***Mapping Russian Propaganda in a Rewired World: Leveraging the Analytic Power of Strategic Narrative and Computational Linguistics***

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*Abstract: This paper seeks to leverage the concept of strategic narrative with computational linguistics to suggest new methods for detecting the influence of Russian propaganda in the U.S. media system. The paper discusses media models in Russia and the United States; the value of strategic narrative; verbal memes in computational linguistics; and suggests a model for synthesizing these elements into a propaganda detection system.*

The news of Russian attempts to influence 2016 U.S. elections is the latest in a series of alarming reports about Russian propaganda in the Western sphere. Western governments have become increasingly concerned about the deployment of ‘soft power’ communication tactics by the Russians, ranging from their response to the false allegations of sexual abuse of a Russian teenager living in Germany to evidence of a long-term campaign to influence Swedish media discourse with forgeries and misinformation. There are many questions that arise from these events. What of this is new and what is linked to traditional Soviet and post-Soviet propaganda? What is engendered by the internet and what is ‘business as usual’ for communication warfare? However, the key question is although we have mounting evidence of Russian propaganda in foreign media, we are struggling to assess the scope and effect of this propaganda because of a lack of a robust measurement tool fit for the internet age. In this paper, I suggest that we need to start thinking much more tactically about the dissemination of propaganda. We can do this by leveraging our understanding of media systems, using the concept of strategic narrative, and re-conceptualizing words as data. I will make the argument in this paper that taking these steps can significantly advance our understanding of the spread of propaganda at a time when analysts and politicians alike need much more precise and useful information about the intrusion of foreign propaganda into their domestic media spheres.

Understanding Russian Media Threat through Media Models

The study of media models – and specifically the relationship of the character of the state to the nature of the media system – is a relatively overlooked, but critical part of political communication theory. It is also somewhat contested, in that many argue what some people call ‘models’ (Siebert et al., 1956) are really no more than descriptive comparisons of the rest of the world with the American libertarian model of the press. The controversies aside, those who study the relationship between the state and the media find credible arguments for showing that media cultures emanate from regime types, media norms, legal systems, and ownership structures (Hallin and Mancini, 2003). Media systems are extremely reflective of their national environments – and audiences have deeply rooted expectations about the media’s role in society. These national systems evolve, but tend to retain characteristics that have developed over long periods.

The U.S. and Russian media systems present a contrast. The Russian media are not free. All major media outlets are owned or controlled by the state. There are some outlets that challenge the Kremlin line, but they are small and often under threat. Despite a brief foray into more diverse voices just before and after the collapse of the Soviet system in 1991, the Russian media carry on the Soviet tradition of the media in service to the state as opposed to the Western ideal of media in service of the citizens (Oates 2007). The Russian media have become steadily less free under Russian President Vladimire Putin and are currently ranked not free by Freedom House.[[1]](#footnote-1) While the Russian government has moved to limit online freedom of expression (particularly with the forced takeover of the leading social-media site *Vkontakte* by government interests in 2014), the Russian internet is still less constrained than the traditional media sphere (Toepfl 2016, Oates 2013, also see the Freedom House Freedom of Net reports on Russia at https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/russia). One particularly powerful element of the Russian media system is “kompromat”, which is the Russian abbreviation for “compromising material.” Kompromat has been in use in Russia since the 1990s and employs the mass media for political blackmail. By using rumors, half-truths, suspicious photos, or even secret recordings of sexual encounters, kompromat is deployed by the Kremlin against its political opponents. Russia’s export of *kompromat* to Germany in 2016 with the ‘Lisa’ case[[2]](#footnote-2) and to the United States in the Trump election serves as a warning sign that Western countries with more open media systems will find it difficult to deal with these tactics.

The issue with the Russian media entering into the U.S. media system, which it does in ways including through its international broadcaster RT, through social-media messaging, experts who ‘front’ from the Kremlin while posing as analysts or journalists, is that the U.S. media system is virtually uncontrolled by the state. Thus, propaganda messages can work more effectively in a system (particularly since the Trump campaign) that has accepted and even embraced pseudo-news sites and dubious spokespeople (Benckler et al., 2017, Starbird 2017). The structure and character of the U.S. media has left it very vulnerable to propaganda (both from within and without), not least because major social-media providers have generally failed to filter or deliver checks on news sources distributed via their platforms. While these social-media companies claim that they are ‘platforms’ and not news outlets, the majority of U.S. news is now distributed via social-media companies. So while Russian news sites could not have gained traction in the media environment of just a few years ago, the ‘pay-to-play’ model of social-media companies (via promotion, search-engine optimization, trolling, bots, etc.) now give them easy visibility in the American media ecosystem. Here we have a war of two media models – a U.S. model that expects the consumer/citizen to decide and the “neo-Soviet model” (Oates 2007) that uses the media as a weapon to gain political ends. This as highlighted by Giglietto at al. (2016) when they wrote about the need for a “new taxonomy” to study misleading information within hybrid media systems.

