

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

FRAMING ANALYSIS OF A CHEMICAL ATTACK IN SYRIA:

AL JAZEERA, CNN, RT AND POLITICAL ECONOMY

BY

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT OF

Jason James Lemon for Master of Arts
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Title: Framing Analysis of a Chemical Attack in Syria: Al Jazeera, CNN, RT and Political Economy

Between Aug. 21 and Sept. 14 of 2013, the conflict raging in Syria took center stage in the international media. A chemical attack with unclear origins drew a wave of international condemnations and skepticism that news organizations followed closely, as direct Western involvement in the Syrian conflict was discussed. This study examines how three international news organizations – Al Jazeera, CNN and RT – framed and covered the incident within their respective political economic contexts. Bringing together literature on framing and the political economy of media, the study examines the varying ways in which the news organizations presented the conflict and the political economic context within which these frames arose.

Keywords: Media, Framing, Political Economy, Syria, War, CNN, RT, Al Jazeera

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background

During the period from Aug. 21 to Sept. 14 of 2013, the Syrian conflict was the focus of significantly heightened media attention due to the repercussions of a chemical weapons attack with unclear origins (BBC, 2013). As Western powers publicly debated becoming involved in the Syrian conflict – which had already raged for more than two years – the international media focused a great deal of spotlight on the seemingly escalating situation. Global news media turned its eye to the conflict, showing varying perspectives on the events that had occurred. Political leaders from all sides of the complex war, weighed in with their perspectives. Many Western leaders called for a strong military response – pinning the blame on the Syrian government. On the other side, regional and Eastern allies of Syrian President Bashar Al Assad voiced their continued support for his government and suggested the blame actually belonged with rebel factions. While all international media covered the details of the attack in a similar fashion to the political discourse surrounding the event, the issue of who was to blame varied greatly between international news organizations.

At particular odds during this moment – as has remained the case throughout the duration of the Syrian conflict – were Russia and the United States. While Russian President Vladimir Putin and his government maintained unwavering support for Assad, the U.S. administration, led by President Barack Obama, took the opportunity to call for a strong military response against the Syrian government. Initially, Putin's government

called into question, along with the Syrian government, whether any attack had even occurred; however as the evidence came in, the Russian government shifted tactics, blaming Syrian rebels for the attack. This international political discourse was followed closely by international news organization, with global interest focusing on the response that the U.S. and its allies would take. In the end, Putin's government put forward a plan that would see Assad's chemical stockpiles remitted into international hands for destruction with the condition that Western powers would hold back on a military strike (Arms Control Association, 2016).

B. Purpose and Significance

This project examines how Al Jazeera, CNN and RT covered the attack and the political discourse during this period of heightened attention on the Syrian conflict, examining the political economy of the selected news organizations and how it relates to their respective framing of the incident. CNN and RT were selected as news organizations from the two main global powers – the U.S. and Russia – which have essentially been at odds over the Syrian conflict since its outset and took opposing positions during this particular moment in the conflict. Al Jazeera was selected to represent a regional (Middle Eastern) or Arab perspective on the conflict, although of course, the Qatari-owned news organization cannot be assumed to speak on behalf of the entire Middle East just as CNN and RT cannot adequately be said to represent the diverse perspectives of their respective countries. These news organizations were also selected because of their distinct styles of ownership. CNN is privately owned and technically entirely independent of the U.S. government (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). RT on the other hand, is directly owned and

managed by the Russian state (Ioffe, 2010). Al Jazeera is funded by the Qatari government (i.e. the royal family) but has often been commended for its relative operational autonomy. Al Jazeera has regularly been lauded for its topnotch journalism and its ability to provide a perspective that is often lacking in the international media landscape (Seib, 2012). However, in the case of Syria and other regional conflicts, where the Qatari government has taken specific positions, critics have begun to question the media outlet's autonomy (Chalala, 2013).

Just as the very brief overview of the three news organizations selected for this study has made clear, news organizations operate under very different circumstances. By definition, media are meant to provide a critical voice to counter systems of power, however many researchers, looking at media very broadly, suggest that they have essentially become a mouthpiece for governments (Bennet, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007). Media outlets often rely heavily on the words of governmental and political leaders, particularly those seen as elites within their respective nations, causing news to be framed by those in power. Furthermore, indirect or direct ownership of media by the government or government leaders can influence such framing. Entman (1993) defines framing as having to do with selection and salience, or “making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful or memorable to audiences” (p. 392). Framing theory has become a widely popular area of research. “[Framing] was the most frequently utilized theory in top mass communication journals since the beginning of the 21st century” according to a review of mass communication journals done in 2004, (D’Angelo and Kuypers, 2010, p. 1-2). Framing has become useful in studying how particular media outlets differ in their

framing of international events, particularly in examining how media often align with their nations' foreign policy or rely on the statements of elites to make news (Alasuutari, Qadir, & Creutz, 2013; Allen, O'Loughlin, Jasperson, & Sullivan, 1994; Lewis & Rose, 2002).

Working within the framework of previous framing research while analyzing the 2013 media spectacle of the Syrian chemical weapons crisis, this study attempts to add to the continuously developing conversation of framing theory, through the lens of political economy and comparative analysis. Specifically this study focuses on how the selected news organization framed their coverage of the attack, the political economy behind such framing decisions and analytically compares these news organizations and their coverage. It compares news organizations from the major opposing sides of the global discourse – Russia and the U.S. – as well as a regional angle provided by Qatari-owned Al Jazeera to understand the distinctions and similarities in frames that were used. Particularly, the study endeavors to gain a better understanding of these news organizations' portrayal of the 2013 Syrian chemical weapons attack, its characterization of the parties involved in the conflict and the frames used to highlight a particular message to the public. The study asks the question: how does relation to the state affect bias and framing? This study hypothesizes that, while ownership and control of the concerned news organizations may vary significantly, all will frame the conflict significantly within the context of their governments foreign policy and promote a bias supporting the position of their governments. Furthermore, proximity – both cultural and geographical – have a greater bearing on the nuance and balance in reporting than direct or indirect ownership of the state. This study reveals that despite the differing political economic realities of the news

organizations, all present significant bias and frame their news articles within the context of their respective nations' foreign policy. It shows that while some news organizations do a better job than others, each has its own shortcomings.

C. Brief Summary of Method

To gain greater insight into the news coverage of the chemical weapons attack from an American, Russian and a Middle Eastern perspective, this study looked at online news articles published by Russia's RT, the United State's CNN and Qatar's Al Jazeera. Specifically articles published during the first three days (August 21, 22 and 23) following the attack and the three days prior to the international agreement (September 12, 13 and 14) were closely analyzed using qualitative textual analysis. Furthermore, the study examines how the policies and statements of the leaders of the media outlet's nations are highlighted, promoted or criticized, to determine if an alignment exists between the framing of news articles and official positions of political elites. The study places the framing by the respective news organizations within the context of their individual political economic situations, comparatively analyzing the differences and nuances between the U.S., Russian and Arab news organization.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is divided into five sections, starting with a theoretical framework that summarizes the research traditions in which this study is based. The following three sections provide an overview of recent studies on framing, a look at how studies have shown a connection between media and political elites, and an overview of how news organizations domesticate and/or align news with their nations' foreign policy. The final section discusses the political economy of the three news organizations examined by this study: Al Jazeera, CNN and RT.

