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News media repertoires and strategic narrative reception:

A paradox of dis/belief in authoritarian Russia

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ABSTRACT: With internet access, citizens in non-democracies are often able to diversify their news media repertoires despite government-imposed restrictions on media freedom. The extent to which they do so depends on motivations and habits of news consumption. This article presents a qualitative study of the motivations and habits underlying news media repertoires among a group of digitally connected university students in authoritarian Russia. Interviews reveal awareness and dissatisfaction vis-a-vis the 'propagandistic' nature of state-controlled news content, resulting in a preference for using multiple different sources - including foreign websites and 'non-official' citizen accounts - to build a personal understanding of what is 'really' going on. The article then examines how the students make sense of conflicting narratives about international affairs which they encounter in state and non-state sources. Paradoxically, low reported consumption of distrusted, 'propagandistic' state television is often accompanied by reproduction of the overarching strategic narrative which state television conveys.

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In non-democratic political systems there tend to be restrictions on the information and opinions that can be communicated via mass media. Indeed, a lack of media pluralism has traditionally been among the criteria by which non-democracies are identified as such. Dahl (1982: 11) declared that citizens in a democracy must have the right to 'seek out alternative sources of information' and alternative sources of information must 'exist and be protected by law'. Countries where alternative, autonomous sources of information are suppressed or absent find themselves, by extension, categorised as 'hybrid', 'semi-consolidated' or 'consolidated' authoritarian regimes (Freedom House, 2015b).

The spread of internet access, however, has radically extended the range of news source options available to the public even in many non-democratic states. Within their own borders, illiberal governments continue to harass journalists and orchestrate the content of state-run news outlets (Reporters Without Borders, 2015). Yet internet access makes it easier for alternative perspectives to circulate and allows individuals to step beyond the confines of their domestic media landscape into a borderless ocean of information where restrictions and censorship are harder to impose. Although there are mechanisms to filter or block 'undesirable' content in some places (Freedom House, 2015a), technical limitations mean that most governments cannot prevent internet connectivity from offering at least the *possibility* of news source diversity. Whether, how and why (not) citizens with internet in non-democracies are *exploiting* and *responding* to this possibility matters greatly for politics and international relations, given that different patterns of news exposure may lead to different impressions of what is happening in the world (Stroud, 2008), with repercussions for political behaviour.

This article presents a study of news consumption among students at a prestigious and relatively liberal university in Russia to explore (a) how digitally connected individuals in an authoritarian media environment form and rationalise their news media repertoires, and (b) how such individuals respond to conflicting narratives they encounter in the media, particularly regarding their country's role in international affairs. The study thus contributes to the literature on news media repertoires (Edgerly, 2015; Hasebrink and Domeyer, 2012; Hasebrink and Popp, 2006) by extending its geographical scope beyond Western democracies, and also to the literature on strategic narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Roselle et al., 2014) by shedding light on the interplay between news media repertoires and

narrative reception. The empirical basis of the paper is a set of semi-structured interviews, in which 20 students from a university in Moscow were invited to describe and explain their approach to acquiring and interpreting news about international developments. The interviews were conducted in autumn 2014, a year when the mainstream Russian media, following Crimea's annexation, were conveying a highly emotive narrative of world events, sharply at odds with the narratives that dominated the mainstream Western media.¹ Although the sample of respondents is not representative of the Russian population as a whole, the studied group has substantive theoretical interest. The participants received Western narratives about events as well as the Kremlin's narrative. Their responses to the conflicting narratives thus provide an important insight into how 'powerful' the Kremlin's narrative is under conditions of news source pluralism and information abundance (conditions which Western policymakers are currently trying to encourage by funding 'alternative' media for Russian-speaking audiences).

A key finding to emerge from the study is that news on state TV channels – the most high-profile disseminators of Russia's strategic narrative – was overwhelmingly consumed 'inadvertently' by the research participants, i.e. consumption was less a matter of deliberate individual choice and more a consequence of the home environment. State channels were considered propagandistic and featured in the students' news media repertoires primarily due to the habits of older family members. The students were far more active in selecting online sources: many of them described attempting to construct a personal understanding of events by reviewing a diverse range of perspectives – often including major international news websites and blogs or forum posts written by informed 'ordinary' people. Trusting in the objectivity of any single source was commonly considered unadvisable. A further striking finding of the study, however, was that consensus about the need for scepticism and variety in news consumption was accompanied by very little divergence from the Russian state's strategic narrative when the students explained Russia's strained relations with the West. Most interviewees paradoxically expressed both distrust and/or distaste towards Russian state television *and* spontaneously reproduced the overarching narrative which Russian state television conveys regarding the causes and optimal solutions of East-West discord. For the literature on strategic narratives, these findings are significant as they underline that

an audience may 'believe' or accept a narrative even while 'disbelieving' or rejecting media sources via which the narrative is forcefully projected.

The article begins with an overview of existing theory relating to the formation of news media repertoires, highlighting its potential to inform recent work within International Relations on the exercise of influence via strategic narratives. The design of the present study is then explained and the main findings presented, before a concluding section discusses their implications, limitations and avenues for future research.

News media repertoires in the digital era

Hasebrink and Domeyer (2012: 758) define a media repertoire as 'the entirety of media' a person uses regularly. However, their concept encapsulates more than the mere sum of various channels, publications, and other products. They describe a media repertoire as a 'meaningfully structured composition' which *holistically* satisfies particular needs within the structures of the user's social context; its components therefore cannot be properly understood in isolation. The conceptual framework of media repertoires places analytical emphasis on patterns of selection (the diversity or variability of selected content) rather than single variables (the likelihood of selecting a specific kind of content) (Hasebrink and Popp, 2006). This is advantageous in the contemporary media environment, where multiplicity and complexity are increasingly an everyday reality for consumers (Yuan, 2011).

