

Media Framing of Hybrid War: 2016 Russian Election Interference
Case

By
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Abstract

This study examined the frame-building process of Russian (English-speaking news, aimed at U.S. audience) and U.S. news during the Russian election interference scandal. Hybrid war is an ambiguous and relatively new concept for the public, political elites, and journalists. Understanding how news covered Russian interference events is crucial because it gives a better understanding of how *journalists* construct the meaning behind Russian interference in the situation when U.S. official discussion surrounding the hybrid war is vague and ununified (Gotev, 2017). The study looked at how both U.S. news media and Russian news media covered the act of hybrid war and compared how both sources used frames. The study used a qualitative approach and a more specific thematic analysis of news content to distinguish its main frames. The study found that news sources used a common conflict theme, which engendered different frames. Frames varied depending on partisanship and the country of origin of the news sources. U.S. non-partisan and liberal media created similar frames, like external attack frame and national security frame. In contrast, the U.S. conservative news and Russian English-speaking news had some similarities. They produced a standard internal disunity frame and two differing guilt-based frames: American hypocrisy and Liberal guilt frame. Other similarities and differences within frames are discussed in the study.

Keywords: Hybrid war, framing, election interference, media, misinformation, framing theory

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review	6
Framing.....	6
Hybrid war	9
Communication, Information, and Hybrid War.....	12
Framing of Hybrid War Across Media Systems.....	18
Chapter 3: Methods.....	23
Case Study	26
Sample	28
Data analysis procedure	30
Researchers' Standpoint	33
Chapter 3: Findings.....	35
Conflict Theme: External Foreign Attack Frame v. Internal Disunity Frame.....	36
External Foreign Attack Frame: The Rachel Maddow Show & ABC News with David Muir	37
National Security Frame	45
Internal Disunity Frame: Hannity and Russia Today	50
Liberal Guilt Frame.....	59
Framing American Hypocrisy.....	63
Chapter 5: Discussion	68

Dominant Theme and Frames.....	68
Implications	74
Theoretical Contributions	76
Limitations & Future Directions.....	78
References.....	82

Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2014, the people of Crimea voted for independence from Ukraine in a referendum after being a part of Ukraine for nearly a century. In 2016, the United Kingdom unexpectedly voted to leave the European Union. In 2016, but in the United States, Donald Trump won the Presidential election despite being behind in popular vote in national polls. All these decisions seemed unexpected. However, despite sometimes being controversial, referenda and elections are the main staples of democracy and manifestations of the masses' will. But were these outcomes as clean-cut as they appear? In 2013, American defense experts discovered a news article of Russian General Valery Gerasimov. The article discussed Russia's new tactics in "ambiguous warfare," including information war, which was used to "brainwash Ukrainian population, and whitewash Russian actions in the West," and how ambiguous warfare, or what NATO specialist started calling "hybrid war," used democratic institutions against the democracy itself (Woolley & Howard, 2019, p.22). The Crimean referendum, Brexit, and Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. elections were considered as acts of hybrid war (Taylor, 2019; Wolley & Howard, 2019). However, the outcomes of hybrid war attacks differed. While national security specialists claimed that, even though Russia might have meddled in Brexit referendum, it did not change the course of voting (Taylor, 2019). The Crimean referendum was deemed illegitimate, and Russia was recognized as an aggressor state by the international community. Russian interference in American elections presents a case where an act of hybrid war influenced the U.S. elections (U.S. Congress. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2017); however, it was not officially recognized by the White House and did not lead to any serious consequences for the Russian side.

Defense specialists argue that modern conflicts that include military tactics and cyber warfare are a new type of nonlinear warfare (a conflict that does not have clear demarcation, front line and distinct friendly/ enemy areas, a conflict where strategies are not limited only to a military force) which is called hybrid war (Schnauffer, 2017; Stojar, 2017). These invisible-to-the-average-citizen threats might not be clearly identified as other foreign threats; nevertheless, threats like these exist. The consequences can bring irrevocable damage to democracy and international relations. Some threats are not connected to military action at all. Economic pressures, election interference, informational and cyber-attacks do not fit into the conventional western concepts of warfare (Stojar, 2017).

