elsewhere in this article confirm Bradshaw and Howard’s finding that social media manipulation strategies in Malaysia involve ‘pro-government or party messages’ and ‘attacks on the opposition’.¹³¹ Some election-specific bot activities have also been observed in Malaysia.

According to a 2018 study by the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFR), in the run-up to GE14 two hashtag campaigns, *#SayNOtoPH* and *#KalahkeanPakatan* [Defeat Pakatan], were run by Twitter bots.¹³² The bots had Cyrillic names, and according to DFR this indicates that the bots were generated by ‘Russian-speaking bot herders’.¹³³ DFR suggested BN or its supporters’ potential involvement in the bot activity, as the images used by bots corresponded to those employed in BN’s campaigns.¹³⁴ The study argued the messages shared by the bots did not incite ‘real user participation’ and this helped preserve the hashtags within a network of bots.¹³⁵ Also, on Election Day, party members from both BN and the opposition were hacked by bot-initiated spam calls.¹³⁶ Bots were also active during GE13. Twitter allegedly accommodated bot-postings of mainly pro-BN content over the course of the GE13 campaign.¹³⁷

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128 Bradshaw and Howard’s study provides an inventory of cyber troops’ computational propaganda efforts in the countries they surveyed. They define computational propaganda as ‘the use of automation, algorithms and big-data analytics to manipulate public life’. See Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, ‘[Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation](#)’, (2018): 4, *Computational Propaganda Research Project*.

129 *Ibid.*, p. 14; The next section on cyber troops demonstrates that bots are used in addition to people hired or volunteering to run (whether they use fake or genuine identity is not disclosed) social media accounts to manipulate information on social media. The difference may stem from Bradshaw and Howard’s focus on the activities that fit their definition of computational propaganda. Also, the researchers state that the automated accounts are more visible on Twitter. The accounts delivered on cyber troops in this article are mostly drawn from newspaper articles.

130 Bradshaw and Howard, ‘Challenging Truth’, p. 9–10.

131 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

132 Donara Barojan, ‘[#BotSpot: Bots Target Malaysian Elections](#)’, Digital Forensic Research Lab. *Medium*, 21 April 2018.

133 *Ibid.*

134 *Ibid.*

135 *Ibid.*

136 *The Straits Times*, ‘[Malaysia election: Politicians claim phones were hacked; probe shows spam calls from unknown bot attacks](#)’, 9 May 2018.

137 Faizal Kasmani, Rosidayu Sabran, and Noor Adzrah Ramle, ‘[Who is Tweeting on #PRU13?](#)’, *Asian Social Science*, 10(18), (2014): 150, 155.

While the reach of bot activity and its capacity to sway public opinion are contested, bots cultivate information disorder and have emerged as drivers polluting the information sphere for the benefit of some—possibly covert—actors.

Cyber troops and big data

Cyber troops¹³⁸ are now commonly employed to assist political parties in countering the new kinds of political risk brought by the Internet. They use a variety of tactics to sway public opinion and respond to the challenges posed by their opposition.¹³⁹ In Malaysia cyber troops have been mobilised to manipulate public opinion, promote a particular political agenda, and defame adversaries and their policies.¹⁴⁰ The operations of cyber troops also assist parties in deflecting criticism, defaming and discrediting the opposition, and creating a public perception aligned with their particular political agenda. A coordinated manipulation effort may combine human efforts and bots.¹⁴¹ The organisational structure of cyber troop operations allows political parties and figures to claim a distance between the party and the acts of cyber troops and degrade any criticism of direct involvement to mere allegation.

Cyber troops are no longer a new phenomenon. A UMNO cyber troop branch was launched within their New Media Unit already in 2004,¹⁴² and BN has allegedly ramped up its investment in cyber troops since the 2008 elections.¹⁴³ While there are accounts of a number of different political parties employing cyber troops, information on the cyber troops used by BN's UMNO is more extensive. I will first discuss BN's cyber troops and then talk about those run by the opposition.

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138 Cyber troops are 'government, military or political party teams' seeking to sway 'public opinion over social media' (Bradshaw and Howard, 2017, p. 3). Trolls, on the other hand, are online personas who deliberately share negative content, seek to disturb the harmony and incite reactions (Siegel, 2018, p. 22). Cyber troops may resort to trolling to counter political opposition (Bradshaw and Howard, 2017, p. 9). Just as people may engage in trolling independently for personal 'entertainment' or to disclose media's 'hypocrisy and sensationalism' (Siegel, 2018, p. 22), cyber troops or hired, individual trolls may operate as teams working for the government, politicians and parties, or as private contractors, volunteers and paid citizens (Siegel, 2018, p. 22–23; Bradshaw and Howard, 2017, p. 2). The focus of this section will be on government, politician and party affiliated, hired or volunteer cyber troops.

139 Yangyue, 'Controlling Cyberspace', p. 818.

140 Freedom House Malaysia Report.

141 Bradshaw and Howard, 'Challenging Truth', p. 11–12.

142 Julian Hopkins, 'Cybertroopers and tea parties: government use of the Internet in Malaysia', *Asian Journal of Communication* 24(1), (2014): 12; see also Ross Tapsell, 'Negotiating Media "Balance" in Malaysia's 2013 General Election', *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, 32(2), (2013): 44.

143 Peter Guest, "'Queen of Dragons': The inside story of Malaysia's election fixer", *Wired*, 9 May 2018.

UMNO is open about its use of cyber troops.¹⁴⁴ However, the exact number of UMNO cyber troops, which also serve BN, and the way they are organised is not very clear.¹⁴⁵ Cyber troops are responsible for scanning online conversations of the opposition to locate ‘offences’;¹⁴⁶ they also deflect criticism and promote BN’s messages and agenda,¹⁴⁷ sometimes at the expense of accuracy. Descriptions of cyber troop operations suggest that the party provides them with guidelines to follow,¹⁴⁸ although it does not micromanage the content they circulate,¹⁴⁹ and gives them liberty to choose their own ‘tactics’.¹⁵⁰ This lack of direct control over content grants BN (and UMNO) the ability to deny association with the activities of their cyber troops when necessary.¹⁵¹ Some commentators depict cyber troops as groups engaged in political communication within ethical boundaries, but such units are created to sway public opinion for the benefit of a particular group and are sometimes allegedly involved in the creation and circulation of disinformation.

Before GE14, UMNO Youth Vice-Chief at the time, Senator Khairul Azwan Harun claimed that the party’s cyber troops were spreading the ‘truth’ and ‘right’ messages and sometimes engaging in ‘rebuttal’ in an ‘ethical’ way.¹⁵² However, ex-cyber troop leader Syarul Ema Rena Abu Samah, who oversaw 80 people in her unit,¹⁵³ claims otherwise. According to her, BN cyber troops engage in countering criticism, managing fake social media accounts, spreading falsehoods to discredit dissent, and diverting attention from vital information that may damage BN’s image.¹⁵⁴ For instance, one day before the 2014 Teluk Intan by-elections, she caused a fabricated video—scripted and plotted by her—to go viral

144 Boo Su-Lyn, ‘[BN reveals art of targeting voters](#)’, *The Malay Mail*, 11 April 2017.

145 The UMNO-dominated BN held ten conventions in different states in 2012 to increase the headcount of its cyber troops to 10,000 before the 2013 elections, according to *Free Malaysia Today*. A BN-supporting media consultant, who was ‘asked to handle’ the new media unit in 2013, argued that the group comprised Facebook and Twitter users and bloggers, and that the division ‘trained more than 2,000 people, 20% of whom [were] active online’ (Leong, p. 54). On the other hand, a pro-UMNO blogger, *Budak Sri Kinta*, asserted that the UMNO’s IT Bureau convened approximately 3,500 cyber troopers in Kuala Lumpur in late 2017 (Ibrahim). He also claimed that UMNO IT Bureau Chair Ahmad Maslan had around nine people responsible for ‘monitor[ing] online activity in all states’ (Ibrahim). He said most of the cyber troop members were working voluntarily, although there were some full-time employees (Ibrahim). See *Free Malaysia Today*, ‘[Now Ahmad plots a new army of cyber troopers](#)’, 31 January 2016; Leong, ‘Political Communication’, p. 54; Diyana Ibrahim, ‘[Up close and personal with Umno cyber troopers](#)’, *Malaysian Insight*, 18 November 2017.

146 Guest, ‘Queen of Dragons’.

147 Yangyue, ‘Controlling Cyberspace’, p. 818; Guest, ‘Queen of Dragons’; Ibrahim, ‘Up close and personal’.

148 Syarul Ema as cited in Guest.

149 Hopkins, ‘Cybertroopers and tea parties’, p. 13; Syarul Ema as cited in Guest.

150 *Ibid.*

151 Hopkins, ‘Cybertroopers and tea parties’, p. 12.

152 Su-Lyn, ‘BN reveals art of targeting voters’.

153 Guest, ‘Queen of Dragons’.

154 *Ibid.*

on WhatsApp with the aim of swinging the Indian minority vote.¹⁵⁵ The video showed an Indian member of BN claiming that DAP activists had ‘assault[ed]’ him, and calling on people to vote for BN to ensure that ‘the DAP loses’.¹⁵⁶ In addition to UMNO, the Parti Rakyat Sarawak revealed using cyber troops¹⁵⁷ and stated its intention to increase their number to assist the party in spreading its messages to voters.¹⁵⁸

Other parties are also said to employ cyber troops to spread fabricated information and to ‘sway voters’.¹⁵⁹ Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Ahmad Zahid Hamidi (current president of UMNO) claimed that the opposition’s cyber troops are receiving ‘foreign training’.¹⁶⁰ Similarly, Gerakan Vice President Datuk Dominic Lau claimed that the DAP cyber troops, also known as the Red Bean Army, received help from Taiwanese political consultants when campaigning for the 2013 elections.¹⁶¹ The Red Bean Army was also accused of circulating ‘lies’ in cyberspace.¹⁶² DAP rejected the allegations, while its National HQ Media and Communications manager Medaline Chang defined the group as active pro-opposition netizens who did not have any monetary attachment to DAP.¹⁶³ PR, like BN, supposedly employed cyber troops to carry out operations that aimed at alleviating the ‘impact and influence’ of the opposing party’s message by ‘discredit[ing]’ and ‘derail[ing]’ their messages.¹⁶⁴ PAS, on the other hand, intends to establish a ‘mujahid cyber group’, which will shield the party against ‘outside attack’, communicate the party’s messages to PAS’s followers, and safeguard PAS’s ‘policy and integrity’ with their real identities, without resorting to ‘fake accounts or fake names’.¹⁶⁵ One operation thought to be carried out by the opposition’s cyber forces entailed an influx of messages to ex-PM Najib’s Facebook page asking him to ‘step down’.¹⁶⁶

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155 Syarul Ema as cited in Guest.

156 Ibid.

157 Su-Lyn, ‘BN reveals art of targeting voters’.

158 Ibid.

159 Ruben Sario, ‘[Opposition cyber troopers getting foreign training, says DPM](#)’, *The Star Online*, 16 December 2017.

160 Sario, ‘Opposition cyber troopers’.

161 Su-Lyn, ‘BN reveals art of targeting voters’.

162 Tapsell, ‘Negotiating Media’, p. 46.

163 Ibid.

164 Leong, ‘Political Communication’, p. 59–60.

165 Embun Majid, ‘[Pas to monilise “mujahid cyber” in run-up to GE14](#)’, *New Straits Times*, 1 May 2017.

166 Freedom House.

The Malaysian people may have some level of awareness of cyber troop activities from news articles or online encounters, but the means of manipulating information online are diverse. For instance, social media manipulation can be elevated by the ‘use of fake accounts and followers, which misrepresent the actual impact and influence of politicians’.¹⁶⁷ In the run-up to GE14, UMNO’s Youth Deputy chief accused PH of buying social media viewers.¹⁶⁸ Their continued cyber operations and the use of social media manipulation tactics demonstrate parties’ persistence in spreading their ‘truths’. As audiences grow accustomed to these activities, cyber troops will likely find more innovative ways to inject their messages. Various parties in Malaysia are exploring big data analytics to better understand and target their audiences and improve their cyber operations. The online information activities of cyber troopers and others can be optimised using big data analytics. Those who can leverage this power can use it to make decisions informed by extensive, complex data sets that can be analysed to extract correlations, preferences, and other desired information.

In a newspaper interview, UMNO, the Malaysian Indian Congress, the Malaysian Chinese Association, and Parti Gerakan Rakyat—all members of the BN coalition—declared their use of big data analytics to aid voter outreach and their campaigning efforts.¹⁶⁹ Other parties are also engaged in such efforts. PAS has been working with ‘companies, groups, and local universities since 2013’ to ‘profile prospective voters through [...] WhatsApp and Facebook’ and reach out to urban and rural populations.¹⁷⁰ PKR and Amanah, on the other hand, receive the support of Invoke, a big data analytics firm established by Rafizi Ramli.¹⁷¹ Invoke aims to discern information about voters’ ‘political leaning[s]’, their approach to political issues, and their potential to switch affiliation to other parties, from the ‘millions’ of pieces of voter data¹⁷² it has at hand.¹⁷³ These and other data-driven efforts cannot merely be discounted as harmful; among other positive uses, they may allow politicians to identify demands and fault lines that can assist with educated decision-making. However, there are a number of standards that should be upheld including the protection of data privacy, clarity regarding

167 Leong, ‘Political Communication’, p. 60.

168 *The Star Online*, ‘BN: Probe Pakatan for data tampering’, 8 May 2018.

169 Su-Lyn, ‘BN reveals art of targeting voters’.

170 Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, ‘Battle Royale on Social Media in the 2018 General Election in Malaysia’, *Asian Politics and Policy*, Vol. 10, Issue 3 (2018): 559.

171 Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, ‘Battle Royale on Social Media in the 2018 General Election in Malaysia’, *Asian Politics and Policy*, Vol. 10, Issue 3 (2018): 558–59.

172 *Ibid.*, Invoke has accumulated ‘basic’ data which includes information such as voters’ ‘age, race, gender, residential postal code, and religion’.

173 *Ibid.*

sources, assurance that data has been provided with informed consent,¹⁷⁴ adherence to the contract with users, and transparency regarding access to the data and its potential uses. Big data should not be exploited to sway votes, manipulate people, or conduct smear and disinformation campaigns. In addition to home-grown efforts such as Invoke, Malaysia has also been linked with Cambridge Analytica, which will be discussed next.

Foreign intervention

The intervention of foreign states in elections has been disturbing to many governments, especially after the 2016 American elections.¹⁷⁵ While this concern had found its way to Malaysia, domestic issues outweighed its importance. Allegations of foreign interference and blame for allying with foreign powers were used more to deflect attention from substantial issues and to discredit rival parties than to begin an actual inquiry into potential interference.¹⁷⁶ Debates about foreign intervention revolved around the Cambridge Analytica scandal, accusations against the international press for spreading fake news, comments regarding Chinese investments, meetings with foreign officials, and campaign assistance from the Chinese ambassador.

The Cambridge Analytica saga unfolded during the heated campaigning period for GE14. Cambridge Analytica declared on its website that it had been engaged with BN since 2008, supposedly for a ‘targeted messaging campaign highlighting [its] school improvements’ in the state of Kedah.¹⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the company’s alleged involvement in GE13 was scrutinised,¹⁷⁸ partly because of BN’s success in taking Kedah from PAS,¹⁷⁹ at the time a part of the Pakatan Rakyat

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174 Some consent forms are not reader friendly and people may sign the long consent forms to receive access to a service without taking the time to read them line-by-line. It is important to provide clear and concise consent forms and perhaps underline important points that readers may overlook. Seeking further consent for particular processes may make the use of data more transparent.

175 One may also argue that the surreptitious nature of foreign interference endeavors might have allowed them to go unnoticed and some domestic actors might have covertly sought their assistance or obliquely benefited them with their actions. However, these issues are hard to investigate given the lack of open sources.

176 Erin Cook argued that ‘both the ruling party and the opposition in Malaysia have at various points used “foreign interference” to “boost their own position at the expense of their opponent, to distract from substantive challenges that they have and sow confusion around clear concerns”’. See Erin Cook, [‘The “Foreign Interference” Blame Game in Malaysia’s Upcoming Election’](#), *The Diplomat*, 23 March 2018.

177 Cambridge Analytica as cited in Trinna Leong, [‘Malaysian Politicians point fingers as Cambridge Analytica linked to 2013 polls’](#), *The Straits Times*, 20 March 2018.

178 Cook, ‘The “Foreign Interference” Blame’; Leong, ‘Malaysian Politicians’.

179 Saifulbahri Ismail, [‘Kedah set to be battleground state in Malaysian general election’](#), Channel News Asia, 17 April 2018.

coalition.¹⁸⁰ BN promptly deflected the accusations by asserting that it did not ‘employ’ Cambridge Analytica.¹⁸¹ It argued that the country representative of Cambridge Analytica’s parent company SCL Group ‘confirmed Cambridge Analytica provided advice on the 2013 election personally to Mr Mukhriz’, who is a ‘former BN leader turned opposition politician’ and the son of Mahathir Mohamad.¹⁸² Mukhriz denied accusations¹⁸³ and said: ‘any claim otherwise is a misrepresentation of the facts, intended to divert attention away from the possible use of illegal campaign tactics as admitted by Cambridge Analytica for BN’.¹⁸⁴ Mutual accusations over Cambridge Analytica worsened confusion rather than trigger a comprehensive investigation, and added to the electioneering contestations. In addition to the allegations about Cambridge Analytica, PH stated that it ‘received pro bono training from an American political advertising agency, the Strategy Group Company’.¹⁸⁵ According to Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, the training was ‘organized by the International Republican Institute’. It is indirectly linked to the Open Society Foundation, offering ‘funding to opposition friendly entities’ including the news outlets *Malaysiakini* and the *Sarawak Report*, and the Coalition for Clean and Fair Elections, also known as Bersih.¹⁸⁶

The foreign press is also occasionally accused of spreading ‘fake news’ and attempting to influence domestic politics. Johari condemned the foreign press for disseminating ‘fake news’ about 1MDB,¹⁸⁷ and the *Economist* was accused of ‘attempting to overthrow’ Najib and BN for its report on 1MDB and gerrymandering.¹⁸⁸ Arguably, BN pointed the finger at the foreign press to deflect criticism and distract attention from the main issue,¹⁸⁹ in this case 1MDB. The 1MDB investigation also sparked a clash between Switzerland and the BN government. When Swiss authorities declared that ‘billions of dollars had been

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180 Pakatan Rakyat coalition had Parti Keadilan Rakyat, Democratic Action Party, and Parti Islam Se Malaysia as its members until it dissolved in 2015. Joceline Tan, ‘[Is the divorce between Pakatan and Pas for real? The Star columnist](#)’, *The Straits Times*, 30 August 2017, and Asrul Hadi Abdullah Sani, ‘[Break up of Malaysia’s opposition bloc Pakatan Rakyat: What happened and What’s next?](#)’, *The Straits Times*, 18 June 2015.

181 Leong, ‘Malaysian Politicians’.

182 Ibid.

183 Ibid.

184 Sumisha Naidu, ‘[Malaysian government denies hiring Cambridge Analytica](#)’, *Channel News Asia*, 20 March 2018.

185 Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani, ‘[Battle Royale on Social Media in the 2018 General Election in Malaysia](#)’, *Asian Politics and Policy*, Vol. 10, Issue 3 (2018): 558.

186 Ibid.

187 *The Straits Times*, ‘[Malaysia’s deputy minister warns foreign media about spreading “fake news” about 1MDB](#)’, 11 March 2018.

188 Cook, ‘The “Foreign Interference” Blame’.

189 Cook (2018) argued that the ‘blame game’ was pursued by both parties to ‘boost their own position at the expense of their opponent, to distract from substantive challenges that they have and sow confusion around clear concerns’. Meanwhile the fake news label as blame directed at foreign interference allowed BN as well as PH to sway conversations and opinions.

stolen from Malaysian state-owned companies’, the BN government blamed Switzerland for ‘circulating misinformation’.¹⁹⁰ Salleh Said Keruak, Minister of Communications at the time, claimed that statements from Switzerland were ‘made without a full and comprehensive appreciation of all the facts’.¹⁹¹

In addition to the foreign press, politicians and parties were in the spotlight following their engagement with international actors. Anifah Aman, the Foreign Minister at the time, criticised Mahathir for meeting with EU ambassadors to seek their ‘help to ensure’ fair elections arguing that the ‘issues raised at the meeting affected the country’s dignity and sovereignty’.¹⁹² During his time in office, Mahathir was concerned about Western interference and had reportedly prevented some opposition leaders from ‘meeting foreign envoys’.¹⁹³ In the run-up to GE14, Mahathir pointed to China’s widening economic influence in Malaysia and ‘joint-projects with other countries’.¹⁹⁴ In addition to allegations of influence by way of investment and projects, a report from the Hoover Institution stated the ‘Chinese ambassador to Malaysia openly campaigned for the president of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) in his constituency’ during GE14, but even so the ‘MCA president lost his seat’.¹⁹⁵

Although there were some incidents with foreign governments and the international press during the GE14 campaigning period, debates regarding foreign interference were limited in comparison with the heated discussions about domestic political issues; at times the issue of foreign interference was pressed into service as a talking point for domestic political debates.

Conclusion

The current environment in Malaysia is conducive to an increase in disinformation and to interruptions in the flow of information. GE14 exposed the activities of politicians and parties, the partisan-leaning media (with spillover onto the Internet), and cyber troops and bots, that disturbed the information sphere. Allegations of foreign interference also emerged as episodic discussions in the

190 Oliver Holmes, [‘Malaysia accuses Switzerland of “misinformation” over stolen 1MDB’](#), *Guardian*, 2 February 2016.

191 Salleh Said Keruak as cited in Holmes, ‘Malaysia accuses Switzerland’.

192 *Reuters*, [‘Malaysia criticizes opposition party meeting with EU ambassadors’](#), 28 January 2018.

193 *Ibid.*

194 Kenneth Cheng, [‘It’s election time in Malaysia, and the spectre of a foreign bogeyman emerges’](#), *Today*, 05 May 2018.

195 Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, ‘Chinese Influence and American interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance’, Hoover Institution Press, (2018): 177–78.

course of GE14. However, the activities of the domestic drivers were more palpable. In addition to these drivers, legal measures and cyber attacks interrupted information flow during GE14. Taken together, the drivers of disinformation and interruption to information flow led to the deterioration of the information space during the election period. The situation surrounding GE14 raised questions about the politicisation of disinformation and the boundaries of political communication.

Malaysia may begin a path of transformation under the PH coalition, which halted the 60-year rule of the BN coalition. Submitting a bill to repeal the Anti-Fake News Act was one of the first acts of the new government. While this is a positive move, PH's direction on the fight against disinformation remains unclear. In a new period conducive to change, PH may study the fault-lines that can be exploited by local or foreign actors engaged in disinformation campaigns, examine the drivers of disinformation campaigns further, and adopt tailored counter-measures. Given the multi-faceted and pervasive nature of the problem, it is necessary to involve different groups of stakeholders and to embrace a multi-pronged approach to institute a healthy information regime. In the course of dismantling the disinformation-friendly framework, Pakatan Harapan must negotiate the various objectives of its prominent party members and will need to prioritise the benefit of Malaysian society.

In light of the drivers discussed in this article, evaluating the communication practices of politicians and political parties and setting guidelines for their conduct is an essential component of the solution process. This not only requires the self-assessment and cooperation of politicians and political parties but also calls for citizens' active scrutiny of acts, comments, and truths of politicians and parties. Indeed, Anwar has already invited citizens to invigilate ministers' behaviour. For this to occur, the environment must be sufficiently open to criticism and alternative voices for citizens and non-governmental organisations confidently and freely to flag misconduct and disinformation. Freedom of speech must be maintained as a fundamental value, and people must have access to accurate information. This necessitates a reform in media and journalistic practices, and a review of curtailments to freedom of speech in cyberspace.

It is necessary to install non-partisan and ethical reporting practices, and to create an online environment free from politically motivated interventions. The traditional media sources that had been lenient toward BN's murky dealings are now in limbo. At this point, it is of paramount importance to institute free

media and to refrain from allowing a PH-supporting media block to be created. Also, as it promised when electioneering, PH may look into the Malaysian laws curtailing freedom of the press (beyond the already abolished Anti-Fake News Act), and create a more favourable legal framework.

It is also essential to address the information pollution stemming from cyber troop/bot activities, and targeted manipulation by way of data analytics. According to Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard's report 'Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation', coordinated social media manipulation efforts jumped from 28 in 2017 to 48 in 2018.¹⁹⁶ The activities of cyber troops and bots are central to current manipulation attempts. The blame for disinformation and manipulation campaigns can too easily be evaded by outsourcing such campaigns to cyber troops, making it hard to raise barriers to the employment of these measures. The global surge in such deleterious means may lead to the normalisation of their employment for political gain. At this point, it is important to improve our understanding of cyber operations, to consider how outsourced operations can be tied to the orchestrators expeditiously, and to discuss the boundaries to their use for ethically acceptable political communication.

This article focused on some of the key disinformation drivers and measures that distorted the flow of information to influence the information environment in the run-up to Malaysia's 14th General Elections. Factors from which the present article has prescinded remain to be explored. Prominent influencers, such as religious and opinion leaders, and civil society movements such as Bersih, may be studied for their role in solving the problem of disinformation. Future research may also explore the question of how disinformation is received and understood by diverse audience groups in Malaysia. Empirical research may delve deeper into some of the queries raised in this article.

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¹⁹⁶ Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N. Howard, '[Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation](#)', (2018): 3, *Computational Propaganda Research Project*.

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BRAND PUTIN: AN ANALYSIS OF VLADIMIR PUTIN'S PROJECTED IMAGES

Matthew Beale

Abstract

With popular discourse increasingly referring to Vladimir Putin's 'brand', this article seeks to apply the conceptual framework of branding to Putin in order to provide a richer interpretation of the composition and significance of Putin's projected images. By applying the concept of 'brand personality' to the existing literature and original source material, this article seeks to provide more comprehensive answers to the 'what, who, how, and why'. What are the images that Putin is trying to project? Who is he projecting these images to? How are these images projected? And why these images in particular? In doing so, it seeks to move beyond the West's one-dimensional understanding of Putin as simply a 'strongman' to reveal a range of representations that are far more complex and choreographed than often appreciated.

Keywords—*Putin, brand personality, discourse analysis, legal-rational legitimacy, strategic communications*

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Introduction

With politics becoming increasingly personalised, the projected images of international leaders have taken on a new significance.¹ This is particularly true in the case of Vladimir Putin's Russia—a state that derives its strength as much from the image of its leader as it does from its resources.² Yet, if the current Western discourse on Putin is anything to go by, the need to better understand Putin's projected images is greater than ever; we *sense* that Putin derives great benefit from them, but we cannot quite articulate exactly *what* he does, *how* he does it, and *why*.³ In essence, this article seeks to provide answers to the 'what, who, how, and why'. What are the images that Putin is trying to project? Who is he projecting these images to? How are these images projected? And why these images in particular?

Put simply, projected images are the representations and mental associations that are consciously promoted to an audience through communicative acts in order to generate a desired perception or response in the target audience.⁴ Whilst these representations and associations are generally 'positive',⁵ they can also be deliberately 'negative' in the sense of seeking to act as a deterrent to any domestic or international opposition.⁶

Popular discourse—and even Putin himself—increasingly refers to his 'brand'.⁷ This article seeks to provide a richer interpretation of these images by applying to Putin the concept of 'brand personality'. Leading brand theorist Jennifer Aaker⁸ analyses brands through a prism of human traits. For Aaker, a brand's personality is generally defined by a combination of five core characteristics:

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1 Gunn Enli and Eli Skogerbo, 'Personalized Campaigns in Party-Centred Politics' in *Information, Communication & Society*, 16:5, (2013), p. 758; Ian McAllister, *The Personalization of Politics* (The Oxford Handbook of Political Behavior, 2007).