A repertoire-oriented approach to studying media consumption emerged in the 1980s, when TV viewers were observed attending to a relatively narrow 'channel repertoire' out of a much broader range of available channel options (Ferguson and Perse, 1993; Heeter, 1985). The term 'information repertoire' was subsequently coined to refer to the set of sources which a person uses to find out about particular topics (Reagan, 1996). Recent work on media repertoires has emphasized how consumers integrate content from multiple platforms, brands and genres into their routine media diet (Swart et al., 2016; Taneja et al., 2012; Yuan, 2011). A central concern has been to explain why certain combinations of media are used ahead of other possible combinations. The present study adopts the term 'news media repertoire', since the focus here is on combinations of media outlets used to obtain news about current affairs. Moreover, this study approaches news media repertoires as being constituted by specific named sources (particular websites, particular TV

programmes and so on). Other researchers have sometimes taken a less finely-grained view, breaking repertoires down into general platform and genre categories such as 'email', 'web search' and 'television viewing' (Taneja et al., 2012; Yuan, 2011).

The media repertoires literature builds on theories of media choice, including selective exposure and the uses and gratifications tradition (Blumler and Katz, 1974; Papacharissi, 2008; Stroud, 2008). The latter are premised on an active audience making rational decisions about media consumption in the desire for information, affirmation, entertainment, social interaction or other rewards. Explanations of media repertoires have therefore tended to highlight individual motivations for accessing particular content via a particular set of platforms. Motivations may in turn be associated with individual demographic or psychological variables (education, age, need for cognition, etc.) that are known to affect media preferences (Das et al., 2003; Kraaykamp and Eijck, 2005; Poindexter and McCombs, 2001; Sears and Freedman, 1967). Swart, Peters and Broersma (2016) identify civic duty, compulsion, and monitoring events for security as motivations associated with different repertoires among Dutch media consumers. Schrøder (2015) and Schrøder and Larsen (2010) argue that 'public connection' (Couldry et al., 2007) and participatory affordances are central to different media's 'perceived worthwhileness', which consumers assess in the process of forming their repertoires.

A much discussed issue is whether, or to what degree, aversion to cognitive dissonance and a preference for cognitive consonance motivate the selection of homogeneous news media repertoires, contributing to a so-called 'echo chamber' or 'filter bubble' effect that is then amplified online by personalised content algorithms (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008; Festinger, 1957; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001). Some evidence exists for this kind of selectivity, but the picture is not clear-cut. Best and colleagues (2005) found that critical views of the Bush administration positively predicted use of foreign online sources (carrying critical perspectives) during the Iraq war. A more recent study (Flaxman et al., 2016) established that Americans who predominantly visit 'left-leaning' news outlets only rarely read substantive news articles from conservative sites (vice versa for 'right-leaning' readers). However, that same study observed that most online news consumption in the USA is driven by individuals visiting the websites of 'mainstream' news organizations, which often profess to be non-partisan and carry a mix of views. Meanwhile Garrett (2009a; 2009b)

asserts that Americans are not sacrificing contact with other opinions even though they do use the internet to increase their exposure to 'congenial' content.

Although most studies treat the audience as active agents in media selection, it is also recognised that routinized media repertoires can persist long after the motives which contributed to their initial compilation have lost relevance. The embeddedness of news consumption habits in everyday life makes them hard to break. Consequently, an individual may consider a news source 'too negative', 'too boring', 'too expensive', 'too complicated' or 'unreliable' – and yet still keep using it (Swart et al., 2016). Motivational factors are expected to operate in conjunction with situational, structural and environmental factors (Webster, 2009), which are sometimes found to outweigh the former as determinants of media use. Thus, Trilling and Schoenbach (2013) observe that region of residence is among the most powerful predictors of Austrians' media repertoires – more powerful than personal attitudes and psychological traits. In a study of the Dutch audience, political interest – a motivational factor – was found to account for very little variation in individuals' TV news viewing (Wonneberger et al., 2011). Watching preceding or subsequent programmes on the same channel and watching TV in company – situational factors – were much more significant. Time available for media consumption affects the breadth and content of a person's media repertoire, as do 'situational fit', ease of access to different sources and awareness of alternatives (Wonneberger et al., 2009). Thus, structural constraints can moderate individual selectivity and intentional exposure. Some elements of a repertoire may even be determined by environmental factors alone, with no real selectivity at all – such as broadcasts playing in a regularly frequented public place or shared space that cannot be avoided.

Normatively speaking, broad and diverse news media repertoires are usually treated as preferable to narrow and homogeneous ones on the basis that exposure to multiple perspectives makes for better informed citizens and hence more optimal decision-making. How, though, should breadth and diversity be gauged? Most existing studies are concerned with left-wing/right-wing, liberal/conservative or Democratic/Republican dichotomies, reflecting the literature's Western-centricity. In non-democratic media environments, a much more salient dividing line tends to run between outlets that are controlled by (or aligned with) the state and those that are independent of state control (Leung and Lee,

2014). In countries such as Russia which face regular Western criticism for their authoritarian proclivities, this divide has an important geopolitical dimension: the state-controlled media convey negative messages about critical Western states, while more positive or neutral portrayals of the West are found among the independent (including foreign-funded or foreign-based) alternatives. This makes media repertoires highly relevant to the study of strategic narratives.

