

A 'Humanitarian Disaster' or a 'Liberation Struggle': A comparative analysis of the coverages of *The Independent* and *The New York Times* of the 2016 and the 2017 military operations in Aleppo and Al-Raqqa

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Abstract

This article explores the coverage by *The Independent* and *The New York Times* of the 2016 and the 2017 military operations in Aleppo and Al-Raqqa. It highlights the uneven reporting on the humanitarian crisis in the two cities. The analysis shows that the similarities in the coverage of the two newspapers were greater than the differences. *The New York Times* and *The Independent* (to a lesser extent) espoused a pro-US narrative of the Syrian conflict by framing Aleppo as a humanitarian 'catastrophe' and Al-Raqqa as a 'liberation' struggle. Biases were constructed out of several elements including (1) the dominance of US sources and selective use of UN and NGO sources; (2) the use of visual content quantitatively and qualitatively; (3) the use of graphic and emotive terms; (4) focus on the humanitarian crisis in Aleppo and the military operations in Al-Raqqa.

Keywords

Aleppo, Al-Raqqa, *The New York Times*, *The Independent*, Islamic State, Al-Nusra Front

Six years after the 2017 military operations in Al-Raqqa led by the US forces, little is known about the victims buried under the debris. According to Airwars (2018b), a UK-based organisation that tracks the 'war on terror' in the Middle East, the US forces were responsible for 95% of the aerial bombardments in the city. Al-Raqqa was considered 'the most-destroyed city of modern times' and 'uninhabitable' after about 80% of it was destroyed (Amnesty International UK, 2019). In direct contrast, the 2016 military operations in East Aleppo led by the Syrian-Russian

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forces received extensive coverage. There, regional and international media coverage featured graphic images of corpses and injured civilians, including children.

By employing Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model (PM) and framing, this paper seeks to investigate the coverage of the battles of Aleppo and Al-Raqqa to highlight the very different reporting on the humanitarian crisis in the two cities. It argues that the coverage of Aleppo was put in a frame stressing humanitarian tragedy, whereas the coverage of Al-Raqqa was placed in a frame stressing liberation. It is not suggested that the two military operations were identical and should have been reported equally. However, the analysis shows that the coverage attempted to legitimise the US invasion of part of Syria and delegitimise the Russian intervention in the country.

This article will show that media war coverage sought to deceive public opinion to win their approval to interfere in Syria. Four main elements were detected and discussed: (1) concentration on the military operations of the opposing forces, (2) selective use of sources, (3) demonising one side and praising the other, and (4) focusing on war-making measures over peacemaking measures.

The PM presents a useful methodology to understand why framing US foreign policy news is often consistent with the agenda of political elites and US corporations (Herring and Robinson, 2003). However, the PM does not analyse how news content is framed. Thus, framing will be employed to expand the analytical capability of the PM. The use of the PM and framing provides a holistic framework for studies that aim to examine propaganda (Mullen and Klaehn, 2010). This study highlights the techniques employed in media coverage, which helps to grasp the purpose of the use of propaganda in the coverage of the Syrian conflict. For example, were the techniques used to maintain peace or to push for a war agenda, and in whose favour?

Dominance of pro-US narratives in the media

Media outlets tend to highlight specific details within a particular event as being more important than those that are neglected or rendered marginal. Early studies of framing in the media examined how media outlets imposed their agenda on the public by prioritising specific events and giving them extensive coverage while overlooking others (Shapiro and Williams, 1983; Williams et al., 1982). Making some ideas salient and others inconspicuous, framing refers to the selection of terms and ideas and structuring them in a certain way to convey a specific message (Entman, 1991; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).

There is a correlation between framing, propaganda, and language choices. Propagandists exploit words and terminologies to sell ideas and objects to shape opinion while seeking to distract the public from noticing their propaganda (Cozma, 2014). In an interview with Powell (2003), Lakoff argued that framing and language are inseparable: 'language always comes with what is called "framing." Every word is defined relative to a conceptual framework'.

Word choices and phrases play a crucial role in propaganda. They present a 'propagandistic function of symbolizing' that aims to encourage particular 'interpretations' and 'inferences' (Matlock, 2012). For instance, in their analysis of the use of framing during the so-called 'Arab Spring', Baresch et al. (2010: 637) point to how the protests were framed in a 'favourable and democratic light'. They explain:

That is the sort of thing news frames do: They highlight some aspects of the events behind a story and downplay others, often with the effect of supporting a certain way of looking at the world. This is accomplished by word choice (e.g. using language of 'awakening' rather than 'chaos' to describe the Middle East uprisings).

Pro-US propaganda frames the US and its allies as the good guys. It sabotages the US opponents and presents them as the bad guys. In this light, civilian casualties of the US and its coalition's wars

are predominantly neglected (Arnaldi, 2011). This includes, but is not limited to Syria and Iraq (Amnesty International, 2018; Hagopian et al., 2013).

