Trump's Troop Withdrawal From Syria:

A Comparative Analysis of MSNBC and RT

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Introduction – (Victoria)

In October of 2019, President Donald Trump announced that he would be bringing American troops back to the United States from Syria. However, more than 700 troops did not go back to the U.S. and they were instead relocated to western Iraq (Benen, 2019). His reasoning for taking troops out of Syria is due to the defeat of ISIS in the area. The Pentagon's inspector general confirmed that there are between 20,000 and 30,000 ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria alone (Benen, 2019). This is not the first time Trump announced his withdrawal of U.S. troops and certainly would not be the last. Trump has received much criticism from media outlets no matter what policy he stated he would implement however, some experts claim that Trump is correct in "lessening US military obligations among backwater wars" (Henriksen, 2019).

This topic is relevant to analyze through the international communication lens because it gives a better understanding about how and why international news outlets write and present their stories differently or similarly to the U.S. When looking at the articles that we chose from both MSNBC and RT, we see that both news outlets write about the president in a way that presents him and his reasoning for pulling troops out of Syria in a negative light. However, RT tends to also portray the U.S. as a whole negatively by stating that the U.S. is not stopping the Turskish military from entering Syria. Readers will learn how framing analysis creates different stories based on news outlets and those that write them.

Framing analysis is appropriate when investigating this topic due to the complexity of understanding what the true issue is and why audiences may perceive it a certain way. The issue of Trump pulling troops out of Syria is not a one-time action and it is important to look at the different ways this story has been communicated to the public and what solutions there may be to not only stop the issue from happening again but even change the way these kinds of issues are

talked about in the media. The news articles that we chose to analyze this topic give detailed descriptions that play into the idea of global media markets. More specifically, MSNBC and Russia Today shape global news in that they report on the same stories but in different ways. Whereas MSNBC may highlight news in the United States one way, Russia Today may find a way to counteract those articles and portray news stories in their own way.

Body

Background: MSNBC (Victoria)

Founded in 1996, MSNBC is one of the three largest cable networks in America alongside CNN and Fox News (Coddington, 2014). They are considered to report on left-leaning news and have even begun the shift from sole news reporting to more opinion pieces through their channel. Political commentator Rachel Maddow has created an outlet within MSNBC to report on news stories but also to shed light on the liberal views of these news stories and compete with media outlets like Fox News. The reasoning for MSNBC to portray a leftist view of news comes after the media outlet started as more of a Republican type news channel. Their shift in political leanings has been driven by ratings and appeal to the masses (Arria, 2019).

Background: Russia Today (Sam)

Russia Today (RT) was founded in mid-2005 as an attempt for the Russia Kremlin to counteract what they saw was an overt anti-Russian bias in Western Media outlets. In reality, RT serves as a mouthpiece to create concise narratives created by former President, Vladmir Putin (Ioffee, 2010). The necessity of creating RT as a media outlet was to project Russia influences in the Western Media to create a better image than had been portrayed regarding Western concerns that Putin had been systematically eroding Democratic rights within Russia during his time in office. Russia Today serves as the prime example of how state owned media sources can help

project a desired image of a government, and as other countries have pursued a similar tactic as RT to project an image of Russia to the Western world that would put out an image specifically curated by the government (Ioffe, 2010).

The Role of Media Imaging: (Sam)

The role of the media has always been significant in understanding current world events, whether domestic or international. In comparing news sources, and especially coverage of specific events, it can become obvious to the discerning eye that the framing of these stories can vary significantly. Completing an analysis of media sources and an understanding of the motives behind a particular source can help to develop a varied understanding of world events on a broader scale. The creation of the 24-hour news cycle means that stories do not often vary during the day, but it becomes imperative that all news media stations can get out in front of stories once they emerge. Even more importantly, if a particular source focuses on the same story repeatedly over a period of time, they can control a narrative to their audience of what stories are important (Howland, 2019). How news outlet frame issues within the news cycle thus becomes extremely impactful and leads to our research question.

RQ1: How do Russia Today and MSNBC frame the U.S. foreign policy in Syria under Trump?

Method

Framing Analysis (Victoria)

Framing analysis is a way in which we can look at media outlets and their news stories through salience, selection, and framing devices. "Framing involves a communication source presenting and defining an issue" (de Vreese, 2005). This is a similar concept to Robert Entman's idea of salience and describing the perceived importance of the issue or event. Things like word choice, sentence structure, and photo captions all work to create salience in a news

story which means that journalists and news broadcasters must carefully select those framing devices that will appeal to the masses and generate views. When using framing analysis, one tries to make sense of reality by using their own life experiences (Kosicki & Zhongdang, 1993). This in turn creates salience which then ultimately creates the issue or event of a news story. Framing analysis has been used for many years to frame public policy issues and conceptualize news texts.

Russia Today: Framing Analysis (James)

To analyze Russia Today's coverage of this topic, we first went onto the news outlet's website and entered in the keywords, 'Trump Russia Syria', into the search bar. We then established the sampling frame by eliminating articles that did not fall into the time-frame of October 1through November 30th, 2019. Subsequently, we numbered the articles in chronological order before using a random number generator to select 10. Some of the articles were not long enough to conduct a successful framing analysis, so we kept using the number generator until we found enough articles which were sufficiently long.