2 Brett Bruen, 'Putin Flexes His Brand to the World', *US News & World Report*, 6 November 2017, [accessed 10 July 2018].

3 Fiona Hill, 'Putin: The One-Man Show the West Doesn't Understand' in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 72:3 (2016), pp. 140–44.

4 Valentina Feklyunina, *National Images in International Relations: Putin's Russia and the West* (Doctoral Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2009), p. 22–24; Jean-Noel Kapferer, *The New Strategic Brand Management: Advanced Insights and Strategic Thinking*, 5th ed. (London; Philadelphia: Kogan Page, 2012), p. 9.

5 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, 1st ed. (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

6 Bruen, 'Putin Flexes His Brand to the World'.

7 Clive Veroni, interview by Todd van der Heyden, CTV News, [Putin's Highly Controlled Image Sharply Contrasts the Chaotic Trump Brand](#), 2018, [accessed 30 July 2018]; Marc Stoiber, 'Putin and the Brand of the Authoritarian Strongman', *Marc Stoiber Brand Strategy*, 2018, [accessed 2 August 2018]; Bruen, 'Putin Flexes His Brand to the World'; Helena Goscolo, 'Russia's Ultimate Celebrity: VVP as VIP Objet D'art' in *Putin As Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, Helena Goscolo (ed.), (London: Routledge 2012), p. 13.

8 Jennifer L. Aaker, 'Dimensions of Brand Personality' in *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34 (1997), pp. 347–356.

sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness.⁹ This article will focus on the three most prominent characteristics projected by Putin's brand that have been identified through literature on the subject: competence, ruggedness, and sincerity. However, in keeping with Putin's reputation as a 'strongman', ruggedness will be redefined as 'strength'. Whilst these characteristics are by no means unique to Putin, they provide a solid analytical framework in which to analyse the unique *range* of images that Putin projects.

Given the vast array of material available for analysis, this article will pursue a process of triangulation by applying the concept of brand personality to both primary and secondary sources from Putin's time in office. Complementing a synthesis of insights from these sources, this paper will analyse a range of additional primary sources—including official biographies, photographs, and interviews, as well as a wealth of 'unofficial' materials from popular culture, such as merchandise, YouTube videos, and memes—using an interpretivist methodology modelled on Lene Hansen's approach to discourse analysis.¹⁰

As this article will demonstrate, the stability and legitimacy of Putin's regime depends upon his popularity,¹¹ which in turn rests on three pillars: economic prosperity, domestic order, and Russia's great-power status.¹² Whilst these pillars are in one sense 'performative', they are also highly 'perceptive' in that Putin must be *seen* as delivering them.¹³ There is a deeper motivation behind the 'what, who, how, and why' through which Putin's popularity is achieved. In the final section of the paper, Derek Hutcheson and Bo Petersson's analysis of the types of legitimacy of nations is considered together with Jean-Noël Kapferer's analysis of the five core functions of a brand to provide valuable insight into the rationale behind Putin's actions at home and abroad.¹⁴

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9 Aaker, 'Dimensions of Brand Personality'.

10 Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (New York: Routledge, 2006); 'Theorizing the Image for Security Studies: Visual Securitization and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17 (2011), pp. 51–74.

11 Timothy Frye, Scott Gehlbach, Kyle L. Marquardt, and Ora John Reuter, 'Is Putin's Popularity Real?', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 33 (2017); Derek Hutcheson and Bo Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy: Popularity in Putin's Russia', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68 (2016), pp. 1107–26.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 1107.

13 Bo Petersson, 'Still Embodying the Myth?: Russia's Recognition as a Great Power and the Sochi Winter Games', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 61.1 (2014), p. 34.

14 Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, 'Putin, Xi, and Hitler—Propaganda and the Paternity of Pseudo Democracy', *Defence Strategic Communications*, 2 (2017), pp. 113–35.

Competence

The projection of competence is critical to any politician's overall image.¹⁵ However, Putin has not always successfully projected competence. In particular, Putin was heavily criticised for his handling of the *Kursk* disaster in 2000, refusing to receive foreign assistance, and failing to cut short his holiday in the belief that his intervention would make no difference.¹⁶ As Putin later admitted, the incident taught him a harsh lesson: perception trumps pragmatism.¹⁷ For Aaker, a brand's competence is defined by three core attributes—successfulness, reliability, and intelligence.¹⁸

Successfulness

The popularity of any political brand depends upon its being perceived as successful. In general terms, the sheer variety of Putin's publicity events is designed to create the impression that Putin succeeds in everything he does, from racing Formula One cars to singing *Blueberry Hill* to Hollywood stars.¹⁹ It is this apparent diversity of achievements that helps differentiate Putin. As one adoring blogger wrote, 'he is the only president I know with a black belt and PhD in economics'.²⁰

However, the most significant projections of Putin's success are deeply rooted in the context in which he came to power. The poverty, instability, and loss of superpower status that characterised Russia in the 1990s meant that the 'success' voters wanted to see was focused on an increase in living standards, the restoration of domestic order, and the restoration of Russia's status as a great power.²¹ A key purpose of the many different images of Putin projected by his PR team has, therefore, been to convince Russians that their president is successful in all of these fields. This section will focus on Putin's projected image of financial and international success, as the Russian public's perception of domestic order is related more to the image of 'strength'.

15 Shawn W. Rosenberg, Shulamit Kahn and Thuy Tran, 'Creating a Political Image: Shaping Appearance and Manipulating the Vote', *Political Behavior*, 13 (1991): 355.

16 Angus Roxburgh, *The Strongman: Vladimir Putin and the Struggle for Russia* (London : New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012), pp. 60–61.

17 David Wastell, '[Putin Admits Regrets over Kursk Crisis](#)', 9 September 2000, [accessed 12 August 2018].

18 Aaker, 'Dimensions of Brand Personality'.

19 Goscilo, 'Russia's Ultimate Celebrity', p. 19.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

21 Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy'.

Putin's economic 'success' is largely the product of favourable circumstances—shrewdly exploited by his brand. By most objective measures, the economy under Putin appeared to have miraculously recovered.²² From near bankruptcy in 2000, during Putin's first two terms Russia experienced a 70% growth in GDP, with real incomes and pensions more than doubling, and the poverty rate being halved.²³ Whilst Putin certainly implemented economic reforms, in reality, this dramatic growth was largely due to the soaring price of oil, which had gone from an average of \$14 a barrel under President Yeltsin to \$90 a barrel by 2008.²⁴

However, Russian voters linked this dramatic increase in living standards directly to Putin, with survey responses such as, 'before Putin we were poor',²⁵ reflecting how these tangible improvements in living standards benefitted Putin's brand by association. In that sense, Putin's financial 'success' didn't need to be communicated to his target audience; it appeared self-evident. However, to ensure Putin received maximum credit, the perceived connection between Putin and prosperity was encouraged through explicit repetition in official discourse. During a major speech in 2008, Putin claimed, '[under Yeltsin] wealthy Russia had turned into a country of impoverished people. In these conditions we started to implement our programme to take the country out of crisis'.²⁶ Whether the rise in living standards was because of—or in spite of—Putin's policies is irrelevant; in the minds of Russians, the improvements they saw on the ground, combined with the consistent messages they received from above, helped establish the image of Putin as delivering economic success.²⁷

In foreign affairs, the Kremlin has long cultivated the image of Putin as a master geopolitical strategist, reviving Russia's great-power status. Indeed, Putin's appearance as *Time* magazine's Person of the Year in 2007 was as much the result of extensive lobbying as it was for his 'extraordinary feat of leadership in imposing stability [...] and [bringing] Russia back to the table of world power'.²⁸ To a large extent, this image has been projected through Putin's asser-

22 Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy, *Mr. Putin: Operative in the Kremlin* (Washington, D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), p. 144.

23 Vladimir Putin, 'The Putin Interviews: Episode 1', by Oliver Stone, produced by Showtime, 2017, [accessed 3 August 2018]; Stephen White and Ian McAllister, 'The Putin Phenomenon' in *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 24 (2008): 622–23; Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, pp. 216–17; Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 144–46.

24 Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 216.

25 White and McAllister, 'The Putin Phenomenon', p. 617.

26 Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 216.

27 Alexander Lukin, 'Russia's New Authoritarianism and the Post-Soviet Political Ideal' in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 25:1 (2009): 77.

28 *Time*, 'Person of the Year 2007', [accessed 16 December 2018]; O'Shaughnessy, *Putin, Xi, And Hitler*, p. 115.

tive foreign policy, with his annexation of Crimea and continual frustration of Western ambitions in Syria leading to record high approval ratings of 89% in 2015.²⁹ Prestigious international events such as the Sochi Olympics and FIFA World Cup are also used to communicate Putin's restoration of Russian power to both domestic and international audiences.³⁰ Such high-profile events provide an excellent platform through which to advertise Putin's personal dynamism—images of Putin energetically driving construction forward were brought home to domestic screens.³¹ Putin's highly publicised involvement in both successful events ensured that they became seen as his achievements domestically and internationally.³²

The impressiveness of these domestic and international successes is deliberately enhanced for domestic audiences through Putin's continual evocation of the past through his speeches. 'The last four years were not easy years [...]. In 2000, it seemed that we were facing a great number of simply irresolvable problems. [...] Together we have achieved a lot and we have achieved it through only our own efforts.'³³ Whilst this speech ostensibly serves to bind the people to Putin through the repetition of 'we', it reflects a deeper purpose: to remind Russians of a nation without Putin.³⁴ The message that only Putin has the competence to bring success underlies many of Putin's projected images, as seen in Putin's response to the question of why he doesn't follow Reagan's habit of delegating: 'there is a great difference between us [...] his difficulties in the U.S. were not comparable to those we faced in Russia.'³⁵

Just as important as these apparent achievements are to Putin's brand, so too is the demonstration that he possesses the qualities needed to keep delivering results for the Russian people. A consistent feature of Putin's brand is the idea that he possesses an almost superhuman capacity to work. As the authors of Putin's official biography *First Person* noted, 'sometimes he arrived exhausted, with drooping eyelids, but he never broke off the conversation'.³⁶ This trait is

29 Michael Birnbaum, 'Putin's approval ratings hit 89 percent, the highest they've ever been', *Washington Post*, 24 June 2015; Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy', pp. 1113–14.

30 Petersson, 'Still Embodying the Myth?'

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 36–37.

32 *Ibid.*

33 Vladimir Putin, '[Address to the Nation at the Presidential Inauguration Ceremony](#)', 7 May 2004, [accessed 17 December 2018].

34 Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy', p. 1114.

35 Putin, '[The Putin Interviews](#)'.

36 Vladimir Putin, Nataliya Gevorkyan, and Natalya Timakova, *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President Vladimir Putin*. (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000), pp. vii–viii.

most commonly communicated through Putin's televised (and heavily mediated) question and answer sessions with audiences, such as the annual broadcast *Direct Line with Vladimir Putin*. One common rhetorical technique is for audience members to compare Putin's workload with his ability to follow other pursuits. One such question posed during the 2007 *Direct Line*—'seeing how busy you are, with a really packed work schedule, how do you manage to learn languages?'—serves to accentuate the impressiveness of Putin's work ethic by implying that he has both the energy and the self-discipline to manage even more work.³⁷ Putin's answers serve to project other qualities too, with his constant use of phrases such as, 'I'm certain', combined with iterated modal adverbs such as 'without fail', projecting an image of extreme confidence.³⁸

Visual projections of Putin as a lone figure, tirelessly working for the welfare of the Russian people, reinforce this rhetoric.³⁹ One image on Putin's presidential website shows a determined looking Putin working at his desk.⁴⁰ In the background we see multiple phones, with stacks of paper piled high. Yet it is the figure of Putin on which the picture is centred, his features alert and focused. That his telephones and paperwork are slightly out of focus is significant; rather than drowning in a sea of work, Putin is visually projected as dominating it. Such images highlight how Putin's very body is effectively used to project desired traits, with his confident appearance and manner frequently eliciting approval in voter surveys.⁴¹

Reliability

Phrases such as 'we'll do that without fail' also point to another key feature of Putin's brand: reliability.⁴² Given the uncertainty of the Yeltsin years, it was important for Putin to quickly establish an image of himself as a leader who could be counted on to deliver. As Putin stressed during his first inauguration, 'I understand that I have taken on a great responsibility [...] in Russia the head of state has always been and will always be the person who is responsible for everything in the country.'⁴³ To achieve this image, Putin understands the importance of the need for his words to *appear* to match his deeds. For example, Muscovites surveyed in

37 Lara Ryazanova-Clarke, 'The discourse of a spectacle at the end of the presidential term' in *Putin As Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, Helena Goscilo (ed.), (London: Routledge 2012), p. 123.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 117–18.

39 Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 129.

40 [Presidential Press and Information Office](#), 2018.

41 White and McAllister, 'The Putin Phenomenon', p. 618.

42 Ryazanova-Clarke, 'The Discourse of a Spectacle', p. 118.

43 Vladimir Putin, '[Speech at the Inauguration Ceremony](#)', 7 May 2000, [accessed 10 August 2018].

2001 noted how despite the criticism Putin received for his handling of the *Kursk* disaster, 'he said he would raise the submarine and he did', which they viewed as proof that he was 'a man of his word'.⁴⁴

This congruence between word and deed is not limited to national tragedies. The Russian media, supported by online activists, frequently publicise occasions where Putin keeps his word to ordinary Russians, such as the video titled 'Putin KEEPS HIS PROMISE and visits Izhevsk family's home as promised during *'Direct Line'*'.⁴⁵ Putin further cultivates this image of reliability through his speeches and interviews, subtly differentiating himself from the popular image of politicians making empty promises.⁴⁶ 'I am very pleased that as a result of my work the perception of me has been changing. And we have a saying: you should judge someone not by what he says about himself but by what he does.'⁴⁷ In one heavily publicised incident in Pikalyovo, Putin personally flew in to resolve a dispute between factory workers and their management, famously demanding an oligarch sign the agreement before growling, 'Give me back my pen!'⁴⁸ Whilst the dramatic scene delighted viewers, in reality the event was carefully staged to make an already agreed settlement appear as the result of Putin's intervention.⁴⁹ On the international level, Putin has cultivated a more sinister reputation of reliability; namely, that he will follow through on any threats he makes.⁵⁰ As ex-Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili discovered to his cost when Russia invaded in 2008: 'Unlike many of his Western counterparts, Putin does not bluff.'⁵¹

Intelligence

Putin has cultivated an image of intelligence and an almost infallible judgment, unlike the alcoholic antics of his predecessor.⁵² During Putin's first election, official biographies provided a useful means to establish his intelligence, using

44 White and McAllister, 'The Putin Phenomenon', p. 618.

45 *Russia Insight*, 'Putin KEEPS HIS PROMISE and Visits Izhevsk Family's Home as Promised during "Direct Line"', YouTube, 2017, [accessed 12 August 2018].

46 Michael Gorham, 'Putin's language' in *Putin As Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, Helena Gosciolo (ed.), (London: Routledge 2012), p. 86.

47 Vladimir Putin, 'Putin remarks on his public image', YouTube, (November 2001).

48 Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 276.

49 Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 196.

50 Hill, *Putin*.

51 Mikheil Saakashvili, 'Ex-Georgian President: Mr. Trump, Putin Does Not Bluff but You Have the Upper Hand—Use It', *Fix: News*, 16 July 2018, [accessed 17 August 2018].

52 Helena Gosciolo, 'Putin's performance of masculinity: The action hero and macho sex-object' in *Putin As Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, Helena Gosciolo (ed.), (London: Routledge 2012), p. 5.

interviews with figures such as Putin's old teacher to deliver the message in a way that seemed more authentic. 'He had a very good memory, a quick mind. I thought: this kid will make something of himself.'⁵³

Surveys during Putin's first presidency also highlighted the importance of his business-like appearance, with respondents noting that he 'always conducted himself in a dignified way' and was 'always neatly dressed'.⁵⁴ This image of professional competence is reinforced by Putin's speech patterns. He has mastered the language of the competent technocrat,⁵⁵ deploying what Petersson refers to as 'the Soviet rhetorical tradition of quoting figures' to demonstrate progress and proficiency.⁵⁶ 'Growth was 7.7%—much higher than the parameters that were in the plan [...] but the supply of new housing will be even bigger, 34.5%'.⁵⁷ Putin's ability to recite precise numbers across a range of subjects without notes is a commonly deployed technique designed to communicate a commanding knowledge on any and every topic.⁵⁸

The format of events such as *Direct Line* is designed to portray Putin as the leading source of knowledge in the country, with audience members passively reinforcing this image by providing the illusion of authentic dialogue.⁵⁹ Publicly broadcasting Putin's meetings serves to emphasise the image of the all-knowing leader, with Putin lecturing deferential ministers on governmental matters, correcting planned pipeline routes for embarrassed oil executives, and translating German perfectly in front of a delighted audience.⁶⁰ Putin's intelligence is also projected through less direct means. In 2015 every Russian politician received a compilation of Putin's speeches published by the pro-Kremlin youth group Network, titled *Words That Change the World*. One of the authors claimed 'it turns out basically everything he said has either already come true or is in the process of coming true at this very moment'.⁶¹

53 Putin, et al., *First Person*, p. 17.

54 White and McAllister, 'The Putin Phenomenon', p. 618.

55 Gorham, 'Putin's Language'.

56 Petersson, 'Still Embodying the Myth', p. 36.

57 Ryazanova-Clarke, 'The Discourse of a Spectacle', pp. 117–22.

58 'The Propaganda of the Putin Era: Part One', *Institute of Modern Russia*, 12 November 2012, [accessed 10 July 2018].

59 Ryazanova-Clarke, 'The Discourse of a Spectacle', p. 106.

60 Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 320; Julie Cassidy and Emily Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', *The Slavonic and East European Review* Vol. 88 Iss 4 (2010): 685; RT, [Putin shows German skills, unexpectedly steps in as translator at forum](#) (2016).

61 Shaun Walker, 'Collection of Vladimir Putin's Most Notable Speeches Published', *The Guardian*, 28 December 2015, [accessed 6 August 2018].

Putin's ability to speak the language of the diplomat is key in presenting him as both competent and reasonable. For example, during a diplomatic ceremony in 2018, Putin stated, '... we still hope that common sense will eventually prevail, and international relations will enter a constructive course [... . Russia will fully adhere to its] international responsibilities and develop cooperation with our partners on a constructive and respectful basis.'⁶² Russia's state-owned broadcaster RT was quick to contrast this speech with Trump's tweet, warning Russia to 'Get ready' for 'nice and new and "smart!"' missiles targeting Syria.⁶³

In less controlled media engagements, moments where Putin appears more knowledgeable than his counterpart are seized upon by Russian media and online activists alike; RT's video '*Putin Schools Megyn Kelly*' received over 900 000 views.⁶⁴ The manipulation of video to frame Putin in a favourable light appears to be a common technique. A basic YouTube search reveals countless videos of Putin apparently 'destroying', 'owning', and 'humiliating' his opponents.⁶⁵ In projecting the desired image of Putin's competence both domestically and internationally, these supposedly spontaneous communications attempt to create the impression of credibility because they appear unofficial. Indeed, the use of unofficial communicators is one of the Kremlin's key methods for projecting the desired image of Putin.

Projections of success and competence are therefore key to Putin's brand. Putin's consistently high approval ratings also serve to reinforce the image of his competence.⁶⁶ Yet with the Russian economy no longer booming, Putin must increasingly turn to images based on other qualities, such as strength and sincerity.

Strength

Whereas the propaganda of the post-Stalin Soviet Union focused on the strength of the state, the propaganda of Putin's Russia revolves around the strength of

62 RT, '[Putin: The world is getting more chaotic, but we hope that common sense will prevail](#)', 11 April 2018.

63 Ibid.

64 Greg Simons, 'The Politics of Marketing of Vladimir Putin to Global Audiences', *ANALYSIS GEURASIA* № 5, 26 June 2017, p. 4; RT America, '[Putin schools Megyn Kelly on Syria, chemical weapons & terrorism](#)', YouTube, 2 June 2017.

65 *News Heist*, '[Vladimir Putin Utterly Destroys BBC Reporter](#)', YouTube, 27 December 2016; *Russia Insight*, '[OWNED! Putin Owns Macron In Under One Minute—CHECKMATE!](#)', YouTube, 28 May 2018; *Russia Insight*, '[LIKE A BOSS: Putin Humiliates Oligarchs 'Cockroaches' For Closing Down a Factory in 2008 Fin Crisis](#)', YouTube, 22 April 2017.

66 Greg Simons, 'Stability and Change in Putin's Political Image During the 2000 and 2012 Presidential Elections: Putin 1.0 and Putin 2.0?' in *Journal of Political Marketing* 15 (2016): 156.



Putin swimming in a lake in Southern Siberia's Tuva region, 21.09.2012, Reuters

its leader.⁶⁷ Strength has been vital to Putin's brand from the outset for two reasons. First, voter studies have confirmed the old adage that Russians are generally attracted to an authoritarian leadership, desiring strength and toughness above other traits.⁶⁸ Second, Putin had to be seen as successfully restoring domestic order, yet he lacked the realities of a strong state apparatus.⁶⁹ According to Putin's former political strategist Gleb Pavlovsky, the purpose of projecting Putin's strength so intensely was to help compensate for the state's weakness, by 'creating an image of power' concentrated in Putin himself.⁷⁰ If Yeltsin's personal weakness was a metaphor for the state's weakness, Putin would become a metaphor for its strength. Early statements such as, 'many people decided that the president was no longer the centre of power. I'll make sure that no one ever has such illusions any more', helped foster Putin's image of strength, relying more

67 Bruen, '[Putin Flexes His Brand to the World](#)'.

68 E.B. Shestopal, T.N. Pishcheva, E.M. Gikavyi, and V.A. Zorin, 'The Image of V.V. Putin in the Consciousness of Russia's Citizens', in *Sociological Research*, 43 (2004).

69 Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy'.

70 Anton Troianovski, '[How the Kremlin Crafted a Popular Brand: Putin](#)', *Washington Post*, [accessed 30 July 2018].

on personal power than presidential authority.⁷¹ However, Putin's projection of strength is far more multifaceted than is often recognised. Indeed, scholars and commentators have identified numerous characterisations of Putin's strength—the tough guy, the commander-in-chief, the sportsman, the action hero, the sex symbol—all of which are deeply rooted in projections of masculinity.

The Tough Guy

One of the more unusual if implicit presentations of Putin's strength is the image of him as a 'tough guy'.⁷² Putin even explicitly refers to himself as 'a hooligan', when discussing his younger years.⁷³ Official biographies frequently point to the alleged lessons Putin learned growing up on the tough streets of Leningrad. 'I had to be strong [...] to fight to the finish in every fight'.⁷⁴ By presenting Putin's youth in this way, these official representations differentiate Putin from the Moscow elite,⁷⁵ and imply that he has lost none of his toughness. This thuggish image has also been enthusiastically promoted in the public imagination through memes and merchandise.⁷⁶ Such unofficial presentations enhance this image of strength and power, giving Putin's brand an almost menacing edge that encourages fear and respect.

The Commander-in-chief

Associating his brand with military power is crucial to the projection of Putin's strength. This was particularly true in his first term, when public trust in the military was more than double that of its trust in Putin.⁷⁷ Arguably, it was the Chechen conflict that established strength as an essential characteristic of Putin's brand. While Russians celebrated the new millennium, Putin's first act as President was to go to the Chechen front. This sent a clear message of determination and solidarity with Russian troops.⁷⁸ One of Putin's most infamous quotes is his reply to a question about the intensity of his campaign: 'We will pursue the

71 Maria Lipman, 'The Media' in *Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, Stephen K. Wegren (ed.), 6th edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), p. 130; Elizabeth Wood, 'Hypermasculinity as a Scenario of Power: VLADIMIR PUTIN'S ICONIC RULE, 1999–2008', in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 18 (2016): 334.

72 Masha Gessen, *The Man Without a Face: The Unlikely Rise of Vladimir Putin* (Granta Books, 2012), quoted in Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 131.

73 Putin, et al., *First Person*, p. 18.

74 Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 93.

75 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

76 Adrian Campbell and Elena Denezhkina, 'From Project Putin to Brand Putin', in *Celebrity Studies*, Vol. 8 Issue 2 (2017): 321; '[Putin Likes Your Joke | Vladimir Putin](#)', *Know Your Meme*, [accessed 21 August 2018].

77 Hutchesson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy', p. 1115.

78 Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 1.

terrorists wherever they are. [...] So, you will excuse me, if we catch them in the toilet, we'll whack them in the outhouse [...].⁷⁹ Whilst some found such language to be beneath the office of president, many Russians were electrified by it.⁸⁰ It distinguished Putin from other politicians, emphasising his determination and decisiveness while simultaneously making him appear more relatable to ordinary Russians.⁸¹ Putin's vigorous prosecution and PR exploitation—of the war transformed him from an unknown bureaucrat into a strongman overnight, taking his projected 2% of the vote in August 1999 to 52% by the election in March 2000.⁸²

Putin's brand also carefully exploits symbolic events. One English language YouTube video titled '*Putin ignores pouring rain to lay wreath on Day of Memory and Sorrow*' shows Putin at a wreath-laying ceremony commemorating the Great Patriotic War.⁸³ Putin stands still and resolute, his suit completely drenched as the wind and rain lash against his unsheltered body (all captured by the media). Praise such as, 'this is why Russians love President Putin', 'he is like the alpha of all alphas', and, 'Western leaders should learn from this man!!!' fills the comments section in real or state-sponsored admiration.⁸⁴ A linked video, 'I am not made of sugar—Putin shrugs off his badass downpour video' shows Putin explaining how, 'it never even occurred to me that it was necessary to stand under the umbrella. [...] I am not sugar; I won't melt.'⁸⁵ Whilst such gestures ostensibly display Putin's respect for the military, in reality they serve to project his personal strength while linking him with powerful national narratives and institutions for the domestic audience.⁸⁶

The Sportsman

One trait that surveys have found consistently praised by Russians is Putin's love of sport.⁸⁷ From the outset, Putin's athleticism has been exploited to promote

79 Wood, 'Hypermasculinity', p. 335; Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 23.

80 Gorham, 'Putin's language', p. 87.

81 Ibid.

82 White and McAllister, 'The Putin Phenomenon', p. 612.

83 *Russia Insight*, '[Putin ignores pouring rain to lay wreath on Day of Memory and Sorrow](#)', YouTube, 22 June 2017.

84 Ibid.

85 *Russia Insight*, '[I am not made of sugar—Putin shrugs off his badass downpour video](#)', YouTube, 22 July 2017.

86 Elizabeth Wood, 'Performing memory: Vladimir Putin and the celebration of World War II in Russia', in *Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 38:2 (2011) quoted in Alexandra Novitskaya, 'Patriotism, sentiment, and male hysteria: Putin's masculinity politics and the persecution of non-heterosexual Russians', in *NORMA*, 12, 2017), p. 305.

87 Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin', p. 50.

an image of virility that distinguishes him at home and abroad. Whereas other leaders are seen playing golf, the Kremlin has consistently promoted official images of Putin engaged in a range of high intensity activities.⁸⁸ For example, Putin doesn't just swim; he performs the butterfly—the hardest of all strokes—in icy Siberian rivers.⁸⁹

Putin, a decorated judo black belt, released *Let's Learn Judo with Vladimir Putin* in 2008. It was less an instructional DVD and more an opportunity for Putin to demonstrate his prowess as a fighter at a time of increasing tensions with the West.⁹⁰ Judo's discipline and physicality underlie perhaps the most commonly projected representation of Putin's strength: Putin as 'action hero'.

