Article

Counter-hegemonic collaborations or alliances of the underdogs? The case of TeleSUR with Al-Mayadeen, RT and CGTN

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Abstract
This study explores how news channels from the Global South challenge western narratives by co-producing TV programmes. It focuses on Telesur (Venezuela) and its collaborations with RT (Russia), Al-Mayadeen (Lebanon) and CCTV/CGTN (China). By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, this paper examines the structure of these collaborations, the discursive construction of alternative narratives and their contribution to countering hegemonic discourses. The findings show that the efforts to construct counterhegemonic narratives are most evident in the co-productions with RT and Al-Mayadeen. Although the co-production with CGTN focusses on culture, it is nonetheless possible to identify the broadcasters' distinct ideological agendas.

Keywords
Al-Mayadeen, CGTN, China, co-production, counter-hegemonic narratives, global media, Global South, Latin America, RT, Telesur

Introduction

This study explores how news channels from the Global South seek to challenge Western narratives by co-producing TV programmes. By focussing on Telesur (Venezuela) and its collaborations with RT (Russia), Al-Mayadeen (Lebanon) and CCTV/CGTN (China), this paper examines the intricacies of these co-productions, the dynamics between

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broadcasters and the implications for global communications. The starting hypothesis is that the participating broadcasters play similar roles and their voices are equally represented. While the first research question tests how well balanced these contributions really are, the remaining research questions explore the ideological narratives spread by these co-productions and whether these collaborations can contribute to challenging Western-led narratives. The analysis of a sample of six episodes per co-production revealed that the dynamics between broadcasters vary significantly and show certain degrees of imbalance. While airtime imbalance works against Telesur and in favour of RT and CGTN, the relation with Al-Mayadeen is the closest to a collaboration among equals. The efforts to construct counter-hegemonic narratives are most evident in the programmes co-produced by Telesur with RT and Al-Mayadeen. Even though the co-production with CGTN focuses on culture, it is nonetheless possible to identify an ideological agenda.

Examining previous studies on international news channels from the Global South, it is possible to see that many focus on their strategies, production (content) or reception, either looking at individual countries or channels (e.g. Geniets, 2013; Gorfinkel et al., 2014; Maweu, 2016) and their relationship to specific governments (e.g. Cañizález and Lugo, 2007; Painter, 2008; Rawnsley, 2015; Yablokov, 2015) or focussing on cross-comparisons of specific elements such as coverage (e.g. Li, 2017; Marsh, 2016) or reception (e.g. Geniets, 2013; Gorfinkel et al., 2014; Morales, 2018). Another strand of research focuses on the rise of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the implications for international communications (de Albuquerque and Lycarião, 2018; Nordenstreng and Thussu, 2015; Pasti and Ramaprasad, 2018; Thussu, 2017), which serves as a backdrop to the less explored phenomenon of counter-hegemonic media collaborations in the Global South. In a comprehensive study on public diplomacy, Cull (2019) argues international broadcasting is one of the ways in which countries engage with foreign publics 'by presenting (or claiming to present) an objective picture of the world at large' (p. 5) and recognises Telesur, RT and CGTN as counter-hegemonic stations with the avowed aim 'to correct the imbalance of news from the global Northwest' (p. 112). The collaboration among international channels could then be considered an extension of their public diplomacy efforts by 'borrowing' platforms and increasing the exposure to and engagement with foreign audiences. Similarly, these co-productions might contribute indirectly to create soft power and ultimately motivate others to act in one's interest without resorting to coercive means (Nye, 2004).

Following the Gramscian notion of hegemony, the media are considered instrumental in maintaining active consent and allowing the ruling elites to wield uncontested power. At an international level, the parochialism of 'global' news channels such as CNN 'contribute to a globalisation of a "North Atlantic" (and centrally US) way of life and way of language' (Fairclough, 2013: 205). Since language is a fundamental tool for winning acceptance for particular representations of change (Fairclough, 2013), the globalisation of discourse, thus, assists in consolidating Western-centric power dynamics and imposing a neo-liberal order. From CNN and BBC to *The New York Times*, *Le Monde* and *The Times* of London, news organisations based in Western countries have played a fundamental role in globalising hegemonic discourses, further exacerbated by the unequal and unidirectional flow of news between developed and developing countries partly due to a

shared monopoly of the market by news agencies based in Western countries, that is, Reuters, AP, AFP and UPI. While this has been linked to concerns of media imperialism, Boyd-Barrett (2015) argues that the media are not necessarily agents *of* imperialism, but rather can become agents *for* imperialism 'when they frame their narratives in a manner that presents imperialistic activity in a positive or benign light, when they prioritise the voices, justifications and discourses of imperial actors over the voices of victims, dissidents and alternatives, and when they omit or marginalise details and perspectives that would serve to critique imperial power' (p. 14). In contrast, broadcasters such as Al-Jazeera, PressTV, Telesur, RT, Al-Mayadeen, CGTN and others strive to become agents *against* imperialism. This study focuses on those broadcasting in Spanish, mainly engaging with audiences in Latin America and significantly less with viewers in Spain or elsewhere. If these efforts are contained within the periphery and hardly reach the centre of power, to what extent can they constitute what Thussu (2006) calls contra-flows?

