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**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Watanabe, Kohei (2017) *The spread of the Kremlin's narratives by a western news agency during the Ukraine crisis*. The Journal of International Communication . ISSN 1321-6597

DOI: [10.1080/13216597.2017.1287750](https://doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2017.1287750)

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This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/69213/>

Available in LSE Research Online: February 2017

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## **The spread of the Kremlin's narratives by a western news agency during the Ukraine crisis**

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### Keywords

Propaganda; news agencies; Ukraine crisis; online news; news flow; globalisation

6,400 words

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**Abstract**

The description of the Ukraine crisis as an ‘information war’ in recently published studies seems to suggest a belief that the Russian government’s propaganda in the crisis contributed to Russia’s swift annexation of Crimea. However, studies focusing on Russia’s state-controlled media fail to explain how Russian’s narrative spread beyond the ‘Slavic world’. This study, based on quantitative and qualitative analyses of news coverage by ITAR-TASS, Reuters, the AP, and AFP over two years, reveals that Russian’s narratives were internationally circulated in news stories published by a western news agency. Although this by no means suggests that the western news agency was complicit in Russia’s propaganda effort, these news stories were published on the most popular online news sites, such as Yahoo News and Huffington Post. These findings highlight the vulnerability of today’s global news-gathering and distribution systems, and the rapid changes in relationships between states and corporations in the media and communications industry.

## **The spread of the Kremlin's narratives by a western news agency during the Ukraine crisis**

A pro-European demonstration in Independence Square in Kiev escalated into a long-lasting confrontation between Russia and the West, attracting extensive coverage by news media. The news media's attention to the Ukraine crisis was not surprising, but it was unusual in terms of the international flows of information. During recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan led by the United States, information was gathered and distributed mainly by the American and the European news media, but during the Ukraine crisis, a substantial amount of news was produced and circulated by the Russian media, including Russia's state-controlled national TV broadcasters (e.g. Channel 1, Russia 1, and NTV), the state-owned satellite TV broadcaster, RT, and the state-controlled international news agency, ITAR-TASS.

The competition in covering the Ukraine crisis between the western and Russian media has been described as an "information war" by media observers (Galeotti, 2015; Hutchings & Szostek, 2015). Earlier results of content analyses of news stories on Ukraine (Boyd-Barrett, 2015; Freedman, 2014; McIntosh, 2015) showed that the Russian state-controlled media's coverage of the pro-European Ukraine government was very negative, claiming it was connected to 'fascists' or 'nationalists' in attempt to delegitimize the new regime. The Russian TV also continuously broadcasted films and documentaries on Nazi's invasion in USSR to recall the historical experience of Russians, and news stories on the alleged crucifixion of an ethnically Russian boy and the murder of heavily pregnant Russian woman by Ukrainian nationalists in an east Ukrainian city (Hill, 2015; Lankina & Watanabe, Forthcoming).

The Russian media's narrative that the revolution in Kiev is a 'coup' by fascists and ultra-nationalists, who threatened the safety of the Russian-speaking minorities in Ukraine would allow Russia to 'protect' its compatriots by invading Ukraine as it did Georgia (Simão,

2016). During the 2008 Georgian War, Russia was unsuccessful in international communication, but the Russian government has heavily invested in the international media to enhance its 'soft-power' in recent years (Avgerinos, 2009; Lankina & Niemczyk, 2015), and it utilized the state-owned international news agency's to achieve its military goals during the Ukraine crisis (Watanabe, 2016). The Russian government's narratives circulated by the mass media created groups of people, both inside and outside of the country, who perceived the Ukraine crisis as a conflict between Ukraine nationalists and ethnic Russian minorities. To counter the narratives, the US State Department, which supported the new Ukraine regime, released a document entitled "President Putin's Fiction: 10 False Claims About Ukraine", contrasting Russia's claims with the 'facts' (US Department of State, 2014). It is not easy to quantify the impact of Russia's propaganda during the Ukraine crisis, but recent publications on Russia's information operation during the crisis by foreign policy and security think tanks suggest that it was a success (Paul & Matthews, 2016; Snegovaya, 2015; StratCom, 2014). After an extensive review of Russia's information operations, Jaitner and Mattsson (2015) concluded that Russia's information warfare significantly contributed to its successful annexation of Crimea.

In those studies, however, the focus is on Russian-language TV broadcasts and social media that target the Russian speaking population in Russia and the Eastern European countries, and they do not address Russia's propaganda beyond the "Slavic world". Russia's English-language news broadcaster, RT, which created a channel targeting American audiences in 2011, is often mentioned in literature on Russia's soft-power (Avgerinos, 2009; Cottiero, Kucharski, Olimpieva, & Orttung, 2015; Evans, 2005; Light, 2015; Nelson, Orttung, & Livshen, 2015; Saari, 2014), but a sobering analysis conducted by Xie and Boyd-Barrett (2015) before the outbreak of the crisis suggests RT's impact on the American population has been very limited

due to the small number of audiences. Snegovaya (2015, p. 19), in a paper on the Ukraine crisis, confirms their view by saying that “an increasing number of analysts point out that RT’s power to shape the narrative in the West is overstated”. If the Russian media’s reach is constrained to Russian-speaking communities, there are no worries regarding its influence on the North American and Western European public, and no need to spread counter-narratives, as the US State Department have done by publishing the unusual documents rebutting the Russian government’s claims about Ukraine.