Scholars have examined the biases and preferences in reporting paired events influenced by pro-US narratives, such as testing the PM (Herman and Chomsky, 2002), and the shooting down of a Korean civil aircraft by a Soviet fighter in 1983 and the shooting down of an Iranian civil aircraft by a US warship in 1988 (Entman, 1991). Herman and Chomsky (2002: 37) compared the media coverage of Jerzy Popieluszko, a Polish priest murdered by the Polish police in October 1984, and the coverage of religious figures murdered within countries in the US sphere of influence. The coverage of Popieluszko's case in Poland – then part of the Soviet bloc – was far greater than the coverage of tens of religious figures murdered in Guatemala and El Salvador which were US allies.

The comparison showed the difference in quality and quantity of treatment between the two cases. The qualitative treatment of 'worthy' victims' coverage was extensive and included quoted expressions of discontent and demands for justice. On the other hand, the coverage of the 'unworthy' victims was 'low-keyed designed to keep the lid on emotions and evoking regretful and philosophical generalities on the omnipresence of violence and the inherent tragedy of human life' (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 39).

The West in general and the US, in particular, are framed as the legitimate parties, while their enemies are framed as the illegitimate parties. Even though the West's 'enemies' have different political identities and regardless of their reasons for challenging the West, these enemies are often framed as terrorists or sponsors of terrorism. The West justifies its intervention to save the 'oppressed' people ruled by 'rogue regimes' (Anderson, 2016). In this context, Zollmann (2018: 229) argues that:

'Humanitarianism' played a major role in policy and news media discussions about potential or actual intervention in Somalia (1992), Rwanda (1994), Bosnia (1995), Kosovo (1999), Darfur (2003–2017), Libya (2011), and Syria (2012–2018). 'Humanitarianism' was also evoked, in conjunction with other ideological devices, to legitimise the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and the 2003 Iraq War.

As for Entman (1991), his study focused on examining the role of metaphors, keywords, visual images, and symbols. By analysing the coverage by the US media of the shooting down of the two civilian aircraft, he found that the victims of the Korean plane were given more coverage and treated as more important than the Iran Air victims. Chomsky explains this technique in a wider context, indicating that media outlets:

Do this in all sorts of ways: by selection of topics, by distribution of concerns, by emphasis and framing issues, by filtering of information, by bounding of debate within certain limits. They determine, they select, they shape, they control, they restrict – in order to serve the interests of dominant, elite groups in the society (Chomsky quoted in Wintonick and Achbar, 1994: 55).

Furthermore, a study by Scherling (2019) compared the coverage of British newspapers of the military operations in Aleppo (2012–2016) and Mosul (2016–2017) that were led by Iraqi-US forces. Scherling found that the coverage of Aleppo was based on non-official sources and focused on civilian casualties, while the coverage of Mosul relied on official sources and overlooked civilian casualties.

While the previous studies examined events that took place in two different countries, this article examines a near-identical paired example within one country that occurred less than one year apart. Moreover, this article is arguably the first study to examine Western media outlets' coverage of the 2017 military operations in Al-Raqqa.

Said (2005) noted that mainstream experts often protect or advance the elites' interests, particularly on controversial issues such as terrorism and Islam. Western countries' military and political roles in the Middle East have long been framed by pro-West scholars as part of a noble and civilised mission (e.g.

Smith, 2014). Nevertheless, the West's interventions in the region, including the 'war on terror', have been used as a pretext to reconstruct countries' economic and political systems and include them in the West's sphere of influence, as was the case with Iraq after the 2003 invasion (Whyte, 2010).

Herman and Chomsky's 'worthy' and 'unworthy' concepts and Entman's (1993) framing functions (problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and recommendation for the problem) were employed to understand how the military operations in Aleppo and Al-Raqqa were reported. These functions define the event being covered, address what is believed to be the cause of the conflict, present moral judgements, and suggest solutions to this conflict.

This study also examines hundreds of images, video clips, and political cartoons attached to the selected newspaper articles to understand how this visual content enhanced the dominant frame of the coverage of the two military operations. Rauch et al. (2007) argue that visual framing in newspaper coverage is considered as important as textual framing. In addition, an essay by Bock (2020) points out that social science studies tend to overlook 'the unique properties of visual communication and tend to emphasise literal depictions and description'. Bock argues scholars should carefully examine the role of visual framing alongside the literal depiction and description of a frame. Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011: 51) indicate that 'visuals, like text, can operate as framing devices insofar as they make use of various rhetorical tools – metaphors, depictions, symbols – that purport to capture the essence of an issue or event graphically'. Rodriguez and Dimitrova assert that mainstream media employ visual framing to promote a particular ideology or advance the political interests of dominant powers. Similarly, Ojala et al. (2017) highlight the role visual framing plays in reporting war, including defining the problem, the victims and the aggressors.

In regard to political cartoons, they have been used for decades as propaganda tools (Conners, 1998; Lively, 1942). Abraham (2009) argues that they offer 'deep reflection' and play an important role in highlighting the editorial content of a newspaper. He suggests there are two fundamental issues when analysing political cartoons: first, what they seem to represent, and second, what the hidden meaning of that representation is. Hecke (2017: 131) agrees and points out that political cartoons are 'part of a mediated filtering system that helps the construction and framing of social reality'. He indicates cartoons draw attention to issues that 'have already been established in the mainstream media as being worthy of public attention'.