The Action Hero

Judging from polls and popular culture, it appears that for many of his supporters Putin's brand has successfully satisfied a desire for a charismatic hero-as-leader.⁹¹ Images of Putin flying fighter jets and saving film crews from charging tigresses closely mirror the aesthetic of the Hollywood hero.⁹² Pavlovsky reveals that this Hollywood model was consciously followed by Putin; 'The main thesis was that Putin corresponds ideally to the Hollywood image of a saviour-hero. [...] The world watches Hollywood—so it will watch Putin.'⁹³ Pavlovsky's admission suggests that Putin's 'action hero' image—like many aspects of his brand—is deliberately designed to overcome the boundaries of language to appeal internationally.⁹⁴ Images of Putin alone on horseback echo the aesthetics of the Marlboro Man poster that once dominated international billboards.⁹⁵ Such images offer plentiful opportunities for supporters and commentators to contrast his rugged masculinity with the 'weakness' of Western leaders—as on the popular FOX programme *Hannity*, which juxtaposed Putin's topless horse riding with Obama riding a bicycle whilst wearing a helmet.⁹⁶

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88 Gosçilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 184.

89 Maeve Shearlaw, '[Let Putin be your fitness inspiration hero](#)', *Guardian*, 9 September 2015.

90 Shearlaw, '[Let Putin be your fitness inspiration hero](#)'; Gosçilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 184.

91 Helen Gosçilo, 'Introduction' in *Putin As Celebrity and Cultural Icon*, Helena Gosçilo (ed.), (London: Routledge 2012), p. 2; Gosçilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 182.

92 Gosçilo, 'Russia's Ultimate Celebrity', pp. 15–16.

93 Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'.

94 Ibid.

95 Wood, 'Hypermasculinity', p. 339.

96 *Fox News Insider*, '[Hannity: Why For the First Time I'm "Humiliated" for My Country](#)', 7 March 2014. [Accessed 19 August 2018].



President Putin on vacation in Tyva, Russia, 05.08.2018, Alexey Nikolsky/TASS

Hollywood's hero blueprint also requires another 'higher' quality: self-control.⁹⁷ Though often manifested in his controlled body language, this quality is also communicated by pulling rhetorical punches: 'When you look at this, you feel you could strangle them with your own hands. But that's emotions [getting in the way].'⁹⁸ Such statements communicate both primal power and self-mastery in language that distinguishes Putin from other leaders and endears him to ordinary Russians.⁹⁹ Putin's psychological strength is also emphasised; *First Person* even claims that Putin's KGB superiors were disconcerted by just how calm Putin was under pressure.¹⁰⁰ Focus groups suggest these messages have achieved their intended effect; voters often attribute psychologically 'strong' characteristics such as determination, confidence, and strength of will to Putin.¹⁰¹

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⁹⁷ Goscilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 188.

⁹⁸ Gorham, 'Putin's language', p. 88; Goscilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 188.

⁹⁹ Gorham, 'Putin's language', p. 88.

¹⁰⁰ Putin, et al., *First Person*, pp. 36–37.

¹⁰¹ Shestopal, et al., *The Image of V. V. Putin*, p. 50.

Putin's KGB past also fuels the image of him as Russia's 'James Bond'.¹⁰² Indeed, in 2011, posters of Putin as Bond inexplicably appeared in Moscow, captioned with '[Putin] will protect.'¹⁰³ In reality, Pavlovsky claims that this 'secret agent' image is consciously modelled on the fictional KGB character Stirlitz, whom secret Kremlin polling revealed as the ideal of Russian heroism in the popular imagination.¹⁰⁴ Given their shared KGB background, a deliberate campaign to recast Putin as the modern Stirlitz was undertaken.¹⁰⁵ 'We intensified Putin's mystery on purpose', deliberately exploiting the lack of visibility into Putin's KGB past to romanticise what was likely a relatively unexceptional desk-based career.¹⁰⁶ This glamourised image reflects how the excitement of Putin's brand largely derives from a heady combination of mystery and adventure.

Like much of Putin's brand, the image cultivated by the Kremlin of Putin as an action hero has been enthusiastically embraced in the popular imagination. As Putin himself noted, 'the public loves to see some "hot stuff", and so they created this image'.¹⁰⁷ Putin-as-hero is an established part of Russian popular culture, with fiction books such as *Prezident* portraying Putin as personally hunting down Chechen terrorists.¹⁰⁸ Even satirical works like the comic series *Superputin*, whilst seemingly mocking Putin's projected heroism paradoxically help reinforce the image by repeating it.¹⁰⁹

This representation of Putin as an 'action hero' through both official and unofficial channels is remarkable for its sheer depth and diversity. Key to this image is one of the brand's most notable assets: Putin's physique. Carefully choreographed presentations of Putin's body, such as his topless Siberian holiday pictures in 2007, have achieved iconic status.¹¹⁰ In a country where the life expectancy for men is 64, a 66-year-old Putin is deliberately presented as the epitome of health and vitality.¹¹¹ Surveys confirm that Putin's activeness is overwhelmingly considered a key component of his brand.¹¹²

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102 Andrew Foxall, 'Photographing Vladimir Putin: Masculinity, Nationalism and Visuality in Russian Political Culture', *Geopolitics* 18:1 (2013): 134.

103 Goscilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 191.

104 Ibid.

105 Ibid.

106 In Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'; Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*.

107 Vladimir Putin, *Putin remarks on his public image* (November 2001).

108 Andrei Rogatchevski, 'Putin in Russian Fiction', in *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 24:4 (2008): 631.

109 Goscilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 188; O'Shaughnessy, 'Putin, Xi, And Hitler'.

110 Wood, 'Hypermasculinity', p. 329.

111 Simons, 'Stability and Change', p. 158; Ian Bremmer, 'What the "Tough Guy" Era Means for Global Politics', *Time*, 14 May 2018, [accessed 18 June 2018].

112 Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin', p. 53.

Putin's muscular body manifests the strength of his brand. Official images of Putin lifting weights broadcast this image.¹¹³ Presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov's jibe that if Trump could walk around bare-chested he would, reflects how conscious Putin's brand managers are of the opportunities his muscular frame presents in positioning him against other leaders.¹¹⁴ Suggestions for exercises that can help you achieve a body like Putin's have appeared in domestic publications,¹¹⁵ and articles such as the *Guardian's* 'Let Putin Be Your Fitness Inspiration'¹¹⁶ reflect how this idea of Putin-as-role model has international appeal.

The Sex Symbol

Images of a topless Putin were also crucial for the construction of Putin as a national sex symbol. Newspapers reported that female readers, 'were screaming with delight and showering [Putin] with compliments'.¹¹⁷ In a country with ten million more women than men, sexual appeal has been a domestically important aspect of Putin's projected image.¹¹⁸ The noticeable absence of Putin's then-wife in early official images¹¹⁹ suggests the possibility of Putin believing that a visible partner would undermine a leader's erotic appeal. However, the Kremlin—and by extension the Russian media—have been careful to ensure that in sexualising Putin, he is always the object and never the subject of sexual desire, creating a paradoxical yet powerful impression of availability and unattainability.¹²⁰

The 2002 chart-topping song *Man Like Putin* publicly amplifies this notion of desirability, giving it credibility by presenting the song as a spontaneous reflection of widespread female admiration (despite being produced by a government official and used heavily during elections).¹²¹ Lyrics such as, '[I want] a man like Putin, who's full of strength. A man like Putin, who doesn't drink', both idealises and differentiates Putin from the ordinary Russian male.¹²² Putin's brand has inspired other forms of sexualisation in popular culture, such as special edition

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113 Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'.

114 Ibid.

115 Goscilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 194.

116 Shearlaw, '[Let Putin be your fitness inspiration here!](#)'

117 Foxall, *Photographing Vladimir Putin*, p. 148.

118 Simons, *Stability and Change in Putin's Political Image*, p. 158.

119 Tatiana Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation: His Family and Other Animals', in *Putin As Celebrity*

and *Cultural Icon* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 68.

120 Goscilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 195.

121 Cassidy and Johnson, *Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality*, p. 690; Wood, *Hyper-masculinity*, p. 337.

122 Cassidy and Johnson, *Putin*; Foxall, *Photographing Vladimir Putin*, p. 148.

magazines devoted to his virility.¹²³ Even reputable newspapers occasionally reported on incidents of ‘Putin hysteria’, such as the story of a hospital creating a, ‘new category of patients—women who are madly in love [with Putin]’.¹²⁴ Such statements reflect how the media and popular culture can be used to reinforce and amplify the Kremlin’s intended images of Putin in ways not possible officially, giving them the appearance of legitimacy and genuine popularity.

Masculinity

The importance of masculinity for Putin’s brand can be inferred from the harsh reprisals aimed at those perceived as emasculating him, such as the arrest and beating of Aleksandr Shednov for his portrait of Putin in a dress.¹²⁵ The purpose of Putin’s exaggerated displays of masculinity is to present him as the ‘ultimate man’ in a deeply patriarchal society.¹²⁶ In one official holiday photograph from 2007 we see a bare-chested Putin in military gear walking purposefully along a river, looking confidently into the distance, his square shoulders emphasising his alpha-male gait.¹²⁷ The image is framed so as to draw the eye to Putin, the dimensions of the river and rugged mountains being subordinate in focus and detail; this image symbolises Putin’s dominance over the Russian landscape.¹²⁸

Putin’s interactions are also carefully choreographed to emphasise his masculine dominance.¹²⁹ Publicly broadcast meetings invariably present Putin as being in complete control, his subordinates listening in deferential silence.¹³⁰ Public castigations further assert Putin’s dominance and image of decisiveness: ‘After the journalists leave, I will tell you what failures to meet the deadlines will amount to.’¹³¹ International confrontations are also used to reinforce Putin’s masculinity. Putin’s warnings to the West not to push the Russian ‘spring’ lest it ‘snap back hard’,¹³² as well as his infamous speech at the 2007 Munich Security Conference (‘This conference’s structure allows me to avoid excessive politeness [...] and] will

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123 White and McAllister, *The Putin Phenomenon*, p. 609.

124 *Ibid.*, p. 608.

125 Novitskaya, *Patriotism, sentiment, and male hysteria*, p. 307; Goscilo, *Putin’s performance of masculinity*, p. 199.

126 Goscilo, ‘Putin’s performance’.

127 Foxall, ‘Photographing Vladimir Putin’, pp. 143–44.

128 *Ibid.*; Wood, ‘Hypermasculinity’, p. 331.

129 Wood, ‘Hypermasculinity’, p. 329.

130 Sky News, ‘[Vladimir Putin’s Action Man Persona Is No Mistake - It’s a Carefully-Crafted Image, Says Body Language Expert Peter Collett](#)’, Twitter, 13 March 2018, [accessed 16 December 2018]; Foxall, ‘Photographing Vladimir Putin’, p. 144.

131 Petersson, ‘Still Embodying the Myth’, p. 37.

132 Hutcheson and Petersson, ‘Shortcut to Legitimacy’, p. 1114.



President Putin on Holiday in Tyva, Russia, 27.08.2018, Alexey Nikolsky/TASS

allow me to say what I really think’),¹³³ projects Putin’s aggressive masculinity internationally. This ‘tough talk’ is given credibility through Putin’s willingness to use force in Ukraine and Syria; a careful balance is struck between avoiding conflict with the West whilst simultaneously presenting it as comparatively weak.¹³⁴ The purpose of Putin’s words and actions on the international stage is to communicate to domestic and international audiences that he is a leader to be reckoned with, and with British journalists questioning British politicians whether they were ‘tough enough’ to face Putin, it appears this image has been effective.¹³⁵

Putin’s projection of strength is therefore much richer than the title of ‘strongman’ suggests. Yet, the ageing process means that those images that are rooted in Putin’s physical strength are becoming increasingly vulnerable. In addition, the intensity with which Putin’s strength is projected creates the potential for it to backfire spectacularly. When asked what had happened to the *Kursk*, Putin’s blunt reply that, ‘it sank’, infuriated Russians who viewed it as deeply insensitive.¹³⁶ As

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¹³³ Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 197.

¹³⁴ O’Shaughnessy, ‘Putin, Xi, and Hitler’, p. 119.

¹³⁵ Gosilo, ‘Putin’s performance’, p. 186; Channel 4 News, ‘*Hell yes, I’m tough enough: Ed Miliband to Jeremy Paxman | Battle For Number 10*’, YouTube, 26 March 2015.

¹³⁶ Gosilo, ‘Putin’s performance’, pp. 180–81.

a result, qualities such as his ‘sincerity’ must be projected in order to help counteract the weaknesses of Putin’s ‘strongman’ image.

Sincerity

Russia’s tendency to deny, divert, and distract from its aggressive actions has made the notion of Putin as an honest and wholesome leader seem farcical to most Western audiences.¹³⁷ Yet domestically, Putin’s sincerity is a carefully calibrated component of his brand. After *Kursk*, the president’s advisors have been diligent to ensure that his visits to disaster victims are prompt and heavily publicised, taking care that Putin will not be confronted by angry crowds, and deflecting any blame away from the President.¹³⁸ More generally, as with most aspects of Putin’s brand, projections of sincerity are carefully curated to provide the public image of Putin with the specific traits revealed as desirable by voter research.¹³⁹ These can best be described as honesty, humility, and compassion.

Honesty

This image was initially communicated through Putin’s rhetoric and actions, though it appears to be increasingly dependent upon ‘spin’ via state-controlled media. During his first inaugural address, Putin pledged to work solely for the interests of the state, declaring that whilst he may make mistakes, ‘what I can promise and what I do promise is that I will work openly and honestly’. His frank appraisal of Russia’s problems and professed commitment to democratic freedoms gave the impression that he was both honest and in touch.¹⁴⁰ To avoid Putin’s KGB past tarnishing this image, biographies were published that included an account of Putin refusing to provide his former KGB colleagues with documents entrusted to him by his new employer, the liberal Mayor of St. Petersburg.¹⁴¹ Putin’s early economic reforms and his manner of presenting himself were crucial to his initial cultivation of good relations with the West. President Bush’s (in)famous claim that he had sensed Putin’s soul and, ‘found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy’, gave this image of Putin as honest great—if short lived—credibility internationally.¹⁴²

137 Mark Molloy, ‘Deny, divert and distract: Russia’s denials over spy poisoning claims have a familiar ring’, *Telegraph*, 6 April 2018.

138 Goscolo, ‘Russia’s Ultimate Celebrity’, p. 19; Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, pp. 197–98; Daily Mail, [Putin visits hospital and talks to patients injured in mall fire](#), 27 March 2018.

139 Mikhailova, ‘Putin as the Father of the Nation’, p. 68.

140 Putin, ‘Speech at the Inauguration Ceremony’; Simons, ‘Stability and Change’, pp. 155–56.

141 Putin, et al., *First Person*, p. 90.

142 Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 35.

Honouring his pledge to obey the constitution and stand down after his second term—despite various ‘spontaneous demands’ from the public that he seek re-election¹⁴³—was also designed to reinforce this image. As 70% of Russians ‘completely trusted’ Putin when he stood down, it appears to have worked.¹⁴⁴ Yet the protests in response to Putin’s third candidacy suggest that his domestic image was briefly tarnished by this apparent breach of the spirit of the constitution; many viewed Medvedev’s presidency as a sham.¹⁴⁵

Putin’s control over the media is increasingly important as he strives to maintain his image of integrity. For example, in 2008, reported rumours that Putin had divorced his first wife to marry a gymnast led to the closure of the offending publication.¹⁴⁶ More recently, RT has been used to frame Putin’s unworkable proposals of ‘assistance’ to Western authorities investigating alleged Russian interference in Western politics as ‘fair and unbiased’.¹⁴⁷ Broadcasting endless statistics in support of the points Putin makes in speeches and interviews is also designed to convey a sense of transparency and truth (‘I’m pleased to note that not once have I massaged any figures or facts.’)¹⁴⁸ Given the high levels of public trust Putin continues to enjoy, it seems this image of honesty remains strong, at least domestically.¹⁴⁹

Humility

Balancing the image of Putin’s omnipotence is the projected image of his humility. Putin’s brand has consistently tried to portray him as a ‘man of the people’.¹⁵⁰ Official narratives stress Putin’s humble origins in a communal flat; an experience shared by many Russians:¹⁵¹ ‘No hot water, no bathroom [...] Putin spends much of his time chasing rats with a stick.’¹⁵² A well-established aspect of the Putin myth, his humble background differentiates him from elite politicians while making his achievements appear all the more impressive.

143 Gosciolo, ‘Russia’s Ultimate Celebrity’, pp. 6–7; Wood, ‘Hypermasculinity’, pp. 339–40.

144 White and McAllister, ‘The Putin Phenomenon’, p. 615.

145 Petersson, ‘Still Embodying the Myth’, p. 34.

146 Roland Oliphant, ‘Fifteen years of Vladimir Putin: in quotes’, *Telegraph*, 7 May 2015.

147 Robert Bridge, ‘Guilty until proven innocent: US rejects Putin’s joint “interrogations” plan to end Russiagate’, *RT*, 20 July 2018.

148 Ryazanova-Clarke, ‘The Discourse of a Spectacle’, p. 117.

149 Levada-Centre, *Approval Ratings for Government Institutions*, 26 September 2017.

150 *The Propaganda of the Putin Era: Part One*.

151 Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, p. 15.

152 Putin, et al., *First Person*, p. 1.

Calculated displays of modesty are also used to connect with ordinary Russians. This was particularly evident during his first term, when he assiduously cultivated the image of a publicity shy man who simply wanted to perform his duty.¹⁵³ Putin repeatedly stated that he had initially refused Yeltsin's offer of the Presidency for fear of the impact it would have on his family's ability to lead ordinary lives, and because, '[leading] Russia back then was a very difficult thing to do'—again, combining humility with achievement.¹⁵⁴

Carefully managed interactions with the public are also broadcast to reinforce Putin's connection with ordinary people. From the outset, Putin has adopted an all-inclusive approach, from riding with commuters on Moscow's trains to sharing meals with shepherds in Tuvan huts.¹⁵⁵ Dramatically staged 'interventions' such as the Pikalyovo incident are coupled with displays of selflessness to create the impression that Putin is firmly of and for the people.¹⁵⁶ His televised response to a father asking how best to explain who the President is to his daughter—'He is a person who works so that you can be happy.'—is a good example.¹⁵⁷

Stage-managed public forums such as *Direct Line* are crucial to Putin's brand, because they create the impression of a dialogue that is simultaneously national and very personal.¹⁵⁸ Putin's frequent use of Russian sayings ("come down off the bottle", as the common folk say) associates him with a folksy style of speaking that resonates with ordinary Russians.¹⁵⁹ Callers from across Russia are shown thanking Putin for taking interest in them,¹⁶⁰ to which Putin replies that he is 'duty-bound to communicate with his people'.¹⁶¹ In another televised forum, after being reminded of how hard his job is, Putin tells students 'I consider myself an ordinary person, albeit it's hard to call my job ordinary.'¹⁶² However, the effectiveness of such attempts to portray Putin as 'one of the people' is questionable. Independent polls suggest that only 17% of Russians view Putin as representing the interests of 'everyday people'.¹⁶³

153 Goscolo, 'Russia's Ultimate Celebrity', p. 16.

154 Putin, [The Putin Interviews](#).

155 Simons, 'Stability and Change', pp. 154–55; Foxall, 'Photographing Vladimir Putin', p. 146.

156 Oliphant, 'Fifteen years of Vladimir Putin'.

157 Inessa S, "[I work so that you could be happy" - Putin](#)", YouTube, 9 December 2016.

158 Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, pp. 192–93.

159 Gorham, 'Putin's language', pp. 89–90.

160 Ryazanova-Clarke, 'The Discourse of a Spectacle', p. 123.

161 In Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 193.

162 Inessa S, "[Putin: I'm just an ordinary person](#)", YouTube, 26 July 2017.

163 Levada-Centre, *Vladimir Putin's Work*, 11 December 2017.



President Putin feeding a baby elk, 05.06.2010, AP

Compassion

Using animals to symbolise a brand's personality is a well-recognised technique, and this is particularly true for brand Putin.¹⁶⁴ Whilst surveys indicate that Putin is overwhelmingly associated with 'strong' animals in the Russian imagination, in marketing the president's image animals are primarily used to project his 'softer' side.¹⁶⁵ Images of Putin cuddling puppies are used to demonstrate his compassion, whilst subconsciously associating him with the positive emotions generated by viewing 'cute' animals in a format that has the potential to go viral internationally.¹⁶⁶ Such displays of tenderness do not just counteract displays of Putin's strength and masculinity; the contrast accentuates their impressiveness by demonstrating Putin's self-confidence and apparent indifference at being perceived as having a gentler side.¹⁶⁷ However, it is interesting that the more notable displays of tenderness, such as his kissing animals, appeared only after his 'macho' image had been firmly established.¹⁶⁸

164 Kapferer, *The New Strategic Brand Management*, p. 168; Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation', p. 71.

165 Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin', p. 53; Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation'.

166 RT, *A Dog's Heart: Pet lover Putin needs name for fluffy puppy*, 17 November 2010.

167 Gosילו, 'Putin's performance', pp. 199–200.

168 Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation', p. 77.

As well as providing opportunities for displays of compassion, animals and children also function as symbolic surrogates for Putin's conspicuously absent family in portraying him as 'father of the nation'.¹⁶⁹ One notable incident occurred in the Kremlin in 2006, when Putin spontaneously lifted up a child's shirt and kissed his stomach. This ostensibly affectionate act has a deeper symbolic message.¹⁷⁰ The Russian word for 'belly' is also an old word for 'life', and by kissing this intimate part of a child's body without permission in the centre of Russian power, Putin symbolically asserted himself as the 'father of the nation' in a post-modern display of power.¹⁷¹ Animals and children, then, are a powerful medium through which the brand Putin's desired traits and symbolic representations can be communicated.

All politicians seek to display traits such as honesty and sincerity, as these are characteristics voters universally desire.¹⁷² However in Putin's case, visual and rhetorical displays of sincerity are designed to both counteract and compliment his projection of strength. In particular, they serve to present Putin as matching the Russian ideal of the leader as a strong but caring 'father of the nation'—critical to his domestic appeal.¹⁷³

Significance for the Brand

By cross-referencing these images with studies of political legitimacy in Russia,¹⁷⁴ a compelling explanation emerges as to their purpose. The lack of legal-rational legitimacy as a basis for trust in modern Russian state institutions means that the stability of Putin's regime is entirely dependent on his popularity, which rests upon three pillars: economic prosperity, domestic order, and Russia's great-power status.¹⁷⁵ These pillars are crucially and inextricably linked with three national myths within the collective imagination.¹⁷⁶ First, the myth of the 'Good Tsar': a strong but caring 'father of the nation' who protects his people.¹⁷⁷ Second, the 'Times of Troubles' [*Smuta*], where Russia experiences cyclical periods of instability, only to be saved by a great leader.¹⁷⁸ And third, that it is

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169 Ibid., p. 75.

170 Ibid., p. 76.

171 Ibid.; Gosילו, *Introduction*, p. 3; Gosילו, *Putin's performance of masculinity*, p. 200.

172 Wojciech Cwalina and Andrzej Falkowski, 'Morality and Competence in Shaping the Images of Political Leaders', *Journal of Political Marketing* 15:2-3 (2016): 220-39.

173 Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin', p. 32; Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation'.

174 Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy'.

175 Ibid., p. 1107.

176 Ibid.; Alexander Lukin, 'Russia's New Authoritarianism and the Post-Soviet Political Ideal', in *Post-Soviet Affairs* 25:1 (2009); Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin'.

177 Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*, p. 133; Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation'; Wood, 'Hypermasculinity'.

178 Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy', p. 1110; Petersson, 'Still Embodying the Myth', pp. 33-35.

Russia's destiny to be a great power.¹⁷⁹

This is the core purpose of Putin's brand: to compensate for his regime's lack of legal-rational legitimacy by ensuring his personal popularity, projecting him as delivering on all three pillars through the invocation of national myths. Again, the concept of the brand can be particularly illuminating for our understanding of how this is accomplished. Consider Jean-Noël Kapferer's five core functions of a brand: differentiation, reducing risk, increasing attractiveness, establishing relationships, and cultivating identities.¹⁸⁰

Differentiation

In a system dependent entirely upon the legitimacy of one man, it is vital that Putin be seen as unique. Images of strength and competence were crucial for differentiating Putin from the discredited Yeltsin when he first assumed the presidency,¹⁸¹ and though the integrity of his subsequent elections remains questionable, they still required Putin to competitively differentiate himself from rivals.¹⁸² The *Hannity* show's visual comparison of Putin with Obama demonstrates how these images can be used to differentiate Putin on the international stage, evoking Russian pride and international envy.¹⁸³ The idea that Putin is uniquely different is a large part of his appeal, with his novel public relations events attracting widespread attention, which, in the age of celebrity politics, equates to political influence.¹⁸⁴

Yet the novelty of Putin's images also distinguishes him from politics itself, elevating him above the discredited state apparatus he manages and deflecting popular criticism of its shortcomings onto others. This differentiation serves to protect the popularity upon which the entire system depends.¹⁸⁵ By saturating Russia's political discourse with Putin's brand, it becomes a form of political 'repression', replacing democracy and serious political dialogue with entertainment and spectacle.¹⁸⁶

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179 Ibid.

180 Kapferer, *The New Strategic Brand Management*.

181 Goscilo, 'Putin's performance', p. 5.

182 Simons, 'Stability and Change', p. 149; Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, pp. 305–06.

183 *Fox News Insider*, 'Hannity'; Bruen, 'Putin Flexes His Brand to the World'.

184 Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'; Andrew F. Cooper, Hugo Dobson, and Mark Wheeler, 'Non-Western Celebrity Politics and Diplomacy: Introduction', *Celebrity Studies*, 8 (2017).

185 Ryazanova-Clarke, 'The Discourse of a Spectacle', p. 118; White and McAllister, 'The Putin Phenomenon', p. 618; Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin', p. 51; Wood, 'Hypermasculinity', p. 331.

186 O'Shaughnessy, 'Putin, Xi, and Hitler', p. 129; Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation', pp. 77–78; Wood, 'Hypermasculinity', p. 331.

Reducing Risk

Because Russians equate a strong government with domestic stability, Putin has had to compensate for the state's inherent weaknesses by creating the image of personal power and restored order.¹⁸⁷ By rhetorically positioning his rule in contrast to the preceding 'dark periods', and by leveraging public displays of power as he did in Pikalyovo, Putin invokes the *Smuta* myth to present himself as the saviour of the Russian people.¹⁸⁸ In a society prone to uncertainty, Putin's brand fosters the belief that he—and he alone—can provide stability, offering the psychological and emotional reassurance voters crave.¹⁸⁹ However, for Putin's rivals, these images actually accentuate risk. Domestically, they both generate and re-communicate Putin's popularity, serving to discourage any opposition.¹⁹⁰ Internationally, the image of Putin as a sinister and omnipotent 'tough guy' acts as a deterrent by instilling both fear and respect.¹⁹¹

Increasing Attractiveness

As a political unknown in 2000, Putin offered a blank canvas upon which his advisors—informed by voter research—could present whatever Russians wanted in an ideal leader.¹⁹² If Putin is presented as a strict but caring 'father of the nation', it is because that is what voters want him to be.¹⁹³ Indeed, the variety of brand Putin images is designed to appeal to the widest possible audience—a key factor in Putin's popularity is that he can be everything to everyone.¹⁹⁴

To a lesser extent, these images also make Putin attractive to international audiences. For some, the image of Putin outmanoeuvring the West and reasserting Russia's position resonates with their own national desires.¹⁹⁵ For others, it is Putin's populism and strength that appeal.¹⁹⁶ Indeed, the 'attractive' qualities of

187 Campbell and Denezhkina, 'From project Putin to brand Putin', p. 319; Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'; Lukin, 'Russia's New Authoritarianism'; Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin', p. 53.