Strategic narratives and their reception

The concept of strategic narrative is the foundation of an analytical framework for studying how influence operates through mass communication in international affairs (Miskimmon et al., 2013; Roselle et al., 2014). A narrative can be understood as the accentuation and emplotment of particular problems or turning points in a way that indicates both causation and a normatively desirable resolution. A narrative may span any number of stories and issues (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014), but it always emphasizes certain aspects of reality while omitting others (Subotić, 2015; Somers and Gibson, 1994), ‘fuses “is” and “ought”’ (Snyder, 2015), and thereby directs its audience towards the narrator’s vision of a better future. The political process is essentially one of constant, competitive narration: each side strategically projects its own value- and often emotion-laden account of the problems that matter most, what caused them and how they should be solved, with the aim of persuading others to the same view.¹ For national governments, target audiences are located both at home and abroad. The substantial state funds spent on diplomacy, public diplomacy, international broadcasting and ‘soft power’ initiatives all testify to a consensus around Nye’s (2010: 8) assertion that foreign policy success depends on ‘whose story wins’. Narratives are scaffolding for human cognition (White, 1980; Patterson and Monroe, 1998), not only regarding the conscious appraisal of different arguments, but also the subconscious, longer-term formation of interests and collective identities (Somers, 1994). Therefore, dual rewards are at stake in the projection of a strategic narrative: it can *convince* interlocutors into taking a particular course of action, while at the same time working to *constitute* and *constrain* how those interlocutors imagine themselves and the international system (Miskimmon et al., 2013).

¹ In a sense, this idea of narration combines the ideas of agenda-setting and framing.

Key to the effectiveness and 'power' of a strategic narrative is its reception among elites and broader publics. Yet the process of strategic narrative reception is generally less accessible and hence less often studied than the processes and instruments involved in narrative formation and projection. Commentators all too often appear to assume a straightforward relationship between the amount of money spent on projecting a strategic narrative and the impact of that narrative on audiences. For example, headlines accuse Russia of 'influencing European elections' through its funding of propaganda, without presenting any solid evidence about consumption of the said propaganda or public reactions to it (Applebaum, 2016). Think-tanks and analysts raise alarm about the West 'losing the information war' to Russia by citing the 'hundreds of millions of dollars' which the Kremlin is spending, then advise Western governments to spend more money on pushing alternative messages in response (Pomerantsev, 2015; Giles, 2016). Meanwhile, discussion of target audiences is negligible. The considerable heterogeneity and individual agency of news consumers regarding what they watch, read and believe are barely acknowledged, let alone investigated for their relevance to strategic narrative impact.

Introducing the concept of media repertoire to the study of strategic narrative reception is helpful in several ways. First, it offers an approach to differentiating between audiences which corresponds to the reality of the contemporary media environment. Rather than breaking down audiences of strategic narratives along the usual geographic lines ('the Russian audience', 'Western audiences', 'the audience in Donbas'), a media-repertoire approach recognises that non-geographic categories (e.g. online/offline) may be equally pertinent to issues of exposure and response. Similarly, a media-repertoire approach treats audiences of strategic narratives differentially with regard to the range of media they consume: reception is likely to be a different kind of process among those who are highly dependent on a single source vs. those who use various numbers and types of other sources on a regular basis (Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, 1976).

The theory associated with media repertoires also provides a guide to questions which merit investigation vis-à-vis strategic narrative reception among mass audiences. If structural and motivational factors together account for an individual's media repertoire, which of these factors explain exposure to particular strategic narratives? If variation between repertoires is explained partly by different motivations, what motivates a media user to include in or

exclude from his repertoire sources associated with different strategic narratives? Do the narratives themselves influence which source(s) get selected, in line with the selective exposure hypothesis? Moving from exposure to response, to what extent does variation in media repertoire correspond to variation in the acceptance/rejection of a strategic narrative? The following, empirical part of this article addresses these questions to the extent that the chosen case study allows.

Methods and data

Media repertoires can be and have been understood as patterns of behaviour, to be operationalised, measured and explained in statistical models. Yet media repertoires are also meaningful social practices which ‘make sense to the user’ and can be explained from the user’s own perspective (Hasebrink and Domeyer, 2012). The present study adopts the latter, user-centric, approach and aims to reveal the ‘logic’ behind media repertoires in participants’ own terms. The study is small-*n* and exploratory in nature; it is not a firm base for generalizations about the Russian population as a whole. However, it does generate original insights into the news-navigation and sense-making experiences of one particular audience group, whose media environment is both authoritarian (domestically) and almost infinitely multifarious (online).

Interviews were conducted in September and October 2014 among second-year students at Moscow’s Higher School of Economics (HSE). HSE is one of Russia’s most prestigious universities, specializing in economics, social sciences, mathematics and computer science. It is considered more liberal than other Russian universities and has partnerships with institutions in the West. It was chosen as a site for the study because its students all enjoy diversity of choice in where to obtain news, as internet access and reasonable proficiency in English are more or less universal. Importantly, HSE was also willing to grant access for the study to be conducted (other institutions were approached, but refused). The participants in this study should not be considered ‘average’ Russians – they come from the more privileged, urban and educated end of society, more likely to have travelled and to have had other kinds of contact with foreigners. Yet these characteristics make the students a group of heightened substantive interest. Not only do they have greater than average chances of occupying positions of influence in future (Mickiewicz, 2014), they are also ideal as a case

study for looking at audience reaction to narrative 'clash'. The socio-demographic profile of HSE students suggests that they should have greater awareness of and ability to use foreign media than the vast majority of their compatriots, and thus a greater likelihood of encountering narratives about international affairs which contradict the dominant domestic (Kremlin-endorsed) narrative. The question of which narrative 'prevails' in such circumstances is important.