Background: Telesur and its partners

The common denominator in the three collaborations analysed here is Telesur. Launched in 2005, Telesur describes itself as 'a Latin American multimedia platform oriented to lead and promote the unification of the peoples of the SOUTH,[1] (TeleSUR, n.d.). Despite being conceived as a multinational project with contributions from the governments of Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Uruguay, the channel was clearly led by Caracas. After all, Venezuela was the main financial supporter from the outset (Di Ricco, 2012) and the channel was envisioned by the late Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez as a communicational project to promote the integration of Latin America and create an ideological front against Washington, DC (Painter, 2008). Regionally, Telesur was instrumental in garnering support from like-minded countries in what was known as the 'pink tide' or 'turn to the left' of governments in Latin America. Domestically, the channel was one of the tools used by Chávez to counter the fierce opposition stemming from the main private TV companies (Painter, 2008).

With the intention of countering CNN en Español, Telesur aimed at becoming the Latin American version of Al-Jazeera (Cañizález and Lugo, 2007), an association that became a concern for US officials, especially after the announcement of a content-sharing agreement between both media outlets (Kozloff, 2011). The potential birth of 'Al Chavezeera' was feared in Washington as opening the door to a 'global television network for terrorists', as described by the Republican Congressman Connie Mack in 2006 (Romero, 2007). Besides some similarities in their world-view and critical approach to Western narratives, Cañizález and Lugo-Ocando (2008) point out that both Al-Jazeera and Telesur have also 'tried to exploit the perception of pan-Arabism and pan-Latin Americanism as a means of promoting themselves among potential audiences' (p. 220). However, the comparison falls short in terms of their relationship with their funding governments. Both networks received grants, but Al-Jazeera then turned into a commercial broadcaster, while Telesur has been a public service broadcaster since its inception (Cañizález and Lugo-Ocando, 2008). In fact, the independence from government intervention is seen by many as the main challenge for Telesur to fully become an impartial and objective news outlet. Its news agenda has been criticised for mirroring the interests

of its shareholders (Burch, 2007). The fact that the first chairman of Telesur was Andrés Izarra, minister of information for the Venezuelan government, 'undermined any pretence at government Independence from the outset' (Cañizález and Lugo-Ocando, 2008: 212). Moreover, the presence of many international and regional Left-wing intellectuals in the advisory council reflects the ideological orientation of the network. Changes in the political landscape in the region in the last decade created new challenges for Telesur, especially after the former Argentine president Mauricio Macri announced the country's pull-out due to 'financial' and 'editorial' reasons (AP, 2016). However, in the same year, Telesur started co-producing programmes with RT, Al-Mayadeen and CCTV/CGTN.

Formerly known as Russia Today, RT launched its Spanish-language channel in 2009, after the English (2005) and Arabic (2007) ones. With correspondents in Madrid, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Havana, Mexico City, Washington and Miami, RT's programming mainly consists of news bulletins, news and politics-oriented debates and documentaries. Available on free-view in Argentina, Venezuela and Ecuador, it is broadcast through state-operated satellite systems in other countries such as Bolivia and Colombia (RT, n.d.a). In Argentina, it started to broadcast on the open digital television network in 2014 after a launch ceremony that included a videoconference between Russia's president Vladimir Putin and former Argentinian president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. After the 2015 presidential elections in Argentina, the new administration notified RT in June 2016 that it would suspend its broadcast to give room for domestic provincial channels (DYN, 2016; RT, 2016a). However, after discussions between RT and the Argentine government, the suspension never took place. RT committed to include more news and programmes about Argentina and to increase the exchange of documentaries (RT, 2016c). As a result, on 19 September 2016, the channel was relaunched in Argentina with the telecast of a documentary about the Falkland Islands conflict (Télam, 2016). That same year, RT en Español was awarded for the third consecutive year the International Journalism Prize for best multimedia news coverage by the Mexican Press Club, mainly for its coverage of the war in Syria (Fierro, 2016; RT, 2016b).