A. Theoretical Framework

The concept of framing analysis theory can be traced back to the work of Goffman (1974). His book provides an explanation and an overview of frame analysis, a way to study how experiences are interpreted and analyzed by individuals. These ideas and concepts have been further developed within various disciplines of the social sciences, including the realm of communication and media studies. Gitlin (1980) was one of the first researchers to apply the concepts to media frames. Through studying the New Left movement of the 1960s, Gitlin established a precedent for studying media with framing analysis. Writing about frames, Gitlin explains that frames are continual patterns of thoughts and interpretations that are highlighted and given emphasis in an elusive way. These frames shape the world for both the readers and viewers of news coverage as well as the journalists who report the stories.

Further developing the ideas of framing analysis in the area of media effects and approaching framing from a more psychological perspective, Iyengar (1991) researched the ways in which television broadcasts frame political issues and how these frames affect the audience's interpretation. Through the use of content analysis in his examination, Iyengar worked to identify distinct ways that issues were framed while also following-up to understand the influence the frame had on the viewer. In the same tradition, Entman's (1993) work has become key to the current research in media framing analysis. Entman explains that framing shows how influence is wielded. Expounding on the concept of framing, Entman states that, "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text" (p. 391). Framing highlights or emphasizes certain aspects of a story in an effort to convey the desired message and a directed influence upon the audience. While an audience also possesses agency and an informed audience can potentially see beyond this directed influence, framing often works to direct an apathetic audiences conclusions about an issue.

As framing has become an increasingly popular area of research for media and communication experts (D'Angelo and Kuypers, 2010), much of the recent research points to the alignment of media with state ideologies, bringing some to suggest that media work as a mouthpiece for the government (Bennet, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007). While news organizations of liberal democracies are often touted as more "free", the words and actions of political elites still often affect their coverage. Previous research suggests that in the absence of a free press, authoritarian leaders are seen to have "additional leeway to exert a greater influence" (Lu, Aldrich, & Shi, 2014). However, this study draws that assumption

into question and suggests that additional factors may be at play. Although news organizations and the audience always maintain a level of agency from the official positions of governments and political elites, understanding the relationship between political powers and media provides a better understanding of how ideas and information are formed and circulated within societies. In particular, much recent research has examined these complex and involving relationship in news coverage of foreign policy issues, particularly war. The coverage of the Persian Gulf War, the War in Iraq, the broad War on Terror and the Egyptian Revolution have all become particular subjects of interest.

Examining the relationship between media and political elites during the period leading up to the Persian Gulf War, Lewis and Rose (2002) utilize the “indexing hypothesis” developed by Bennet (1990) to study the way media framed the discourse by focusing on the words of governmental leaders. The “indexing hypothesis” posits that foreign policy debate covered by the media is directly related to the debate occurring in Washington D.C. The study examines U.S. media coverage of war powers leading up to and following the start of the conflict. Results of the analysis supported the “indexing hypothesis” and as debate among leaders dissipated following the invasion – in this particular context – so did debate within the media. Similarly, research on international media coverage has examined how media follow the statements and actions of national government officials when framing international news stories (Alasuutari, Qadir, & Creutz; 2013). Through examining how different leading international newspapers framed the Egyptian Revolution, the study showed how the newspapers relied on framing the news with the actions and statements of their nations’ leaders or through highlighting citizens

from the news organizations' nations affected by the revolution, thus domesticating the foreign news for a local audience. News coverage accordingly tends to be framed, both on an international and national level, through the words and actions of government leaders, as this makes the news more relevant or relatable to a specific audience. Following within this research tradition, this study analyzes how international media outlets framed the Syrian chemical weapons crisis and whether the various media followed similar framing patterns.

At the same time, this study examines the political economy behind CNN, RT and Al Jazeera. A narrow understanding defines political economy as “the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources,” (Mosco, 2009, p. 2). A broader and more “ambitious” definition would be “the study of control and survival in social life.” Particularly when it comes to communications research, political economy refers to how politics, society and economic factors influence or are influenced by mass media. Within the context of this study, the news coverage of three unique news organizations – representing different ownership patterns and different international perspectives – is analyzed. Much political economy research of media has been ethnocentric in nature, neglecting a comparative international analysis. It is important to examine news organizations outside of an ethnocentric perspective as comparative analysis “sensitizes us to variation and to similarity, and this can contribute powerfully to concept formation and to the refinement of our conceptual apparatus,” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 2).

B. Summary of Recent Studies on Framing

In preparation for this study's analysis, I examined recent literature that similarly analyzed framing and the relationship between news organizations and their governments. Much framing research suggests that media tend to follow the statements and actions of their national political elites. In a study of news leading up to the Persian Gulf War, Lewis and Rose (2002) studied the U.S. media coverage and discovered a failure in addressing the war-making power of the president due to the "newsworthiness" of sources and the absence of debate occurring in Washington. Similarly, a study of media frames of the Iraq War in relation to the frames utilized by the White House demonstrated that the frames converged at points and usually only diverged when political debate surrounding the war occurred within the nation; however, the coverage remained focused on political elites (Glazier & Boydston, 2012). Another study that deals with Western and Arab coverage of the Iraq War demonstrated the different frames utilized and determined that the Arab media painted a more negative picture of the war, aligning with both political and public opinion of the region (Connolly-Ahern & Dimitrova, 2007). Looking more broadly at diversity in international media coverage, another study analyzed media coverage from the United States, the United Kingdom, Qatar, South Africa, Germany, and the Czech Republic demonstrating the differences relating to the nations' relation to the Iraq War (Kolmer & Semetko, 2009). Moreover, a study of coverage of the Egyptian Revolution revealed that media in the United Kingdom, Finland and Pakistan focused on domesticating the news story by telling it through the context of their nations' political elites or citizens (Alasuutari, Qadir, & Creutz, 2013). Furthermore, research done on a broad range of

international media revealed that during the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War, coverage by the analyzed television stations aligned overall with their nations' foreign policies (Melki, 2014).

C. Media Framing and Political Elites

Lewis and Rose (2002) demonstrate a connection between media frames and political debate occurring in Washington D.C. Looking specifically at ABC News, The New York Times, and the questions journalists asked during presidential news conferences leading up to the Persian Gulf War, the study reveals that little debate occurred in the media surrounding the president's war powers until debate began among other national leaders. The study suggests that the absence of media debate was related to the absence of debate by American political leaders. The media remained virtually silent on the issue of presidential war powers for more than two months following the deployment of American troops to the Gulf, which the article credits to a lack of debate among Washington elites. Not until the issue became controversial to politicians did it become newsworthy to the media. Lewis and Rose's study demonstrates a correlation between news coverage and political elites within U.S. media, a point that this project also examines in the context of Syria.

Further research by other scholars has brought forth similar conclusions. Using the Iraq War as a subject and focusing on the frames utilized by both the media and the president of the United States, Glazier and Boydston (2012) analyzed the way the frames diverged and converged. Overall the frames utilized by the president and the media diverge widely, yet at certain moments they align likely due to the absence of political debate

among national leaders. The study suggests that as long as debate does not occur in Washington D.C., debate will not be salient in the media either. Relatedly, this study aims to examine the relationship between political elites and their nations' news organization in the aftermath of the Syria chemical weapons attack.