The students' news media use and support for the Russian state's narrative about the West were initially investigated via a self-administered survey ($n = 452$), the results of which are reported elsewhere (*insert citation post-review*).² After completing the survey questionnaire, the students were asked if they would be willing to discuss their media use and views of international politics with the researcher – either individually or together with a course-mate of their choosing. Most of the interviews were conducted in Russian, although three were in English at the students' request (they were keen to practice their language skills). In total 20 students were interviewed, although one interview has been discarded from the analysis due to poor recording quality. The interviews lasted around 30 to 40 minutes and each student was asked the same set of open-ended questions:

- How do you assess the current state of relations between Russia and the West?
- How did relations between Russia and the West reach this state?
- Which actions should be taken, by which side(s), to improve relations between Russia and the West?
- How do you follow news about international relations and how do you assess the quality of coverage in the media you use?
- How do you decide where to get news from and what to believe?

The first three questions were intended to prompt the students into vocalising their own narratives of Russia's strained relations with the West. The two latter questions were intended to elicit the students' news media repertoires and influences within their social context which regulate exposure to particular sources. The transcripts and notes from the interviews were coded manually by the researcher using Atlas.ti. Coding focused first on emerging themes and patterns in the students' accounts of how they encountered news,

and then on the causally interlinked problems and favoured resolutions that constituted the students' own narratives of Russia's strained relations with the West.

The causally interlinked problems and favoured resolutions emplotted in the students' narratives were then compared against the corresponding elements of the Russian government's strategic narrative about tensions with the West. This government narrative was identified through methodical qualitative analysis of the leading weekly news programme on Russian state television (*Vesti Nedeli*), as well as statements by President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, in the months preceding the study (June and July 2014). Further details of this analysis and the narrative itself are reported elsewhere (*insert citation post-review*). Figure 1 below summarises the state's strategic narrative in terms of its basic structure.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

As Figure 1 illustrates, the Russian state's narrative of tensions with the West follows a plot of causality that is rooted in the characterization of the USA as craving global dominance, driven by a sense of (unjustified) American exceptionalism. The USA's sense of exceptionalism leads to hypocrisy on Washington's part – 'double standards', whereby it criticises other countries for transgressing rules and norms while ignoring the same rules and norms itself. It also leads to American foreign policy being formulated and implemented unilaterally – without consultation or regard for the views and interests of others – and to strong opposition whenever a challenger to American dominance (such as Russia) emerges.

European states are characterized as lacking the strength necessary to resist the USA in policy matters (even when it would be in their interests to do so); hence any Western consensus reflects American power rather than a truly shared stance. All the above results in excessive intervention by the West in the affairs of other states – intervention that violates norms and rules, puts American interests above the common good, and causes great damage (instability) because it is not informed by the wisdom of the non-Western world. This plot points to Russia's desired ends in international politics: a reduction in US/Western foreign interventionism (particularly in parts of the world where Russian interests are at stake, such as Ukraine), a greater voice/veto for Russia and other (likeminded) non-Western countries in international decision-making, and weaker alignment

between Europe and the USA – which would make space for more ‘pragmatic’, profitable economic cooperation between Europe and Russia.

To assess alignment between the Russian state’s strategic narrative and the students’ own spontaneous narratives of East-West tensions, each interview transcript was analysed for the presence/absence of each boxed element from Figure 1. The findings are reported below, after findings about the habits and motivations which shaped the students’ news media repertoires.

Explaining news media repertoires and strategic narrative exposure

State TV channels (most notably *Pervyy Kanal*, *Rossiya 1*, *Rossiya 24* and *NTV*) are the Russian leadership’s principal domestic narrative-projection tools; their editorial policy is closely overseen by Kremlin officials (Loshak, 2015; Sidorov, 2015). One of the most striking findings to emerge from the interviews was that hardly any of the students reported watching these channels as part of a deliberate, active search for information. Rather, those who mentioned television as a news source described their viewing as something almost inadvertent – a product of their habits and family environment. One student (P6), for example said:

‘Our television can be switched off straight away – it’s complete hot air [*eto voobshche ne o chem*]. But nevertheless, a Russian family comes [home] and switches on the television, right? ... Although our generation less so. It also watches, but it’s very hard to believe all that stuff.’

Parental habits are influential. In Moscow it is common for several generations to live together in relatively small apartments where living rooms double up as bedrooms. Therefore, if the parents or grandparents are regular TV viewers, their young adult offspring are unlikely to live completely TV-free lives. One student (P8) made clear that her TV viewing – and news consumption more generally – depended heavily on her parents:

‘If I’m honest, I don’t particularly follow the situation in the world, I’m more interested in my own life, so I can’t say that I make any kind of special selection [of news sources]. But sometimes my parents turn on the TV in the evening – I listen to what’s happened. And that’s all.’

