

Distant Suffering

A multimodal analysis of the politics of pity in news agencies' mediation of the chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhoun

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Abstract

This thesis explores of how American and British television mediated the crisis that started with the 4 April 2017 alleged chemical attack in Syria and culminated with the subsequent attack on Syria by the United States 7 April 2017. It builds upon a rich literature and focuses on the politics of pity in the mediated representation of distant suffering as set out by Luc Boltanski. The thesis utilizes a methodological approach which merges Lilie Chouliaraki's 'analytics of mediation' with Roxanne Lynn Doty's view of discourse analysis. The results find that CNNW mediated the distant suffering based on ostensible *a priori* knowledge, whereas BBC News was more inclined to guide the spectators along a line of investigative reasoning.

Keywords: distant suffering, mediation, global crisis, poststructuralism, discourse analysis, international relations, political science, communication, analytics of mediation

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1.1 Introduction

Building on the theoretical concept of distant suffering, this study employs a discursive and multimodal approach to study of CNNW and BBC News mediation of the alleged chemical weapons attack in Syria on 4 April 2017. The role of news agencies in mediating crises has been covered from various angles that prescribe their own theoretical and methodological points of departure. This study utilizes the *politics of pity* as set out by Luc Boltanski in his seminal work *Distant Suffering*, to challenge the field of inquiry in several respects. Lillie Chouliaraki's influential framework 'analytics of mediation' is merged with Roxanne Lynn Doty's methodological tools in order to account for how the discursive and semiotic practices deployed by CNNW and BBC News in their coverage, seeks to interact and influence the spectator by drawing on the politics of pity. When, the small town of Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib, Syria, suddenly became the locus of the world's attention on 4 April, it set off a political crisis in anticipation of U.S. response. The U.S. President Donald Trump's declared that he was deeply moved by the images coming out of Syria and felt compelled to change his stance vis-à-vis Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In response to the chemical weapons attack, he ordered the launch of 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles striking the Syrian airfield of Shayrat from the Eastern Mediterranean. This observation has served as departure point for the research on distant suffering in the televised mediation of the crisis conducted in this paper.

1.2 Research problem

The chemical weapons attack in Khan Sheikhoun presents an intriguing instance for the study of distant suffering. While this thesis does not concern itself with humanitarian intervention per sé, the mediation of the U.S. reflexive response to the crisis was indeed construed as action taken out of humanitarian care. Moreover, the exhaustive nature of analyzing both

visual semiotic and verbal discursive practices typically hampers in detail research of the televised mediation of crises. The fact that the crisis that ensued from the chemical weapons attack lingered from 4 April 2017 to 7 April 2017, presents an interesting occasion for analyzing how the distant suffering was sustained and changed over time as the U.S. prepared to strike Syria. Thus, the research undertaken in this thesis fills two gaps. First, it constitutes a bounded event, which makes it possible to employ an exhaustive and space consuming method to the study of mediated distant suffering. Second, it focuses on the politics of pity in an, as of yet, academically unexplored crisis. In addition, it proposes a novel approach to studying how the political *subject positioning* of subjects throughout a news report is constituted discursively and visually.

1.3 Purpose and research question

In 2013, the chemical attack on Ghouta, Damascus put the U.S. and Syria on collision course, a fate which was narrowly escaped by the deal brokered by Russia which led the Syrian government to give up its stockpile of chemical weapons. That event has been covered from various angles and I expect the April 4 2017 attack on Khan Sheikhoun to yield more academic debate as it also constitutes an important event in the Syrian Civil War. However, due to the recentness of the 2017 attack, this literature is yet to be written. Therefore, I recognize it as an interesting opportunity to develop on the mediated construction of distant suffering during the crisis which, after almost seven years, drew a direct military response by the U.S. Hence, the intention of this paper is to assess the overarching mediation of distant suffering that two major Western English language news agencies, CNNW and BBC, deployed between 4 April 2017 and 7 April 2017. Hence the analysis is intended to bring forth meanings that are created through semiotic and discursive practices and the implications they had for the overall mediation of the distant suffering. The results will be reflected upon and contrasted in the concluding discussion. The following research questions are assessed in

this thesis:

1. How did CNNW and BBC News construe the distant suffering in their mediation of the 4 April 2017 chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun?
2. How did CNNW and BBC News mediation of the distant suffering change up until the U.S. strike on Syria on 7 April 2017?
3. How did discourse and visuals relate to the identity construction and the representation of the politics of pity?

1.4 Previous literature

As can be seen from the examples outlined in this section, the complexity of the Syrian Civil War has nurtured an interdisciplinary strain of academia which drawing from both IR and communication studies. Together the texts form a body of work which shows how the role of media in conflicts has continued to evolve in the digital era. The coverage of the Syrian Civil War has unequivocally been mediated in a way that takes advantage of the technological evolution of the digital age. This is perhaps most obvious in the news agencies incorporation of amateur footage utilized to underpin their narratives. In *Witnessing in The New Memory Ecology: Memory Construction of the Syrian Conflict on YouTube*, Rik Smit et al. study the role of cell phones and the impact of YouTube in recording and reminiscing events of the Syrian Civil War. The study draws upon a rich scholarship on citizen eyewitnessing and explores how different actors portrayed the Ghouta attack and how the sociotechnical practices found on YouTube shape the memory construction of the war.¹ The authors find

¹ R. Smit, A. Heinrich & M. Broersma, "Witnessing in the new memory ecology: Memory construction of the

that the user generated content was tagged and entitled in ways that sought to increase the materials' visibility on the website.² Ahva and Hellman turn towards audience receptivity and engagement with amateur footage in *Citizen Eyewitness Images and Audience Engagement in Crisis Coverage*. By interviewing focus groups they found that citizen eyewitness images from Syria and Libya were perceived as exhibiting a high degree of authenticity. Moreover, they assert that the nature of the images became a cause for introspective self-reflection among the surveyed individuals.³

The study of citizen eyewitness images has also been conducted in conjunction with chemical attacks in Syria. Anna Geis and Gabi Schlag approach user generated content from the Ghouta attack from a different angle. In *'The Facts Cannot be denied': legitimacy, war and the use of chemical weapons in Syria*, they reflect on the spread of video images portraying suffering, and its failure to bring about direct foreign military intervention.⁴ The authors conclude that images human rights violations do not cause military intervention but might catalyze policy change.⁵

The media narrative of the Syrian Civil War has also been scrutinized in comparative studies. In *A Nightmare Painted by Goya*, James D.J. Brown makes a comparative analysis which juxtaposes the Russian media coverage with that of its counterparts in U.S., United Kingdom, and France. His study is designed to assess how the national narrative provided by four Russian newspapers differ from three Western newspapers. D.J. Brown stresses the Russian language media's reluctance to assign the blame to any warring party, citing a lack of evidence. By comparison he finds that the Western media narrative asserts that the Syrian

Syrian conflict on YouTube," in *New Media & Society*, vol. 19, 2017, p. 291.

² Ibid., p. 303

³L. Ahva & M. Hellman, "Citizen eyewitness images and audience engagement in crisis coverage," in *International Communication Gazette*, vol. 77, no. 7, 2015, p. 11-12.

⁴ A. Geis & G. Schlag, "'The facts cannot be denied': legitimacy, war and the use of chemical weapons in Syria," in *Global Discourse*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2017, p. 6.

⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

government was the perpetrator of the Ghouta attack.⁶

Christian Vukasovich and Tamara Dejanovic-Vukasovich turn to Western media narratives in a in *'Humanitarian Intervention', A Predictable Narrative? A Comparative Analysis of Media Narratives from Serbia to Syria*. Their analysis strives to discern themes prevalent within three news outlets - New York Times, The Times and the Associated Press. To achieve this, the authors utilize a grounded theory approach which enables them to inductively engage with the material and draw theoretical conclusions based on their assessments of the intrinsic nature of the newspapers' reporting.⁷

Pavel Doboš has written a research paper on the Syrian Civil War using Chouliaraki's 'analytics of mediation' to explore how the concept of imaginative geographies is mediated on Czech television. In *Imaginative Geographies of Distant Suffering: Two Cases of the Syrian Civil War on Television* he compares the imaginative geographies evident in the Czech news agencies' mediation of the suffering of Syrian civilians at two points in time: before as well as after the Islamic State announced its caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Doboš finds that the first type of mediation holds a prognostic perspective which represents the Syrian civilians and rebels as Orientals desperately aiming at de-Orientalizing themselves. This representation of the Other, he argues, brings the Western audience closer to the suffering of Syrians at the hands of the construction of a brutal Oriental despot. The civilians and rebels opposing Assad are essentially presented as striving to achieve the same humanitarian outlook and ideas of freedom that the Western Self identifies with. Doboš considers this perception to be an example of how the imaginative geography blurs the default line between the Occident and the Orient and facilitates what Chouliaraki calls a

⁶ J. D.J. Brown, "A Nightmare painted by Goya": Russian Media Coverage of the Syrian Chemical Weapons Attacks in Comparative Perspective, *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 62, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015, p. 237.

