



Transnational news media coverage of distant suffering in the Syrian civil war: An analysis of CNN, Al-Jazeera English and Sputnik online news

Media, War & Conflict
1–26

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DOI: 10.1177/1750635219846029

journals.sagepub.com/home/mwc



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Abstract

This study analyzed news stories published on the online sites of CNN, Al-Jazeera English, and Sputnik to investigate how the transnational news outlets framed the human suffering associated with the Syrian war. Unlike prior studies that have tended to be based on traditional nation-state paradigms, this research approached the analysis from a cosmopolitan perspective. The findings revealed that in concert with standard journalistic routines and news values, all three news outlets commonly employed a *mass death and displacement* frame to depict human suffering inside Syria. The adoption of this frame suggests that in telling the story of human suffering, the three media outlets focused on brief facts and shocking statistics without detailed depictions of the human suffering. The meager presence of a cosmopolitan outlook in the news coverage indicates that although transnational media target a global audience with English as *Lingua Franca*, they cannot be completely independent of geopolitics.

Keywords

distant suffering, cosmopolitanism, Syria, war, CNN, Al-Jazeera English, Sputnik, framing

Introduction

Growing out of the unrest of the 2011 Arab Spring, the Syrian civil war soon became a multi-sided armed conflict in Syria, involving the intervention of major international powers. The still-ongoing conflict has caused instability and tremendous humanitarian catastrophe in the specified region. From the spring of 2011 to the spring of 2016, an

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estimated 400,000 individuals had been directly killed by violence and 70,000 had died due to lack of food, medication, and other indirect causes (Boghani, 2016). The total death toll has no doubt dramatically increased for, according to the Security Council of the United Nations (2018), in the first week of February alone in 2018, more than 1,000 people had been killed. The war has also created the largest refugee crisis since World War II (Sanger and Barnard, 2016). The complexity associated with the war has made Syria a dangerous place for journalists. The assignment for media practitioners inside Syria has been a logistical nightmare; journalists have had to operate covertly in a life-risking environment with minimum security, or as Ricchiardi (2012: 26) has characterized it, 'a porous safety net'.

The Syrian civil conflict has commanded widespread media attention since its outbreak. News media across the globe have devoted extensive coverage to Syria's civil war and have produced varying media discourses. According to a research study conducted by the European Institute of Peace (EIP, 2016),¹ terrorism and conflict news in relation to the Syrian war were the main aspects of global media coverage from March 2015 to February 2016, whereas only 3 percent of the news coverage concerned humanitarian issues. The study found that a majority of the world's news media focused heavily on the conflict side of the Syrian civil war, despite the fact that more than 85 percent of Syrians, at the time of EIP's study, were not involved in hostile activities.

The results from EIP's study align with findings from studies that have examined news coverage of war and suffering (Fahmy and Eakin, 2014; Lee and Maslog, 2005; Neumann and Fahmy, 2012; Robinson et al., 2009). Those studies have also found that war-related humanitarian issues often do not attract as much media attention as warfare and acts of violence and atrocities. Even though humanitarian stories are often overshadowed by lead stories of conflict in news, it is still important to understand how news media construct the image of vulnerable civilians in the context of violence. For as Cottle (2009b) has found, how those misfortunes are communicated around the globe largely determines public knowledge of and attitudes on suffering of people in distant locations. Moreover, the media coverage of humanitarian sufferings so often is 'accompanied by an upsurge of global reactions and outpouring of aid pledges' (Kyriakidou, 2009: 481). As such, the media have the potential of playing a critical role in the protection of human rights as well as the development of foreign policy (Ovisovitch, 1993).

Past research has provided useful insights into news media representations of humanitarian sufferings in the reporting of war/natural disasters (Chouliaraki, 2008a; Joye, 2015; Moeller, 1999) and how those portrayals might affect a nation's foreign policy stance toward those issues (Livingston and Eachus, 1995). However, their studies have tended to be grounded in the traditional nation-state paradigm. A national framework of analysis is incapable of accounting for the major social transformations that have taken place under globalization. Significant advancements in technology have enhanced instantaneous communication across national borders and have led to an increased sense of human interconnectedness and even a reconfiguration of cultural identities apart from the nation-state. Given these changes, certain scholars have argued that there has been an epistemological shift from 'methodological nationalism' to 'cosmopolitanism' (Beck, 2002; Cottle, 2009a) and have called for research perspectives to move beyond national

borders and agendas. According to Beck (2002: 18), 'The national perspective is a monologic imagination ... the cosmopolitan perspective is an alternative imagination, an imagination of alternative ways of life and rationalities, which include the otherness of the other.' He conceptualizes cosmopolitanization as an 'internal globalization' whereby global issues or concerns become 'everyday local experiences and the "moral life-worlds" of the people' (p. 17).

This study therefore attempts to explore the possibility that transnational news media are presenting a cosmopolitan perspective in their coverage of a global crisis situation, namely the human suffering caused by the Syrian civil war. It does so through a qualitative thematic analysis of online news stories from three transnational news media outlets: CNN, Al-Jazeera English, and Sputnik. The study's overarching objectives were to: (1) reveal the overarching news frames embedded in the news stories regarding the human suffering caused by the Syrian conflict, and (2) bring to light the possible existence of a cosmopolitan outlook in the stories. Before the specifics of the present study are introduced, a conceptual understanding of human suffering and how it has been portrayed in the news media are provided, followed by an overview of the theoretical frameworks, framing and cosmopolitanism, which served to undergird the study.

News-mediated human suffering

From the perspective of medicine, the meaning of 'suffering' is commonly associated with the concept of pain and human dignity (Milton, 2013). According to Cassell (1991), suffering is caused by severe distress that has a detrimental impact on personhood. The distress can be a result of threat, major loss, or damage to someone or his or her own identity (Anderson, 2015). Human suffering can happen to a certain group of people, a community, or even a society as a whole. According to the 2010 UN Development Program and Human Development report, the volume of deaths, injuries, diseases, and displacements has rapidly increased since the late 20th century, especially in less-developed nations. Social injustice, violence, dire human consequences of the 'failing state' and natural disaster are major factors that have led to various global crises (Moeller, 2006). So often, global crises are illuminated through gut-wrenching photographs, video footages, and texts in contemporary media, thus earning the frequently used label of 'global suffering' (Milton, 2013: 227).

Human suffering is on the opposite side of humanity that 'recognizes the fundamental dignity and value of an essential humanity common to all people' (Rieff, 2002: 332). Although a single, universally accepted definition of humanitarianism does not exist, the dominant view of humanitarianism is grounded in several key ideas such as the commitment to compassion, the alleviation of suffering, the reduction of loss of life, and the improvement of humanity beyond borders, especially in emergency situations (Anderson, 2015; Barnett, 2011; Orgad and Seu, 2014).