Based in Beirut, Al Mayadeen was launched in 2012. Its founder, Ghassan bin Jiddo, was the former head of Al-Jazeera's Lebanon and Iran offices, who quit for what he saw as biased reporting on the Syrian civil war (Karam, 2012). Although it claims to receive funds from wealthy businessmen, it is widely speculated that Iran, Syria and even Hezbollah contribute financial support (Dot-Pouillard, 2017; Watkins, 2019). With a name that makes reference to the 'squares' of the Arab Spring, such as Tahrir in Cairo, its rhetoric has been described as *néo-tiers-mondiste* due to its open and militant support for so-called Third World causes (Dot-Pouillard, 2017), not just in the Middle East such as the Palestinian resistance movement, but also beyond. In fact, very soon Al Mayadeen started to show interest in Latin America by sending representatives to participate in the Cuba 2013 Radio and Television Festival (Radio Rebelde, 2013). The following year, it signed a cooperation agreement with Cuba's Prensa Latina and on 5 March 2015, exactly 2 years after the death of Hugo Chávez, Al-Mayadeen launched a Spanish-language version of its website to honour the former Venezuelan leader and 'to revert the estrangement between Arabs and Latin Americans' (Canales, 2015). Unlike other

international channels, Al Mayadeen publishes content in Arabic and Spanish but not English.

China's interest in reaching international audiences has become a hot topic of research in the last decade, particularly due to its perceived utility as soft power creation tools (see, among others, Jirik, 2016; Rawnsley, 2015; Thussu et al., 2018; Zhang, 2011). In the case of the Spanish-speaking world, Beijing's efforts can be traced to China Radio International in the middle of the 20th century. Its first attempt on television was through a Spanish-French bilingual channel in 2004, which by 2007 separated into two different channels broadcasting in French and Spanish, respectively (Madrid-Morales, 2015). These channels do not focus solely on news, but also include other types of programmes such as documentaries, cultural magazines, cooking shows and fiction series. Previous studies indicate that one of the main challenges faced by the channel is its scarce availability and accessibility in Latin America, which contribute to its low visibility across the region (Morales, 2018; Ye and Albornoz, 2018). On 31 December 2016, CCTV (China Central TV) rebranded its international channels as CGTN (China Global Television Network) and a year later came the announcement of a future rebranding as the Voice of China (Xinhua, 2018).

Counter-hegemonic collaborations

The co-production with RT, *Rusia y Venezuela en la mira* (*Russia and Venezuela Targetted*) was first broadcast on 30 March 2015. According to Telesur's director, Patricia Villegas, the programme '[. . .] invites reflection on the true interests of the US when attacking Russia and Venezuela' (Telesur, n.d.). RT defines it as 'a series of programmes designed to counteract the dictation of the mainstream mass media' with the main topics of discussion being 'the policy of sanctions carried out by the US, the opposition to Western media corporations, as well as the creation of a multipolar world' (RT, n.d.b).

A perceived ideological alignment between Al-Mayadeen and Telesur seems to have facilitated the co-production of *Poder*, which was first broadcast on 8 June 2015. By recognising similarities in the Middle East and Latin America as targets of destabilisation by Western countries, both channels define the programme's aim as seeking 'to make an X-ray of the conflict that the Middle East is experiencing and its repercussions in Latin America' (Al-Mayadeen, 2015; Telesur, 2015). On its website, Telesur elaborates on the anti-imperialistic mission of both channels, saying, '*Poder* offers a critical view of the reality of the peoples, their struggles and resistance mechanisms' (Telesur, 2015).

Instead of politics and international security, the collaboration between CCTV/CGTN and Telesur stands out for focussing on culture. First broadcast on 8 August 2016, *Prisma Cultural* (TeleSUR) or *Prisma, la cultura que nos ilumina* (CCTV) is described as the product of a cultural exchange whereby both channels join forces to present news about the rich cultural and ethnic diversity of China and Latin America (CCTV, n.d.). Nevertheless, a closer look can help identify ideological elements that go beyond these self-reported claims of apolitical goals.

Table 1. Sampling per collaboration.

Collaboration	Total	Sample
TR	20	6 (March, April and May 2015; March, April and May 2019)
TA	42	6 (June, July and September 2015; March, April and May 2019)
TC	39	6 (August, September and October 2016; March, April and May 2019)

Methodology

The self-reported aims of these programmes suggest that a relative ideological alignment between both parties served as a premise for such collaborations. This is related to both a specific world-view and shared values regarding the role of journalists and news organisations in society. However, despite the motives being similar, the final products have taken different shapes. This paper explores what these differences can tell us about the collaborations and their potential in challenging Western narratives. The proposed research questions are:

RQ1: How well balanced are the contributions made by the broadcasters?

RQ2: What is the ideological narrative behind these co-productions?

RQ3: Can these collaborations contribute to challenge Western-led narratives?

The exploratory nature of this study requires a combination of different methodological approaches. While a quantitative approach sets the framework of analysis for the balance of roles of the broadcasters in the co-production (RQ1), a qualitative approach is better suited to analyse the discursive singularities of these collaborations (RQ2). By comparing both sets of data, I assess some of the implications of this phenomenon for global communications (RQ3).