⁷ C. Vukasovich & T. Dejanovic-Vukasovich, "'Humanitarian intervention', a predictable narrative? A comparative analysis of media narratives from Serbia to Syria", in *Global Media and Communication*, vol. 12, 2016, 311-331.

politics of pity, which impels the Western audience to care and reflect upon possible courses of action.⁸

1.5 Background

In 2013, the Syrian Civil War entered its fourth year during which the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad came close to being the subject of direct foreign military intervention. The previous year, U.S. President Barack Obama warned the Syrian government not to provoke the U.S. to take action by treading over his red line and use chemical weapons in its warfare.⁹ Despite this explicit declaration of intent, a chemical attack was launched against the Damascus suburb Ghouta on 21 August 2013. As the prospect of a U.S. intervention became a political reality, Russia intervened as mediator to persuade the Syrian government to give up its large stockpile of chemical weapons for destruction by the international watchdog the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.¹⁰ Those critical of President Obama construe his decision to back away from his red line in 2013 as a sign of U.S. weakness.¹¹¹²

⁸ P. Doboš, 'Imaginative geographies of distant suffering: two cases of the Syrian Civil War on television' in *Social & Cultural Geography*, 9365, 2017, 1–25, <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14649365.2017.1312695>>, p. 16.

⁹ J. Ball & J. Ball, "Obama issues Syria a 'red line' warning on chemical weapons", in *Washington Post*, , 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obama-issues-syria-red-line-warning-on-chemical-weapons/2012/08/20/ba5d26ec-eaf7-11e1-b811-09036bcb182b_story.html?utm_term=.ee4b5ce268d2, [accessed 20 May 2017].

¹⁰ J. Borger, A. Luhn & I. Traynor, "Syria takes UN step to surrender chemical weapons as US keeps up pressure", *The Guardian*, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/12/syria-chemical-weapons-un-us-russia>, [accessed 20 May 2017].

¹¹ A. Miller, "Does Obama Have Any Regrets About His Middle East Policy?", in *Foreign Policy*, , 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/29/does-obama-regrets-middle-east-policy-syria-iraq-islamic-state/>, [accessed 22 May 2017].

¹² C. Ryan Browne and E. Labott, "White House condemns Syria's chemical weapons use," *CNN*, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/08/25/politics/un-report-chemical-weapons-syria/>, [accessed 22 May 2017].

Moreover, the perception that America was ceding ground to other powers in the Middle East was reinforced when Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a Russian military intervention to prop up the Syrian government in fall 2015.¹³ President Obama's decision to refrain from military action after the Ghouta attack set the scene for the geopolitical turmoil that emanated from the 4 April 2017 chemical weapons attack in Khan Sheikhoun, which killed 87 people, including children.¹⁴ After a period of fraught Russian and U.S. diplomatic ties on the highest level, the Donald Trump administration's Secretary of State Rex Tillerson indicated that the U.S. would be willing to see eye to eye with Russia on the issue of President Assad's future, citing 'political realities' and that the future of his government would be a matter for the Syrian people to decide.¹⁵ This shift in policy, first declared on 31 March 2017 was tested almost immediately a few days later on April 4 2017, when reports of an alleged chemical attack on the rebel held town Khan Sheikhoun in Idlib province, prompted the U.S. to respond with force. Within less than 72 hours from the incident, President Trump ordered U.S. Navy ships in the Mediterranean to launch a 'punitive strike' on the Syrian airfield of Shayrat.¹⁶

1.6 Disposition

This thesis has been divided into six sections. Chapter two outlines the theoretical concepts explored in this study. These are in turn operationalized in the methodology section under

¹³ K. Shaheen, S Walker & I Black, "Bashar al-Assad thanks Putin for Syria strikes as Russia announces US talks", *The Guardian*, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/21/bashar-al-assad-thanks-russia-vladimir-putin-syria-airstrikes>, [accessed 20 May 2017].

¹⁴ S. Osborne, "British scientists find sarin gas used in Syria attack", in *The Independent*, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syria-chemical-attack-sarin-gas-khan-sheikhoun-assad-strike-uk-ambassador-to-un-british-scientists-a7680556.html>, [accessed 20 May 2017].

¹⁵ M. Gordon, "White House Accepts 'Political Reality' of Assad's Grip on Power in Syria", in *New York Times*, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/31/us/politics/trump-bashar-assad-syria.html>, [accessed 22 May 2017].

¹⁶ Syria: After the Airstrikes', *National Review*, 2017, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/446533/donald-trump-syria-airstrikes>, [accessed 22 May 2017].

chapter three. Chapter four is devoted to the presentation of material and strategy for data collection. The analysis is conducted in section five and further elaborated with discussion of the findings and concluding remarks in the sixth and final section.

2 Theoretical concepts

2.1 Introduction

This study builds on theoretical strands that straddle the intersection of international relations (IR) and communication studies. It has a poststructuralist knowledge claim and utilizes theoretical concepts that prescribe the need for a meticulously outlined methodological framework for the study of multimodal mediation. This approach facilitates a thorough assessment of how the news agencies under scrutiny mediated distant suffering using discursive and semiotic practices. In sum, the theoretical definitions have been used to derive analytical categories that have guided the research process. This section begins with a brief conceptualization of mediation and a declaration of the epistemological claim which constitute the basis for the research conducted in this thesis. It proceeds to define the theoretical construction of identity and agency and its implications for mediating distant suffering.

2.2 Epistemology

Poststructuralism within IR has, as with any theory, been conceptualized in forms that postulate disparate methodologies. In Foucault's theorizing, knowledge can never be neutral, rather it relies on the application of power as supportive force. According to him, power relations are vital to the production of knowledge and history is therefore bound to constitute

a series of dominating practices employed by rivaling forces.¹⁷¹⁸ Furthermore, the study of IR from a poststructuralist perspective is concerned with the study of discursive practices which manifest and reproduce these power relations, crucially in relation to the construction of identity.¹⁹ Its knowledge claim is post-positivist at heart, hence, it subscribes to the idea that the the perception of the world is constituted in discourse. David Campbell refuses to acknowledge the existence of what he terms *epistemic realism*, i.e. a reality untouched by the interpretations made by human perception. Instead, he proposes that there is ‘nothing outside discourse’, a statement predicated on the notion that the world is inescapably structured discursively and endowed with meaning as we try to interpret it.²⁰ As we shall see as we move along, this insight is the *sine qua non* which flows through all of the theoretical concepts explored here.

2.3 Mediation defined

According to Chouliaraki, mediation refers to the discursive and semiotic practices employed to communicate within a given medium. It also denotes the capacity such practices have to ‘[...] involve us emotionally and culturally with ‘distant’ others.’²¹ It gives rise to what Roger Silverstone terms the *mediated space of appearance*, i.e. a social space where identities are reproduced and given meaning through semiotics and discourse.²² In the televised mediation studied in this thesis, the visual and verbal dimensions inhabit central roles in the production

¹⁷ R. Devetak, Post-structuralism, in *Theories of international relations*, 1st ed., ed. by S. Burchill, Basingstoke, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. p. 189

¹⁸ J. Milliken, ‘The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods’, in *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 5, 1999, p. 243.

¹⁹ T. Lundborg & N. Vaughan-Williams, ‘New Materialisms, Discourse Analysis, and International Relations: A Radical Intertextual Approach,’ in *Review of International Studies*, vol. 41, 2014, 10-11.

²⁰ D. Campbell, *Politics without principle*, 1st ed., Boulder, Colo, L. Rienner, 1993. p. 7-8.

²¹ L. Chouliaraki, *The spectatorship of suffering*, 1st ed., London, SAGE Publications, 2011. p. 19-20.

²² R. Silverstone, *Media and Morality: On the Rise of the Mediapolis*, 1st ed., New York, NY, John Wiley & Sons, 2006, p. 31.

of knowledge. This is the case because the mediation of the event is contingent on the interplay between the verbal and the visual in the construction of meaning.²³ As mediators, news agencies can turn to very different ways of packaging news, in effect producing altogether different mediations with heterogeneous implications for the coverage of the same crisis. Indeed, as Chouliaraki notes, ‘[...] the power of mediation works by selecting and staging the events it reports and, simultaneously, by promoting its own norms about how we should feel, think and act on the world that this staging of the event entails.’ Therefore, she argues, one has to undertake a multimodal analysis which assesses both discourse and semiotic choices.²⁴

2.4 The suffering of the distant Other/Identity/Agency

The connection between identity and language is made visible through the articulation of difference. As Campbell asserts:

Difference is constituted in relations to identity. The problematic of identity/difference contains, therefore, no foundations that are prior to, or outside of, its operation.²⁵

Thus, identity the Self comes into being by delineating oneself vis-à-vis the Other. This insight, Campbell argues, is also prevalent on the international level as the Self becomes domestic and the Other foreign.²⁶ However, the identity is not fixed, rather it is predicated upon the constant iteration of performative constitutive acts which inscribe the identity with

²³ Chouliaraki, *The spectatorship of suffering*, p. 60

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60-61.