Broadening the spectrum to include a variety of international media, as this study also does within the context of the Syrian conflict, Connolly-Ahern & Dimitrova (2007) examine online news coverage of the Iraq War by The New York Times, The Guardian, Al Jazeera and Al Ahram between March 20, 2003 and May 1, 2003—the official war period. The New York Times and The Guardian tended to focus on the future outcome of the struggle and the rebuilding of a better Iraq while the Arab media focused on the destruction, death, and military activity. Overall, the western news organizations appeared determined to remain relatively neutral whereas the Arab news organizations painted a negative picture of the conflict. Additionally, Al Jazeera was shown to be the most negative, often using condemning and moralizing language. As with the other studies mentioned previously, all of the media outlets relied predominately on leaders and governmental sources in their coverage.

Further expanding the analysis of international media coverage, Kolmer and Semetko (2009) analyze news coverage of the Iraq War, focusing on the “official” war period between March and April. Through examining the media of several different nations, the study examines links between coverage and the national political context in which it was produced. The research examines television coverage from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Czech Republic, Qatar and South Africa. The authors

concluded that overall, the framing of the events and the balance of the coverage occurred within the national political context of the respective nations and raised “serious questions about the credibility and impartiality of TV news in the reporting of the war.” While the study is interesting, it would seem deeper analysis of the collected data would shed further answers to how the events were framed by the various media outlets. Furthermore, it is important to better understand the ownership and political influences of the various media outlets. Nonetheless, Kolmer and Semetko’s research relates to this study in that it looks at international media and their relation to their own respective governments.

D. Domestication and Foreign Policy

A study focusing specifically on the way media “domesticates” international news to a local audience analyzed newspapers representing three different nations—Finland, Britain, and Pakistan (Alasuutari, Qadir, & Creutz, 2013). The researchers make the argument that other important players besides journalists affect how the news is reported, such as political elites, individuals from the news organizations’ countries close to the events and cultural or political interests. These factors shape the way in which the news is framed by the newspaper in order to domesticate its appeal to the local reader. Strangely, the authors initially believed that Pakistan would have a stronger emotional connection to the news from Egypt and thus The Daily Times would reflect this in its coverage. The researchers assumed that the prevalence of Islam within both countries connects them more strongly. However, it would make greater sense to argue that Britain and Egypt have much stronger ties considering the history of colonization and ongoing economic interests within the region. The research showed that the researchers’ original assumption was incorrect

and that both The Times and Helsingin Sanomat actually presented a more personal and emotional connection, than The Daily Times while all the media tended to frame the news through national political leaders' statements or actions. The conclusion suggests that news story becomes more popular when domesticated and connected to local interests.

Further demonstrating the connection between foreign policy and media coverage, a study of U.S., Arab and Israeli television media coverage of the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War, revealed an overall alignment with national leaders (Melki, 2014). Both the Arab and Israeli media exhibited expected bias, with Israeli media critical of Lebanon and Hezbollah and Arab media taking a position against Israel. However, differences also existed between the coverage of the various Arab media. Several Arab channels were more critical of Hezbollah and less negative towards Israel. The U.S. media presented an overall biased support of Israel, sometimes even surpassing the Israeli channel with positive support. Overall, the coverage aligned with the foreign policy of the news organizations' nations, which is an integral issue that this study also examines in the context of the Syria chemical attack.

Each of these highlighted studies emphasizes the use of framing by the media and particularly how the media rely on political elites to frame their coverage of events. The studies specifically demonstrate that the media rely heavily on the words, opinions and quotes of political elites as sources and to justify the newsworthiness of a particular story, often without taking a critical approach or adequately representing other perspectives to provide context. Following within this tradition, this study compares the coverage by international news organization to determine how they framed the Syrian chemical

weapons crisis, observing the respective organizations frames in reference to their governments and political leaders.

E. Political Economy of Al Jazeera, CNN and RT

To adequately understand the context within which Al Jazeera, CNN and RT framed their coverage of the chemical weapon's attack in Syria, it's important to examine and compare the different political economic situations each news organization exists within (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). While each may purport to present balanced and unbiased coverage of international events, media coverage and framing is formed within its specific context based on a variety of factors including ownership, editorial policy and individual agency of journalists and editors (Chomsky & Herman, 2002). As Wasko (2014) explains:

“Even though studies of ownership patterns and the dynamics of corporate control are essential, political economic analysis is much more than merely identifying and then condemning those who control media and communication resources. To understand the media's role in society, it is essential to understand relationships between media power and state power, as well as the media's relationships with other economic sectors. Interrelationships between media and communication industries and sites of power in society are necessary for the complete analysis of communications.”

Therefore, a closer examination of these three news organizations' relationship to power and position in society is important to understand their framing of the chemical weapon's attack

Al Jazeera launched in late 1996 under the slogan, “The opinion and the other opinion.” Initially, many hailed this as a positive step for freedom of speech and democracy in the Arab world (Seib, 2012). However, following the events of September 11, 2001, American leaders began to criticize the news organization, as it took a critical Arab stance

against U.S. leaders' far reaching call to arms against the Middle East and Islam.

Nonetheless, the media outlet has carried forward and expanded its platform immensely since its conception, reaching an increasingly global audience. "Al Jazeera is a relatively free channel operating in what many observers perceive as one of the regions that are less inclined toward freedom of expression," Mohamed Zayani (2005) wrote. Explaining how the existence of the network came about, Zayani explains: "Upon taking power, the Emir of Qatar – who is keen not only on nurturing free speech but also on flirting with democracy – lifted censorship of the media by disbanding the Information Ministry, which was responsible for media censorship."

With the new freedoms afforded by the Qatari royal families' decision, journalists were able to operate under relative autonomy (although, as explained below, critics have argued this autonomy varies based on the issue or news story). The channel quickly made an effort to provide a platform for a wide variety of views to be shared. From social activists to the leaders of extremist organizations, Al Jazeera ensures that Middle Eastern voices are heard by a pan-Arab and global audience. While the channel's funding comes from the royal family, from its inception, it hasn't been afraid to criticize Qatari allies within the region and abroad.

"In fact, some governments have denied Al Jazeera permission to open a bureau or closed its bureaus temporarily. While some Arab states have rebuked the network, others have banned its reporters or refused them visas. Even in Palestine, the Ramallah office of Al Jazeera was closed after Al Jazeera broadcast an unflattering image of Chairman Yasser Arafat in a promotional trailer for a documentary on the 1975-90 Lebanese Civil War, showing a demonstrator holding a pair of shoes over a picture of the Palestinian leader in a sign of contempt, thus silencing a media outlet that had provided extensive coverage for the Palestinian intifada against Israel and has helped put the Palestinian issue on the front burner. Likewise, Arab

states – including so-called moderate governments – have complained to the Qatari foreign minis try about AI Jazeera” (Zayana, 2005, p. 3).

Following the so-called Arab Spring, which is said to have begun in 2011, Al Jazeera began to receive criticism for allegedly biased-coverage of the Arab uprisings and particularly the proceeding and ongoing Syrian conflict (Chalala, 2013), to which this study is most interested. Several journalists resigned from the news organization citing biased anti-regime editorial policies during the Syrian conflict (Kanaan, 2012). As the Qatari government has been supporting rebel groups against the government of Assad throughout the conflict, many have suggested a clear lack of credibility considering Al Jazeera and the rebels are funded from the same source. This criticism has been extended beyond Syria as well and usually has been made from the perspective that Qatar is a Sunni government, opposed to Shiite minority groups and governments in the region. Cables from the U.S. embassy have similarly alleged that Qatar is using the network, in its English, Arabic and other languages, as a tool to wield its foreign policy (Booth, 2010). This was prior to the launch of Al Jazeera America, which was a short-lived endeavor running from August 2013 to April 2016.