Comparison of the two battles

The two conflicts are comparable in terms of the number of civilians who lived in the two cities when the battles began, the number of civilian casualties and the number of fighters on the ground. These factors help understand the context in which the two battles were reported. The casualty statistics were derived from different sources, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Syrian opposition sources such as the Syrian Network for Human Rights and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) (it is not assumed that these organisations are independent).

A report by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria (set up by the UN Human Rights Council) has estimated the death toll in Aleppo between July and December 2016 at 'hundreds of civilians' (Human Rights Council, 2017). After reviewing the statements of Airwars, Human Rights Watch, and the Syrian Network for Human Rights, the number of civilians alleged to have been killed by the Syrian-Russian forces during the last stage of the military operations in Aleppo was estimated at between 1300 and 1600 (Airwars, 2018a; Human Rights Watch, 2017; The Syrian Network for Human Rights, 2016). As for Al-Raqqa, according to an investigation by Amnesty International, 'more than 1600 civilian lives (were) lost as a direct result of thousands of US, UK, and French air strikes and tens of thousands of US artillery strikes in the coalition's military campaign' (Amnesty International, 2019).

At the beginning of the two battles, there were between 270,000 and 300,000 civilians in East Aleppo and between 160,000 and 200,000 civilians in Al-Raqqa (Said and Perry, 2017; UN, 2016). The number of opposition armed forces in East Aleppo was estimated at 8000 fighters, including about 1000 fighters from Al-Nusra Front (Cumming-Bruce and Gladstone, 2016) and about 4000 fighters from the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Al-Raqqa (Said and Perry, 2017). It has to be noted, however, that according to – then – US Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman Colonel Steve Warren, Al-Nusra Front was in control of the eastern part of Aleppo (US Department of Defense, 2016).

This article analyses the coverage by *The Independent* and *The New York Times* (*The NYT*), two well-known and relatively independent newspapers of their respective countries, the UK and the US. These two media outlets were selected because the UK and the US were those that led the international coalition to fight terror in Syria and because both newspapers are highly regarded international newspapers and have previously won many international awards for their coverage.

The NYT is considered one of the world's most-followed mainstream media outlets on its social media platforms (#Socialscene, 2017: 2). It has more than 55 million followers on *Twitter* and more than 18 million likes or followers on *Facebook*, compared with about 18.5 million followers on *Twitter* and about 7 million likes or followers on *Facebook* for *The Washington Post*. As for *The Independent*, the newspaper recorded more than 24.5 million readers in one month to become 'the UK's largest quality digital news brand' (The Independent, 2019) and it won the 2018 Content Team of the Year at the British Media Awards (The Independent, 2018) for 'highest reach and engagement of any of the (UK) main news publishers' with 'seven of the 10 most shared stories on *Facebook*' including the top three stories (Campaign, 2018).

Method and data collection

The analysis will only examine the last stage of the operations, which mainly involved the Syrian-Russian forces recapturing East Aleppo from 11 July 2016 to 31 December 2016. The military campaign aimed first to control the Castello highway that linked East Aleppo (the last stronghold of the opposition armed forces in Aleppo) with the areas controlled by other opposition forces in the northern and western countryside of the city.

The military operations in Al-Raqqa were a battle of the international 'war on terror' led by the US coalition forces and Kurdish armed groups on the ground to capture the city from IS from 6 June 2017 until 31 October 2017. Two main articles were selected from each of *The NYT*'s and *The Independent*'s websites from each day of the two battles. These main articles were selected because they were written by prominent and senior journalists such as Mark Mazzetti, Anne Barnard and Eric Schmitt from *The NYT* and Lizzie Dearden, Samuel Osborne and Harry Cockburn from *The Independent*.

One hundred eighty-five articles, including 17 opinion pieces, were selected from *The Independent*, and 184 articles were selected from *The NYT*, including seven video reports published as independent articles, eight editorials, 20 opinion pieces and three cartoons. Considering that the analysis focused on articles published by prominent journalists in the two newspapers and that the data made up 72.9% of the total number of published articles that reported on the two battles during the period of the study, it can be argued that the selected articles represented the overall tone of the coverage of the two military operations.

It has to be stressed that opinion pieces were collected because, on some days, *The NYT* or *The Independent* only published opinion pieces about Aleppo or Al-Raqqa, and these opinions were included to understand how much attention was given to the two military operations. Moreover, some of the opinion pieces, particularly those published by *The Independent*, were accompanied by visual content (images or video clips). This visual content was chosen to be published by the editors, and therefore it can be argued that it represented the editorial line of the newspaper.

The analysis will focus on news articles and the visuals and cartoons attached to them. These are the primary sources for the study. The analysis, however, will also be informed by editorials, as they contribute to the overall frame of the coverage of the two battles. The selected articles were analysed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Have *The Independent* and *The NYT* promoted a pro-US and anti-Syrian-Russian agenda in their coverage of the military operations in Aleppo and Al-Raqqa?