²⁵ D. Campbell, *Writing security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, 2nd ed., Minneapolis, Minn., University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p. 9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

meanings.²⁷ Hence, the discursive acts become tools for the demarcation between the Self and Other. These practices are deeply embedded within media culture and referred to by Silverstone as *boundary work*, i.e. the work of reproducing difference.²⁸ Consequently, media serves a crucial role in establishing identities, but also in ascribing agencies to subjects as modes of being. Lene Hansen exemplifies this in an instructive way as she argues that the Western discourse on the Balkan identity during the Bosnian war construed it as being ‘backward’.²⁹ Doty holds that such perceptions are constituted in *presuppositions* regarding a given identity.³⁰ Building on her writings, Borg and Åhäll elaborates:

In the absence of the ‘truth’ of the background knowledge and the world it presupposes, the statement would not make sense.³¹

It is thus perceived as *a priori* knowledge which upon articulation is taken for a fact.³² In addition, Hansen finds that the Othering of the perceived Balkan identity drew on connotations such as ‘barbaric’ and ‘violent’, which were implied to be inherent traits of the identity.³³ These descriptive linguistics are examples of *predicates* utilized to construct a discourse on an identity by attaching attributes to it.³⁴ Predicates, more specifically adverbs and adjectives, are studied in order to discern how the identities are endowed with qualities and capacities which, as Borg and Åhäll argue ‘[...] is linked to whether the subject is

²⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁸ Silverstone, *Media and Morality*, p. 19.

²⁹ L. Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*, 1st ed., London: Routledge, 2006, p. 107.

³⁰ R. L. Doty, "Foreign Policy as Social Construction: A Post-Positivist Analysis of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy in the Philippines", in *International Studies Quarterly*, vol. 37, 1993, p. 307-308.

³¹ L. Åhäll, S. Borg, ‘Predication, Presupposition and Subject-positioning,’ in *Critical approaches to security*, 1st ed., edited by L. Shepherd, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 8.

³² Doty, p. 307-308.

³³ Hansen, *Security as Practice*, p. 112.

³⁴ Borg, Åhäll, ‘Predication, Presupposition and Subject-positioning’, p.7.

ascribed agency or not.³⁵ Conversely, the Othering process applied to Bosnians, Hansen finds, victimized the identity in order to impel the Western audience to feel pity towards them.³⁶ This renders the subjects' identity void of agency. Moreover, the act of discursively juxtaposing the persecutor vis-à-vis the suffering victim, effectively creating a hierarchy between subjects, is termed *subject-positioning*.³⁷ Presuppositions, predicates and subject positions will be further elaborated and operationalized in the methodology section.

2.5 Mediating the suffering of the distant Other

The theoretical concepts outlined above have profound implications for how television mediates news reports. News agencies frequently delineate between sufferers and persecutors by utilizing discursive practices as well as visual semiotics to mediate what Boltanski refers to as *distant suffering*. Chouliaraki conceptualizes distant suffering by stating that it is the:

[...]capacity of the Western world to relate to distant suffering with a sense of care and act on it with a sense of social responsibility[...].³⁸

The question then, becomes by what modes the mediation of distant suffering can be represented. Boltanski argues that the spectacle of distant suffering follows a *politics of pity* which renders it a case of *denunciation*, *sentiment* or *aesthetic*.³⁹ Which topic a news report conforms to is ultimately contingent on '[...] how media represent the triangle of sufferer,

³⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

³⁶ Hansen, p. 112.

³⁷ Doty p. 308.

³⁸ L. Chouliaraki, "Towards an analytics of mediation," in *Critical Discourse Studies*, vol. 3, 2006, p. 153.

³⁹ L. Boltanski, *Distant suffering*, 1st ed., Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press, 1999. p. 115

persecutor and benefactor [...].⁴⁰ The genre of denunciation refers to mediation characterized by speech acts levelling strong condemnations towards the actor construed as persecutor. In essence, the mediator seeks to conjure up feelings of anger against the persecutor which is construed as responsible for the suffering witnessed on the screen.⁴¹ The topic of *sentiment* promotes tender-heartedness in that it:

[...] turns away from the search of a persecutor, and so from accusation, and directs attention to the possibility of an *act of charity* performed by a *benefactor*.⁴²

Thus it constitutes a genre of care in which the spectator is invited to feel sentiment toward e.g. voluntary worker or hospital personnel, who intervene in order to ameliorate the suffering of the distant Other.⁴³ The final category, sublime is used to define news segments that succeed in showing the vast devastation of events such as 9/11 or the 2004 Tsunami in the Indian Ocean. This kind of mediation makes the spectator struggle to gauge the extent and nature of the human suffering witnessed.⁴⁴ It is important to stress that a broadcast can propose a single mode of politics of pity or incorporate a combination throughout the news report.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ A. Hoskins & B. O' Loughlin, *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused Wars*, 1st ed., Hoboken, Wiley, 2013, p. 46-47.

⁴¹ Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, p. 57.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴⁴ Chouliaraki, *Spectatorship of Suffering*, p. 81.

⁴⁵ Chouliaraki, 'Towards an analytics of mediation,' p. 164.

3 Method

3.1 Methodological operationalization

The approach outlined here draws on theory and method conceptualized by Chouliaraki and Doty in order to assess the modes of distant suffering as defined by Boltanski. As explained above, his theorizing on distant suffering, the *politics of pity*, postulates three topics of mediated suffering, namely: *denunciation*, *sentiment* and *aesthetic*.⁴⁶ Chouliaraki holds that the politics of pity in the newscast functions as a ‘[...] consequence of both its mode of presentation and the relationship that the news text establishes language and images.’ In addition to *mode of presentation* and *verbal-visual correspondence*, she utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis to study how the Other is construed in the discourse.⁴⁷ However, in this study Critical Discourse Analysis has been replaced with Doty’s methodological tools *predication*, *presupposition*, and *subject positioning* since it conforms better to the knowledge claim.⁴⁸ In addition, the expediency and clarity by which they can be applied makes for a more stringent and transparent analysis. Hence, the politics of pity will be assessed by analyzing what presuppositions, predicates and subject positioning, the news mediators deploy to construct the distant sufferer, the persecutor, and possible benefactors. More specifically, in the context of this study this tool is operationalized to scrutinize how these *speech acts* are used to discursively construe the capacities, qualities and agencies of

⁴⁶ Boltanski, *Distant suffering*, p. 15.

⁴⁷ Chouliaraki, *Spectatorship of Suffering*, p. 84.

⁴⁸ Doty, ‘Foreign Policy as Social Construction’, p. 307-308

the all the actors that inhabit the material.

To reiterate, whether it is denunciation, sentiment or aesthetic is ultimately contingent on “[...] how media represent the triangle of sufferer, persecutor and benefactor [...].”⁴⁹ The act of establishing a politics of pity is contingent on the deployment of descriptive linguistics which seek to impel the spectator to feel in a certain way. As established in the theory section, predication is an adjective or an adverb assigned to an identity and presupposition pertains to *a priori* knowledge.

In the definition conceptualized by Doty, subject positioning is primarily applied to written material. However, Borg and Åhäll argue in *Predication, Presupposition and Subject Positioning* that the subject positioning between subjects and object can read visually since discourse does not discriminate among material that constitutes ‘text’.⁵⁰ The operationalization employed in this thesis acknowledges this proposal and seeks to expand it in a novel way by studying the verbal and visual positioning of subjects throughout a news report. It is expected to manifest itself through montage edited to position subjects vis-à-vis one another, but also by verbally pitting persecutor, sufferer and benefactor against each other and the visuals. Moreover, I want to stress that all enunciations made in the news reports become part of mediation and are thus treated as part of material under scrutiny. The following analytical questions will be guiding the analysis of predication, presupposition and subject positioning:

- How are sufferers, persecutors and benefactors visualized and/or verbalized?

- What predicates and presuppositions are attached to the subjects?

⁴⁹ Hoskins & O’Loughlin, *War and Media*, p. 46-47.

⁵⁰ S. Borgh, L. Åhäll, ‘Predication, Presupposition and Subject-positioning,’ p. 8.

- How is the positioning vis-à-vis subjects constituted throughout the news report using the verbal and visual aspects of mediation?

These questions conform to the research questions in a way which makes for an unambiguous and exhaustive reading of the material. They are admittedly wide in scope in order to facilitate an inductive engagement with the material. Thus by using sharp tools and wide questions, it makes it possible to clearly define on what basis the conclusions have been drawn.