188 Vladimir Putin, [Vladimir Putin Has Been Sworn in as President of Russia](#), *President of Russia*, 7 May 2018.

[Accessed 7 August 2018]; Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy', p. 1114.

189 Simons, 'Stability and Change'; E. A. Rees, 'Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions', in *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc*, (Basingstoke, 2004) cited in Cassidy and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', p. 685.

190 Frye et al., 'Is Putin's Popularity Real?', p. 5.

191 Bruen, ['Putin Flexes His Brand to the World'](#).

192 Simons, 'Stability and Change'.

193 Shestopal, et al., 'The Image of V.V. Putin', p. 32; Mikhailova, 'Putin as the Father of the Nation'.

194 Goscolo, 'Russia's Ultimate Celebrity', pp. 20–21; Cassidy and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality', p. 686; Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*.

195 Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'.

196 Khatya Chhor, ['Trump, Farage, Le Pen: Why Western conservatives love Vladimir Putin'](#), *France 24*, 15 November 2016; Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'.

Putin's brand give it the potential to be a weapon in Russia's information war by persuading part of the global audience that Putin and his Russia deserve admiration and support.¹⁹⁷

Establishing Relationships

Putin's brand also produces a fantasised relationship of dependency, binding the Russian people to the 'Good Tsar'.¹⁹⁸ Incidents such as Pikalyovo are designed to exploit the culturally ingrained myth that only the Tsar can protect the people from the 'evil boyars', helping justify Putin's concentration of power.¹⁹⁹ From solving mundane issues on *Direct Line* to fighting forest fires, Putin is presented as the 'Omnipresident', able to solve all his people's problems, creating a sense of dependency whilst simultaneously discouraging political activism 'from below'.²⁰⁰ Therefore, these images create a mutually beneficial—if unequal—relationship, where the people get the fantasy of their ideal leader in exchange for acquiescing to the realities of his autocratic rule.²⁰¹

Cultivating Identities

'Russians say Putin, military power & unique spirit make them glorious nation.'²⁰² This RT headline encapsulates how his brand is designed to link inextricably Putin with Russia's identity as a great power, framing him as the 'hero' within national mythology.²⁰³ Putin—through his projection of personal strength and vitality—has become the symbol of a renewed Russia.²⁰⁴ By making him appear as the source of national strength and pride, the presidential brand makes a Russia without Putin seem almost unthinkable.²⁰⁵ As well as masking the fragilities of his state domestically, Putin's projection of strength also serves to mask them internationally.²⁰⁶ If Putin appears strong, so too does the country he leads.

197 O'Shaughnessy, 'Putin, Xi, and Hitler', p. 124.

198 Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*.

199 'Anna Arutunyan Explains the Putin Mystique', NYU Jordan Center, November 14th 2014; Roxburgh, *The Strongman*, pp. 63–65.

200 Petersson, 'Still Embodying the Myth', p. 36; Hill and Gaddy, *Mr. Putin*; Goscilo, 'Russia's Ultimate Celebrity', p. 19; Ryazanova-Clarke, 'The discourse of a spectacle', p. 120.

201 O'Shaughnessy, 'Putin, Xi, and Hitler', p. 118.

202 RT, '[Russians say Putin, military power & unique spirit make them glorious nation](#)', 21 May 2018.

203 Petersson, 'Still Embodying the Myth', p. 31; '[The Propaganda of the Putin Era: Part Two](#)', *Institute of Modern Russia*, 5 December 2012 [Accessed 10 July 2018]; Goscilo, *Putin's performance of masculinity*,

204 Campbell and Denezhkina, 'From project Putin to brand Putin', pp. 320–21.

205 Bruen, '[Putin Flexes His Brand to the World](#)'.

206 Troianovski, 'Branding Putin'.

Conclusion

The images associated with the brand of President Vladimir Putin are remarkably diverse. So remarkable, in fact, that the West's fixation on Putin's 'strongman' image is both one-dimensional and analytically limiting.²⁰⁷ Whilst the diversity of Putin's images is undoubtedly a source of strength, it is a diversity borne from the need to mask vulnerability — the vulnerability of his political system domestically, and the vulnerability of his nation internationally.²⁰⁸ This diversity of images reflects the diversity of audiences targeted and methods used. Putin's words, deeds, and even his very body have been choreographed and exploited to such an extent that he is the most 'manufactured' actor in international politics today, the product of voter research more than genuine personality.

Through his dominance of Russia's media, Putin is able to saturate the market with images that are managed to a degree that would otherwise be impossible, providing a consistency and credibility that is crucial to the brand's strength. Through the active manipulation of social media, spontaneous content is produced to amplify official images, manufacturing the illusion of their authenticity for domestic and international audiences alike.²⁰⁹ By reproducing images inspired by the top, ordinary people play a role in their creation and communication from the bottom as well.²¹⁰

By branding himself as competent, strong, and sincere, Putin has successfully projected images of himself that take advantage of a uniquely Russian context in the most effective way. The primary aim of the brand is to compensate with his own personal popularity for the Russian political system's inherent weakness and lack of legal-rational legitimacy.²¹¹ Whereas most political brands are managed to secure survival within a political system, Putin's brand is managed to ensure the survival of the system itself. With his approval rating never dropping below 61%, it appears that, at least for now, brand Putin is achieving its intended effect.²¹²

207 Bremmer, 'What the "Tough Guy" Era Means for Global Politics'.

208 Campbell and Denezhkina, 'From project Putin to brand Putin'; Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy'; Bruen, 'Putin Flexes His Brand to the World'.

209 O'Shaughnessy, 'Putin, Xi, And Hitler', p. 116.

210 Cassiday and Johnson, 'Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality'; Goscilo, 'Introduction'.

211 Hutcheson and Petersson, 'Shortcut to Legitimacy'.

212 Levada-Centre, *Putin's Approval Rating* (2018).

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR A COMMUNICATION TO BE TRUSTED?

Francesca Granelli

Abstract

Despite following best practice, most governments fail in their strategic communications. There is a missing 'X' factor: trust. This offers a quick win to strategic communicators, provided they understand what the phenomenon involves. Moreover, it allows practitioners to avoid the risk of citizens feeling betrayed when their government fails to deliver.

Keywords: *trust, communications, impersonal trust, distrust, reliance, co-operation, strategic communications*

About the author

Dr Francesca Granelli is a Teaching Fellow at King's College London, where her research focuses on trust. Her forthcoming book is *Trust, Politics and Revolution: A European History*.

Introduction

Governments, politicians, and commentators are worried. The ‘crisis of trust’ is now a common refrain, which draws upon a mountain of apparent evidence.¹ Edelman’s *Trust Barometer*, for instance, points to declining levels of trust in governments, NGOs, businesses, and the media across most countries each year. Moreover, the situation in the United States is portrayed as extremely dire:

No country saw steeper declines than the United States, with a 37-point aggregate drop in trust across all institutions. The loss of trust was most severe among the informed public—a 23-point fall on the Trust Index—nearly erasing the ‘mass-class’ divide that once stood between this segment of the US population and the country’s far-less-trusting mass population.²

Yet, despite the apparent lack of trust we place in them, our governments continue to govern—and routinely ask for our trust.

Theresa May, for instance, has asked the British people to trust her to deliver Brexit,³ although half the country no longer trusts what the other half says on the issue. Donald Trump relies on a simple phrase—‘believe me’—and has successfully encouraged his supporters to distrust the mainstream media. South Korea’s envoy has stated that Kim Jong Un’s trust in Trump remains unchanged, yet North Korea’s state media has accused the US of talking with ‘a smile on its face’ while plotting invasion.⁴ Disinformation, misinformation, mal-information and non-information can be found widely and are perceived even more widely, and a growing number of people see this as an existential threat to liberal

1 The author is sceptical of research that purports to measure trust; the point here is that, whether or not the methodology is valid, many commentators find such reports compelling.

2 Edelman, *Trust Barometer Global Report* (London, 2018).

3 Rob Merrick, ‘Theresa May urges the public to “trust me” to deliver Brexit amid increasingly bitter cabinet rows’, *The Independent*, 12 May 2018.

4 Griffiths, James and Yoonjung Seo, ‘North Korea’s Kim has “unwavering trust” in Trump, South Korea says’, *CNN (International Edition)*, 6 September 2018.

democracy across Europe and beyond.⁵

Moreover, it is proving increasingly difficult to communicate in today's challenging media environment: the unrelenting volume, noise, and speed are too much to cope with. A few years ago, the problem was thought to be self-publication by bloggers and citizen journalists, which bypassed editorial review and traditional curation. Yet that issue was swiftly displaced by concern over so-called fake news; whereas self-publication was both villain and hero, fake news has no redeeming features.

Not only do commentators identify a decline of trust, they refer to it as a problem that needs to be tackled with solutions that range from fact checking to artificial intelligence. Yet the real challenge is that fake news is more trusted today than before and no one suggests we should encourage this—quite the opposite. This is a simple point, but one that policymakers and commentators obscure when they merely demand more trust: the fact is we're not lacking in trust but proffering it indiscriminately.

We need better trust, not more trust.

Airbnb, TaskRabbit, RelayRides, Getaround, Fon, and Lending Club all show that there is plenty of trust in today's world.⁶ Rather than diminishing, it has shifted from a small number of traditional, vertical relationships to a variety of novel, horizontal relationships that run through society. This has led to a diffusion of trust. Trust in informal, personal relationships (or ostensibly personal relationships, such as peer-to-peer relationships enabled via the Internet) has increased at the expense of hierarchical, top-down relationships with authorities and

5 **Disinformation** is 'the manipulation of information that purposefully aims to mislead or deceive', while **mis-information** is 'inaccurate information that is the result of an honest mistake or of negligence'. Jente Althuis and Leonie Haiden (eds), *Fake News: A Roadmap* (Riga: NATO StratCom Centre of Excellence | King's Centre for Strategic Communications, 2018); **mal-information** is defined as 'information that is used to inflict harm on a person, organisation, community, or country' in Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan's 2017 [Council of Europe report](#); and **non-information** is usually understood to be the absence or lack of information. This has the potential to be 'more difficult to deal with because we don't know what we don't know', writes John Williams, 'When People Don't Know What They Don't Know: Brexit and the British Communication Breakdown', *Defence Strategic Communications* Vol. 4 (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Spring 2018), p. 208.

6 Part of the so-called reputation or sharing economy. Rachel Botsman, *Who can you Trust? How Technology Brought Us Together—and Why It Could Drive Us Apart* (London: Portfolio Penguin, 2017).

institutions. Both can be used for good or ill, and it is the responsibility of citizens to identify which is which.

But how should strategic communications practitioners think of trust? The relationship—and direction of causality—between trust and communication remains unexplored in the academic literature;⁷ what is clear is that it is a complex, iterative, and symbiotic process.⁸ In any event, that we trust communications is an unstated axiom of most communication theory. This is as true for more recent frameworks as it is for the classic models from Shannon & Weaver⁹ or Osgood & Schramm.¹⁰ We rely on trust. So, do we ‘trust’ the source, the sender, the medium, and the receiver equally? Meanwhile, the encoding and decoding of messages is governed by semiotic rules that take into account the relationships between all parties, as well as the wider social environment.

Yet Regina Jucks *et al.* remind us that ‘words are more than merely a “device” to transport a message. They indicate deeply grounded attitudes, our emotional state, and relationship to the given communication partner’.¹¹ Words are more than their content. The very words we choose to express an idea, the sound they make, and the mood they evoke, offer to the listener an understanding richer than mere content. That said, we have no choice but to interpret them in order to draw conclusions about the communicator—whether to assess their ability, their benevolence, or their values. This is true not only of words, but also of images or actions, including the decision not to act in a situation. Trust is pivotal, since it means that we do not have to make that assessment *in toto*.

7 It is worth noting that the British government has been researching this extensively in recent years, especially post-2016, however, results are not yet readily available.

8 J. C. Anderson and J. A. Narus, ‘A model of distributor firm and manufacturing firm working relationships’, (1990), Vol. 54, № 1, pp. 42–58; R. Zeffane et al., ‘Commitment, Communication & Trust—Exploring the the Triad’, International Journal of Business and Management (2011) Vol. 6, № 6, pp.

9 Described as the ‘mother of all models’, the communication model described by Shannon and Weaver is one of the simplest communications models. Claude Elwood Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

10 W. Schramm, ‘How Communication Works’ in W. Schramm (ed.) *The Process and Effects of Mass Communication* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1954) pp. 3–26.

11 Regina Jucks, Gesa A. Linnemann, Franziska M. Thon, and Maria Zimmermann, ‘Trust the Words: Insights into the Role of Language in Trust Building in a Digital World’, in Bernd Blobaum (ed.), *Trust and Communications in a Digitized World* (Springer, 2016).

Moreover, credible, coherent, and consistent communication nurtures trust. Effective dialogue reinforces trust by enabling the sender and the receiver to understand each other better, to share their values, and to offer a vision for the future. Such dialogue is further reinforced when communications are relevant, rather than simply treated as a ‘download’. Effective dialogue not only reflects an understanding of the audience and what matters to them, but also can convey that listening and feedback are valued by ensuring that responses are timely. Communicating parties invest in each other as they develop their relationship over time. The opposite is also true: trust is eroded when communication is unfocused, inaccurate, dishonest, or incomplete.

Strategic communications, in particular, enjoys a symbiotic relationship with trust.¹² At its core, strategic communications is the coordination of words, images, and actions, to inform, influence, and persuade a target audience in pursuit of a clear, strategic goal.¹³ Consider some recent examples.

Images and reports about the Grenfell Towers fire¹⁴ in London on 14 June 2017 illustrate how quickly trust can be lost or reinforced through effective communications.¹⁵ As Britain’s worst residential fire since the Second World War, the incident was widely reported as it unfolded, and its aftermath was closely analysed. Prime Minister Theresa May initially waited for some time to visit the scene and, when she finally arrived, she seemed to focus her attention mainly on the emergency services. This was in stark contrast to Jeremy Corbyn, the Leader of the Opposition,

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12 Strategic communications uses words, images, actions, and omissions—and at times silence—to influence discourses in order to shift attitudes and change behaviour and thereby shape the future in the national interest. It is a contested concept, which is often misunderstood and poorly defined; at a superficial level, it is often conflated with political marketing, which seeks to influence electoral contests, or public relations, which seeks to ameliorate relations between an organisation and its stakeholders. At a deeper level, strategic communications is often misunderstood as linear and transactional rather than complex, dynamic, adaptable, and never-ending.

13 James P. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communications* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012) pp. xviii-xix.

14 The fire in the 24-story Grenfell tower block of flats in North Kensington, West London was first reported to the emergency services at 00.54am on 14 June 2017. Seventy-two people died, seventy were injured and 223 people escaped. The fire burned for about 60 hours until it was finally extinguished. More than 250 London Fire Brigade firefighters, 70 fire engines, 100 London Ambulance Service crews, and other special services were involved in the rescue effort.

15 Theresa May’s approval rating sank to levels matching those of Jeremy Corbyn before the 2017 election campaign.

who immediately sought to empathise with residents and locals. Their different approaches were vividly captured in starkly contrasting images: Theresa May was pictured through a long-lens camera being briefed by senior figures of the emergency services. She was advised, and perhaps believed, that she should avoid being seen as making political capital out of the suffering of the survivors of the fire. Her intentions may have been good, but her actions were interpreted as cold. In contrast, Jeremy Corbyn hugged Councillor Mushtaq Lasharie as he arrived at St Clement's Church to meet surviving Grenfell residents as they were given aid and relief. Where the Prime Minister misread the public mood, the Opposition Leader understood and embraced it. Was Theresa May out of kilter with public opinion? Or were local residents, journalists, and the wider public predisposed to see her as lacking empathy?¹⁶ In demonstrating sympathy and solidarity with those affected, Jeremy Corbyn was seen as 'one of us', while Theresa May was seen as 'one of them'—unsympathetic and elitist.¹⁷ We tend to trust those who we perceive, rightly or wrongly, to share the same values, respond in the same manner, and understand our way of life.

This was not the only relationship of trust to come under strain during the incident. Trust in both local and national government was challenged as it emerged that warnings had been neglected, and it was argued that there had been systematic under-investment on the part of responsible authorities that tracked social divisions within the local community. Indeed, Theresa May acknowledged, almost a week later, that the criticism was accurate; government, both local and national, had failed to protect and help its people in a crisis that involved their very survival and that of their families: 'As prime minister I apologise for that failure. And as prime minister I've taken responsibility for doing what we can to put

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¹⁶ It subsequently emerged that Theresa May visited several families affected by the tragedy but felt that these ought to be private meetings rather than public interactions 'playing to the cameras'. Comparisons could be made with the Queen's initial public response to Princess Diana's death; recent private correspondence has emerged which paints a very different picture of the Queen to the one portrayed in the media at the time.

¹⁷ Nadir, a local resident, described Theresa May as a coward and 'one of them' during an [Interview with Andrea Leadsom](#) on Sky News on Friday 16th June 2017.

things right.¹⁸ This failure to meet expectations weakened the credibility of and trust in local and national government, resulting in a sense of betrayal among those affected. Polls confirm this,¹⁹ but the results should be treated with caution given the lack of baseline polling data and the well-documented limitations of trust polls specifically.²⁰ Insufficient resources, together with the slow pace and lack of transparency in their delivery, only added to the mistrust. At the same time, the residents' loss of their identity documents facilitated criminal fraud that further poisoned the atmosphere. The absence of dialogue, exacerbated by the reluctance of anyone in a position of authority to express regret, let alone take responsibility, caused the community to feel marginalised.

Similarly, media reporting—whether traditional or digital—came under increasing scrutiny as (i) unsubstantiated casualty reports circulated online, only to be debunked later; while (ii) the mainstream media reported the statements of onlookers claiming to have witnessed the miraculous survival of a baby thrown to rescuers—a significant, but also fictitious event that was later discredited by BBC Newsnight's David Grossmann and Dan Newling on 9 October 2017. These reports undermined confidence, influenced perceptions, and shaped the public response, creating a greater sense of uncertainty just when customarily trusted relationships were found wanting. These challenges to trust were not felt uniformly, but were embedded in specific contexts—they built on one another, reinforcing a sense of a 'them-and-us' dislocation that will not easily be undone.

The poisoning of former Russian military intelligence officer Sergei Skripal and his daughter Julia in Salisbury, England in March 2018 would

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18 Caroline Davies, 'Grenfell Tower: May apologises for "failures of state, local and national"', *Guardian*, 21 June 2017.

19 A ComRes survey, found that, as a result of the Grenfell Tower fire, almost half (46%) of the 2,000 people surveyed were less confident in local authorities to oversee the safety of high-rise residential buildings. [Grenfell Tower tragedy dents confidence in councils, poll suggests](#), *PBC Today*, 27 November 2018.

20 Survey questions are often vague, abstract, and hard to interpret; they also frequently conflate trust and trustworthiness. Even respected organisations such as Gallup and the Pew Research Center often have to infer attitudes, rather than directly measure them. See M. Naef & J. Schupp, 'Measuring Trust: Experiments and Surveys in Contrast and Combination' (IZA Discussion Paper, 2009) and S. Lundasen, 'Methodological problems with surveying trust', JSM Proceedings at AAPOR (Alexandria, VA: American Statistical Association, 2010).

become a war of words described variously by the media as tragedy, farce, or confusion. This case highlights the difficulties of whom to trust in today's new media ecology. The UK government had to overcome a barrage of disinformation and misinformation to get its message out. In the hours immediately following the incident, the number of alternative narratives multiplied. Within a couple of days, over thirty different versions of the events were circulating, rising to around forty-seven in the following weeks. The British government followed procedure, gathered evidence before commenting, ensured it did not compromise intelligence, and sought international support. By contrast, Russia and her alleged proxies—including the likes of 21st Century News, LiveLeak.com, The Truth Seeker, RightWeb, and an estimated 2,800 troll accounts²¹—chose ambiguity, obfuscation, and moral outrage. In what is now widely understood to be Russia's strategy of subversive confusion—the dissemination of many explanations, from the absurd to the mildly tenable—the multitude of stories combined to cloud the public's judgement about evidence-based accounts. The British state was also sensitive to the memory of the government's earlier handling of intelligence surrounding claims that Saddam Hussein's Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. Government announcements included the phrase 'highly likely'—more suited to diplomatic communiqués than to press releases—when referring to the origins of the military grade poison, Novichok, used to poison the Skripals.²² Nonetheless, Theresa May was able quickly to unite Britain's allies in NATO and the European Union, who not only issued statements expressing support for May's position, but coordinated their actions in expelling over 120 Russians diplomats. This was a significant diplomatic victory for May and the British government.

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21 As noted by Deborah Haynes in her article 'Skripal Attack: 2,800 Russian bots sowed confusion after poison attacks', *The Times*, 24 March 2018.

22 Widely used in diplomacy, the phrase 'highly likely' has become more commonplace in government communication since accusations that Iraq surreptitiously retained weapons of mass destruction, supported by several Western governments, particularly in the 'September Dossier' published by the British government in 2002, were shown to be false.

Trust in the institutions of either government, British or Russian, such as the police, forensic teams, the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory,²³ and official media sources, were repeatedly called into question. Starkly different approaches were taken by the various actors: the British government sought to use logic, procedure, process, and past experience, whereas the Russians appeared to be leveraging denial, diversion, and distraction. Trust between states was lacking, and both sought to win over target audiences by nourishing their pre-existing perceptions of the world. The difference in the nature of the two governments' messages reflects cultural differences in their relationships of trust and in their approaches to strategic communications. The intricacies of this topic go far beyond the scope of this article: both nations played on their Cold War and post-Cold War histories to provide context, setting out conflicting narratives with the aim of simultaneously reinforcing trust in their version of events and undermining trust in the other. This was clearly a battle of trust. While some in the media argued, rightly or wrongly, that Russia 'won' the information war in this case,²⁴ Theresa May's ability to quickly unite the countries of the EU, the USA, and Canada in condemnation of Russia is a testament to the trusting relationships she and the British government have built.

Even these two short case studies demonstrate that, although we usually refer to 'trust' in the singular, it tends to be a complex bundle of relationships; different types of trust overlap, bisect, dissect, reinforce, and compete with each other. They create multiple interconnecting relationships and continuously adapting networks that underpin society.²⁵ Consider money—as it evolved, so too has the nature of our trust in it. Our monetary system now represents such a complex amalgam of factors—including trust in the Bank of England, the banking sector, the financial system, and fiat currency—that it is beyond the understanding

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23 The Defence Science and Technology Laboratory is an executive agency of the UK's Ministry of Defence that aims to maximise the impact of science and technology for the defence and security of the UK.

24 Tom Parfitt, 'Russia is Winning the Information War on Home Turf', *The Times*, 6 April 2018.

25 This emphasises the shortcomings of much of the polling data on trust, which reduce complex relationships into simple short questions 'do you trust X' or 'do you trust X more than you trust Y'. They do not explore what sits underneath.

of most people.²⁶ Best described as ‘a collective act of imagination’,²⁷ money is ‘a thing which we have invested our credence in and it works because we do’.²⁸

Personal networks of trust have multiplied exponentially in this digital information age.²⁹ The fluidity of these relationships has enabled them to challenge the stasis of traditional forms of trust between state and citizen. At the same time, reliance has displaced trust in this structure as governments address the increasingly risk averse electorate. The replacement of hierarchical, static, impersonal networks with flatter, dynamic, personal relationships has underpinned an increasingly turbulent politics³⁰ —and there is every indication that trust will become ever more dispersed. This is set to continue. The good news is that strategic communications practitioners have an opportunity to adapt to this new environment, if there is investment in research that goes beyond our familiar use of polling to map the landscape of trust.

Although practitioners may recognise the vital role trust plays, it nonetheless remains a difficult concept to assimilate across cultural lines and to deploy in practice. Academics do not help, often presenting the concept as multifaceted, complex, and abstract. Consequently, trust remains difficult to identify, let alone quantify. This suggests the need for careful use of the term, especially as strategic communications is a rapidly emerging discipline, not merely an empirical practice.

One way to approach the study of trust is to distinguish it from several interlopers. This clears the ground for a more focused exploration later in this article.

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26 A trading relationship between two parties using hard, commodity money requires only trust relationships that are simple and direct. By contrast, an impersonal relationship between two parties using fiat currency in an open environment requires far more: trust relationships that underpin one’s faith in money itself.

27 Drawing from diverse sources, including Shakespeare and Goethe, Marx (1844) was the first to highlight that money was more than a token and method of exchange, it had a life of its own and had become a symbol of wealth.

28 John Murphy, [‘What is Money, Why Do We Trust It, and Has It Become Too Confusing?’](#), *BBC Radio 4 current affairs programme*, 26 March 2012.

29 This new information ecosystem is reshaping the power of communications. It is now possible for multiple competing voices to capitalise on the free flow of information and challenge the *status quo*. Digital empowerment has overturned traditional ‘trusted’ lines of communication.

30 Helen Z. Margetts, Peter John, Scott Hale, and Taha Yasseri, *Political Turbulence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

Trust and trustworthiness

One notion that is often conflated with trust is trustworthiness, perhaps because we have a natural disposition not only to trust, but also to judge the trustworthiness of others.³¹ However, there is a clear difference: trustworthiness is demonstrated (by the sender) while trust must be given (by the recipient). Trustworthiness is a positive character trait or virtue that reflects a willingness to take responsibility, to perform a duty, or to discharge an obligation.³² By contrast, trust is dependent on our psychological profile, our attitudes, and personal experience—and, although we all trust to some degree, the act of trusting is specific and episodic (for instance, we might trust a communicator on one topic but not on another). An individual's trustworthiness is seen as constant, whereas trust is more ambiguous; we can trust blindly, foolishly, and immorally, but by being trustworthy we are honest and dependable.³³

Trust and distrust

Distrust has limited attraction for researchers but has nonetheless already produced an extensive array of multiple definitions and meanings. An individual can both trust and distrust simultaneously; the two phenomena interact to reduce the complexities of daily life, shaping and colouring our perceptions, aiding us in making decisions, enabling us to assess risks and uncertainty against a backdrop of incomplete information and

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31 For example, they are conflated, amongst others, by Luhmann, in *Trust and Power*, and Bernard Williams in 'Formal Structures and Social Reality', in D. Gambetta (ed.), *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1988), pp. 3–8.

32 Aristotle defines a virtue as a character trait, not a passion or faculty (Nicomachean Ethics 2.5). Machiavelli, however, writes that leaders should trust wisely and cautiously, as 'one can make this generalisation about men: they are ungrateful, fickle, liars, and deceivers, they shun danger and are greedy for profit, while you treat them well, they are yours [...] but when you are in danger they turn away', and yet, to ensure their leadership continues unchallenged, they should be perceived as being trustworthy by the wider populace. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, p. 17. While Richard Christie and Florence. L. Geis, *Studies in Machiavellianism (Social Psychology Monographs)* (Academic Press Inc, 1970) first drew attention to Machiavellianism as a recognised personality trait in leadership, creating an instrument to measure, it is a more useful measure of reciprocity than trusting behaviour. Anna Gunnthorsdóttir *et al.*, 'Using the Machiavellianism instrument to predict trustworthiness in a bargaining game', *Journal of Economic Psychology*, Vol. 23, No 1 (2002): 49–66.