Unlike Al Jazeera, CNN is privately owned and unaffiliated with the American government. Launched in 1980, CNN was a brand new concept in the television media landscape, becoming the first 24-hour live news channel in history. Media and business experts were initially skeptical of the model, certain that news would not bring an adequate audience to justify the channels’ existence. However, the experts were wrong and with the help of several major media moments like the explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger in

1986 and then the major catapult effect of the Gulf War in 1991, it became apparent that CNN definitely had an audience and was here to stay, at least for the foreseeable future.

Much has been written on CNN and its relation to the Gulf War, as is the case with American media coverage of the conflict more broadly. However, the unique discussion surrounding CNN relates to the constant live coverage it shared of the conflict and the way in which its journalists carried out their coverage during the conflict. Some have written that CNN journalists became participants in the conflict, as they often related their personal experiences – sometimes live experiences – as an integral part of the events they were covering (Zelizer, 1992). Furthermore, it has been posited that the metanarrative of the Gulf War news coverage became more about CNN and its coverage of the event than the actual conflict.

While the channel is American, CNN is privately owned by Turner Broadcasting System, which is a division of Time Warner (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). While CNN does not officially have direct financial or personal ties to any politicians or political parties, it is an integral part of the American media landscape. Numerous researchers have argued that American news organizations regularly highlight the words and actions of American political elites, choose their frames based on the business interests of their parent companies and even “rally around the president” in times of conflict (Bennet, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007; Alasuutari, Qadir, & Creutz, 2013; Allen, O’Loughlin, Jasperson, & Sullivan, 1994; Lewis & Rose, 2002). Thus, even though CNN is privately owned, researchers have revealed that it (Zelizer, 1992 & Bennet, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007)

– along with U.S. news organizations more broadly – often operates in certain ways that one would associate more with authoritarian regimes than with democracy.

In the context of the Syrian conflict, the U.S. government has long been critical of Assad and his pro-Iranian/anti-Israel government. While President Obama, and many other American political leaders, consistently criticized the Syrian government throughout the duration of the civil war, Obama revealed a reluctance to support rebels militarily. This hesitancy has been credited to the unpopularity of the American invasion of Iraq, which Obama never supported. His initially hesitant also stance reflected the popular stance of the American people according to opinion data. However, during this particular moment, Obama attempted to take a stronger stance, threatening military action and even sending a strong military presence to the region for potential deployment.

Quite different than CNN and even differing greatly from Al Jazeera, RT is state-owned and state-operated. According to Ioffe (2010), RT is often viewed as a direct propaganda arm of Putin’s government and is viewed skeptically by many Western journalists. Founded in 2005, RT was launched under the directive of Putin with the aim of countering the often-negative portrayal of Russia and its policies by Western media. Since its inception, RT has been characterized as a young news channel, featuring young, fresh professionals who bring a new perspective (or at least didn’t argue with the editorial policy of the Kremlin) (Ioffe, 2010). However, while RT has been criticized heavily, Peter Lavelle, the host of RT’s program “CrossTalk”, rightly pointed out, “Are you telling me Murdoch [referring to Rupert Murdoch, a media mogul] doesn’t control the editorial line of his publications? No one can escape who pays for what” (Ioffe, 2010). While Lavelle’s

comment is a clear jab at major American media brands, his point is a merited criticism. Certainly, Putin's government heavily dictates the editorial policies of RT, but is government control of a media outlet a greater crime against journalistic values than billionaires or corporations dictating editorial policies?

In the context of the Syrian conflict, Russia has been the strongest international supporter of Assad and his government (Yan, H., Castillo, M., Shoichet, C., Brumfield, B., & Sterling, J., 2013). Considering the conditions under which RT operates, it is not surprising that the network would frame its coverage from this allied perspective, countering the tone of Western and Gulf media, whose governments supported opposition forces from the start of the war. While there are very valid criticisms to be made of RT and its editorial policies, it's perhaps less easy to argue that RT's editorial policies are somehow more problematic than many prominent Western news organizations that are officially autonomous from direct government interference and yet often avoid taking a critical stance against their governments' foreign policies.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

A. Unit of Analysis

In order to analyze the frames put forward by the international news organizations selected for this study, qualitative textual analysis will be used to examine the articles. Content analysis is a research method that examines the content of the chosen medium. Textual analysis is a type of content analysis that “aims at revealing some hidden and out of sight values, positions, and perspectives” in the analyzed object (Ayish, 2010). Text generally denotes “books, essays, interviews, newspaper articles, and historical documents” (Ayish, 2010). Furthermore, a closer look at content examines the images, layout and placement of information within a text to qualitatively analyze the messages and meanings being conveyed. Additionally, the coverage of RT, CNN and Al Jazeera is comparatively analyzed in the context of each news organizations specific political economic context (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

Online news articles from RT, CNN and Al Jazeera published on the three days directly following the attack (August 21, 22 and 23) and the three days leading up to the international agreement resolving the crisis (September 12, 13 and 14) are the object of analysis for the study. Only news articles with content created by the respective news organizations were analyzed, meaning opinion pieces and any articles taken verbatim from wire services were not included. In total, 12 articles from Al Jazeera, nine articles from CNN and 21 articles from RT were analyzed. The analyzed articles represent the total number published by each news organization on the six dates mentioned above. A small

segment of news coverage was chosen to make this analysis manageable for the purposes of this project, focusing on the beginning and the end to gain a grasp of framing shifts that may have taken place. The study pays particular attention to the text of the articles to better understand the way the news is framed and presented. Analyzed articles were located using the databases on the respective news organizations' websites and in some instance by using Advanced Google searches. Each news organizations' articles were analyzed individually and collectively to understand the overall framing of the chemical weapons attack. While all three news organizations have versions in multiple languages, only English content was examined for the purposes of this study, with the assumption that general editorial policy remains constant across languages. RT, CNN and Al Jazeera were selected as they are comparable platforms – broadcasting on Television and publishing online – and are the among the most internationally recognized media brands of this nature representing their nations. However, while RT and Al Jazeera receive direct state funding – although as explained above, the editorial standards between the two organizations vary greatly – CNN is corporately owned and technically independent from the U.S. government (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This difference was taken into account to examine whether CNN remained more neutral from its country's foreign policy in regards to the chemical weapons crisis as opposed to its international counterparts.

While only the online articles from the beginning and the end of the crisis published by RT, Al Jazeera and CNN were included in the analysis. The coverage by the three news organizations was looked at more broadly in preparation for the analysis as well as coverage by other international media outlets such as BBC, France 24, Press TV and Al

Arabiya. The three selected media organizations were specifically chosen to represent three international perspectives invested in the Syrian conflict as well as broad geo-political perspectives on the conflict; two from the most prominent international players (Russia and the U.S.) involved in the international political discourse surrounding the attack and one representing a regional perspective (Al Jazeera). Although Al Jazeera represented a regional perspective, it's also important to note that Qatar, along with other Gulf nations, maintained a positive relationship with the U.S. (home to an American military base), opposed the Assad government and was reportedly funding various rebels groups leading up to the chemical weapons attack. Al Jazeera is state-funded, as is RT; this immediately throws both company's coverage of the conflict into scrutiny. However, as past research by scholars has revealed (Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Herman & Chomsky, 2002), for-profit private news organizations are equally subject to political economic realities that merit suspicion. At the same time, Al Jazeera has a staff of Arab and foreign editors and journalists that are allowed a measure of editorial freedom and bring their own politics and perspectives to their coverage (Seib, 2008). A similar argument can be made for RT; however the Russian state reportedly exercises a greater direct control over the network's editorial policy (Ioffe, 2010).