3.2 Verbal-visual correspondence

The linguistic tools employed in the mediation have profound impact on the correspondence between the verbal and the visual. Chouliaraki argues that the mediated suffering can take on a meaning as either *indexical*, *iconic* or *symbolic*, each of which hold distinct characteristics.⁵¹ The meaning that the correspondence between the verbal and the visual creates is contingent on what kind of narration the mediators employ in the mediation the news report. In cases where the suffering is construed as indexical, it is rooted within highly descriptive enunciations and grounded in what can be seen on screen. Hence, as Chouliaraki argues, it includes ‘[...] employing language to establish a ‘physical’ or direct connection to the image.’⁵² However, when the narration takes a turn towards imbuing the visuals with feelings, the distant suffering becomes an instance of *iconic meaning*. Thus, as Chouliaraki exemplifies with a study of the Argentinian famine of 1982, the narration of the visuals rendered the children icons of starvation.⁵³ The children in this example, functions as an

⁵¹ Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, p. 76.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 79-80.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 134

abstraction for a wider suffering stemming from the starvation.⁵⁴ Hence, the iconic meaning arises from the emotionally laden verbalization of the visuals. News report exhibiting a symbolic relationship between the verbal and the visual also depart from the strict facticity of the indexical meaning. symbolic meaning is created when the mediator's narration exploits the visualization of the distant suffering to make ideological statements about the suffering, the world at large, and demand justice for the suffering witnessed on the screen.⁵⁵

Hence, the assessment from the analysis of the correspondence between verbal and visual semiotics determines which category of realism the news piece belongs to. As Chouliaraki notes, although a news report can be assessed as privileging the narrative of a specific category, it can still manifest features associated with the other the categories to varying degrees.⁵⁶ This insight is important for understanding why the research conducted in this paper is not merely a task of coding different news pieces. Rather, the theoretical foundation for this methodological approach mandates a thorough inductive probe of the material underpinned by a highly descriptive analysis that clearly shows the empirical basis for the assessment. In order to make an assessment regarding the verbal - visual correspondence the following questions have been devised:

- Can the verbal dimension seemingly be verified by the visuals?

- How does the mediator imbue the report with emotions and impelling the audience to feel the urgency of the suffering?

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 80-81

⁵⁵ Ibid.,

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 80-81.

- How does the mediator utilize the visuals to make an ideological claim about the state of the world?

3.3 Mode of presentation

Chouliaraki asserts that the mode of presentation denotes the '[...] locations from which the news story is told and the media used to tell the story.' Hence, the analysis of mode of presentation unveils whether the mediation is narrated in studio, through voice over, live on site, or by a correspondent who has put together a news report. These semiotic choices have an impact on the mediation as e.g. on site correspondents close the proximity gap between spectators and sufferers.⁵⁷ In the context of the studio, the news anchor has the ability to set the pace of the mediation by alternating between expert commentators, visual material and reports by correspondents.⁵⁸ Moreover, what kind of technological tools the mediator employs also speaks of the specific presentational mode pursued in the broadcast. The assessment of mode of presentation within each news item will be discussed in brevity in order to set the scene for the discursive analysis of the politics of pity and the verbal-visual correspondence.

3.4 Summary

To sum up, *predication*, *presuppositions* and *subject positioning* will be utilized to discern the implications of the *politics of pity* the mediator discursively constructs between the roles

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 74.

⁵⁸ Chouliaraki, 'Towards an analytics of mediation,' p. 160.

of distant sufferer, persecutor and benefactor. Chouliaraki's categories of *mode of presentation* and *verbal-visual correspondence* will be employed to scrutinize the semiotic and technological choices used to enhance the discourse established by the politics of pity. In essence, the utility of adopting a complex framework resides with the fact that it, in my view, has the capacity to address the diverse range of forms distant suffering can take. It is through inductive engagement with the material using these tools that meaning takes place. Admittedly, the complexity by which distant suffering can be mediated will render these tools more or less important to stress depending on the nature of the specific newscast.

3.5 Critical reflections on theory and method

A central critique held by the sceptics of discourse theory is that it is fundamentally unscientific in that it is interpretive and not sufficiently methodological stringent.⁵⁹ The inherent volatility of discourse analysis, i.e. the fact that it is contingent on interpretations, remains a challenge for all studies that employ it. It is therefore crucial for the validity to be as clear and transparent as possible in how the meaning-making is conducted with regards to theoretical and methodological application. It also prescribes a highly descriptive analysis. Moreover, it is acknowledged that the methodological approach undertaken in this study typically mandates an exhaustive and space consuming analysis of the material in order to provide the basis for the conclusions. However, this is a necessity due to the visual and verbal aspects of the material.

⁵⁹D. Howarth, *Discourse*, 1st ed., Buckingham, Open University Press, 2000.

4. Material

4.1 Research Strategy

4.1.2 Database

An inherent problem to the study of old broadcasts, I would argue, is that they are rarely available to be viewed online after the original airing. During the research process however, I came across the wealth of newscasts stored by the TV News Archive, an open source project devoted to storing original news broadcasts as they were aired at a given date. TV News Archive was launched in 2012 by the non-profit US-based digital library Internet Archive, with the purpose to ‘[...] enhance the capabilities of journalists, scholars, teachers, librarians, civic organizations and other engaged citizens.’⁶⁰ The search engine allows the user to search closed captioning, a feature which has proved to be most helpful in sifting through the many millions of hours’ worth of material available on the website. Internet Archive itself was founded by Brewster Kahle in 1996 and has since functioned as a digital library and aggregator of text, visual and audio material. Over the years it has grown to house several different projects, TV News Archive being one of them, as part of its self-proclaimed mission to preserve material and make it available to all for free. On their website Internet Archive mention that Vanderbilt University’s Television News Archive project has served as major inspiration. However, a major benefit for the individual user is that Internet Archive’s TV News Archive, unlike Vanderbilt University’s archive, does not require license from an associated university to gain access. It is not an overstatement to admit that the research conducted in this thesis was made possible thanks to TV News Archive’s accessibility and expediency.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Internet Archive, ‘About the TV News Archive,’ Internet Archive [website], 2017, <<https://archive.org/details/tv#about>>, (accessed 22 May 2017).

⁶¹ Ibid.,

4.1.2 Strategy for data collection

The selection of material for this study has been purposive, meaning it has been selected using a set of criteria that speaks to its relevancy for the research aim. In terms of time frame, the analyzed event presents a natural delimitation due to the short time span between the chemical attack and the U.S. response. It was therefore limited to include newscasts aired between 4-7 April that address the chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun.

In order to determine whether a specific news segment was deemed relevant or not, it was subjected to an initial assessment based on a specific criteria. The search query used to derive data was 'Syria', which yielded a vast amount of hits. It was then narrowed down to the specific day and channel in question which brought it down to as little as 16 hits on 4 April and 23 on 7 April for CNNW. However the most important criteria set out was that the newscasts had to feature a comprehensive news report. For BBC News, this was BBC News at 10 for all of the days within the time frame. CNN did not exhibit any consistency in terms of comprehensiveness to the reports. Most of the news shows in the initial probe were rejected because they focused on discussion with expert panels instead of news reports. They were then picked out on the basis of both comprehensiveness and length. Thanks to the close-captioned search it was easy to locate the moments that commented on the chemical weapons attack in Syria. The following newscasts are assessed in this thesis:

CNN

CNN New Day Broadcast, 4 April 2017.⁶²

CNN Situation Room With Wolf Blitzer, 5 April 2017.⁶³

CNN The Lead With Jake Tapper, 6 April 2017.⁶⁴

⁶² CNN New Day Broadcast, 4 April 2017 [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/CNNW_20170404_120000_New_Day/start/180/end/240>, (accessed 19 May 2017).

⁶³ CNN Situation Room With Wolf Blitzer, 5 April 2017 [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/CNNW_20170405_220000_Situation_Room_With_Wolf_Blitzer/start/180/end/240>, (accessed 19 May 2017).

CNN The Lead With Jake Tapper, 7 April 2017.⁶⁵

BBC

BBC News at 10, 4 April 2017.⁶⁶

BBC News at 10, 5 April 2017.⁶⁷

BBC News at 10, 6 April 2017.⁶⁸

BBC News at 10, 7 April 2017.⁶⁹

4.2 Delimitation

The reason for selecting BBC and CNNW was I wanted to study Western English language media. Moreover, the perspectives expressed by these two channels are frequently analyzed as part of the Western media narrative. When studying media, al Jazeera and RT are often added but they were never considered during the research process since I wanted to study channels that conform to the Western based theoretical foundation applied in this thesis.

⁶⁴ CNN The Lead With Jake Tapper, 6 April 2017 [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/CNNW_20170406_200000_The_Lead_With_Jake_Tapper/start/180/end/240>, (accessed 19 May 2017).

⁶⁵ CNN The Lead With Jake Tapper 7 April 2017, [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/CNNW_20170407_200000_The_Lead_With_Jake_Tapper/start/60/end/120>, (accessed 19 May 2017).