As Table 1 shows, the total number of episodes ranges from 20 to 42. The sample for each programme is six episodes. An extra layer of comparison is added by sampling the first three and three of the most recent episodes for each programme. The cut-off date for the data collection was May 2019. The aim is to highlight any significant changes in the programme format, as these elements are the result of negotiations between broadcasters and their specific interests. All programmes were downloaded from Telesur's website. In the analytical section of this paper, the programmes will be referenced according to the collaborations, as TR (Telesur-RT) for *En la Mira*, TA (Telesur-Al-Mayadeen) for *Poder* and TC (Telesur-CCTV/CGTN) for *Prisma Cultural*. Each episode will be chronologically referenced with numbers from 1 to 6, according to the order of broadcast, for example, TA6 refers to the episode of *En la mira* that was broadcast in May 2019.

To enquire about the apparent balance of roles of the broadcasters (RQ1), the starting point is the hypothesis that this type of collaborations puts both broadcasters on an equal level, with similar roles and editorial power. The operational definition of balance is the allocation of relatively equal roles to both broadcasters, in terms of airtime used by each presenter, the role of each presenter (e.g. leading, commenting, conducting interviews,

etc.), the shooting location and the choice of topic (i.e. related to either one or both broadcasters or their countries of origin), among other elements. In order to test the balance of airtime, I first quantified the elements of each programme, that is, how much time was used by each presenter, interviews, reports and transitions, among others. Other elements such as video reports were also timed and, when possible, coded according to the broadcaster in charge of production. Interviews were timed and coded according to location.

The co-production of programmes reflects a series of decisions concerning the choice of topics, locations, presenters, structure of the programme, colour of the set, positioning of logos, music and camera angles, and, most importantly, the wording of each message and who is in charge of voicing them. All these can be considered part of codified messages that contribute to creating meaning which both reflects and helps re-create a specific discourse. Analysing the discursive singularities of these programmes can not only assist in understanding how they might contribute to challenging and reshaping existing global narratives, but also help to test the hypothesis of role balance among broadcasters. Discourse analysis helps unveil this process of meaning creation by contrasting the discourse that these messages aim to counter and the discourse that these broadcasters seek to construct. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is then instrumental in unveiling the connections between text and context, discourse and society and how ultimately language wields power (Fairclough, 2013). van Dijk (1985) recognises the positive contributions of applying discourse analysis to media messages, particularly because it is important 'to know how final news items in the press or on TV are the ultimate results of a complex *sequence of text processing stages*' (p. 6). Drawing on the Foucauldian idea that ideology is reproduced and circulated through discourse (Foucault, 2002), Johnstone (2002) defines the aim of CDA as:

> [. . .] to uncover the ways in which discourse and ideology are intertwined. [. . .] every linguistic choice – every choice about how to produce discourse, but also every choice about how to interpret it – is a choice about how the world is to be divided up and explained. Every choice is strategic, in the sense that every utterance has an epistemological agenda, a way of seeing the world that is favoured via that choice and not via others (p. 45).

Among the series of choices available to encoders, Johnstone recognises four main types. The first is related to the way in which actions, actors and events are represented, and their roles in terms of agency. Who are described as victims or perpetrators is not just a claim about something, but also about sets of values and ideology. The second choice is about the relationship of the speakers vis-à-vis their own claims. This not only reveals how knowledge status is represented, but that 'speakers can also be *represented*, via descriptions or reconstructions of their speech, as making epistemic claims' (Johnstone, 2002: 48). The third set of choices is linked to the subtleties of carefully choosing specific words to name something, which in itself constitutes a claim about it. When news organisations describe a country's government as a 'regime', this already constitutes an ideological claim about political ideals. Finally, there are also choices about how other voices are incorporated and represented. By selecting specific interviewees or citing certain sources, an extended layer of meaning is added to the text, which goes beyond the voiced message.

Table 2. Presenters.

Channel	Episode	TR	TA	TC
Telesur	1–3	Rey Gómez ♂	Abraham Istillarte ♂	Luis Blandón ♂
	4–6		Lucía Córdova ♀	Rosa Colmenares ♀
Counterpart	1–3	Javier Rodríguez Carrasco ♂ Karen Méndez ♀	Wafa Saraya ♀	Xu Xin ♀
	4–6	Nicolás Trinchero♂	Mohammad Jradi ♂	

Unbalanced collaborations

Despite the illusion of equality of roles between the broadcasters, all three co-productions show imbalances, albeit articulated in different ways. While the presence of two presenters across all collaborations contributes to a perceived balance of roles between broadcasters, a closer look at Table 2 reveals some elements that challenge this first impression. While TR mostly features two male presenters, based in Moscow (RT) and Caracas (Telesur), respectively, RT's correspondent (female) in Caracas acted as a third presenter in the first few episodes (TR1-3). This seems to tip the balance in favour of RT, at least in the early stages. In the case of TA, gender balance seems to be an important consideration. While Al-Mayadeen features a female presenter in the first few episodes, Telesur has a female presenter in the last three. This change was mirrored inversely by the male presenters. Gender balance is also a feature in TC1-TC3, with a male (Telesur) and a female (CCTV) presenter. However, in TC4-6, both presenters are female. While Telesur replaced Luis Blandón with Rosa Colmenares, CGTN maintained Xu Xin.