Without direct personal experience, most news audiences come to know and make sense of human suffering primarily through media (Chouliaraki, 2006; Frosh and Pinchevski, 2014; Milton, 2013; Von Engelhardt and Jansz, 2015). In this sense, media discourse plays a big role in how the suffering is constructed and perceived, especially in foreign news (EIP, 2016). As Cottle (2006) has argued, media work in a variety of

complex ways to mediatize the crisis and sufferings. They help audiences to imagine the reality of other people's suffering and influence the stances the audiences take in relation to those suffering (Silverstone, 2006).

Studies have shown, however, that media portrayals of human suffering of distant others have tended to implicate the power imbalance between the West and the rest of the world (Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001). That imbalance leads to the empirical question of whose suffering matters more –Westerners or non-Westerners? One study (Hawkins, 2002) found that, in the case of the catastrophic 1994 ethnic cleansing in Rwanda, human suffering remained invisible in the mass media. Chouliaraki (2008a: 13) contends that even with the recent changes in technology, news of others' suffering is still subject to a selection process guided by different gatekeeping forces that ultimately 'define whose suffering matters most for the Western spectators'. Thussu (2005) argues that news on human suffering remains a priority in international news only when it is subject to the demand of infotainment. The news cleanses human suffering from its horrors to make the suffering more palatable for Western audience taste or highlights the sensational aspects of human suffering. Thussu's argument resonates with the findings of Moeller's (1999) study on American news coverage of disease, famine, and war. She found that distant sufferers were often repetitively and sensationally presented in news stories. With such news coverage, Moeller asserts that viewer compassion is reduced or, as she describes it, 'compassion fatigue' sets in.

Western-centric and sensational approaches to news coverage of human suffering can have broad implications. They can lead to psychological detachment on the part of the viewer and a lack of impetus toward action to alleviate the suffering (Joye, 2015). Failing to act, in turn, can lead to an exacerbation of the crisis for, as Beck (2006a) contends, threats to one nation-state can potentially extend to other regions of the world. And, as Bauman (2007: 25–26) argues, 'there cannot be local solutions to globally originated and globally invigorated problems.' It is within this context that it is easy to understand the importance of the media in portraying human suffering. To understand how human suffering has been covered in more recent times, specifically in relation to the Syrian conflict, this present study employed the theoretical concepts of framing and cosmopolitanism.

Framing

Although framing research originated within the fields of sociology and psychology, communication scholar Robert Entman's work (e.g. Entman, 1993, 2004) and his conceptualization of framing have significantly shaped research involving media and conflict. In his often-cited definition, Entman (1993: 52) asserts,

to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, casual interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.

In essence, within the context of news media, frames are manifestations of how news-makers are constructing and providing meaning to events and issues. Some scholars (e.g. Bennett et al., 2007) have argued that news frames emanate from the dynamics of elite

press–government relationships, while others (e.g. Reich, 2008; Tuchman, 1973) assert they are a result of news production routines and journalistic news values (e.g. Price and Tewksbury, 1997) or the news media outlets under which the journalists operate (e.g. Hamdy and Gomaa, 2012). Within the context of international conflict, the influence of geopolitics has also been maintained as a major factor (Ojala and Pantti, 2017).

A vast number of studies have been conducted under the theoretical framework of framing. These studies have not only contributed to our understanding of the varying contours of news frames, but also the impact of the frames at individual (Iyengar, 1991) and societal levels (e.g. De Vreese, 2005). Researchers have categorized news frames as either thematic or episodic depending on the narrative techniques used in the news content. Thematic frames encompass narratives that focus on information (e.g. statistics, historical facts, comments by officials) that provides background or context to the story (Iyengar, 1991). In contrast, episodic frames place emphasis on individual examples or stories that serve to illustrate the events and issues. Episodic frames are said to be more emotionally engrossing (Gross, 2008). In fact, because of their compelling nature and ability to elicit emotions, episodic frames have been found to have strength in influencing attitudes regarding the event or issue being covered (Iyengar, 1991; Springer and Harwood, 2014).

Based on their review of framing literature, De Vreese et al. (2001) found that news frames can be separated into ‘generic news frames’ or ‘issue-specific news frames’. Generic news frames (e.g. conflict, economic interest, morality, human interest, etc.) mirror broad news values and can be applied to a wider spectrum of news topics. Issue-specific news frames, on the other hand, are more detailed, and are centralized around particular news events or topics.

In war-time reporting, Nygren et al. (2018) have characterized journalists as working in a ‘crossfire’ or ‘quite literally between the two sides in the conflict’ (p. 1059) and suggest that this struggle ‘puts the normative foundations of journalism under pressure’ (p. 1061). The researchers content analyzed news coverage in Russia, Ukraine, Sweden, and Poland regarding the 2014 conflict in eastern Ukraine between pro-Russian, anti-government forces and the Ukrainian government. They found that, with the exception of Sweden, the frames reflected the historical and political context of each country.

Focusing on the Egyptian news coverage of the 2011 democracy movement in Egypt, Hamdy and Gomaa (2012) found that the news frames corresponded with the type of news media outlet generating the news. Whereas the state-owned ‘semiofficial’ newspapers used the conflict and economic consequences frames to connote support of the Mubarak government, the independent newspapers presented a mixture of the differing frames, which included the human-interest and responsibility frames, and suggested balanced coverage.

In his book entitled *Media, Propaganda and the Politics of Intervention*, Zollman (2017) presents his extensive study on how the elite press in the US, Germany, and the UK framed human rights violations in select armed conflicts. Coming from an international propaganda perspective based on the works of Herman and Chomsky (2008), at the outset the author asserts that the ‘news media in liberal democracies operates as a propaganda system on behalf of state-corporate elite interests’ (Zollman, 2017: 1). Through his analysis of the reporting of human rights abuses by Muammar Gaddafi’s

forces in Libya, the Serbian forces in Kosovo, the Syrian army in Syria, the Egyptian forces in Egypt, and the United States/Coalition forces in Iraq, Zollman is able to sustain his propaganda model argument by showing differences in the frames offered by the elite press that were related to whether or not the perpetrators were considered enemy or ally. Specifically, he found that incidents involving human rights violations conducted by those viewed as enemies were largely framed as nefarious atrocities. Victims were often featured prominently and dramatically. In stark contrast, incidents involving human rights violations perpetrated by those thought to be allies were framed as military and/or police casualties. The deaths were minimalized and presented as tragic, but unavoidable consequences of war.

Zollman's work is among the few studies that have analyzed press coverage of the Syrian conflict. The other existing studies have specifically examined news coverage of the conflict through the lens of established generic frames. Godefroidt et al. (2016) analyzed stories appearing in *Le Figaro*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The New York Times*, and *The Moscow Times* before and after the chemical weapon attack of 21 August 2013. They found that *nationalism* and *responsibility* were the most prevalent frames across all four of the newspapers. *Human interest*, *morality*, and *economic interest* frames were barely present.