We then conducted a pilot study. Several coding categories began emerging from this. For the framing function of causes, RT emphasizes American meddling and incompetence in the Middle East drove Trump's pullout and its resultant problems. The news outlet claims problems facing the US military in their efforts to leave Syria never would have occurred if the US was not there and if the US had more competent leadership. RT also considers Trump's desire to stop 'endless wars' helped cause the US troop withdrawal. They then define the problem resulting from Trump's decision as a conflict between Turkey and the rest of NATO, specifically the US. To a lesser extent, RT also defines the problem as the Kurds needing a new ally. This dovetails with contradictory moral judgments consisting of a lukewarm condemnation of the Kurds'

abandonment and a stronger critique of US violation of sovereignty. Finally, RT emphasizes America should pull out from the Middle East entirely to prevent future problems, but the Kurds should ally with Russia and Assad in the interim.

MSNBC: Framing Analysis (Sam)

To find coverage of Trump's decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria, we used the same method as we did for RT to find relevant news articles. We aimed for a time period between October 1st, 2019 to November 31st, 2019. We felt that this was an accurate time table to understand the full scope of coverage from Trump's initial statements that troops would begin phasing out of Syria 'very soon'. Ten articles were selected from MSNBC that focused on different aspects of the Trump administrations decisions in Syria. The coding categories that were developed in the framing analysis (referenced in the appendix) completed on MSNBCs articles showed a clear pattern of coverage and opinion based articles revolving around Trump's decisions. The root cause of Trump's decision to begin withdrawing troops from Syria was that Trump had ignored the information and advice of his national security and foreign relations team regarding the implications if the U.S. were to withdraw from Syria. While it is also referenced that Trump conveyed a war-weariness in the American public, this is only secondary to the main root cause. The problems that are highlighted by MSNBC are that Trumps' actions in Syria ultimately work against the U.S interests in Syria and in the Middle East more broadly, it also serves to continue to consolidate power under the banner of other foreign powers. While MSNBC does not ultimately offer a solution to the problem of U.S. involvement in Syria in the same manner that RT does, it instead more broadly focuses on Trump's foreign policy to be brought under closer supervision by his advisors who may be able to impress upon him the importance of the U.S. to project its power in the region.

Findings:

Russia Today: The Incompetent Empire and Cautious Intervention (James)

RT usually blames Trump's pullout and the resultant problems on American incompetence and overextension. For example, Trump's advisers suggest the military presence in the region proves frivolous, but the withdrawal is also marked by blunders ("NATO War," 2020; "Turkish backed forces," 2020). The occasional cause of attempting to stop endless wars also suggests political forces in the US no longer support foreign intervention. Both causes are often counterposed with a strong emphasis on the problem of internal conflicts between Turkey and other NATO countries, a category that appears in half the stories. A NATO member, usually the United States, criticizes Turkey while being unable to stop its incursion. For example, a small number of American forces were cut off by the Turkish military in their attempt to withdraw, but this did not inspire any retaliation or verbal rebuke from the US ("Turkish backed," 2019). In addition, the Kurds are presented as in need of a new ally and possibly endangered due to Trump's abrupt decision. The latter moral judgment is made tepidly and infrequently, as it could be used to justify US intervention. When these coding categories are considered holistically, a narrative emerges in which an immoral empire suffering from incompetent leadership and a waning will to carry on embarks on a sudden policy change that abandons some allies but fails to avoid exposing internal divisions in the process. This framing changes somewhat in the later stories when the US stationed troops in Iraq, and RT condemns it for backsliding, violating sovereignty, and pilfering oil ("Coming back", 2019).

This portrayal of the US contrasts with the depiction of Russia. Judgments and problematizations of the Kurds' isolation are often accompanied by a pro-Russian solution. For example, one story focuses on Kurdish leaders meeting with Assad and Russian officials to

discuss their situation, but Russia is not uninvited in these cases ("Kurds mull," 2020). Rather, they are being approached for help. Russia also appears less frequently than the US, suggesting it does not meddle in the same way as other superpowers. This subtly indicates Russian intervention is not a violation of sovereignty. Instead, it functions to help those who ask for it. RT thus primarily frames the US as an incompetent empire while Russia appears as a cautious intervener.

MSNBC: A Balance of Powers: Protecting U.S. Interests in the Middle East (Sam)

The focus of MSNBC while covering the Trump administration's withdrawal from Syria places a heavy emphasis on lack of coordination between Trump's foreign policy and national security team. Prior to his announcement that Trump sought to withdraw the majority of ground forces in Syria, he had been advised of the ramifications of the withdrawal on the United States backed Kurdish forces. From the sample articles chosen from MSNBC, a consistent narrative was how ignoring his advisors, Trump actively invited Turkey to siege Kurdish allied forces in Northern Syria. ("We have no soldiers in Syria", 2019). MSNBC repeatedly points out that Trump portrayed the withdrawal of U.S. troops as necessary because the U.S. had completed its mission of eliminating ISIS fighters within Syria and no longer had a vested interest in the region. This highlights another causal theme of Trump's misunderstanding of the complexities of the region and does not leverage the experts he has at his disposal ("Trump's Syrian withdrawal", 2019).