There is clearly a significant gap between the actual and the perceived ability of the Russian media to spread the government’s narratives internationally. This gap leads us to the question of how Russia spread its narratives beyond the Russian speaking communities during the Ukraine crisis. To answer this question, the author analysed news coverage of the Ukraine crisis by today’s most influential international news gathering and distribution agencies, namely Reuters, the Associated Press (AP) and Agence France-Presse (AFP). News stories on Ukraine published by these three news agencies from 2013-2014 were content analysed, and compared with news stories published by Russia’s state-controlled news agency, ITAR-TASS. The result shows that Reuters’ coverage of Ukraine during a 3-month period after the annexation of Crimea correlated highly with that of ITAR-TASS, and that some of Reuters’ news stories conveying Russian governments’ narratives were published on popular online news portals in the United States. This is a channel of Russian propaganda that has not been identified in earlier studies.

This discovery, however, by no means suggests that Reuters was complicit in Russia’s propaganda effort, but shows the vulnerability of today’s international news gathering and distribution system. While newspapers, TV broadcasters and news portals are increasingly dependent on the news agencies for foreign news gathering, they are under strong pressure to

produce news stories at lower costs because general news services are unprofitable. The economic pressure encourages their foreign correspondents to rely on official sources in governments, some of whom are intent on exploiting international news agencies as a medium of foreign propaganda. Since western news agencies are still highly trusted, stories that contain propagandist messages are circulated internationally and published on online websites without professional gatekeeping.

### **Reuters, AP and AFP**

Reuters, the AP and AFP are today's most influential news agencies. They were founded in the western capitals in the middle of the 19th century, and developed as "fundamentally national organizations" (Boyd-Barrett, 1980, p. 36) in terms of their ownership structures and sources of revenues. However, these news agencies have transformed several times in their long histories. While the AP and AFP are still tied respectively to the United States and France by their owners and clients, Reuters is hardly a British organization as it is owned by a multi-national media and information company. The greatest challenge facing these news agencies is the rapid decline in the news market due to the emergence of new technologies, and their general news services are only sustained by cross-funding from more profitable financial information services.

Reuters, the AP and AFP were all founded as commercial enterprises, but they developed in different relationships with their governments. AFP's predecessor, Havas, was established in Paris as an advertising agency in 1835, and developed its news agency service with privileged access to France's official news sources and telegraph network. Reuters was established in London as an international news agency in 1851, and grew along with the expansion of the

British Empire, enjoying access to the government's communication facilities. The origin of the AP is the creation of a non-profit corporative in 1848 by newspaper publishers in New York. The AP lacked access to the government's telegraph networks and was initially barred from entering a cartel established by European agencies, but it grew quickly as the lucrative domestic newspaper market expanded (Boyd-Barrett, 1980).

AFP kept its close relationship with the French government and became an official news agency (OFI) in 1940 under the Vichy government in order to contribute to its propaganda. Reuters has never been an official agency and has been protected from government interventions due to its lack of involvement in domestic news distribution, but it received funds from the British government and was involved in propaganda for foreign countries during and between the world wars. The AP maintained higher degrees of independence from the government thanks to the strong tradition of media freedom in the United States, but its executives have occasionally expressed shared interests with the government, and its historical relationship with the Central Information Agency is opaque (Boyd-Barrett, 1980; Palmer & Tunstall, 1991).

After the Second World War, state funding to the European news agencies declined steeply, and they were required to be self-sufficient. AFP's status changed from an official agency to a cooperative news agency of French newspapers to ensure independence from the state in 1957, but its chief executive was appointed by the parliament and the government remained the most important client, whose subscription fees accounted for 50% of its revenue. In the 1970s, Reuters was receiving funds from the British government through the provision of foreign news to the BBC World Service (Boyd-Barrett, 1997).

Since the UK's news market was relatively small, 80% of Reuters' revenue was from overseas clients in the 1970s. AFP also lacked a large domestic news market, but its revenues



from foreign clients only accounted for 20%, so it relied on clients in the public sector for more than 70% of domestic revenues (Boyd-Barrett, 1980; Moisy, 1996; Tunstall, 1999). In contrast to its European counterparts, the AP was enjoying the world's largest domestic news market. Most of the clients of the AP were the American and Canadian media and the revenue shares of foreign clients were only 20% to 30% in the 1970s (Boyd-Barrett, 1980).

In the 1960s, Reuters launched financial information services to compensate for the small domestic demands, but its financial services grew exponentially along with the liberalization of the financial markets. Between 1977 and 1995, its overall revenue multiplied by 40, and its revenue share exceeded 90% of its total revenue by 1989 (Boyd-Barrett, 1998; Palmer & Tunstall, 1991). Its profit from financial services was invested in the acquisition of a wide range of companies in the communication industry in the 1990s, and it became one of the largest multi-media companies in the world (Moisy, 1996). In 2008, Reuters was acquired by a Canadian media company, Thomson, and became a part of a multi-national media and information company. The AP also provided financial information services for non-media clients in alliance with Dow Jones, but this had not exceeded 25% of its revenues by 1996. AFP was also involved in financial news services for extra revenue, and distributing financial news supplied by Bloomberg (Boyd-Barrett, 1997; Palmer, Boyd-Barrett, & Rantanen, 1998). It has been diversifying its clients and services to reduce its dependency on public financing, but its status as a cooperative news agency prevents it from investing private capitals into new technologies (Laville, 2010; Palmer & Tunstall, 1991). Currently, financial information services are the main sources of funds for general news services at Reuters and the AP, although the contribution is much less in the latter.