Cozma and Kozman (2015) similarly studied how two US elite newspapers, *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*, covered international reactions to the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons against its own citizens in August 2013. The study found that *conflict* framing, thematic coverage, and a high reliance on official sources were the main attributes of the two newspapers' coverage. In particular, despite the fact that the chemical weapons attack caused a large number of casualties, the researchers found that the *conflict* frame predominated in the two newspapers' coverage, which emphasized disagreement among the major international players involved in the crisis. *Human-interest* and *morality* frames were hardly present. The authors explained their findings through the lens of social identity theory. They argued that since American journalists were not able to personally identify with the Syrians due to little cultural connectedness, the *human-interest* frame that focused on a human face or an emotional angle was scarce.

Rather than approaching the analysis of the Syrian conflict with predefined generic frames, this present study took an issue-specific framing approach by examining the main frames embedded in the online stories of CNN, Al-Jazeera English, and Sputnik that pertained to the humanitarian crisis created by the Syrian war. Thus, the first two research questions were:

RQ1: What were the main news frames circulated on CNN, Al-Jazeera English, and Sputnik regarding humanitarian issues in the Syrian civil war?

RQ2: What were the variations in coverage across the three media organizations in terms of the frames that emerged?

This study also explores the possibility of a central cosmopolitan outlook coming to light in the stories pertaining to the Syrian conflict. The following section explains the concept of cosmopolitanism and presents an argument as to why it should be considered within the context of understanding transnational news coverage.

Cosmopolitanism

Originating from the Greek word *Kosmopolites*, the concept of cosmopolitanism has been theorized by various socio-political philosophers both in ancient and modern times (Kleingeld and Brown, 2013). For instance, in the 4th century BCE, as an exile of Sinope, Greek philosopher Diogenes claimed that he belonged to a citizenship of the world, which represented a larger and morally significant community of humans (Commissiong, 2012). Later, Stoic philosophers developed the idea of cosmopolitanism by concerning the causes of human suffering at the individual level. They firmly believed that ‘every person by virtue of their communicative and rational faculties has inherent dignity and should be treated as such regardless of where they happen to live or their social class’ (p. 26). During the Enlightenment era, philosopher Immanuel Kant expounded on the international legal order by articulating the need for a cosmopolitan condition in which the world is linked together, so that a violation of rights on one equals to a violation on all human beings (Kleingeld, 2006).

Although variations in current interpretations of cosmopolitanism exist, at the core of the understandings is a concept that describes a cosmopolitan as ‘a citizen of the world: an enlightened individual who believes he or she belongs to a common humanity or world order rather than a set of particular customs or traditions’ (Trepanier and Habib, 2011: 1). In terms of media and communication, coming from a ‘world risk society’ perspective, Beck (2009) explains that global crises can become ‘cosmopolitan events’ once they are staged and centralized in mass media. In an interconnected world, mediated global crises transcend traditional boundaries that symbolically define local and global by creating a cosmopolitan vision or outlook. Beck (2006b: 13–14) further explains, ‘in a world of global crises and dangers produced by civilization, the old differentiations between internal and external, national and international, us and them, lose their validity and a new cosmopolitan realism becomes essential to survival.’

Chouliaraki (2008b) maintains that the news media hold a symbolic power to advance a cosmopolitan perspective through the employment of emotive words and imagery, and thereby, spread empathy and compassion toward those suffering. Through the power of language, a local concern becomes a global concern. In line with this argument, Bruggemann and Von Konigslow (2013) assert that media coverage with a cosmopolitan outlook encompasses a substantial number of voices, including those from foreign nationals. The local perspectives are valued and transnational discursive understandings are exchanged. The social imagination is expanded beyond the local and national discourse (Kyriakidou, 2009).

Researchers who have explored the notion of cosmopolitanism and news media’s symbolic constructions of different cases of human suffering in relation to violence and natural disasters (Chouliaraki, 2006; Joye, 2015; Orgad and Seu, 2014) have employed a variety of research methods such as critical discourse analysis, thematic analysis, content analysis, and framing analysis. For example, based on a cross-national critical discourse analysis of broadcast news coverage of human suffering, Chouliaraki (2008a) proposed a model of ‘hierarchy of distant suffering’ in news that included three types of mediation: ‘adventure news’, ‘emergency news’ and ‘ecstatic news’. In this hierarchical model, ‘adventure news’ is merely a brief representation of facts or what happens without any

reference to a broad context. This type of news representation curtails the viewers' feelings of sympathy toward sufferers and thus stays at the very bottom of the hierarchy. 'Emergency news', on the other hand, entails relatively complex narratives that present the dangers facing the sufferers and offers different calls for action. Perched at the top of the hierarchical model is 'ecstatic news'. It involves coverage of extraordinary events that evoke alarm and dismay among viewers. The sufferer is presented as a 'sovereign' being; a relationship is set up between the sufferers and spectator 'whereby the spectator engages with the misfortune of the sufferer continuously, intensely and in multiple ways' (Chouliaraki, 2008a: 378). This type of news narrows the proximity between viewers and sufferers, and thus potentially solicits the viewers' disposition toward compassion and social action.

Through examining two Belgian television stations' coverage of international disasters in 2011, Joye (2015) identified four different discourse modes that domesticated the international disasters. They are: *emotional domestication*, *what's at stake for us*, *aid-driven domestication*, and *familiarizing the unfamiliar*. Joye argued that, through these four discourse modes, journalists could elicit feelings of sympathy within audiences and hence invite them to relate to those who were suffering, potentially leading to cosmopolitan sentiments. West and O'Reilly (2014) examined the main discourses pertaining to the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami that appeared in major Australian major newspapers. They found that 'risk', 'suffering', 'government aid' and 'public charity' were the four major discourses to emerge. Even though four discourses were constructed within the national (Australian) boundaries and sentiment, the authors surmised that the newspapers' discourses that 'focused on global connections that were formed through international tourism and expatriates, allowed empathy to be created with those who were suffering' as a result of the tsunami (p. 348).

Through analyzing Brazilian, French, and American news coverage of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Robinson (2015) found that Brazilian newspaper stories reflected a cosmopolitan outlook by identifying victims as members of the human family. Similarly, French newspaper content adopted a transnational cosmopolitan perspective to construct the story of the 9/11 terror attack. In the French news stories, expressions of solidarity with those who were suffering were found. In discussing his findings, Robinson argued that a cosmopolitan viewpoint could possibly function as a bridge to connect distant others.