B. Analysis Plan

Terms and descriptions used to refer to the main players in the crisis and its resolution were examined closely. The terms used to describe the government of Syria, the various rebel factions and their supporters, Russian leaders and other Syrian allies and American leaders and other anti-Assad leaders were looked at closely to see the positions

the news organizations took towards them. Additionally, the way in which articles were framed was examined closely. For instance, did the article frame the story from an American-centric context or from a Russian-centric context? An American-centric approach would highlight American actions and statements regarding the crisis and vice versa for a Russian-centric context. Even if an Al Jazeera article framed an article from a Russian-centric perspective, was it portraying a negative, positive or neutral perspective of Russia? Beyond simply determining how the coverage was framed or domesticated, the analysis endeavored to see the particular stance that the news organizations were taking towards the issue. Did they take a critical approach to their governments' positions? How did they succeed or fail at presenting a variety of positions and perspectives, allowing the reader to understand the situation more completely? If opinions were shared, were these presented in a positive, negative or neutral way? Looking at the coverage more broadly instead of specifically from the vantage point of one media outlet, did the coverage tend to focus more on the actions of international leaders than the players actually fighting in the Syrian civil war? Furthermore, the analysis looked at what quotes or opinions were given greater salience within the text of the articles. Even if a quote from U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry was the lead, perhaps the rest of the article focused on Assad defending himself against accusations. These were some of the ways of thinking about the way the articles were written to determine how to analyze the coverage by the news organizations. The analysis of the articles examined these particular variables to determine how the three news organizations framed the Syrian chemical weapons crisis, observing their stances within their political economic contexts.

C. Limitations of Research Design

While this study examines media coverage from U.S., Russian and Arab news organizations, only one outlet from each was analyzed. Thus, the analysis cannot be said to broadly represent all U.S., Russian or Arab news organizations. However, it serves as a starting point for understanding the discourse emerging from these three unique vantage points of the Syrian chemical weapons crisis. Furthermore, that analysis only examines articles from the beginning and end of the crisis. A much broader analysis of CNN, RT and Al Jazeera's overall coverage would be required to fully understand the news organizations' overall coverage of the event. However, it is fair to assume that general editorial policy remains somewhat consistent across the various platforms of news organizations such as the ones examined – although variations are not out of the question. Nonetheless, this study falls within the existing format of previous research in its methodological decisions (Connolly-Ahern & Dimitrova, 2007; Alasuutari, Qadir, & Creutz, 2013).

Looking at the Syrian conflict in its broader context, this study only examined one brief moment in the conflict that began in March of 2011 and remains ongoing at the time of writing. A series of broader studies would be necessary and should be conducted to understand how Western, Arab and Eastern media covered the conflict throughout its duration. Certainly, coverage has shifted and changed as political leaders have also reviewed and revised their stances on the conflict. Even in this small study, subtle shifts and changes in political leaders' stances can be noted, which would only increase exponentially if expanded to the war's wider context.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first three sections examine the coverage by Al Jazeera, CNN and RT respectively, approaching the analysis from the angle presented in the methodology. The fourth section presents a comparative analysis of the three news organizations' articles.

A. Analysis of Al Jazeera's News Articles

Although Al Jazeera is a state funded news organization from Qatar, a regional ally of the United States with openly anti-Assad leanings, the organization has long been credited with quality journalism, particularly within the context of the Arab world. While scholars have noted that Al Jazeera is reluctant to directly target the Qatari royal family and often tiptoes around domestic issues, it has often reported news that has even caused tensions between Qatar and its regional allies. This has often been touted as a sign of media freedom and autonomy from official Qatari foreign policy, while Al Jazeera is also generally viewed as an integral part of the government's soft power (Seib, 2012). Al Jazeera can be characterized within the Pluralist Polarized Model put forward by Hallin and Mancini (2004). Within this model, news organizations are characterized by "instrumentalization" by the government, political parties, and industrialists with political ties. While the state plays a significant role in funding and regulating news organizations, its ability to regulate entirely may be limited. As this study looks at Al Jazeera English, it's important to note that the framing of news is geared towards an international audience. Having an international news organization like Al Jazeera serves to heighten Qatar's

position globally. “The network helped to give Qatar prominence which is disproportionate to its size, military power and economic strength,” (Zayani, 2005).

When it comes to the specific news coverage of the chemical weapons attack in Syria, Al Jazeera certainly makes an effort to convey different perspectives on the attack. Throughout the articles analyzed by this study, perspectives from rebel groups, the Syrian government, Western powers (mainly the United States), the Eastern powers (mainly Russia) and the United Nations are readily included in the coverage. Behind the news coverage, there is an apparent journalistic integrity guiding the details included in the articles. At the same time, the salience of certain quotes and information provides insight into the gatekeeping or editorial line of the news organization, one that does not stray far from Qatar’s policy toward the Syrian conflict. Within each article, a more prominent platform is given to rebel groups and the statements of Western leaders that have taken a stance against the Syrian government. These quotes and statements are usually placed higher than quotes from the Syrian government and its allies. Even within the headlines and lead sentences, Al Jazeera’s articles generally set the context from a perspective that targets Assad’s government as the perpetrator of the chemical attack. In reality and facts actually remained unclear and there is significant international debate over the context and perpetrators of the attack. At times, the news coverage even frames statements or actions by international leaders as critical of Assad; when in reality, within context they were made in support of Assad’s government.

The chemical attack is fully presented within an international context. From the outset, headlines and lead sentences highlight the words and actions of the international

community, most prominently the U.S., Russia and the UN. This analysis looks at the four news articles published by Al Jazeera on the three consecutive days following the chemical attack. The first article published was headlined, “UN Security Council discusses Syria attack,” and lead with accusations against the Syrian government voiced by the Syrian opposition in the wake of the attack. Following this article, one titled, “Obama orders Syria 'gas attack' inquiry,” was published, highlighting the pressure the U.S. administration was receiving to act against the Syrian government. The next two articles were titled, “UN chief calls for Syria probe without delay” and “Russia backs UN probe of Syria attack” respectively. Although neither the UN chief or Russia’s government were condemning the Syrian government – in fact, the Russian government was defending the Syrian government – both articles open in a manner that lead the reader to believe the words are directed against Assad. Interestingly, all of these initial articles highlight a different key international player in the conflict: the UN, the U.S. and Russia. Thus, from the outset, the event and the attack are presented as significant on the international stage, elevating the global importance of the chemical attacks, highlighting the importance of this local attack to the international community.