Perhaps all this could remain just an interesting theoretical point about the collision of two media models. A frequent criticism of media model theory is that it doesn’t take into account the critical variable of the audience. In the case of the U.S. audience, there is compelling evidence that U.S. citizens do a poor job at distinguishing reputable news from fakery. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center carried out in December 2016, only 39 percent of Americans feel “very confident” that they can recognize fake news.[[3]](#footnote-3) Almost two-thirds of them (64 percent) agree that fake news has left American confused about basic facts and almost a quarter of them report having shared fake news either on purpose or by mistake. This is fairly compelling evidence that you cannot leave it to the audience to detect the different between actual news and propaganda (which falls under the concept of fake news[[4]](#footnote-4)). By the same token, the Russian audience is likely to be far more skeptical, particularly about foreign news sources, given their suspicions about the value of ‘news’ in general in their neo-Soviet media system.[[5]](#footnote-5)

This means that Russian propaganda can become lost in a sea of news, quasi-news, sponsored content (‘advertorials’), and partisan news that makes up the U.S. media ecosystem. In essence, the nature of the U.S. media system today allows Russian propaganda to ‘hide in plain sight.’ However, as outlined below, it is possible to define Russian narratives, making detection of them in an open media system feasible.

Finding Russian News Narratives

Recently, a communication researcher new to studying Russia asked me how one could find the Kremlin’s message, which led me to realize that it can be difficult for Westerners to conceptualize just how much the media are a part of the power apparatus in Russia. My reply was that the function of *Vremya* (*Time*), the main news program on the state-run First Channel, was to communicate the Kremlin’s message. There is no competing message or deviation from this narrative, making it relatively easy to gauge the nature and direction of the Kremlin’s message. Almost all of the significant media outlets in Russia are ‘on message’ with the Kremlin. Not only are there regular meetings and directives issued by the Kremlin, the entire media industry is attuned to its function as propaganda for the state. There is media diversity in Russia, in that there are some relatively minor media outlets that are allowed to publish criticism and opposing viewpoints, but they lie outside of the mainstream.[[6]](#footnote-6) Thus, a review of *Vremya* news, for example, will provide a clear indication of Kremlin message frames. RT, an international broadcaster funded by the Russian state, performs the function of communicating Kremlin messages in the United States and in other foreign countries.

Which messages matter and how can researchers identify them? Unsurprisingly, those stories that are popular on the internet – such as those listed as the most retweeted of the year by RT – are typically about non-political issues such as a rare blue lobster. It is actually more effective to find an issue, whether it is the downing of Malaysia Flight 17 or the election of Donald Trump, and identify the Russian framing/message on *Vremya* or in another important part of the dominant, state-run media. I argue that it is important to think not about specific messages, but about strategic narratives (Miskimmon at al., 2013). How are these narratives expressed by leaders via the traditional mass media and then promoted by the pro-state social media efforts? How do Russian propaganda messages relate to these strategic goals? It is critically important to understand these goals, because it then gives us the ability to try to decode how Russian propaganda efforts in various countries (such as dossiers on U.S. candidates or misinformation in Germany) feed into narratives about a resurgent Russian nation.

What makes a narrative?[[7]](#footnote-7)

Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle (2013) identify strategic narrative as a measurable and critical variable in international relations. In the case of strategic narratives, a narrative sets out “the story of why a state is involved in a conflict, who is with the state and against the state, and how the conflict will be resolved” (Roselle 2010, p. 1, citing Antoniades, Miskimmon and O’Loughlin, 2010). But what is a ‘story’ for a state? This refers back to the theories of instrumentalism in national identity, particular as expressed by Benedict Anderson and the idea of “imagined communities” (1991). This is the concept that while citizens of states cannot personally know one another, they can share ideals and opinions via the mass media. While Anderson was discussing this in the context of the rise of profitable print media in vernacular language, it is a powerful theory for conceptualizing the symbiotic relationship between media and national identity. While significant debate continues about the importance of primordial foundations of nation-states vis-à-vis instrumentalist nationalism such as that in an “imagined” community, there is strong evidence of how media systems reproduce and reinforce cultural norms. Indeed, it is impossible to conceive of any significant nation-state that did not have a national identity consistently expressed via mass media outlets. That does not dismiss the idea or even the importance of primordialism, but it does show that media discourses and state identities are intertwined.

