

Reporting, Uncertainty, and the Orchestrated Fog of War: A Practice-Based Lens for Understanding Global Media Events

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Media coverage of the ongoing multistate conflict in Syria, extending into Iraq, has been punctuated by the marshaling of conditions for exceptional global media event coverage by states, citizens, and newsmakers alike. Where conditions for reporting are already limited because of ongoing conflict, both international agency coverage and governmental sources represent crucial conduits for dissemination of information worldwide. This research develops a practice-based lens to examine the embodied, geographic, and temporal networks of media production practices through a multilingual database comparison of French, Russian, American, and British newswire coverage of major military campaigns. Mapping shifts between on-the-ground reporting and dislocated geopolitical coverage against the temporal unfolding of event coverage reveals a new typology: the premediated media event.

Keywords: Syria, Russia, media events, news agencies, journalism, war studies, digital humanities

The ability to understand information flows across the global media landscape is always partial and obstructed, transitory and contingent: They are embodied by newsmakers, materially mediated by infrastructure and conditions on the ground, while being negotiated across conventions of organizational cultures and fields of practice. By focusing on the extreme conditions of war reporting in Syria and Iraq, this article locates the limitations of, and stressors on, on-the-ground reporting and dislocated coverage through a comparison of international agency coverage. The “media event” framework (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Hepp & Couldry, 2010) is inverted to focus on ostensible militarized strategies to alternatively promote or stifle reporting, thereby managing or disrupting the witnessing capacity and integrating potential of global media events. The economic and technological realities of journalistic practice, then, can be understood as the conditions for militarized influence on and interference with responsible news-gathering practices, highlighting the contours and limitations of contemporary media power.

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Engaged in mediatized practices of diplomacy, governmental communications, and the murkier realm of media interference, political actors are adopting and developing methods that, as O'Loughlin, Miskimmon, and Roselle (2017) surmise, could lead to a global communication landscape

characterized by continual listening, engaging, trying to influence each other . . . with the highest quality of audience research . . . to manipulate overseas publics . . . simulate transparency . . . [and] manage . . . domestic public opinion. (p. 47)

In such an environment, research must continually rearticulate methods toward agile diagnostic glimpses of media production practices. This article addresses specific methodological gaps in journalism studies through the multilingual comparative study of international agency reporting, retrospectively employing Factiva database content to interpret the temporal and spatial conditions for news-making practices across the difficult and uneven landscape of the ongoing Syrian War.

Actors, technology, geography, and time are all dimensions of the relationally and materially mediated practices of news production occurring across digitally networked global communication infrastructures. These represent the conditions governing the possible exchange and reception of global events as framed by the news (Archetti, 2019, p. 89). This research operationalizes the notion that "practice weaves together the discursive and material worlds" (Adler & Pouliot, 2011, p. 7). When communication is enmeshed in nearly ritualized processes, such as global media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Hepp & Couldry, 2009), our attention as researchers needs to move past the quantitative dominance of messaging and toward an understanding of a media ecology that is "an unpredictable, textured, and recursive set of overlapping ecologies" (O'Loughlin et al., 2017, p. 33). Practice theory opens up research questions to examine things done "in relation to media" (Couldry, 2004, p. 128) and how some practices "anchor, order, or organize others" (Swidler, 2001, p. 79). This lens allows us to understand how stories are told and not told, how absences of information sow seeds of conflict under the guise of certainty when the first draft of history is produced in multiple contradictory ways.

Method

By treating practice theory, taken up by media studies (Couldry, 2004; Schatzki, 2001) and international relations alike (Adler & Pouliot, 2011; Neumann, 2002), as a lens, this research links existing frameworks to move between scales and forms of analysis for comparing contexts of media production with international flows of war reporting. Grounded in a delimited set of empirical phenomena, analysis focuses on particular social entities²: preplanned military sieges and international newswire agencies. Diverse patterns of news production practices are mapped through the derivation of metadata from agency content to develop comparative coverage timelines, offering analytical propositions about the negotiation between particular fields of practice, specifically, international reporting and mediatized political strategy.

The amorphous flows of diverse media cultures and the near rituals of global media events, which emerge across and as global media cultures, can be better understood in terms of practices (Hepp, 2013).

² Following Hepp's (2013, p. 140) approach to analyzing global media cultures.

In their rearticulating of the original nation-state formulation of the exceptional, historic, and monopolizing character of media events, Hepp and Couldry (2009) outline a more fraught, contested, multcentered notion of the global media event as “certain situated, thickened, centering performances of mediated communication that are focused on a specific thematic core . . . [to] reach a wide and diverse multiplicity of audiences and participants” (p. 12). Hepp (2013) argues that media cultures can be understood as the “thickening of translocal classification systems...[and] discursive formations” (pp. 72-73) recalling that such phenomena can most readily be engaged through the “increasing intensity with which numerous ‘minor’ everyday practices and routines, layer upon layer” (p. 73) contribute to national, translocal, and global manifestations of media cultures.

The proposed practice theory lens allows research to extend its view of media content as a field replete with discursive traces of production practices, to map the embodied, geographically situated, relational, and temporal dimensions of networked news production. Schatzki (2001) reminds us to “conceive of practices as embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understandings” (p. 2). In her call to engage the “hard” side of strategic political communication research, Archetti (2019) sets out a similar constellation of the mediated and embodied elements of communication production: “The material infrastructure . . . affects, by having an impact on where our bodies can be located, what they can do and perceive, the creation and sharing of meaning” (p. 87). By reconceptualizing strategic narratives via relational sociology, opportunities for political action are found in conjunction with the “opportunities and constraints for individuals and organizations” (Brown, 2017, p. 168) undertaking media production. Brown (2017) focuses this application of relational sociology to international strategic narratives by asking, “What is the interaction between external events and narrative networks?” (p. 172).

Global media events are part of a “thick . . . complex, reflexive” space of communicative practices in which the fields of journalism and politics converge, requiring a methodological evaluation beyond the quantified “domination” of event narratives, problematizing the linear “transmission of messages”: These types of political engagement with and within the news media call for research to “take into account how media ecologies amplify or contain” (O’Loughlin et al., 2017, p. 34) not just the strategic narratives in circulation, but also as I argue here the shifting possibilities for particular forms of journalistic practice to be conducted.

International Newswires

The international newswire agencies compared here, Reuters, Associated Press (AP), Agence France Press (AFP), ITAR-TASS, and Ria Novosti (RIA), are based in, and have retained significant national association with, states that have been involved militarily in the Syrian War. The two Russian agencies represent, respectively, a historically well-regarded international agency and one with increasing integration into the state-media apparatus of domestic and international-facing news. As networks of news reporting, production, and dissemination of information worldwide, international newswire agencies are the oft-overlooked partners undergirding the global information landscape (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998; Horvit, 2006; Tworek, 2019).

Publicly listed Reuters, the not-for-profit cooperative AP, and the governmental subscriptions-subsidized AFP are classed as the “big three” international news agencies. Until 1991, ITAR-TASS had been similarly classed and was one of the two largest state-run news agencies, alongside China’s Xinhua (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998, p. 20; Horvit, 2006, p. 429). With increased independence from the state compared with its Soviet predecessor, ITAR-TASS continues to enjoy privileged access to state sources while having reaped the economic benefits of tax exemption in contrast to emerging domestic competition. According to Rantanen and Vartanova (1995, p. 214), Western journalists confirm that the repositioned agency reports with greater breadth and speed, having adopted a more Western bulletin style, but seemingly at the cost of accuracy and reliability.

