From Network to Narrative: Understanding the Nature and Trajectory of Russian Disinformation in the U.S. News

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Abstract

While we understand a lot about news *networks*, it is more difficult for social scientists to identify and track specific news *narratives* as they move through media ecosystems. While network analysis shows how online information is connected, it doesn’t look at the broader nature of that information. Without understanding the specific nature of particular news narratives, we can neither find a point of origin, understand how they spread, or – in the case of disinformation – devise strategies to combat the problem. In this sense, we are like early medical researchers, who could identify unhealthy environments such as crowded city slums or malarial swamps, but did not yet know how to detect the specific microbes that caused the problem. We know there are problematic areas where online users cluster and even disseminate toxic material, but we need to know more about the nature of that material itself and how it transcends a particular Tweet, post, comment, etc. This paper will address this challenge by combining classic content analysis and computational linguistics to develop keywords linked to specific strategic narratives relating to Russia-U.S. tensions. Starting from a definition of key Russian strategic narratives based on expert analysis, this paper mines content in both Russian and U.S. outlets to understand how strategic narratives may differ or converge in the two national media contexts. Using a software application called PropagandaIQ that was developed by the two of the authors at the University of Maryland, the analysis examines content in RT, Sputnik, the *Washington Post*, CNN, and Fox News to explore two key Russian strategic narratives relating to NATO and Ukraine. By using PropagandaIQ’s “cyborg” classifier that combines human and automated content analysis, the research finds distinctive keywords linked to specific elements of strategic narrative in Russian and U.S. sources. This holds significant promise for automated tools that can define, tag, and trace Russian-based narratives as they move through the U.S. media ecosystem. This will allow us to see which narratives resonate, which are hardly present, and – perhaps most importantly – which narratives are promoted by Russian-backed propaganda rather than by legitimate news sources.

Keywords: Propaganda, Strategic Narrative, Russia, Content Analysis, Computational Linguistics

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An American television viewer flipping between CNN and the Russian broadcaster RT to watch news about Ukraine might find herself wondering how two outlets could tell such completely different stories about a single country. On CNN, the viewer would see information about how Russian troops invaded Crimea and the Donbass region. On the English-language variant of Russia’s RT network, the viewer would see how Russian-speaking Ukrainians bravely fought for their ethic dignity by rebelling against Western-led rebels who illegally seized control of Ukraine. These are two highly incompatible narratives about why there is fighting in Eastern Ukraine, why a million refugees have fled their homes and -- ultimately -- who is responsible for the death and destruction in Eastern Ukraine.

These are not simply different frames of the same story covered by two different media outlets. Rather, these are two incompatible narratives, a way of telling the audience how and why a story plays out in a certain setting. The actors and action are inscribed within a narrative that defines the problem and attributes blame in specific ways. This is more than merely a frame -- which Goffman (1974) famously defined as a determining what is salient in a given event or experience -- as there is not enough shared agreement on key aspects of the event or experience to make framing relevant. Indeed, Goffman’s metaphor of framing as a literal frame around a picture is useful here: In the case of these competing narratives, the pictures themselves are so different that framing is not the issue. If you move frames around on two different pictures, you will never find the same image.

While on the one hand divergent media narratives are frustrating for societal coherence, they hold great promise for the study of political communication. Political narratives within democracies have become wildly contradictory, particularly in the United States since the Trump campaign and election in 2016. At the same time, there is internal dissonance in the United States, foreign actors such as Russia have taken advantage of a lack of shared media reality to push disinformation into the U.S. media system as part of its information war.

This paper uses distinctive linguistic elements of divergent narratives to apply both human content analysis and computational linguistics as a way of defining, tagging, and analyzing how Russian propaganda narratives disseminate through the U.S. media system. While finding Russian disinformation in U.S. media content addresses a specific political concern of the moment, it is the intent of this work to further the value of the concept of narrative in understanding information flow in the contemporary media ecology in three ways. First, this paper will analyze the existing literature on narrative, with a focus on strategic narrative, in an attempt to refine a definition of the term to make it more useful for political communication specialists. Second, the paper will present an approach to operationalizing the concept of strategic narrative so that it can be measured via content analysis. Finally, this paper will test a new software application that synthesizes human coding with computational linguistics in an attempt to combine the value of human content analysis with natural language processing to measure narrative. By employing these three steps, it is hoped that this paper can advance our ability to understand, detect, and possibly counter information warfare more effectively.

From Network to Narrative

Since the explosion of online content, network analysis has served as a useful way to look at the way in which information travels in the new media ecology. Network analysis has contributed a great deal to understanding the pathways of media circulation in the digital age (Kumpel et al. 2015, Bakshy et al. 2012, Bruns and Burgess 2012, Choi and Lee 2015). In particular, the ability to track news URLs (Universal Resource Locators) in social media shows how people on social media click on, like, share, or even comment on particular news stories. As a result, we can see and analyze a map of the way that people share and interact with particular URLs. Most of this research is on Twitter, given it is relatively open to researchers, although Facebook has recently offered some public data to examine. This has created useful insights into how many social media users tend to cluster into “echo chambers” or “information cocoons” (Sunstein 2008) in which a relatively narrow set of media links are shared to reflect and augment existing beliefs. One of the most powerful examples of the way in which network analytics illuminates our understanding of the contemporary media ecology is Benkler et al.’s work (March 3, 2017) that demonstrates how alt-Right supporters have insular and isolated media consumption habits.