Yet, how much do state narratives matter? When put into the context of *strategic* state narratives, it is clear that narratives are both a reflection and a tool of state power. Roselle (2010) focused on strategic narratives and alliance relationships, notably how allies feared entrapment and abandonment during protracted conflicts such as the wars in Afghanistan. She noted that strategic narrative could be studied in a range of settings, including “with the instrumental use of communication and/or rhetoric to legitimize policy (Roselle 2006) or to mobilize domestic publics (Brown 2005)” and “the (re)construction of identity claims in international relations (Hopf 2005).” Thus, strategic state narrative is a useful proxy for the state’s intentions and terms of engagement with the world. It cannot deviate too radically from the reality of that state, but at the same time it both signals intentions and aspirations on the world stage. For example, while U.S. strategic narrative had anti-communism as the main frame for Korea and Vietnam, by the first Gulf War in 1991 the narrative had shifted from anti-communism to U.S. economic interests. By the second Gulf War in 2001, the narrative had shifted again to the ‘War on Terror’ (Entman, 2003), a particularly resonant and powerful frame with the U.S. public (Oates, Kaid, and Berry, 2009) that endured for well over a decade beyond the 9/11 attacks. It also was a narrative that left Russia sidelined, despite attempts by the Russian state to try to align their conflict in Chechnya and a series of terrorist attacks on Russian soil to a global ‘War on Terror’ (Oates, Kaid, and Berry).

While common and effective strategic narratives were well defined during the Soviet era, the landscape of post-Soviet strategic narrative has been a work in progress for Russia, although it has become increasingly anti-Western and pro-Slavic over time. It remains difficult for other nations to understand the signs and signifiers of Russian narratives. During the seizure of Crimea and the invasion of eastern Ukraine, it was clear that the Russians were attempting to project a narrative of the contemporary Russian state as the savior of the Russian people living in the near abroad as well as a noble force resisting the attempted global domination led by the United States. Within this broader narrative is the more proximate concern about European domination of Russian border. Much of this narrative has been played out in critical events, including the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 in the summer of 2014 (Oates 2014) and Russian moral panic in the alleged kidnapping and rape of a Russian teenager in Germany in 2016 (Meister N.D.). Qualitative content analysis provides the overall frame of the message, while more quantitative analysis (including who speaks and which words are used how often) can refine the messages to the point at which computational linguists can identify central, codable memes.

The production of strategic narratives has changed very little since the Cold War. Strategic narratives (such as the War on Terror) are crafted by leaders and disseminated via the mass media. However, the distribution of news has changed dramatically in the online era, first via websites and then even more profoundly by the distribution of news via social-media networks. As discussed by Chadwick (2013) this has created a hybrid media system in which traditional gatekeeping is widened and news is distributed in a globalized, decentralized system driven by audience interests. This also creates the opportunity for ‘hybrid propaganda’, in which media message are created by the state, broadcast initially through the traditional mass media such as television and newspapers, and then re-mediated via social media. This mean that propaganda can be amplified both for domestic and foreign audiences. Recent evidence of the way which Americans consume “fake news” (Benckler et al., Starbird) suggests that Russia has a particularly good opportunity to leverage the hybrid media.

Cottiero et al. (2015) specifically explored the idea of the propaganda dissemination in the hybrid media system by analyzing the way in which Russian state television narratives can resonate into the online sphere. The researchers carried out a content analysis of Dmitri Kiselev’s *News of the Week* show as it reflected a strong, pro-state message for the conflict in Ukraine with the two key frames of World War II-era fascism and anti-Americanism. Cottiero et al. chose Kiselev’s program as he “often reduces these frames to buzzwords, we were able to track the impact of these words on Internet users” (p. 1). They analyzed search query histories on Yandex (the man Russian search engine) and Google, an inspired use of search analytics as a burgeoning tool in audience metrics. Their findings suggest that while the “fascist” and anti-American frames did find resonance (based on their relative popularity as search terms over the time studied), many of the other buzzwords did not have a strong presence in search history. Toepfl (2014) also makes an important contribution by using interviews to detail how Russians decode media messages. Earlier work with Regina Smyth used public opinion surveys to show that assumptions about a straight cleavage between internet users and television viewers were not only not useful, they could be misleading (Smyth and Oates, 2015).