⁶⁶ BBC News at 10, 4 April 2017 [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/BBCNEWS_20170404_210000_BBC_News_at_Ten/start/120/end/180>, (accessed 19 May 2017).

⁶⁷ BBC News at 10, 5 April 2017 [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/BBCNEWS_20170405_210000_BBC_News_at_Ten/start/0/end/60?q=syria>, (accessed 19 May 2017).

⁶⁸ BBC News at 10, 6 April 2017 [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/BBCNEWS_20170406_210000_BBC_News_at_Ten/start/0/end/60?q=syria>, (accessed 19 May 2017).

⁶⁹ BBC News at 10, 7 April 2017 [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/BBCNEWS_20170407_210000_BBC_News_at_Ten/start/27/end/87?q=syria>, (accessed on 19 May 2017).

5. Empirical findings

5.1.1 CNN New Day 4 April

Mode of presentation

On 4 April CNN New Day, news anchors Chris Cuomo and Alisyn Camerota narrate the first footage from the aftermath of the chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhoun. The mode of presentation in this report features a map to provide the spectator with the geographical context for the suffering. A visual map is followed by scenes from the hospital where wounded are being treated. Everything is narrated in-studio as visuals from the attack are shown.

Multimodal Analysis

In this segment the Camerota and Cuomo utilize voice over to tell the story of a larger narrative. Camerota begins the report by stressing that 10 children are reported dead and comments that

[...] some of the images we have seen and you can see on the screen right now, they are very hard to watch, these are raw images as you can see, children are being treated and doctored there. And it is also the truth of what is happening right now, in a part of the world that seems to be in the collective negligence of the US, the coalition, the allies who all say want to make a difference in Syria. The timing matters. This attack you are seeing the product of right now comes days after the Trump administration announced a major shift in the US policy on Syria. That shift was, no longer would the US have any interest in regime change and ousting Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. Is it just a

coincidence that right after that we saw what could have been want-on attack on his own people?⁷⁰

This narration is running against the backdrop of several different visuals stemming from disparate rebel affiliated sources depicting children and adults given oxygen through gas masks. In this sequence, the verbal-visual correspondence *subject positions* the visuals of the distant suffering of children vis-à-vis the verbalized suggestion that it was perpetrated by President al-Assad. It is thus heavily implied that he holds the *agency* of *persecutor* capable of committing a ‘wanton attack’. Hence, they render the *politics of pity* in this news report into a case of denunciation by ascribing the predication ‘wanton’ to President al-Assad. Moreover, the news anchors’ mediation abandons what the spectator can independently verify from watching the footage to propose an account of the event imbued with feelings of indignation toward the symbolic meaning created by the verbal-visual correspondence. To build the case, the Camerota invites the spectator to trust the veracity of the images as she says: ‘as you can see.’⁷¹ Cuomo, goes onto underscore that ‘this is the truth’, and in so doing strives to impel the spectator to trust the ideological statement he is about to make.⁷² Moreover, he proclaims that the U.S. coalition and its allies are guilty of ‘collective negligence’, a predication ascribe to the ‘difference’ he claims that they want to do in the world.⁷³

All of these semiotic practices work together to promote a sense of *ideological realism*, i.e. we are bearing witness to suffering which can, but has not been ameliorated due to the purported ‘negligence’ of other actors.⁷⁴ Both the visuals and the narration of the news report highlight the suffering of children. In essence, the prevalence of children among the

⁷⁰ CNN 4 April 2017 New Day Broadcast, [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/CNNW_20170404_120000_New_Day/start/180/end/240>, 05.01.35-05.02.30, (accessed 19 May 2017).

⁷¹ Ibid., 05.01.35-0.5.01.37.

⁷² Ibid., 05.01.48.

⁷³ Ibid.,

⁷⁴ Ibid.,

casualties is elevated to attain a *symbolic meaning* in the mediation. They are the distant sufferers who are made visible using verbal and visual semiotics and it is they who are construed as the primary victims whose plight the spectator is beckoned to acknowledge. Moreover, the mediators invoke the immediate past by referencing the Trump administration decision the regime change policy in Syria. President Trump is ascribed the predicate of having acted in ‘neglect’, which allegedly resulted in the ‘product’ seen on the screen. He is consequently being blamed for not having assumed the role of a benefactor in this context. As Cuomo’s enunciation of the word ‘product’ is paired with visuals of a child looking sideways into the camera from beneath an oxygen mask. Consequently, his accusation levelled against the Trump administration verbally subject positions the U.S. president vis-à-vis the visualization of the distant suffering.⁷⁵ The triangle of agencies that formulate in this mediation can be summarized as: President al-Assad - active in the capacity of persecutor, victims and children - passive in the capacity of distant sufferers, U.S. and allies - failed to become benefactors due to negligence.

5.1.2 CNN Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer 5 April

Mode of presentation

This mediation features Wolf Blitzer in-studio who delegates the duty of informing the viewers on the latest on Syria to correspondent Ryan Nobos. In the featured report, Nobos narrates footage from Syria and mixes it with President Trump’s speech and U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley’s speech at the UN Security Council. In addition, the report includes the latest developments on President Trump’s stance on North Korea. In sum, the specificity of the attack on Khan Sheikhoun is blurred to become part of a larger narrative on Trump’s America first foreign policy.

⁷⁵ 5.02.05-5.02.25.

Multimodal analysis

The name “Situation Room”, referencing the room in the White House in which the U.S. president makes crucial decisions on and monitors big crises, captures the essence of the mediation well. Blitzer introduces Nobos who goes onto explain the latest developments on the alleged chemical attack. Footage from President Trump’s speech at Rose Garden is shown in a montage cutting back and forth between his denunciation of the attack and images from the aftermath. Footage of children being sprayed with water is shown as President Trump declares:

When you kill innocent children, innocent babies, babies, little babies, with a chemical gas so lethal that people were shocked to hear what gas it was. That crosses many, many lines, beyond a red line. Many, many lines.⁷⁶

In attaching the predicate ‘innocent’ to children, President Trump underscores their helplessness and lack of agency to act. The practice of editing the material in this fashion has several purposes. First, it visualizes the suffering that President Trump comments upon, effectively making it impossible to look away. Second, but equally important, it juxtaposes the responsibility he declares is “now his”, with the mediated suffering, thereby *subject positioning* him as a possible intervening agent who can act upon the suffering. This constitutes a striking example of juxtaposing scenes of distant suffering with the speech act which, Chouliaraki argues, can be fashioned as a request-response relationship.⁷⁷ However, President Trump’s enunciation lack descriptive character and is rather focused on the “bare

⁷⁶ CNN Situation Room With Wolf Blitzer, 5 April 2017, [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/CNNW_20170405_220000_Situation_Room_With_Wolf_Blitzer/start/180/end/240> 3.03.45—3.04.05, (accessed 19 May 2017).

⁷⁷ Chouliaraki, *Spectatorship of Suffering*, p. 90.

life” associated with the innocent of a child. Hence, the verbalization of ‘innocent babies’ elevates the visuals to attain a *symbolic meaning*, which Nobos takes advantage of to produce a salient sense of *ideological realism*.⁷⁸ President Trump continues by saying:

I now have responsibility and I will have that responsibility and carry it very proudly. I will tell you that.⁷⁹

Nobos’ voice over replies to this proclamation by saying that President Trump’s ‘[...] promise however, did not include a plan to take swift and direct action to solve the crisis.’⁸⁰ As Nobos’s says ‘crisis’, a man wounded in the chemical attack can be seen coughing in an oxygen man. This manner of commenting construes the crisis, and hence the distant suffering witnessed on the screen, as something which can be solved with ‘direct action’. Thus, in line with the topic of denunciation, Nobos mediates a message which seeks to impel the spectator to feel that justice must be done. Moreover, he goes on to construe President Trump as unwilling to commit to action in Syria by stating that ‘The Trump administration’s hands off policy in Syria echoes his pledge to not get the U.S. embroiled in unending conflict.’⁸¹ The next sequence, shows President Trump publicly stating:

I’m not, and I don’t wanna be the President of the world, I’m the President of the United States and from now on, it’s going to be America First.⁸²

Throughout this sequence Nobos invokes the unwillingness President Trump had expressed

⁷⁸ CNN Situation Room With Wolf Blitzer, 5 April 2017, [online video], TV News Archive, https://archive.org/details/CNNW_20170405_220000_Situation_Room_With_Wolf_Blitzer/start/180/end/240,03.04.05-03.04.12, (accessed 19 May 2017).

⁷⁹ Ibid., 03.04.15-03.04.21.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 03.04.22-03.04.26.

⁸¹ Ibid., 03.04.30.