None of the interviewees indicated that they took TV news reports at face value. Levels of reported scepticism were high – and were sometimes contrasted against the apparent credulity of older generations. Thus, one student (P2) said: ‘I very, very rarely watch TV. My parents are constantly watching the first channel [*Pervyy Kanal*] and the second [*Rossiya 1*], but I am sceptical towards it.’ Another said that federal television was ‘complete bullshit [*fuflo*]’ (P6) but that his parents and grandparents’ generation ‘believed in it a bit’. The same interviewee (P6) admitted that he himself watched TV sometimes – ‘I can’t say that I don’t watch it – I do watch it’. But he emphasized his attempts to ‘filter’ what he saw and to ‘think what might be true in all that’.

The interviewees did highlight qualitative differences between TV channels and programmes. One of the only students who watched state TV deliberately (P1) liked the discussion show hosted by Vladimir Pozner on *Pervyy Kanal*. Pozner is a high-profile presenter who grew up in the USA before returning to work on Soviet television.

‘Mum and I sit and watch it [Pozner’s show] every Monday. It’s like a breath of fresh air. Because everything else on Russian TV doesn’t allow any opportunity to think.’

Non-state channels such as *Euronews* (the Russian-language version of the pan-European news channel) and *Dozhd* (a privately funded news channel) were also mentioned by a number of interviewees as ‘serious’ (P3) or ‘authoritative’ (P12, P14). These channels were considered somewhat less tendentious in their reporting than the state channels, although one user observed that *Dozhd* also had ‘a certain orientation [*napravlennost*]’ (P14) and *Euronews* was criticized for paying insufficient attention to Ukraine (P12). A couple of students recalled using foreign TV channels from time to time, but their very different take on events evoked confusion. ‘On my television, *CNN* and *Russia Today* are back to back. When I turn them on, I watch and I get the sense that I’m watching TV from different planets,’ one student said (P9). Another student who occasionally watched American shows said it was ‘completely obvious’ they were tendentious (*zaangazhirovano*) and ‘propaganda for the most part’ (P10).

The internet was the students’ primary platform for accessing news. Their explanations for preferring the internet varied. Some found it to be less afflicted by the ‘hysterics, propaganda... subjectivism and ideology’ (P5) they saw on television. ‘When every channel is

saying the same thing, as a person who is educated and well brought up in a certain sense, it just becomes unpleasant and you turn to the internet,' one said (P14). For others it was more a matter of convenience. One noted: 'I simply don't like watching TV. So it's easier for me, when I'm travelling by metro, it's easier for me to read news on the internet' (P9).

The students described varying approaches to navigating a path through the multitude of sources available online. A substantial proportion of those interviewed named one or several established news outlets which they liked or trusted enough to use on a regular basis. The sites of business-oriented dailies *Vedomosti* (P1) and *Kommersant* (P2, P3) were mentioned in this regard, as were RBC.ru (P1, P2, P3), Slon.ru (P1), the-village.ru (P3, P4), NovayaGazeta.ru (P3, P15), Meduza.io (P13, P14), Snob.ru (P12) and RIA.ru (P9, P15).² Loyalty to a particular news organization was not expressed by all the interviewees, however. Some spoke of relying on search engines and aggregator sites such as Yandex (P2) and Yahoo (P6), or their social media news feeds (P3, P4, P10, P18) and Twitter (P3, P14), to provide them with headlines and articles from a wide range of sources. Visiting sources beyond the boundaries of professional journalism – such as blogs (P8, P9, P20) or forums (P9, P17, P18, P19) – also constituted an important element of the news repertoire for some.

A normative preference for constructing one's own understanding of events based on a range of sources, especially non-official 'citizen' reports, came through strongly in almost all the interviews. Upon seeing dubious or contentious news on TV, one student (P8) said she used the internet to 'confirm or refute' the claims made:

'For example, when the Boeing [MH17] crashed [in Eastern Ukraine], many people said it was shot down by Russian forces. Many people said it was the Ukrainians... And then I read various blogs on the internet, analysed the opinions that were put forward by the Ukrainian side and our side, and it seems to me the Ukrainian side is more likely to be the guilty party, after all.'

Another student (P14) praised Twitter, in particular, for offering easy access to diverse viewpoints:

² Of these, only RIA is state-owned; the rest are privately or commercially funded.

‘I think Twitter is good because I have subscribed to a certain group of people who represent different opinions... It’s like I can understand their position, then compare their position, roughly speaking, with the next tweet which another person has posted.’

Individuals providing ‘first-hand’ accounts from the scene of news events were considered especially valuable information sources. One student (P9), for example, said:

‘The main resource, after all, is private commenting and communication on the internet and forums – first-hand information. I think it’s more correct [*gramotno*] to get a video from the scene of events, for example.’

Another student said he was provided with news about Ukraine by a friend in Donbas who was at the ‘heart of events’ (P19), while two others highlighted forums or blogs where they could learn about Ukrainian developments from individuals who apparently had direct connections to what was happening on the ground. A blog (Colonelcassad.livejournal.com) ‘led by a communist from Sevastopol, not linked to the Party’ (P18) was one such source; another was described as ‘a forum where there were representatives from approximately 60 countries, mostly Russian-speakers’, who had moved abroad but still had relatives in Ukraine. The student (P17) who used this forum said its participants had shared their impressions

‘of what happened after their relatives [in Ukraine] went to rallies... impressions with confirmatory information, quite well-founded, quite confirmed, about some kind of psychotropic element being in the tea and food which they gave out.’