While Anderson highlights how the state narrative both reflects and constructs a state identity, this is a broad theory. The point is that there is no one single state narrative, although one can identify them more easily in countries such as Russia that have strong control of key mass media. There are reasonable methods for content analysis to identify key media outlets and analyze how states such as Russia are choosing to frame situations. This can be seen by attempts on state television to portray Russian mass street demonstrations in the winter of 2011-12 as organized by self-indulgent timewasters interested in disruption rather than genuine public outcry against government manipulation of election results (the former frame was not particularly successful, see Oates and Lokot 2013). A more successful endeavor was the way in which Russian media framed the 2014 Sochi Olympics as a glorious triumph of the post-Soviet state over the West, although there was anger as the West focused on the Russian prejudice against homosexuals.[[8]](#footnote-8) A more critical exercise in strategic communication management is the Russian seizure of Crimea as well as the Russian military intervention in Eastern Ukraine. In these cases, the Russian state narrative centers on the support from the Russian state for ethnic Russian people ‘trapped’ in Ukrainian territory who wish to be ‘reunited’ with a traditional Russian homeland.

Re-conceptualizing Words as Data

By re-conceptualizing words as data, I mean the actual ‘coding’ of a story linguistically so that you can identify where it appears in later public conversation, even when the link to the original story is not mentioned or is long lost. For example, computational linguists have developed a way of codifying news stories/political messages that make it possible for a reliable link to be established between the original story and its retelling in other formats. Leskovec, Backstrom, and Kleinberg (2009) detailed how to use computational linguistics to isolate unique elements of statements and narratives so that these components can be tracked across social-media platforms. In addition to their scholarly work, the trio established an interactive website in which one can look at how their visualizations of the spread of messages in the U.S. 2008 elections (see <http://www.memetracker.org>). Leskovec et al. use the idea of memes to capture the essential message of a particular quote. Although the idea of a meme has come to be linked to visuals with a clever or witty text overlay (such as Grumpy Cat or The New Old Spice Guy), computational linguists use the term to refer to the essential root or identity of an idea expressed verbally. For example, in the U.S. 2016 presidential campaign, one meme would be ‘nasty woman’ – originally uttered by Trump during a debate to castigate Hillary Clinton, but then picked up as a riposte by liberals -- or the phrase “build a wall” popularized by Trump as an extremist response to immigration issues.

If we can visualize the spread of specific narratives across a media system (both among different media outlets and as they are discussed in social media), our ability to use narrative as a tool through which to understand media influence is greatly enhanced. One of the most significant challenges, particularly in assessing either the strength of propaganda or the value of free media discourse, is measuring the effect of both propaganda and news. Government officials and media scholars must assume an effect – i.e. if RT broadcasts numerous stories attacking the record of the Clinton Foundation, than it could have an effect on how people perceive Clintons in the United States. But, in general, we only have two static types of data relating to this propaganda. First, we can measure and categorize the coverage from RT, for example by recording all of its content, finding where the Clintons are mentioned, counting the number of seconds of coverage, and then categorizing the coverage as either negative or positive. All of this is quite time-consuming and – as one who has coded a great deal of broadcast and other media content – I have to say it is often more an art than a science particularly when using the terms “negative” and “positive.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Although one can – with time, effort, and dedicated researchers – make a compelling case that the propaganda aimed at Western audiences exists (for example, see Nelson and Orttung 2016), how do we then gauge the effect of the propaganda? Traditionally, we have used (or even commissioned) nationally representative surveys or used focus groups. Again, these are blunt instruments, although each adds value (surveys particularly in terms of mass interest, focus groups in terms of deeper understanding of how messages are interpreted). Yet, if even if a survey finds that support for the Clintons has declined in the United States during the time period of a Russian propaganda effort, it’s really impossible to tie that to the propaganda effort with the current research tools (content analysis, surveys, focus groups) in use. Even the burgeoning field of social-media analytics has not developed well enough to track nuanced political messages and their resonance in the media sphere (Oates and Moe 2016).