RQ2: How has the use of sources and visual content advanced the pro-US agenda?

The analysis focused on the use of terminology, visual content and sources to report on the two events (note: opinion pieces were not included in the analysis of terminology and use of sources). The use of official and non-official sources was examined to find out whether a pro-US agenda has been promoted. Each source used in the news articles was counted and categorised based on their affiliation. For instance, the White House, the State Department, or the Pentagon sources were considered official voices representing the US. Statements by the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) or other state-controlled media were categorised as Syrian official sources because they represented the official voice. A source was counted as a single source only, even if it was referred to or cited more than once in any particular news article.

As for the images, Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis was used as a methodology to identify and report patterns within a visual data set. The images attached to the articles were analysed and categorised thematically into three main themes: (1) civilian casualty theme, which included images of deaths, injuries and displacement of civilians. (2) Destruction theme and it included images of damaged buildings and infrastructure (houses, schools and neighbourhoods). (3) Liberation theme and it included images of civilians celebrating after they were 'freed' from IS. This categorisation helped identify what themes were dominant in the coverage of the two battles.

Findings and analysis

The Independent's coverage of the two battles

Of the 173 days over which the battle of Aleppo unfolded, *The Independent* published articles about the battle on 103 days (59.5%). In contrast, of the 147 days over which the battle of Al-Raqqa unfolded, the British newspaper published about Al-Raqqa on only 31 days (21%). Comparing the coverage of Aleppo (from 11th July to 5th December) with the coverage of Al-Raqqa (from 6th June to 31st October) over the same number of days, *The Independent* published articles about Aleppo on 85 of 147 days (57.8%) compared with 31 days (21%) for Al-Raqqa.

The main sources of the coverage of Aleppo were the SOHR and the White Helmets, with the UN being cited a total of 158 times (31.4%) in contrast to the coverage of Al-Raqqa which relied on US and Kurdish sources that were cited a total of 49 times (47.4%). As for the Syrian official voice, it was downgraded in the coverage of Aleppo in two ways. First, by giving official sources less attention; on average, they were cited in less than four out of every ten news articles. Second, by giving anti-Syrian government sources more coverage, with an average of four sources to one source whenever a Syrian official was quoted.

The use of international anti-Syrian and anti-Russian sources is another indication of the biased coverage that promoted a US viewpoint on the military operations in Aleppo. US and European sources such as Britain, France, and NATO were cited a total of 88 times (17.5%). These sources were given a platform to recount their narrative of the events, which helped generate opinions

critical of the Syrian-Russian military operations. To cite three telling examples: *The Independent* quoted David Miliband, former British Foreign Secretary, on 1 August 2016, as saying that ‘there is unspeakable humanitarian abuse going on across Syria at the moment and there is very little accountability for people committing these crimes’; then British foreign secretary Boris Johnson was quoted on 19 August 2016, and pointed out that ‘the whole world is horrified by the suffering of the people of Aleppo – the bombing of innocent civilians, the murder of defenceless children’; finally, the newspaper quoted Francois Delattre, then the French envoy to the UN, on 25 September 2016, referring to the ‘war crimes (that) are being committed here in Aleppo’.

In contrast, a voice critical of the US military operations in Al-Raqqa was largely unheard. In total, Syrian and Russian sources were only quoted six times (5.7%). Of these, the only direct criticism of the US military operations came from Major-General Igor Konashenkov, Chief Spokesman for the Russian Defence Ministry, who on 22 October 2017 (after the battle ended) was quoted as saying that ‘Raqqa has inherited the fate of Dresden in 1945, wiped off the face of the earth by Anglo-American bombardments’ (Osborne, 2017).

The quantitative measures are not the only indicators of the biased reporting of the two battles, which also becomes obvious using qualitative methods. While the main two themes in reporting on Aleppo were civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian infrastructure, the main theme for Al-Raqqa was the celebration of victory over IS. The civilian casualty theme was covered to a lesser extent. While a death toll was included in 15 of 36 news articles (41.6%) about Al-Raqqa, civilian casualties were the main theme in only seven of them.

The Independent’s coverage of Aleppo considered the Syrian-Russian forces largely responsible for the human tragedy in the city and urged the world to act and save civilians. For the coverage of Al-Raqqa, however, the newspaper avoided condemning the US forces. Although *The Independent’s* coverage of Al-Raqqa was slightly more critical than *The NYT’s* coverage of the US forces, the terms used were less dramatic and did not use the same condemning tone. For instance, while ‘war crimes’ was used to describe the operations in Aleppo, this term was not used in the coverage of Al-Raqqa. In another example, while ‘children’ was not used in the main headline in the coverage of Al-Raqqa, this word appeared in 17 different headlines in the coverage of Aleppo (e.g., Bulman, 2016).

Furthermore, the headlines of the few articles that reported on civilian casualties were very different from the headlines used in Aleppo. For instance, the headlines of Aleppo used strong terms such as ‘Judgment Day’, ‘one of the worst massacres since World War Two’ and ‘the graveyards are now full’. For Al-Raqqa, ‘civilian death toll mounts’, ‘at least 42 civilians killed by US-led bomb attack’ and ‘US air strikes kill 18 civilians’.