Both NATO and the leading European Union Institutions have described hybrid war as one of the most important threats of the 21st century (as cited in Caliskan & Cramers, 2018). Simultaneously, while hybrid war became one of the most widely used terms by journalists when describing modern warfare outside the U.S., the usage of the term by journalists and the public understanding of the term is unclear (Caliskan & Cramers, 2018). Understanding how media content portrays hybrid war instances is essential because media frames can influence how the public thinks about specific events. According to Su et al. (2019), "framing is the process where an overarching template organizes the meanings that get assigned to a communication text" (p.203). According to Olmastroni (2014), frames help in shaping public opinion on a problem and, at the same time, serve as a bridge between the political elite and the mass public. The public does not accept frames that are contradictory or are not persuasive enough. The public's lack of support or denial of a frame informs political elites that their frame is not a satisfactory explanation for the events; therefore, it must be changed. Media framing is essential regarding the acts of mass violence, such as military conflicts, protests, and terrorist acts (Kearns et al.,

2018). While historical context is vital in constructing enemy identity, news programming plays a vital role in reinforcing and supporting the enemy identity. U.S. journalists have created a sustainable frame of a "Muslim" threat, which leaves little space for identifying non-Muslim threats that are underrepresented or in the media discussion (Kearns et al., 2018). Because of a lack of discussion surrounding non-Muslim threats, it is crucial to see how media is framing specific international or even national conflicts that have elements of hybrid warfare. Are they framing them as a cyberattack, informational war, terrorism, or international conflict?

The 2016 Russian election interference scandal—an event that was covered in conservative, liberal and international media, reignited public debate about the use of social media and divided opinions about main institutions in the United States (Badawy et al., 2018; Fisher, 2017)—serves as a case study for media coverage of a hybrid war. Interference in the electoral process is rightfully viewed as a threat to democracy, and interference from a foreign government creates an even bigger problem for election security (Badawy, Ferrara, & Lerman, 2018). However, U.S. political elites disagreed about how to define the Russian intervention. According to the U.S. House of Representatives Intelligence Committee, Russian election interference had a goal "to [sow] discord in the U.S. political system," "undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process" and more specifically to "denigrate Secretary Clinton" ("Exposing Russia's Effort to Sow Discord Online: The Internet Research Agency and Advertisements," 2018). Some officials even went further. For example, Rex Tillerson, the Secretary of State in the Trump administration, called Russian interference in the election none other than an "act of hybrid warfare" (Gotev, 2017). However, President Trump and his administration denied any claims that Russia could have helped him win the elections (Horsley & Parks, 2018). Understanding how news covered Russian interference events is vital because of these varied

definitions of the threat. If political elites were sending confusing messages, journalists received conflicting information about the information they needed to transmit to the public. They decided on their own how to frame the issue and interpret its severity.

Therefore, it is essential to know how *journalists* construct the meaning behind Russian interference in the situation when U.S. official discussion surrounding the hybrid war is vague and ununified. On the one hand, it is important to see if American news programs used a one-sided, Trump administration-backed view of external interference while dismissing any threat. As the public mostly gets its political information from the media, it is sometimes force-fed a one-sided view on the issue and is likely to embrace the government's interpretation line (Boaz, 2005; Chong & Druckman, 2007; Olmastroni, 2014).

On the other hand, when alternative frames arise from multiple sources, the frame created by the government can be rejected by the public (Benford & Snow, 2000). As U.S. officials did not have one framing strategy, and Secretary Tillerson's remarks clearly labeling Russian interference as the hybrid war were seen as controversial (Gotev, 2017), it can be hypothesized that the United States presidential administration did not have one cohesive frame of reference. As a result, journalists from partisan and non-partisan media may have been left to construct their frames or adopt alternative frames from other sources. Therefore, the ununified response of both U.S. officials and possibly of U.S. media might have given more opportunities for Russian counter-framing that might underplay the threat and shift the blame. This possibility calls for an analysis of the differences in the framing of hybrid war between U.S. and Russian news sources.

This study examined the frame-building process of Russian (English-speaking news, aimed at U.S. audience) and U.S. news during the Russian election interference scandal, which includes the coverage of critical events during Robert Muller's investigation and Robert Muller's

testimonies before Congress. The study looked at how both U.S. news media and Russian news media covered the act of hybrid war and compared which frames were used by both sources. The study used a qualitative approach and more specifically thematic analysis of news content to distinguish main frames in the news coverage to answer these questions. The study found that news sources used a common conflict theme, which engendered different frames. Frames varied depending on partisanship and the country of origin of the news sources. U.S. non-partisan and liberal media created similar to each other frames in contrast to U.S. conservative news and Russian English-speaking news that had some similarities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

As a hybrid war as a concept is very flexible and has multiple definitions, the way it is covered in news media may shape the audience's perceptions of a foreign threat (or lack thereof)—the sections below overview news framing theory, as well as the multiple definitions of hybrid war. The sections also preview certain factors within U.S. and Russian media systems that might have influenced the hybrid war's framing. This review offers framing theory as a theoretical, analytical tool for studying an ambiguous phenomenon such as hybrid war.