Throughout the three collaborations, Telesur's presenters are all Venezuelan and native speakers of Spanish. In the case of RT, the presenters of this show are also native speakers, but while in PR1-3 the presenter in RT's studio in Moscow is from Spain and speaks with a distinctive accent, the correspondent in Caracas is a Venezuelan journalist. The difference in accents may suggest to some viewers that Karen Méndez works for Telesur rather than RT. In the case of TA, the distinction is very clear. Al-Mayadeen's presenters are Arabic speakers and their voice is dubbed in Spanish for Telesur's broadcast. Inversely, the voices of Spanish speakers are dubbed in Arabic for Al-Mayadeen's broadcast. In the case of CCTV/CGTN, Xu Xin is not a native speaker of Spanish and, despite being fluent, she speaks with a distinctive foreign accent.

The perceived balance of having one presenter per broadcaster is shattered when observing the airtime used by each of them. Table 3 shows the average length of each programme in minutes and seconds, as well as the length of the interventions made by presenters, reports, interviews and transitions, among others. On average, Telesur's presenters spoke less as compared to their counterparts. While in TA the difference is almost unnoticeable (00:09, or 2.48%), it is more prominent in TR and TC. In the case of TR, the difference is even more significant in TR1-3 (05:06, or 32%) when there are three presenters, two of them representing RT. However, the imbalance persists even in TR4-TR6 (01:30, or 16.7%), despite being halved. Table 4 shows how the imbalance is

Table 3. Airtime balance (in minutes and %).

	TR		TA		TC	
Average programme length	26:31	100%	24:39	100%	29:19	100%
Telesur's presenter	05:17	17.26%	02:57	11.96%	01:37	5.49%
Counterpart's presenter(s)	09:48	36.92%	03:06	12.60%	02:55	9.93%
Reports	03:42	13.94%	04:28	18.14%	24:00	81.88%
Interviews	09:33	36.06%	12:28	50.56%		
Transitions	00:49	3.06%	01:19	5.34%	00:48	2.70%
Other	–		00:21	1.40%	–	

Table 4. CCTV/CGTN average airtime imbalance (in minutes and %).

	Presenter		Reports		Total	
Telesur	01:37	35.59%	09:39	40.23%	11:16	39.49%
CCTV/CGTN	02:55	64.41%	14:21	59.77%	17:15	60.51%
Total	04:31	100%	24:00	100%	28:31	100%
Ideal balance	02:15.5	50%	12:00	50%	14:15.5	50%
Actual imbalance	01:18	28.78%	04:41	19.51%	06:00	21.04%

also quite prominent in TC not only when presenters are considered (01:18, or 28.78%), but also when the reports produced by each channel are considered (04:41, or 19.51%).

Besides airtime, imbalance is also seen in other aspects such as location. TR starts every episode in Moscow, which is only mentioned in TR1-3 but not TR4-6. Both studios are decorated in a very similar way and transitions are very smooth due to the use of the presenters interacting through monitors and quick transitions between locations. However, the location change is only apparent due to the affiliation of each presenter. TR4-6 features a segment called 'Todos Hablan' ('All Speak'), which gauges public sentiment by conducting short interviews on the street with members of the public. In these cases, all interviewees are located either in Latin American countries or Spain. By observing the mic's logo, it is possible to determine the broadcaster in charge of the production. While Telesur conducted all mini interviews in two episodes (TR4, TR5), both broadcasters shared production in one (TR6). In the first case (TR4), interviews were conducted in Venezuela without mentioning a specific location. In the second case, specific locations were mentioned: Brasília (TR5). In the last episode (TR6), RT covered interviews in Buenos Aires and Mexico, while Telesur's journalists were present in Santiago, Bogotá and Madrid. In TA, the location is always different. While in the first episodes they alternate between Caracas (TA1, TA3) and Lebanon (TA2), in the last episodes they go on a trip together: first to Lebanon (TA4), then Tunisia (TA5) and finally Iraq (TA6). In the case of TC, CCTV/CGTN seems to be in control. Every show starts and finishes in Beijing. While Xu Xin is always in the studio, Luis Blandón or Rosa Colmenares are contacted through a monitor and they are always outside, as if they were only reporters on location.