The emergence of the internet accelerated the diversification of the news products of the news agencies' services because the abundance of online news content makes it impossible for them to keep high subscription fees for general news services (Sambrook, 2010). Today, news agencies are providing new types of products, such as professional information services, specialist reports, feature materials and multimedia content (Bielsa & Bassnett, 2008; Laville & Palmer, 2012; Palmer & Tunstall, 1991; Sambrook, 2010). Apart from the diversification of the product line-up, news agencies are also expanding their range of customers, who include internet service providers. The bulk of studies have shown that news agencies are one of the most important providers of news materials for online news sites (Garcia, 2008; Paterson, 2005; Quandt, 2008; Tameling & Broersma, 2013; Thurman & Myllylahti, 2009; Watanabe, 2013).

## **Methodology**

The methodology of this research is a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analyses. The quantitative content analysis is employed to discover a period when the western news agencies' coverage of Ukraine was affected by Russia's narratives over the two years, and the qualitative content analysis is performed focusing on a smaller number of news stories published in that period. In both the quantitative and the qualitative analyses, Russian's narratives were identified in ITAR-TASS's news stories on Ukraine, following the earlier study (Jaitner & Mattsson, 2015). Russia also has Interfax, which has stronger ties with western information companies, but it is an independent commercial news agency (Boyd-Barrett, 2014; Vartanova & Frolova, 2010).

ITAR-TASS is a successor of the Soviet TASS, which was actively involved in international propaganda. The root of ITAR-TASS can be traced back to the Russian Telegraph

Agency (RTA), which was created by the tsar in 1866. Its news service was initially limited to domestic clients, but Russia started the international distribution of newswires in 1904 through the St. Petersburg Telegraph Agency, which was created to overcome Russia's dependence on a German news agency. After the communist revolution in 1917, the official news agency underwent several name changes, but finally became the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union, known as TASS, which was controlled by the Soviet authorities and often utilized as a propaganda medium of the communist party. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, TASS was succeeded by ITAR-TASS, becoming one of the official news agencies of the Russian Federation along with RIA Novosti. After the government's decision to disband RIA Novosti in December 2013 due to its disobedience to the media control (Lankina & Niemczyk, 2015), ITAR-TASS became the only official news agency of the Russian Federation that is funded and administered by the government (Vartanova & Frolova, 2010).<sup>1</sup>

### ***Data collection***

As Jowett & O'Donnell (2014) note that research on propaganda requires a systematic and longitudinal analysis of news content, the author collected and analysed all the news stories on Ukraine published between January 1, 2013 and December 31, 2014 by the four news agencies. The sources of data were three news databases: Integrum for ITAR-TASS, Factiva for Reuters, and Nexis for the AP and AFP. For ITAR-TASS, all the stories in the database in 2013-2014 were downloaded, but for Reuters, the AP and AFP, considering the large numbers of stories they publish, only stories related to Russia or Ukraine were downloaded with the search

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<sup>1</sup> ITAR-TASS was renamed TASS in September 2014 again to emphasize its connection to the predecessor (TASS, n.d.).

terms “russia\*” or “ukrain\*”. The total numbers of news articles downloaded were 90,131 from ITAR-TASS and 21,795 from Reuters, 12,154 from the AP, and 31,898 from AFP excluding duplications.

### *Content analysis*

The content analysis focused on news framing of democracy in Ukraine because it is central to the crisis as it relates to the mass protests that toppled the pro-Russian Ukrainian government and the following secessionist movement in south and east Ukraine. Content analysis is particularly challenging when news sources are prolific, but this research achieved an analysis of all the downloaded news stories by employing automated geographical classification and dictionary-based sentiment analysis techniques (Watanabe, Forthcoming). The advantage of utilizing computerized techniques in this project is not only their efficiency, but also their consistency in analysing the content of news stories collected over a two-year period, which is very difficult for human coders to achieve.

### *Geographical classification*

It is obvious that not all news stories searched and downloaded from the sources with the keyword queries were mainly about Ukraine. Therefore, the author selected news stories about Ukraine using a geographical classifier which accurately identifies the main geographical focus of news stories (Author, 2016). This geographical classifier recognizes diverse sets of geographical traits, including the names of people or organizations (such as Arseny Yatsenyuk, OSCE or Black Sea Fleet), which are obtained from an automatic expansion of the list of place names based on co-occurrence of words (c.f. Qiu, Liu, Bu, & Chen, 2009). The expansion of the

geographical lexicon is achieved by utilizing a large corpus of world news, which is, in this project, the complete set of news stories published by ITAR-TASS in 2013-2014.<sup>2</sup> After the geographical classification, the numbers of news stories were reduced to 15,203 (16.8%) in ITAR-TASS, 3,899 (17.8%) in Reuters, 1,370 (11.2%) in the AP and 4,967 (15.5%) in AFP.

### *Framing analysis*

The manner in which the news agencies reported democracy in the Ukraine crisis was analysed in terms of news framing (Entman, 2004). The frames in their news reporting are negative, neutral or positive, depending on the aspect of the crisis focused on, or the news source relied upon, and their temporal variations allow the author to compare the overall similarity in news coverage patterns between the news agencies. Positive frames of Ukraine's democracy are agreement based on dialogue (e.g. signing a truce; ratifying a treaty); discussion between different parties (e.g. in the parliament or formal meetings); actions based on people's support; actions respecting laws and the constitution (e.g. fair elections). Negative frames are use of violence against political opponents; coercion of opponents by political power or physical force; Infringement or limitation of civil rights (e.g. Arrest or prosecution of citizens); abuse of political power or excessive power concentration; existence of obstructions to dialogue; people's expression of discontent against the government (e.g. mass anti-government rallies); lack of transparency in political institutions; restriction on journalists and mass media.