33 See Diego Gambetta's work *The Sicilian Mafia: The Business of Private Protection* (Harvard University Press, 1996) investigating the effects of trust within southern Italian villages and the Mafia.

knowledge.³⁴ While we often seek to align messages and actions in order to minimise cognitive dissonance, it is worth remembering that cognitive dissonance can itself be used to change attitudes and sway behaviours. Where trust is optimistic, distrust is pessimistic—and, consequently, the two are sometimes portrayed as polar opposites. Julian Rotter, however, argues that they work together, simultaneously being weighed and considered as part of the trust process: distrust must be overcome in order to trust. Distrust is not a lack of trust or a precursor to trust.³⁵ Equally, Karen Jones has written that trust and distrust are contraries, not contradictories.³⁶ Roy Lewicki and his associates are exemplary in challenging the dominant discourse in both the media and the political science literature that positions the trust of citizens as good and distrust as bad; for, in fact, the phenomena (i) are empirically separate, (ii) co-exist, and (iii) have different antecedents and consequences.³⁷ They are certainly not different points on the same continuum. All the while, they position their definitions as ‘movements towards certainty’.³⁸

Whereas theorists attempt to distinguish between trust and distrust, individuals must balance the two. The manner in which this is achieved reflects an individual’s psychology as well as the situation she faces. As Piotr Sztompka remarks, ‘the culture of trust developed within a democracy is due precisely to the institutionalisation of distrust within

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34 Festinger’s cognitive dissonance theory maintains that inconsistency between internal beliefs and external information gives rise to psychological discomfort. It comprises two hypotheses. First, individuals attempt to achieve consonance, or inner harmony, in order to reduce the discomfort. They have three methods to achieve this: (i) minimise the importance of the dissonant thought; (ii) outweigh the dissonant thought with consonant thoughts; or (iii) incorporate the dissonant thought into one’s current belief system. Second, individuals try to avoid future dissonance by avoiding challenging situations and disregarding information that does not affirm their current beliefs. This is why conservatives tune to Fox and liberals to MSNBC—and why the Internet ‘filter bubbles’ are so significant. Psychologists refer to this second phenomenon as ‘selective exposure’ or ‘confirmation bias’; see Joachim I. Krueger, *Social Judgment and Decision Making* (New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2012). Cognitive dissonance has the potential to alter people’s behaviour, but we cannot predict which of the three methods a person may choose to reduce psychological discomfort. Accordingly, attempts to sway opinion can sometimes backfire and reinforce an undesirable attitude.

35 Julian B. Rotter, ‘Interpersonal Trust, Trustworthiness, & Gullibility’, *American Psychologist*, Vol. 35, No 1 (1980): 1–7.

36 Karen Jones, ‘Trust as an Affective Attitude’, *Ethics*, Vol. 107, No 1(1996): 4–25, p. 7.

37 As Geraint Parry notes in ‘Trust, distrust and consensus’, *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 6, No 2 (1976): 129–43; Hardin, *Trust and Trustworthiness*.

38 Roy Lewicki, Daniel J. McAllister and Robert J. Bies, ‘Trust and Distrust: New Relationships and Realities’, *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 23, No 3 (1998): 438–58.

its construction'.³⁹ Democracy is built on an equilibrium of trust and distrust—and nowhere is this more clearly exemplified than in the US system of checks and balances.⁴⁰ If there is too much trust or too little distrust, the system becomes open to misuse. Consider the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy in the early 20th century.⁴¹ Too little trust and too much distrust have the opposite effect—institutions become inert and/or social cohesion fractures, as in Palestine and Iraq.⁴² The importance of balancing trust and distrust also sits behind the maxim to 'trust but verify' used by President Ronald Reagan, with respect to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 1987. Ten years later, President Clinton exhorted the public to 'trust in God but keep your powder dry', emboldened by the prospect of bipartisan co-operation to reach a balanced budget agreement.⁴³

Trust versus reliance

The difference between trust and reliance is well documented. Trust is more than mere reliance. In both cases individuals accept a degree of vulnerability,⁴⁴ what distinguishes the two is the depth of that vulnerability and its actual or potential long-term effect. One relies on the postman to deliver our mail but we trust him not to read it.⁴⁵ If a letter is undelivered one is disappointed, even angry, but if it is

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39 Democracy is 'a paradoxical mechanism'. Piotr Sztompka, *Trust, Distrust and the Paradox of Democracy* (WZB, 1997), p. 16.

40 Marek Kohn, *Trust: Self-Interest and the Common Good*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 7 and 123.

41 See Roger Griffin, *Fascism (Oxford Readers)* (Oxford Paperbacks, 1995) and Bruce, F. Pauley, *Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini: Totalitarianism in the Twentieth Century (European History)*, (Harlan Davidson Inc, 1997) for insight into fascism and its policies of indoctrination.

42 'the Palestinian Authority are undermining democracy. [...] It also failed to prevent the murder of civilians in Gaza and instead [...] create a youth-led shadow government' as noted in Alaa Tartir's Foreign Policy article 'Palestinians Have Been Abandoned by Their Leaders', 24 May 2018. The current lack of trust in the system of governance and its leaders has produced a government that can no longer govern. Similarly, Sunni militants were able to seize control of Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, in 2014 due largely to sectarian distrust, and lingers today following the expulsion of Daesh. See Heather M. Robinson, Ben Connable, David E. Thaler, Ali G. Scotten, *Sectarianism in the Middle East Implications for the United States*, RAND Corporation 2018.

43 Clinton's use of the quote (generally attributed to Oliver Cromwell) captures the ironic balance of trust and verification explained by Freedman: '...the need to police the implementation of a disarmament agreement arises from the fact that states do not trust each other to implement spontaneously, yet even establishing such a system requires a considerable degree of trust'. Lawrence Freedman, *Nuclear Disarmament: The Need for a New Theory*. (Lowy Institute for International Policy, 2009), p. 4.

44 On reliance see Baier, *Moral Prejudices*, p. 98. On vulnerability see Lahno, *On the Emotional*, p. 171.

45 A recognisable postal system was in place already in the twelfth century, but the Royal Mail was only set up in 1516. In 1635 Charles I opened it to the public. Use of the postal service became commonplace, yet it only became an offence to intentionally open or delay the post with the Postal Services Act of 2000. Duncan Campbell-Smith, *Masters of the Post: The Authorised History of the Royal Mail* (Penguin, 2012).

read one feels betrayed. When our reliance has been transgressed we feel disappointed, but when our trust has been transgressed we feel betrayed.⁴⁶ The feeling of having been betrayed is a powerful human emotion and can be experienced only within the bounds of human interaction.⁴⁷ Betrayal is a deliberate and sometimes calculated action, the emotional response to which far and away exceeds the feeling of disappointment; not only does the emotion run deeper, but an act of betrayal presents an existential challenge.⁴⁸

Disappointment is something that we all experience and is a ‘fact of life’, one that facilitates learning, development, and maturity. By contrast, betrayal can shake the ‘very foundations of our relationship to the world or parts thereof’ and thus presents ‘a much deeper and [more] serious challenge in our everyday lives’.⁴⁹ Betrayal has the potential to change our very perceptions of the world around us and our place within it. Therefore, while we can, to some degree, account for disappointment in our deliberations and actions, and adapt our subsequent behaviour accordingly, betrayal challenges our very interpretation and perception of the world, together with our expectations of it. To re-establish trust, we may have to reinterpret and recreate our world.

Trust versus co-operation

Is trust a precondition for co-operation or does co-operation build trust? As Robert Axelrod demonstrated in his seminal work *The Evolution of Cooperation*, co-operation requires neither rationality nor trust.⁵⁰ More recently Karen Cook, Russell Hardin, and Margaret Levi have similarly argued that mutually beneficial co-operation is possible without trust, while highlighting a variety of mechanisms to enable, aid, and expedite co-operation in the absence of trust, such as facilitating mutually

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46 Baier, *Moral Prejudices*, p. 99.

47 Betrayal is defined as exposing an individual to threat/danger, disclosing a deep confidence/secret, or breaking a promise/being disloyal.

48 Stephen Wright, ‘Trust and Trustworthiness’, *Philosophia*, Vol. 38, (2010) p. 617.

49 Lahno, ‘On the Emotional’, p. 177, and Lewis and Weigert, ‘Trust as a Social Reality’, p. 971, respectively.

50 Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

beneficial conditions, monitoring, sanctions, and legislation.⁵¹

For co-operation to work, the parties need simply to be able to identify each other and recognise that potential benefits outweigh any potential costs—something that might be easier between peers rather than between citizen and state. It is a commonality of interest that provides the motivation needed to cooperate. Parties co-operate to improve their position. That could mean maintaining a communal resource, constructing or sharing a jointly usable asset, collaborating in political activity, or simply being civil to one another. However, although both parties benefit from such arrangements, they may not do so equally, though the benefit in both cases must be sufficient to ensure co-operation. In doing so, co-operating parties operate within defined boundaries, which are in turn situated within a wider social system that can incentivise, coerce, or enforce co-operation. It is the very absence of trust that drives people to attempt to mitigate their risks.

Trust, belief, and ideology

Trust and belief are thought of, and used, interchangeably by many of us—the general public and strategic communications practitioners alike—but the concepts are actually quite different. The confusion arises when a rational, typically reductionist, approach is taken. A belief is an idea, a principle, an opinion, or even a faith that we accept as true. It provides us with a framework within which to approach and understand the world around us, shaping our perceptions and our reality. Beliefs are often neither irrefutable nor incontrovertible, but can be inflexible, persistent, and delusional.⁵² While trust and belief both affect our actions, trust varies with each situation; it is episodic. Undoubtedly dynamic, trust is ‘constructed out of a relationship [... and is] the product of communication in that relationship’.⁵³ Belief is more permanent (‘I

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51 Karen S. Cook *et al.*, *Cooperation without Trust?* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 2005).

52 The conviction that the earth was flat was promoted in the Victorian Age by authors J.W. Draper, A.D. White, and W. Irving against an ideological backdrop that struggled with evolution, despite evidence to the contrary. Jeffrey B. Russell, ‘The Myth of the Flat Earth’, in *American Scientific Affiliation Conference* (Westmont College, 1997), p. 1.

53 Solomon & Flores, *Building Trust*, p. 51

believe in God', 'seeing is believing')—a constant, irrespective of the situation, and so not reliant on personal interaction.

In the same vein, the concepts of trust and ideology are linked, yet distinct. Ideology is a logically coherent system of ideas or systematic body of thought.⁵⁴ Increasingly, research suggests that ideologies—in thought, behaviour, and language—function 'as pre-packaged units of interpretation that spread because of basic human motives to understand the world, avoid existential threat, and maintain valued interpersonal relationships'.⁵⁵ Trust is easier when individuals can identify commonalities, such as ideological beliefs, for this reflects a sense of social solidarity.⁵⁶

What is Trust?

Despite this ground clearing exercise, multiple types of trust remain—and rightly so; it would do violence to our understanding to smooth out its crooked timber. However, all kinds of trust involve an acceptance of vulnerability in the expectation of certain outcomes/behaviours in a specific situation (and time). To trust a communication is thus to accept what is said, and how and by whom it is communicated, regardless of the risk of doing so, and, where appropriate, to act upon it. Clearly, we need to operationalise this working definition for strategic communicators. To this end, it is helpful to consider three approaches to trust in the literature: rationalist, trust building, and social practice. What they share

54 While there are many different definitions of ideology, the consensus is that an ideology is a system of ideas. See Philip, E. Converse, 'The nature of belief systems in mass publics', *Critical Review*, Vol. 18, № 1–3, (2006) 1–74; Herbert McClosky, 'Consensus and Ideology in American Politics', *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 58, No. 2, (1964): 361–82; and W. A. Mullins, 'Sartori's concept of ideology: a dissent and an alternative in', in A.R. Wilcox (ed), *Public Opinion and Political Attitudes: A Reader* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974)77–87.

55 John T. Jost, Alison Ledgerwood, and Curtis T. Hardin, '[Shared Reality, System Justification, and the Relational Basis of Ideological Beliefs](#)', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2(1)(2008): 171–86, Abstract; 'It is mainly in discourse that ideologies are transmitted and meanings and values are learned and taught [...] which in turn also influences how we acquire, learn or change ideologies.' S.S. Nahrkhalaji, [Language, Ideology and Power: a Critical Approach to Political Discourse](#), 2007, p. 1.

56 Researchers have found that trust prospers in more homogenous settings where an identification-based trust can flourish—see R. M. Kramer and J. Wei, 'Social uncertainty and the problem of trust in social groups: The Social Self in Doubt', in T.R. Tyler et al. (eds), *The psychology of the social self* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999): 145–68; and R. Lewicki and B. Bunker, 'Developing and Maintaining Trust in Working Relationships', in R.M Kramer & T.R Tyler (eds), *Trust in Organizations: Frontiers of theory and research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996): 114–39—as shared memberships (when relevant) can reduce individual distinctions and simplify the trusting process. John C. Turner, *Rediscovering the social group: A self-categorization theory*. Vol. 94. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

is a belief that trust involves a combination of cognitive, affective, and behavioural components.⁵⁷

- Cognitive—risks and rewards are calculated; a rational assessment must be made as knowledge-driven trust presumes incomplete information and a degree of uncertainty (full knowledge does not require trust)
- Affective—an individual's past experiences and their own propensity to trust play a role
- Behavioural—an individual's past experiences of other people and/or institutions and that individual's own propensity to be reliable are used to predict trustworthiness

Although all three feature in any plausible account of trusted communication, the precise mix changes to reflect the message, the messenger, and the medium, as well as local cultural and social norms. However, in the course of our discussion, we shall see that existing accounts omit two key components: the emotional and the temporal.

- The Emotional—emotions are tied to our perception of the world around us. By incorporating emotion into the concept of trust, a world of possibilities opens up to us.
- The Temporal—the past experiences of the parties involved, together with present conditions and available information/knowledge, are used to envisage the future when deciding whether or not to trust.

Students of trust initially followed a rationalist account, but lacunae led some commentators towards a trust building approach. This introduced two fundamental elements—the emotional and the temporal—which, I

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⁵⁷ Bernd Lahno, 'Three Aspects of Interpersonal Trust', *Analyse & Kritik*, Vol. 26, № 2 (2004): 30–47; Niklas Luhmann, *Trust and power* (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 1979); D. Harrison McKnight and Norman L. Chervany, 'The Meanings of Trust', Working Paper series, WP 96-04 (University of Minnesota MIS Research Center, 1996).

argue, merit an even greater explanatory role. Moreover, once this has been granted, it is inevitable that we also admit the importance of social practice.

Rationalist

Rational choices and theories of exchange have dominated the slim but growing literature on trust, not least because several influential philosophical treatments have assumed that the actions of both trustee and trustor, sender and recipient, can be understood through the lens of instrumental rationality.⁵⁸

James Samuel Coleman provides the most austere version of this approach, reducing the concept to a rational deliberation.⁵⁹ He asserts that ‘the elements confronting the potential trustor are nothing more or less than the considerations a rational actor applies in deciding whether to place a bet’.⁶⁰ In trusting a communication, therefore, the individual is exposed to risk, and within the framework of the theory of rational choice, the action of trusting becomes a simple risk and reward scenario for sender and recipient.

Several authors offer a richer account. Annette Baier, for instance, claims that ‘when I trust another, I depend on her goodwill towards me’.⁶¹ She is by no means alone in taking this stance.⁶² Yet this interpretation still cannot deal with the many instances where goodwill (a favourable disposition or attitude towards another person) is neither necessary nor sufficient for a communication to be trusted. Onora O’Neill demonstrated this shortcoming with the doctor-patient scenario: while one may trust a doctor personally as a friend or colleague, one trusts his/her medical judgement and professionalism based on their years of training, their professional qualifications, and the rules and regulations

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58 It places a rational self-interest at the heart of its construction of trust.

59 James Coleman, *Foundations of Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990)

60 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

61 Annette C. Baier, *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics*. (Harvard University Press, 1995) p. 99.

62 Lawrence C. Becker, ‘Trust as Noncognitive Security about Motives’, *Ethics*, Vol. 107, № 1 (1996): 43–61.

under which they operate, together with the checks and balances that maintain the integrity of their profession,⁶³ while recognising they bear their patients no particular good or ill will.⁶⁴

Equally, Richard Holton highlighted that a reliance on goodwill does not necessitate trust; a con man may actually rely on the goodwill of his victims but never trusts them.⁶⁵ He regards trust as laden with normative expectations. ‘When you trust someone to do something, you rely on them to do it; and they regard that reliance in a certain way: you have a readiness to feel betrayal should it be disappointed, and gratitude should it be upheld’. As with Baier’s approach, however, this definition is unable to account for the wide variety of instances of trusted communication and the different roles of those involved.⁶⁶ For it implies an obligation that is often absent and reduces trust to a matter of reliance (which is sharply distinguished below).

Russell Hardin presents the most comprehensive rationalist account of trust.⁶⁷ His work is predicated on the exclusive application of rational choice theory: ‘A trusts B because A thinks it is in B’s interest to take his or her own interest in the relevant matter seriously’, which in turn means that B values an ongoing relationship with A.⁶⁸ Trust is therefore based on the calculated interests and preferences of others, but places them in context; that is, the parties involved have a specific role to play, which in turn dictates their preferences and behaviour in any given scenario. Yet Hardin’s theory thereby negates the very need to speak of a ‘trusted’ communication (or communicator) since, with sufficient information about the interests of others, one can make an informed rational decision. Trust is crowded out.

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63 Although in this scenario trusting a doctor on the personal and professional levels are two separate things, they may overlap and/or conflict

64 Onora O’Neill, *A Question of Trust: The BBC Reith Lectures 2002*. (Cambridge University Press, 2002) p. 14.

65 Richard Holton, ‘Deciding to Trust, Coming to Believe’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 72, № 1 (1994): 63–76.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

67 Russell Hardin, *Trust and Trustworthiness* (Russell Sage Foundation Publications, 1996).

68 Laszlo Zsolnai, ‘The Rationality of Trust’, *International Journal of Social Economics*, Vol. 32, № 3 (2005): 268–69.

As with other rationalist theories of trust, therefore, it remains the case that the ‘concomitant conception of agency portrays rational mono-dimensional actors whose behaviour is calculable if sufficient knowledge about incentives, objectives and preferences are [sic] known’.⁶⁹ All things being equal, senders and recipients are interchangeable.⁷⁰ In the search for a universal definition of trust, such a simplistic and reductionist approach does little to further our understanding of trust, and only highlights the paucity of a purely rationalist account that ignores the complexity of real life communication and dialogue.⁷¹

Similarly, the use of rationalist theory to explain the emergence of trusted communication by a leap of faith relegates the act of communication to effect rather than to cause: it is the result of pre-existing trust rather than a precondition to creating new trust.⁷² For, in reality, trust does not emerge because of a leap of faith but reflects an existing attitude; in short, trust in communications increases over time through repeated, positive interactions.

While the rational approach still dominates—not least because it can be modelled, measured, and ‘validated’—it conflates co-operation and reciprocity with trust.⁷³ Accordingly, there is a growing sentiment among some academics that ‘trust will remain elusive if we fail to grasp its emotional basis’. Consequently, they support a more multi-disciplinary

69 Torsten Michel, ‘Time to Get Emotional: Trust, Rationality and the Spectre of Manipulative Mentality’ (Bristol, 2011), p. 7.

70 Martin Hollis, *Trust within Reason*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 10–14.

71 Ken Booth and Nicholas Wheeler, *The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Jonathan Mercer, ‘Rationality and Psychology in International Politics’, *International Organization*, Vol. 59, No 1 (2005): 95.

72 Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard’s often referenced phrase ‘leap of faith’ is more accurately rendered as a ‘leap into faith’, and for him is a prerequisite for accepting Christianity. It is usually taken to mean believing or trusting in something without robust and supportable empirical evidence. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript: Philosophical Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) pp. 263–66.

73 Coleman, *Foundations*; Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*. (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Partha Dasgupta, ‘Trust as a Commodity’, in Diego Gambetta (ed.), *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1988): 49–72. Although these three authors have made use of Game Theory, the Prisoner’s Dilemma, and the Assurance Game for some time, this approach is criticised not only for assuming individuals are rational decision-makers seeking to maximise their utility/value but also because the approach conflated co-operation and reciprocity with trust. Beset with problems of context and over-simplification, they continue to be used as they provide trust research with empirical data. However, their wider value is limited by the difficulties surrounding the measurement of trust. See Andrew H. Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

approach to trust.⁷⁴ They are right to do so: it is this human factor that not only distinguishes trust, but holds the key to unlocking it.

Trust-building

Consider the nature and emergence of trust. Practitioners of strategic communications are familiar with models that focus on trust-building in conflict situations.⁷⁵ For instance, two countries overcome their hostilities by implementing mutually reassuring actions (exchanging prisoners, calling a ceasefire, demobilising forces) within an agreed system of transparent checks and balances (independent monitoring). Small and largely symbolic steps are discussed and agreed upon between parties; provided these are adhered to, confidence is built over time. Do you need trust if you have confidence?

Nicholas Wheeler notes that the strategic dialogue between Brazil and Argentina over their nuclear facilities was an instance of successful trust-building in the 1980s.⁷⁶ A cooperative agreement and public expressions of trust regarding each other's peaceful nuclear intentions laid the foundations. Meanwhile the personal commitment of both Presidents Raúl Alfonsín and José Sarnay led to transparent confidence- and security-building measures. This included military-to-military contact, scientific and technical exchanges, a joint nuclear policy committee, and reciprocal nuclear site visits.⁷⁷ Wheeler also discusses the relationship between India and Pakistan, regarding their dialogue to overcome mutual distrust in February 1999 as a 'leap of trust', stressing how politically risky it was for Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to travel on the inaugural

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74 Nicholas J. Wheeler, 'Trust building between enemies in the nuclear age', Paper delivered to the All-Wales Peace Conference, 22 September 2007, p. 6.

75 See Charles E. Osgood's conception of graduated reciprocation in tension reduction in *An Alternative To War Or Surrender* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1962) and Andrew, Kydd's, model of costly signalling in *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005) model of costly signalling.

76 Rodrigo Mallea, Matias Spektor, and Nicholas J. Wheeler, 'The Origins of Nuclear Cooperation: A Critical Oral History between Argentina and, A joint conference between FGV, ICCS and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars Rio de Janeiro, 21–23 March 2012.

77 Adam Daniel Rotfeld, 'Confidence- and Security-building Measures (CSBMs) in the Modern Context: The European Experience 1', *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 20, № 1 (2008): 3–12.

Delhi-Lahore bus to meet his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif.⁷⁸ Vajpayee signalled his intent and Sharif responded favourably, which made it possible for the two men to build a rapport that enabled them temporarily to bypass the traditional routes of state communication. Unfortunately, due to the Kargil Crisis, a border conflict in Kashmir in May–July 1999 that wrecked the bilateral talks, we can only speculate on the long-term impact of their efforts.⁷⁹

Yet increased transparency, incentives, and a formalised system of interactions do not constitute trust, since trust is neither present nor required in such circumstances. As Mercer pithily put it, ‘if trust depends on external evidence, transparency, iteration, or incentives, then trust adds nothing to the explanation’; indeed, such arrangements ‘eliminate the need for, and the opportunity for, trust’. Furthermore, Wheeler and Ken Booth point out that the leap of faith required to kick-start this process may be an expression of already-present trust.⁸⁰ Rationalist theories are therefore incomplete, at best: they do not, and cannot, explain how and why trust emerges. Consequently, the role of human agency becomes either a simple reflection of the risk profile of the participants, or a readily available explanation when trust-building exercises fail. The very need for checks and balances, norms, procedures, regulations, routines, and institutionalisation required in a more functional approach to trust building highlights a lack of trust. Trusted communication ‘cannot be derived from a decision-making process in which we simply judge the risks and opportunities involved’, even when a token human element is added.⁸¹

78 N. J. Wheeler, ‘“I Had Gone to Lahore With a Message of Goodwill but in Return We Got Kargil”: The Promise and Perils of ‘Leaps of Trust’ in India-Pakistan Relations’, *India Review*, Vol. 9, № 3 (2010): 319–44.

79 A dispute over Pakistani-occupied Indian army lookout posts in Kashmir, May–July 1999.

80 Michel, ‘Time to Get Emotional’, p. 11

81 Bernd Lahno, ‘On the Emotional Character of Trust’, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 4, № 2 (2001): 172–73.

We therefore need an account fit for humans as they exist, not as they are modelled. Psychological profiles have been used to add emotion to trust;⁸² this acknowledges that individuals are unique, different in both their appetite for risk and their propensity to trust. Yet, since both are relative to the individual and the situation in question, they are difficult to measure and offer little to further one's understanding of trusted communication.⁸³

Interlude: emotional and temporal elements

When asked to describe when, and why, we trust communication, we usually fall back on trite remarks, such as 'because the messenger/medium/message has never let me down in the past'. At best these are approximations; at worst, we are post-rationalising our behaviour. So how can one incorporate emotions into an approach to trust? Torsten Michel has suggested an approach based on *phronesis*,⁸⁴ or practical wisdom.⁸⁵ Equally, Alasdair MacIntyre points out that the unpredictability of human beings and human life requires a focus on practical experience. 'Trust then appears as a form of emotive coping that involves practical forms of wisdom on the part of the trusting agent rather than an abstractly reasoned and technically implementable decision'.⁸⁶ For practitioners, there is hence a clear distinction between the types of trusted communication being outlined and the quality of the trust involved; the first is functional in nature, the second is emotive and far more than the sum and outcome of rational decision-making.⁸⁷ As Bernd Lahno remarks, 'genuine trust is an emotion and emotions are, in general, not subject to direct rational control'.⁸⁸

82 An emotion is the genuine or feigned display of a feeling (a personal and autobiographical sensation), an internal state broadcast to the world, or a contrivance displayed in order to fulfil social expectations. Although infants display emotions, they do not have the biographical or language skills to experience feelings—their emotions are direct expressions of affect. Laura E. Berk, 'Emotional Development', in L. E. Berk (ed.) *Child Development* (Pearson, 2012), pp. 398–443.

83 Holton, 'Deciding to Trust', p. 63

84 *Phronesis* is understood by Aristotle to be a type of wisdom, referred to as practical wisdom (and the process of good decision-making) or prudence, combining rational thought with experience, practical knowledge, and decorum. It is concerned with the context and specifics of a situation. Flyvbjerg refers to it as 'practical knowledge and practical ethics'. Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter* (Cambridge University Press, 2001) pp. 56–57.

85 Practical wisdom is interpreted as the ability to make good decisions and deliver on them. For further discussion see Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 6–16.

86 Michel, 'Time to Get Emotional', p. 17.

87 Olli Lagerspetz, *Trust: The Tacit Demand* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), pp. 38–39.

88 Lahno, 'On the Emotional', p. 172.

The wider debate between pursuing a rational versus an emotional approach to trusted communication, rather than a combination of the two, will endure as long as we focus on the abstract nature of trust rather than the experience of practitioners.⁸⁹ Given that the decision to trust is more often taken in an instant and unconsciously, it seems unlikely that rational abstraction will provide us with deeper insight.