Counter-hegemonic narratives

Ideology in a name

The name chosen for the TR collaboration was shortened from *Rusia y Venezuela en la mira* for the first four episodes in 2015 to simply *En la mira* after 2016. All these names have rich connotations. *Mira* (sight) comes from the verb *mirar* (to see), hence the phrase *en la mira* (in sight) can make reference to something that is in sight, for example, of public scrutiny. However, *mira* is also the word for the optical devices used in weapons, thus suggesting that Russia and Venezuela are being targetted by Western media, thus projecting a siege-mentality narrative. The exclusion of the names of the countries in the later episodes (TR4-6), however, may signal a change in the way RT presents itself. While the channel was known as Russia between 2005 and 2009, since 2010, it only uses the acronym RT because audiences would not be interested in news solely about Russia, as claimed by Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of the English-language channel (von Twickel, 2010).

   Poder, the word chosen for the TA collaboration, is also subject to various interpretations. As a noun, *poder* means 'power', and as a verb, it means 'to be able to' or 'can'. As the names of programmes in the Spanish-speaking world are mostly expressed as either nouns or short phrases, it evokes the concept of 'power', as in speaking truth to power. Nevertheless, the name chosen for the Arabic-language version of the programme (*maʿan nastaṭyʿ*) refers to the collaboration as a space for joining forces to achieve a particular goal and can be rendered in English as 'together we can', which is closer to the second association in Spanish mentioned above.

   Finally, the name selected for the TC collaboration presents a few variations. While Telesur refers to it as *Prisma Cultural* (*Cultural Prism*), CGTN uses *Prisma* (*Prism*) and sometimes adds the phrase *La cultura que nos ilumina* (The Culture that Shines upon Us). Culture is compared to a beam of light, which becomes a plethora of colours upon passage through a prism. A further interpretation suggests the association with the cultural diversity and rich heritage of both China and Latin America.

Social actors and allocations of roles

Table 5 shows the topics covered by these co-productions across the episodes analysed. These topics set the frame where social actors are placed. van Leeuwen (2008) distinguishes a series of common practices in their representation, for example, the inclusion or exclusion of certain social actors is as important as what is claimed about them. 'Representations include or exclude social actors to suit their interests and purposes in relation to the readers for whom they are intended' (van Leeuwen, 2008: 28). This is independent of role allocation, for example, depending on the narrative the excluded can be both victims and aggressors. In this example, victims and aggressors are defined by the level of agency with respect to the activity. Thus, while aggressors are agents of violence, victims are those over whom violence is exerted. van Leeuwen argues that '*activation* occurs when social actors are represented as the active, dynamic forces in an activity, *passivation* when they are represented as undergoing the activity, or as being "at the receiving end of it"' (2008: 33).

Table 5. Choice of topics.

Episode	TR	TA	TC
1	Special programme: Russia and Venezuela considered as 'threats' by the United States	Reality in the Middle East	T: José Rodríguez Fuster, Cuban artist C: Buddhist heritage in China, sculptures and dance performance
2	The media and their owners	Hugo Chávez's legacy	T: Susana Baca, Peruvian musician C: Jingdezhen and Chinese porcelain
3	The battle for oil	Islamic State	T: Children and Youth Orchestra system 'Simón Bolívar' C: Chinese traditional opera and block-printing in Hangzhou
4	Sovereignty and interference	Children living under occupation (Palestine)	T: Samuel Formell, Cuban musician C: Xu Bing, contemporary artist
5	Jair Bolsonaro's first months as president in Brazil	Tunisia: history, culture and patrimony	T: Félix Gerardi, photographer and documentary maker from Venezuela C: Hanggai, (Inner) Mongolian band
6	Agribusiness: Neo-liberalism in the countryside	The geopolitical seat of Iraq	T: Joe Vasconcellos, Chilean musician and composer C: Chengdu, the origin of the Southwest Silk Road

In TR2, Western media are shown as agents of manipulation by creating negative perceptions of Venezuela and Russia. At first glance, these countries are shown as the victims, but not necessarily completely passive. Through this co-production, Telesur and RT are actively trying to project an image of agency, that is, they are fighting against Western mainstream media's unfavourable portrayal of Venezuela and Russia by unmasking their tactics. In TR3, the mechanisms of oppression are expanded beyond the mass media, and international oil companies are seen as the agents of evil, for example, 'the cannibalism of the large oil companies encouraged by the governments of the Western powers and the states of the Middle East [that] are causing a collapse in the crude oil market'. Similarly, *passivation* is also expanded, that is, the Venezuelan government and the national oil company Petrocaribe are not the only victim, but also all Caribbean countries that benefit from Venezuelan oil. In TR6, the role of the aggressor is allocated to transnational companies like Monsanto, but victimhood is sometimes deserved. The

episode starts with a call for reflection: 'Who has access to healthy foods and who doesn't? This has already stopped being a sovereign decision of the nations that have turned their backs on small agricultural producers' (TR6). In this case, the phrase 'turned their backs' suggests that the role allocation is not always straightforward. Those who seem to be victims are sometimes culpable for their own unfavourable position.