While network analytics can illuminate a map of how information is shared, it says less about the nature of the information and more about those who are sharing it. In other words, we have a map of the linked links through network analysis, but we don’t have the broader view of what is travelling on that map. We know that some links are far more likely to be shared than others and this relates to a range of factors such as visibility of a website, super-users who promote particular links, bots, timeliness of the topic, and validation needs of the user. Scholars have referred to the concept of story resonance or “stickiness” in the way in which web content is shared: Some news stories are far “stickier” than others. Even when stories share some characteristics, such as timeliness or validation needs, a handful of stories rise to high visibility in the news ecosystem while others quickly fade into obscurity. Thus, we need to consider the broader view. While network analysis can tell us *how* information is moving through the online sphere, narrative analysis could come much closer to telling us *why* this information is being transmitted so widely by illuminating how particular stories are part of attractive narratives for the audience. As Kümpel et al. (2015) point out in a review article of ten years of scholarly work on news sharing and social media, studies have focussed on three central research areas: how users share news, the content of what is shared, and networks. Thus, there is work that recognizes the need to examine what news is shared as well as how it is shared and who is sharing it. While the studies they cite are interesting and useful, including analysis of “content-related factors” such as valence, interestingness, issues, or topics discussed (page 6), the authors did not find studies that focused on how that shared content resonated with national narratives.

Defining the concept of narrative

A narrative is, at its most basic definition, a story, i.e. an account of collected events. Brad Allenby (2017) posits that “Narratives, often implicit, are the core of identity, and construct and validate meaning for the individual” (page 1). At issue in this paper is how states (as opposed to individuals) construct narratives. States can attempt to construct entire narratives from scratch, as the Soviets did with relative success, via the Communist media. Yet, even narratives for new states are embedded within “master” narratives or a “transhistorical narrative that is deeply imbedded in a particular culture” (Halverson et al. 2011, page 14). Here, culture can refer to an ethnic, social, or religious group. Master narratives are more powerful and persistent than individual narratives, and they vary between countries (Chew and Turnley, October 2017). A possible master narrative for the United States would be that it is the land of the free, where individual liberty against tyranny is a central value that it fights for domestically and internationally. An example of a master narrative for Russia might be the one of space exploration that views Russia (and especially the Soviet Union) as the great power with advanced space technology as well as a revolutionary and extremely successful space program. Allenby notes that narratives are an important construct for those seeking to spread disinformation, as increased access to technology and the rabid development in the fields of evolutionary psychology, behavior economics, and neuroscience have enabled originations and states to build propaganda campaigns on scientific advancements that enable their narratives.

Halverson et al. help to operationalize the concept of narrative by analyzing “master narratives” of Islamic extremism. They note that narratives are “powerful resources for defining cultures and framing actions, and it is particularly important to understand how they operate if we hope to understand and counter them” (page 1). They also find that the term “narrative” is not used consistently in scholarly analysis and is often used interchangeably with “story.” Halverson et al. define a story as “a particular sequence of related events that are situated in the past and recounted for rhetorical/ideological purposes” (page 13) while a narrative is “a coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories that share a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience expectations according to the known trajectories of its literary and rhetorical form” (page 14). They call for defining narrative as a “system of stories” and delineating between a narrative and a master narrative by defining a master narrative as something that “is deeply embedded in a culture, provides a pattern for cultural life and social structure, and creates a framework for communication about what people are expected to do in certain situations” (page 7). These master narratives have components that include story forms and archetype characters (page 7). The storylines within narratives must have both appeal and a type of unity (Halverson et al., page 13).

The concept of narrative usefully moves the conversation forward from a recent focus on detecting the spread “fake news” in the American news ecosystem. There are several problems with using the term “fake news.” Politically, it is a term coined by Trump and the alt-Right in a deliberate attempt to disempower free media and continued use of the term legitimizes the concept in a worrying way. More broadly from a scientific standpoint, “fake news” is a vague and often loaded term that holds little value as an analytical concept. There is no shared meaning between the U.S. Left and Right about the definition of either “fake” or “news.” In the case of Trump and the alt-Right, news is apparently PR and fake is something with which you do not agree as opposed to the standard definition of “fake” as “counterfeit.” A Google Trends analysis shows that the term “fake news” exploded in popularity during the Trump campaign and presidency (See Figure 1). The politicization of language aside, the term “fake” as “counterfeit” is also problematic given there is often little shared reality between the Left and Right in the United States (Benkler et al.). To most Democrats, Trump’s claims of lack of collusion with Russians is “fake”, while to many Republicans the idea that Clinton didn’t commit fraud is “fake” as well. Even shifting the conversation to try to delineate among information, misinformation, and disinformation is fraught with problems of perception. This is not to say we shouldn’t aspire to a society in which there are shared values, which in turn would lead to broadly shared narratives. But by using the idea of narratives rather than what is “fake” or not allows us to move the analysis away from the realm of what shared reality “should be” and instead measure the reality as it is perceived in the online sphere.[[1]](#footnote-1)

While acknowledging the value of a “master” narrative as defined by Halverson et al. as highly useful in demonstrating the value and strength of the concept, this paper refines the discussion of narrative into the field of international affairs by using the concept of “strategic” narrative defined as “tools that political actors employ to promote their interests, values, and aspirations for international order by managing expectations and altering the discursive environment” (Miskimmon et al. 2017). This element of how words work within a broader international strategy is important. Miskimmon et al. are demonstrating the way in which strategic narratives are part of an overall information strategy. Strategic narratives are tools that political actors employ to promote their interests, values and aspirations for the international order. In other words, it’s how countries attempt to tell the stories of who they are, what kind of world order they would like to see, and how they see their place in that order. For Russia, strategic narratives have both reflected and justified their recent military incursions, including Ukraine (Szostek 2017, Hinck et al. 2018).