Framing

Sociologists used the term frame to describe an interpretational framework to understand a culture, which would allow people to develop a subjective sense of reality (Goffman, 1974). Gitlin (2007) combined a sociological interpretation with a psychological approach to framing by viewing frames as an interpretive schema. However, in Gitlin's (2007) research, an interpretive schema results from a rational psychological selection of already existing in society cultural patterns. Recent studies moved from a "culturalist" view of frames to social constructivism view. More specifically, recent studies tried to determine how socially constructed frames interacted with individuals' ideas that have been recently accessed and frequently activated through media coverage (Entman, 2010; Olmastroni, 2014). Therefore, the current project approaches a frame as "an organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration of information" (Olmastroni, 2014, p.12).

Entman (2010) offers one of the most prominent definitions of frames in the news production context. According to Entman (2010), the news framing process consists of journalists selecting and highlighting some parts of events or issues in news coverage and

making connections in a way that promotes solution, interpretation, or evaluation of the issue (Entman, 2010). Journalists create frames of reference based on their own *or* elite political judgments. The frames that end up in the news can influence news audiences' thoughts about political issues. However, a news consumer's interpretation of the concept is influenced by preexisting beliefs, meaning that people's previous predispositions might dictate which frames to accept and which not (Neuman et al., 1992). Typically, several possible frames compete to become a frame that will emerge in a news story and/or become the most effective representation of reality across many news presentations (Scheufele, 1999).

News framing involves journalists making judgments about a subject of news, selecting information about that subject for publication, and making decisions about presenting the story in the news (Guzman, 2016). According to Entman (2003), framing is the central process in which political elites and journalists exercise influence over each other, making them interdependent. Entman (2003) formalized the link between political elites and news frames through his cascading activation model, which predicts the spread of information and the creation of frames from elites to journalists and from journalists to the news audience. He stated that the news frames shaped the way people think about certain problems. Framing coherence within political elites is necessary as frames help the elite defy certain events or conditions as problematic, identify causes of the events, convey moral judgments, and endorse improvements to the problematic situation (Entman, 2003). According to this model, specific issue frames start at the administration level. At that level, the President and other officials, such as the Chief of Staff or Secretary of State, decide which existing public mental associations concerning certain problems or events to activate to suit the general public and news circulation. The administration then disseminates these associations to other elite networks, including Congress, other staff, experts,

and White House insiders. As White House insiders and other Washington officials have their connections with journalists, both officials and insiders transmit the White House frame of interpretation along with their thoughts and input. Based on all the transmitted information and cues-built frames, journalists present frames to the public (Entman, 2003). The public, in its turn, can either accept presented frames or deny it. The political elite and journalists learn whether the frame was accepted through public opinion polls and then decide to change the frame and make it more convincing (Entman, 2003). Therefore, the frame-building process is influenced by political elites, journalists, and the public. In the proposed study, framing theory provides an essential basis for analyzing what frames are constructed for hybrid war and what kind of Russian interference elements as an act of hybrid war was highlighted in U.S. and Russian news coverage.

Prior research has detailed the complex interconnections among frames in news coverage of foreign affairs. For instance, Ha (2017) found that news outlets might have reproduced the same frames as political elites when covering foreign affairs. In the case of the Arab Spring, even though political elites talked more about U.S. involvement in the Middle East, and journalists were portraying the protests through the frame of chaos, there were still many common themes of “democratic transformation,” “multilateralism,” “human dignity” and “guilty hegemon,” which were dominant in both journalists’ frames and political elites’ frames. Rowling et al. (2011) argued that journalists could challenge specific White House frames when covering foreign policy, as opposition political party elites create messages that compete with official presidential frames; however, journalists still echo other parts of White House frames. In times of foreign crisis, presidential administrations use the tool of affirmation of national identity, as

broader audiences and journalists tend to perceive nation-protective messages better in times of foreign crisis.