But by re-conceptualizing words into data and then using the map of the hybrid media system, we should be able to follow messages from their origins across the media ecosystem, down to where people are distributing and re-mediating these messages via social-media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Some of the most egregious examples of Russian propaganda, particularly the denial of sending soldiers and weapons to destabilize Eastern Ukraine, are not particularly resonant with the U.S. audience. However, there is widespread concern and suspicion surrounding news manipulation in the election of Trump. One can either look at the messages as distributed on what has been identified as far-Right news sources (Benckler et al.) to define and try to trace back to the origin or – perhaps more productively – one can start with clear Russian propaganda memes and work outward from there.

Next Steps

This paper has found both challenges and opportunities in understanding Russian propaganda in the digital age. First, the current system that relies on content analysis, public opinion surveys, and focus groups is too slow and blunt for this purpose. The study of Russian propaganda (and indeed of news and propaganda in general) can be usefully re-engineered to take advantage of the relative openness of the online sphere. The key lies in finding a way to tag and trace messages through the hybrid media. This paper suggests that meme tracking as suggested by scholars such as Leskovec et al. is a promising blueprint for the future. I also will end the paper on a note of urgency to find research solutions that can meet the speed and power of the way in which propaganda is disseminating from authoritarian media systems to democratic media systems. As noted above in my discussion about media models, the different norms of the two models strongly favor authoritarian states in terms of leveraging the online sphere for the spread of propaganda. This leaves democratic states with an urgent need to be able to identify and counter propaganda attacks in the age of hybrid war. At this moment, we do not know the extent of the influence of Russian propaganda campaigns in critical democratic events such as the election of Donald Trump. Through an evolution in the study of online propaganda, we can and should know the damage done. At the same time, this also creates the opportunity to discuss how the internet can challenge Russian propaganda both internationally and abroad. While the online sphere gives the Russians the ability to attempt to manipulate opinion in the online sphere, it also leaves open channels of communication that challenge its internal information hegemony. A greater level of precision in understanding and tracking Russian propaganda via the lens of strategic narratives will allow us to understand (and counter) communication attacks.

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1. See the 2017 Freedom House report on Freedom of the Press at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2017> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The ‘Lisa F’ case involved a 13-year-old German girl (who was originally from Russia) who disappeared on her way home from school in January 2016 and returned a day later claiming she had been sexually assaulted by immigrants. The girl (whose last name was withheld as she is a minor) told different versions of the story. Eventually it transpired that she spent the night at the home of a friend and there was no sexual assault, a story that she apparently invented. However, the Russian media framed the story as a failure of the German government to protect a young Russian girl, leading to a diplomatic intervention from Russia as well as street demonstrations by angry Russians in Berlin in January. The very different framing of the case in the two different media systems – including the very aggressive criticism of the German authorities as well as the publication of rumors rather than facts – were a warning to Germany that Russia was prepared to use its Russian ethno-nationalism/protection of citizen narrative by basing it on innuendo and rumor rather than news. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.journalism.org/2016/12/15/many-americans-believe-fake-news-is-sowing-confusion/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There is enormous debate about what is meant by ‘fake’ news, which I will not rehearse here. By its nature, propaganda is designed to promote a particular point of view. Not all of it would be ‘fake’ in that well-designed propaganda will be rooted in facts, etc. However, it is designed and deployed with a completely different purpose from ‘news’ in the traditional American sense as news is supposed to provide disinterested information to inform and empower citizens. If often falls short, but the intent matters. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The “neo-Soviet” model of the media suggests that there is a strong Soviet legacy in the contemporary Russian media, exemplified by rejection of objectivity as a norm, flaws in media laws, self-censorship among journalists, government interference and harassment of media outlets, lack of journalistic professionalism, violence against journalists, and an audience attuned to passivity. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In many ways, the Kremlin is challenged by new ways of delivering news in the online sphere, specifically by creative documentaries such as one recently produced and delivered online by regime opponent Alexei Navalny. His documentary about the corruption of Russian Prime Minister and former President Dmitri Medvedev (“He’s Not Little Dmitri to You”) had attracted more than 21 million views on YouTube by late May 2017. There are individual journalists, including those who work for Latvia-based online news site Meduza and the Echo of Moscow radio stations, who continue to write stories that challenge the regime on important issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This section draws heavily from earlier work, see Oates 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The international press corps was unable to get much attention for the story of huge corruption for Olympic construction, although there were many detailed stories on this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Happy to discuss sentiment dictionaries – I have yet to find that they work, but willing to listen to any evidence that they work. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)