⁸² Ibid., 03.04.40.

in the past, and in so doing, subject positions him against his former self. Ultimately, he casts doubt on the U.S. President's agency as intervening benefactor. The politics of pity is established without any verbal or visual presence of the persecutor. Seemingly, this report is more about President Trump's capacity to act rather than establishing a relationship between persecutor and distant sufferer. In effect, it hides from the spectator what such action would entail. To solve the problem of inaction, Nobos shifts the attention to North Korea. A North Korean missile test and military march is visualized as he narrates:

While Syria festers, the White House is taking a much different approach to North Korea. The President himself is promising to address the problem with North Korea's nuclear weapons program. With or without the support of the most powerful country in the region: China.⁸³

Thus, the perceived threat stemming from North Korea is *subject positioned* as a potential persecutor vis-à-vis the U.S. and construed as a 'problem' against which President Trump is resolute to take action against. Hence, the indignation over inaction towards the suffering of Syrian children is conflated with action taken against North Korea. The resulting narrative is therefore that President Trump with the capacity as benefactor, is willing to take measures against a deeply militarized state such as North Korea, but unwilling to take 'swift and direct action' to help the Syrian children visualized and verbalized in the beginning of the report.

5.1.3 CNN The Lead With Jake Tapper 6 April

Mode of presentation

Jake Tapper introduces this segment in-studio with help of correspondent Jim Acosta and an unnamed correspondent who narrates the news report. The report in question utilizes footage

⁸³ Ibid., 03.04.47-03.05.10.

from the aftermath of the chemical attack, visuals of U.S. and Syrian military capabilities, maps, statements by President Trump and imagery depicting President al-Assad. The editing is fast-paced and makes far reaching suggestions for military action on the U.S. part.

Multimodal analysis

In the beginning of the segment, Tapper introduces CNN correspondent Jim Acosta who briefs the viewer on the latest developments. Acosta explains that the U.S. calculus has changed very much in the wake of the attack and that President Trump thinks that something should happen. In the next scene President Trump is seen answering questions to reporters aboard Air Force One:

I think what Assad did is terrible. I think what happened in Syria is one of the truly egregious crimes. It shouldn't have happened. It shouldn't be allowed to happen.

Journalist: Do you think Assad should leave power in Syria?

I think what happened in Syria is a disgrace to humanity. He's there and I guess he's running things, so something should happen.⁸⁴

President Trump's denunciation endows the President al-Assad, who is construed as the persecutor, with the predicates 'terrible', 'egregious' and 'disgrace'. In essence he is denounced as someone capable of committing crimes which constitute a disgrace to humanity, thereby stressing the seriousness of the nature of the attack. As Acosta picks up and explains the prospects of a U.S. military response, President al-Assad is featured briefly in the visuals with a subtitle reading "Trump on Assad: Something should happen". Tapper thanks Acosta for the update and proceeds to introduce a report which establishes the context

⁸⁴ CNN The Lead With Jake Tapper, 6 April 2017, [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/CNNW_20170406_200000_The_Lead_With_Jake_Tapper/start/180/end/240>, 01.03.22-01.03.50, (accessed 19 May 2017).

of the unfolding political event:

A grieving father, cradling his dead children. As the death toll rises, more bodies were counted, 86 murdered, including 26 children. Tonight the Trump administration is considering airstrikes against Bashar al-Assad's regime in direct retaliation for bombing with nerve agent here in Northern Syria's province.⁸⁵

The visuals feature Abdul Hamid al-Youssef, the man who was interviewed by the BBC on 5 April. Yet, instead of lingering on his pain and sufferer, the voice over quickly turns this indignation to a call for action, in effect creating a symbolic relationship between the verbal and the visual. As the voice over denounces President al-Assad, the corresponding visuals show a U.S. warplane taking off from an aircraft carrier. Hence the agency of persecutor is verbally subject positioned vis-à-vis the display of possible benefactor in the form of U.S. military capabilities to 'retaliate'. By ascribing the predication 'retaliate' to the Trump administration, the narration solidifies the agency of benefactor. Consequently, construing the capacity in which the U.S. would act as retaliatory, takes away the offensive nature of conducting an airstrike.

President al-Assad is featured in visuals from Syrian state television showing him advancing towards the screen in the company of a large group of men. The narration paired to these images describe Syria's military capabilities:

[...] Assad can still use artillery and rocket shells filled with deadly agent and barrel bombs thrown out of helicopters.⁸⁶

⁸⁵Ibid., 01.05.45-01.06.10.

⁸⁶Ibid., 01.07.00-01.07.05.

The physical manifestation of President al-Assad fades into footage of cluster bombings and barrel bombs thrown out of a helicopter. In the next instance, the aircraft seen in earlier in the segment is shown again as the correspondent goes on to explain the range of military options President Trump has at his disposal. Computer graphics show U.S. warships, a launch of Tomahawk missiles, and a stealth bomber taking off. This display of power is thus juxtaposed against the preceding footage of barrel bombs, effectively asserting U.S. power dominance in the visual presentation. Most importantly, the inclusion of barrel bombs ascribes a low level of military sophistication to President al-Assad's capabilities. The *a priori* knowledge that this presupposes is further underscored by the visual and verbal description of U.S. military options. Thus, it enables Trump administration's agency to act, without the restraints of repercussions in terms of military retaliation from Syria. In order to bring it all into context one last time, the concluding segment shows President Trump denouncing the President al-Assad for killing 'innocent babies', thus rendering the overarching politics of pity of the mediation into a topic of denunciation in which the distant suffering of Syrian children is given a *symbolic meaning*.⁸⁷

5.1.4 CNN The Lead With Jake Tapper 7 April

Mode of presentation

The mode of presentation in this starts in-studio with Jake Tapper and features a report by Jim Acosta. The report focuses on the U.S. attack on Syria and rehashes footage from the chemical weapons attack. Computer graphics are utilized to show the specifics of the attack in a manner which resembles scenes from computer games. Statements by U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley and a Syrian spokesperson are also included in the mediation.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 01.06.50-0.1.08.10.

Multimodal analysis

CNN news anchor Jake Tapper introduces the show by recounting the shift in U.S. policy which happened shortly beforehand the chemical attack. Behind Tapper, a visual backdrop shows a picture of President al-Assad with the words ‘Depraved Attack’ written above. Thus the visualized accusation ties in with the verbal denouncement of the Syrian president. He goes onto invoke the memory of the chemical attack on Ghouta in 2013 by saying that:

[...] it wasn’t even the deadliest attack. That was in 2013 and citizen Trump at that point opposed any intervention, but this time President Trump, well, he threw his long-standing position out the window.⁸⁸

In doing so, he verbally *subject positions* Donald Trump, the citizen vis-à-vis Donald Trump, the president in a struggle where the latter prevailed. The verbal narration in the news report that follows claims that U.S. military is trying to determine if Russia bombed a hospital treating victims from the chemical weapons attack. This suggestion is verbalized over the rehashed visuals of the aftermath of the chemical weapons which depict rescue workers trying to decontaminate children with water. In the next instance, images of the U.S. missile launch are shown in a display of power as the correspondent goes on to describe the strike. Embedded in this stream of consecutive clips lies a verbalized accusation followed by a visualization of U.S. military might, which *subjects positions* Russia head to head with the U.S. This assessment is further reinforced when the montage is succeeded by U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley’s statement, in which she underscores that the U.S. is prepared to take further action.⁸⁹ In essence, the mediation at play in this editing deploys the semiotics cues of the topic of denunciation to keep the door open to more strikes. Based on

⁸⁸ CNN The Lead With Jake Tapper 7 April 2017, [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/CNNW_20170407_200000_The_Lead_With_Jake_Tapper/start/60/end/120>, 01.01.56-01.02.03, (accessed 19 May 2017).

⁸⁹ Ibid., 01.03.25-01.04.12.

these observations the news report represents an example of *ideological realism* which rehashes the *symbolic meaning* of the distant suffering to suggest that matter may not yet have been settled.

5.2.1 BBC News at 10, 4 April

Mode of presentation

BBC News at 10 mediate the chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun using correspondents, maps, footage from the scene and interweave it with interviews with Syrians who had lost family members and personnel working at one of the hospitals treating wounded.

Multimodal analysis

News anchor Huw Edwards introduces a report by BBC Middle East correspondent Jeremy Bowen, who utilizes highly descriptive linguistics to narrate the news report. Visuals of a boy foaming from his mouth is described as showing ‘classic symptoms of poisoning’, and ‘the victims lungs were badly affected’ is paired with images of a man struggling to breathe. In addition, he also details the measures taken by rescue workers as they cut open the victims’ clothes and spray them with water to get rid of residues of the nerve agent.⁹⁰ Hence, the statements made through the verbalization of the distant suffering can seemingly be verified by the visuals thus far in the report. This correspondence between the verbal and the visual lends a quality of *perceptual realism* to Bowen’s narration. Even as the spatial location shifts to a hospital, he narrates the circumstance under which the doctors worked to save life stating

⁹⁰ BBC News at 10, 4 April 2017 [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/BBCNEWS_20170404_210000_BBC_News_at_Ten/start/120/end/180>, 10.02.49-10.03.15, (accessed 19 May 2017).