Yet framing research has not investigated a case when the U.S. might be under attack (in the case of this study, ambiguous, hybrid attack from Russia). The current study seeks to determine how journalists create frames when a foreign threat is ambiguous and when an administration provides contradictory statements about the possible threat. The U.S. political elite did not promote one unified frame, evaluation, or interpretation of the events. President Trump denied interference (Horsley & Parks, 2018). Some members of his administration downplayed the threat (Cohen et al., 2020). Still, others claimed that Russia was and still stays a hybrid threat to the U.S. election (Gotev, 2017). Thus, journalists might be more open to other frames created in the frame hierarchy.

Hybrid war

Scholars and military experts call a mix of older methods of conducting the war (e.g., military intervention) and novel methods connected with new means of communication (e.g., cyberattacks and disinformation through social media) a "hybrid war" (Manolea, 2018). Scholars have argued that hybrid war is different from previously established concepts of war as to how states conducted wars changed through the years, and hybrid war included new force capabilities that have not been seen before (Asmussen, 2014). Changes in military tactics, weapons (i.e., development of nuclear weapons), and international law created unconventional warfare methods that could be used by political actors to reach political goals without conducting a full-on war (Almang, 2019). Simultaneously, the ambiguity of the term makes it hard to compare to the other concepts of war and conflict—and, importantly for this study, may allow for a variety of frames regarding a hybrid war to appear in news coverage.

The term hybrid was coined not so long ago and is still flexible in usage. Official NATO reports stated that the phrase “hybrid war” appeared in 2005 to describe Hezbollah’s strategy, which included “regular and irregular means of warfare” in the Lebanon War (Puyvelde, 2015). However, while the term was first used in 2005, hybrid war as a form of conflict before (Puyvelde, 2015). The conflict between Hezbollah and Israel for a long time was a paradigm example of a hybrid war. Hezbollah was not a state per se but was conducting war like a state, an example of non-conventional actors' involvement in the warfare. At that point, the hybrid war was a conflict that involved a full spectrum of warfare, including regular and irregular tactics, but what exactly encompassed an "irregular" tactic was not clearly defined (Tholens, 2017). Later, in 2015, the term "hybrid war" came up during Russian aggression in Ukraine, as Russia used economic pressures, conducted disinformation campaigns, and supported unregular military forces in Eastern Ukraine. Yet, NATO's political and military leaders could not agree on a clear definition of what they were facing (Puyvelde, 2015). Therefore, it is not surprising that different definitions of the term are made at different times and by different political agents.

One of the definitional approaches to hybrid war is a historical analysis of previous warfare. At the first stage, the hybrid war was defined as a military conflict that involved regular armed forces (regular army with a particular organization and chain of command) and irregular, like guerrillas, insurgents, and terroristic organizations, military forces. Here, "irregular" involves armies that were not under official governmental control but rather act as independent allies within the country that was attacked. Irregular armies were, for instance, used during the 2008 Georgia – Russia conflict, where Russian Special Operational forces used a select militia in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and were portrayed in media coverage as "local defense" when in reality they were supported Russian separatists (Wither, 2016). In its essence, this early

definition of hybrid war was not different from the traditional understanding of warfare, as irregular military forces have been present in almost every war (Wither, 2016).

With time, irregular forces, such as terroristic groups, rebels, and militia, became used more and more in contemporary conflicts to reach political goals without an official proclamation of war. The term "hybrid" became synonymous with any new war during this second stage of research. Hoffman (2007) stated that hybrid war included "threats that incorporate a full range of capabilities, irregular tactics, and formations, terroristic acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, criminal disorder, conducted by both sides and a variety of non-state actors" (p.17). As a new element of warfare, cyberattacks were added to the understanding of sophisticated non-state actors' irregular tactics. Despite the inclusion of cyber warfare, the hybrid war was still defined in terms of "irregular" military forces, rather than "irregular" spaces of conducting war, and cyberattacks were seen as new tactics of "irregular" military forces (Hoffman, 2007).

Russia's military action in Eastern Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea made researchers reevaluate hybrid warfare again. Current research sees hybrid war not only in categories of "regular" and "irregular" military forces but also adds such techniques as support and sponsorship of political protest, economic pressure, cyber-attacks, and informational campaigns (Wither, 2016). In this recent definition, the emphasis on non-military methods of warfare makes the definition broader but at the same time proves that hybrid war differs from traditional warfare. This definition is not exhaustive, as, with time, more and more means of conducting war can be added. Still, some key elements represent common themes that make hybrid war differ from conventional definitions of war. These elements include the use of conventional and unconventional military forces at the strategic and tactical level (e.g., using

unrecognized military formations and labeling unseen forces as "rebels," rather than acknowledging real involvement into military conflict or using terrorist tactics and terrorist groups rather than regular military); incorporation of cyber operations; information campaigns, and economic pressures; utilization of all capabilities of the battlespace to achieve the objectives, without actually proclaiming a state of war between two legitimate states (Schmidt, 2014).