This comment about ‘psychotropic elements’ has the ring of a conspiracy theory; unverifiable rumours spread easily via online forums. Nevertheless, such non-official sources were highlighted by one student (P16) as more reliable than official ones with regard to analysis and interpretation of events – because ‘official’ media are more inclined to serve state interests, whichever side they are on. The student said he was unlikely to read analysis from ‘official’ media, whether Russian or Western:

‘They can’t intersect, so I prefer opinions, I read bloggers, the ones I think more or less have a grasp of the political situation, the foreign affairs situation, and I try to superimpose some kind of view of my own on what I know of the official facts.’

Interestingly, roughly half of the interviewed students included English-language or other non-Russian news websites among their repertoires, at least from time to time. These included the *Guardian* (P5), *Vice News* (P10), the *Washington Post* and the *Economist* (P13), *Foreign Policy* and the BBC (P14), the *New York Times* and the *Daily Mail* (P18) and even ‘Ukrainian media... for the sake of interest’ (P16). Using foreign media tended to reflect the students’ belief that an accurate picture of developments could only be constructed autonomously by reviewing diverse viewpoints with a sceptical eye. As one interviewee (P6) put it,

‘I make my own news. I look here and I look there and there... Add it up and divide by two. That’s how it is done.’

Another described his approach as the ‘comparison’ (*sopostavleniye*) of ideologically opposite sources – such as US-funded Radio Svoboda vs. Russian state television. However, he was not confident in the conclusions he could draw from such comparisons, noting that ‘one has to listen for quite a long time to understand where the information is correct or not; not just a month or two must pass, but a whole year even... it’s rather difficult’ (P15). Moreover, interest in foreign media reporting was not universal. One student said she tried to ‘brush aside’ (*otmetat*) English language news with which she disagreed because she had her own ‘subjective opinion’ and ‘of course tried to avoid negative things’ which she considered incorrect (P9).

Overall, a repertoire-based analytical approach is clearly appropriate for this audience. The majority of the students explained their news source selection *with reference to other news sources*; thus the composition of their news media repertoires is best explained holistically. In line with existing theory, structural and motivational factors can be observed behind the formation of their repertoires. Distaste for a ‘hysterical’, ‘propagandistic’ *style* of news presentation motivated the students to selectively avoid certain outlets, although avoidance was mitigated by the influence of older family members. However, most of the students were *not* motivated to selectively avoid dissonant narratives. On the contrary, they actively

sought out contradictory perspectives in their attempt to construct their own understandings of events – which are discussed in the following section.

Narrative responses

Given their heterogeneous news media repertoires and scepticism about state television, one might have expected divergence between these students' views of international affairs and the narrative promoted by the Russian government. In fact, however, there was considerable alignment.

Table 1 illustrates how many of the students emplotted core elements from the state's strategic narrative (identified in Figure 1) into their own spontaneous narratives when asked to explain Russia-West tensions and how relations might be improved.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

The students' narratives were far less coherent and comprehensive than the strategically formulated state narrative; they intertwined certain elements from the state's narrative with other ideas (some compatible, some contradictory) plus doubts and hesitations. Nevertheless, the state's narrative echoed with varying degrees of strength and clarity in all but five (P5, P7, P14, P15, P17) of the interviewees' contributions.

Thus, tensions between Russia and the West were attributed to American or Western 'aggression' (P12, P16) and relatedly to NATO's eastward expansion (P2, P3). There were frequent references to the 'inevitable' or 'continuous' (P6, P11, P15) dynamics of rivalry between Russia and the US-led West, with the latter viewed as unwilling to 'share the world' (P4) or 'accept Russia's independence' (P18) and 'resistant' to Russia defending its interests (P10). The West was described as 'forgetting that it doesn't know everything' (P1), 'imposing its values (P16), and interfering in the affairs of other countries with 'catastrophic consequences' (P1). As per the state's strategic narrative, the students saw Europe as 'dictated to' (P9) or 'pressured by' (P6) the USA, which 'uses' Europe in its 'attempts to occupy the super-position, so that no one can argue with any of its decisions' (P13).

Roughly half the students proposed resolutions to the tensions which mapped onto desired resolutions from the state's narrative. There were calls for the West or the USA to 'be less

involved in matters which concern Russia' (P2), to 'try not to influence everything that happens in the world' (P4), to set up 'some kind of council' for dialogue with the BRIC countries (P8), to 'accept equal rules for all' (P18), 'to change their double standards' (P9) and to continue economic cooperation that is divorced from politics (P2) because it is 'very beneficial for Europe' (P3). Even when the students' resolutions did not map directly onto the state's strategic resolutions, they tended to be compatible: generic proposals such as 'more meetings between leaders' (P12), both sides 'searching for compromises' (P9, P13, P19) and 'gathering around a table' (P10, P14) were quite common. One student suggested that there would need to be an 'outright winner' for the tensions to disappear (P15).

Only five students vocalised narratives which directly clashed with that of the state, echoing narratives found in the mainstream Western media. Participant P5 attributed tensions to the fact that 'no other countries have infringed international law like Russia' and thought Russia should 'change its position'. For participant P7, tensions were due to 'people in Ukraine wanting to go with Europe, not Russia', which the Russian government 'did not like'; her proposed resolution was for Russia to 'stop screaming about the United States' and 'allow Ukraine to choose for itself'. Participant P14 acknowledged that Russia was a 'direct participant' in the Ukraine conflict and felt that the government should 'end that bloody war' if it 'didn't have a plan', while participant P17 proposed 'returning Crimea' to Ukraine. Finally, P16 also saw the solution in Russia 'leaving Ukraine' – but only because it 'could not win' as it was 'too dependent on the West'.