‘There doesn’t seem to be much oxygen there which could have saved more people.’⁹¹ In doing so, he imbues the perceptual realism of the broadcast with *a topic of sentiment* aimed at showing sympathy for the hospital workers’ agency as benefactors who struggle to alleviate the distant suffering of the Other.

Despite the nature of the mediated suffering, Bowen himself does not venture into emotional discourse in the report. Yet, it is very present in the overall mediation, most prominently when an interviewed mother says: ‘I lost my sons my sons, my children, my neighbors, my daughter, I only have God left.’⁹² However, this testimony is not dwelled upon in Bowen’s narration and it is therefore left to speak for itself. In the next scene he addresses the temporal aspects of the chemical attack by linking it discursively to the 2013 chemical attack in saying: ‘Confronted with scenes just like these, President Obama threatened with military action, and then pulled back when Syria gave up its chemical weapons.’⁹³ He stops short of denouncing Syria but suggests that if the attack was perpetrated by the Syrian government, it would indicate that some of the chemical weapons did not leave the country. UK Prime Minister Theresa May is featured making a statement which echoes this sentiment:

I am appalled by the reports that there has been a chemical weapons attack on a town South of Idlib. Allegedly by the regime. We condemn the use of chemical weapons in all circumstances. If proven, it is further evidence of the barbarism of the Syrian regime.⁹⁴

As Prime Minister May invokes the presupposition barbarism she effectively ascribes it to the Syrian government, thus rendering it a denunciation regardless of whether it is guilty to the distant suffering or not. In the next segment however, Bowen is seen in-studio, analyzing the

⁹¹ Ibid., 10.03.30

⁹² BBC News at 10, 4 April 2017, 10.03.47-10.03.56.

⁹³ Ibid., 11.04.05-11.04.16.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 11.04.30-11.04.44.

political implications of the chemical attack. He explains that Idlib is one of the rebel's last strongholds and suggests that the outcome of the political crisis in 2013 may have led President al-Assad to '[...] think he can get away with it again?'⁹⁵ At this point Bowen deviates from the primarily descriptive report to construe President al-Assad as persecutor, by invoking the 2013 attack. Thus, the suggestion that President al-Assad is the persecutor is constituted in the presupposition regarding his guilt in the previous attack. *A priori* knowledge are therefore deployed to produce meaning in the present. As Bowen makes this suggestion in-studio, the visual backdrop depicts victims of the 2013 attack along with the words 'Ghouta August 2013'. When he walks towards the camera, the visuals fade and turn into pictures of President al-Assad. This semiotic choice constitutes a clear act of visual and verbal subject positioning as it puts the distant suffering of the Ghouta victims vis-à-vis their persecutor. As the news report draws to an end, the distant suffering within the mediation of the event comes off as a case of ideological realism due to the denunciation that emerges throughout the clip.

5.2.2 BBC News at 10, 5 April

Mode of presentation

The mode of presentation in this broadcast includes testimonies from survivors of the attack, statements from the UN Security Council, President Trump, correspondents as well as footage from the aftermath of the attack.

Multimodal analysis

News anchor Huw Edwards starts by updating the spectators on the latest developments on

⁹⁵ Ibid., 11.05.20-11.05.31.

Syria. He recounts the death toll and explains that ‘Syria and Russia have both come under intense criticism [...],’ during the emergency session at the UN Security Council, which took place that day. Edwards presents a news report assembled by Washington correspondent Nick Bryant, which starts off with interviews and witnesses’ testimonies on the attack and its immediate aftermath. He introduces the victims by name and reveals the family losses they have suffered from the attack. The first victim, a child named Ibrahim, is shown crying in the visuals and Bryant narrates that the boy’s father was killed in the attack. Ibrahim’s grandmother is sitting by his bed and recounts what they were doing when the attack occurred. The next victim, a man named Abdul Hamid al-Youssef, apparently lost 20 members of his family. Bryant narrates:

It’s also easy to become desensitized to the suffering of the Syrian people. Consider the plight of Abdul Hamid al-Youssef al-Youssef. He lost 20 members of his family, including his twin children.⁹⁶

In presenting Ibrahim and Abdul Hamid al-Youssef by name Bryant aims to humanize them and endow their distant suffering with agency on a first name basis. The decision to feature Ibrahim’s grandmother turns the mode of distant suffering towards the *topic of sentiment* as it is understood that he still has someone to care for him. Moreover, the statement that it is easy to become desensitized serves as an implicit encouragement not to look away, but try to grasp the width of the suffering. As Boltanski argues, if the spectator looks away or turns off the television ‘[...] he could be accused, or may accuse himself, of indifference.’⁹⁷ Indeed, this is the precise accusation Bryant levels at the spectator and it constitutes a cause for denunciation. Throughout this part of the report, the anguish and desolation of having lost family members is highly visualized to correspond to the narration and testimonies. President Trump is featured in the next segment where he declares that:

⁹⁶ BBC News at 10, 5 April 2017 [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/BBCNEWS_20170405_210000_BBC_News_at_Ten/start/0/end/60?q=syria>, accessed on 19 May 2017, 10.03.33-10.03.46.

⁹⁷ Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, p. 26.

These heinous acts by the Assad regime, cannot be tolerated. My attitude toward Syria and Assad, has changed very much. It crossed a lot of lines for me.⁹⁸

Starting here, the mediation proceeds to evoke a politics of pity which leans towards denunciation. Footage from the UN Security Council's emergency session during which U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley criticized Russia for negligence is shown followed by visuals from the aftermath of the chemical attack. Bryant speaks over the visuals:

This is the deadliest attack in nearly four years, and after that atrocity in 2013, the Assad regime were supposed to have handed over its chemical weapons stockpile, but it continues to use banned toxic weapons and experts believe the evidence points to Damascus having carried out another war crime.⁹⁹

Thus, while the semiotic practices employed sought to display the distant suffering in all its bareness through a topic of sentiment at first, he proceeds to suggest that the Syrian government was indeed responsible for the attack based on the beliefs of experts and the presupposition that it has done so in the past. The distant suffering in the visuals takes on a *symbolic meaning* as Bryant verbally denounces President al-Assad's prosecution of the war. Hence, the articulation of the presupposition that construes President al-Assad as persecutor, subject positions him vis-à-vis the distant suffering.

⁹⁸ BBC News at 10, 5 April 2017, 10.04.19-10.04.30.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 10.05.55-10.06.16.

5.2.3 BBC News at 10, 6 April

Mode of presentation

This report begins in studio with a short introduction by news anchor Clive Myrie. The report on Syria is presented by correspondent Nick Bryant who narrates footage from Syria through voice over.

Multimodal analysis

The report featured in this broadcast is narrated by Nick Bryant. His report starts by revisiting Abdul Hamid al-Youssef, who was seen in pain at the loss of his family members the previous day. In this sequence, he is pictured crying at a cemetery, Bryant narrates:

Yesterday we saw Abdul Hamid al-Youssef, grieving for his twin children who suffered in the attack, today he suffered the further agony of burying them.¹⁰⁰

In connecting both the verbal and the visual to the report from the previous day, he strikes the very same emotionally imbued chord associated with *categorical realism*. As Abdul Hamid al-Youssef kneels over the grave of his children, he is surrounded by five friends who are trying their best to console him amid his grief. Thus, it becomes a powerful vehicle to communicate a politics of pity which is based upon *the topic sentiment* towards his friends. It does not turn into denunciation due to the absence of a persecutor to blame for his sorrow. Bryant reflects on the nature of the distant suffering in Syria:

¹⁰⁰ BBC News at 10, 6 April 2017 [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/BBCNEWS_20170406_210000_BBC_News_at_Ten/start/0/end/60?q=syria>, 10.02.55-10.03.12, (accessed 19 May 2017).

Often the images we see from Syria are of helpless victims, caught in a spiral of violence that they have no way of controlling.¹⁰¹

The articulation ties into the following scene in which children and rescue workers in the besieged Damascus suburb of East Ghouta, are seen holding protest signs reading ‘We are next’ and ‘I need a gas mask’.¹⁰² Moreover, the word ‘victim’ becomes a presupposition as it presupposes the existence of a persecutor who is to blame for the distant suffering. Furthermore, the adjective ‘helpless’ functions as a predicate which defines the capacity of the victims and thus deprives them of agency. As Bryant continues his narration he inserts agency into the victims:

But today these Syrians became activists, doctors, rescue workers, children a silent protest, an expression of dignified rage, an act of self preservation. They’re demanding punishment for the Assad regime, and protection from the international community.¹⁰³

A construction of the Syrian identity consisting of doctors, rescue workers and children emerges from this pronouncement and establishes an understanding of the civilian nature of the sufferers seen in the visuals. Their agency arise from the fact that Bryant endows the distant sufferers with the means of acting by inscribing them with the predicate self-preservation. When Bryant endows them with the means of acting in self-preservation, it becomes a predicate by which they regain some degree of agency to act. Moreover, the enunciation of the Syrians’ feelings and aims carry an explicit temporal and spatial link to the Khan Sheikhoun, but also an implicit connection to the 2013 chemical attack in Ghouta. It is implicit because the only hint of the protesters’ spatial location can be read from a small

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 10.03.12-10.03.30.