With a lineage dating back to 1941, the internationally facing output of RIA was replaced in 2014 by the newly launched Sputnik news agency, after being incorporated into state-owned media group Rossiya Segodnya in which RIA continues to operate as a Russian-language news service. Much like the multilingual broadcaster RT, originally launched by the RIA group under the name Russia Today and today nominally independent from Rossiya Segodnya despite a shared editor-in-chief as of this writing, Sputnik is noted for producing “straight” news with an observable anti-Western slant that is in keeping with, for example, RT’s explicit mission statement to counter U.S. media hegemony (Hutchings, Gillespie, Yablokov, Lvov, & Voss, 2015; Oates, 2018). The journalistic output of RT and Sputnik mingles with accusatory and conspiracy-laden editorial content, facing consistent criticism that it contributes to disinformation campaigns in relation to sensitive geopolitical issues such as NATO, Ukraine, Putin, and Kremlin corruption scandals (Oates, 2018, p. 12).

Siege Media Events

Six major preplanned, preannounced, and therein often preframed military campaigns were identified for study: Kobani (January 2015), Aleppo (September 2015), Raqqa (October 2015), Mosul (October 2016), Daraa (June 2018), and Idlib (September 2018). Retrospective data collection took place through Factiva databases from September 2017 up to December 2018. Despite their framing as temporally limited events—“turning points” in the war—by governmental actors, these sieges were often already ongoing with multiple prior media focal points for any new campaign. For example, there were at least two distinct internationally supported sieges of Mosul and three of Raqqa over as many years.

To capture the facility of these campaigns as “focusing events” (Cottle, 2019) within coverage of otherwise ongoing multiyear conflicts, data collection hinged on the media-oriented announcement of a fresh military campaign, logging particular types of coverage for 30 days prior to the siege announcement and 30 days following. Analytically within this article, the 30 days following the announcement are presented in terms of the first 10 days and subsequent 20 days to highlight the shift in news production practices as news cycles move on from what has, or has not, become an ongoing global media event. Figures 1–9 purposefully contrast coverage of these three segments of the timeline despite their varied length (i.e., without normalization or scaling) to visually prioritize the focus on the intensity of media coverage at the outset of the campaign: the “thickening” of coverage that is a necessary characteristic for global media events (Hepp & Couldry, 2009).

Logging developments was limited to first mentions of a new story or new information about a story within a single agency's content, not the first mention within the wider media landscape. This was not a quantitative comparison of the total output between agencies but a comparison of patterns between event-space reporting and geographically dislocated coverage within each organization as location and type of journalist practices shift; the limited scope of the timeline was designed to capture, distinguish, and compare the types of journalistic work that contribute in different ways to a potential media event.

This article focuses on three sieges (Aleppo, Mosul, and Idlib), each uniquely fulfilling media event genre characteristics. Each siege media event can be understood as a strategic mediatized "platform" (Burchell, 2015; Price, 2011) propped up, but also contested and undermined, by multiple sets of political and politicized actors involved in the conflict.

Conflict Reporting and Coverage Practices

Agencies have traditionally been providers of "spot news," reporting on events as they occur and from where they are occurring. This 19th-century Anglo-Saxon tradition of factual reporting contributed to the 20th-century "journalism of information" for which a routinized style of wire reporting was developed to project the "authenticity" of reporting on distant events. This conventionalized practice for constructing news as "facts" is understood to "favour certain categories of information and events over others, certain sources over others, and certain locations over others" (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998, p. 20). This dependency on certain favored categories within news production is at the heart of this research, where the temporal currency of unfolding distant events is juxtaposed against the political voices commenting on and reacting to those events.

A practice-based lens distinguishes between what is referred to here as event-space reporting and dislocated coverage. On-the-spot and location-specific reporting in Syria can stand in contrast to wider news production practices occurring at a distance, in which dislocated coverage involves the selection, framing, and contextualization of international developments in relation to unfolding events on the ground in Syria. This empirical and analytical distinction teases apart "spot news" reporting on crisis events where and when they are occurring from the dislocated coverage of global (often governmental) reactions and statements made in relation to those events.

Geographic Metadata: Event-Space and Dislocated Developments

The ongoing newswire coverage of Syria is often difficult to distinguish from coverage of multiple related global issues: migration, terror, multilateral organizations, proxy wars, and regional geopolitical interests. Conflating war with such issues ensures that even searches for particular campaigns or crisis events return a glut of stories, most only tangentially related to on-the-ground developments, often recapping recent reporting. The project timelines did not collect all coverage related to each siege for each newswire; to do so would have obscured the study's primary analytical thrust.

In the construction of comparative coverage timelines for each agency, the geographic specificity of event-space reporting was identified as an empirical hinge whereby coverage of primary developments

within the space of possible media events is contradistinguished from dislocated coverage of geographically distant secondary developments, those news items that ensure coherent context, balance, histories of, and reactions to the unfolding conflict. Tertiary developments, such as reporting on reactions to or commentary on the already dislocated secondary developments, were not included in this study.

To operationalize the contradistinction between these event-space developments and dislocated secondary developments, I added a set of content-derived metadata categories to the timeline: the siege location (or event space), development location, and filing location. The filing or development location either aligns with or differs from the siege event space, thereby mapping shifting patterns of journalistic work covering event-space developments and dislocated secondary developments: Interstate talks and announcements in New York, Geneva, or Moscow, for example, are immediately distinguishable in the timeline from on-the-ground reporting from the event space or stories filed from regional bureaus near military campaigns.

Temporal Metadata: Breaking News and Circulatory Reporting

The second axis for operationalizing media events through a practice-based lens is temporal. The changing intensity and types of journalistic practice extend from successive bulletins, updates, and summaries of a story contributing to the daily news cycle and to the persistence of coverage across news cycles over the hours, days, and weeks of unfolding siege and crisis events. The temporal intensity of journalistic work can be analytically distinguished across sets of article metadata in which iterative forms of breaking news reporting (BN) stand apart from practices of concurrent forms of circulatory reporting (CR).

To better understand BN, a very particular form of newswire metadata becomes useful: Comparable iterative versions of stories are collated as “duplicates” in the Factiva database, with iteration-specific timestamps, word counts, and the number of duplicates. When a single story is republished and lengthened with additional verified facts or sources in an iterative fashion on the same day, then comparing the metadata and the primary content of each iteration provides a glimpse into reporting practices as they are occurring, so to speak.

Beyond BN, there are relays of information concurrently available to multiple outlets from media competitors or governmental sources, which often involving little additional information or reframing other than source selection and editing. These stories are analytically categorized as CR, which can be understood as “known information” in circulation across the international agency landscape, often accessible and reported on by multiple media outlets. Both BN and CR focus on the immediacy of reporting practices and the circulation of reported events as they are unfolding, but CR demonstrates forms of journalistic work that explicitly relay information from other organizations and institutions from both the journalistic and political fields.

Results

By tracing and comparing international newswire conflict reporting, patterns of underreporting and differential coverage of the same events emerge alongside forms of media–state engagement. This highlights the plausibility of geographically oriented countersurveillance practices occurring in tandem with strategic governmental media engagement by political actors, ostensibly as argued here to foster or suppress possible media events. Such practices of media interference impact the very conditions for reporting and news production, echoing the “militarized media strategies” observed amid the dueling media event narratives of the 2014 Sochi Olympics and the Ukrainian conflict (Burchell, 2015). Cottle (2009) argues that war and crises are staged in the news through global surveillance, particular focusing events, and strategic spectacle, in which the “universalizing impact of potential news surveillance” (p. 501) provides for the visibility of military action to global audiences. It is the assumed totality of global reporting as a field of surveillance, perceived to be unmitigated and autonomous from the political field, that serves for wars and crises absent from the news to be absent from this first draft of history and, therein, from global public consciousness.