Operationalizing Narrative

While the concept of strategic narrative has become a useful element for understanding the role of communication within international relations, it is difficult to find robust and consistent models of how to operationalize the concept. Miskimmon et al. strike a useful note of caution about studying strategic narrative: “It is one thing to say that an idea – or a narrative, for that matter – is ‘dominant’ or ‘hegemonic.’ It is another thing altogether to explain how and why an idea dominates policy or public agendas” (page 13). Miskimmon et al. offer a range of approaches in their edited volume, particularly that strategic narratives have the following components (page 7): character or actors, setting/environment, conflict/action, tools/behavior, as well as a resolution (either suggested, realized, or merely a goal). Defining the difference between a narrative, a frame, and a story is more of an art than a science. For example, narratives can have many different stories within them (Paletz et al., page 3). In this context, narratives refer to coherent stories that are shared with multiple people rather than isolated pieces of information (Green and Brock 2005, Hinck et al. 2017). Defined in this manner, a narrative might describe an activity or conflict consisting of a storyline with a beginning, middle, and end, rather than a single fact, and it may imply or state a context, how, and why (Van Krieken and Sanders, 2016). For example, the Russian strategic narrative that democracy is fatally flawed may include stories about media bias, isolated examples of media corruption, lack of fair coverage, etc. Roselle et al. argue narratives are “more important for ordering the chaos” in a world “with leaders who are ill-prepared for its complexities” as we develop into a more globalized community (2014, page 74). The scholars emphasize that one must study how strategic narratives are formed, projected, and received. This paper, however, focuses on detection and, to a lesser extent, projection of strategic narratives.

How do we take up Miskimmon et al.’s challenge and operationalize the elements of narrative that they present? In reviewing Miskimmon et al.’s components of narratives listed above, it could be useful to embed these within a series of narrative actions: strategic narrative must have actors relating to a particular setting that take action with some type of behavior in pursuit of a goal. This is more complex and intricate than the idea of a media “frame” but it would appear that this approach offers a more robust fit with how information is transmitted in the online sphere. Specifically, viewing the transmission of information through the lens of narratives could illuminate how specific stories fit into compelling and widely shared narratives. Thus, while scholars such as Starbird (2017) have been justly puzzled by the prevalence of demonstrably false conspiracy theories having surprising popularity in the online sphere, the existence of “false flags” conspiracies makes more sense within the narrative of a lack of trust in governance and media.

Coding for Narrative

The paper leverages content analysis performed by human coders with natural language processing performed by computer, creating a “cyborg classifier” that combines the strength of both human and computer analysis. This is an attempt to take the best of both worlds: the nuances that human coders can see in language with the ability of computational linguistics to both augment and automate the coding process. A software application named PropagandaIQ was developed by two of the authors (Oates and Barrow) at the University of Maryland over the past year. PropagandaIQ uses keywords input by researchers to retrieve any text with that contains those keywords. Using computational linguistics classification systems, the application reviews any articles coded as on narrative and finds words in common that are not listed in the initial keywords for the researcher. The system then presents the researcher with a list of suggested keywords. The researcher can then add or ignore those words to further train the classifier and return more keywords. Eventually, the researcher creates a list of distinctive keywords in one set of content that can be compared to a set of keywords developed by the same method in another set of content. Currently, PropagandaIQ analyzes text in RT, Sputnik, the *Washington Post*, Fox News, and Breitbart from January 2014 to the present. In the initial step for research for this paper, keywords from Russian narratives (details below on identifying those keywords) are entered first in the Russian English-language sources (RT and Sputnik) in PropagandaIQ. The system uses English-language Russian sources for two reasons. First, this research is interested in the spread of Russian-origin messages in the U.S. media and, as such, it makes sense to look at how Russian sources use specific words and phrases in English. The second reason is more prosaic: In designing a computational word classifier, it is far easier to design and test a system in a single language.

PropagandaIQ is attempting to create a digital “meme”, essentially a type of verbal DNA that can be used to detect, tag, and trace a distinctive set of text across a wide array of documents. For example, computational linguists have developed a way of codifying news stories/political messages that make it possible for a reliable link to be established between the original story and its retelling in other formats. Leskovec et al. (2009) detailed how to use computational linguistics to isolate unique elements of statements and narratives so that these components can be tracked across social-media platforms.[[2]](#footnote-2) Leskovec et al. use the idea of memes to capture the essential message of a particular quote. Although the idea of a meme has come to be linked to visuals with a clever or witty text overlay (such as Grumpy Cat or The New Old Spice Guy), computational linguists use the term to refer to the essential root or identity of an idea expressed verbally. For example, in the U.S. 2016 presidential campaign, one verbal meme was “nasty woman” – originally uttered by Trump during a debate to castigate Hillary Clinton, but then picked up as a riposte by liberals -- or the phrase “build a wall” popularized by Trump as an extremist response to immigration issues.

If we can visualize the spread of specific narratives across a media system (both among different media outlets and as they are discussed in social media), our ability to use narrative as a tool through which to understand media influence is greatly enhanced. One of the most significant challenges, particularly in assessing either the strength of propaganda or the value of free media discourse, is measuring the effect of both propaganda and news. Government officials and media scholars must assume an effect – i.e. if RT broadcasts numerous stories attacking the record of the Clinton Foundation, then it could have an effect on how people perceive the Clintons in the United States. But, in general, we only have two static types of data relating to this propaganda. First, we can measure and categorize the coverage from RT, for example by recording all of its content, finding where the Clintons are mentioned, counting the number of seconds of coverage, and then categorizing the coverage as either negative or positive. We could also use word counts and transcripts (which is closer to the approach here).[[3]](#footnote-3) All of this is quite time-consuming and those who have spent years doing content analysis can attest it is often more an art than a science particularly when using the terms “negative” and “positive.” Although broad claims are made about sentiment dictionary, they can be, at best, a blunt instrument in understanding political sentiment (Oates and Moe 2016). There is compelling and useful work that has measured the content of Russian propaganda, including Nelson et al.’s examination of online RT content (2015), but it’s not feasible to conduct in-depth coding in real time or at the volume necessary to track Russian or other propaganda in a realistic way.