Although much of the hybrid warfare literature is related to military victories (Manolea, 2016; McCuen, 2008), current scholarship states that some non-military conflict should be viewed as part of hybrid warfare (Manolea, 2016). Bresmeth (as cited in Manolea, 2016), while trying to predict the future of warfare, claimed that the purpose of a fight in hybrid war is not for territories but rather for citizens of countries' minds and attitudes have been attacked. Instead of waging a full-on military intervention, which drains economic and human resources, states involved in the hybrid war tried to create allies within the "enemy" country, who act in the interest of the attacking state. For instance, instead of proclaiming war, Russia supported separatists. It launched disinformation campaigns in the East of Ukraine, supported nationalist groups during elections in European countries, and tried to interfere in the electoral process in the U.S. Hybrid war, therefore, is a conflict between states, where one of the states is trying to subordinate the other by various means, which include informational and political influences. Thus, non-military means, like disinformation campaign against Hillary Clinton during the 2016 Presidential Election or Russia's cyber-attacks, can be viewed as a part of hybrid warfare.

Communication, Information, and Hybrid War

The informational element of hybrid war has become one of the essential factors in recent years due to developing new communicational methods (e.g., social media) of influence (Struhatskyi, 2016). Some scholars use the term "informational war" instead of a hybrid war to

show the importance of information elements in conducting hybrid war (Struhatskyi, 2016).

Disinformation, propaganda, manipulation, cyber-attacks all have the destructive potential for stability and cause real damage to the state. Therefore, hybrid war involves all people, organizations, and states that *intentionally* influence how citizens think about a hybrid attack.

The informational component of hybrid war also makes it harder for countries to protect national borders. Informational campaigns can contest national sovereignty and national borders (Tholens, 2017). Yet, the practices that are used to destabilize the opposing side are not necessarily seen as an external threat to borders; instead, they are used as a strategy to destabilize national borders from within. For instance, instead of launching a military operation, Russia used disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks to influence the political attitudes of people living in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Therefore, international security research demonstrates that the ambiguity of the definition of hybrid war and its complication as a non-traditional threat creates substantial new threats for global security and sustainable peace.

To date, much of the hybrid war scholarship has emerged from military literature; for example, Struhatskyi (2016) investigated the mythmaking process during the military stage of hybrid war; international security scholarship as Schmidt (2014) and Asmussen (2014) described the role of hybrid war in the international security. Yet, these non-communication approaches do little to analyze the media's role in defining the threat of hybrid war for public members, framing the attacks, and identifying possible potential in resisting harmful frames.

As informational campaigns are essential parts that define modern warfare concepts (Struhatskyi, 2016), communication research surrounding hybrid war is much needed.

Communication research of hybrid war was sparked by Russian hybrid warfare in Ukraine, the European Union, and the United States. The communication field provides information about

disseminating disinformation and other strategies used by the Russian government in Ukraine, but the research is limited to specific cases where hybrid war is accompanied by military action (Kamusella, 2018; Petrenko, 2018). These studies do, however, suggest that media coverage during hybrid warfare can have effects. For example, when covering the invasion of Ukraine for an international audience, Russian media adopted an ethnolinguistic nationalism frame (all Russian speakers all over the world constitute the Russian nation), which caused a situation of mistrust towards the Russian speaking community in different countries and at the same time encouraged Russian speakers to lobby Russian interest in the countries of their residency (Kamusella, 2018). To a domestic Russian audience, frames of patriotism and nationalism were also created for destroying peace movements in Russia, as people who protest were deemed “unpatriotic” and “foreign” (Nikolayenko, 2019). Such Russian media tactics were acknowledged by the European Parliament, which characterized Russian interference in the Brexit referendum, Netherlands, and French elections as a part of hybrid warfare (Wagnsson & Hellman, 2018).