The research studies discussed above addressed several central issues that are tied to media representations of distant sufferings. Their analyses revealed patterns and modes employed by news media to depict humanitarian disasters and distant sufferings. The studies also provided in-depth discussion on how media representations might shape viewers' understandings of distant sufferings and, in the end, possibly cultivate compassion and a sense of solidarity (Orgad and Seu, 2014).

Building upon past research, this present study goes beyond the state-media nexus to examine how three transnational news networks, CNN (US-based), Al-Jazeera English (Qatar-based) and Sputnik International (Russia-based) news constructed their humanitarian reports regarding the Syrian civil war. Since disasters and human sufferings are no longer territorially bound or nationally defined events, the ontology and epistemological constitutions of disaster and distant suffering through media and communication have

been fundamentally changed (Cottle, 2014). And as Chouliaraki (2008b: 329) argues, transnational media may be able to ‘produce a sense of moral agency that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, thereby constituting cosmopolitan communities of emotion and action’. This study hopes to contribute to scholarship on media witnessing/media spectatorship of distant suffering by investigating whether or not a cosmopolitan outlook was reflected in the selected transnational news media outlets’ coverage of humanitarian issues stemming from the Syrian civil war. Thus, the final research question posed was:

RQ3: Via the news frames, did the three transnational news media outlets (CNN, Al-Jazeera English, and Sputnik) convey a cosmopolitan outlook in regard to the humanitarian issues associated with the Syrian civil war?

Method

Sampling

This study examined the news stories regarding the humanitarian crisis stemming from the Syrian civil conflict that appeared on the online sites of three transnational news outlets: CNN, Al-Jazeera English, and Sputnik.

Volkmer (2002) has argued that global news networks have revolutionized international news reporting by extending the narrow, national political context of journalism practice beyond the nation-state. News organizations like CNN, Euronews, and BBC World Service Television, which focused on international distribution of news, had established a new form of global communication via the presentation of global issues by ‘globally expanding consciousness of “humankind”’ (Volkmer, 1999: 5). Compared to local news sources, all three of the selected news sources in this study use English as lingua franca and target large-scale global audiences. For instance, CNN has a staff of more than 4,000 and reaches nearly 260 million global audiences (‘CNN changed news’, 2005). Likewise, Al-Jazeera English’s programming has been distributed to more than 260 million homes in 120 countries (Figenschou, 2014). On their online news sites, both CNN and Al-Jazeera English have proclaimed their global visions (Al Jazeera English, 2015; CNN, 2015). Similarly, Russia’s recently launched multimedia news outlet, Sputnik, has been reaching all major cities across the world with programming presented in 30 languages (Rawnsley, 2015). Sputnik purports to offer ‘alternative news content’ (Sputnik, 2016) in order to ‘serve up a more objective kind of news’ (Groll, 2014).

The online sites of CNN, Al-Jazeera English, and Sputnik share common multi-media attributes that include news text, photographs, video components, and social media (e.g. tweets) inserts. As major transnational news outlets, all three feature on their websites news articles written by their journalists or special columnists. The articles can be freely accessed by anyone connected to the internet. Read by a wide spectrum of individuals, the content of the news articles become a part of the collective imagination on a global scale. This study’s researchers decided to focus their analysis on the three selected news media outlets because of their transnational nature, their similar online attributes, and because the ‘intensification, diversity and complexity of global news media have contributed to an

increased transnational awareness of “other” news stories’ (Figenschou, 2014: 235). With the news outlets’ global orientation, an expectation existed that the news outlets would employ a cosmopolitan perspective in their news coverage of the humanitarian crisis caused by the Syrian civil conflict.

The study’s researchers also recognized, however, that despite the news outlets’ commonalities, variations in coverage would exist due to the differences in the outlets’ countries of origin and the differing political–economic and cultural drivers of their news operations. CNN is a commercially run 24/7 news company based in the US. Al-Jazeera channel is funded by Qatar’s ruling family and usually informs through Arabic perspectives (El-Nawawy and Iskandar, 2003). Sputnik is an online multimedia news service created by the Russian state-owned news agency (Sputnik, 2016).

Additionally, the researchers acknowledged the possibility that differences in coverage might exist due to the political postures taken by each of the countries in which the news outlets reside. Specifically, the US has unequivocally advocated for a regime change in Syria with the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad (Simons, 2016). In a similar vein, after failing to convince the Assad regime to adopt political reforms designed to appease oppositionists and due to the rise in violence in Syria, Qatar, along with other Gulf States such as Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE), has favored a regime change in Syria (Hokayem, 2014). Russia, on the other hand, has steadfastly supported the Assad regime. In taking this position, Russian President Vladimir Putin has maintained that external forces, namely Western nations, should not infringe on the territorial sovereignty of authoritarian states (Allison, 2013). Political observers have also pointed out that one of the main underlying reasons for Russia’s support of the al-Assad government is Russia’s concerns that if the Islamist groups in Syria are successful in ousting al-Assad, they might turn their attention to assisting insurgents in Russia’s North Caucasus (Allison, 2013; Stent, 2016).

It is beyond the scope of this study to delve into the direct influences of a country’s political positioning vis-à-vis Syria on the news content of the selected news outlets. Moreover, the impact of the structural and socio-cultural differences between the outlets on any content variations also cannot be adequately dissected. What this study can stress at the beginning, however, is that all three organizations are presenting themselves as objective transnational news organizations. Past studies (e.g. Samuel-Azran and Assaf, 2016) also suggest that with regard to Al-Jazeera English and CNN, professional journalistic norms are being followed.

For the purposes of this study, news articles pertaining to the humanitarian issues emanating from the Syrian conflict were collected using the search engine of each of the transnational news outlet’s online sites. The issues included civilian casualties (as a result of warfare, acts of violence or atrocities perpetrated by terror groups), displacement (as a result of conflict, Syrian citizens fled to neighboring countries), children and women, humanitarian aid, and the everyday lives of ordinary people. A one-year time frame was used beginning with the date of 30 September 2015, when Russia began air-strikes in Syria, thus intensifying international involvement in the conflict. To identify the news stories (text) archived on the three online news sites that appeared within the selected one-year period, the keywords of ‘Syria’, ‘Syrian humanitarian crisis’, ‘civilian casualties’, and ‘Syrian civilians’ were used for the search. CNN generated 32 news

articles, Al-Jazeera English generated 88 news articles, and Sputnik had 53 news articles.

In order to analyze a relatively similar number of samples, a simple random sampling technique was employed to select 38 (3 editorial pieces, 3 feature stories, and 32 news report) Al-Jazeera English's news articles out of 88, and 28 Sputnik news articles (1 editorial piece, 27 news reports) out of 53. All 32 retrieved news articles on CNN were analyzed (5 editorial pieces, 4 feature stories, and 23 news reports). After selecting samples across the three media outlets, all retrieved news articles (98) in total were downloaded from their respective online news sites and saved as PDF files for further analysis.