From the outset, Al Jazeera frames the attack from the perspective of rebel groups within Syria. In an article published on Aug. 21, the first eight paragraphs focus on the actions and statements of opposition groups, accusing the Assad government of perpetrating the attack. After all these details are revealed, within the context that the UN is reviewing the evidence and discussing the incident, the article includes a brief statement highlighting the reaction of the Syrian government: “The Syrian armed forces strongly

denied the usage of chemical weapons, and state television said the accusations were fabricated to distract the UN investigators.” Continuing from there, the article goes on to highlight the international communities reaction as well as the opinions of scientists who have viewed the footage of the attacks aftermath. In the final paragraphs of the article, Russia’s skepticism about the attack is mentioned, quoting the foreign minister. Additionally, the end of the article points out that both sides have accused each other of chemical attacks in the past but closes with a statement saying that the U.S. “had conclusive evidence that Bashar al-Assad's regime used such arms against opposition forces.” A similar pattern is continued in Al Jazeera’s other articles published on the first few days following the crisis. An emphasis is placed on the opposition groups’ statements and action, supported by international context and concern surrounding the attack. Brief statements from the Syrian government and Russia, its ally, are included after the oppositions’ position is emphasized. While varying perspectives and information are always included in the initial Al Jazeera reports, there is a clear preference and agenda guiding which perspectives are emphasized to frame the story.

Although these initial articles published by Al Jazeera seem overall to present a critical perspective of the Assad government, seeming to support a strong international response, a subtle shift occurs in the articles published during the three days leading up to the international agreement resolving the crisis. An international frame continues to be utilized, transforming the event into one of international significance and focusing on the key international players, the articles present the possibility of a peaceful international agreement to resolve the crisis in a positive light. While the blame for the attack remains

assigned to the Syrian government, the articles highlight the importance of an international agreement. The coverage focuses on the peace talks and an entire article is devoted to Russian President Vladimir Putin's Op-Ed in *The New York Times*, criticizing American interventionism. Interestingly, this article in particular seems to support Putin's arguments in many ways, suggesting that the journalists and editors at Al Jazeera – and perhaps the Qatari government – are also wary of U.S. intervention in regional countries. After all, Al Jazeera was one of the strongest voices of criticism to the Iraq War, so much so that its journalists were targeted by U.S. attacks (Jamail, 2013).

In a Sept. 14 article explaining that an international agreement had been reached to remove the Syrian government's chemical stockpile, Al Jazeera takes a very straightforward news approach, framing the story through the statements of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, followed by the statements of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. Again, there is a preference for the perspectives of those opposed to Assad versus his supporters, even though both sides are shared. However, more telling, at the end of the article several paragraphs are dedicated to the oppositions' anger towards the deal, quoting General Salim Idris of the Free Syrian Army as saying, "We cannot accept any part of this initiative. The FSA will work towards toppling Assad and does not care about US-Russia deals. I and my brothers in arms will continue to fight until the regime falls." Further background is then given, presenting the Assad government in a negative light and highlighting the U.S. view towards the conflict saying, "The US accuses the Assad regime of killing 1,429 people in a chemical assault in Damascus suburbs on August 21," followed by a brief sentence mentioning the Syrian government's denial of the attack. Again, it is

clear that while Al Jazeera makes an effort to present all the facts, a strong anti-Assad agenda guides the news organization's coverage within this particular moment, as the words and actions of opposition groups and anti-Assad western powers are given greater salience throughout Al Jazeera's reporting.

At the same time, from the outset, Al Jazeera appears to be very careful in the terms it uses when referring to the Syrian parties involved in the conflict. Although the general editorial stance may be against Assad, the news articles are careful to avoid using the word "regime," which could denote a more negative connotation than the word of choice, "government." It seems that Al Jazeera was more flexible when it came to describing the Syrian opposition, alternating between "opposition," a relatively neutral sounding word and "rebels," a word that could be perceived negatively by some. While Al Jazeera conveys an overall bias against the Syrian government, it is apparent from the news articles that an editorial effort has been made to present alternative perspectives and facts in a reasonable manner. Some articles may actually even seem entirely neutral to a casual reader that has not read them within the context of Al Jazeera's other articles about the chemical weapons attack. However, examining the news coverage as a whole reveals an alignment with Qatari foreign policy while also maintaining journalistic standards of presenting various perspectives and including all the relevant details.

B. Analysis of CNN News Articles

Unlike Al Jazeera, CNN is privately owned by Turner Broadcasting System, which is a division of Time Warner, and officially independent from the U.S. government. The news organization falls into the "Liberal Model" as defined by Hallin and Mancini (2004).

Within this model, generally speaking, “political parallelism is low, and internal pluralism predominates” (p. 75). The autonomy of journalists and news organizations is “more likely to be limited by commercial pressures than by political instrumentalization.” To generalize, it could be said that Liberal news organizations “are closer to the world of business.” However, while Liberal news organizations like CNN can be seen to push particular agendas related to corporate interests, this does not discount the agency of individual journalists and editors working for the organization. CNN, conversely to Al Jazeera, addresses a specifically American audience. This means CNN will generally present the news with the average American in mind.

Interestingly, while the Syrian chemical weapon’s attack garnered significant media attention around the world, CNN published relatively few articles about the conflict on its website. Instead of publishing numerous articles covering various aspects of the crisis as other media outlets did, CNN relied on publishing daily long form articles highlighting the significant aspects and international developments. From the outset, CNN couched the crisis from a dramatic perspective of the victims. The first article published by CNN discussing the crisis leads with the following lines:

A camera pans slowly over a row of children partly under a sheet, their eyes closed, their skin looking sallow. A man behind them, crazy with anger, shouts, "Stop lying to us! Stop lying! Where did all these children go? Where is this regime ... that is killing us?"
"Chemical weapons," he screams, holding his head. "We were hit with chemical weapons!"

CNN’s initial reports on the crisis focus on the human suffering caused by the attack and quickly turn to the Syrian opposition and anti-government activists for analysis of the attack. While highlighting the human suffering of the attack focuses important attention on

the victims of the Syrian civil war, civilians, couching this suffering in the context of opposition forces rhetoric politicizes the suffering, transforming the victims into a tool to be used against the Syrian government.

While the initial reports focused on the victims as the leading element, as the international response continues, CNN falls into the mode of tracing the actions and words of political elites, heavily couching them in the context of an anti-Assad frame. Quotes from western leaders and their allies criticizing or condemning Assad are made more salient in the top of the article, while the Syrian government and Russian statements are included only after a list of criticism has been laid out overwhelmingly against them and generally framed with skepticism. For instance, in an article published on August 23, the opening lines frame the news within the context of calls for an investigation by the U.S. and UN into “claims that the Bashar al-Assad government used chemical weapons in an attack on civilians.” The next 16 news paragraphs of the article highlight official statements of representatives from the U.S. and the UN calling for an investigation before mentioning the actions or claims of supporters of the Syrian government. However, even when supporters of the Syrian government are mentioned, they are framed with skepticism. The first mention of support for Assad’s position is:

The reports prompted international outrage, with a U.N. Security Council briefing called late Wednesday to discuss the situation. However, Russia and China -- consistent allies of the Syrian government -- reportedly blocked a formal resolution.