Use of visual content

As for visual content, two types of images were generally attached to each article of *The Independent*: (1) images about the event being reported, and (2) a photo album, a group of images between six and 19 and sometimes 30 placed in the middle of the webpage, normally of previous events related to the story being reported or the Syrian conflict in general. In total, 1584 images were attached to the articles that reported on Aleppo, including 1410 images from the photo albums. Of the 1584 images, fewer than 65 were portraits of politicians and military figures. While only eight were of anti-Syrian government fighters, the remaining images were of killed or injured civilians and the destruction of infrastructure in Aleppo.

As for the short clips of video reports, 8978 s or 149.6 min, of short clips were attached to *The Independent’s* articles. Over 135 min (8100 s or about 90%) of these clips were about the humanitarian crisis in the city. Similar to the images, besides showing scenes of destruction, the video clips contained graphic scenes of killed or injured civilians, such as corpses and graveyards, and injured civilians being treated in a hospital.

For Al-Raqqa, 397 images, including 343 album images and 1730 s (28.8 min) of video content, were attached to the articles. Most of the images did not depict civilian suffering. Forty of the 54 images attached to the articles about Al-Raqqa were of fighters allied with the US moving in on a pickup vehicle or running towards or from a firelight during the battle. Other mostly random images were of, for instance, IS former leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, or then the US envoy to fight terrorism, Brett McGurk. Strikingly, of 343 album images, 192 (55.9%) were actually about Aleppo (reporting on the civilian casualty and destruction themes during the military operations in 2016), while 25 images (7.2%) of Al-Raqqa showed Kurdish fighters or civilians celebrating the victory over IS.

Also noted, a photo album that included 13 images of children from different Syrian cities holding a sheet of paper with drawings of Pokemon asking to be saved was attached to 14 news articles reporting on child casualties or other news related to the children in East Aleppo, including one news article that reported on children killed by opposition armed forces shells. A photo album like this, nevertheless, was not attached to any of the 36 articles of Al-Raqqa, even those that reported on child casualties.

The video clips attached to the articles in the coverage of Al-Raqqa showed small parts of the military operations and documented one aspect of the civilians' lives, specifically women burning their *Abayas* or *Burqas* and men shaving their beards as they arrived in areas controlled by the Kurdish militias. These clips reinforced the 'liberation' aspect of the military operations. While some scenes of destruction appeared in the background, there was very little information about civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian infrastructure caused by US forces.

The NYT's coverage of the two battles

Of the 173 days over which the battle of Aleppo took place, *The NYT* published articles about the battle on 103 days (59.5%). To compare the coverage until 5 December 2016, *The NYT* published articles about Aleppo on 85 days out of 147 days (57.8%) and 26 days (17.6%) on Al-Raqqa. The main two sources in *The NYT's* coverage of Aleppo were local NGOs and anti-Syrian government media groups, or 'activists', which together were cited a total of 148 times (33.1%). The coverage relied on these sources for on-the-ground reporting, particularly to report on civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian infrastructure. In contrast, the coverage of Al-Raqqa relied predominantly on US sources and 'experts' (mainly US), who were quoted a total of 64 times (45.3%).

Moreover, local sources were given less attention in the coverage of Al-Raqqa compared with Aleppo. Organisations such as the SOHR and Raqqa Are Being Slaughtered Silently, which in particular reported on civilian casualties of the US military operations, were only cited 11 times (7.8%) in the coverage of Al-Raqqa. In contrast, local NGOs, 'activists', and opposition fighters who adopted an anti-Syria and anti-Russia narrative were quoted 176 times (28.1%) in the coverage of Aleppo. In numbers, sources that opposed the Syrian-Russian forces in Aleppo were given more than three times more coverage than those that opposed the US forces in Al-Raqqa.

Furthermore, while the main themes in the reporting on Aleppo were civilian casualties and the destruction of civilian infrastructure, the main themes in the reporting on Al-Raqqa were the victory over IS and the suffering of civilians under its rule. The analysis showed that 55 of the 123 news articles (44.7%) of the coverage of Aleppo mentioned at least one civilian casualty or devoted the whole article to reporting on this theme. In contrast, despite reporting on the issue, suffering and civilian casualties were not the focus of the coverage of Al-Raqqa. Of the 30 articles, civilian casualties appeared in nine (30%), in two of which civilian casualties constituted the main theme.

In *The NYT's* coverage, the US was rarely blamed for the humanitarian crisis in Al-Raqqa, while IS was considered responsible for the miserable conditions of the civilians. For example, an article published on 8 September 2017, recounted the suffering of civilians during the battle, including the

struggle to find medical treatment for the wounded and the shortage of water. However, this article focused more on IS than US airstrikes.