Among the six major sieges examined, two preplanned siege media events—the “Aleppo Offensive” by Russian-backed Syrian forces from September 2015 and the “Battle for Mosul” by the Iraqi army and Peshmerga forces of Iraqi Kurdistan within a U.S.-led international coalition in late October 2016—highlight patterns of underreporting and differential reporting across agencies. These sieges both demonstrate the efficacy of the comparative coverage timeline in comparing shifts between types of journalistic practices during global media events. Both were protracted conflicts, spanning years. The 60-day timeline zoomed in on the preemptively announced “turning points” of fresh military campaigns by foreign states. These represent a classic “conquest” media event through the state’s orchestration of media access and the subsequent military spectacle, preemptively framed by political actors in the media as “historic” turning points in the Syrian Civil War and the fight against ISIS, respectively, for the Aleppo and Mosul sieges. The “Battle for Idlib,” the last remaining stronghold of the Syrian opposition, emerged within this study as a contrastive and unique form of siege event: borrowing from Grusin’s (2010) concept of premediation, I propose the premediated media event, whereby the centrality of mediatised diplomacy frames multiple contradictory futures across coverage that is largely dislocated from the event space itself, conducted almost entirely at the intersection of the journalistic and political field from world capitals rather than on the ground where the siege or crisis is unfolding.

Aleppo and Mosul

Across the various sieges, AFP was uniquely consistent among the five agencies with situated on-the-ground reporting and numerous iterative BN stories during crucial turning points of each military campaign. In Aleppo, AFP reporting ($n = 42$; see Figure 1) was initially based in the Aleppo province. After withdrawing when the siege began, likely for safety reasons, coverage was regionally filled with increased international reporting. A later reengagement with the event space involved increased dependence on relays of nongovernmental organization-sourced information, framed explicitly as such in the headlines. AFP coverage of Aleppo and Mosul ($n = 152$; see Figure 2) demonstrates the artifice of the media event as a coordinated platform for political ends: AFP reporting had persistently followed the

protracted conflict of both cities long before the political focusing events were announced as, for example, the “Battle for Mosul.” This ongoing reporting contrasted the relative underreporting from other agencies until campaign announcements (see Figures 3 and 4).

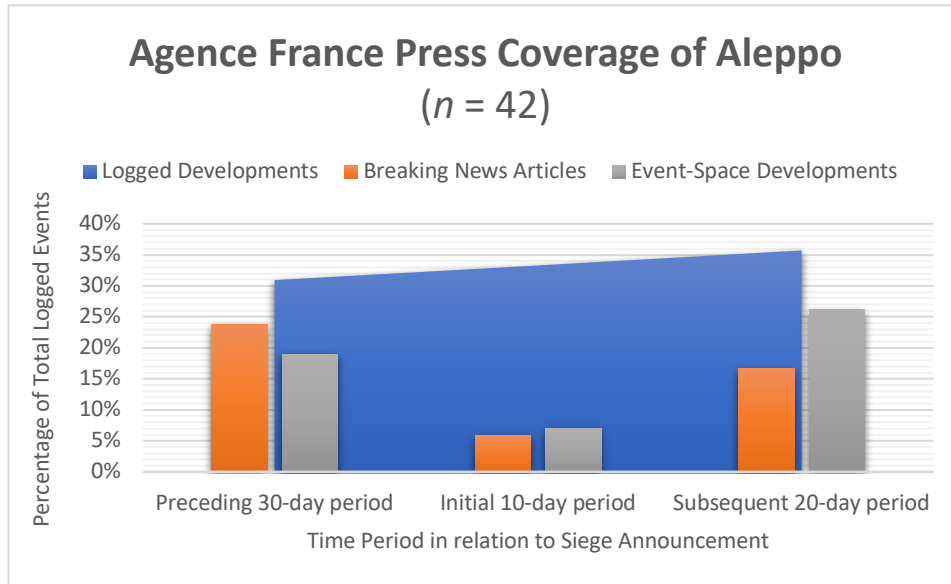


Figure 1. Logged developments in Agence France Press coverage of Aleppo.

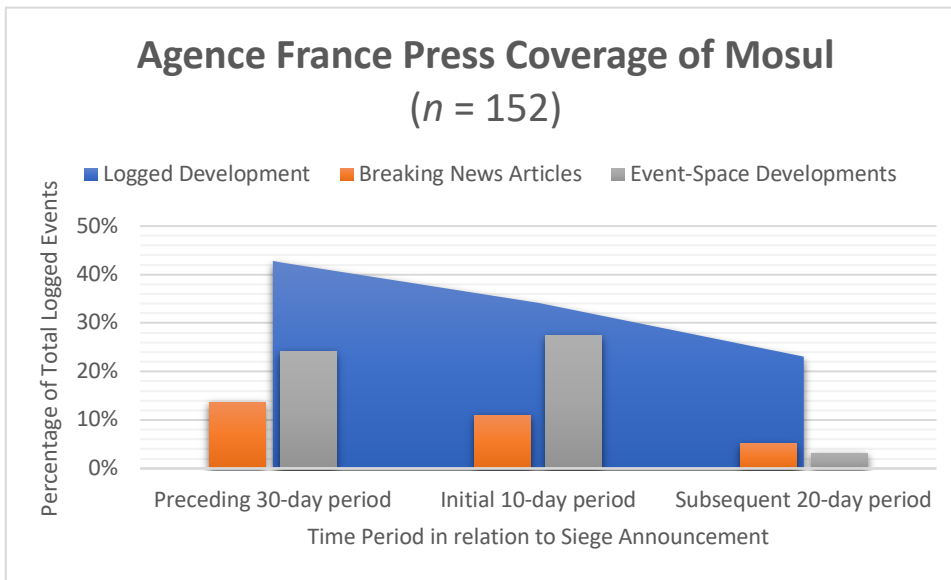


Figure 2. Logged developments in Agence France Press coverage of Mosul.

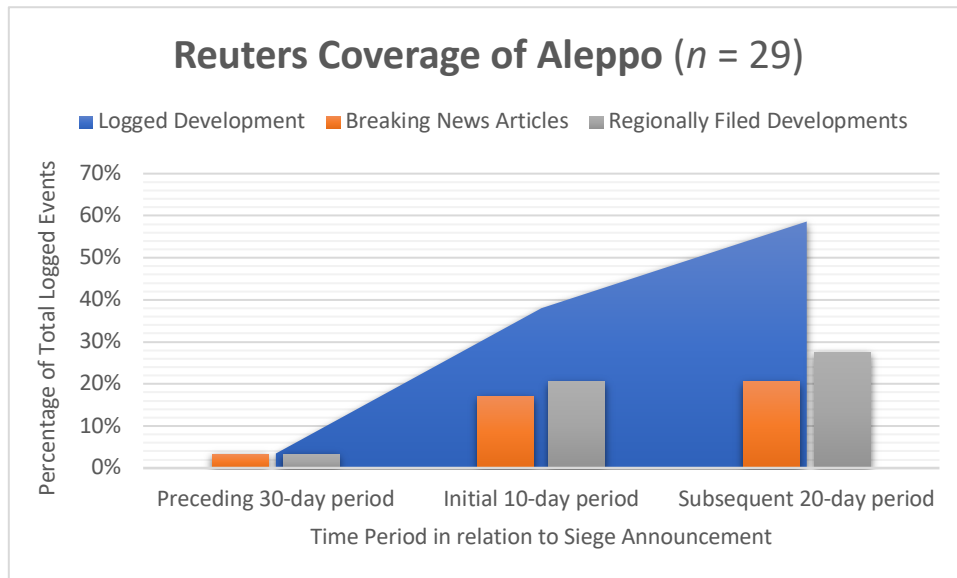


Figure 3. Logged developments in Reuters coverage of Aleppo.