Russian Strategic Narratives

It is important to discuss the rationale for picking the two narratives for this study, which are:

1. NATO wants to invade Russia
2. Russia’s Involvement in Ukraine

These narratives relate to long-term Russian strategic narratives. While there were expectations on the part of Russians in the early post-Soviet era that the reign of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization would be over, NATO has continued to be a significant military presence in Europe.[[4]](#footnote-4) While Russian border states such as Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia perceive NATO as a critical shield against the kind of Russian invasions seen in Georgia and Ukraine, the Kremlin views NATO as an existential threat to Russia. In particular, Russia complains that NATO is nothing more than a puppet for American global dominance. America’s largely unilateral action in the second Gulf War has enabled this narrative as well.

The second narrative under review for this paper is not as well-defined. Initially, this paper attempted to use the Russian frame for the conflict in Ukraine, which could be defined as “Russia is Liberating Ukraine.” In this narrative, Russians citizens are helping to free their fellow ethnic Russians from the oppressive yoke of the (American-led or at least American-encouraged) coup leaders who took over the Ukrainian government illegally in the Euromaidan Revolution in 2014. In invading Crimea and Ukraine, Russia is merely returning the Russian people to their rightful relationship with Mother Russia.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, in the course of coding it became clear it was too difficult to code for the kind of intent found in a “Russia is Liberating Ukraine” narrative, so the decision was made to code for Russia’s involvement in Ukraine. In other words, the anti-NATO rhetoric is clear, while Russia’s intent in Ukraine is more clouded in the Russian content used in this research.

There has been useful research on Russian narrative, including Szostek and Hinck et al. A particularly ambitious project of measuring Russian narratives has been carried out by the Hybrid Warfare Analytical Group at the Ukraine Crisis Media Center (<http://ucmc.org.ua/hybrid/>). The center analyzed content from all news broadcasts and political talk shows on the three biggest Russian national TV channels for more than three years (July 1, 2014, to December 31, 2017). Using both human and automated coding, their research found six major, overwhelmingly negative narratives in the Russian media when reporting on the West: horrors of life, protests, “decaying Europe”, terrorism, refugee crisis, and sanctions (<http://uacrisis.org/66275-countering-disinformation-lessons-learnt>).

There are other and intriguing Russian strategic narratives that relate much more closely to American politics. For example, Russians have embraced a “Flawed U.S. Media” narrative that also is espoused by Trump. The idea that the U.S. media are (to quote the U.S. President[[6]](#footnote-6)) the “enemy of the people” is a new, strange, and disturbing narrative. It is broadly promoted by Trump, but it’s also been a constant theme in Russian news over the years. The Russians (and even the Soviets in their time) have attacked the U.S. media as pandering to the interest of the elites while pretending to uphold the ideals of democracy. This could be construed as ironic coming from the heavily controlled and unfree Russian media, but it’s both intriguing and perhaps one of the more alluring narratives to undermine U.S. democracy. This is not least because the White House is one of the most powerful platforms to influence U.S. narratives, including the enduring War on Terror narrative that the White House created after 9/11 (Entman 2003). Another promising narrative to measure would be that the “Alt-Right Destroys US Democracy” or even “the Far Left Destroys U.S. Democracy.” Qualitative review of Russian sources such as RT for this paper show that Russian strategic narratives about the United States attempt to leverage strong emotions on both ends of the American political spectrum. While the Russian strategic narratives that relate to U.S. politics are intriguing, this paper will focus on the Russian international narratives (NATO and Ukraine).This is, in part, due to considerations of space in a single paper. More important, it is important to use a “most-similar” case study in order to test the methods outlined above.

Data

This paper relies on earlier work (Oates 2006, Oates 2014) that demonstrates that Russian strategic narratives are highly vertically oriented, originating in the Kremlin and spreading through the Russian media system in a process that Entman (2003) would call “cascading activation.” The research also considered speeches made by Russian President Vladimir Putin, particularly his statements in his annual New Year’s address and at the Helsinki summit with Trump on July 16, 2018.

The use of expert knowledge in defining keywords for narratives has both benefits and drawbacks. An expert with prior knowledge is aware of existing narratives, often has much deeper knowledge of a particular country, and can more readily identify the elements defined above as key parts of strategic narrative: actors, settings, actions, behavior, and goals. It also could be that long experience with media content analysis is valuable, particularly in knowing that these elements are generally easier to detect and measure during events with high political salience, ranging from elections to invasions to terrorist attacks (Oates, Kaid and Berry 2009). At the same time, knowledge of a case study can create blinkers for a researcher, blinding her to key changes and new players that may be beyond her established framing and understanding of a topic. A more grounded approach, i.e. by either reading a range of material in relevant news outlets or refining a search for content through keywords such as “Ukraine” or “NATO”, could yield new insights. But this approach is both time-consuming and difficult to operationalize as valid and reliable -- essentially it is down to the informed researcher to add layers to her own knowledge and insight to translate them into coding categories. Beyond the most obvious keywords for a particular narratives (such as NATO, Europe, EU, America, Russia, troops, exercises for the “NATO wants to invade Russia” narrative), it becomes a matter of individual perception and experience to try to link other words to the narrative.