The study thus observed support for the Russian state's strategic narrative about international affairs among an audience which described Russian state media as 'propagandistic' (P10, P16, P18), 'one-sided' (P8, P19), 'unprofessional' (P13), 'untrue' (P6, P9), hard to believe or trust (P2) or otherwise 'terrible' (P12), with many (P2, P4, P9, P10, P12, P15, P18) claiming to rarely or never watch television. These findings constitute something of a challenge to the axiom that authoritarian governments direct public opinion *thanks* to the messages spread by their powerful and loyal TV channels; among this (admittedly small) audience, the Russian government appears to have secured support for its narrative *despite* the content of its channels, which participants avoided and dismissed as untrustworthy.

Discussion

The findings presented above raise almost as many questions as they answer. First, given the limited scope of the study, one might ask whether the observed dynamics of news media repertoire formation and the paradox of ‘believing the message while disbelieving the messenger’ are widespread phenomena, or unique to the distinctive participant cohort of HSE students. Additional research with larger, more diverse participant samples would be required to explore this issue.

Existing public opinion polls already hint that similar patterns of dis/belief might be present among the wider Russian population. In 2014 almost 70 per cent of Russian citizens acknowledged that their main TV channels were censored (Levada-Tsentr, 2014a). Yet polls show similarly large majorities backing state television’s interpretations of international events, such as Western criticism of Russian actions in Ukraine being due to a desire to ‘pressurize Russia and weaken Russian influence in the world’ (Levada-Tsentr, 2014b).

Around half of the Russian population still gets its news exclusively from TV, but this figure is declining. Internet penetration in Russia is estimated to have risen from just 29 per cent in 2009 to around 71 per cent at the end of 2014 (Freedom House, 2015a). More than half of internet users are under the age of 35. Far from every internet user accesses news online. In fact, Levada Centre data suggests that only 20–25 per cent of Russians do so, while television remains the ‘main’ news source for roughly 85 per cent of the Russian population – a figure that has changed little in the last seven years (Volkov 2016b). Nevertheless, the number of Russians with multiple sources in their news media repertoires is growing, especially in the most politically influential large cities. Volkov and Goncharov (2014) say a third of Moscow residents access online news regularly. So far they observe few differences in the political preferences of these online news consumers relative to offline Russians. Yet as with the HSE students, it seems inadequate to attribute the views of digitally connected Russians entirely to the direct, hypnotic effect of state television, when state television is not particularly trusted and alternative sources are being used.

What, then, might explain the ‘power’ or resonance of Russia’s strategic narrative about international affairs among diverse domestic audiences, even those who distrust state media and turn to alternative sources? There is likely to be some *indirect* influence from

state television, which probably shapes ‘eyewitness’ discourse on the forums and blogs that certain individuals trust more than ‘official’ sources. The government also reportedly spreads its narrative in online discussions covertly through bots and paid ‘trolls’ (Rezunkov, 2015), and there are many Russian news websites which are aligned with the state without being obviously controlled or owned by it. Sentiments of patriotism and national pride may give the state’s narrative greater appeal than competing alternatives, in which Russia is characterized negatively. Finally, part of the explanation may lie in long-term public discourse. Volkov (2016a) writes that as early as May 1998 around 75 per cent of Russians believed America was trying to weaken Russia, with 51 per cent saying that America was unceremoniously interfering in the affairs of other countries. He has observed (Volkov, 2015):

‘By the moment Putin arrived as president at the start of 2000, the USA’s image had already acquired its familiar characteristics without the help of the daily TV propaganda to which we now readily attribute its appearance.’

The Russian state’s current strategic narrative draws heavily on narratives or themes that have been circulating and resonating widely in Russian society for decades. The present alignment between the state’s strategic narrative and the views of so many Russian citizens, including the students who contributed to this study, may owe much to experiences, memories, imaginations and fantasies accumulated individually and collectively over the long term (Pilkington et al., 2002), not only through news media but also school, family, peer groups and popular culture.

It may seem odd to urge further research on news media repertoires and strategic narrative reception, having just found that variety in the former does not guarantee much variation in the outcome of the latter. However, it would be worth collecting more detailed, accurate data on news media repertoires in a range of authoritarian contexts, as there may still be a relationship between repertoire breadth/content and narrative reception outcome which the present study could not uncover. The interview method used here was only able to capture one snapshot in time, and it is possible that participants may have ‘self-censored’ to some degree to give socially acceptable responses. A broader range of methods should therefore be employed to cover a more extended period – diaries and panel studies, for

example, could be productive. Finally, there is a strong case for arguing that variation in media repertoires affects the sense-making processes behind narrative reception, if not always outcomes. Sense-making among the digitally connected individuals studied here did not match the model of credulity and easy 'brainwashing' which is often ascribed to audiences in non-democracies. Further exploration of these sense-making processes among different audiences, with different media repertoires, would therefore be valuable, and could greatly contribute to understanding how influence works (or fails to work) through strategic narratives in international affairs.

Notes

¹ Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014, after supporting a rushed and flawed referendum that did not allow Crimean voters to keep the status quo. The annexation followed the ousting from power of Ukraine's President Viktor Yanukovich. Russian leaders claim the mass protests which toppled Yanukovich were orchestrated by Western governments. Russia's annexation of Crimea and its support for the separatist movement in Ukraine's Donbas region were strongly condemned by the United States and the EU, which imposed sanctions as their relations with Moscow deteriorated to the worst state seen since the end of the Cold War.