The NYT's coverage framed the killing of civilians by US airstrikes in Al-Raqqa as 'unintentional'. To cite two telling examples, the newspaper wrote, 'airstrikes by the American-led coalition against Islamic State targets have killed hundreds of civilians around Raqqa' (Cumming-Bruce, 2017) and 'images and reports from witnesses in the northern Syrian city of Raqqa suggest that the United States-led coalition battling the Islamic State there has used munitions loaded with white phosphorus' (Barnard, 2017). In both examples, the US strikes were presented as initially targeting IS but they missed their targets and killed civilians. Moreover, using 'suggest' in the second example indicated uncertainty about whether the event occurred.

In Aleppo, however, Russian airstrikes were framed as intentionally hitting civilians and civilian infrastructure. For example, 'doctors sleep in the hospitals, but other people are afraid to stay near hospitals unless they really need to be there because they are sure that hospitals are being deliberately targeted' (Specia and Bishara, 2016), and 'effects of Russia's bombing campaign in the Syrian city of Aleppo – destroying hospitals and schools, choking off basic supplies, and killing aid workers and hundreds of civilians over just days – raise a question: What could possibly motivate such brutality?' (Fisher, 2016).

In another indication of the unequal coverage of the two battles, no editorials were published to voice concerns over Al-Raqqa from mid-October until the end of October 2017, compared with three editorials published about Aleppo from mid-December (the end of the battle) until the end of December 2016. Furthermore, *The NYT* selected four images in the memorable images for the year 2016 article published on 22 December 2016, and all of them portrayed human suffering in Aleppo. As a direct contrast, in *The Year In Pictures 2017* article published on 19 December 2017, only one image from Al-Raqqa was selected, and it was of a family and friends mourning a Kurdish fighter killed in the battle against IS.

Use of visual content

As for the visual content, 225 images were included with the articles on Aleppo. In total, 115 images (51.1%) portrayed the humanitarian crisis in Aleppo (civilian casualty and destruction themes), 17 images (7.5%) showed civilian suffering in other Syrian cities, and other images included members of armed groups, Syrian soldiers, and portraits of politicians (e.g., US former Secretary of State John Kerry). Moreover, 8562 s or 142.7 min of short clips were included with the articles, about 6605 s (110 min) of which were related to the suffering of civilians in Aleppo.

For Al-Raqqa, 77 images were attached to the articles. Forty-seven images (61%) reported on the military operations, while 30 (38.9%) reported other issues such as fighting IS in Iraq and the destruction of civilian infrastructure in other Syrian cities. Of all, only 21 images (27.2%) covered the civilian casualty or destruction themes in Al-Raqqa. For video clips, 233 s or 3.8 min were included in *The NYT's* articles, and only 83 s were related to the humanitarian crisis. Other video clips were of Kurdish fighters celebrating or of cities in Iraq.

Similar to the other visual content, the cartoons published by *The NYT* enhanced the overall frame of the two coverages. In Cartoon 1 of Aleppo (Chappatte, 2016a), the cartoonist Patrick Chappatte criticised former US President Barack Obama for not taking action to intervene in Aleppo. There was heavy black smoke, the entire city was destroyed, and Russian military aircraft (identified by the word Russia that was written on the main aircraft) dropped bombs, including what appeared to be barrel bombs (referencing the Syrian government). Cartoon 2 (Chappatte, 2016b) showed Russian President Vladimir Putin giving bloodied Aleppo as a Christmas present to Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, who was framed as the character Gargamel from *The Smurfs*. Gargamel was evil and endeavoured to eat the Smurfs and destroy their little village. Cartoon 3

on the capture of Al-Raqqa (Chappatte, 2017) showed a destroyed city, black smoke, three military helicopters, and two IS fighters leaving the city after the group was defeated. There is no indication of who owned or controlled these helicopters.

Comparison of the two newspapers' coverages of Aleppo and Al-Raqqa

The foregoing analysis has shown that the similarities in the coverage of the two newspapers were greater than the differences between them. Entman (1991: 6) argues that:

Unless narratives are compared, frames are difficult to detect fully and reliably, because many of the framing devices can appear as 'natural' unremarkable choices of words or images. Comparison reveals that such choices are not inevitable or unproblematic but rather are central to the way the news frame helps establish the literally 'common sense' (i.e., widespread) interpretation of events.

The situation in Aleppo was put in a far more humane context compared with Al-Raqqa. For instance, more coverage and visual content accompanied the articles that reported on the civilian casualty or the destruction themes in Aleppo compared with Al-Raqqa. In addition, various sources were used in the coverage by the two newspapers of Aleppo that mostly voiced an anti-Syria and anti-Russia narrative. Moreover, the UN's and international NGOs' voices figured more prominently in Aleppo. This lent more credibility to the coverage of Aleppo because these sources are often considered reliable and trustworthy (Table 1).

The two newspapers relied on local anti-Syrian government sources mostly when they corresponded to the narrative of the conflict as reported two newspapers. Herman and Chomsky (2002: 35) pointed to this particular issue, arguing that 'we would expect official sources of the United States and its client regimes to be used heavily-and uncritically-in connection with one's own abuses and those of friendly governments, while refugees and other dissident sources will be used in dealing with enemies' (Table 2).