The idea behind this paper and the PropagandaIQ software is that computational linguistics analysis can start with the insights of a researcher and then use natural language processing to expand on the keywords in a logical way. This allows for an expansion of the topic, including material that the researcher might miss or be unaware of -- in other words, making connections linguistically that the researcher cannot perceive intellectually. Ultimately, it is hoped that this type of “cyborg” classifier can detect and delineate specific patterns of words around a strategic narrative. In the current version of PropagandaIQ, the machine classifier uses natural language processing to find relationships among words and return new keyword suggestions as the researcher marks content as either on, off, or irrelevant to the narrative under analysis. Ultimately, this provides a list of words ( called a “bag” of words in computational linguistics) that define a particular narrative. Once a narrative is associated with a particular list of words (generated by a human specialist, but then augmented by machine classifiers), that list of words serves as a defining list for a specific strategic narrative. If you start out by defining the strategic narrative within Russian sources and create a list of words, one should be able to then use the same list of words to check for the presence of the narrative in U.S. sources. The current version of PropagandaIQ uses editorial content from RT and Sputnik stories (scraped from the web) as Russian sources, with the *Washington Post*, CNN, and Fox News(as scraped from the web) serving as U.S. sources. The system also scrapes and archives Breitbart, but it is not included in an analysis of U.S. news for this paper.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Testing the system

This is the first attempt to use PropagandaIQ for analysis, so this paper will report both on results and challenges in using the system. Overall, the cyborg classifier works, but more attention to human use of the system needs to be considered.

The first step was to use seed keywords to start the identification of a strategic narrative in the Russian content (RT and Sputnik). It immediately became clear that one needs clear and unambiguous words to initiate a search for content relating to a strategic narrative. Although we were able to identify a list of keywords relating to elements of a narrative, putting more than a handful of words into the initial search returned far too many hits even in a single media source. The same process was repeated for the U.S. media outlets of CNN, Fox News, and the *Washington Post*. The lists were then compared. This leaves open the question of how Russian propaganda messages may disseminate through specific U.S. media outlets as the U.S. outlets were studied only as a single group. As noted in earlier research (Oates, Kaid, and Berry), there is significant variation in media content within U.S. traditional media outlets. Ultimately, it is important to know which U.S. media outlets (if any) are the best ‘carriers’ of Russian propaganda. However, this paper focuses at the national level, by comparing all Russian content with all U.S. news content in our sample.

PropagandaIQ requires that the researcher code each article as either on the strategic narrative, off the narrative, or irrelevant. At this point, it is somewhat too much of a judgment call to make this approach as reliable and valid as needed. In this case, it was less important as it was the same researcher (the first author) performing the coding. The article was marked as relevant if at any point in the text there is a statement that supports the narrative. It was marked as off the narrative if the article countered the narrative in some fashion. If the article either didn’t address the narrative in a meaningful fashion or had elements that both supported and challenged the narrative, it was marked as irrelevant.[[8]](#footnote-8) If it was impossible to tell or if the article was a repeat (which is still a problem in terms of presentation in the PropagandaIQ system, but often a challenge in scraping news stories in general), then it was marked as irrelevant. For each article marked as relevant, the natural language processing system assesses the content and makes recommendations for more relevant keywords, producing a list of suggestions for every 10 articles coded. If an article is marked as not relevant, that content is weighted negatively in the classifier. The coder then needs to either confirm a suggested keyword as relevant for the narrative or delete the suggested keyword from the suggestions. Each time a new keyword is added, the coder can re-run the search system to expand the content search. For each narrative in each set of national media content, the coder coded 100 stories to arrive at a list of final keywords. Coding beyond 100 stories did not appear to improve the list in a meaningful way.

After some consideration, all types of content was coded. This included straight news stories, editorial content, features, interview, and guest columnists. This is quite a difficult subject in terms of coding content found on news websites, as typically only “straight” news is supposed to report facts, etc. However, for the Russian sources it is known that only material that is “on message” is allowed to be published and this is where the majority of the non-news material was found. There are occasionally non-news opinion pieces or interviews that mostly represent individual viewpoints published on the U.S. sites, but they are relatively rare. The non-news material contains important state messaging in the Russian content, so it was all included in the coding as a way of determining narrative for this paper.

In practice, there are are benefits and drawbacks to PropagandaIQ that were discovered through work for this paper. PropagandaIQ often suggested related keywords that were not immediately apparent to the researcher, fulfilling the goal of augmenting deductive content analysis with inductive content analysis. The researcher is unaware of any other system that does this. Second, by using PropagandaIQ, it is possible to create a list of keywords that define narratives with reasonable confidence that the list is supported by both inductive and deductive methods.

The drawbacks to PropagandaIQ are in the need for more structure in the human coding element. The coder found there was perhaps too much latitude in:

1. Making the coding decision about whether the story was on or off narrative. To move this from essentially an individual decision by the researcher by reading the story to a valid and reliable measure, a clear set of coding rules would need to be established. It might be necessary to code segments of stories (rather than the story as one unit), in that sometimes stories include both sides of a narrative (although curiously not that often). It also might be necessary to focus more precisely on specific stories within narratives, as some narratives are complex and complicated.
2. Deciding which of the keywords suggested by the PropagandaIQ system should be added to the search list is tricky and, at this time, the coder for this paper does not have a robust solution. For this paper, words were selected if they appeared to logically fit a narrative, even if they were surprising to the researcher. For example, in Russian media sources, Serbia is often invoked when discussion is about the threat of NATO. The researcher used knowledge of the case study and logic to include and exclude words because, at times, the suggested keywords didn’t make sense to the researcher. This runs the risk of subverting one of the key goals of PropagandaIQ, i.e. to leverage the inductive approach that avoids researcher preconceptions. If a word that was relevant to the narrative but too generic was added (such as Clinton or Europe), it tended to return too many hits in the next search and dilute the power of the classifier.
3. PropagandaIQ in its current form stops short of providing a workable digital “meme” to tag and track a story in news content. PropagandaIQ does help a coder to generate a list of words that are specific to the verbal pattern of a particular strategic narrative. However, the list of words does not have linguistic detail (such as word proximity and relationship) to tag and track a particular narrative as it moves through the media ecology. It would be more useful if PropagandaIQ could detect and export not just the keyword list, but a more detailed linguistic pattern of the strategic narrative. This is a goal for the future.
4. Be mindful of dates searched, as there can be problems with either too much or too little content. When initially searching for the NATO narrative, the entire date range available (from January 2014 to September 2018) was used. This captured a great deal of the Obama’s administration approach to NATO, which is different from that of the Trump administration. Thus, the initial stories retrieved were less likely to be as relevant and it was harder to train the classifier. This makes clear that some common sense in limiting a date range so that it corresponds with a particular administration, election, etc., makes sense. The other point is that some narratives are not very prevalent, particularly messages about Ukraine in general U.S. news. Messages become sharper and more visible during particular news events, such as reports of invasions, deaths, battles, etc. So one might need a longer time window to capture relevant keywords if the narrative is less salient. In this way, capturing and measuring a strategic narrative in the news remains somewhat of an art rather than a science.

Results

NATO and Russia for Narrative 1

Using the seed words “Russia” and “NATO,” an initial search was run in PropagandaIQ, first in Russian sources (RT and Sputnik) and then in U.S. news sources (the *Washington Post*, CNN, and Fox News) with material from January 3, 2016 through September 24, 2018. The coding method outlined above was followed.

It is apparent from scanning the material that narratives surrounding NATO are very different in the two national sources. This is unsurprising, but what is perhaps surprising is the lack of questioning or consideration in the U.S. media. Neither national media sample gives another “side” to the narrative, because the narratives are so firmly established. This is not surprising for the Russian sources, but is somewhat surprising for the U.S. sources that should be following liberal media norms that include balance. In the Russian sources, NATO is portrayed as an alliance with the overt goal of destroying Russia. In the U.S. sources, NATO is portrayed as an alliance of Western states that brings peace and stability to the European region. Even with the election of Trump, who openly questioned the value of NATO during his campaign, the American narrative on NATO has essentially not shifted. So what could one further learn from a cyborg classification system, i.e. are there keywords that will emerge from material that is then identified as on narrative by the human coder?

Use of the cyber classifier brings up seven of the same words (or variants of the same words such as Serb or Serbian, PropagandaIQ does not yet consistently stem words to show common roots) in both Russian and U.S. sources (see Table 1). The suggested keyword extensions for the U.S. news content were relatively limited: Croatia, cyber, Egyptian, ICC (International Criminal Court), and Isra (for Israel). This is part due to the fact that relatively few articles about NATO addressed Russia as a specific threat and tended to address security (including cybersecurity) in more general terms. Of the 100 articles coded, 36 were coded as addressing the Russia/NATO narrative, 50 were coded as not addressing the narrative, and 14 were not relevant or repeats so were excluded from coding.

Table 1 about here.

One of the largest points of intersection between Russian and U.S. sources was on the subject of Montenegro, which joined NATO in June 2017. Both sides also referenced Serbia, with the Russia claiming unfair treatment and prejudice against Serbians by the West. The U.S. coverage was much less emotionally charged and did not include many references to a specific Russian threat. The Russian concerns echo lingering anger over NATO-led bombing during the war in the former Yugoslavia. With roots of bitterness entangled in Russian history -- as the Serbian population of the former Yugoslavia has historically been allied with the Slavic nations -- the interpretation of fault in the Bosnian conflict still sharply divides Russia and the West. In the Russian content, what is perceived as the unfair intervention of the West on the wrong side in Bosnia is an expression of the dangers of NATO in general. As a result, it is unsurprising that many of the keywords retrieved by the cyber classifier for the Russian content related to the former Yugoslavia: Albanian, Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Milosev(ic). It is not surprising that Georgia, as the literal battleground between Westernizing and Russian forces, is a shared keyword.

It was surprising to the researcher that two of the major political battlegrounds were not a part of the U.S. media content relating to NATO. Neither Ukraine nor any of the Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) appeared as keywords in the U.S. sources. These regions are present in the Russian sources (Baltic, Estonia, Ukrain(e)). This would suggest that despite passion and concern from these countries about a feared or actual Russian military invasion, this isn’t linked to the news narrative about NATO in the U.S. sources under review. The much longer list of Russian keywords is, in part, due to more focus on the NATO/Russia narrative in Russian sources than in U.S. news: 75 of the 100 stories in Russian content were on the narrative, 23 were not on the narrative, and only two were excluded as not relevant. That meant that three-quarters of the stories in the Russian search had something to do with the narrative, a narrative that is expressed well in this except from an RT headline and story summary:

*NATO: Instrument of US imperial power masquerading as freedom-loving military alliance*

*NATO is not an organization committed to promoting democratic values, as claimed, but to promoting Western hegemony, domination and, wherever the writ of the West is resisted or contested, regime change.*

From: [RT (Sat, 15 Jul 2017 05:15:00 GMT)](http://rt.com/op-edge/396398-nato-us-imperialism-russia/)

It was also clear from a qualitative review that Russians feared an “Arab NATO” (a term that was used three times) or a general repeat of a NATO alliance in other parts of the world that would work to destroy Russia. Turkey was covered as a battleground state for NATO, in particular as Turkey (a NATO member) purchased a weapons system from Russia during the coverage period. This is an example of the value of a cyborg classifier: Although a coder might notice a reference to the Arab states in stories about NATO, it would be difficult to see this as a pattern or possible verbal meme that is characteristic of how Russia presents a strategic narrative surrounding NATO. By knowing that Russians will pair Arab and NATO in discussions, it becomes a way to tag and track narrative that emanates specifically from Russia.