Framing of Ukraine with respect to democracy was measured by constructing a topic-specific dictionary for computerized content analysis developed based on Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA) (Deerwester, Dumais, Landauer, Furnas, & Harshman, 1990). Words in the

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<sup>2</sup> Crimea was treated as a separate territory in the classification and later merged into Ukraine.

dictionary are those strongly associated with topics, which are identified by co-occurrences (collocation) with the target word ‘democra\*’. These words are then weighted by estimated semantic similarity to general English positive and negative words in a semantic space of the news corpus smoothed by LSA.<sup>3</sup> As a result, a dictionary on democracy that is comprised of 874 topic-related entry words accompanied by continuous scores representing positive-negative sentiment was produced.

The dictionary on democracy assigned positive-negative framing scores to each of the news stories. The overall score of a news story was calculated as weighted-averages of the sentiment scores of words in the stories, ignoring all the words that did not appear in the dictionary. This scoring method has been proposed by Benoit and Laver (2003) and makes the scoring robust against occurrences of words irrelevant to the topic. The document scores were finally zero-centered and normalized making the standard deviation equal to 100. The quality of this dictionary-based coding was assessed by manually content analysing 30 randomly sampled news stories. The agreement between machine and manual coding measured by Pearson’s correlation coefficient was  $r=0.77$ .

### *Topic filtering*

The dictionary was not only used for the framing analysis, but also for filtering out news articles unrelated to the topic. Since the dictionary is comprised of words strongly associated with the topics, the relevance of news articles to the topic can be judged based on the density

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<sup>3</sup> The general English positive-negative seeds were identified by Turney and Littman (2003). Positive words were “good, nice, excellent, positive, fortunate, correct, superior”, and negative words were “bad, nasty, poor, negative, unfortunate, wrong, inferior”. See Landauer and Dutnais (1997) and Author (2015) for details of the technique. The dictionaries are available at [http://koheiw.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/dictionary\\_ukraine.zip](http://koheiw.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/dictionary_ukraine.zip).

(normalized frequency) of the entry words. For topic filtering, the author first generated a subset of the news corpus by selecting news articles in which topic-related target words appear more than once. Then, the first quantile density of entry words in the subset was calculated to obtain a threshold. Finally, the threshold was applied to the entire corpus to exclude articles not strongly related to the topic. Although this approach mechanically discards the lowest 25% of the articles in the subsets, it effectively excludes long irrelevant articles while retaining very short relevant articles. As a result of the geographical classification and topic-filtering, the total numbers of news stories mainly about Ukraine's democracy became 5,149 (5.7%) for ITAR-TASS, 1,342 (6.1%) for Reuters, 757 for AP (6.2%), and 2,033 for AFP (6.3%).<sup>4</sup>

## **Analysis**

In the Ukraine crisis, there were at least six pivotal events relevant to democracy, which are labelled as E1-6 in the following analysis. The first pivotal event was Victor Yanukovich's speech in the Ukrainian parliament calling for legal reforms for the EU association plan on September 03, 2013 (E1), but the Ukrainian government suddenly changed its mind and announced it was abandoning trade negotiations with the European Union on November 21 (E2), which triggered anti-regime rallies in Kiev. The peaceful pro-EU rallies turned into violent confrontations between protesters and the police, which lead to the death of civilians on January 16, 2014 (E3). In the middle of the confrontation between the protesters and the police, Yanukovich disappeared from Kiev and was removed from presidency by the parliament on

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<sup>4</sup> The large gaps in the number of news stories is partially due to the difference in formats of news stories, and the differences become smaller in total number of words. ITAR-TASS is still the most productive (0.91 million), but only 1.5 times more than AFP (0.61 million); Reuters (0.31 million) and AP (0.27 million) are much closer.

February 22 (E4). Soon after the collapse of the Yanukovich government, Russia announced a referendum on Crimea's status and, reportedly, 95% of Crimean voters supported accession to Russia on March 16 (E5). Following Crimea's accession to Russia, the Kiev government launched military operations against separatists in the eastern Ukraine regions on April 15 (E6). The Ukrainians elected Petro Poroshenko as a new president on May 17 (E7) and held a parliamentary election on October 26 (E8).

Figure 1 shows the total number of words in the news stories published by the news agencies in 7-day periods. After E1, there are only small changes in increase in wordage in ITAR-TASS, but there are significant increases in all the news agencies after E2 and E3. The peaks of news coverage were around E4 in all the news agencies, but the western news agencies' coverage significantly decreased in E4-6. News coverage of Ukraine by AFP and Reuters was intense around E7, but it was only ITAR-TASS that extensively covered events around E8. It is clear from this chart that Russian and French news agencies played key roles in news coverage of the Ukraine crisis. The interesting pattern in this figure is the almost equal amount of information published by those two news agencies in the early stage of the crisis (E2-4), although they were focusing on different elections in the later stage (E7-8).

Figure 1: Weekly wordage of news on democracy in Ukraine published by news agencies