MSNBC highlights the significance of the problems caused by Trump's ineptitude of the regional politics of the Middle East through his willingness to concede territorial influence to other global powers; in this case specifically, Iran, Turkey, and Russia. Ultimately, Trump's decision to withdraw the majority of U.S. ground forces in Syria results in only benefiting

Russia, Iran, Turkey, and the Assad region that will continue to be supported by other major powers ("Trump's foreign policy", 2019). Trump's actions in Syria ultimately further corrupt the United States ability to maintain a balance of power in the region, which is ultimately avoidable if he were to utilize the resources out his disposal to understand the significance of protecting Kurdish allies and not allowing Russia to consolidate power in the Middle East. MSNBC does not immediately offer a solution to the issues at hand in Syria, but it continuously highlights that Trump's foreign policy decisions would benefit from better oversight from his advisors and hopefully protect broader U.S. interests abroad.

Comparing Frames (James & Sam)

Russia Today: The Incompetent Empire and Cautious Intervention (James)

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Conclusion (Sam, James & Victoria)

Our study has produced salient insights into the framing devices of RT and MSNBC. It reveals that both MSNBC and RT frame Trump's policy in Syria in a very critical way, but the underlying reasons for this are antithetical. MSNBC criticizes Trump's management of US intervention, while RT attacks America's regional policy as a whole. These findings are important because they reveal the underlying geostrategic interests guiding the frames of these outlets on this topic, and such findings can help guide viewers who are traversing the contradictory world of international news. Such results can also serve as the basis of future research which explores these topics in greater detail.

Despite these valuable findings, our study has certain limitations. It does not exhaustively consider all of, or even the majority of, the news articles on this topic by these particular outlets. More importantly, framing itself suffers from certain methodological limitations. Its subjective nature needs to be constrained by using multiple coders or follow up studies, and framing cannot reveal the motivations behind outlets' behavior in an unequivocal way. These constraints do not suggest this method proves useless in the study of international communication. Rather, they highlight the need for combining framing with other research methods in a way that reveals both how and why news outlets present information the way they do. Such a multifaceted approach can help illuminate an increasingly complex, globalized world.

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Appendix: Code Books: MSNBC: Sam/RT: James

Issue/ Event:	Frame(s)	Frame Functions	Coding Categories:	Descriptions/Examples	Frequency: (RT)
U.S troop withdrawal from Syria in October-November 2019.	**The Incompetent Empire**	**Causes:**	U.S. meddling and incompetence	Excessive U.S. meddling in the Middle East caused the unorganized, incomplete Troop pull out	7/10 (70%)
			Endless wars	Trump withdrew troops to end America's endless wars.	2/10 (20%)
		Problem Definition:	Conflict between Turkey and the rest of NATO.	Trump's withdrawal and the Turkey's subsequent invasion have created major tensions between Turkey and the rest of NATO, e.g. the U.S. and Turkey on the ground, economic sanctions, etc.	5/10 (50%)
			Kurds needs a new ally	American withdrawal means the Kurds need people to support them now.	2/10 (20%)
		Moral Judgment:	American intervention	American intervention has violated sovereignty throughout this process	5/10 (50%)
			Endangered and abandoned, kind of	Turkish-U.S. foreign policy endangers civilians	4/10 (40%)
		Remedy/Solution:	U.S. Withdrawal	The U.S. should withdrawal from the region, not just move troops out of Syria.	2/10 (20%)
			Ally with Russia & Assad	The Kurds should ally with Russia and Assad.	5/10 (50%)s

Issue/ Event:	Frame(s)	Frame Functions	Coding Categories:	Descriptions/Examples	Frequency: (MSNBC)
United States troop withdrawal from Syria in October-November 2019.	**Advisement** **Political Irresponsibility** **Policy Decisions**	**Causes:**	Ignoring advice of advisors.	Trump ignored the advice of his foreign policy and national security advisors about stability of Syria.	7/10 (70%)
			Lack of understanding of regional insecurity	Donald Trump has shown that he lacks the understanding of the complexities of the region.	5/10 (50%)
		Problem Definition:	Abandoning Kurdish allies.	Most directly impacted is the Kurdish allies in Syria who have long been allied with U.S. Experienced harsh causalities.	7/10 (70%)
			Against U.S. foreign policy interests/weakens America's power	Decision to withdrawal troops from Syria is against U.S. interests in the region and diminishes the relative power of the U.S.	5/10 (50%)
			Gives advantage to U.S. adversaries.	The only ones who benefit by U.S. troop withdrawal is Russia, Assad regime, Iran, and Islamic State.	4/10 (40%)
		Moral Judgment:	Post-Policy decision making	Perceived as not well thought through and no coordination of departments who have wealth of knowledge on complexities of the region.	6/10 (60%)
		Remedy/Solution:	Better advisement of regional politics	Trump would benefit from listening to his advisors before making decisions that would negatively impact the region.	6/10 (60%)