TA follows a very similar narrative and role allocation is laid out in great detail by Al-Mayadeen's director Ghassan bin Jiddo and Telesur's president Patricia Villegas during the first episode (TA1). The role of the oppressor is mostly occupied by the USA, which is seen as promoting the destabilisation in the Middle East and facilitating the emergence of the IS. Its closest allies are also seen as negative forces, for example, Israel is living a golden age by profiting from the current conflicts in the region. Even 'backward' Arab and other Muslim countries such as Jordan, UAE, Kuwait and Turkey are included in this group. On the opposite side are the victims: Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Palestine. Latin America is also depicted as suffering from foreign interference. Similar to TR, the victims are not shown as completely powerless, but rather capable of some level of agency, for example, while Damascus (i.e. Assad) defends the Arab cause, Bolivia, Ecuador and Cuba fight against USAID and its plans to destabilise the region.

Culture and ideology

The nature of TC as a programme about culture would suggest that content would be removed from any political interests. However, there are a number of elements that clearly expose the ideological agendas of each broadcaster. The structure of the programme shows a very clear division of the production, and the differences in style are most evident in the reports they contribute. Despite being referred to by different names such as *Personaje Prisma* (TC1, TC4, TC5), *Semblanza prisma* (TC3) and *Entrevistas* (TC4), the first report is always produced by Telesur. CCTV/CGTN produces the second report, which is first referred to as *Documentales* (TC1-2), but the name is often not mentioned in later episodes.

The reports produced by Telesur follow a narrative built on the struggle against oppression and in favour of social inclusion of the have-nots. For example, Venezuela's orchestra system is shown as having represented the country around the world, and its programme of youth orchestras seeks to expand musical inclusion from an early age (TC3). The photographer Félix Gerardi 'has portrayed the Venezuelan people', which has led him to win 'the national culture prize and a special mention of the Simón Bolívar national journalism award' (TC5). And it is not just Venezuelans, the Peruvian singer Susana Baca is introduced as 'an afro-Peruvian woman who has dedicated her songs to the struggle of women and the oppressed' (TC2), and Joe Vasconcellos' report starts by mentioning the hardships during the Chilean dictatorship and how he had to seek refuge in Brazil (TC6).

Although the topics of the reports produced by CCTV/CGTN seem to be much more focused on culture, it is also possible to identify traces of an ideological agenda. For example, TC3 focuses on Chinese traditional opera and block-printing in Hangzhou, which coincides with the celebration of the 2016 summit of the G20 in Hangzhou, the

first to be held in China. The artist Xu Bing is shown as an example of China passing from being influenced by the West to influencing the West with art (TC4). The international success of the Inner-Mongolian band Hanggai is not only used as an example of China's rich ethnic diversity, but also of the creativity of contemporary Chinese musicians, which combines traditional elements with modern beats (TC5). Finally, the report about the South-Western Silk Road (TC6) provides historical and cultural information about traditional products such as embroidery, but, most importantly, it highlights how the Belt and Road Initiative has allowed these products to be exported thanks to the railway connection between Chengdu and Europe.

Incorporating other voices

These co-productions present abundant examples of how legitimation of a specific discourse is constructed by incorporating other voices. One of the most frequent strategies is appealing to authorities. van Leeuwen (2008) recognises different ways in which this is done: 'personal authority', 'expert authority' and 'role model authority', among others. When legitimate authority is 'vested in people because of their status or role in a particular institution' (van Leeuwen, 2008: 106), then it is referred to as 'personal authority', for example, interviewing Venezuela's ambassador to the UN (TR1), the general secretary of Unasur (TR3), and the heads of Al-Mayadeen and Telesur (TA1). Sometimes the status is determined by association, for example, the former Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez's brother is interviewed on TA2. 'Expert authority' is when expertise is the defining element of legitimacy, which can be mentioned explicitly by revealing credentials (van Leeuwen, 2008). For example, Marin Katusa is interviewed not just because of his credentials as a 'fund manager' but also because he is 'someone that knows a lot about all of this' (TR3), Najla Nusair Bashour is 'doctor in Education Sciences' (TA4), and Lufti Rahmouni is a 'Tunisian historian' (TA5). In some cases, the credentials of the interviewee are listed in detail, for example, a total of 01:16 are used to introduce Ahmad Al-Assadi (TA6). Sometimes 'personal' and 'expert' authority can be combined, for example, Paul Craig Roberts is introduced both as an 'American political scientist' and 'Ronald Reagan's former adviser' (TR2). Another type of legitimation is by appealing to the authority of 'role models', that is, 'people follow the example of role models or opinion leaders' (van Leeuwen, 2008: 107). The most emblematic example is that of Hugo Chávez and how TA devotes an entire episode to his legacy. The international affairs analyst Abdel Bari-Atwan sees in Hugo Chávez the qualities of a leader:

> [Chávez was] more Palestinian than the Palestinians, more Arab than the Arabs themselves. He was honest, loyal and defiant in front of global imperialism in general, and American imperialism in particular. He is a man that was next to the poor and supported the oppressed. He never doubted nor was afraid. And at the same time, most Arab leaders, if not all, yielded to the United States (TA2).