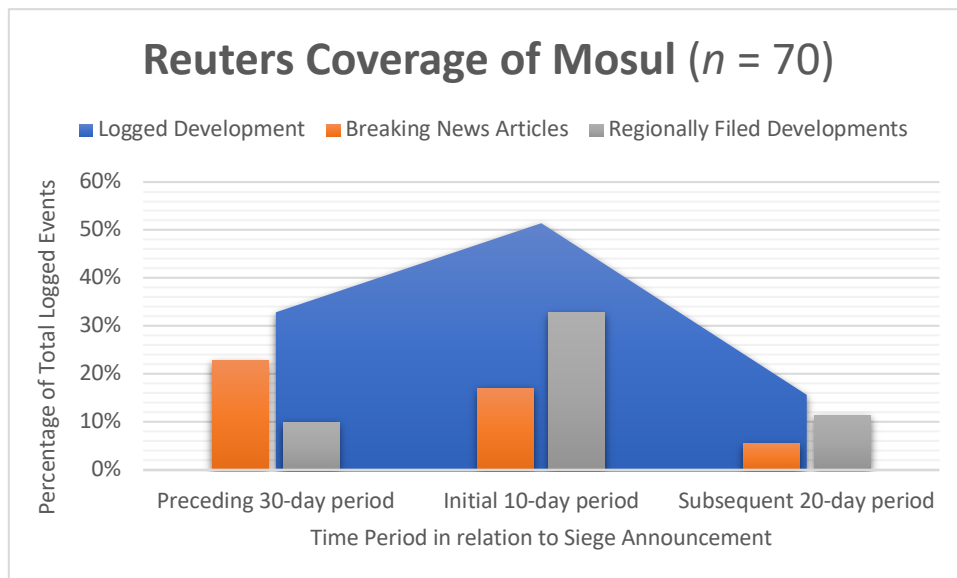


Figure 4. Logged developments in Reuters coverage of Mosul.

In contrast to AFP’s persistent coverage of the Russian-supported “Aleppo Offensive” (see Figure 1), the relative dislocation of Reuters ($n = 29$; see Figure 3) and AP ($n = 7$) from conflict zones was matched by the inverse pattern of coverage by Russian newswires, whereby dislocated coverage prior to the offensive

was replaced with extensive CR, uniquely relaying daily on-the-ground developments from other sources (see Figure 5). Both Reuters and AP were notable for the lack of stories from within Syria: Reuters depended on regional correspondents in Beirut, Ankara, and Amman, with CR of Russian and Syrian military actions; AP coverage ($n = 7$) involved one logged development updating death tolls from Beirut, and the remaining coverage was located in international capitals.

By contrast, at the outset of the American-backed siege of Mosul in Iraq, Reuters ($n = 70$; see Figure 4) extended its reporting to multiple sites, tracing the movements and successes of the U.S. coalition, with just over 50% of the developments filed in Iraq, 30% of which were in the Mosul province, often pinpointed to specific towns surrounding the city. Similarly, for AP ($n = 41$), all initial logged developments were filed from Iraq, with a marked increase in stories incrementally filed from newly secured towns in and around the Mosul region. Although AP's commitment to on-the-ground reporting of the siege was observable, it was short-lived, with 53% of the follow-up coverage filed internationally.

Both agencies also filed reporting from military locations, necessitating coordination with governments of the military coalition. Prior to the siege, AP reported from a "guided tour for reporters" at the British Royal Air Force Akrotiri base in Cypress, featuring longer personal vignettes of soldiers, with two AP correspondents additionally filing from the American Camp Swift in Iraq. During the initial siege window, Reuters filed from "ON BOARD THE USS DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER" aircraft carrier. The lede paragraph opens with the type of remediated witnessing integral to facilitating a sense of mediated participation for audiences: "Rock music blasts over loudspeakers as U.S. Navy pilots run out of the briefing room and into their jets," a notable shift from the objective spot-news genre of newswire reporting to the media event genre when enthralling reporting provides for the mediated experience of witnessing and participation.

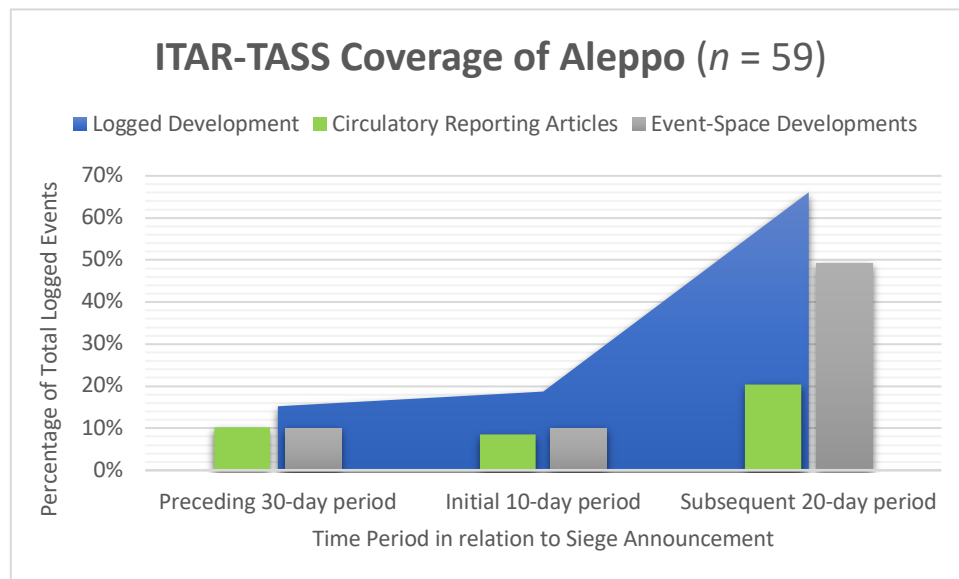


Figure 5. Logged developments in ITAR-TASS coverage of Aleppo.

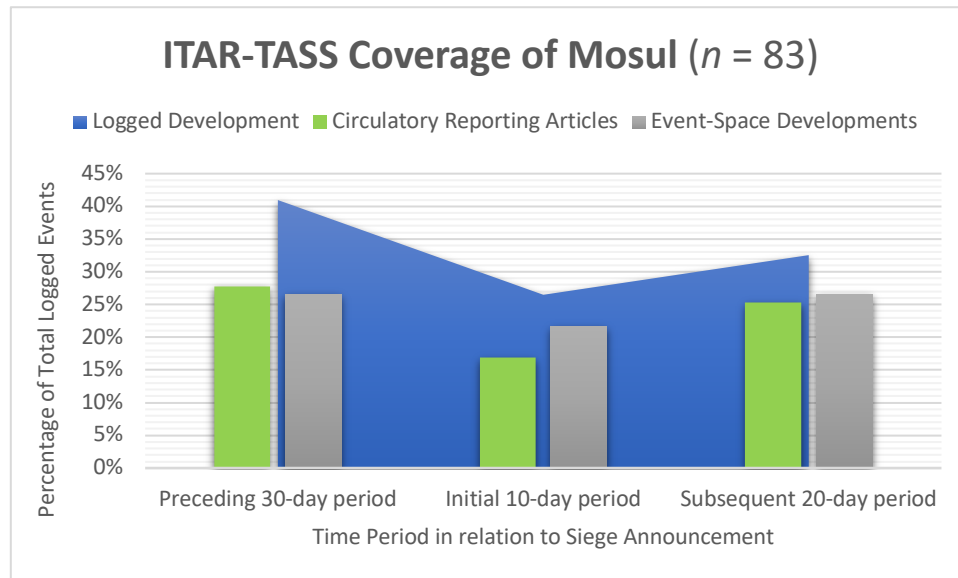


Figure 6. Logged developments in ITAR-TASS coverage of Mosul.