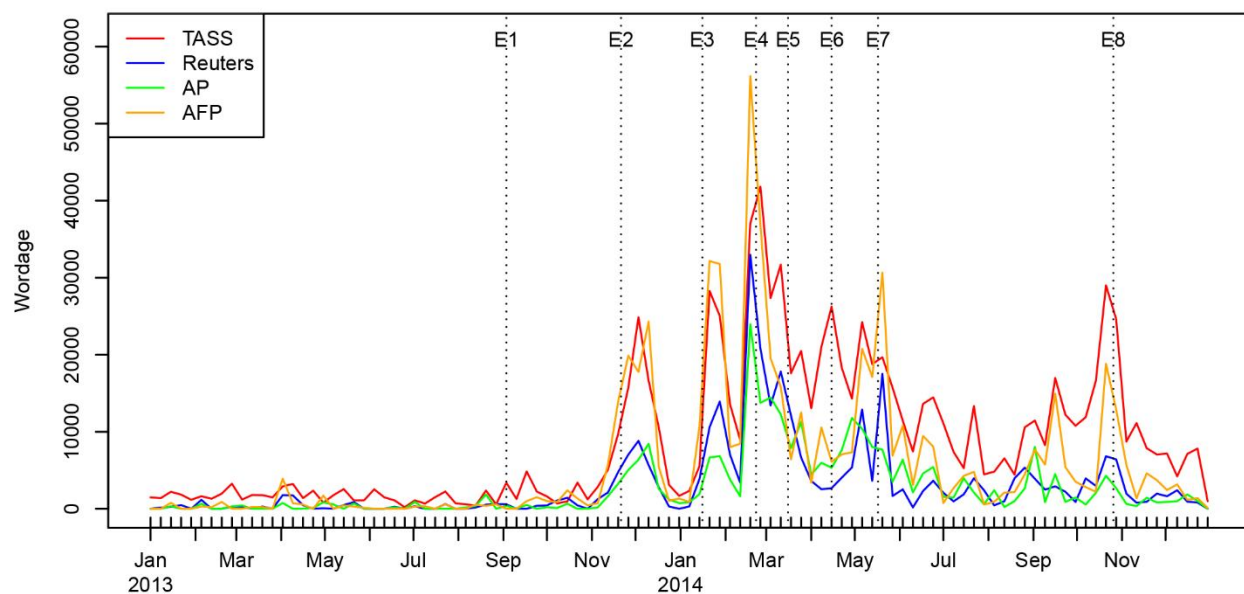
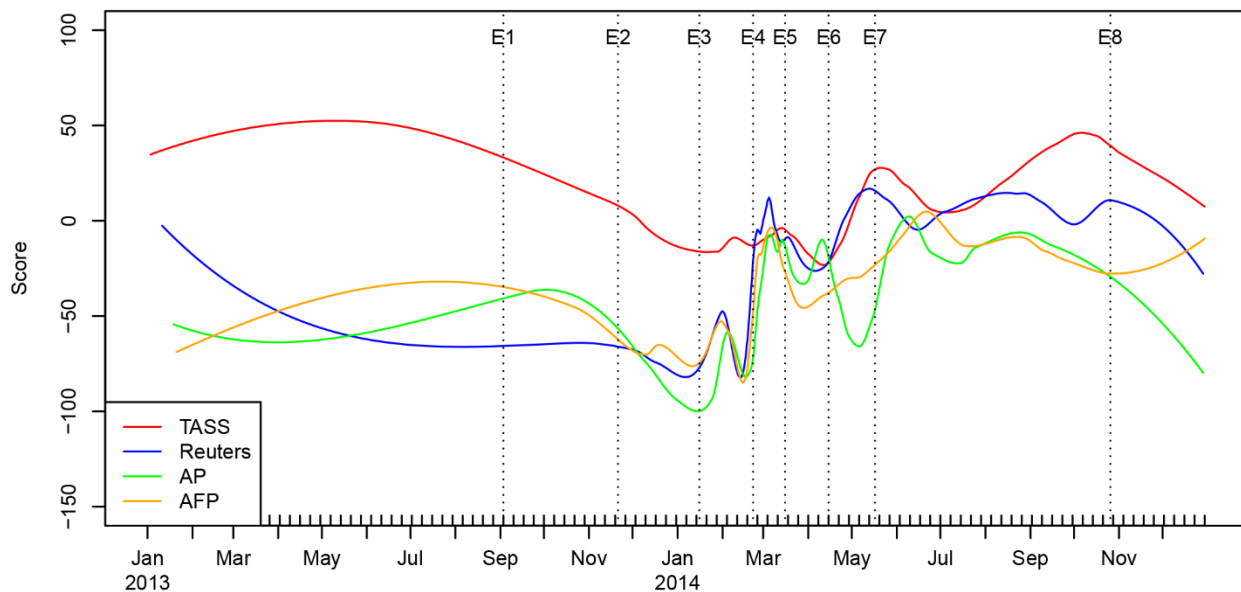


Figure 2 represents framing of democracy in Ukraine by the news stories published by the news agencies, where coloured curves are the averages of the sentiment scores calculated by local-regression (LOESS). The western news agencies' coverage of Ukraine correlated highly with each other in the early stage of the crisis (E1-5), but this pattern disappeared in the later stage. Their coverage of Ukraine was considerably negative until E4 since their news on Ukraine was dominated by stories about political and social disruptions, but it became significantly positive after E4 as the collapse of the Yanukovich government ended the violence against protesters. In contrast, ITAR-TASS was consistently more positive about Ukraine than other news agencies except for the period following the collapse of the pro-Russian regime (E4-5). However, despite the contrasting overall news coverage patterns between the western and the Russian news agencies, there was a strong correlation between Reuters and ITAR-TASS following the Russian annexation of Crimea (E5), which indicates that the content of the news stories published by these two news agencies were very similar during this period.