Russian interference in the 2016 American election also sparked some research on the Russian attack's informational elements. For example, Jamieson (2018) argued that Russian-backed hacker groups usage of the social media algorithms to their advantage, the strategic release of stolen content by WikiLeaks, and the Russian trolls who disseminated fake information and "hijacked" news coverage were among the main reasons why Clinton lost in 2016. While this research contributes to a better understanding of cyber-attacks' mechanism during the elections, it does not show whether U.S. journalists recognize and how they frame the threat of hybrid war for audiences. Another study of news coverage during the 2016 election supported Jamieson's idea of Russian influence on U.S. news programming (Lukito et al., 2019).

It showed that U.S. news programs quoted social media posts made by the Russian-sponsored Internet Research Agency. The authors argued that, because of modern gatekeeping practices (journalists relying on fallacious social media posts), the U.S. media system became vulnerable to foreign influence (Lukito et al., 2019). The research about the Russian influence on U.S. media shows that news media play an essential role in disseminating informational attacks, as journalists and mainstream media bigger audiences than any given social media post. While American media can become a victim of fake messages on social media, news framing is a more complicated process that pushes not one or multiple messages but rather an interpretation of the problem; therefore, the full impact of Russian frames on the U.S. news landscape is unknown. The United States and Russia do not share borders, do not have direct military conflict, and the United States government does not identify Russia as a country that practices the hybrid war on the U.S. territory.

At the same time, Russia is involved in disseminating disinformation in the U.S., was conducting cyber-attacks during presidential elections, and is involved in a proxy war in Syria where Russian troops are opposing American army forces (U.S. Congress. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, 2017). While officially Russia and the U.S. are not involved in warfare with each other, the whole essence of hybrid war is to make a conflict ambiguous and undetected. As a result, while the U.S. might not acknowledge it or understand it, it might be involved in hybrid warfare right now (Bremseth as cited in Manolea, 2018). The adaptation of Russian frames might mean that Russia can get away with their interference, as people in the U.S., while exposed to the pro-Russian frame, will see the conflict as an internal conflict rather than an external issue. And because of the ambiguity of hybrid warfare, news coverage may not be up to the task of framing informational warfare as a threat to the nation.

The framing research paradigm is a critical methodological and theoretical tool in investigating news coverage of war and conflict (Al Nahed & Hammond, 2018; Boydston & Glaizer, 2013; Boaz, 2015; Dimitriva & Connolly-Ahern, 2007). The framing of war is critical, as research points out that consistent media frames substantially impact citizens about the necessity of war (Boaz, 2005). Although traditional war framing is more consistent, hybrid war, due to its ambiguity, is likely covered in various ways by journalists and political figures. Journalists are not sure how to correctly define acts of hybrid war. The quantitative content analysis of media coverage of hybrid war showed that only 30% of media sources used the term correctly (Caliskan & Cramers, 2018). During the Russian annexation of Crimea and the invasion of Eastern Ukraine in 2014, journalists either did not use the term or misidentified and downplayed warfare strategies. This can mean that, due to the ambiguity of the term and various frames from the elites, U.S. journalists and politicians likely underestimate a hybrid threat. This tendency could leave U.S. democratic and media systems unprotected from future informational threats.

The current research will move beyond just analyzing the definition of hybrid war by looking at how U.S. journalists are framing the act of hybrid war in all its complexity. Moreover, it is crucial to understand if foreign frames concerning hybrid war are present in the U.S. media landscape as alternative frames, which potentially can be harmful to U.S. citizens and the democratic process, as Russian media as an actor who committed the act of hybrid war may try to shift attention from Russian interference to the internal conflict. This leads to the first research question of this thesis:

RQ1: How do U.S. news sources frame an act of hybrid war?

Frames affect how people think about different events; however, the influence on different audiences varies. According to Su et al. (2019), audience members might perceive one frame differently, depending on their prior knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and predispositions. This means that even though some predominant frames are constructed in media coverage, there is no guarantee that those frames will have consistent effects on the audience. According to Olmastroni (2014), frame persuasiveness depends on such factors as credibility and legitimacy of source; congruency with community values and views; frame must be realistic and consistent with people's pre-existing beliefs and levels of knowledge about the issue. As people take cues from political elites and their position on relevant topics, political elites and mass media choose specific frames to promote interpretations. The newer and the more complex the issue, the easier it is to promote a specific frame among the audiences (Su et al., 2019).

Most importantly, for the current study, the public's reception of some frames can be limited by the group's ideological predisposition. The research found that the greater the political polarization is in the news, the stronger is the correlation between news exposure and partisanship (Horwitz & Nir, 2015). This shows that partisan news coverage deepens partisan divides as it strengthens the partisan affiliation. Partisanship in the media also is a factor that contributes to supporting false information and conspiracy thinking. While some partisan news proved to be mostly truthful in presenting facts, the framing of certain events in a conspiratorial manner influenced like-minded viewers to perceive these events in the same manner, too (Hollander, 2018). Conservatives are also more likely to support frames concerning domestic issues like healthcare and marriage equality when produced by Republicans or conservative news media.