Analysis technique

It was determined that a qualitative method would be most appropriate to analyze the collected news stories for this present study since the researchers strived to reveal the types of frames that transnational news outlets are conveying to their global consumers in regard to the humanitarian crisis associated with the Syrian conflict. An inductive approach was used to analyze the news stories. More specifically, instead of taking a deductive approach by seeking the presence of established generic frames (i.e. economic interest, conflict, etc.), frames were allowed to emerge through a careful thematic analysis of the text. Following the analysis and identification of frames, whether or not the derived frames would be categorized as thematic or episodic was then considered.

The unit of analysis was each news article. Rather than manually coding the articles to uncover the underlying themes, a computer-assisted qualitative data software analysis program called NVivo was used. NVivo is a rigorous qualitative method that allows researchers to generate themes from the data and find relationships (Hilal and Alabri, 2013). Researchers are able to easily tag areas within a text (labeled as 'nodes') that they decipher to be related to concepts of interests or emergent themes. Similar to the procedure that one would carry out when identifying codes as part of a manual textual analysis, NVivo allows researchers to pinpoint nodes that can then be examined within the context of the text under examination or across different texts. Memos can be taken on the possible relationships that may exist between the nodes. The nodes can then be examined and merged into broader categories or themes. Based on the identified categories, NVivo also permits the creation of visual models that shows the interconnections between the newly created categories or themes.

Although the NVivo program provides a means to employ a rigorous qualitative analysis of data, it still falls short of alleviating concerns regarding the validity and reliability of the themes decoded from the analysis (Ozkan, 2004). To address this in this particular study, a secondary coder randomly selected 25 percent of the articles and used a manual thematic analysis method to code those articles. More specifically, four stages identified by Boyatzis (1998) were used: (1) 'sensing themes' (i.e. 'recognizing the codable moment'); (2) 'doing it reliably' (i.e. coding in a consistent manner); (3) 'developing codes'; (4) and 'interpreting the information and themes in the context of a theory or conceptual framework'. A deep reading of all of the news stories was repeatedly carried out before segments of passages were identified as codes. Codes were interpreted as

topics or wording thought to be related to the research questions posed in the study. The codes were then examined to search for patterns and revealed themes. Existing tensions or similarities between the themes were also recorded. From these themes, news frames were identified.

An initial review of the themes that were emerging from the data via the NVivo qualitative analysis method indicated that those themes closely matched the themes that the secondary coder had revealed through manual coding. Thus, confidence in the chosen method was heightened.

Through the thematic analysis completed via Nvivo and manual coding, several frames were identified based upon identical wording, repetitive reading, and interpretation of key information within the context. All frames identified in this study are presented in the next findings section.

Findings

Syrian conflict news frames

To decipher the main news frames that were circulated on CNN, Al-Jazeera English and Sputnik regarding humanitarian issues in the context of the Syrian civil conflict, a total of 98 sample articles were examined with the help of NVivo, a computer software thematic analysis program. Overall, the frame of ‘mass death and displacement’ was manifested through all three of the selected transnational news outlets’ coverage. The analysis also revealed other noticeable news frames across the outlets.

CNN. With regard to RQ1, the news frames of ‘civilian as victims’, ‘mass death and displacement’, ‘Russian war crime’, ‘children’s nightmare’, and ‘call for humanity’ were manifested in CNN’s articles.

Civilians as victims. Because the intense military conflict caused a large scale of death and destruction, it is not surprising that a majority of CNN’s news articles focused on the struggles of the Syrian people. For example, by quoting CNN international correspondent Clarissa Ward’s speech on Syria at the UN, CNN’s coverage focused on desperate civilians in Aleppo, Syria.

I sat in the apartment of an older woman called Souad who lost three of her sons in this war, she’s blind and elderly and suffers from various health problems. Needless to say she was not able to get the medicine that she required for quite some time and the neighborhood that she lives in has really been bombed into the stone age. (quoted in CNN, 15 August 2016)

Moreover, CNN displayed the people’s helplessness and vulnerability, as Clarissa Ward went on, ‘... and we both understood in that moment that we were absolutely powerless to protect ourselves.’ By quoting from a local Aleppo resident, ‘The last time I had a full meal was at least a month and a half ago ... now, I mainly have water with leaves. Winter is here and the trees no longer have leaves, so I am not sure how we will survive’ (quoted in CNN, 9 January 2016), CNN’s coverage expressed that, as the victims of the endless civil war, local residents were drained of needed food and water and they could hardly live.

Children's nightmare. CNN's coverage also focused on a special group of people – children. CNN demonstrated that the Syrian children were direct victims of the starvation caused by war:

The UNICEF team screened the children they found in the hospital. They found 22 children under the age of 5 suffering from malnutrition, according to a statement Friday from Hanaa Singer, the organization's representative in Syria. They also found six children between the ages of 6 and 18 suffering from severe malnutrition. (CNN, 15 January 2016)

In the meantime, CNN's coverage showed that children suffered from war both physically and psychologically, evidenced by the following writing:

When you look at Omran's face, this bloodied, impassive face, it hits you that the boy is so traumatized that even as he pulled his hand away with his own blood, he doesn't react, he just doesn't respond. This is now what it looks like to be lucky, as a child, in Syria.

He raises his left hand to his eye and feels the area around his temple as if he has been hit there. He wipes his face and looks down at the blood. (CNN, 19 August 2016).

Besides an empathetic approach to children suffering, CNN also used quotes from children's parents to further illuminate the negative influence of warfare on children. For example, one interviewed mom said:

My daughter, who is five years old, was born in this war and does not know anything about normal life. She is used to seeing the streets in ruins, full of debris; houses without walls or ceilings; and trees broken or burned ... All she knows is that people are dying because of the bombing. She cannot even understand a natural death. (CNN, 19 August 2016).

This interview quote reflected how bad the situation was for children inside of Syria.

Mass death and displacement. Apart from journalists' narratives and interviews with locals, CNN's news articles used statistics frequently to emphasize the mass death toll and displacement caused by war. Here are several examples.

More than 250,000 Syrians – mostly civilians – have been killed, according to the United Nations. About 10.5 million Syrians have fled their homes – and more than 4 million of those have left the country, playing a large part in Europe's migrant crisis. (CNN, 15 January 2016)

The United Nations says 42,000 people in the area are at risk of starvation. And they make up only a fraction of the 400,000 in similar situations in other towns – and millions more struggling in hard-to-reach areas because of the country's civil war, which is about to mark its five-year anniversary. Millions more Syrians have become refugees abroad. (CNN, 7 January 2016)

As these paragraphs have shown, instead of vivid first-hand descriptions, the distant suffering was quantified. The quantified suffering provided news audiences with shocking facts associated with humanitarian disaster in the Syrian civil conflict.