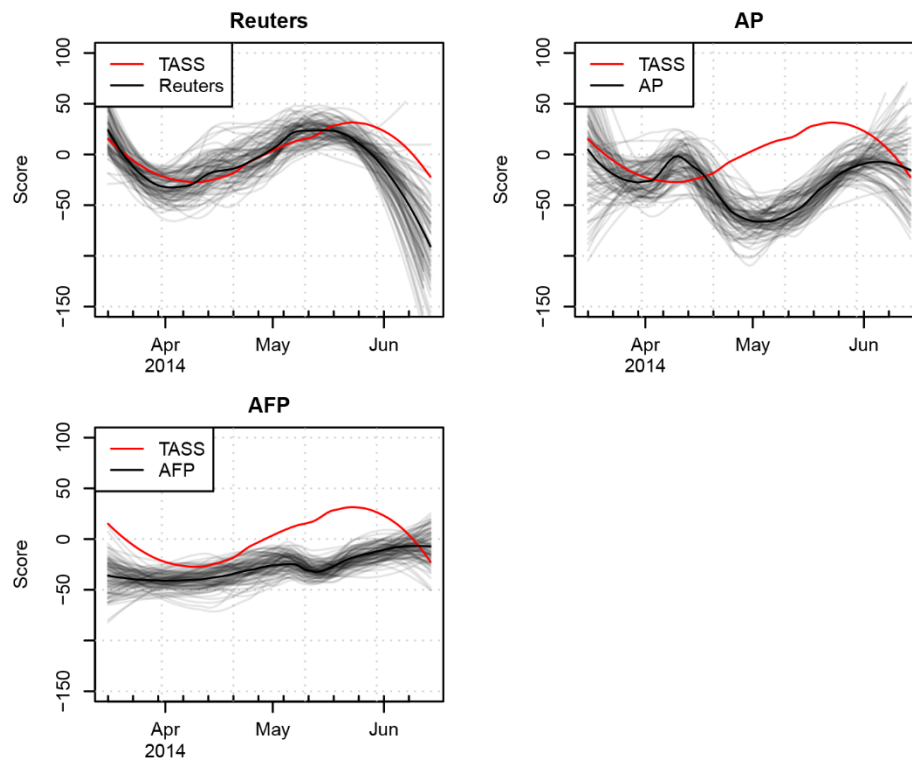
Figure 2: Framing of democracy in Ukraine by news agencies



To further investigate these intriguing patterns, the author first calculated the similarity in coverage of Ukraine between Reuters and ITAR-TASS only including the news articles published over the 90-day period following the annexation (March 16 to June 14, 2014). The correlation of the changes of the mean framing scores was as high as  $r=0.89$  between Reuters and ITAR-TASS, while it was only  $r=0.07$  for AP and  $r=0.33$  for AFP. Yet, these correlation coefficients are only point estimations, because we cannot trust the confidence intervals of the Pearson's correlation coefficients for the smoothed sentiment scores, which are not independent of each other. Therefore, the author took a non-parametric approach known as bootstrapping to test if the correlation between Reuters and ITAR-TASS was simply by chance. Bootstrapping is widely used to estimate uncertainty in statistics by repeatedly resampling and calculating the statistics with replacement: the author repeated random resampling of Reuters news stories with replacement and calculated its correlation with ITAR-TASS for each of the sub-samples. By repeating this process 10,000 times, 10,000 correlation coefficients were obtained to establish if

Reuters's curve was statistically significantly correlated with ITAR-TASS's curve. The proportion of positive correlation coefficients can be interpreted as confidence in the correlation between the news agencies not being zero. Figure 3 illustrates this bootstrapping process by showing first 100 curves generated by resampling (grey), along with the original curves (black and red). From the bootstrapping, 99.9% of the correlation coefficients were positive and median value was  $r=0.81$  between ITAR-TASS and Reuters, while these values were 57.8% and  $r=0.06$  in AP and 69.2% and  $r=0.21$  in AFP. This result suggests that the Reuters' framing of democracy in Ukraine during the period following the annexation of Crimea was statistically significantly correlated with ITAR-TASS at 99.9% confidence.

Figure 3: Correlation in framing of the democracy in Ukraine after Russia's annexation of Crimea.



Although the above statistical analysis already shows very high confidence, the author also searched for actual news stories that created very strong correlation between Reuters and ITAR-TASS in the dataset. It was, in fact, not difficult to find Reuters news stories that highly resemble ITAR-TASS's news stories in the 90-day period. Among many of such stories, two of the most striking examples are presented below. In the following examples, key words or phrases are underlined by the author for the readers' convenience, but these are original and complete news stories.

***Example 1***

This Reuters' news article dated March 16, 2014 originated from Moscow and reported a discussion on the Ukraine crisis between Russian and American foreign ministers, but it was dominated by the Russian government's views on Ukraine. It emphasized the importance of international support for "constitutional reforms" in Ukraine and the need to protect the "interests of all regions" in its eastern regions; it also quoted the Russian foreign minister claiming "massive lawlessness" against Russian-speaking minorities. These were typical of the Russian government's narratives reiterated in ITAR-TASS's coverage of the crisis.

*Reuters*

**Lavrov, Kerry agree to work on constitutional reform in Ukraine - Russian ministry**

MOSCOW, March 16 (Reuters) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S.

Secretary of State John Kerry agreed on Sunday to seek a solution to crisis in Ukraine by pushing for constitutional reforms there, the Russian foreign ministry said.

It did not go into details on the kind of reforms needed except to say they should come "in a generally acceptable form and while taking into the account the interests of all regions of Ukraine".

There was no immediate confirmation from Washington.

In their second phone conversation in two days, Lavrov also urged Kerry to use the influence of the United States to encourage authorities in Kiev to stop "massive lawlessness" against Russian-speaking population.

"Sergei Viktorovich Lavrov and John Kerry agreed to continue work to find a resolution on Ukraine through a speedy launch of constitutional reform with the support of international community," the ministry said in a statement.

*ITAR-TASS.*

**URGENT - Int'l community should appeal to launch constitutional reform in Ukraine - Russia foreign minister Lavrov**

LONDON, March 14 (Itar-Tass) - The international community should appeal to launch a constitutional reform in Ukraine, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said after talks with U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in the British capital on Friday.