During the Russian-backed siege of Aleppo, ITAR-TASS coverage ($n = 59$; see Figure 5) maintained a relative balance between dislocated coverage and event-space reporting, contrasting the consistent dislocated and staggered regional reporting of Reuters and AP in Aleppo. ITAR-TASS maintained consistent coverage: With the exception of three of 30 days, there was continuing coverage from the day of announcement with multiple daily event-space developments covered by ITAR-TASS through until the 30th day of analysis. Between the 10th and 20th days following the siege announcement, there was a sharp increase in event-space reporting. RIA ($n = 45$) held a similar pattern of continuing coverage but with clear locating of stories in Moscow and Damascus, explicitly relaying bulletins from these government sources with additional CR of Syria-based stories relayed from other media. The iterative BN style was consistently rare for ITAR-TASS throughout this study; yet, there were still five instances of BN logged in the first 10 days of this siege, and just one for RIA. With this in mind, ITAR-TASS's relative dependence on CR is highlighted in Figures 5, 6, and 9.

In Mosul, ITAR-TASS ($n = 83$; see Figure 6) and RIA ($n = 84$) consistently intensified coverage with multiple daily developments for the pre-, initial, follow-up siege data collection windows; yet, these were largely CR, relaying stories from wider mass media and broadcast news sources, often explicitly denoted in the headline. For ITAR-TASS, these relays still represent an increase in relative reporting on developments in the event space from the initial window onward, whereas for AP, AFP, and Reuters, despite their on-the-ground or regional reporting in the initial siege window, coverage became increasingly dislocated to global capitals following the announcement of the siege.

Idlib

In early September 2018, Putin's warnings of the imminent aerial bombardment and siege of the Syrian opposition stronghold, Idlib, flooded the global media landscape (see Figures 7–9). Rather than a conquest media event, Idlib can be considered an emerging event type: the premediated media event, indicative of the contemporary era of mediatized global diplomacy. Taking into consideration the spatial and temporal patterns of journalistic practices, very different stories are plausibly being told across translocal media landscapes. Given the distinct nature of a siege announcement without a clearly defined campaign that followed, data is discussed below through two coverage timeframes without further subdivision: 30 days prior to the announcement and 30 days following, though the charts maintain a focus on the initial 10-days following the announcement (see Figures 7–9).

Idlib presented a unique reporting context: There was little event-space reporting that was not CR, dependent on other sources. AFP did increase its event-space reporting post announcement ($n = 81$; see Figure 7), however other Western agencies focused on the international debate (see Figure 8).

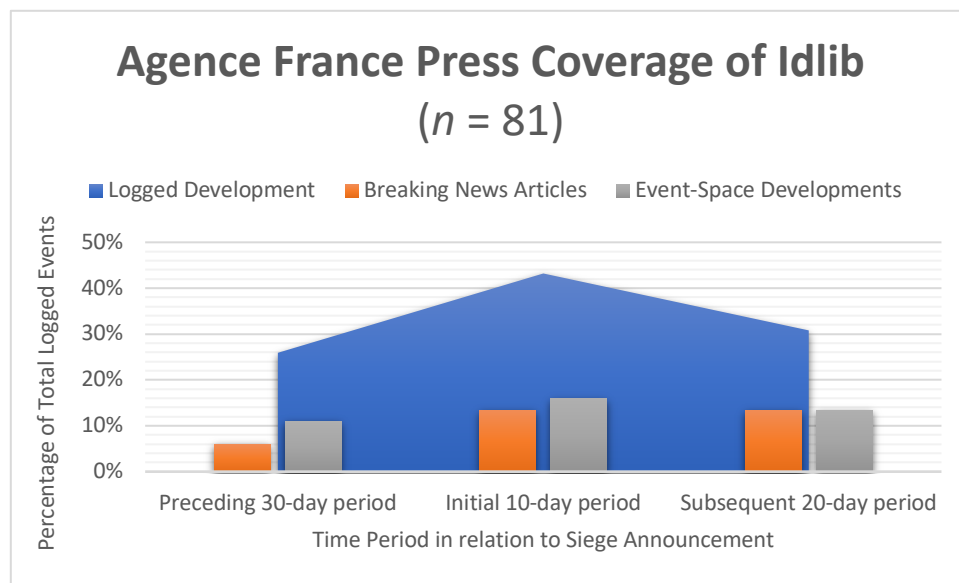


Figure 7. Logged developments in Agence France Press coverage of Idlib.

With little event-space coverage, Reuters ($n = 96$; see Figure 8) remained largely dislocated from Syria, providing sparse CR from monitoring agencies, TV reports, or political statements about the potential siege; 14% and 10% of the 30 days preceding and following the siege announcement, respectively, were notably relays of Russian agency stories. Although much of this CR related to Russian diplomatic and military actions, other relays uncritically circulated the politicized reframing of actors in Idlib and strategic positions taken by the Russian state such as "RUSSIA'S LAVROV, ON SYRIA'S IDLIB, SAYS SYRIAN GOVERNMENT HAS FULL RIGHT TO CHASE TERRORISTS OUT OF ITS TERRITORY—RIA." AP reporting ($n = 34$) was sparse

and dislocated, with relatively more regional reporting than Reuters but without Reuters' temporal engagement with global developments in a highly granular, iterative BN fashion across 38% of its stories.

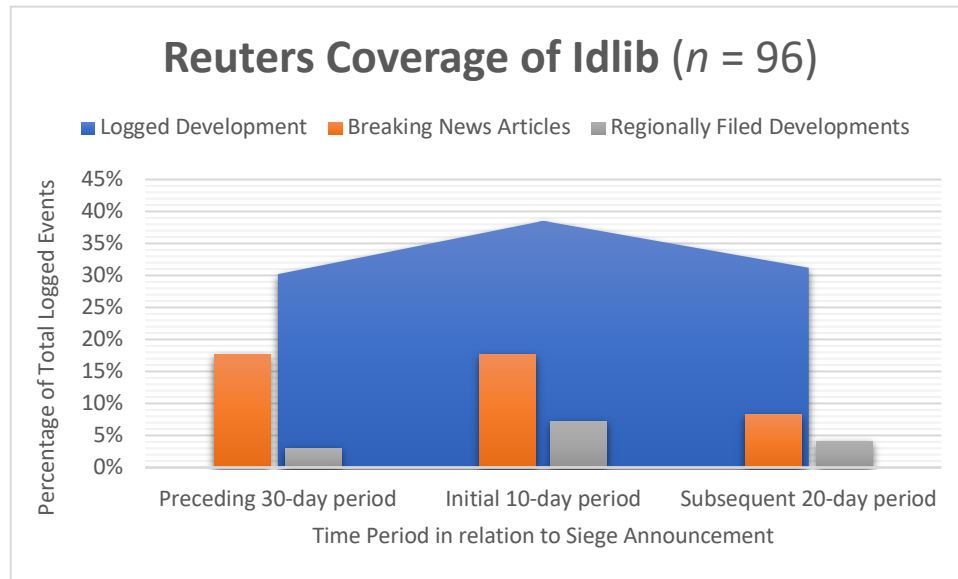


Figure 8. Logged developments in Reuters coverage of Idlib.