Similar to Entman's (1991) findings, the civilian casualties of the military operations in Al-Raqqa were generally framed by technical discourse and as accidents, while the civilian casualties of the military operations in Aleppo were framed as deliberate and premeditated incidents. The victims of Aleppo were 'worthy' of attention, and these were used to admonish the Syrian-Russian forces. In contrast, the low-key coverage of the 'unworthy' victims of Al-Raqqa relied on US and Kurdish militia sources that were responsible for the deaths of many of these victims. In Aleppo, the problem was framed as a struggle between outgunned armed opposition groups and unarmed civilians who were seeking to defend themselves against brutal forces. In this light, Cockburn (2016) noted that:

There was no sign of the 8,000 to 10,000 armed fighters whom the UN estimated to have been in east Aleppo. In fact, I cannot recall seeing anybody with a gun or manning a fortified position in these heart-rending films. The only visible inhabitants of Aleppo are unarmed civilians.

In fact, *The Independent*, for instance, published eight images of the opposition armed forces in Aleppo out of 1584 images (0.5%). Attacks on civilians by the opposition armed forces received very little coverage. For instance, civilian casualties in West Aleppo (a government-held area) were reported on by *The NYT* in only 21 of 123 articles (17%) and they were never the main theme in any of these articles. As for visual content from West Aleppo, only four images (1.7%) were attached to the articles.

In the case of Al-Raqqa, however, the problem was framed as a military campaign against a terrorist organisation. In this case, the only solution was to liberate the city and its people. By carrying out these military operations, the US and its allies were framed as playing a positive role in the

Table 1. A comparison of the coverage of US and Russian airstrikes in Syria.

	The US	Russia
Intention and focus	- Wrongful deaths - Go wrong - Accidental bombing - Mistaken bombing - Liberation - Fighting terrorism - Less reporting on civilian deaths and/or less emphasis on this issue. - Fewer details about the suffering of civilians (hunger, displaced civilians, refugees).	- Deliberate - War crimes - Indiscriminate bombings - Routine - Invasion - Oppressing civilians - Details of civilian deaths. - Details of the suffering of civilians. - Focus on the destruction of civil infrastructure.
Sourcing	- More coverage from US official sources. - Less coverage given to NGO or anti-US official narrative sources.	- Less coverage from Russian official sources. - Detailed quotes from NGO reports and anti-Syrian-Russian NGO sources.

Table 2. A comparison of the use of the main sources in the coverage by *The Independent* and *The NYT* of Aleppo and Al-Raqqa.

Types of sources	<i>The Independent</i>		<i>The NYT</i>	
	Aleppo	Al-Raqqa	Aleppo	Al-Raqqa
The US	4.9%	20.3%	16.3%	39%
Syrian officials	10.7%	1.9%	7%	0.7%
The UN and international NGOs	19.3%	15.5%	16.8%	9.9%
Anti-govt NGOs and activists	34.3%	13.6%	28.1%	8.5%

Syrian conflict compared to the negative role Russia played when its forces targeted civilians instead of saving them. To complete the story, it was necessary to overlook the victims and destruction in Al-Raqqa and focus on the positive outcome of the campaign, which was defeating IS.

Discussion

There were four main features for *The NYT's* and *The Independent's* coverage of the two military operations. Firstly, the coverage largely concentrated on the military operations of the opposing forces. The humanitarian crisis, however, was also taken into account, but only when it complemented or reinforced the two newspapers, particularly *The NYT's*, narrative of the conflict. As discussed, the coverage of Aleppo differed from the coverage of Al-Raqqa because *The NYT* avoided indicating the victims killed by the US military forces. This is understandable considering that the dominant sources of the coverage were US politicians and military figures.

Secondly, a noteworthy feature of the coverage of *The NYT* and *The Independent* was the selective use of non-official sources to push an agenda that sought to overthrow the Syrian government. UN and international NGO sources were used mostly when they corresponded to the narrative of the conflict as reported by the two newspapers. For instance, non-official sources were given more

weight in the coverage of Aleppo than official sources. Non-official sources, particularly those that disclosed atrocities caused by the US military operations, however, were not given much weight in the coverage of Al-Raqqa. There was a systematic use of official sources in the coverage of both Aleppo and Al-Raqqa, and a very selective use of unofficial sources in the coverage of the two battles. The US official narrative of the military operations in Al-Raqqa was hardly challenged.

Thirdly, the coverage enhanced the good guys and bad guys frame. Promoting foreign intervention can be achieved, for instance, by praising one side of the conflict and demonising the other. In this light, Macleod (2019) argues that ‘when official enemies can be presented as evil and allies as sympathetic victims, corporate media will be very interested in a story’. Thus, the Syrian and Russian armies were framed as murderers by accusing them of intentionally targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure. On the contrary, the opposition armed forces were often framed positively as patrons of their people. Attacks on civilians carried out by these forces received very little coverage. The opposition armed forces were generally framed as moderate, but this moderation was never defined despite the fact that the main body of these forces was explicitly seeking to establish what they believed to be an ‘Islamic’ state through their alliance with the Al-Nusra Front (Shaam Network, 2017).