The narrative is then constructed whereby these qualities do not just support the legitimacy of his own actions, but also those of his followers both at home and abroad.

Discussion and conclusion

This study explored how Telesur joined forces with like-minded news channels to co-produce programmes seeking to challenge what they see as Western-led hegemonic narratives. The findings provide an interesting insight into the dynamics of these collaborations and the roles of broadcasters, the discursive construction of alternative narratives and the implications of such partnerships for the future of international communications and the flow of news around the world.

The findings exposed a series of imbalances in the dynamics of these partnerships and the roles of each broadcaster (RQ1). While airtime imbalance in TR suggests a more prominent role by RT, there seems to be a certain degree of dissociation on the part of Russia in the last episodes. However, this is also accompanied by an increased visibility of Latin American elements which could be perceived as attributable to Telesur. In the last episodes, both presenters speak with a Latin American accent, *vox populi* interviews are conducted in the region and many of the experts interviewed also come from this region and not Russia. All this may suggest that Telesur performed a decisive role, despite the fact that RT has a broad network of correspondents in the region, who are actively engaged in contributing to the production of the show. Nevertheless, this is arguably the desired effect: to highlight Latin American elements in order to place the focus away from RT – and by association Russia – while maintaining editorial control.

The collaboration between Telesur and Al-Mayadeen is the closest to an ideal balance. Helped by historical similarities between their regions of origin, the audio-visual packaging of the programme shows both broadcasters at the same level, for example, both presenters are physically present in the same location, each speaks their own language and both enjoy almost the same airtime. Besides, topics, interviewees and locations vary between the Middle East and Latin America, and even when the topic of discussion is more related to one or the other of the regions, there are always references to the other region.

The co-production with CCTV/CGTN takes a somewhat different shape. It claims to focus on culture and bridge a gap between Latin American and Chinese audiences. China and Latin America are described as 'looking at each other on the eye once again' (TC3). However, airtime allocation and the dynamics between the presenters show a series of imbalances where China is in control. From start to end, the main location is CCTV/CGTN's studio and Telesur's presenters appear like secondary contributors. Hence, the collaboration appears to help CCTV/CGTN gain an additional platform for China's public diplomacy efforts.

With regard to the discursive construction of alternative narratives (RQ2), the collaboration with RT and Al-Mayadeen resulted in co-productions that are heavily loaded with ideological rhetoric. The counter-hegemonic narrative is constructed upon opposition to (US-led) Western/mainstream news organisations allegedly acting as agents *for* imperialism. This is contrasted with a very clear political camaraderie vis-à-vis their peers, as agents *against* imperialism. However, although the collaborations between Telesur with both RT and Al-Mayadeen claim to become the voice of the voiceless, the systematic imbalances described above reveal how broadcasters also pursue their own interests.

These co-productions constitute an interesting space for broadcasters from the Global South to identify common issues and discuss alternative views that hardly find a platform in mainstream Western media. From this point of view, there is indeed a clear contribution to challenging Western-led narratives (RQ3). However, their pursuit also risks perpetuating narratives that seek conflict by placing countries in opposing teams with irreconcilable differences. Viewed from the perspective of the overall output of these channels and the fierce competition from other international, national and regional broadcasters, these are programmes that last less than 30 minutes and are broadcast monthly by TV channels with relatively limited viewership. Although at this stage these alliances seem marginal and can hardly be considered effective contra-flows, further South-South collaborations between broadcasters may change this. In fact, during the 9th BRICS summit in Xiamen in 2017, CGTN co-hosted a 1-hour special programme with presenters from RT, NDTV (India), SABC (South Africa) and SBT (Brazil) in which they both discussed the need for changes in the structures of global governance and called for further cooperation between news media organisations (CGTN, 2017). Finally, when considering all RQs, the imbalances in the collaborations point to the ambitions of China and Russia to become leading forces in the international media arena, even ahead of their own allies.

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Note

1. Capitalised in the original text. 'SOUTH' is defined by Telesur as a 'geopolitical concept that promotes the struggle of peoples for peace, self-determination, respect for Human Rights and Social Justice' (TeleSUR, n.d.).

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