In contrast, opposite frames might be seen as provocative and lead to ambivalent statements from partisans (Price et al., 2005). The same stands for Democrats. However, if the frame is used inconsistently, partisans can't recognize ideological and value cues that would make them support the frame of their party (Price et al., 2005). While news media is not the only factor contributing to societal disagreement, news media still plays an essential role in supporting those divides. This paper will not test the frames' persuasiveness, but the research surrounding partisan news's effects shows the importance of an uncontradictory framework and its impact and partisan audiences. The partisan difference in frame perception of domestic issues leads us to how partisan media covers external threats. This leads to the second research question:

RQ2: Do patterns of coverage related to hybrid war differ across U.S. partisan news channels?

Framing of Hybrid War Across Media Systems

The ambiguity of the term in the academic world, as overviewed in detail above, does not help journalists to recognize, understand, and frame real hybrid threats; therefore, there is a possibility that journalists unknowingly can *become a part* of hybrid war. Research in the area of understanding how journalists frame hybrid threats and foreign hybrid attacks is needed. This thesis, specifically, examines whether hybrid war frames span boundaries between media coverage originating from a targeted country (in this case, the U.S.) and media coverage from the news source of an attacker country (in this case, Russia).

As a social construction tool, news can be shaped by multiple factors, including political culture (Ostertag, 2008). Frames created in the news are culturally and ideologically determined; therefore, specific issues, especially international relations issues, are covered differently by different media systems (Olmanstroni, 2014). The Russian media system creates a very

comfortable environment for the Russian President and different war frames (Feng-Yung Hu, 2009). After a short period of total freedom of speech during the glasnost era of the Soviet Union and during two terms of the first President Yeltsin, came a more restrained and controlled period. Public media was turned into governmentally controlled and governmentally supported media, while the internet was trying to survive under strict restrictions of Russian Federal law (Feng-Yung Hu, 2009).

The modern shift happened because of the systematic imposition of control in all Russian life spheres by Vladimir Putin. When Putin became president, Russia was amid the second Chechen war (Simons, 2006). As Chechnya was almost an uncontrollable republic, due to historical and political reasons, the public was expecting a new leader to solve this long-running and irresolvable conflict. However, Putin's administration did not try to stop military intervention and coped with the criticism differently. First, there was a need to manipulate national news about the real situation in Chechnya. Chechnya's rebels were portrayed as criminal outlaws, separatists, and terrorists. Putin's government started to implement strict federal laws for media activity. Later, after terrorist attacks in a Moscow theater and a storm of criticism about the anti-terrorist operation's conduct, a new set of laws regarding media control was passed through Russian legislation institutions. One of the most controversial laws put news through an evaluation process that would show whether news content is "serving propaganda or justifying extremist activities," which viewed criticism of governmental actions as a federal crime (Feng-Yung Hu, 2009, p. 26). The main Russian broadcasting channels silently agreed to obey the law and received governmental subsidies. The main Russian channels started to change their language and tone to describe terrorism and Russian military actions everywhere in the world (Feng-Yung Hu, 2009).

The current Russian media system has three qualities that increase the likelihood that the government will use it for hybrid warfare (Wasiuta & Wasiuta, 2016). First, Russian mainstream media is heavily dependent on governmental support; therefore, it likely reinforces the war's official narrative. Second, Russian opposition media has little to no impact, as alternative narratives are labeled as “unpatriotic” and sometimes even “unlawful.” Finally, the Russian strict media legislation was implemented because of a war on terror, and after the terroristic attacks, it successfully legitimized the state's actions (Feng-Yung Hu, 2009).

The Russian media system structure also contributes to a particular Russian news structure aimed at English speakers. Russia Today (RT) is an English-speaking satellite channel financed by the Russian government and is targeted at viewers worldwide. According to some reports, RT was created as a soft-power tool to improve Russia’s image abroad and counter anti-Russian bias that Kremlin saw in Western media (Fisher, 2019; Ioffe, 2010). Whether this bias existed is up for discussion and further research; however, RT's purpose was predominantly not connected to defending Russian people or Russia as a country, but instead was aimed at clearing Putin’s administration and its policies (Fisher, 2019; Ioffe, 2010). The notion that Russia Today was trying to create a compatible U.S. news coverage is supported in research surrounding Russia Today's framing (Hedlund, 2020). In attempts to attract and persuade international audiences, RT was trying to build compelling narratives. While these narratives used some of U.S. media frames, they provided alternative Russian-centric perspectives on the events.