ITAR-TASS demonstrated substantially more engagement with Idlib than with other sieges ($n = 110$; see Figure 9); yet, this near daily engagement is also visible in the 30 days prior to the siege announcement. Although there was a 30% increase in the logged developments in the 30 days that followed, interestingly, a high level of event-space developments, amounting to 35% of all logged developments, had been maintained through the entire 60-day period analyzed. ITAR-TASS, which rarely files in a BN fashion, employed BN reporting for 14% and 10% of logged coverage prior to and following the announcement, with RIA reporting ($n = 91$) surpassing even AFP's commitment to BN coverage in this study, with 40% and 49% BN stories, respectively prior to and following the announcement. The relative glut of daily logged developments in ITAR-TASS and RIA coverage represented a consistent level of CR of Russian governmental accusations and predictions of future events. For ITAR-TASS, 60% of all logged developments were CR, although much of this was dislocated from the event space and filed from the Russian capital: Circulation of government statements and local Syrian media had taken on the function of reporting on-the-ground developments.

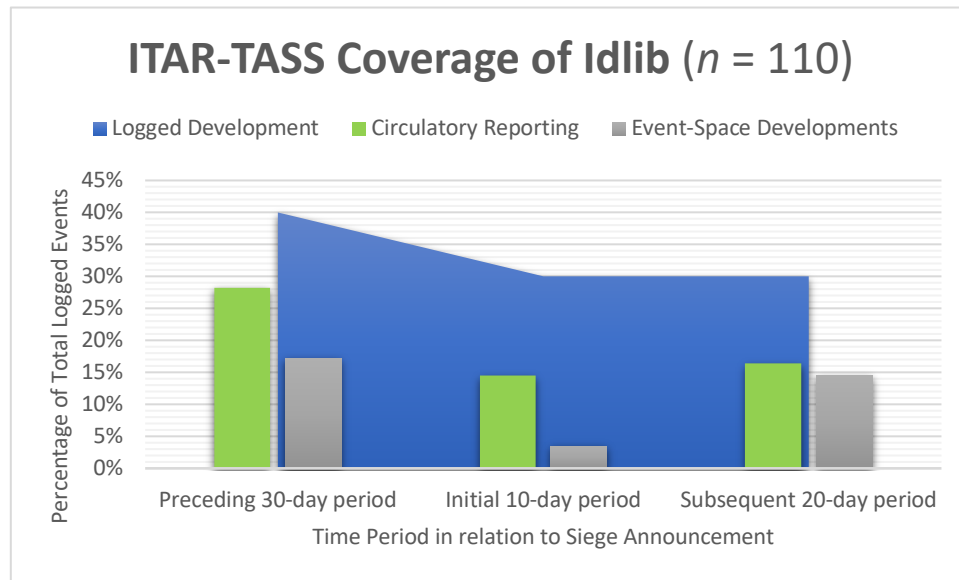


Figure 9. Logged developments in ITAR-TASS coverage of Idlib.

Within the metadata, headlines and ledes analyzed, ITAR-TASS event-space reporting could not always be distinguished from Moscow-based sources. RIA followed a similar pattern of dependence on, and relay of, official sources: Following the siege announcement, 15% of stories were filed from Damascus, and 36% were filed from Moscow, involving relays of on-the-ground developments framed by governmental reactions and commentary of a geopolitical nature. What emerges from the timeline construction of ITAR-TASS' and RIA's Idlib coverage is the politicalized framing of actors on the ground in Idlib—opposition groups as terrorists—explicitly set out in the headlines. In the lead up to Putin's announcement of the imminent siege, ITAR-TASS reports included these indicative examples³: "Terrorists detain more than 2 thousand supporters of truce with Damascus in Idlib—Nebenzya" and "Terrorists prepared chlorine to stage a Chemical Attack in Idlib—Zakharova," citing Russia's representative to the United Nations and the spokesperson for Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs as the sources of recent events and possible future developments on the ground in Idlib. Other logged ITAR-TASS developments across the timeline involve CR of foreign governmental statements and media reports that aligned with these framings such as the bulletin "TASS: USA CONSIDERS THAT THERE ARE IN THE ORDER OF 35 THOUSAND TERRORISTS IN THE SYRIAN PROVINCE IDLIB—TRUMP." Plausible future threats were also framed: "Militants in Syria to poison orphans with chlorine to stage chemical attack—Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation" and "Militants in the province of Idlib prepare provocations with poisonous substance—Reconciliation Center" relaying information from the Russian military-affiliated center.

For RIA, the dislocated practice of relaying governmental information circulated politicized and accusatory frames particular to on-the-ground events and actors. Again, the Syrian opposition was framed

³ ITAR-TASS and RIA headlines have been translated from Russian by the author.

as terrorists, like ITAR-TASS, but extended this reframing to include the volunteer rescue organization the Syrian Civil Defense, known as the White Helmets and widely lauded in Western media framings: "A gathering of terrorists with the participation of 'White Helmets' was held on September 7 in Idlib." Proregime supporters in Syria have persistently employed smear campaigns to undermine the credibility of such organizations (Matar, 2019, p. 2405), but here the amplification of ostensible misinformation extended beyond Syrian state media and toward linguistically diverse global audiences. Again paralleling ITAR-TASS, RIA offered CR of official statements from international actors, capturing once again a sense of developments on the ground but through spatially dislocated sources: "More than 38 thousand people left their homes in Syrian Idlib from 1 to 12 September—UN OCHA."

Discussion

While the comparative coverage timeline engages with existing newswire metadata and project-specific metadata developed for each article, the changing metadata patterns provide a new analytical layer to real-world events as they unfold across numerous articles, teasing apart the spatial as well as temporal distinctions among the types of journalistic practices undertaken. When considering the potential for mediated participation in the times and spaces of a siege or crisis media events, there are qualitative and empirical differences captured in the metadata, spatially distinguishing types of event-space reporting in Syria from dislocated coverage occurring internationally, and temporally distinguishing breaking news reporting, evident in the published iterations of events that are still unfolding, from circulatory reporting, evident in the explicit relays of information that are available to, and reported on by, multiple media outlets or institutional sources.

Each type of journalistic production contributes to the potential for mediated participation in distant events by global audiences, but in different ways. Event-space reporting and breaking news reporting provide a heightened sense of mediated witnessing that, respectively, connects audiences to the event space or region of distant media events, while offering an approximation of "liveness" in the successive iterations of news coverage as events unfold. Dislocated coverage and circulatory reporting both contribute to the "monopolistic" quality of global media event coverage, such that the ubiquity and continuity of media attention on particular distant events and related, often political, developments contribute to continuing coverage for any one outlet and often across outlets. Tracing these shifts in journalistic practice from the event space to dislocated foreign capitals for each agency, then, allows for a comparison of the conditions and cultures of journalistic practice among newswire organizations. Crucially, this practice-based lens links the micro level and situated practices of reporting with the "mezzo level" of the "interorganizational field," providing researchers a partial view onto the "universe of journalists and media organizations acting and reacting in relation to one another" (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p. 11). Comparison across particular siege events highlights the militarized geographic spaces of media production within a multistate conflict, through which changing patterns of engagement between the journalistic and political fields can be inferred.

Sequestering Journalist Practice

Not all international reporting on the Syrian War is war reporting. Correspondents reporting from a local or regional theater of war rely on a diverse array of relational, institutional, and informational sources;

yet, there is a distinct quality to timely reporting on distant events for global audiences. With military embedding and informational dependence polarized by an Anglo-American and Russian–Syrian governmental divide, agency reporters enjoy different degrees of access to geographic areas and community networks across Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq, influenced both by contemporary political relationships and colonial histories. “Host-country” media are also integral to the work of any foreign correspondent, more so for many foreign correspondents than engagement with personal contacts (Archetti, 2013, p. 422).