Nonetheless, there remains a reluctance to focus on emotion. Some argue that trust is a performative quality of action rather than a conscious decision. Since Plato propounded his doctrine of a tripartite soul, Western thought has portrayed emotions as dysfunctional, irrational, and something we ought to control.⁹⁰ However, there is an emerging viewpoint suggesting that emotions are not only significant but a form of wisdom, albeit not the classical one.⁹¹ Indeed, some advocate a highly integrative view where emotions are a type of perception and play a crucial role in rational beliefs, desires, and decisions that circumvent the impasse of pure reason.⁹² In such scenarios the emotional component of trust comes to the fore and trust is 'necessarily tied to a particular perception of the world, or some part of the world', influencing the way we think and act and, therefore, 'cannot be understood as the immediate result of rational calculation'.⁹³

It is in pursuing the role that trust plays in interacting with, refreshing, and altering our perceptions of the world, that we may gain more nuanced insight into whether and how communication is trusted. Such an approach situates human agency inescapably in context; there is no abstraction, no outside theoretical view.⁹⁴ Individuals appear no longer as already formed

89 Lahno, 'On the Emotional', p. 176.

90 Jonathan Haidt, 'The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment', *Psychological Review*, Vol. 108, № 4 (2001): 814–34.

91 David M. Buss, 'Cognitive Biases and Emotional Wisdom in the Evolution of the Conflict between the Sexes', *American Psychologist Society*, Vol. 10, № 6 (2001): 219–23; Scherer, Klaus R., 'On the Rationality of Emotions: Or, When are Emotions Rational?', *Social Science Information*, Vol. 50, № 3–4 (2011): 330–50.

Scherer suggests 'that emotions can be assessed as to whether, in particular situations, they are adaptive (functional), based on well-grounded inference from available information [...] considered as reasonable by others'.

92 Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge University Press, 1982).

93 Lahno, 'On the Emotional', p. 177.

94 Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being in the World: Commentary on Heidegger's 'Being and Time'* (MIT Press, 1991).

‘rational monads’, but as agents who interact within a constantly evolving world, opening up infinite possibilities and avenues for action.⁹⁵

By acknowledging the limitations of a rationalist approach, and the associated shortcomings of trust-building, it becomes clear that a different approach is required. As society and environment are constantly changing, communications—especially strategic communications—must be understood as dynamically interactive. A useful way forward is to see trust as a social practice.

Social practice

Helpful material can be found in the work of some contemporary sociologists, who regard trust as a social practice.⁹⁶ They stress that it is the responsibility and commitment of both parties that facilitate trusted communication.⁹⁷ Trust in such an approach ‘is historical, but it is not so much tied to the past as it is pregnant with the future’.⁹⁸ If trusted communication is viewed as a process, its creation, development, and maintenance can be seen as a form of agency.⁹⁹

95 Brian Goodwin, *How the Leopard Changed its Spots: The Evolution of Complexity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 45–46.

96 Trust is seen as a dependent variable (Coleman, *Foundations*), an independent variable (Niklas Luhmann, ‘Familiarity, Confidence, Trust: Problems and Alternatives’, in Diego Gambetta, (ed.), *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations* (Oxford: University of Oxford, 1988), pp. 94–107), or a process (Dmitri M. Khodyakov, ‘Trust as a Process: A Three-Dimensional Approach’, *Sociology*, Vol. 41, № 1 (2007): 115–32).

97 See Khodyakov’s description of trust as a two-way process in *Trust as a Process*, p. 125.

98 R.C. Solomon & F. Flores, *Building Trust in Business, Politics, Relationships, and Life*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 15.

99 Within sociology, functionalism, symbolic interactionism and conflict theory, whether implicitly or explicitly, draw on the concepts of trust and distrust to understand the social processes that underpin social actions, social structure and functions. Functionalists’ macro-perspective—Talcott, Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action: 001*, 2nd Edition (Free Press, 1967); Robert, K. Merton, *On Social Structure and Science (Heritage of Sociology Series)*, (University of Chicago Press, 1996); and Samuel, P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale University Press, 1973)—emphasises the pre-eminence of an orderly social world over its constituent parts, often with biological analogies, while socialisation of the individual into society is achieved through the internalisation of norms and values. This requires trust. On the other hand, symbolic interactionists—Herbert Blumer, ‘Collective Behavior’, in A.M. Lee (ed.), *Principles of Sociology*, 3rd Edition (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1969), pp. 219–88; and George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (The University of Chicago Press, 1969)—with their focus on the micro, see ‘...humans as active, creative participants who construct their social world and are not passive conforming objects of socialisation’ and therefore focus on cohesive systems and a ‘more changeable continually re-adjusting social process’. C. Hunter & K. McClelland, ‘Theoretical Perspectives in Sociology’, in S. J. Ferguson (ed.), *Mapping the Social Landscape: Readings in Sociology*, 7th Edition (McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 2012), p. 36. Garfinkel’s 1967 trust experiments specifically question how individuals who interact can create the illusion of a shared social order. In marked contrast, conflict theorists—C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite (Galaxy Books)*, (Oxford University Press Inc., 1956); Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Progress Publishers, 1969); and Randall Collins, *Conflict Sociology: Toward an Explanatory Science* (Academic Press Inc, 1975)—emphasise domination, power and manipulation in maintaining social order, highlighting the interaction of the concepts of trust and distrust. Change is seen as rapid and disorganised.

It is part of our human nature to imagine, evaluate, and assess the various options available to us against a backdrop of past experiences, norms, and traditions, in combination with our hopes and aspirations for the future—all the while recognising the ever-present risks and uncertainty. Trust is necessary precisely because humans lack full knowledge. In this perspective, trusted communication is always future-oriented. Understood as a social practice, trust goes beyond the dominant rational-choice perspective by incorporating the emotional, often indefinable, human element in recognition of the risks and uncertainty we perpetually face in the ever-changing social-psychological environs in which we live. Moreover, drawing on the specific nexus of societal norms, habits, and traditions in question, the inclusive nature of trust makes it a social practice. Dmitry Khodyakov has defined trust as ‘a process of constant imaginative anticipation of the reliability of the other party’s actions based on (1) the reputation of the partner and the actor; (2) the evaluation of the current circumstances of action; (3) assumptions about the partner’s actions; and (4) the belief in the honesty and morality of the other side’.¹⁰⁰

Niklas Luhmann’s work offers insight into the social practice approach to trust; while his writings are not easy to grasp at first reading, they are rich and rewarding for practitioners of strategic communications. He argues that society actually ‘consists of meaningful communications’¹⁰¹ rather than of people and objects. Of particular relevance to the current inquiry, all these communications are underpinned by the ‘irreducible and multidimensional social reality’ that is trust.¹⁰²

Luhmann differentiates between personal, impersonal, institutional, and system trust. He rightly emphasises that what unites them all is emotion.¹⁰³ As Jocelyn Pixley notes: ‘personal trust is based on familiarity and rests

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100 Khodyakov, *Trust as a Process* p. 126.

101 ‘It cannot be conceived as a finite and bounded set of things and events (in the classical sense of a *universitas rerum* or *aggregatio corporum*)’. Niklas Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) p. 232.

102 David J. Lewis and Andrew J. Weigert, ‘Trust as a Social Reality’, *Social Forces*, Vol. 63, № 4 (1985): 967–85, p. 968.

103 Luhmann, *Trust and Power*, pp. 22 and 81.

on emotional bonds (the embeddedness thesis), whereas system trust, for example, entails taking a conscious risk by “renouncing” further information and taking a “wary indifference”—hardly non-emotional¹⁰⁴.

Luhmann identifies three limiting factors that specifically apply to communicative efficacy. First, meaning is ambiguous: ‘only in context can meaning be understood, and context is, initially, supplied by one’s own perceptual field and memory’.¹⁰⁵ Second, ‘it is improbable for a communication to reach more persons than are present in a concrete situation, and this improbability grows if one makes the additional demand that the communication be reproduced unchanged’.¹⁰⁶ Third, ‘even if a communication is understood by the person it reaches, this does not guarantee that it is accepted and followed’.¹⁰⁷

It helps to place Luhmann’s writing in the agency-structure debate, where trust takes centre stage as an essential ingredient for the smooth-functioning of society and thereby facilitates individual and societal wellbeing. Without trust, only very simple forms of human co-operation—effectively, those which can be fully transacted on the spot—are possible.¹⁰⁸ In contrast to a rational-choice interpretation of trust, his ‘theory of trust presupposes a theory of time’, because trust has ‘a problematic relationship with time. To show trust is to anticipate the future. It is to behave as though the future were certain’.¹⁰⁹ Trust is therefore the means whereby an uncertain future is given the semblance of certainty so that otherwise unachievable outcomes are attained.¹¹⁰

104 Jocelyn Pixley, ‘Impersonal Trust in Global Mediating Organizations’, *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 42, № 4 (Winter, 1999), pp. 647–71.

105 Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) p. 158.

106 *Ibid.*, p.158.

107 *Ibid.*

108 In this context, rationality does not refer to the decisions concerning action, but the meaningfulness of the action taken. Luhmann, *Trust and Power*, p. 88.

109 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

110 *Ibid.*, pp. 10 and 25.

Non-personal trust

All three approaches make clear that there are inevitably different kinds of trust. Strategic communicators are primarily concerned with institutional trust, which is situated in the nexus between individuals and the organisations that are intended to represent them; indeed, it is the means by which the latter are legitimised.¹¹¹ This differs from trust between individuals as it presupposes ‘no encounters at all with the individuals or groups who are in some way “responsible” for them’.¹¹² However, it is a vital coping mechanism that simplifies the complexities of everyday life. When trusting in institutional communication, we expect certain behaviours, actions, and outcomes, which in turn provide us with a degree of certainty in a complex and uncertain world. Institutional trust enables us to look forward more optimistically, plan for and invest in the future, and make long-term commitments. If there is a high degree of uncertainty, we focus on the short term. This affects, among other things, our actions, the economy, and government strategy.

Trust in organisational communication is therefore a reflection of its ‘perceived legitimacy, technical competence, and ability to perform assigned duties efficiently’.¹¹³ Therefore, it is more of a calculated decision rather than pure trust.¹¹⁴ This kind of trust can easily be shaken and lost when expectations of service, integrity, and perhaps even value for money, are not met.¹¹⁵ This is not to say that citizens always fail to distinguish between the shortcomings of an official and the institution represented by that official.¹¹⁶ Furthermore, the lack of such trust in a particular bureaucratic department does not necessarily

111 William Mishler, and Richard Rose, ‘What are the Origins of Political Trust? Testing Institutional and Cultural Theories in Post-Communist Societies’, *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 34, № 1 (February, 2001): pp. 30–62.

112 Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society*. Vol. 20. (Oxford, England: Polity Press, 1984), p. 83.

113 Khodyakov, *Trust as a Process*, p. 123.

114 Margaret Levi defines trust as only existing between individuals, yet individuals and institutions can be trustworthy. See Margaret, Levi, ‘A State of Trust’, in Valerie Braithwaite and Margaret Levi (eds), *Trust and Governance* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998), pp. 77–101.

115 Examples include the MP expenses scandals, the NSA spying debacle, the ‘sexing-up’ of the dossier on Iraq’s Weapons of Mass Destruction, and the Brexit parliamentary debacle.

116 Jack Citrin, ‘Comment: The Political Relevance of Trust in Government’, *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 68, № 3 (1974): 973–88, p. 974.

result in a boycott; for this to happen, there would need to be a widespread breakdown in a regime's power, authority, and perceived legitimacy.¹¹⁷

We are all born into some system of governance with which we interact from an early age¹¹⁸—even in so-called failed states or geographically isolated communities. On the one hand, we come to understand the institutional structures and systems within which we live; on the other, we reinforce them through use. We both learn the rules of the game and play the game. An upshot is that we cannot step outside our reality objectively to evaluate or to challenge what is in place, since our reaction is shaped and coloured by it.¹¹⁹ This observation is key to strategic communications.

There are two competing schools of thought to consider. Cultural theorists argue that non-personal trust is determined by cultural norms, habits, and socialisation; personal trust, by contrast, is projected or superimposed onto political and other institutions.¹²⁰ Institutional theorists take a rather different approach, linking trust to satisfactory performance, and describing it as a rational consequence of met expectations.¹²¹ While these explanations are very different, they are not mutually exclusive, but complement and reinforce each other; each shares 'the fundamental assumption that trust is learned and linked at some level to experience'.¹²²

117 During the banking crisis of 2007–08, trust in bankers plummeted yet societies remained reliant on the banking system. Losing trust in the underlying system would have created chaos, similar to the panic of 1930. Elmus Wicker details the effects of the 1930s crash in *The Banking Panics of the Great Depression*. (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 42–45, 138–141.

118 The distinction lies not in the form, but in the degree of governance. Lippman observed that '...there is no greater necessity for men [to] be governed, self-governed if possible, well-governed if they are fortunate, but in any event, governed'. Walter Lippmann, 'Today and Tomorrow', *New York Herald Tribune*, 10 December 1963, p. 24.

119 Communitarians such as Michael, J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge University Press, 1998) and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Harvard University Press, 1992).

120 See Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture Revisited*, Revised ed. (Sage Publications, 1989); Robert D Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon & Schuster, 2000); and Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies* (Princeton University Press, 1997).

121 See Coleman, *Foundations*; Dasgupta, 'Trust as a Commodity'; and M. J. Hetherington, *Why Trust Matters: Declining Political Trust and the Demise of American Liberalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

122 Mishler & Rose, 'What are the origins', pp. 8–9.

Citizens of Western nations rely on government in their everyday lives,¹²³ changing the relationship between state and citizen¹²⁴ and thereby shifting the boundary between the ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres. Nineteenth-century individuals had few expectations of their governments beyond basic provisions (defence, law and order, currency management, trade support). Participation in politics was restricted and referred to as a prize, not a birthright. The relationship between government and society was limited: government provided a framework, but society ran itself. However, a combination of national and international pressures, including but not limited to a changing political and social landscape, the pressure of war, internationalisation and globalisation, demographic growth, and scientific advancement, significantly increased expectations of and demands upon the state in the following century.¹²⁵ In seeking to account for and improve on rapidly changing societal conditions, the state has expanded its role and encroached upon the private sphere. Having taken on a larger role in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, governments have been increasingly criticised, not only for their shortcomings, but for creating ‘servile’ citizens and ‘nanny states’, leading to a something for nothing culture that has changed the perception of citizens’ rights.¹²⁶

However, there is a paradox. While governments require trust to function effectively, let alone to expand their activity, recent polling data suggest that impersonal or political trust is diminishing. So how does the

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123 ‘Institutions by definition are the more enduring features of social life.’ Giddens lists—institutional orders, modes of discourse, political institutions, economic institutions, and legal institutions. Giddens, *Constitution of Society*, pages 24 and 31, respectively.

124 J. Harris ‘Society and the state in twentieth-century Britain’, in F.M.L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750–1950 Volume 3: Social Agencies and Institutions* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 63–118; Keith Middlemas, *Politics in an Industrial Society: The Experience of the British System Since 1911*. (HarperCollins, 1979); and Almond and Verba, *The Civic Culture Revisited*.

125 In Britain the modern welfare system began with the Old Age Pension Act (1908), the National Insurance Act (1911), the Employment Act (1934), and the National Health Service (1948). Overall government spending increased from 9.4% of GDP around the year 1870 to 43% in 1996 (in France the increase was from 12.6% to 55% and in Germany from 10% to 49.1% 1870–1996 respectively). Vito Tanzi and Ludger Schuknecht, *Public Spending in the 20th Century: A Global Perspective*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 6.

126 Hilaire Belloc, *The Servile State*. (1912; Cosimo Classics, 2007), pp. 95–113. Iain MacLeod MP coined the term, referring to ‘...what I like to call the nanny state’ in his column in *The Spectator* (3 December 1965), to describe an interfering/overbearing state that sought to make decisions for its citizens that they might otherwise make for themselves.

system continue to work?¹²⁷ A move to increase transparency is seen as the way to rebuild trust, yet this approach may well increase the distance between the individual and the institution: concomitant form-filling reduces human interaction and, moreover, overloads citizens with data they cannot hope to digest. Accordingly, it reduces the need for trust while increasing expectations. A more fruitful alternative is to expand the dialogue between individuals and institutions: to view non-personal trust similarly to the way we view personal trust—not only from rational and trust building perspectives, but as a social practice that requires creation, development, and maintenance.¹²⁸

Conclusion

We have covered a lot of territory. What should be clear is that, although trust has become a ubiquitous term in twenty-first century discourse, it is rarely defined. Strategic communicators must develop a better understanding of what trust means if they are to create, maintain, and rebuild it. The British Government's Communication Plan 2018/19, a glossy twenty-eight-page document, refers to trust on four occasions: 'using active listening to build trust', 'maximis[ing] the role of government communications in challenging declining trust', 'working alongside trusted partners', and finally, 'ensuring communicators are visible, trusted advisors to their Ministers and senior executives'. Yet at no point is the term 'trust' defined. Given the lack of clarity, how can this trust be implemented, measured, or managed?

The short answer is that it can't. Trust is a deeply nuanced concept that underpins our daily interactions and communications. It influences how information is exchanged and absorbed, and in doing so, trust shapes our understanding of the world around us. Yet it remains under-researched.

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127 Citrin, 'Comment: The Political Relevance', Seymour, M. Lipset and William Schneider, 'The Confidence Gap during the Reagan Years 1981–1987', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 102, No. 1, (1987) pp. 1–23; S. C. Craig, *Broken Contract? Changing Relationships Between Americans And Their Government (Transforming American Politics)*, (Westview Press, 1996); and Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, have charted the extraordinary collapse of political trust, sometimes referred to as 'trust'.

128 Geoff Mulgan, *The Art of Public Strategy: Mobilizing Power and Knowledge for the Common Good*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 227.

By better understanding trust, practitioners of strategic communications would be better placed to succeed where they would otherwise fall short. This article has sought to take the first steps in defining trust and differentiating it from similar concepts.

But this is only the beginning of a much-needed conversation about the role of trust in strategic communications. The dominant view sets trust and distrust as binary opposites; this view, rather than build social cohesion, contributes to a widening of social fractures. It is counterproductive. This view also has a secondary effect: over time it changes the meaning and very nature of trust. Yet there is a more fundamental issue—in seeking to influence behaviour by changing attitudes, should governments even be harnessing trust? A breakdown of trust can lead to a sense of betrayal, which can shake the very foundations of one's world view. Should governments therefore adopt a lower risk approach, with a focus on building confidence in systems instead?

Sometimes. However, there are surely occasions on which governments need more than confidence; they require trust. For instance, many European governments had to deal with two world wars, the decline of Empire, closer ties with Europe and, now, a resurgent populism that has manifested itself in Brexit and growing protectionism. Yet in these cases, practitioners can only succeed if they understand what they are dealing with. They need a working knowledge of trust.

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AT THE PYEONGCHANG WINTER OLYMPICS: A GROUNDWORK STUDY

Nicholas Michelsen
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Abstract

This article draws on content and sentiment analysis of a sample of international English-language media reports to identify the core elements of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) strategic communications campaign conducted at the PyeongChang Winter Olympics, and to establish groundwork for an assessment of its effectiveness. Using the Olympics as a stage for strategic communications is as old as the games themselves. The article examines the structure and elements of a DPRK Strategic Communications campaign by locating it in historical and theoretical context, and shows how it bears the hallmarks of a carefully crafted and timed agenda-setting campaign. Subsequent to the games, the supreme leader of the DPRK, Kim Jong-un, met with President Moon Jae-in of South Korea, to discuss a full peace treaty and, in June 2018, met with President Trump of the United States. Irrespective of the ultimate outcome of these engagements, a month before the games such a meeting would have been inconceivable. We contend that the 2018 Winter Olympics held in the Republic of Korea (ROK) provides a case study for assessing how influencing discourses in the media space may impact the conditions of possibility for international political action.

Keywords *PyeongChang Winter Olympics, Kim Jong-un, Moon Jae-in, Donald Trump, North Korea, South Korea, China, strategic communications*

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Introduction

In February 2018, as the 23rd Winter Olympic Games approached, there had been a notable increase in tension on the Korean peninsula. In 2016, the UN Security Council had adopted Resolution 2270, leading to measures against Pyongyang taken by the Council of Europe. The preceding 12 months had seen the leadership of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) under Kim Jong-un, grandson of founder Kim Il-sung, launch 23 missiles during 16 tests, apparently refining its technology with each launch. In July 2017, North Korea conducted its first test of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), which it claimed could reach 'anywhere in the world'. A further launch, taking place during the early hours of 29 November 2017, flew higher and farther than any previous test launch. That missile, which landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone, came after a break in testing of almost two months.

Where the Obama administration's posture of 'strategic patience' represented hopes that North Korea might voluntarily de-nuclearise or spontaneously implode, the regime's rapidly growing nuclear confidence led to a change in posture by Donald Trump's White House. Then US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson announced the end of the policy of 'strategic patience' in March 2017, and declared that 'all options are on the table'. During the latter half of 2017, international concern mounted over what this meant for the complex security

balance in North East Asia. Communicating that the era of ‘strategic patience’ was over did not explicate what outcome, short of a preemptive war, would suit the Trump administration, and what posture South Korea would assume. This febrile security environment coincided with a change in administration in South Korea; the sitting president was impeached and Moon Jae-in, a former human rights lawyer and son of North Korean refugees, was elected in May 2017.

Relations between the DPRK and the ROK have been cyclical in nature. Periods of high tension and escalation marked by overtly hostile communications and missile or nuclear testing have alternated with periods of rapprochement. The North has previously been effective in leveraging these cycles to extract monetary aid and development assistance.¹ The DPRK’s first leader, Kim Il-sung, extracted almost \$US20 billion in economic and military aid from the USSR and China, and used the war with the South to prop up his hold on power in the face of early challenges.² Recent history reflects an established pattern of nuclear testing and missile launches as a prelude to negotiations and engagement, followed by further tests.³

Widespread cynicism regarding the DPRK’s unexpected offer to participate in the PyeongChang Games⁴ in January 2018 reflected a belief that the DPRK simply aimed to extract financial assistance from the newly emollient South, potentially through an easing of sanctions. Whilst heading off risk of a US-led intervention, it was also seeking to reinforce potentially fraying domestic regime stability. On the other hand, the PyeongChang Olympics appeared to some to present a real opportunity for reconciliation between the North and the South, as well as reducing the possibility of disastrous, full-blown conflict with the US. It is certainly possible that the DPRK now envisages a peacefully united peninsula.

Hopeful responses to the DPRK’s participation in the PyeongChang Games reflect a widespread assumption that major sporting events can function as tools

1 Andrei Lankov, ‘Changing North Korea: An information campaign can beat the regime’, *Foreign Affairs* 88:6 (2009): 95–105.

2 Selig S. Harrison, *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement* (Princeton University Press, 2002).

3 Victor Cha, James Lewis, Jenny Jun, Scott LaFoy and Ethan Sohn, ‘North Korea’s Cyber Operations, Strategy and Responses’, *Report for CSIS Korea Chair* (Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2015).

4 PyeongChang was spelled with a capital C in the Olympic marketing materials to differentiate it from Pyongyang for foreign audiences.

of reconciliation, and that sport 'brings people together'.⁵ The Olympics have been thought to exemplify the pacifying potential of sport. There is a long history of projects of national reconciliation using the Olympics as a platform for communications aimed at fostering unity, for example, between West and East Germany, or in Yemen after its previous civil conflicts.⁶ On the other hand, the Olympics are clearly not free of international tensions; there have been recurrent calls for boycotts, including Spain's boycott of the 1936 Berlin Games due to differences with Germany, and the African nations' boycott of the 1976 Montreal Games due to the failure of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to ban New Zealand for participating in a rugby tournament in South Africa still under Apartheid.

Whilst the historical record is mixed regarding the relationship between sporting events and peace-making, the Olympics constitute a unique venue for international strategic communications. International strategic communications are defined here as planned interventions into the information environment, with observable effects on that environment, which serve international political ends. The Olympic Games are a platform that is conducive to specific kinds of communication by states, and thereby constitute a unique avenue to measurable influence. There is evidence to support the hypothesis that the DPRK viewed the PyeongChang Olympics as a political opportunity to shape its representation by the international media. We argue below that DPRK strategic communications using the Olympics have been effective to some degree, inasmuch as they influenced the tone and content of international coverage within our sample of English-language media.

Any perception by the DPRK that it succeeded in creating behavioural change in other countries through its Olympic communications may shape its subsequent actions, but measuring the influence of strategic communications on other international actors' decision-making is challenging. In the aftermath of the Olympics, a US-North Korea summit was proposed and accepted, resulting in a face-to-face meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong-un in Singapore. Over the course of a single month, the mood and tone of engagements among the DPRK, the ROK, China, and the US turned to diplomacy and talks. The presence of multiple variables, including changing attitudes amongst a Chinese

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⁵ Liam Stockdale, 'More than just games: the global politics of the Olympic movement', in Spaaij, Ramón, and Cindy Burleson (eds) *The Olympic movement and the sport of peacemaking* (Routledge, 2016): p. 83.

⁶ Ibid.

leadership keen to quieten the security situation on its borders, sanctions, and the unpredictability of Trump himself, must foster caution regarding linear explanations for this change on the basis of our media sample. Though, it is noteworthy that claims that the DPRK may have been forced to the table by sanctions are tempered by the lack of material concessions offered by the DPRK in subsequent talks with the US. It seems clear that the DPRK responded to the environment in which it found itself in late 2017 by launching a strategic communications campaign at the Olympics. In this article, we identify the elements of that campaign and make a preliminary assessment of how it may have influenced subsequent events.

To conduct this research, we undertook a qualitative analysis of a sample of international and domestic (South Korean) English-language media reporting of DPRK activities at the games. Our analysis identifies how DPRK strategic communicative actions at the PyeongChang Olympics were received, and provides a preliminary assessment of their influence on the tone of reports in the international media. We examined 110 English-language articles, including reports from the leading international news wire services; all major US television channels; the major print media in New York, Washington DC, and around the US; magazines (from *Time* and *Esquire* to *Cosmopolitan* and *People*); global media including the BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera; the UK media from the *Sun* to the *Telegraph*; as well as coverage from Canada to the Antipodes. We sorted these articles for their focus, then subjected them to sentiment analysis to identify ways in which the DPRK may have contributed to setting the agenda and tone of international media discourse.

We were interested in the degree to which North Korean messaging at the Olympics appears to have influenced the content and tone of English-language media coverage as the English-language media were overwhelmingly negative in their representation of the DPRK prior to the Olympics.⁷ Focusing on English-language media facilitated coding across the sample, but it is also justified inasmuch as they are an influential source of secondary news content globally. Local ROK-based English-language media representations of the North—generally translations of articles from local media—are constrained by the National Security Law, which prohibits positive representations of the North. However, they provided a sample that could be effectively compared with international

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⁷ Hyun-jin Seo, 'International media coverage of North Korea: study of journalists and news reports on the six-party nuclear talks', *Asian Journal of Communication*, 19:1 (2009): 1–17.

content. This is a groundwork study, laying the foundation for robust preliminary hypotheses that we plan to test in further research, expanding the analysis to include other likely target audiences for DPRK Olympic communications. Such research will test preliminary findings by comparing English-language media sentiment with content and sentiment in Chinese- and Korean-language media before and after the PyeongChang Games.

In the first section, we outline the historical and geopolitical context for DPRK strategic communications. In the second section, we examine the background for strategic communications on the Olympic stage and what is distinctive about this forum. These sections provide the theoretical grounds for positing that it is advantageous to view DPRK participation in the Olympics in the context of strategic communications. In the third section, we analyse the dominant narratives in our sample of English-language media reports about the Games. We identify three areas of activity that appear to constitute the pillars of a DPRK strategic communications campaign conducted at the Games, evident in the three most widely-reported communicative actions undertaken by the North:

- 1) the joint-Korean team presence at the opening and closing ceremonies;
- 2) the Cheerleading squad that accompanied the DPRK team;
- 3) the stage-managed presentation of Kim Jong-un's sister Kim Yo-jong at the Games.