"The international community should appeal to launch the process of constitutional reform, the Verkhovna Rada (Ukrainian parliament - Itar-Tass eds) should invite all regions without exception to involve in it," the Russian foreign minister noted.

**URGENT - SERGEI LAVROV CONFIRMS RUSSIA'S POSITION ON CRIMEA REFERENDUM**

MOSCOW, March 16 (Itar-Tass) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has confirmed Russia's position on the referendum in Crimea.

In a telephone conversation with US Secretary of State John Kerry on Sunday, Lavrov said Russia's position on the referendum in Crimea remained unchanged.

Lavrov and Kerry "agreed to continue contacts to search for ways to settle the crisis in Ukraine in order to launch a constitutional reform in the country in respect of all Ukrainian regions", the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

**URGENT - Lavrov urges US to use influence on Kiev authorities to make them stop mass lawlessness against Russian speaking population**

MOSCOW, March 16 (Itar-Tass) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov urged the United States to use its influence on Kiev's authorities to make them to stop mass lawlessness and arbitrariness against the Russian speaking population.

"In recent times ultranationalist and radical forces stepped up the activities in Ukraine's south-east. Victims among civilians are reported. Radicals' actions seriously destabilise the situation," Lavrov said in a telephone conversation with US Secretary of State John Kerry on Sunday.

Kerry said the USA took necessary efforts that would yield positive results soon.

***Example 2***

On April 20, 2014, Reuters published a story on gun shooting in Sloviansk based on the Russian foreign ministry's statement. This story reproduced the minister's account of the event, which links the revolution in Kiev with a far-right nationalist group, and strongly resembled

ITAR-TASS's stories published on the same day, which emphasized the Kiev government's responsibility for "de-escalating" the violence caused by "nationalists and extremists", and the Russian government's surprise and anger at the violence.

*Reuters*

**Russia says Ukraine clash shows Kiev not disarming militants**

MOSCOW, April 20 (Reuters) - A fatal gun battle overnight near the eastern Ukrainian city of Slaviansk shows that the Ukrainian authorities are failing to rein in armed extremists, Russia's foreign ministry said on Sunday.

In a statement, the ministry said an unspecified number of innocent civilians were killed in an attack by armed men from "Right Sector," a far-right nationalist group which figured prominently in the overthrow of Moscow-backed president Viktor Yanukovich in February.

"Russia is indignant about this provocation by gunmen, which testifies to the lack of will on the part of the Kiev authorities to rein in and disarm nationalists and extremists," the statement said.

It said it was a source of surprise that the incident had happened after Russia, the European Union, the United States and Ukraine signed an April 17 accord in Geneva calling on people to desist from using violence or intimidation.

"Russia insists on the strict implementation by Ukraine of the commitments it took upon itself to de-escalate the situation in the south-east of Ukraine," the ministry's statement said. (Reporting by Christian Lowe; Editing by Richard Balmforth)

ITAR-TASS

**URGENT - Militants' provocation in Slavyansk proves Kiev's authorities not willing to disarm nationalists and extremists - Russia's FM**

MOSCOW, April 20 (Itar-Tass) - The militants organized the provocation on the night of Sunday in Ukraine's Slavyansk (Donetsk region). It proves the Ukrainian authorities are not willing to disarm nationalists and extremists, Russia's foreign ministry says in a statement published on Sunday.

"At the night of Sunday, April 20, the Easter armistice was broken in Slavyansk. The attack of the armed militants from the so-called Right Sector claimed lives of innocent civilians. The Russian side is indignant at this provocation of the militants, which proves Kiev's authorities are not willing to control and disarm the nationalists and extremists."

**Russia insists on Ukraine's fulfilment of obligations to de-escalate situation in south-east - Russian FM**

(Adds details) MOSCOW, April 20 (Itar-Tass) - Russia insists on Ukraine's strict observance of the obligations it has undertaken to de-escalate the situation in Ukraine's south-eastern regions, Russia's foreign ministry said commenting on the events in Slavyansk, where militants from the Right Sector had breached the Easter armistice.

"We are surprise[d] the tragedy happened already after signing on April 17 in the Geneva the statement of the four-sided meeting featuring representatives of Russia, the US, the EU and Ukraine, which contains the urge to refrain from any force actions, threats and provocations," the foreign ministry said.



"The Russian side is indignant at this provocation of the militants, which proves Kiev's authorities are not willing to control and disarm the nationalists and extremists," the foreign ministry said adding the local people found in the attackers' cars weapons, maps of the region and symbols of the Right Sector.

## **Discussion**

Overall, there were significant differences in news coverage of the Ukraine crisis among the western news agencies. AFP was very active in covering the early stage of the Ukraine crisis and its total wordage was as high as ITAR-TASS's. This is not surprising if we consider the French news agency's strong ties to the government. In contrast, Reuters and the AP were less active in covering the crisis, presumably because of their higher degree of independence from the governments of their home countries. More importantly, the Reuters news coverage after the Crimean referendum strongly correlated with ITAR-TASS's coverage, replicating the Russian government's narratives as shown in the two examples.