Russian war crime. Some of CNN's articles focused on the Russian military's role in Syria. Within the context of humanitarian stories, the Russian military was shown as the perpetrator of war crimes:

The 27-year-old woman, whose name we can't publish for her own safety, says 'her neighborhood was hit by Russian bombs' – and although most of it is still standing she says 'it is now a "ghost town" with no electricity'. (CNN, 4 December 2015)

By including a quote from a local resident, CNN demonstrated that the Russian military deliberately targeted innocent civilians. Another quote from a civilian group presented evidence that the Russian military used UN-banned weaponry in the conflict and thus committed a war crime. 'Human Rights Watch, as well as many US and other officials, have accused Russia of using cluster bombs as it supports the Syrian regime' (CNN, 1 October 2016).

Call for humanity. A cosmopolitan viewpoint, in the form of calling for the world to act together in the name of humanity to help Syrian people, was reflected in CNN's coverage through the inclusion of lines like this:

Ultimately, when we talk about Syria, we should remember it's not all about military tactics, power politics or ideology. It is about human beings. And that's not a naïve point of view. The suffering of individuals – of children, of the elderly – is fueling the rage that keeps this conflict burning and growing. (CNN, 7 January 2016)

In this passage, the words 'we' and 'human beings' were used in a utilitarian way to emphasize the humanitarian aspects of the conflict and the far-reaching implications of the human toll. Likewise, quotes from another piece 'Two Faces of the Syria tragedy', expressed the same concern:

This war is not the fault of President Barack Obama, or of Angela Merkel or Ban Ki-moon. But world leaders should hang their head in shame for standing back much too long and allowing this wound to fester. It is a disaster of overwhelming humanitarian proportions. (CNN, 18 August 2016)

This editorial piece called upon the world to act to further prevent the humanitarian disaster in Syria.

Al-Jazeera English. Regarding RQ1, the dominant news frames from Al-Jazeera English's coverage were 'civilian as victims' and 'repressive Syrian Assad regime'. The frames of 'mass death and displacement' and 'resiliency in adversity' were also presented in the coverage.

Civilians as victims. This frame humanized Al-Jazeera English's news stories in several aspects. First, this frame demonstrated that people in Syria were struggling in harsh living conditions created by the civil war. For example, 'Residents, who are caught in the middle, are unable to leave, and are trying to survive with little or no food, water and

electricity' (Al-Jazeera English, 6 August 2016). The large-scale suffering of the Syrian people also comes across in the following news story insert, 'As the fighting rages on around them, almost five million Syrians are not getting enough food, water or medicine, according to UNICEF' (Al-Jazeera English, 23 July 2016).

Second, by quoting a first-hand witness, Al-Jazeera English documented how the conflict had disrupted people's normal lives:

Shimale described the streets as empty as most people stay indoors. 'People are doing nothing other than hiding in their homes', he said. 'They rush in the morning to buy food and get home as quickly as possible so they aren't outside when the strikes start. There has been a lot of damage to buildings and cars. (quoted in Al-Jazeera English, 30 April 2016).

Other stories also told of civilians losing their families in the conflict. As one local resident told Al-Jazeera English, 'I searched among the rubble trying to find my brother's body, but couldn't get it out until the next morning. He left behind a wife and four kids' (quoted in Al-Jazeera English, 4 May 2016).

In conveying the frame of civilians as victims, it was also intimated that, to the Syrian people, neither leaving for another country nor staying at home were good choices. Stories described how displaced citizens who fled to other countries could hardly survive and had to deal with an identity crisis: 'for displaced widows and children, often living in derelict accommodation with no source of income and fast approaching the end of their life savings, the daily fight for survival is real' (Al-Jazeera English, 31 May 2016). 'I don't have a country, I don't have any papers, I don't have anything', he (Fadi) said. 'I have only to stay here, nothing else' (Al-Jazeera English, 25 July 2016).

For those who stayed in Syria, life was described as being engulfed in devastation. Syrian people were shown to be deeply worried about their future. As one refugee who had fled, Fadi, told Al-Jazeera English, 'When I started to build my future, the war started and everything is gone. Until now, I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm lost. What will happen in the future, what will happen to us' (quoted in Al-Jazeera English, 25 July 2016). By presenting the voice of those voiceless, this frame humanized the ordinary individuals who were suffering from the civil war.

Mass death and displacement. Syrians' struggles were not always presented with detailed descriptions. Al-Jazeera English also presented a frame of mass death and displacement via the delivery of straightforward and shocking information. Within this frame, the large death toll and displacement were displayed with astonishing statistics. For example: 'the statement said, 'Nearly 1,716 civilians, including women and children, were killed, while 12 hospitals in three provinces, as well as bakeries in Ter Maaleh and Saraqib, were hit by the Russian air strikes' (quoted in Al-Jazeera English, 30 October 2015). 'More than 4.8 million Syrians have become refugees displaced from their homeland, while more than 6.5 million people are internally displaced within the country's borders' (Al-Jazeera English, 27 July 2016).

Resiliency in adversity. Despite the harsh conditions brought about by the civil war, the resilience of the Syrian people was conveyed through quotes such as that from a member of

the ‘White Helmet’ Syrian civil volunteer rescue team, ‘I do not want to kill anybody. I feel it is my duty to stay here and help’ (quoted in Al-Jazeera English, 14 August 2016). In one Al-Jazeera English feature story on Syria, the bravery and resilience of the ‘White Helmet’ team was conveyed through a quote from one of the team members, ‘But it’s my duty to save these people. If I don’t, who will then do it? If the worst thing happens and I die, at least I know that my children will be proud of me and know what I stood up for’ (quoted in Al-Jazeera English, 14 August 2016). These findings indicate that, although death had been a part of their normal life during the civil conflict, some Syrians did not give up their hopes and values.

Repressive Syrian Assad regime. In Al-Jazeera English’s coverage, blame was placed on Syrian President Basshar al-Assad and his regime for causing the humanitarian disaster. For example, ‘due to the government-imposed siege, hundreds of residents starved to death, while reports told of mass malnutrition and people being reduced to eating stray animals and grass in order to survive’ (Al-Jazeera English, 14 February 2016). By using the phrase ‘government-imposed’, Al-Jazeera English conveyed a message that the Syrian people’s struggle was *de facto* caused by a repressive Assad regime. In reporting the Syrian government claim that they had opened a humanitarian corridor for people during the conflict, Al-Jazeera English quoted a Syrian government opposition group member as refuting the claim: ‘Be clear – these “corridors” are not for getting aid in, but driving people out’, Basma Kodmani, a member of the opposition High Negotiations Committee, told the AFP news agency on Friday’ (quoted in Al-Jazeera English, 30 July 2016).

Lastly, within this frame, Al-Jazeera English emphasized that the Assad regime not only imposed war on its own people, but also suppressed people’s freedom of speech.