Zelizer (2007, p. 423) argues that the increasing import of immediacy, idealized in “live” or near-live coverage of spot reporting, reveals particular organizational coping mechanisms whereby media outlets rely on extended networks of journalists and nonconventional journalists to provide a semblance of professional “on-the-spot” witnessing: Faced with safety concerns during the Iraq War, Western correspondents increasingly relied on their logistical support network on the ground, receiving information through “fixers” and “minders” as an extension of the “eyewitness presence” of correspondents. Organizational research into foreign correspondent practices reveals a much wider, conventionalized, yet convoluted network of actors that contributes to the translocal flow of coverage inherent to news production. These are differentiated along a spectrum of contractual arrangements from full- or part-time foreign correspondent staff, contributing freelance correspondents, to the occasional regional freelance “stringers” for international agencies, often editorial staff of nearby national outlets (Archetti, 2013, p. 421; Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998, p. 9).

The constrained eyewitness role of newsmakers providing “grounded proof” has largely been “outsourced”: The timely relay of accounts by private citizens additionally fulfills both the embodied proximity and temporal immediacy of conflict reporting, while the editorial conventions of anchors or correspondents serve to mask the “spatial dislocation” (Zelizer, 2007, pp. 421–422) of journalistic work, simulating that on-the-ground presence. Yet, citizen journalism, vital for international coverage in Syria, emerges from an affective landscape marred by the violence and multiple antagonisms of conflict, which are often flattened and rarely remediated by Western news outlets (Al-Ghazzi, 2014). The “data glut” facing newsmakers involves navigating the strategic motivations of citizen media production and the differential framing of events within media accessed or consumed by sectarian communities. Although the volume and verification of content both present challenges, international media outlets nevertheless seek to frame events for which no singular account has emerged; yet, this is additionally influenced by the lens of their own organizational and ideological literacies (Powers & O’Loughlin, 2015 p. 177).

There is also a long history of governmental strategies in managing the situational and, therein, relational realities of war-reporting practices. During the Vietnam War, the wide latitude for journalist movement and the subsequent visceral coverage produced exposed the realities of war, destabilizing the U.S. administration’s ability to quell domestic opposition. The subsequent Gulf War saw the U.S. military impose greater restrictions in access for reporters and the establishment of “press pools.” The Pentagon’s rationale for embedding journalists with U.S. forces related to the temporal immediacy of relaying preferential factual aspects of unfolding events before those events could be reframed or distorted through competing interpretations via unembedded journalists, foreign media, or foreign governments (Roselle, 2017, pp. 63, 66). A similar trajectory would see Putin adopt selective geographic press access as a form of censorship in the second Chechen War after Yeltsin’s preferential frontline access for state media during the first had left

the crews of independent broadcaster NTV free to remediate voices and witness accounts from across the region and from different sides of the conflict, thereby disproving much of what the government claimed about its successes in executing the conflict (Roselle, 2017, p. 73).

Aligning Events and Spectacle

Militaristic spectacles of sanitized violence frame global media events as already-historic turning points, coordinated with newsmakers for near-live witnessing experiences that offer narratives of preplanned accomplishments, which are rarely achieved or ever observable on the ground. When the U.S.-allied Iraqi forces at Mosul were livestreamed by an embedded Kurdish journalist, the media event's "rare realization of the full potential of electronic media technology" (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 15) brought global audiences the first "Facebook War" (Thompson, 2016): Video streams were embedded on social media platforms and websites of international broadcasters, where users' emphatic clicks floated across live imagery. Echoing the control and hijacking of the Sochi Olympics event space for the suppression, but also assertion, of alternative media event narratives (Burchell, 2015), the protracted "Battle of Aleppo" would produce the #SaveAleppo campaign as local citizens facing the aerial bombardment pleaded for a reprieve via social media. A correspondent from RT would, however, reassert the Russian-Syrian governmental position, streaming a taxied tour from government-controlled western Aleppo: "It looks like we're not in a war zone," yet the shelling is "half a kilometre away" (Phelan, 2016, 00:03:15-00:04:10).

These are examples of "effects-based" propaganda whereby military actions and political messaging are aligned with known events and "selections of truth" that allow for the stimulation of certain narrative trajectories in global media discourse (Briant, 2015). At the core of this strategy is the coordination and consistency of messaging both over time and among allied political actors. Misinformation campaigns during the "War on Terror" demonstrated the very incompatibility of "audience targeting" with the hyperconnected reality of the global media landscape. Following high-profile failures of such nefarious "gray" or "black" propaganda campaigns, this reality has ostensibly been accepted by U.S. and UK governments. During the Iraq War, for example, information was strategically released internationally to newspapers in India, Poland, and South Africa to deniably avoid what political actors call "playback," "spillover," or "feedback" of misinformation to American and British domestic audiences (Briant, 2015). Although MI6 confirmed the existence of one such campaign, similar campaigns by the Pentagon were revealed to Congress as having additionally targeted audiences of allied nations, thereby increasing the likelihood of such narratives reaching U.S. audiences. Both the UK and U.S. governments were forced to accept the erroneous nature that had governed their propaganda tactics: The global media landscape is not made up of easily isolated and monopolized national audiences, or even porous national media cultures, but flows of global and translocal media.

In Syria and Iraq, strategic military spectacles become focusing events for those newswires with a readied and existing relationship of coordination with the governments involved. A degree of narrative fidelity can be achieved if preplanned event messaging does not contravene existing or circulating knowledge of events among audiences. This provides a consistency of siege-event narratives amid constraints on journalistic practice and, consequently, a restriction of known events that can be circulating across global media. This contributes to the limiting and divergence of narratives produced by global newswires,

consequently for the newsrooms subscribing to their services along the translocal, linguistic, and regional economic contours of national media industries. When strategic political communication, however, does not seek consistency in messaging but rather fosters degrees of uncertainty in relation to events, then these divergent flows of information can be mobilized to produce a more flexible mediatized field for possible military and political action.

Translocal Flows of Uncertainty

Historically, objectivity has been only one ideal measure of news value. Whereas the 19th- and 20th-century development of Anglo-American journalism focused on maintaining standards of "impartiality," other European traditions upheld a duty of appropriate interpretation for their public, where the mingling of facts and opinion is "governed by an ethics of conviction" (Tworek, 2019, p. 4) alongside ideological or partisan leanings. Drawing from the Soviet legacy, a similarly interpretative role of journalist as "commentator" is a more accepted standard of practice beyond Western media systems (Camaj, 2010).

Whereas coordination between U.S. allied forces with AP and Reuters contributed to the media event of Mosul, the particular type of dislocated reporting by ITAR-TASS and RIA during Aleppo and Idlib highlighted an emerging geographically oriented militarized media strategy involving political spokespeople dislocated from the event space usurping the on-the-ground reporting function of journalists. The field of journalism has traditionally struggled to maintain its "weak autonomy" from political and economic domains through a professionalization of journalistic norms and conventions of practice, despite its dependency on the political field's "monopoly of access" (Bourdieu, 1995, p. 35) to spokespeople, official state positions, planning, and activities. In a study of six agencies during the Iraq War debate, Western agencies most frequently relied on U.S. official sources, whereas ITAR-TASS "showed nationalistic bias in its sourcing" (Horvit, 2006, p. 346) and Xinhua was most likely to source Iraqi officials. Similar to what was evident in this study with ITAR-TASS and RIA, sourcing patterns of U.S. journalists depended on routinized pathways for newsgathering where official governmental sources such as press conferences, official spokespeople, and executive addresses dominate news coverage (Horvit, 2006). Rather than reacting to event developments or delayed governmental "releases" of information from dislocated capitals, the type of CR relayed Russian State framings of events from a distance, but without forfeiting the immediacy and granularity of more-than-daily developments occurring within the event space.