While Russia and China were consistent allies of the Syrian government, this information is given without addressing Assad’s government’s denial of the attack or the reasons why

his allies blocked the resolution. No statements or quotes from the Syrian government or its allies are given to provide further context. This serves to solidify a certain understanding of the conflict. At the same time, statements of Syrian opposition forces and supporters are highlighted with little question or skepticism. By the time the international resolution is reached, the narrative of human suffering becomes buried in the long form articles. Instead, the coverage focuses on the actions and words of President Obama, the United Nations and the high-level Syria talks discussing the crisis. While the human suffering becomes buried, the position of the Syrian opposition becomes even more elevated. On September 13, CNN featured an article based on unverified claims by a Syrian opposition leader that the Syrian government is transferring chemical weapons to Iraq and Lebanon. Titled “Rebel leader: Syria moving its chemical weapons into Iraq, Lebanon,” the article leads with a quote by an opposition leader: “‘Today, we have information that the regime began to move chemical materials and chemical weapons to Lebanon and to Iraq,’ Gen. Salim Idriss said from inside Syria.” This quote is followed by a sentence explaining that CNN cannot independently verify the claim. While it is not necessarily biased to publish news of this nature, the presence of unverified claims like this making CNN headlines opposed to the claims of Russian or Syrian leaders, who made many strong counter claims to the opposition, suggests an editorial preference for the Syrian opposition.

Like Al Jazeera, CNN presents a bias against the Syrian government and support for the Syrian opposition. However, while Al Jazeera makes an effort to share viewpoints from various sides of the crisis in a nuanced manner, CNN seems more willing to bury and discredit the positions of those supporting the Syrian government. At the same time, CNN

strongly follows the words and actions of political elites, while simultaneously utilizing the human victims of the attack as a catalyst to support a political position against the Syrian government. Although the Syrian government merits criticism, CNN neglects to question rhetoric espoused against the government while constantly framing pro-government rhetoric with skeptical disclaimers. This represents a clear bias that makes the careful reader question whether facts are sensationalized or reported in a straightforward manner.

C. Analysis of RT News Articles

Again, differing from both CNN and Al Jazeera, Russia's RT is state-funded and state-run. Although not specifically addressed by Hallin and Mancini's models, Russian media perhaps fits best within the "Pluralist Polarized Model" with some elements of the "Liberal Model." News organizations within the Pluralist Polarized model generally are "marked by a strong focus on political life, external pluralism, and a tradition of commentary-oriented or advocacy journalism persists more strongly" (p. 73). Additionally, "instrumentalization of the media by the government, by political parties, and by industrialists with political ties is common." The state normally plays the role of regulator and funder of the news organizations however, "its capacity to regulate effectively is often limited." While state funding and management presents a clear bias, the question must be posed whether a government controlled bias is worse than one tied up with economic interests, such as the case of CNN and other U.S. media. It's important to note that while RT is Russian, its English language operation is geared specifically toward an international audience. "Russia Today was conceived as a soft-power tool to improve

Russia's image abroad, to counter the anti-Russian bias the Kremlin saw in the Western media," (Ioffe, 2010).

From its first article, RT frames the chemical attack from a skeptical perspective. Publishing multiple articles about the attack per day during the first three days following the attack, it's clear that RT aimed to share as much information about the attack as possible, emphasizing the significance this attack has from the Russian government's perspective. The opening lines of its first article cite "conflicting reports" of the chemical attack and fairly highlighted the discrepancies in numbers and versions of the story surrounding the attack. Whereas CNN immediately appeared to side with the opposition's narrative of the attack, RT calls into question whether the attack itself even occurred. However, interestingly, the first sources quoted regarding the attack come from the Syrian opposition and are critical comments against the Assad government, blaming the attack on Syrian government forces. Following the accusation, a quote from the Syrian government completely denying the attack is placed to contradict the opposition's words.

"He went on to stress that the Syrian government has pledged 'its commitment to full cooperation with the investigation committee and other specialized committees.'

Media reports about Syrian government troops using chemical weapons near Damascus are aimed at misleading international observers, the Syrian ambassador in Russia, Riyadh Haddad told Interfax."

RT, from the outset and continuing throughout its coverage of the attack, gives significantly more salience to words and statements from Syrian government officials as well as to allies of the Syrian government than CNN or Al Jazeera. At the same time, RT readily includes perspectives from western leaders, and tends to include a broader range of international perspectives than either CNN or Al Jazeera.

Following the first article, RT repeatedly cites Russian, Syrian and expert sources that go as far as to call into question whether the attacks even occurred. However, the other argument put forward in framing the articles is that the chemical attack was a well-planned provocation aimed at western powers, just as a UN team of chemical weapons experts has landed to examine previously claims of chemical attacks. While Al Jazeera and CNN virtually ignored this angle in their coverage, RT explores this valid question, one that seems worth asking. Why would President Assad welcome UN experts into his country only to provoke them with a new chemical attack as soon as they arrive? Whether or not Assad and his government were behind the attacks, it at least merits questioning why such a bizarre decision would have been made.

“Reports by ‘biased regional media’ about alleged chemical weapons use near Damascus might be ‘a provocation planned in advance,’ says Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman, Aleksandr Lukashevich.

‘It draws attention to the fact that biased regional media have immediately, as if on command, begun an aggressive information attack, laying all the responsibility on the government,’ Lukashevich said in a statement on Wednesday.”

While RT’s denial of the attacks dissipates as more and more evidence comes in corroborating the reality of the chemical attack, it fades less slowly from questioning the rationale behind Assad committing such an attack. However, much of this questioning is done by reporting on the words and actions of Russian’s political leaders, who of course continued to back President Assad throughout the international attention.

Like CNN and Al Jazeera, RT frames the story within an international framework, highlighting the actions of the UN and the international dialogue that occurred between Russia and the West regarding the conflict. Interestingly, RT makes an effort to give American leaders headlines during its coverage. However, these articles are framed in a

way to negatively represent the United States or a particular leader. One article cites a high-ranking American official who suggests assisting Syrian rebels is a bad idea. Another article covers the words of Senator John McCain, portraying him as a warmonger who turns to military might as a first resort in situations of international conflict. When it comes to Obama's "red line," RT seems to simultaneously promote his distancing himself from this statement as positive while also suggesting it's a point of weakness. However, RT also makes an effort to include multiple perspectives, almost too perfectly checking boxes in its coverage. Is there a quote from the America? Check. Is there a quote from the Syrian opposition? Check. It is clear that RT endeavors to present an image of balance and fairness in its coverage, ensuring that multiple views are shown, while consistently framing these views from a perspective inline with the Russian government.

When turning to examine the articles published by RT on the last three days before the international resolution was agreed upon, it seems that RT has transitioned to suggesting that the U.S. is the aggressor in the situation. The Syrian government has become a victim, caught between opposition forces and Western powers that would see it overthrown. This stands in line with President Putin's famous editorial, calling out America's interventionism and criticizing Obama's comments about American exceptionalism. RT of course wrote about this editorial, while also framing the final international agreement as something that the United States has a burden to hold up. Highlighting the strong words of Secretary of State John Kerry and President Obama, RT seems to suggest that the deal could fail because of America's war mongering tendencies.

"He added that Washington will continue working with the UN, Russia, France, the UK and other international players to 'ensure that this process is verifiable' and that

there will be consequences should the Syrian regime not comply with the framework agreed on Saturday in Geneva.

‘And, if diplomacy fails, the United States remains prepared to act,’ Obama stated.

RT emphasizes the promise by Obama “to act,” if necessary. Interestingly, RT also highlights Obama blaming the Syrian government of carrying out the chemical attack. However, this is couched with the caveat that there is international disagreement surrounding who is to blame.

“Yet again, the US president blamed the Syrian government for the chemical weapons use on August 21 in a Damascus suburb.