The problem was that while Assad gave the people some kind of freedom, it was followed by a strong, fatal blow. Political and cultural forums, where Syrians could debate freely for the first time in four decades, were shut down. Where we had once been full of hope and high expectations, we suddenly became terrified. (quoted in Al-Jazeera English, 16 March 2016).

By including such a narrative from a Syrian activist, Al-Jazeera English provided readers with background information and thus contextualized the Syrian civil war.

Sputnik. Regarding RQ1, the news frames of ‘mass death and displacement’, ‘Russian humanitarian aid’, ‘ISIS’s brutality’ and ‘West wrongdoing in Syria’ were manifested in Sputnik’s news coverage.

Mass death and displacement. Similar to CNN and Al-Jazeera English, the large death toll and displacement numbers were used in *Sputnik* as a means to deliver the shocking facts about the humanitarian disaster in the Syrian civil war. The following are examples:

Thousands of people from towns in the northeast of Syria have allegedly been displaced over the past couple of days, according to reports received by UN agencies. (Sputnik, 2 March 2016)

Over 100 civilians have been killed and 700 have been injured since the start of August as a result of shelling in the Syrian city of Aleppo, local authorities told Russian journalists. (Sputnik, 13 August 2016)

‘Almost 42,000 people remaining in Madaya are at risk of further hunger and starvation. The UN has received credible reports of people dying from starvation and being killed while trying to leave’, the statement said. (Sputnik, 7 January 2016).

Within this frame, sources from the United Nations and other authorities were usually quoted to validate the information.

Russian humanitarian aid. The news frame of the Russian government and military providing humanitarian aid to local Syrian residents, was clearly communicated through quotes from the Russian military ministry, as in the following example, “‘Rice, canned meat and tea were distributed among two areas in the Syrian Latakia province as part of a two-ton humanitarian aid delivered to low-income families”, the Russian Defense Ministry said’ (Sputnik, 28 August 2016). The frame was also conveyed by including quotes from the Russian representative at the United Nations: “‘Russia will continue to provide humanitarian aid to civilians in conflict-torn Syria, particularly those in cities besieged by terrorists”, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vladimir Safronkov told the UN Security Council on Friday’ (Sputnik, 16 January 2016). With this frame, Sputnik seems to be justifying the Russian military intervention in Syria. One can see the conflicting findings between CNN and Sputnik regarding the Russian military’s role in the Syrian civil war.

ISIS’s brutality. In Sputnik news coverage, a frame emerged that implied that the ISIS militant group was one of the major causes of the humanitarian disaster in Syria. In one news article, although its sources were not specified, Sputnik highlighted ISIS’s terrorist acts on civilians by presenting large shocking numbers. ‘The terrorist group has killed 300 civilians and kidnapped an additional 400 after attacking areas of the eastern Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor, according to reports’ (Sputnik, 17 January 2016). In another article, through the inclusion of a quote from a local source, Sputnik explained why the ISIS militant group killed civilians. “‘The horrific massacre carried out today by ISIL militants in al-Bagilya in Deir ez-Zor. 280 victims, including women, children and old people. Reason – cooperation with the Syrian army”, the local source said’ (Sputnik, 16 January 2016). With this quote, Sputnik alluded to the notion that the Syrian army under al-Assad’s authority was fighting against terrorism in the region. In doing so, a positive representation of Assad’s regime is connoted, quite different from how CNN and Al-Jazeera English represented al-Assad and his military.

West wrongdoing in Syria. The final news frame that was evident from the Sputnik stories involved blaming the West for Syria’s crisis. The following are examples that connote this frame: ‘Cameron, Kerry and the rest of these charlatans should spare us the emotional blackmail. Most of the governments represented at the London conference are the very instigators and perpetrators of Syria’s destruction’ (Sputnik, 5 February 2016); ‘Western governments are culpable in a criminal scheme of regime change in Syria, as they have been in countless other unfortunate countries’ (Sputnik, 5 February 2016).

Through the inclusion of these quotes, Sputnik implied that Western countries' intervention in Syrian domestic affairs was a major factor that led to mass destruction and the humanitarian crisis in Syria.

Discussion

This study uncovered the predominant news frames that were presented by the online sites of CNN, Al-Jazeera English, and Sputnik in their coverage of the humanitarian issues in relation to the Syrian civil conflict. Regarding RQ2, through a qualitative inductive approach to analysis, several major news frames emerged from the stories, revealing nuanced stances taken by the three transnational news organizations in relation to Syria. Only one frame, 'mass death and displacement', existed across the outlets. The other found frames were distinct in nature.

The findings from this present study correspond with Chouliaraki's (2008a) typology of a 'hierarchy of distant suffering' in news. All three media outlets provided figures on the large numbers of death and displacement in a straightforward fashion. The numbers and brief descriptive narratives that only register 'facts' appear to make no emotional demands on the news audiences, thus potentially alienating news audiences from the distant suffering. In this way, the transnational news outlets created 'adventure news' in their coverage, which is 'a class of news that blocks feelings of pity towards distant sufferers' (Chouliaraki, 2008a: 8).

The lack of detailed, first-hand descriptions of human suffering might stem from news organizations not having enough journalists on the ground. This supposition is buttressed by a few studies that found mainstream news media covering the Syrian conflict often relied on user-generated content (Johnston, 2015; Murrell, 2017; Wall and El Zahed, 2015). Thus, in the context of Syria, professional journalists' traditional framing and gatekeeping roles were jointly shared by citizen activists.

Ready access to ground sources might also have been a factor in the lack of in-depth, first-hand accounts. An interview-based study by Vandervoort (2016) revealed that reporters who covered the Syrian conflict often faced severe restrictions within Syria on access to information that were imposed by Assad's regime. Furthermore, journalists' organizations might have also placed limits on the operational capacity of reporters to deliver first-hand information due to the high physical risks and dangers imposed by the conflict. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that both CNN and Al-Jazeera English did manage to have those first-hand accounts in their stories, whereas Sputnik did not.

When considering the uncovered frames within the thematic versus episodic classification of news frames, it becomes clear that CNN and Al-Jazeera English had both forms of framing in their news stories. Both news organizations presented in their articles death and displacement figures in a matter-of-fact manner, thus representing a thematic frame. However, they also had articles that delved into the human stories of suffering, with powerful quotes from individuals and dramatic descriptions of how they were living under wartime strife, forms of narratives emblematic of episodic framing. Sputnik, on the other hand, with its straightforward stories that included the numbers of those killed or injured in the conflict and what Russia was doing to assist,

had news frames that were thematic in nature. Stories that focused on individuals who were suffering were non-existent.