Reuters' publication of such news stories does not necessarily mean that the western public was exposed to Russia's narratives because its news services are primarily for news media whose foreign news editors chose which news stories to be published in newspapers or on websites. However, it is widely known that online news sites are heavily dependent on news agencies for foreign news gathering (Hamilton & Jenner, 2004; Paterson, 2011; Riffe & Budianto, 2001; Sambrook, 2010; Watanabe, 2013). To examine the possibility that Reuters' news stories conveying Russian's narratives were exposed to the public through online news sites, the author searched news stories published by Yahoo News and Huffington Post in 2014 for keywords 'Ukraine' and 'fascist' or 'nazi'. Yahoo News and Huffington Post are the most

popular news sites in the United States, which attracted over 100 million unique visitors in January 2015 (Pew Research Center, 2015). In this search, it was easy to discover large numbers of Reuters news stories that replicate the Russian government's views, including those presented as examples (c.f. Huffington Post, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, Yahoo News, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d). According to the by-lines in news summaries that the author collected in 2014 from the RSS feeds of Yahoo News and Huffington Post, respectively, 21% and 10% of foreign news stories were supplied by Reuters. Given the high popularity of the online news sites and their dependency on Reuters, it is very likely that substantial numbers of American news readers were exposed to Russian's narratives in their daily news consumption.

The striking similarity between news stories published by Reuters and ITAR-TASS can be explained in only two ways: either Reuters reporters were totally dependent on press releases from the Russian government or they were subediting news wires supplied by ITAR-TASS. Although there was a report that indicates that the Russian government attempted to influence western journalists by giving them exclusive access to high ranking officials (Evans, 2005), and this is a possibility that we cannot exclude, we have no information to determine which was the case. Nonetheless, there are factors that could explain the Reuters news coverage. While the AP and AFP are still largely American and French news agencies in terms of their ownership, today's Reuters is a multi-national corporation without strong ties to any of the home countries. This lack of connection to countries makes the news agency less reluctant to distribute news materials supplied by Russia. Also, for the media and technology giant, its news agency services are the least economically viable, only accounting for 2% of its total revenues (Thomson Reuters, 2016), and therefore, its journalistic resources for the Ukraine crisis could be

insufficient to the extent that its reporters were forced to rely on the Russian government's official sources.

Another factor, which is rather technical, is the style of the Reuters news stories. The average length of Reuters news stories was 238 words, which is considerably shorter than in the AP (366 words) and in AFP (301 words). These short stories, as clearly show in the examples, tend to rely on few sources and lack contextual information. Concise reporting is the classic style in newswires, and this is not problematic when recipients of newswires are news editors who have access to different news sources and the ability to correctly interpret news reports based on their background knowledge. However, when these stories based on the Russia government's statement are published on popular online news sites without proper contextualization, they could mislead general audiences about the nature of the Ukraine crisis. Newswires are often updated several times with additional information, but updated stories do not always reach the audiences of the original stories on news portal sites. Once the audience believed that the revolution in Ukraine was a coup by nationalists, it was easy for them to reinforce their beliefs through selective exposure to online content via search engines or social media.

In the quantitative content analysis, a strong correlation between Reuters and ITAR-TASS was found only after the referendum in Crimea, but this does not necessarily mean that Reuters' reliance on Russian's official sources only started after this event. As shown in Figure 1, Reuters was particularly inactive in covering Ukraine during this period, while ITAR-TASS was very active in doing so. This suggests that the large input from the Russian officials following the referendum could have increased the prominence of their narratives in the small number of Reuters stories, and made Reuters' coverage of Ukraine correlate nearly perfectly

with ITAR-TASS. In this case, the Russian government's narratives had been circulated internationally by the news agency from the earlier stage of the crisis.

The findings of this study by no means suggest that Reuters were complicit in Russia's international propaganda effort, but they highlight the vulnerability of today's international news gathering and distribution systems. In news gathering, on the one hand, more and more western newspapers and TV broadcasters are retreating from foreign news gathering. According to Pew Research Center (2015), the numbers of foreign bureaus of CNN, Fox News and MSNBC decreased by 10% (from 53 to 48) between 2010 to 2015. A decrease in foreign correspondents usually increases their dependence on news agencies, but news agencies are also making losses in traditional news services and these are sustained only by cross-funding from financial information services. As earlier news production studies have shown (Fico, 1984; Gans, 1979; Tuchman, 1978), the lack of sufficient journalistic resources has a direct impact on the quality of news content. As Fico (1984, p. 42) eloquently stated, "the more constrained the reporter, the more narrow the range of sources relied upon and thus the more narrow the diversity of perspectives presented to the public". In news distribution, news agencies' stories are published on new portal sites with little gatekeeping and no editing to quickly fill the large capacity of the online media (Arant & Anderson, 2001; Cottle & Ashton, 1999; Garcia, 2008; Phillips, 2009; Quandt, 2008; Tameling & Broersma, 2013), these stories often appearing with the logo marks of the still-highly-trusted news agencies. Newswires are not only published to the most popular news sites, but also on small news sites all over the world. These stories are then copied and shared on social media, removing the traces to the original sources.

In conclusion, the Ukraine crisis clearly showed us that national boundaries are becoming almost meaningless for some of the western news agencies. Historically, western news agencies

are tied to their counties of origin based on their ownership and source of revenues, but Reuters was first to cut such ties. Even today, Reuters is the main supplier for British newspapers, but it is also one of the main sources of the most popular online news sites in the United States.

Reuters was also heavily dependent on the Russian government's official news sources in the international crisis, in which Russia collided with the United States and the European Union over vital strategic interests, and the news agency almost undermined the interests of the western countries. This discovery rebuts the theory of media imperialism that claims the western multi-national media corporations are complicit in their governments' international propaganda (Herman & Chomsky, 1988/1995). For multi-national corporations like Reuters, the interests of their home countries are not the priority in pursuit of their own economic interests. Given the rapidly changing relationship between the states and corporations in the media and communications industry, we must further investigate flows of information in the global news gathering and distribution system as they have a substantial impact on world politics.

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