Russian sources also reported NATO interference in Syria. Here is an example of the framing of the Syrian conflict vis-a-vis NATO:

*'NATO considers Syrian troop deployment fearing ISIS may be defeated'*

*NATO and its allies talk about sending forces into Syria not to defeat ISIS but out of fear the Syrian government in alliance with Russia, Hezbollah and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards may defeat ISIS, political analyst Caleb Maupin told RT.*

From: [RT (2016-02-11T12:49:00)](http://rt.com/op-edge/332134-syria-nato-russia-isis/)

See full article here: <http://rt.com/op-edge/332134-syria-nato-russia-isis/>

There is also some mention of Eastern Europe, but it’s clear that NATO is not a regional issue for Russia: NATO is proxy for all that Russians fear and detest in a world system that they see as unfairly rigged against their country. There is never acknowledgment in the Russian RT or Sputnik coverage that Russia’s illegal seizure of Crimea, invasion of Eastern Ukraine, or shooting down of Malaysia Airlines 17 are the reasons that Russia is often considered a rogue, pariah state. It should be noted, however, that there was no discussion of Ukraine or Crimea in the NATO discourse as coded in the U.S. sources. While Russian sources see NATO as a global threat, U.S. sources see NATO as essentially a routine alliance related to European defense.

Russia in Ukraine for Narrative 2

This paper began with an example of the divergent narrative on Ukraine for Russian and U.S. sources. The coding with PropagandaIQ underlined some key points about how this narrative is covered differently in the two media systems (as measured by the limited content for this research). The seed words for this narrative were “Russia” and “Ukraine.” This worked particularly well at retrieving relevant content, especially for the U.S. outlets. For the U.S. content, 79 of the articles retrieved were on a narrative about Russian involvement in Ukraine and no articles were deemed to be off the narrative. Granted, this was a fairly wide narrative, but it’s interesting that no content appeared that mentioned the two countries together in a benign or separate context. There were a high number of repeats, however, so 21 articles were marked as irrelevant. RT and Sputnik did occasionally mention Russia and Ukraine in the same story without talking about Russia’s involvement in the country: 76 were marked as on the narrative and 24 were marked off the narrative (with no stories being deemed irrelevant).

There was very little overlap linguistically between the two national samples. Only four words -- Crimea, Manafort, Poroshenko, and sanction -- were found in common in the 100 stories coded through PropagandaIQ. This tells us that coverage in both countries dealt with the high-profile case of Paul Manafort, an illegal lobbyist for pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych. Petro Poroshenko has been president of Ukraine since 2014. The common mention of Crimea underlines the problem of using keywords to characterize media content: In the Russian content, it is often referenced as liberation for Crimea or as an issue that angers the West. In the U.S. content, Crimea is consistently characterized as an illegal seizure of Ukrainian territory. However, it is acknowledged that the PropagandaIQ classifier cannot assign affect to the words it retrieves; rather, it points the researcher in a particular direction and/or provides contrasting wordlists that may show a different approach to coverage in two sets of media content.

Indeed, the point about differing content is very clear in the PropagandaIQ analysis for Russian in Ukraine (see Table 2). Aside from the four shared words, the keywords retrieved by the system deviate significantly. In the Russian content, there is a focus on the news of the indictment and subsequent legal proceedings for Manafort and his associates (Indict, Lobbyist, Mueller) as well as the oft-repeated complaints about the Democrats (Podesta[[9]](#footnote-9)) that generally characterizes Russian news about America. Content about Ukraine is linked to issues that evoke significant security concerns in Russia, including Maidan (fear of similar revolutions in Russia, as well as the conviction that it was backed by the Americans) and NATO. Russian context references the former Russia-backed president of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovych, who was ousted by the Euromaidan protests in 2014. Perhaps the most interesting linguistic findings is the emergence of the word “Neocon” and “Russophobia” in conjunction with the Russia/Ukraine narrative in Russian content. In particular, “Russophobia” is a phrase that is employed by both Putin[[10]](#footnote-10) and Russian propaganda outlets (it appeared 25 times in the RT and Sputnik PropagandaIQ content between December 30, 2013, and September 23, 2018). It serves as a memetic device to claim that the United States manufactures outsize fears about Russia to mask its own crippling internal issues. While there is not time to completely unpack and study the term Russophobia in this paper, it serves as an intriguing subject for future study as a possible disinformation linguistic “tag” or meme that can be tracked in the U.S. media.

The keywords retrieved through the PropagandaIQ system show that U.S. media content is much more focused on the military action in Ukraine than the Russian content. This is unsurprising, given both that the Russian content under review is for foreign consumption and not focused on giving military news and that Russia would like to avoid highlighting its own military incursion into Ukraine. The keywords retrieved for the content in the *Washington Post*, CNN, and Fox News included these words related to the military conflict: Ceas(efire), Fire, Rebel, and Separatist. In addition, the location of the conflict was referenced: Donbass, Donetsk, Luhansk. The appearance of the keywork Minsk relates to the shaky peace agreement brokered in Minsk between the Russian-backed separatists and the Ukrainian government in Kyiv. Finally, the U.S. sources linked the story of Nadiya Savchenko, the Ukrainian fighter pilot who was held and finally released by Russians, to the Russia/Ukraine narrative.[[11]](#footnote-11)

PropagandaIQ highlights that, despite starting with the same search terms, the content surrounding the Russia/Ukraine narrative differs significantly in the two groups of different national sources. That is to be expected, but what is interesting about using the machine classifier is the way in which unexpected words such as Russophobia for the Russian narrative emerge.