In answer to RQ3 regarding the presence of a cosmopolitan outlook, the themes from the news stories pertaining to human suffering in the transnational news media outlets also reflected some attributes of what Chouliaraki (2008a) refers to in her hierarchy of distant suffering as 'emergency news' and 'ecstatic news', both of which are indications of cosmopolitanism. These types of news stories demand actions to alleviate the suffering, and manage to bring global audiences together by presenting several key components of cosmopolitan coverage of sufferings (Bruggemann and Von Konigslow, 2013; Chouliaraki, 2008a; Kyriakidou, 2009). As mentioned above, a majority of CNN and Al-Jazeera English's news articles presented episodic frames that highlighted the suffering of local residents and children with much detail and emotional language, potentially eliciting powerful emotions from their online audiences. Particularly, in CNN and Al-Jazeera English's coverage, local residents' powerlessness, fear, frustration as well as their distrust of any authoritative institutions (the UN, Russian government, etc.) were foregrounded for the audiences. By provoking empathy with the Syrian people from a local perspective, such descriptions could possibly shorten the psychological proximity between news audiences and the distant sufferers. Thus, one component of cosmopolitan coverage identified in a previous study (Bruggemann and Konigslow, 2009: 363), presenting the voices of foreign origin, is reflected in CNN and Al-Jazeera English's media representations of the suffering of innocent Syrian people.

Specifically, in terms of Al-Jazeera English, a large proportion of the news coverage used direct quotes from local sufferers and offered viewers in-depth descriptive narratives of suffering from the local residents' point of view. News audiences were 'invited' by Al-Jazeera English's news stories to witness the misfortunes of those who were direct victims of the Syrian civil war, thus heightening the chances that audience members might reflect on and actively engage with the stories of those suffering in Syria, thereby creating a sense of global solidarity. Al-Jazeera English's reporting style on suffering could be a result of its own unique editorial policies, which emphasize '(1) journalism of depth, (2) putting human beings at the heart of the news story, and (3) voices of grass roots' (Figenschou, 2014: 212).

It should also be noted that, in terms of contextualizing the suffering of Syrian civilians, this present study found that Al-Jazeera English tended to implicate Bashar al-Assad's regime through direct quotes from locals who blamed the regime for causing the humanitarian crisis. This finding resonates with the findings from Abdul-Nabi's (2015) study on Al-Jazeera's coverage of Syria's chemical attack in 2013. In that study, the researcher found that through the adoption of a *war journalism* frame, both Al-Jazeera Arabic and Al-Jazeera English insinuated that the Syrian government was behind the chemical attack. In light of Abdul-Nabi's finding, the news frame of 'repressive Assad regime' presented in Al-Jazeera English's coverage is perhaps not surprising.

With regard to CNN's coverage, the employment of the 'call for humanity' frame could have the effect of bringing together global audiences. By urging world leaders to take action to de-escalate the humanitarian crisis inside Syria and presenting a global voice (Chouliaraki, 2008a), CNN appears to be taking a global responsibility role and helping to create an ethical value-based relationship between the spectators and sufferers, thus formalizing a

cosmopolitan outlook. This finding corresponds to the characteristics of transnational news outlets discovered in previous literatures (Moeller, 1999; Wojcieszak, 2007).

While this study's researchers have interpreted the findings as suggesting that a cosmopolitan outlook is being reflected in the stories disseminated by the transnational organizations of CNN and Al-Jazeera English, it would be remiss not to present an alternative interpretation. The two organizations do indeed focus on the suffering of the Syrian people and make calls for the international community to act to end the conflict in the name of humanity. However, the possibility does exist that underlying this narrative approach and call to action are tacit coverage alignments with their home nation's foreign policy stances vis-à-vis the Russian government and the Assad regime. For as scholars (e.g. Bennett et al., 2007; Cottle, 2009b; Ojala and Pantti, 2017; Tsatou and Armstrong, 2014) who have examined international news coverage have demonstrated through their research, elite news organizations tend to reflect in their coverage the ideological and national context in which they operate. This could very well also be the case in the instance of the transnational news coverage of the Syrian conflict.

Several political and defense analysts (e.g. Hughes, 2014; Jokar, 2017a) have contended that the war in Syria has moved beyond being a civil war, and that it should now be considered a proxy war. A proxy war allows major powers to support an armed insurgency without incurring large losses either at a human or financial level in order to further their own national interests or to reduce an adversary's power (Hughes, 2014). In the case of Syria, the economic and geostrategic interests of the US and other Western nations are pushing against the interests of Russia. The Assad government has been a strategic ally of both Iran and Russia. Qatar, as an economic powerhouse, has had close partnerships with Western nations and has been in direct competition with Iran in the extraction and supply of gas energy (Jokar, 2017b). Tensions between the US and Russia have continued to increase due to differences in geopolitical stances, including their disagreement on the containment of Iran's nuclear power program.

Thus, when considering that the US-based CNN and the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera English presented stories embedded with episodic frames involving heart-tugging narratives alongside a stern condemnation of Russia's military actions in Syria and the Assad government, the possibility that geopolitics might be coming into play does present itself. This notion is reinforced with the types of frames found in Sputnik. As a Russia-based transnational news organization, Sputnik's main news frames largely reflected the Russian government's positions on Syria. The frames of 'Russian military aid' and 'West wrongdoing in Syria' suggest that *Sputnik* might be operating as an indirect propaganda machine of the Russian government and military forces. The findings viewed in a holistic manner add substance to the assertion that the Syrian conflict has evolved into a full-fledged proxy war with the US and Russia, in particular, gathering allies to assist them in their fight for regional dominance, similar to what occurred during the Cold War (Defense Intelligence Agency Document, 2012; Hove and Mutanda, 2015: 559).

Concluding remarks

Through analyzing how transnational media outlets covered the humanitarian issues associated with the Syrian civil war, this study explored the potential mediating role of

global news organizations in how audiences worldwide come to understand crises that cross national borders. It contributes to current literature on news media's role in the mediation of distant human suffering by going beyond the nation-state. The comparative approach utilized in this study also enabled researchers to uncover similarities as well as differences between the three examined transnational news sources in how they covered the human rights issue inside Syria. While the study began with the position that perhaps a cosmopolitan outlook might be reflected in the news coverage from the transnational news organizations, this was not found to be entirely the case. The country of origin of the news media outlets appeared to be impacting on the types of coverage offered. Although hints at a cosmopolitan orientation were present, the findings from this present study suggest that the notion of a global community in which empathy toward each other's suffering is widespread appears still to be an elusive ideal. Although global news media outlets operate at a transnational level and target a global audience by using English as lingua franca, this study reinforces the idea that they are not completely independent of the needs of state-institutionalized political elites, as Wojcieszak (2007) has suggested, and could be unintentional players in this new era of geopolitics.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Note

1. See: <http://eip.org/en/news-events/warpeace-reporting-syria-global-media>

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