We conclude that North Korea appears to have waged a relatively effective agenda-setting campaign. Effectiveness is a measure of the degree to which planned DPRK communicative actions influenced English-language media coverage of the PyeongChang Olympics. Whilst our findings are provisional, they provide grounds for further comparative research to test this hypothesis against a larger multilingual media sample. Irrespective of the ultimate intentions of the DPRK, their apparent ability to influence the agenda of international news reporting using the Olympic Games as a political stage is suggestive of how strategic communicative action can create opportunity spaces in world politics. Whilst we do not posit linear causation regarding subsequent changes to US foreign policy behaviour, DPRK communications at the Olympics influenced discourses within the information environment, which form part of the context for behavioural change.

DPRK international strategic communications in context

The North's international strategic communications should be understood in light of its domestic propaganda. The regime adopted many of the elements of Stalin's USSR, combining a cult of personality centered around the Kims with the idea of a sacred mandate that legitimates their rule. As noted by McFate, North Korean internal propaganda involves a combination of 'top down culture, intentionally imposed by the regime to instil certain behaviours and norms, and bottom up culture, organically developed over the course of centuries of Korean history'.⁸ As such, stable, endogenous, inter-Korean values, including self-sufficiency, family loyalty, 'small group communalism', and conceptions of the sacred, are also critical to the regime. This is particularly clear in the concept of the Kims' 'Mandate of Heaven', which justifies hereditary rule,⁹ and in the national ideology of *Juche*. Invented by Kim Il-sung, and tightly bound up with the sacred coding of the regime, *Juche* legitimises cultural, economic, and political isolationism by stressing the error of imitating foreign countries or of becoming excessively international.¹⁰

Considerable effort has been expended to project an image of the supreme leader Kim Jong-un to both domestic elite and North Korean youth audiences as energetic and likeable, generously forgiving 'defectors' who return to the North after travelling abroad.¹¹ Kim's position is not yet certain within the state apparatus, as prominent defector Thae Yong-ho recently testified: 'while on the surface the Kim Jong-un regime seems to have consolidated its power through [a] reign of terror [...] there are great and unexpected changes taking place within North Korea'.¹² The stability of young Kim's rule relies on maintaining a narrative of technological advancement and modernity.¹³ Domestic propaganda, projected through tightly-controlled state media, centres on the concept of a 'modern socialist paradise'. The central content of this claim is 'that North Korea is the most technologically and spiritually advanced country on earth', with

8 Montgomery McFate, 'Manipulating the architecture of cultural control: A conceptual model for Strategic Influence Operations in North Korea', *Journal of Information Warfare*, Volume 4:1 (2005): 22.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., p. 34

11 Enrico D'Ambrogio, 'European Parliamentary Research Service, North Korea's propaganda strategy', *European Parliament Briefing* (October 2016).

12 Thae Yong-ho, 'Testimony of Minister Thae Yong-ho', *Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs* (Washington, DC, 1 November 2017).

13 D'Ambrogio, 'European Parliamentary Research Service'.

South Korea a poor relative.¹⁴ Whilst this was perhaps an accurate description of the comparative situations immediately after the War, the South has developed at a significantly greater rate than the North.¹⁵ This ideologically significant claim is thus vulnerable, which likely explains why so little of the PyeongChang Olympics was broadcast inside the DPRK.¹⁶ This also suggests that any DPRK strategic communications at the Olympics were targeted primarily at external audiences.

The North has a developed capability for international information activities, including the spread of anti-ROK and anti-US propaganda, a function that is apparently led by Kim Jong-un's sister who headed the North Korean delegation to the Winter Olympics.¹⁷ During the period leading up to the Games a campaign of disruptive cyber-attacks targeting institutions in the South and banks worldwide was widely attributed to the North.¹⁸ Whilst there is debate about the strategic communications function of these attacks, for example the degree to which they were intended to function as a deterrent, their economic focus is also thought to provide evidence that economic sanctions were biting.¹⁹ The DPRK's open pursuit of nuclear and missile weapons programmes throughout 2017, alongside demonstrations of informational and cyber capabilities, have been described by H. Pak Jung as signaling to the DPRK's key international target audiences—the ROK, China, and the United States—the regime's commitment to ensuring the country's 'independence and sovereignty under the leadership of the Kim family and to maintain[ing] strategic relevance and [the] ability to drive events on the Korean Peninsula'.²⁰

Whilst DPRK domestic propaganda dismisses the South as a corrupt and venal dictatorship, their cross-border strategic communications are better fitted to those target audiences. In the immediate run-up to the Olympics, its messages were clearly intended to be positive and welcoming. North Korean propaganda material is often found scattered around public places in Seoul. In early 2018, a series of new DPRK propaganda fliers and leaflets that appeared there, pre-

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14 Lankov, 'Changing North Korea', p. 98.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., pp. 95–105.

17 D'Ambrogio, 'European Parliamentary Research Service'.

18 Paul Mozur and Sang-hun Choe, 'North Korea's Rising Ambition Seen in Bid to Breach Global Banks', *New York Times*, 25 March 2017.

19 Min-kyung Jung, 'Cash-strapped North Korea turning more to cryptocurrency', *The Korea Herald*, 19 December 2017.

20 H. Pak Jung, 'Regime Insecurity or Regime Resilience? North Korea's Grand Strategy in the Context of Nuclear and Missile Development', *Brookings Institute* (February 2018)

sumed to have been dropped from balloons, showed the 2018 PyeongChang Olympics logo and its two cartoon mascots standing beneath the Olympic rings. One side showed the Winter Olympics mascots welcoming guests from Pyongyang who were arriving for the Games. The reverse side showed them striding side-by-side, saying ‘Let’s go to Kaesong! Let’s go to Mount Kumgang!’—a reference to the now closed inter-Korean industrial zone and failed inter-Korean tourist project that sit just inside North Korea. The South Korean government closed Kaesong in 2016 in protest over North Korea’s nuclear and missile programmes. The inter-Korean Mount Kumgang resort lies in the coastal province of Kangwon, which is divided by the border between the two Koreas. It was closed after a South Korean tourist was shot by a North Korean guard in 2008. These propaganda leaflets thus suggested to audiences in the South that the Olympics could provide an opening for a return to friendly inter-Korean co-operation. North Korea simultaneously announced a new ‘world-level’ tourist project in Kangwon province that appeared to be aimed at capitalising on the international attention surrounding the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, which lies in the South Korean half of the province.²¹

This suggested that the North was launching a new strategic communications campaign as the PyeongChang Games approached, the tone of which was in striking contrast to the belligerent messaging that had marked the prior six months and had contributed to intensifying sanctions. The threatening rhetoric between the US and the DPRK, which had accelerated throughout 2017, had been accompanied by a tightening of international sanctions under pressure from the US. By the end of 2017, the DPRK had completed a series of missile tests, which, it claimed, established North Korea’s nuclear deterrent capability, rendering the possibility of conflict on the peninsula more dangerous for everyone. The DPRK claim of having completed its efforts towards developing an operational nuclear missile deterrent capacity suggested that the North now saw an interest in de-escalating tensions with the United States. This would be in keeping with the cyclical de-escalatory bargaining patterns observed in DPRK behaviour over time.²² Since any evidence of productive engagement with the international community would undercut arguments for further pressure to be exerted, either militarily or through sanctions, it is reasonable to infer that the DPRK’s participation in the Olympics constitutes part of a wider effort to soft-

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²¹ James Pearson, ‘[North Korea sends winter Olympics fliers to Seoul: website](#)’, *Reuters*, 5 February 2018.
²² Lankov, ‘Changing North Korea’.

en its international representations, particularly those within English-language media widely consumed by key US audiences and policy-makers. The international English-language news wires dominate media discourse around the world, shaping the information environment in which the international community deliberates.

Through participating more actively in sanctions in 2017, China had signaled that there were limits to its patience with regards to DPRK actions, which undoubtedly featured in DPRK calculations. The North's *Juche* or 'national self-reliance' ideology, put in place by Kim Il-sung and maintained by Kim Jong-un, has, in practice, meant an increasing dependence on its powerful neighbour. Mao and successive Chinese leaders viewed North Korea as 'close as lips and teeth', and an important buffer against the threat of a united peninsula under US influence. China is the only continental state that shares a border with North Korea. The Chinese leadership and population thus constitute a key target audience for North Korea's strategic communications.²³ China is the DPRK's predominant trading partner, both explicit and covert, and its principle source of fossil fuels. Whilst the English-language media are the target for strategic communications aimed at the US and the international community, influencing representations within the Chinese-language media is likely to be another key regime objective.

The timing of the DPRK's projection of more emollient messaging also made considerable sense in light of the ROK's desire for the Olympics to be a 'good news' story for the peninsula. The friendly disposition of the new Moon government in the South assured a positive reception of DPRK overtures across the border in January 2018. South Korea's role as Olympic host must be understood in the context of the state's own strategic communications objectives. The ROK has embraced global trade as its mantra since the Korean War, and has adopted a free-market system with distinctive characteristics that led to GDP growth from less than \$US 100 per capita in 1961 to more than \$US 25,458 in 2016. South Korea has been hailed as a regional 'cultural powerhouse', successfully exporting cultural products as far afield as New Zealand and the United States, as well as closer to home—to China, Indonesia, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

South Korea seems to 'think in terms of relational power, rather than simply

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²³ Yu-Hua Chen, 'China and North Korea: Still "Lips and Teeth"', *The Diplomat*, 21 July 2018.

thinking in terms of the distribution of content around the world'.²⁴ The term *hallyu* or 'Korean Wave' was first coined by the Chinese press in the late 1990s to describe the growing popularity of Korean pop culture in the country.²⁵ What started as a South Korean marketing campaign for selling products to East Asia, then went global with the sale of K-dramas and K-pop, has now grown to the worldwide marketing of a broad range of South Korean products such as fashion, food, and makeup. The Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) and the Korea Foundation for International Culture Exchange (KO-FICE) announced on 10 April 2016 that the *hallyu* content exports from South Korea totaled 3.2 trillion *won* (US\$2.8 billion) in 2015, to show year-on-year growth of 13.4%. The estimated effect of the export of cultural content on other products was 15.6 trillion *won*.²⁶ This global marketing of K-culture has been further enhanced as part of a policy of boosting national image by investing in broadband infrastructure, technology, and entertainment industries. This has not only resulted in economic growth but has also boosted bilateral relations and the expansion of the country's 'soft power'.²⁷ The Olympics were clearly intended to sit within and resonate with these soft power efforts. The tagline of the 2018 Winter Games was 'Passion Connected', symbolic not only of Korea's place in the global economy but also of its investment in its Internet and telecommunications infrastructure. South Korea, the world's 12th largest economy and 6th largest exporter, is now the most connected country on earth.²⁸

Moon Jae-in's election as President of South Korea in May 2017 provided a vindication of constitutional process in ROK. The current popularity of the Democrat Party comes from its promise of a clean and transparent government restoring faith in political institutions by addressing the influence wielded by the influential '*chaebol*' (business conglomerates) such as Samsung, and by pursuing a softer policy towards the North. Moon's instincts and his party's traditions favour an accommodation with Kim Jong-un. The left wing of Moon's party con-

24 Terry Flew, 'Entertainment media, cultural power, and post-globalization: The case of China's international media expansion and the discourse of soft power', *Global Media and China*, 1:4 (2016): 278–94, p. 278.

25 B.H. Chua and K. Iwabuchi, *East Asian Pop Culture: Analysing the Korean Wave* (Hong Kong University Press: 2008), J. Parc and H.C. Moon, 'Korean dramas and films: key factors for their international competitiveness', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 41:2 (2013): 126–149; Jonathan R Woodier and Sung-woo Park, 'Republic of Korea: K-culture and The Next Wave of Economic Growth', *International Journal of Cultural and Creative Industries*, 5:1 (2017): 70–81.

26 Jung Min-hee, 'South Korea's Hallyu Content Exports Reached US\$2.82 Billion Last Year', *Business Korea*, 11 April 2016.

27 Joseph S. Nye, *Soft power: The means to success in world politics* (Public Affairs, 2004).

28 According to the United Nations International Telecommunication Union's seventh annual *Measuring the Information Society Report*, which ranks countries based on their infocomm development.

siders the South's dependence on the United States oppressively colonial. Moon has stated that he is keen to revive the Sunshine Policy of greater friendship with North Korea begun in 2000 by the first Democrat President Kim Dae-jung and continued by Moon's mentor President Roh Moo-hyun. At his inauguration, Moon announced his intention 'to solve the crisis in national security', saying that he would 'go anywhere for the peace of the Korean peninsula'. Moon has clearly stated that he wants his legacy to be that of the man 'who built a peaceful relationship between the North and South'.²⁹ So it is unsurprising that Moon immediately accepted Kim Jong-un's offer to send a delegation to the Winter Olympics in January 2018, and quickly agreed to the two Korean teams marching together at the opening and closing ceremonies. Moon described this as a first step towards a new phase of bilateral engagement.³⁰

Moon's attraction to representing the Olympics as promising a new chapter for Korea aligns with the broader ROK nation-branding objectives around the Games. Alongside the South's evident desire for the PyeongChang Olympics to carry positive messages about the peninsula to an international audience, Moon's openness to relaunching positive engagement with the North adds to the likelihood that the DPRK viewed PyeongChang as a viable platform for projecting its own strategic communications.

Strategic Communications on the Olympian Stage

Choosing the Olympics as a venue for DPRK strategic communications suggests an adroit reading of the manner in which the Olympic stage amplifies positive messaging around reconciliation. These messages are carried by a range of global media platforms accessed by key international target audiences, but are largely inaccessible to the population of the North. Since the first modern-day Olympics in 1896, politics have been a part of the international sporting competition. To make sense of any DPRK strategic communications in Pyeongchang, it is necessary to outline what is distinctive about this as a context for national strategic communications, and with it, for the projection of national power.³¹ As Victor Cha notes, Olympic sport has long been intertwined with national projects fostering national prestige or rebirth, and has also often been mobilised

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29 Paula Hancock and James Griffiths, 'South Korea's sunshine man: can Moon Jae-in fix the North Korea crisis?', *CNN.com*, 20 January 2018.

30 Steve George and Tae-hoon Lee, 'South Korean leader welcomes North Korean Olympic participation', *CNN.com*, 2 January 2018.

31 Victor Cha, 'Role of Sport in International Relations: National Rebirth and Renewal', *Asian Economic Policy Review* 11:1 (2016): 139–55.

for the reconstruction and projection of new aspirational roles and identities through strategic narratives.³² The Olympics constitute a uniquely pre-structured forum for strategic communications in any national interest, which facilitates certain types and forms of messaging and inhibits others.

Olympic ‘mega events’ are widely seen as ideal platforms for the diffusion of international norms.³³ The concept of an ‘Olympic truce’ dating back to the ancient world, concretised in Pierre de Coubertin’s philosophy of Olympism, views the Olympic games as intrinsically a celebration of cross-cultural dialogue and understanding for the purpose of global peace-building.³⁴ In 1993, the Olympic truce was endorsed by the United Nations and, as UN Secretary General Kofi Annan put it on the eve of the 2008 games, the Olympic Truce ‘can demonstrate to the world that peace is possible even in the most seemingly intractable situations if we work towards it’.³⁵ This normative universalism constitutes a key interpretative frame by which communicative actions on the Olympic stage are read globally.

Darren Van Tassel and Dean Terry note that sporting cooperation has been tightly bound up with the project of peace and unification in the specific Korean context.³⁶ The two Koreas marched together in the 2000, 2004, and 2006 Winter Olympics, and in the Asian Games of 2006. Both North and South Korea are expressly committed to the project of unification. Sport has thus ‘provided a venue for joint cooperation and a demonstration of the ability of the North and South Koreans to work together’.³⁷ The expressed value of sporting cooperation for the development of a common national consciousness may have led to overly hopeful paeans, but the forum of Olympic sport clearly provides a space for safe interaction, the development of interpersonal ties, and related negotiations that may foster more peaceable relations in the future.³⁸

Negotiations were undertaken ‘before the Beijing Games in Guangzhou in September 2005, where an agreement was reached in principle to field a united

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32 Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication power and the new world order*, Vol. 3 (Routledge, 2014).

33 Graeme Hayes and John Karamichas, (eds) *Olympic Games, Mega-events and Civil Societies. Globalisation, Environment, Resistance* (Palgrave, 2012), p. 12.

34 Ramon Spaaij, ‘Olympic rings of peace? The Olympic movement, peace-making and intercultural understanding’ in Spaaij, Ramón, and Burleson, Cindy (eds) *The Olympic movement and the sport of peacemaking* (Routledge, 2016), p. 1.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

36 Van Tassel and Terry, ‘An overlooked path’, p. 56.

37 Ramon Spaaij, ‘Olympic rings of peace?’, p. 57.

38 *Ibid.*

team', with a single unification flag and uniforms and a single national anthem. This effort was disrupted by nuclear tests and then by wrangling over how to divide the participants, and 'in the end, the two countries only agreed to field a unified delegation of supporters for the Beijing games'.³⁹ Cooperation at the 2018 Winter Olympics built expressly on this history. The pre-existing framework of Olympic dialogue and the history of fragile cooperation between the Koreans in this arena suggest that the international surprise that met North Korean overtures was unwarranted. The DPRK's headline-capturing expression of intent to participate in the February 2018 Winter Olympics, submitted in January 2018, was likely planned well in advance of this date—this casts the hostile communications of the preceding six months in a more strategic light.

Whilst the rhetoric of Olympism is often 'inflated',⁴⁰ it is not meaningless or unimportant to participant nations' strategic communications in and around these events. The 'meaning of all strategic communications' in international relations, by states or other actors, presupposes the existence of practices that carry with them ethical precepts and conditions. These ethical terms are central to 'the justifications, rationales, narratives and explanations' that make up all strategic communicative actions: 'For those terms to make sense to interlocutors, whether states or publics', the interlocutors must pay attention to these settled norms and ethical conditions, even, or indeed especially, when an actor has poor international standing, as the DPRK does, and wishes to be improve that standing.⁴¹ It is part of the coding of national Olympic communications that participants play by implicit communicative 'rules of the game', involving an expression of a commitment to dialogue and negotiation, and categorical opposition to conflict. The fundamental principles of Olympism, based on the values articulated by the founder of the International Olympic Committee and father of the modern Olympics, Pierre De Coubertin, is the 'harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity'.⁴²

This implicit content frames any national strategic communications at the Olympics. To violate the spirit of the Olympic truce, which is to be perceived

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39 Cha, 'Role of Sport'.

Hayes and Karamichas, *Olympic Games, Mega-events and Civil Societies*, p. 143.

40 Stockdale, 'More than just games', p. 82.

41 Nicholas Michelsen and Mervyn Frost, 'Strategic Communications in International Relations: Practical Traps and Ethical Puzzles', *NATO Defence Strategic Communications 2* (2017): 9–33.

42 [The Olympic Charter](#) (15 September 2017), p. 11.

as explicitly politicising the games, will invariably result in loss in standing and influence, and is, thus, likely to backfire from an international audience perspective. Negative messaging often has limited purchase on the Olympic stage. The discourse of Olympism limits cases for exclusion, and calls for boycotts are often unsuccessful.⁴³ A widespread boycott of the 1980 Moscow Games, led by the US and followed by 62 other countries, ostensibly in protest against the Afghanistan War, was simply followed by a tit-for-tat boycott of the subsequent Los Angeles Games in 1984.⁴⁴ The IOC is only very occasionally forced into action, as in Mexico 1968, and with the sanctions that were put in place in 2017, the penalty for Russia's apparently long-running nationwide doping operation.

The Olympics have been viewed as an efficient forum for de-securitisation through positive international messaging.⁴⁵ Authors have argued that the pursuit of soft power generally characterises state communications at the Olympics.⁴⁶ Soft power refers to the ways in which states seek to get their way by attracting others to them, rather than by coercing them.⁴⁷ As Jonathan Grix notes, 'the Olympics—is clearly considered by states to provide a major contribution in the process of improving their nation's image, profiling and showcasing themselves globally and "attracting" others through inbound tourism, increased trade and a growing sense of national pride through the often experienced, but under-researched "feel-good" factor that accompanies major sports events'.⁴⁸ Cha argues that the potential for reconstruction of national identity is central to the value of the Olympic Games, as with other sporting mega-events, for host nations in particular. He argues that whilst 'sport can be a generator of soft power' internationally, it is often at least as important as a forum for nation-building, through the assertion of coherent identities oriented by national pride: In this sense 'sport acts as a prism through which national identity gets refracted domestically and internationally'.⁴⁹

43 Charles Little, 'The Sports Boycott against Rhodesia reconsidered', in Paul Gilchrist and Russell Holden (eds), *The Politics of Sport: Community, Mobility, Identity* (Routledge, 2012).

44 Ibid.

45 Jonathan Grix, 'Sport politics and the Olympics', *Political Studies Review* 11.1 (2013): 15–25.

46 Ibid.

47 Joseph Nye and Youna Kim, 'Soft power and the Korean Wave' in Youna Kim (ed.) *The Korean wave: Korean media go global* (Routledge, 2013), p. 31.

48 Grix, 'Sport politics and the Olympics'. Surveys on the 2012 London Olympics show that positive public is correlated with hosting such events. See *BBC News*, 'Post-Olympic spirits high but may fizzle—Survey', 14 August 2012. However, there are questions about how lasting such effects are. Cases such as Montreal 1976 suggest that there is also no guarantee that even a temporary feel-good factor will materialise. See Jack Todd, 'The 40-year hangover: how the 1976 Olympics nearly broke Montreal', *Guardian*, 6 July 2016.

49 Cha, 'Role of Sport in International Relations', p. 141.

When South Korea hosted the Seoul Games of 1988, it was led by the authoritarian administration of Chun Doo-hwan. The regime made very effective use of the games to ‘call world attention to South Korea’s economic miracle while simultaneously obfuscating and downplaying the repressive political practices that enabled such economic success’.⁵⁰ The Seoul Games were an important element in South Korea’s ‘modernization project’, and marked the beginning of South Korea’s export of cultural products, known as the ‘Korean wave’, or *hallyu*.⁵¹ The success of Seoul ‘88 led to the ROK hosting other major global events, including the Asian Games in 2002 and 2014, the FIFA World Cup in 2002, and the World Expo in Daejeon in 1993. International Public Relations giant Burson Marsteller formulated the country’s PR campaign for both the 1988 Olympics and the 2002 FIFA World Cup. Then regional head of Burson, Bill Rylance, explained: ‘it’s a mix of cohesive national pride blended with a deeply rooted need to show the world that Korea is a sophisticated and successful country’.⁵²

Whilst the concept of soft power captures the manner in which the frame of Olympism inhibits negative messaging and reinforces positive messaging, this does not fully grasp the ways in which global influence may be garnered through communications on the Olympic stage. There is clearly tension between the globalist normative rhetoric enshrined in the Olympic charter and the diverse national interests of hosts and participants. The ‘pursuit of soft power’ may not be entirely adequate in making sense of, for example, Nazi Germany’s triumphant posturing at the 1936 Berlin Games, or efforts by the super powers to reflect their ‘natural’ superiority by topping the medal tables during the Cold War. The Olympics is a stage for political communications operating in service of hard power-political dynamics. There is always a risk to national communicators in overtly politicising the Olympics that such communications may backfire, or be hijacked by other actors as they were in Munich 1972 or Mexico 1968, but it nonetheless provides a powerful arena for the construction and maintenance of national brands amidst competitive international dynamics.⁵³

Differentiation of target audiences is of particular salience here.⁵⁴ Whilst politi-

50 Stockdale, ‘More than just games’, p. 85.

51 Ji-Hyun Cho, and Alan Bairner, ‘The sociocultural legacy of the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games’, *Leisure Studies*, 31:3 (2012): 271–89.

52 Andrew Salmon, ‘A sporting host: how South Korea has continued to build on the legacy of the Seoul Olympics’, *SCMP.com*, 5 July 2015.

53 Roy Panagiotopoulou, ‘Nation branding and the Olympic games: New media images for Greece and China’, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 29.16 (2012): 2337–48.

54 Akihiko Tanaka, ‘Comment on “role of sport in international relations: national rebirth and renewal”’, *Asian Economic Policy Review*, 11.1 (2016): 156–57.

cal communications at the Olympics are framed by the discourse of Olympism, that frame clearly does not preclude communication in service of perceived national interests.⁵⁵ Strategic Communications, as a key term of reference here, seeks to capture the ways in which communications may be designed to achieve various strategic ends, and so must be tailored to discrete audiences, whether the intention is to (re)construct national identity, build international soft power, or intervene in the international discursive climate so as to nudge the decision making of another state or other states.⁵⁶ In the Korean context, Olympic cooperation in the past has ‘stood in’ for the pursuit of political resolutions to the crisis on the peninsula, which has allowed the North to prepare more effectively for the next cycle of tension.⁵⁷ Periods during which the highest degree of sporting cooperation took place between the two Koreas were also the periods during which development aid moved most smoothly from the South to the North, a process commonly seen as having allowed the North to reach its present nuclear and missile capability.

Olympic coverage reaches global audiences, and is reported widely in international media. Early estimates predicted that some three billion people would watch some coverage of the 2018 Winter Games and the event was broadcast on television in more than 80 countries. The IOC’s director of television and marketing, Timo Lumme, notes that preliminary data showed overall output from the Games in South Korea was bigger than at any previous winter Olympics, with an average of 130 hours of programming per rights-holding broadcaster.⁵⁸ As noted above, the Olympic stage is predisposed to reinforce positive messaging around reconciliation and international cooperation. The scale and global extent of the Olympic audience provides potential opportunities for communications to bypass media narratives that have become entrenched over time, as long as the new projected message coheres with the discourse of Olympism.

As Manuel Castells argues, seeking to shift the tone of media coverage, thus nudging discourses within the information environment surrounding an actor, event, process, or issue, is a well-documented method by which to influence the behaviour of target audiences.⁵⁹ A study of the media coverage of the six-party

55 Brennan K. Berg et al., ‘A realist perspective of sport and international relations: US governmental perceptions of Olympic boycott movements, 1936–2008’, *The ‘Olympic and Paralympic Effect’ on Public Policy* (2016): 7.

56 Miskimmon et al., *Strategic Narratives*.

57 Van Tassel and Terry, ‘An overlooked path’, p. 56.

58 Karolos Grohmann, ‘“Global broadcasters” output up by 14 percent from Sochi: IOC’, *Reuters*, 20 February 2018.

59 Manuel Castells, *Communication Power* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

talks held between 2003 and 2007 on the Korean question revealed the vulnerability of international journalists to deliberate influence from the US and South Korean government officials, both of which took a negative view on North Korea and emphasised the importance of the North's 'rogue state' dimension.⁶⁰ This became the dominant narrative in global media. The DPRK rarely enjoys a sympathetic hearing from international media, particularly the English-language media, which dominate global news coverage. This supposed 'media bias' is a subject of complaint from the North.⁶¹

News coverage of scandals, such as President Park's impeachment and removal, show that media in the South are able to cover politics effectively and to criticise the country's institutions. The debate about relations with North Korea remains, however, tightly censored. Any discussion on the DPRK in South Korea is hampered by a national security law under which any article or broadcast favorable to the North is punishable by imprisonment.⁶² This is one of the main grounds for online censorship.⁶³ These legal constraints make it less likely that the domestic South Korean media, and by extension the population, would be a principal target audience for DPRK communications at the Olympics.