² The results of the survey were in line with the results from the individual interviews. More than half the students who participated in the survey reported using at least one 'alternative' news source which regularly conveys narratives at odds with the Russian state's narrative (specifically, the TV channel *Dozhd*, the radio station *Ekho Moskvy*, the websites *slon.ru*, *snob.ru*, *grani.ru*, and BBC Russian, and the newspapers *Vedomosti* and *Novaya Gazeta*). At the same time, most of the students expressed more agreement than disagreement with Russian state's strategic narrative, as measured by a series of Likert items. Regression analysis of the survey results indicated that students who used no state-aligned media were inclined to express less strong agreement with the Russian strategic narrative than users of state-aligned media – but overall they still agreed with it more than disagreed. Use vs. non-use of the 'alternative' sources had only a small statistical effect on support for the state's strategic narrative.

Interviews

P1 – Male student, Moscow, 16 October 2014

P2 – Female student, Moscow, 17 October 2014

P3 – Female student, Moscow, 17 October 2014

P4 – Male student studying PR and Communication, Moscow, 17 October 2014

P5 – Male student studying History, 17 October 2014

P6 – Male student studying Advertising and Public Relations, 20 October 2014

P7 – Female student studying History, 21 October 2014

P8 – Female student studying Economics, 21 October 2014

P9 – Female student studying Psychology, 21 October 2014

P10 – Male student studying Philosophy, 22 October 2014

P11 – Male student studying Economics, 22 October 2014

P12 – Female student studying Business-Informatics, 23 October 2014

P13 – Male student studying Business-Informatics, 23 October 2014

P14 – Male student studying Law, 23 October 2014

P15 – Male student studying Law, 24 October 2014

P16 – Male student studying Law, 24 October 2014

P17 – Male student studying Mathematics, 24 October 2014

P18 – Male student, Moscow, 24 October 2014

P19 – Male student studying Mathematics, 27 October 2014

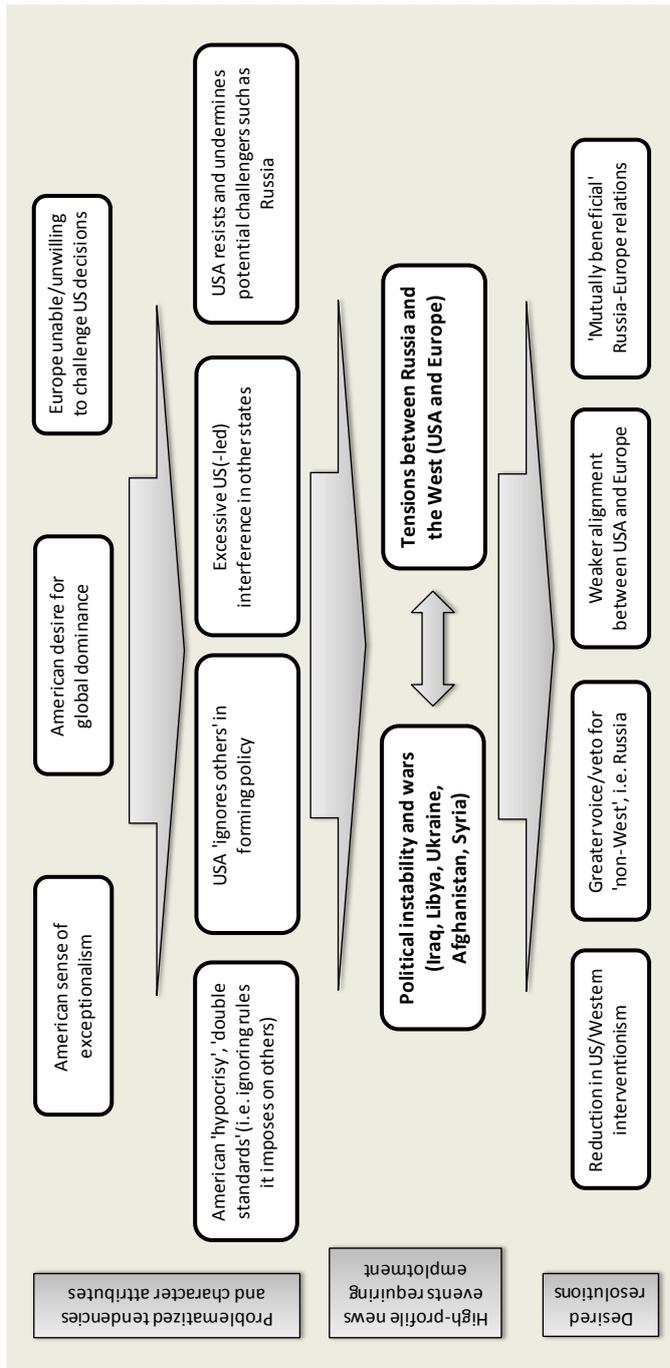


Figure 1: Summary of Russian state's strategic narrative about international affairs

Table 1: Elements of Russian state's strategic narrative reproduced by students

<i>participant#</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
US exceptionalism																			
US dominance				•								•	•						
Europe not challenging US				•		•			•		•		•						
US double standards									•									•	
US ignores others								•											
US(-led) interference	•			•		•				•						•			
US undermines challengers				•		•				•	•							•	•
Political instability, wars	•	•	•			•			•										
<i>(Russia-West tensions)</i>	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•	•
Reduce interventionism		•	•	•															
More voice for 'non-West'	•				•			•	•										
Weaker US-EU alignment																		•	
Beneficial Russia-EU ties		•	•										•					•	

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