While it is not contested that chemical weapons were used, the international community is at odds as to who was behind incident – the Assad government or rebel groups. Both sides have blamed each other.”

This emphasis by RT is valid, as opposing sides have pointed blame at different players. At the same time, this emphasis shows a support for the Syrian government. Although RT initially suggested there was no chemical attack at all, when the evidence came in, this framing shifted to suggest that the origins of the attack are not necessarily clear.

While RT presents alternative perspectives throughout its coverage of this chemical attack, a clear pro-Assad or pro-Russian position is emphasized throughout its coverage. While the statements and actions of Western leaders and Syrian opposition groups are followed and reported, these are always framed within the context of the Russian foreign ministry’s or the Syrian government’s perspective. A shift in explaining the attack can be clearly noted, going from suggesting the attack was fabricated and transitioning to emphasizing that the culprit of the attack is unclear. This framing serves to support the Assad government and the Russian position on the conflict, while still presenting key facts and details.

D. Comparing Al Jazeera, CNN and RT

Although Al Jazeera, CNN and RT all exist and function within different political and economic contexts, they all – to different degrees – conform to their respective nation’s foreign policies when it comes to the Syrian chemical weapon’s attack. Each news organization works to domesticate and frame its coverage from a particular perspective, catered at promoting a particular understanding of the event to its audience (Alasuutari, Qadir, & Creutz, 2013). Furthermore, CNN and RT heavily emphasize the words and actions of their national leaders and also those of their international allies (Connolly-Ahern & Dimitrova, 2007). Although alternative perspectives are presented, these are consistently made less salient or framed from a negative or skeptical context. Al Jazeera does not promote the statements and actions of the Qatari leadership and only briefly mentions responses to the attack from Arab leaders. Instead, it frames the conflict within the context of Western governments and political leaders. At the same time, Al Jazeera shows a greater willingness than CNN to highlight perspectives that support the Syrian government or criticize Obama’s initial approach of promoting a strong international response against the Syrian government. Differences do exist in the framing styles and level of bias within the articles of each news organization, however each news organization conforms to a perspective in line with their government’s position on the Syrian chemical attack.

Of the news organizations, Al Jazeera presents the most nuanced perspective. Although RT also presents different perspectives, these are consistently situated within a Russian-centric context, leading and caveating with a perspective that highlights Russia’s role and perspective. Clearly, Al Jazeera makes the words and actions of those opposed to

the Syrian government more salient within its articles; however, perspectives and information supporting Assad are also shared within the articles in a manner that grants them credibility. Although Al Jazeera has faced criticism for its coverage of the Syrian conflict (Chalala, 2013; Kaanan, 2012), it has traditionally been lauded positively for adhering to high journalist standards (Seib, 2012; Zayani, 2005). No news organization can ever be entirely free from some level of bias (Mosco, 2009). The political economic circumstances that Al Jazeera operates within would suggest that significantly less nuance would be promoted through its coverage of the attack. However, perhaps the autonomy of individual journalists and editors as well as the regional Arab perspective and memories of the recent American invasion of Iraq help provide the news organization this added perspective in its coverage. CNN conversely operates from an American-centric perspective, controlled by economic and corporate interests. Nuance is significantly lacking in the articles presented by CNN, with little effort to identify and represent a diversity of perspectives. Framing consistently comes from a Western-centric approach, with American and UN leaders taking center stage and very minimal effort to include opposing views from the Syrian government or its allies, or even those criticizing the American reaction within the West. RT operates similarly to CNN in this approach, albeit from the opposite side of the spectrum. At the same time, RT does highlight the Western reaction significantly as well, showing a variety of perspectives, while framing the conflict from a Russian perspective and often taking a critical approach to the Western reaction.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed three news organizations – Al Jazeera, CNN and RT – to examine their respective framing of the chemical attack that took place in Syria during August of 2013. It examined the framing of the news within the political economic context of each respective news organization, revealing similarities and differences. In line with previous framing research, this study demonstrated that all three news organizations preferred to frame their coverage within the context of the words and actions of political elites and national and international leaders (Lewis & Rose, 2002; Glazier & Boydston, 2012; Connely-Ahern & Dimitrova, 2007; Kolmer & Semtko, 2009). Additionally, the study aligned with previous research in showing that the news organizations domesticated their coverage and aligned with their nation’s foreign policy (Alasuutari, Qadir, & Creutz, 2013; Melki, 2014). Furthermore, the study explored the political economy of the news organizations and how this played a role in these framing choices. Although Al Jazeera, CNN and RT operate under different ownership and funding models, significant similarities – within their own varying contexts – can be seen in their approach to framing the chemical attack. Using the models put forward by Hallin and Mancini (2004), this study distinguished the different contexts within which the news organizations operate while identifying the similar effects that each model had. At the same time, while each news organization demonstrated an adherence to framing the chemical attack within the context of its nation’s foreign policy, clear differences were also noted. Al Jazeera, CNN and RT all operate under different political economic models, with CNN operating independently

from the state and with Al Jazeera and RT operating under different forms of state control, leading them to frame the attack in unique ways while incorporating varying levels of nuance in their reporting.

CNN, although technically independent of the state, presented the most bias in its coverage, often burying quotes and details – or neglecting to include them altogether – that would support the Syrian government while also presenting skepticism towards those that support President Assad. Although Al Jazeera also framed the chemical attack with an approach that presented the Syrian government in a negative manner, a more balanced approach was taken, ensuring that views and details supportive of Assad’s government were included and made salient – although less so than those of Western powers opposed to the Syrian government. RT presented a strong bias towards Russia’s position on the chemical attack, supporting the Syrian government throughout its coverage. However, it also consistently presented views critical of Assad, albeit tending to couch them with skepticism. These different framing approaches to the chemical attack are not surprising as media coverage and framing are formed within their specific context based on a variety of factors including ownership, editorial policy and the individual agency of journalists and editors (Herman & Chomsky, 2002).

With the political economic reality of news organizations framing choices apparent, it is prudent to understand these biases and ownership models. Understanding these distinctions and biases allows a media consumer to approach a news report with skepticism and to appropriately critique the way in which the story is framed. Particularly with international events like the chemical attack in Syria, it is imperative to read a variety of

international news coverage to gain a better understanding of what has actually taken place. News organizations are always imperfect and biases consistently shine through, regardless of the political economic context. Understanding the decisions by news organizations must be done by examining “relationships between media power and state power, as well as the media’s relationships with other economic sectors” (Wasko, 2014). Beyond understanding these interrelationships, it is imperative for media consumers to recognize the importance of viewing the news from an alternative perspective to better recognize the framing choices made by individual news organizations. As this study clearly revealed, despite the political economic model of the news organizations, they will always fall short of presenting an unbiased understanding of events. It’s not about finding the right news organization that has the best coverage; it’s about understanding the broader range of coverage and the framing realities behind the news being shared. News coverage should always be viewed skeptically and compared to that of other news organizations in order for the media consumer to have a broader range of information to form a proper understanding.

While this study examines one specific moment in the Syrian conflict, it would be interesting and worthwhile for future research to be done on a much broader scope. Further analysis of the coverage by these three news organizations and a deeper look at their political economic realities could shed further light on how the events of the conflict were reported. Additionally, a broader look at further U.S., Russian and Arab media would present an interesting look into the different framing choices and how the story of the Syrian war was told.

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