The Olympic forum is a rational choice for hosting a communications campaign aimed at softening international perceptions of an autocratic regime by seeking to influence international media coverage.⁶⁴ Of particular interest to a country like the DPRK is the fact that narratives and images communicated at the Games are less subject to the filter of English language international news media, which rarely portray the DPRK in a positive light. Olympic broadcast rights holder NBC says the overall audience in the US for prime-time Olympics across platforms reached 26 million, slightly down from the viewing figures for previous Winter Olympics, but standing up well in the face of generally falling television audience numbers.⁶⁵ As noted above, the United States' geopolitical significance for the Korean peninsula, and its active role in the international criticism of

60 Seo, 'International media coverage of North Korea'.

61 *Macau Daily Times*, '[North Korea Expels Three BBC Journalists Over Complaints of Coverage](#)', 10 May 2016.

62 The issue is outlined by Reporters Without Borders in '[South Korea: Distinct improvement after a bad decade](#)'.

63 This censorship has been shown to be of limited value to inhibiting the distribution of rumours online. See K. Hazel Kwon and H. Raghav Roa, 'Cyber-rumour sharing under a homeland security threat in the context of government Internet surveillance: The case of South-North Korea conflict', *Government Information Quarterly*, 34: 2 (2015): 307–16.

64 Similar observations might be made with respect to Russia hosting the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

65 Josef Adalian, '[Why NBC Shouldn't Worry About the Winter Olympics TV Ratings](#)', *Vulture.com*, 13 February 2018.

the DPRK that characterised the preceding six months, would suggest that US audiences are probably the key targets for a communications campaign making use of the Olympic forum to soften media representations of the DPRK. As a consequence, our initial analysis looks at a sample of English-language media.

The PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games likely also appealed to the North as a promising venue for international strategic communications aimed at Chinese audiences. The PyeongChang Games are the first of three consecutive Olympics in Asia, with Tokyo hosting the 2020 Summer Games and Beijing staging the 2022 Winter Olympics. While China sent only about 100 athletes to Pyeongchang, less than half the number of Team USA, with the country set to host the next Winter Games in 2022 it is likely that the DPRK judged that the games presented a unique opportunity for direct communication with the Chinese domestic public and Communist Party target audiences. In China, Internet giants Tencent and Alisports (the online sports arm of Alibaba) stream the Olympics alongside the main rights holder, CCTV, China's state broadcaster.⁶⁶ Tencent by itself has about 500 million monthly subscribers to its video channel, which shows the scale of the potentially accessible audience.⁶⁷ Whilst this groundwork study does not assess Chinese-language media, a fuller multi-lingual comparative analysis will form the next stage in our research.

DPRK Strategic Communications at the Games

In early January 2017, Lee Hee-beom, head of the organising committee for Pyeongchang 2018, announced to great fanfare that North Korean athletes would compete in four sports and that the two groups of athletes would march together under the Korea Unification Flag at the opening ceremony in February. North Korea would send athletes in pair figure skating, alpine skiing, cross-country skiing, and women's ice hockey. It would be the first time that the two countries would compete as one nation at the Olympics.⁶⁸

Our media sample was limited in size and restricted to English-language media. As such, it provides only preliminary grounds for hypotheses that need to be more fully substantiated in larger-scale analysis. However, the content analysis identified three clear areas of activity that featured in almost all the Olympic coverage touching on the DPRK: i) the stage-managed presentation of Kim

66 Emma Lee, 'China is watching the Olympics with Internet companies instead of state TV', *Technode.com*, 9 August 2018.

67 Bien Perez, 'Tencent Video, iQiyi, in race to lead China's online video market', *SCMP.com*, 2 October 2017.

68 *Yonhap News*, 'N. Korea to participate in four sports at PyeongChang 2018: top organizer', 18 January 2018.

Jong-un's sister Kim Yo-jong during the games, ii) a squad of DPRK cheerleaders, and iii) the opening and closing ceremonies.

Whilst these DPRK activities did appear in domestic ROK media reports on the games, a range of issues dominated local media reportage which were less prevalent in international media reports. Significant efforts had been made to provide English-language ticketing and booking facilities; the local train company Korail and Korea's Google, Naver, translated their apps into English for the first time. Tickets for the venues appeared to be sold out, as were the trains from Seoul to the Olympic sites, yet seats in both remained empty. Perhaps due to concerns about rising tensions on the Peninsula during the lead up to the Games, many international visitors stayed away. Low domestic turnout for the games had the organisers scrambling to fill the seats in the stands. This is not a wholly unusual scenario for the Olympics, but the Pyeongchang sites were particularly remote. Limited expectations of South Korean athletes winning medals, except perhaps in ice skating and speed skating, the expense of tickets and local lodging, and the relative distance of the Olympic sites from the major population centers, all featured in media reports of a muted domestic reception.⁶⁹ A team from Intel had put together the largest coordinated drone exhibition for the opening ceremony, only to have their performance cancelled at the last moment. Local media coverage of the cancellation was limited, and the television audience was treated to a recording of an earlier rehearsal. Reasons of public safety were given to enquiries from the media, and the local team was told the ROK military had cancelled everything at the last moment.⁷⁰

There was also a dispute with Japan over the flag the two Koreas had agreed to use in the opening ceremony; its depiction of a unified Korea included disputed territory—a dot representing islands claimed by Japan, leading Tokyo to lodge a diplomatic protest.⁷¹ ROK media themes indicated a mixed local reaction to the North Korean presence. In Seoul, anti-North Korean demonstrations continued throughout the Olympics. There was concern expressed in national media over the fact that North Korean athletes were to replace South Korean hockey players who had trained for four years for the event and qualified. These con-

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69 Tariq Panja, 'Olympic Organizers Say Tickets Are Sold, but Where Are the People?', *New York Times*, 15 February 2018.

70 Michael Luciano, 'Olympic opening ceremony drone show cancelled last minute', *ECNMag.com*, 12 February 2018.

71 AFP, 'South Korea to stop using Olympic flag with disputed isles after Japan protest', *SCMP.com*, 5 February 2018.

cerns were amplified when it became clear that South Korea was paying for the North Korean delegation's presence.

Influencing public opinion in the South appears not to have been the key objective of the DPRK, as evidenced by the decision of the North to send one of its most contentious generals to the closing ceremony, which was a subject of widespread media discussion in the ROK. In what was presented as a last-minute decision, South Korea's Ministry of Unification announced that General Kim Yong-chol, vice-chairman of the ruling Workers' Party's Central Committee, would attend the closing ceremony and stay in the South for three days. Kim also heads the United Front Department, the North Korean office responsible for handling inter-Korean affairs. More controversially, he was previously chief of the Reconnaissance General Bureau, a top North Korean military intelligence agency, which South Korea blamed for the deadly 2010 sinking of the *Cheonan*, a South Korean navy corvette.⁷² This decision, which appears to have had significantly more negative resonance locally than internationally, suggested some degree of DPRK willingness to test South Korean audiences so as to create propaganda for its own population. Public opinion in the South seems not to have been the priority for the DPRK, this may potentially have been because the Moon government was already committed to facilitating de-escalation.

Domestic reception of the DPRK's presence at the Games was relatively muted. Our English-language media sample suggests that internationally the opposite was the case. North Korea's belligerence in late 2017 ensured the world was paying attention when Pyongyang accepted the invitation to take part in the Games. It is possible that this decision was taken at the last minute, in light of the impact of sanctions and escalating rhetoric emerging from the United States before the end of that year. It seems more likely, as the preceding sections outline, that the North had pre-determined at least the potential for this route to de-escalation.

The three DPRK activities at the Olympics most prominent in English-language media reports broadly cohered in seeking to represent North Korea as a legitimate state, ready to cooperate with the South in pursuit of a unified Korea, and appear to have been targeted principally at an international audience. The US is likely to have been a key target audience for these messages. Given the tone of US communications about the DPRK in the months prior, it is unsurprising that

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⁷² Christine Kim and Hyon-hee Shin, [North Korean closing delegation includes man blamed for deadly sinking](#), *Reuters*, 22 February 2018.

initial signals towards de-escalation at the Games were rebuffed by the US Vice president Mike Pence.⁷³ As Washington vigorously warned against a North Korean charm offensive, athletes from the two Koreas entered the arena together under a unification flag, which was widely reported in the international media as offering hope of a breakthrough in the geopolitical standoff.⁷⁴ The pictures of the athletes marching into the stadium side-by-side dominated most media coverage around the world. This was clear in our sample, where almost all of the articles and news reports mentioned the joint presence of the two Koreas at the opening ceremony, even describing it as ‘peace in motion’.⁷⁵ The preceding period of high tensions, and the sudden surprise move to participate, invited interpretation of the new spirit of collaboration within the framework of Olympism.

The obviously cool reaction by Vice President Pence to being seated close to Kim Jong-un’s sister in the South Korea President’s box was clearly meant for his US domestic audience, but also risked communicating failure to get into the spirit of the Games. Pence was criticised for not standing up with the South Korea President and the rest of the crowd when the unified team entered the stadium. This communicative bind could only play out to the benefit of the DPRK, and contributed to widespread media representations of the United States as haughty. North Korean state media reinforced this in warning that the conservatives in the US, Japan, and the ROK should not spoil the atmosphere of détente. Kim and the DPRK have always sought to present themselves as the peacemakers, with their military stance one of self-defence against an aggressive militarism from the South and its allies. In remaining relentlessly positive at the games, they maximised their ability to get this message across. CNN reported widely what Kim Yo-jong wrote in the South Korean President’s guestbook: ‘I hope Pyongyang and Seoul get closer in our people’s hearts and move forward the future of prosperous unification.’⁷⁶

The North’s communications at the Games centered on Kim Yo-jong, who became the first member of Pyongyang’s ruling dynasty to set foot in South Korea since the Korean War. Again, this was clear in our sample of English-language

73 Makiko Takita and Rui Abiru, ‘Moon Jae-In’s Smile Vanishes as Shinzo Abe, Mike Pence Flaunt Bond’, *Sankei Shinbun*, 23 February 2018.

74 Rich Motoko, ‘Olympics Open With Koreas Marching Together, Offering Hope for Peace’, *New York Times*, 9 February 2018.

75 Morgan Winsor, ‘Olympics 2018: Opening ceremony “Peace in Motion” kicks off Pyeongchang Winter Games’, *ABC News*, 9 February 2018.

76 Will Ripley and James Griffiths, ‘North and South Korea to meet to discuss taking part in Paralympics’, *CNN.com*, 23 February 2018.

media reportage, with Kim Yo-jong dominating news reports, appearing in most stories that discussed the PyeongChang Olympics and the North and South détente. Her presence appears to have played a key role in framing international media discourses away from the narrative of the rogue state, and the more problematic presence of General Kim Yong-chol. A significant sample of reports fixed on Kim Yo-jong as a peacemaker carrying her brother's wishes for peace. Kim Yo-jong is known to be a leading figure in the domestic propaganda and state communication institutional architecture. The success of Kim Yo-jong in generating positive international media coverage of the North Korean delegation was significant, with 90 per cent of such accounts mentioning her positively. Her words and actions were in constant resonance with the Olympic frame, sustaining message continuity, and framing the reportage of her as the 'Pyongyang Princess', the human face of a secretive regime. A story on CNN.com was typical of the coverage, carrying the headline: 'Kim Jong-un's sister is stealing the show at the Winter Olympics'. Positioning Kim Yo-jong as Kim Jong-un's Ivanka, the report suggested she was a 'foil to the perception of North Korea as antiquated and militaristic'. The DPRK's domestic purpose in raising the profile of Kim Jong-un's wider family is difficult to ascertain, though Kim Yo-jong's role here offers some support for presumptions about her significance to the regime's stability.⁷⁷ This role continued at the subsequent Singapore summit between Kim Jong-un and US President Donald Trump.

The red-parka-clad North Korean cheerleaders also emerged as the domestic, international, and social media stars of the early days of the Olympics because of their carefully choreographed songs and dances. First appearing at the opening ceremony, they garnered the media epithet in South Korea of the 'army of beauties'. The all-female cheering squad and their singing performances piqued the interest of Olympic fans worldwide, even though the North's athletes, inexperienced in international events, won no medals. The North Korean cheerleaders drew mixed responses, but their pictures were distributed around the world, emphasising the viral power of the image.⁷⁸ As messages about peace and unification were tied to images of the cheerleaders, they were effective in pushing more unfavourable mention of the North Korean regime to the bottom of articles.

77 Myong-song Kim, 'Kim Jong-un's Sister Returns to Hero's Welcome in Pyongyang', *The Chosunilbo*, 13 February 2018.

78 Neville Bolt, *The Violent Image: Insurgent propaganda and the new revolutionaries* (Columbia University Press, 2012).

International media reports of the reactions of people from various countries who attended the Games were often gushing in their accounts of the Korean cheerleaders. It was easy for the global media to pick up the story along with the great photo opportunities the cheerleaders provided. The positive media response to the cheerleading squad is perhaps surprising, as significant international cynicism was generated at the 2010 FIFA World Cup when the North sent a tiny group of uniformly dressed fans who cheered wildly at matches; they were filmed close-up, implying the stadium was full of fans, when actually they were only a small group of people in a confined area. The images of the cheerleaders, suggestive of North Korean propaganda but created by the South's television coverage, may have invited satirisation. However, it remains an effective example of agenda-setting in that international media attention was kept on the North Korean presence. Even satirisation combined with critique, evident in a quarter of over fifty media reports which mentioned them, may have contributed to softening representations of the regime in the North. Given that these images were so conducive to distribution on social media, the cheerleaders may have been intended to sustain media attention on the DPRK presence at the Games, regardless of their athletic successes.

In what was described in international media as an unprecedented and unexpected display of unity, President Moon shook hands with Kim Yo-jong and Kim Yong-nam, North Korea's ceremonial Head of State and the highest-level official to have visited the South.⁷⁹ A diplomatic fiasco at a state dinner hosted at the Blue House (the South Korean President's executive office and official residence, similar to the White House in the USA) before the opening ceremonies was widely reported.⁸⁰ US Vice President Pence was to share a table with Kim Yong-nam. He arrived at the dinner, exchanged greetings with President Moon, Japanese Prime Minister Abe, and others, but avoided Kim Yong-nam and left before the meal was served. US Defence Secretary Jim Mattis was forced to deny explicitly any division between the US and South Korea, and Lee Nak-yeon, the ROK's Prime Minister, suggested that any summit would need the 'right conditions' to go ahead.⁸¹ It was clear that an informal summit, a deliberate breaking of the ice, was what Mr Moon had intended.

There was no improvement in the atmosphere in President Moon's box at the

79 Benjamin Haas, '[Pence skips Olympics dinner in snub to North Korean officials](#)', *Guardian*, 9 February 2018.

80 So-young Kim, '[At Games reception, a hopeful dessert and a hasty exit](#)', *Reuters*, 9 February 2018.

81 Bryan Harris and Katrina Manson, '[Seoul seeks to ease US concerns about Korean détente](#)', *FT.com*, 12 February 2018.

stadium for the closing ceremony. This time, the US was represented by President Donald Trump's daughter Ivanka, who sat beside Moon's wife, while North Korea's Kim was seated a row behind. Sitting two seats along from him was General Vincent Brooks, the commander of the United States Forces Korea headquarters. During his speech, Thomas Bach, President of the International Olympic Committee, invited several athletes to join him on stage, including South Korea's gold medalist skeleton rider Yun Sung-bin and North Korean figure skater Ryom Tae-ok. The unease with which the US and Japan greeted this rapprochement between the North and the South was reflected in the local English-language media headlines. A poll conducted at the time suggested six out of ten South Koreans thought the two Koreas should hold another round of bilateral summit talks; among those in their 60s and older the percentage of support was less than half.⁸² In the ROK, the Moon administration's approval ratings were recorded as dropping below 60 per cent for the first time since he took office.⁸³ Domestic opinion in the ROK tends to be divided along the lines of the familiar generational groups. Older, more conservative South Koreans are against improving relations with the North, while those in their 40s and 50s, generally Moon supporters, hope for improved relations. And the young are closer in opinion to older Koreans.⁸⁴

The message from the North Korean state media was consistently celebratory and focused on peaceful reunification. Korean Central Television, which rarely shows live events, did not show the opening ceremony or any Olympics coverage live. Indeed, early coverage from the broadcaster was limited to still images of the Olympic competition published in its news bulletin—they showed Kim Yong-nam and Kim Jo-yong attending an ice hockey match where the two Koreas fielded the combined team, and a Taekwondo performance by athletes from both countries that was not part of the official Olympic competition.⁸⁵

Although North Korea's visit to the Winter Olympics marked a step away from its normally isolationist position and ideological emphasis on self-reliance, the next steps were unclear. After the Games, keen to be seen as a peace-maker, President Moon continued to press for high-level meetings between Seoul and

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82 Yonhap News Agency, 'Over 60 pct of S. Koreans support proposed inter-Korean summit: poll', *N.K. News*, 15 February 2018.

83 Clint Work, 'What Do Younger South Koreans Think of North Korea?', *The Diplomat*, 2 February 2018.

84 Philip Lee and Steven Denney, 'South Korea's Identity Gap: Diverging Views on North Korea', *Sinonk.com*, 23 January 2017.

85 Williams Martyn, 'Olympics notes: No coverage yet on KCTV', *North Korea Tech*, 12 February 2018.

Pyongyang, and for trilateral talks in South Korea between Pyongyang, Seoul, and Washington. The domestic South Korean media were more interested in Moon's disagreements with his allies. In the international media this was less pronounced. The South's national image-building efforts, promoting a 'super-connected Korea' developing into a major player in the global creative economy, appear to have been overpowered in the international media by the North's consistently positive messaging tied to the three themes that dominate the media sample analysed for this paper—the presence of both Koreas at the Games, the photogenic North Korean cheerleaders, and Kim Jo-yong, the 'Pyongyang Princess'. These strategic topics likely helped ensure the way the international media framed its reports about the Games, highlighting the potential for peace-building across the 38th parallel. Moon facilitated Pyongyang's efforts, allowing it to substantively set the agenda attached to its own participation.

This required little from Kim Jong-un himself. He had used his annual televised New Year's address to announce North Korea's plan to participate in the PyeongChang Winter Olympics and to wish for their success. On the eve of the Games—just one day before the opening ceremony—Kim Jong-un presided over the annual military parade in Pyongyang to mark the founding of its armed forces. News footage in North Korea showed him together with party officials watching the display of military strength in the capital. The parade was not shown live on state television, but in a speech marking the event Kim said the parade underlined 'the status of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, which has developed into a world-class military power'.⁸⁶ Having established a narrative of military security aimed at his domestic audience, Kim remained quiet throughout the Games, leaving DPRK international strategic communications to his sister and her 'army of beauties'. Once the Games had concluded, the tone of Kim's international communications shifted—after exchanging insults with Trump in late 2017, he was now asserting a willingness to de-nuclearise, but only if unspecified conditions were met. Following a summit with Trump (announced, cancelled, then rescheduled and held in Singapore in June 2018), Kim was rewarded with a long-desired strategic objective for his regime—the suspension of joint ROK-US military exercises.

As the Olympics began, there was very little evidence of appetite within the United States government for a rapprochement with the North. This suggests

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⁸⁶ Yonhap News Agency, '[N. Korea displays ICBMs during low-key military parade](#)', *Korea Herald*, 8 February 2018.

that the Olympics took place at an inflection point, after which there was a shift in US strategy. The international impact of the strategic communications campaign that the DPRK conducted at the Olympics contributed to the context for that change. The sentiment in our sample of English-language media, as well as the content of the reportage, appear to have been influenced by DPRK activities at the Olympics. In the conclusion below, we set out the resultant hypothesis for further empirical testing.

Discussion and conclusions

Identifying stakeholders, both actual and potential, is at the heart of all effective strategic communications.⁸⁷ It is also important to identify the behavioural change sought and the significance of the communication for political action—in other words, why stakeholders should pay attention. Strategic communications must be proactive if they are to be effective—setting the agenda, rather than merely responding and recruiting allies in what the media could use as participative stories. Effective communications on the global political stage involve providing stories for multiple media platforms while ensuring that all these stories have arguments, anecdotes, illustrations, and actions, communicated step by step, from the headlines throughout the entire article. Each communication must fit a broader narrative, integrating key themes in pursuit of desired behavioural change. Success is a matter of creating the proper setting for desired behaviours to emerge.

Ensuring continuity of attention is also critical for agenda setting. The DPRK ran a successful strategic communications campaign insofar as it ensured its own coverage. In large part this was because the narrative of peace-building and reconciliation was already prefigured by the idea of the Olympic Games, and the regime needed to do little more than keep this idea in the frame. Using simple but visually arresting communications at Pyeongchang, North Korea got the world to talk about their country.

The Olympics were an opportunity to invite the US and China to engage with the DPRK as a ‘normal state’ without its having to offer significant material concessions. The Olympic forum amplified the positive messaging around reconciliation, and increased the public diplomatic costs of appearing belligerent. The ROK desired to communicate a positive message about Moon’s hope of

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⁸⁷ Neale Consultants Limited—Building Executive Presence, communication tools.

relaunching negotiations with the North; the timing of the Olympics was ideal for the DPRK to pursue de-escalation. The North anticipated that Moon would amplify any message of positivity and contribute to shaping international media coverage. It made sense for the DPRK to use the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang to strategically promote a softer image of the Kim regime.

The PyeongChang Winter Olympics provided the means for the DPRK to gain access to, for them, an unprecedented international audience. We have provisionally gauged the effectiveness of DPRK strategic communications by identifying the degree to which they shaped English-language media representation during the Games, although effectiveness in shaping the agenda and the tone of coverage does not prove causal influence on the behaviour of others. Assessing the degree to which the DPRK's effectiveness in agenda-setting at the Olympics translated into influence over the decision-making of international actors would require knowing which media reports were consumed by key decision makers. We have no data on which international media reports about North Korea shaped by DPRK communications had an effect on their target audiences. Whilst psychologists such as Daniel Kahneman have shown that 'mere exposure effects' (priming, framing, and anchoring) shape actors' understandings and orientate their actions,⁸⁸ it is difficult to quantify the relationship between media consumption and behavioural change.⁸⁹ There are 'growing signs of inefficiency and even gridlock in the variety of ways framing, agenda setting, and priming theory are used by researchers'.⁹⁰ The shifting tone of international media reports regarding the Olympics is suggestive, but without further comparative research we can only provide grounds for a reasoned hypothesis.

Since the Olympic Games, international actors' behaviour aligns with what may reasonably be assumed to have been the DPRK's strategic objectives for Pyeongchang—less hostile communications with the US, as well as more friendly and direct communications between Kim and China's President Xi Jinping. Trump actively contributed to detoxifying the Kim regime by celebrating their exchange of 'beautiful' letters. And, as noted above, the cancellation of joint military exercises between the US and the ROK has long been a strategic objective of the

88 Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Penguin; Reprint edition, 2012).

89 Michael Scharkow and Marko Bacht, 'How measurement error in content analysis and self-reported media use leads to minimal media effect findings in linkage analyses: A simulation study', *Political Communication* 34.3 (2017): 323–43.

90 Dietram A. Scheufele and David Tewksbury, 'Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models', *Journal of Communication* 57 (2007): 9–20, p. 18.

North. At the very least, we can be confident that a DPRK strategic communications campaign was conducted at the PyeongChang Games, and that North Korea probably considers it to have been effective. Whether or not the perception is accurate, the changes in political attitudes among states will certainly influence the behaviour of the DPRK in the future, for example by reinforcing policy-making that seeks international influence through interventions in the information environment.

Few will conclude that the DPRK has altered its fundamental strategic calculation—it completed its last missile launch in November 2017. It is possible to overvalue the ‘art’ of strategic communications.⁹¹ Behaviour is always multi-causal. The Olympic Games provided a springboard from which the DPRK could achieve more positive media coverage from outlets that have previously tended to create overwhelmingly negative publicity. The Olympics interrupted global discourses about the legitimacy of different policy responses to North Korea’s behaviour, and also interrupted the narrative of military pressure the Trump administration had constructed during 2017.

This suggests that DPRK strategic communications at the PyeongChang Olympics helped set the stage for further action, including the meeting between President Trump and Kim Jong-un in the aftermath of the games. The traditional emphasis in International Relations scholarship on hard power, in association with formal diplomacy, as a route to assessing and influencing the comparative effects of sanctions as potential determinants of behavioural change can miss the role of carefully timed, subtle influence on the tone of international discourse, which nudges, facilitates, or discourages actions in world politics. The DPRK’s communications on the Olympic stage successfully shaped international coverage and influenced the information environment, which, at least to some extent, shaped the conduct of politicians, and so of world politics. This much is true, even if a definitive measurement of their effect requires more extensive sampling and analysis of global media content.

Affecting the tone of international discourse in world politics at a strategic moment, even minutely, can be useful for foreign policy; it can buy time to prepare new policy strategies and make it more difficult for opponents to leverage the ‘rogue state’ label. The DPRK’s campaign-sought to influence the perception of states’ behaviour and attitudes by international actions. The DPRK’s Olym-

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91 James P. Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The art of strategic communication*, (Georgetown University Press, 2012).

pic strategic communications helped Kim Jong-un to reframe North Korea's nuclear testing as preparation for engagement with the world, an engagement in which North Korea would be perceived a 'normal' state in global diplomatic processes. It also, at least temporarily, helped undercut calls for military action emerging from hawks in the United States administration, such as John Bolton. Given that various regional actors were now engaging diplomatically with the DPRK regime, and with apparent positive results, it became much more difficult to make a credible argument for escalation.

Sensitive to the opportunities presented by shifting media narratives, Trump immediately claimed personal responsibility for the inter-Korean détente. His assertion of a foreign policy victory has at least as much to do with US domestic politics as with any expectation that the talks will actually lead to de-nuclearisation, but in Pyongyang this would only reinforce the sense that the irenic campaign at the Olympics was a well-timed strategic intervention by the North, reading the US domestic context effectively. Trump enthusiastically seized the opportunity presented by the Olympian moment to mint a commemorative coin celebrating the planned peace summit. The coin was announced in May 2017, with a price of \$US 100. When in June the summit was called off, the price was discounted; the summit was rescheduled and finally occurred in September. In his 2018 speech to the UN, Trump lauded the de-escalation of tension on the Korean peninsula as one of his major foreign policy achievements, irrespective of any evidence that the North was taking steps towards de-nuclearisation.

Cognisant of China's being selected to host the next Winter Olympics, the DPRK also appears to have used the PyeongChang Olympic platform to directly address Chinese audiences, in hopes of demonstrating the DPRK's reasonableness and openness to diplomacy; Beijing allowed Kim to make this presentation to its populace, a significant fact in a country that exercises tight control on what the public is allowed to see. After the Olympics, Kim met with Chinese President Xi twice before meeting with Trump; China was his first overseas destination as Head of State. These trips contributed to developing his international diplomatic standing and support our hypothesis of the importance of China as a target audience. Post-Olympic diplomacy has created a dynamic in which China and the US must now compete for influence, or the impression of influence, on the North Korean regime.⁹² This reflects the established cyclical historical pattern

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⁹² Samuel S. Kim, 'US-China competition over nuclear North Korea', *Insight Turkey* 19.3 (2017): 121–38.

of strategic action by the North.

The North's Olympic communications leveraged public attitudes of the new leader in the South, and facilitated the development of a personal relationship between Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in. Having staked his premiership on improving inter-Korean relations, Moon will not easily give up on this possibility, and has shown himself open to extending talks regardless of the relationship between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump. The Olympics have in no way precluded a breakdown in talks or the resumption of conflict, nor should we assume that a lasting or significant shift in global public opinion has taken place. North Korea's success in agenda-setting at Pyeongchang seems to have, at the very least, bought the regime some time. This may have been a limited aim of the North's Olympic campaign. The DPRK's Olympic communications do not allow us to determine what their strategic endgame might be. But they show how the Olympics may be used as a forum by states for their strategic communications in seeking to influence the conditions under which actions can take place in world politics.

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