Yet, in contrast to Mosul and Aleppo, the limited event-space reporting from Idlib amid consistent dislocated coverage and CR represents an emerging typology of such spectacles, the premediated media event: an event that is preempted in the media, manifest through contradictory future scenarios of predicted humanitarian crisis and potential threats justifying possible future action, mobilized as and through mediatized diplomacy among international state actors who are dislocated from the space of the imminent siege itself. In the wars following 9/11, a logic of securitization within the political field engaged with the networked realities of the journalistic field in the "premediation" of war, a mediatized preemption of conflict by political actors within the media. Premediation is not prediction, but the "proliferation of competing and often contradictory future scenarios" (Grusin, 2010, p. 46). In Idlib, the premediation of threats from so-called terrorists within the city was accompanied by contradictory reports of the threat of chemical weapon attacks alongside reports of conspiracies to falsely "stage" such an attack. The degree of uncertainty sowed

by the very multiplicity of possible outcomes extends the field for strategic future actions, including in this case a preempted mediatized logic to support future denials of potential future chemical weapons used clandestinely by the Assad regime. The Iraq War saw a similar premediation of threat through the infamous WMDs Intel presentation at the United Nations; yet, certainty and consistency in such messaging are restrictive. By contrast, Russian and Syrian misinformation campaigns do not depend on consistency but on informational ambiguity that fosters the divergence of translocal information flows and possibilities for audience reception.

With increased governmental control over the national media landscape, Russia's domestic broadcasting has maintained its popularity throughout much of the post-Soviet space through contractual limitations with broadcasters in other countries to stem transmission of popular Western programming in any language other than Russian (Brown, 2017, pp. 177–178). This real diaspora of Russian speakers is being strategically extended through the liberal "passportization" of former Soviet populations, such that linguistically specific media flows offer the potential mobilization of a yet-to-be-complete (trans)national identity, but specifically a mobilization that "is indifferent to the reaction of those that it excludes" (Brown, 2017, p. 178). The Russian domestic media market operates largely in alignment with governmental priorities (Vartanova, 2011), but tensions between this transnational strategy and the ethnocentric Russian nationalism that pervades domestic journalism are reconciled through a wider Eurasianism in which ethnicity, citizenship, and allies can be mobilized through anti-Western sentiment (Hutchings & Burchell, 2015). Beyond this cultural and linguistic sphere of influence, media outlets such as RT and Sputnik extend these particular types of soft power diplomacy within the field of multilingual internationally facing media. In this manner, Russia projects narratives about itself, its place in the world, and its Western counterparts.

When contested accounts and government denials of operations in Ukraine fostered degrees of uncertainty about what was in fact happening, this sowed confusion among audiences as well as Ukrainian and Western political actors as to the appropriate counteraction. Reports of Russian military involvement in the conflict persisted alongside its strident refutation of such involvement by governmental representatives in the media (Brown, 2017, p. 1789). Media outlets such as RT capitalized on a 24-hour news cycle peppered with competing unverified accounts—rumors and counterrumors—that undermine certainty through the multiplicity of possible interpretations, themselves embedded within a preframed "information war" narrative (Hutchings et al., 2015, p. 645). Ambiguity during the Ukrainian conflict instrumentalized the exclusion of nonsympathetic audiences within narratives of mediatized political antagonism, allowing consumers of Russian media and wider potentially sympathetic networks of translocal audiences to be conditioned by the circulation of known events and also by the circulation of uncertainties surrounding events. In Syria, similarly, proregime media amplified multiple contradictory misinformation campaigns across an already-fragmented media landscape, exacerbating existing divisions among sectarian audiences while undermining opposition movements, nongovernmental organizations, and journalists alike (Matar, 2019, p. 2405).

Conclusion

By tracing shifts in journalistic practice, both temporally and spatially, in relation to announced military campaigns, there are clear combinations of reporting and dislocated coverage, of breaking news

and circulatory relays, each of which contributes to siege or crisis media events in particular ways. This practice-based lens highlights the contemporary economic and networked realities of global news production as they map onto preferred events, locations, and sources of international conflict reporting, demonstrating the fault lines of contemporary media production as sites of possible media interference.

News coverage of multistate global conflicts is already embedded within a politicized landscape of opportunity and constraint for media production. Following each siege discussed, arduous postfact investigations conducted months or years later by journalists, multilateral organizations and nongovernmental organizations reveal the brutality of total war inflicted on the besieged cities. These stand in stark contrast to the clear-cut historical "conquest" media event, limited in time and space, organized through militarized media strategies privileging the international political field within coverage, while reporting practices engaging the lives and experiences of Syrian and Iraqi communities are constrained if not precluded.

The conditions for a premeditated media event, first, involve a geographic and material marshaling of conditions to reduce or delay, if not preclude, event-space reporting. Second, an asymmetry of access is instrumentalized in a context of near-monopolistic coverage. Western media rarely facilitated witnessing of events on the ground, focusing on the multisided mediatised diplomacy between international capitals as to Idlib's fate. Coordinated circulatory relays via ITAR-TASS and RIA offered, in contrast, a temporal granularity and geographic situatedness of Russian and Syrian state information. Third, amid this asymmetry, a proliferation of multiple, contradictory accounts and possible future outcomes is produced by those with geographic and informational access, additionally circulated in this study by those without access. This represents, fourth, a platform for the strategic reframing of actors by conflating mediatised political narratives amid the perceived veracity of on-the-ground information releases. In contrast to Western criticism from foreign capitals, coverage by ITAR-TASS and RIA framed Russia's role on the world stage as protecting the sovereignty of the Syrian state and contributing to the "War on Terror" while facilitating mediated witnessing to event-space developments in which threats to Russian soldiers and local populations mingled with the conflated reframing of diverse nongovernmental Syrian actors as terrorists. These conditions contribute, fifth, to an enthralling degree of uncertainty among known events and contradictory reporting, exacerbating the sympathies and divisions between sets of domestic and transnational audiences who will often receive contradictory news. This multiplication of narratives cannot simply be attributed to a so-called information war; rather, the divergence of crisis narratives within global reporting can be traced to the very heart of newsmaking, in which distinct types journalistic work can be precluded or promoted and influenced or undermined.

Understanding the practices that contribute to international newsmaking, from the embodied and geographically situated to the relationally and technologically networked, provides a map to the stressors and fault lines inherent in responsible reporting. These represent the exploitable weaknesses of our global media ecosystem and strategic levers available to the political field. Sequestering journalists and coordinating opportunities for media coverage of U.S.-backed or Russia-backed sieges represent a space for the strategic marshaling of conditions to produce global media events that assert divergent geopolitical hierarchies for the states involved. Unsafe conditions for reporting on the ground, as a reality of conflict or purposeful military strategy, offer a vacuum within which the media's reporting function is filled by citizen-

produced media or it is usurped by the political field. The interorganizational and linguistic dependencies that shape relationships between regional and national media industries represent a further reality of the global and translocal media landscape that can be instrumentalized toward political ends. Translocal audiences across such divisions can receive not only contradictory news and, therein, divergent opportunities for witnessing global events, but also divergent narratives about those same events. Such divergence can feed into polarizing populist discourses, narratives of a global information war, and pervasive accusations of fake news, in which the undermining of fact-based reporting practices primes publics for malevolent and state-sponsored political narratives. This leaves the realities of suffering in Syria and Iraq largely untold, despite the orchestration of global attention to media events projected onto the fog of war. The first casualty of today's global war is not the truth, but the very field of certainty among truth tellers.

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