¹⁰² Ibid., 10.03.30.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 10.03.19-10.03.36.

protest sign reading ‘Ghouta’. The politics of pity emerging out of this semiotic choice is unequivocally a form of *denunciation*, i.e., it seeks to point out the injustice and demand justice for the suffering of the distant other. The most striking aspect is that the call for punishment for the persecutor, that is, President al-Assad, and protection against the distant suffering comes from the sufferers themselves. This call is then answered in a request and response manner by the next segment which shows U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson commenting that they are considering an ‘appropriate response’.¹⁰⁴ Consequently, the mediation underscores the distant sufferers the agency deficit and thereof incapacity to act, and subject positions it with the agency and capacity of the possible *benefactor*.

5.2.4 BBC News at 10, 7 April

Mode of presentation

This airing is presented by news anchor Reeta Chakrabarti in-studio who goes on to present correspondent Nick Bryant’s news report on Syria. The mediation also includes footage from the U.S. launch of cruise missiles, the aftermath of that attack, as well as President Trump’s statement on it.

Multimodal analysis

BCC correspondent Nick Bryant puts the launch of cruise missiles front and center in the report and describes it as a response to the chemical attack. While the verbalization of the U.S. military strike can seemingly be verified by the visuals, the overarching verbal-visual correspondence emerges as symbolic as the report progresses. The next sequence features a montage that juxtaposes a speech by President Trump with visuals of victims from the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 10.03.37-10.03.52.

chemical attack. President Trump claims enunciates that there can be ‘no dispute that Syria used banned chemical weapons’ and that striking Syria was deemed a vital national security issue for the U.S. in order to deter further use. Thus, it subject positions the President Trump vis-à-vis the distant suffering the footage he acted upon. The voice over paired with these pictures narrates:

The grotesque after-effects of the attack, the U.S. believes the nerve agent sarin was used, horrified the world, and more importantly, horrified this president. A line had been crossed. Unlike his predecessor, he was going to act.¹⁰⁵

The narration of the attack does not follow the visuals, but rather strives at utilizing the imagery in order to make a statement about the world, hence rendering it an instance of *symbolic* relationship between the verbal and the visual. President Trump is once again featured in the visuals as he goes onto denounce the Syrian president:

Assad choked out the lives of helpless men, women and children. It was a slow and brutal death for so many. Even beautiful babies were cruelly murdered in this very barbaric attack. No child of god should ever suffer such horror.¹⁰⁶

By verbally depicting President al-Assad as having choked and murdered helpless ‘[...] men women and children,’ President Trump addresses the visuals that BBC inserted in his statement. In essence his accusation delivers what Boltanski phrases as an ‘[...] explanation of the way in which the persecutor’s action has affected the unfortunate’s destiny’.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, he connects these predicates with the predicates ‘cruelly’ and ‘barbaric’ in order to

¹⁰⁵ BBC News at 10, 7 April 2017 [online video], TV News Archive, <https://archive.org/details/BBCNEWS_20170407_210000_BBC_News_at_Ten/start/27/end/87?q=syria>, (accessed 19 May 2017).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.,

¹⁰⁷ Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, p. 62.

inscribe the markings of persecutor into the agency by which President al-Assad acts.

6. Discussion

The analysis of BBC and CNN's mediation of the chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun presented both differences and similarities. BBC is more inclined toward using investigative reasoning, guiding the spectator through interviews and several modes of the politics of pity. While the topic of denunciation lingers over all of the news reports, BBC's mediation of the crisis begins in a comparably restrained tone on 4 April and features a greater degree of semiotics evoking a topic of sentiment in the reports. It is ultimately in-studio in that broadcast where the denunciation starts from a mode of suggesting who the persecutor is with regards to the presuppositions ascribed to President al-Assad. The voice over narrative in BBC's first report on the attack deployed much more descriptive enunciations of the distant suffering. Bowen utilized this foundation to produce a topic of sentiment through an interview with a doctor and description of their shortage on oxygen. Moreover, BBC's tendency towards endowing the distant sufferers with a voice of their own through short interviews is manifested in both the 4 April and the 5 April reports. CNN does not employ interviews with victims at all in their mode of presentation. Furthermore, BBC builds a coherent narrative which proposes new dispositions and engages directly with the visuals in relation to the spectator. This is perhaps most visible in the report on 6 April in which we are encountered with 'a grieving father' and behold as the inhabitants of Ghouta are endowed with agency and thus the capacity to act out of self-preservation. In BBC's mediation of the chemical attack and its aftermath, the spectator is impelled to feel with and sympathize with the distant sufferers.

In CNN's mediation, the U.S. responsibility to uphold justice and decentness is underscored in the visual-verbal correspondence as well as in the discourse. This is first encountered on 4

April when Cuomo blames the U.S. for letting the suffering happen due to negligence. In the mediation of that newscast, Cuomo subjects positions President Trump vis-à-vis the visuals to stress that it happened on his watch. This was before President Trump had made any statement on the attack, but even after he had on 5 April, there lies an implicit criticism in Nobos comments. As found in the analysis, he critiques the President for not coming up with a plan for action to alleviate the distant suffering. Moreover, the juxtaposing of the dual crises of Syria and North Korea constitutes another instance which overshadows the seriousness of Syria and attempts at blurring the risks entailed with taking action. The decision to not show Syrian or Russian military capabilities or even ask what the results could be, but instead visualize the North Korean military amounts to false equivalence regarding very serious foreign policy issues. However, there is a utility behind featuring two fundamentally disparate issues within the same news report. As observed in the analysis, when President al-Assad from the discourse and the visuals, there is no persecutor represented who can be blamed for the distant suffering of the Syrian children in the footage. The indignation that overcomes spectators upon seeing children brutally murdered and hearing the affective denouncements needs a release. It is at this point that Nobos introduces the North Korean missile launch into the narrative, effectively satisfying the need for someone to blame over the injustices of the world. Consequently, the CNN's subject positioning of Trump toward distant suffering in Syria and persecutor in the form of North Korea, elevates him to a privileged position in the 5 April news report on Syria.

The act of subject positioning between the verbal and the visual plane is manifested at various instances. On 6 April, the U.S. military capabilities are most strikingly featured in an almost ritualistic manner featuring footage of the same fighter jet taking flight twice over the course of a minute. In terms of distant suffering, it is only shown in brevity, rehashing the footage from the attack. Furthermore, Abdul Hamid al-Youssef who was interviewed BBC is only mentioned with a single sentence here in the 6 April CNN news report. The decision to shut out the witnesses' own stories renders the Syrian victims void of agency. What seems to

be more important is President Trump's feelings about the chemical attack which are edited into short segments and aired at several instances. President Trump's reaction to the 'innocent' babies is e.g. utilized on both 5 April and the following day as a vehicle for the mediation of the distant suffering.

As the analysis shows, the legitimization of the U.S. strike on Syria began even almost immediately after the attack. The discourse shaping this position consisted of ascribing predicates such as wanton and depraved to President al-Assad, but mostly it would seem, CNN could rely on President Trump's denunciations. Presuppositions regarding the Syrian Arab Army's military capabilities were also invoked to both verbally and visually and juxtaposed with the U.S. military hardware. On 7 April, the same footage of distant suffering was again and pitted against suggestions of Russian complicity. The overarching sense stemming from the sequence which positions the accusation vis-à-vis the distant suffering followed by the launch of the U.S. Tomahawk missiles on 7 April is that there is yet more to the story.

CNN constructs a reality in which U.S. inaction towards the distant suffering is deemed impossible. By mediating the distant suffering and positioning President Trump previously held views against his newfound self-declared "flexibility", they enhance the expectations for U.S. military action. Thus, the channel's mediation partakes in the creation of a present in which the presuppositions regarding the president's views on Syria and Assad seemingly cannot co-exist with his new stance. The explicit denunciation of the persecutor needs to be resolved through action. While both channel's address the U.S. as possible benefactor, BBC does not indulge in the war imagery which CNN suggests could be used. In BBC's mediation of the distant suffering, the call for action came from Syrians themselves. To conclude, the attempts at humanizing the distant sufferer beyond possible mobilization for action was solely left to BBC.

Concluding remarks

In addition to the study undertaken here, I set out of to contribute to the field of inquiry in two ways. First I argued that further analytical tools, most prominently featured the concept of subject positioning, can be deployed to scrutinize the breadth of agencies pitted against each other across the verbal and visual plane over the course of a news report. Second, I argued for applying the ‘analytics of mediation’ to research how a crisis is mediated day by day as it unfolds. I hope that this study has showcased the utility of conceptualizing subject positioning in this way in a satisfactory manner.

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