Fourthly, *The NYT*’s and *The Independent*’s coverage favoured military solutions over other peaceful ones. By focusing on children and civilian casualties, *The NYT* and *The Independent* framed the military operations in Aleppo as a struggle between unarmed groups and an authoritarian regime. Moreover, there was almost no mention of Al-Nusra Front members who were fighting alongside these groups. This can be attributed to the fact that acknowledging the existence of Al-Qaeda or terrorism in Aleppo would have justified the Syrian-Russian military operations in the city and framed Syria and Russia as countries that fight terrorism. Thus, there was a need to focus on the civilians in East Aleppo.

The Independent was slightly more critical than *The NYT* of the US forces in Al-Raqqa by, for instance, allocating more coverage to civilian casualties. The biased coverage of the two newspapers was constructed out of several elements: the amount of media attention given to each city; the use of visual content quantitatively (number of images and video clips attached) and qualitatively (types of images and video clips attached); the use of dramatic terminology in the case of Aleppo and less dramatic language in the case of Al-Raqqa; via the focus on the humanitarian situation in the coverage of Aleppo and the military operations in the coverage of Al-Raqqa; the use of sources, particularly US sources, that enhanced a pro-US narrative; and, by paying more attention to UN and anti-Syrian government NGO sources. In addition, the outcome of the battle of Aleppo was framed as a ‘disaster’ while capturing Al-Raqqa was framed mainly as a ‘victory’.

Publishing graphic visual content in the coverage of Aleppo aimed to delegitimise the enemy and encourage people to support the Western/US intervention in Syria. According to research, graphic images are likely to stick in memory (Newhagen and Reeves, 1992). Soroka et al.’s 2016 experimental study shows that visual content plays a profound role in generating public support to go to war. Similarly, Barnett and Reynolds (2009: 85) point out that ‘graphic images might cause the outrage to suggest something needs to be done, but only as long as those images are novel, something useful for those trying to compel action from the audience’. They add ‘if producers want to draw attention to a story, they need to draw attention with images that cause anger and then introduce what they want viewers to remember right after those images’.

Media play a key role in gaining the public’s consent during wars, and wars can hardly be won without the support of the people (Seagren and Henderson, 2018). *The Independent* and *The NYT* were involved in promoting a pro-US narrative by, for instance, framing the Americans as having ‘noble’ intentions and the Russians as being murderers. In this context, having a ‘noble’ intention

justifies the breaching of international law and the sovereignty of independent countries. Addressing this issue, Zulaika underscores that:

Under the guise of combating terrorism, U.S. counterterrorism considers itself legitimized to overrule national sovereignties and flaunt international law; in short, to establish a state of exception by which actions that ordinarily are illegal and immoral are suddenly tolerable because the fight against the terrorist demands it (Zulaika, 2013: 4).

Herman considers 'humanitarian' intervention and the 'war on terror' as two different terms (Aksan and Bailes, 2013b: 100). Nonetheless, in Syria, the two terms overlapped. The intervention in Syria needed a strong propaganda campaign to win public consent. The US military activities were first framed as a humanitarian intervention to protect the people from the Syrian government, and this was later changed to a counter-terrorism frame.

Conclusion

Through the engagement of regional and international media outlets and social media platforms, the conflict in Syria has received considerable attention, particularly after Syrian and Russian forces launched their military campaign in 2016 to recapture East Aleppo from the opposition armed forces and foreign fighter allies.

This article has found that textual and visual framings (including cartoons), and official sources were used to emphasise the overall theme of the coverage of the Syrian conflict and legitimise a military intervention. While previous studies (Kleemans et al., 2017; Tiffen et al., 2014) noted a rise in the use of non-official sources in news coverage, this paper demonstrated that non-official sources were mostly quoted when they corresponded to the narrative of the conflict as reported by *The Independent* and *The NYT*. Thus, more attention should be paid to these sources and their affiliations, particularly in the coverage of conflicts.

It has to be stressed that this paper does not deny the Syrian people the right to oppose their government or to establish a democratic system in their country. The people of Syria, like any other people, have the right to run their own country the way they believe is suitable. This article sought to show how the pro-US narrative influenced what is believed to be independent mainstream media. While Aleppo will be remembered as one of the 'worst human tragedies' of the 21st century, Al-Raqqa, nonetheless, will just be remembered as another 'successful battle' in the 'war on terror'.

An *NYT*'s editorial published on 31 December 2016, entitled *Can Russia Make Peace as Well as War?* questioned whether Russian President Vladimir Putin was 'willing and able to take responsibility for Syria's future, including rebuilding the cities that Russia helped destroy'. Not surprisingly, the American newspaper did not express similar feelings about Al-Raqqa, and a similar question was not directed to the US President.

This article's findings concern the selected two newspapers only. Because the conflict in Syria has received considerable media attention regionally and internationally, more studies of US and UK media outlets are needed. This article shows that there is a need to question independent media outlets over their engagement with their respective governments' propaganda. It invites scholars to investigate mainstream media coverage of Western powers' assaults on civilians, particularly in the Middle East.

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