Conclusions

This paper set out to complete three tasks: to analyze the existing literature on narrative with a focus on strategic narrative, to attempt to find a way to operationalize the term for political communication research for content analysis, and to test a new software application that synthesizes human content analysis with computational linguistics. On reflection, this was a lot of to ask of a single paper, but progress was made in each of the three areas. By reviewing key works on narrative, master narrative, and strategic narrative, the paper is able to synthesize a working definition of strategic narrative with identifiable components. While much of this work was completed by Miskimmon et. al and Roselle et al., but this paper was an attempt to further refine and illuminate key, measurable characteristics of strategic narrative. The ability to operationalize the concept of strategic narrative, tested in this paper, holds promise for better analysis of foreign propaganda deployed as part of information war. This is particularly useful in an era in which the very concept of “news” has become heavily politicized in the United States. By concentrating on the level of story and narrative -- who is saying what to whom in what way and to what end -- one can avoid a quagmire of bias, affect, and intentionality. Rather, we are illuminating storylines that fold into strategic narratives and highlighting how and why certain narratives are more effective and appealing at projecting national power into another country’s media. PropagandaIQ, the “cyber classifier” developed by two authors and tested for this study, shows promise in terms of multidimensional content analysis in two key ways. This ‘test run’ of the system showed that PropagandaIQ can both effectively leverage inductive and deductive reasoning, illuminating textual connections in news content in a new and useful way. At the same time -- despite some bugs and challenges -- PropagandaIQ demonstrated a promising way to blend human coding with automated linguistic analysis to leverage the benefits of both types of news content analysis.

Table 1

Keywords for Russia and NATO Narratives in Russian and US Media Sources

January 3, 2016 to September 24, 2018

Seed words: Russia and NATO

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Shared | US Sources Only | Russian Sources Only  |
| Balkan | Croatia | Albanian |
| Crimea | Cyber | Baltic |
| Democrat/Democracy | Egyptian | Belgrad |
| Georgia/Georgian | ICC | Bosnia |
| Kosovo | Isra(el) | Estonia |
| Montenegrin/Montenegro |  | Herzegovina |
| Serb/Serbia/Serbian |  | ISI(S) |
|  |  | Latvia |
|  |  | Macedonia |
|  |  | Milosev |
|  |  | Nuclear |
|  |  | Poland |
|  |  | Romania |
|  |  | Soviet |
|  |  | Syrian |
|  |  | Terror |
|  |  | Turkish |
|  |  | Ukrain(e) |
|  |  | War  |

Table 2

Keywords for Russia and Ukraine Narratives in Russian and US Media Sources

January 4, 2016 to September 25, 2018

Seed words: Russia and Ukraine

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Shared | US Sources Only | Russian Sources Only  |
| Crimea | Ceas(efire) | Indict |
| Manafort | Donbass | Lobbyist |
| Poroshenko | Donetsk | Maidan |
| Sanction | Fire | Mueller |
|  | Luhansk | NATO |
|  | Minsk | Neocon |
|  | Rebel | Podesta |
|  | Savchenko | Russophobia |
|  | Separatist | Yanukovich/Yanukovych |

Figure 1

Rise of “Fake News” in Google Trends, January 1, 2016, to September 30, 2018



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1. It could even be that we discover that narratives have more overlap between the Left and the Right in the United States than currently perceived. This, however, may be unfounded optimism. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In addition to their scholarly work, the trio established an interactive website in which one can look at how their visualizations of the spread of messages in the U.S. 2008 elections (see<http://www.memetracker.org>). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This leaves out the role of other powerful elements of broadcasting, including video, still images, music, vocal tones, etc. This research makes the assumption that words are the basic key element of message transmission. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. NATO is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which was formed after World War II in order to contain the Soviet threat in Europe. It has grown from the original 12 countries to 29 members. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Russia has pursued a similar narrative for Crimea; however, for this paper we decided to focus on Ukraine as an ongoing conflict that is discussed at least somewhat more frequently in the West. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Trump often tries to obfuscate, but he constantly attacks the institution of the press in the United States. For example, on August 2, 2018, Trump tweeted “They asked my daughter Ivanka whether or not the media is the enemy of the people. She correctly said no. It is the FAKE NEWS, which is a large percentage of the media, that is the enemy of the people!” For a discussion, see <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/aug/03/sanders-trump-acosta-media-enemy> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The system scrapes the text from news stories for CNN and Fox News. Breitbart was included as an “outlier” source that does not ascribe to norms of U.S. media. It is better defined as an advocacy or propaganda website rather than a news website. Because of the media interest in a link between outlets such as Breitbart and Russian propaganda (for example, see https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/08/24/breitbart-other-alt-right-websites-darlings-russian-propaganda-effort/598258001/), the project includes Breitbart for future analysis of its specific role in spreading Russian narratives. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Finding articles with this approach was relatively rare, which is somewhat surprising in the U.S. news context that is supposed to provide ‘balance.’ However, this would suggest that the narratives under discussion were not contested narratives. In addition, U.S. news is traditionally less concerned about balance in international reporting as opposed to contentious issues in U.S. politics. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John Podesta was chair of Hillary Clinton’s presidential election campaign. His Email was hacked and content deemed to cast a negative light on the Clintons was posted on Wikileaks during the 2016 campaign. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Sean Steiner, a 2018 intern at the Wilson Center, helped me to make the connection between “Russophobia” in Putin’s statements and its appearance in Russian content. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The Savchenko story had a very bizarre ending, in that after her release in 2016 she took a seat in the Ukrainian parliament but was soon arrested on charges of attempted terrorism. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)