Russia Today’s purpose broadened with the Russian annexation of Crimea. At that point, RT was not only using competitive to U.S. coverage of Crimea annexation but also kept whitewashing Kremlin’s military and non-military attacks in the future. While positioning itself as the Russian BBC, RT proved to be complicit in spreading misinformation and contributing to

a hybrid war between Russia and Ukraine (Yablokov, 2015; Partanen-Dufour, 2016). Various conspiratorial notions within RT coverage aimed at legitimizing Russia's foreign policies and delegitimizing policies of the American government (Yablokov, 2015).

U.S. media, on the other hand, is not so complaisant. On the one hand, during foreign policy crises, news media often defer to the president's official frames. After the 9/11 terroristic attacks, for instance, journalists maintained the status quo, and even liberal news content did not contain much criticism of the President at first. According to Harmon and Muenchen's (2009) research on media post-9/11 framing of war on terror, news organizations overall used framing words and phrases that echoed the Administration's push for war. It is not surprising that Fox News supported Bush's rhetoric with pro-war framing terms. Still, passive support from liberal news channels, like CNN, ABC, CBS, and NBC, who used complementary to Bush rhetoric about the war on terror, is surprising.

Alternatively, because of the freedom of the press, U.S. news media are protected by the Constitution. The newsrooms are not government-run institutions, not government-owned, and have claimed their independence. The content of U.S. news has become dominated by partisanship and negativity (Niven, 2001). This partisan media coverage means that presidents of both parties can expect harsh criticism from the press (Harmon & Muenchen, 2009). The differences between the two media systems are evident. While Russia Today exists within the U.S. media landscape, as it is an English-speaking source with U.S. journalists aimed at a U.S. audience, it still complies with the Russian media system's rules and principles. This factor means that while Russia Today might not seem for U.S. viewers as an outside source, it will probably create an alternative to U.S. media coverage of the hybrid war. The distinction between

the Russian and U.S. media systems and the notion that Russia has a channel that can potentially influence U.S. citizens leads to my final research question.

RQ3: Do U.S. news sources and Russian English news sources frame an instance of hybrid war similarly or differently?

Chapter 3: Methods

This study used a qualitative, thematic analysis of media coverage of the act of hybrid war (media coverage of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Elections) to answer the proposed research questions. Qualitative data analysis involves sorting and categorizing information and later immersing oneself as a researcher into the theory (Tracy, 2020). According to Wimmer and Dominick (2006), using a qualitative approach to analyze news frames is warranted when the media research aims to fully describe and interpret communication content and not just describe the content size and word frequency. Some researchers even define media frames only as qualitative constructs that can't be measured with quantitative methods, but rather must be understood through full emersion in data (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Others also argued that, while news can be measured through quantitative content analysis, news frames cannot, as the quantitative analysis does not provide a broader understanding of content's structure or a substantial insight into the data, which is essential for understanding frames (Linstrom & Marais, 2012). It is also important to note that this study dealt with political content, which relied heavily on social meaning, and was better analyzed through qualitative methods (D'Angelo & Kuypers, 2009).

An interpretive approach to data analysis was logical in this case, as it helps researchers understand socially constructed meanings. In this case, as I was seeking how news coverage of hybrid war progressed over time, the interpretative approach helped me identify the changes (or the absence of changes through the time) in the news coverage. As frames are considered a way in which media constructs reality, this approach was consistent with qualitative media analysis's main principles. Research surrounding media coverage of the hybrid war is rare; thus, an interpretative approach strikes a perfect balance between exploratory analysis of a relatively new area of analysis

(news coverage of hybrid war) and a more in-depth explanation of the phenomenon of hybrid war itself. My research questions about hybrid war were designed to explore relationships among different media sources and constructed realities. Taking into consideration the previously explained philosophical assumptions, I identify myself as an interpretive researcher.

Mass media coverage is a powerful tool that organizes and presents information. Framing is a form of organizing this information into the news stories and presents it in a certain way (Gitlin, 2007; Goffman, 1974; Dijk, 1983). It is essential to identify and analyze the existing frames by not only trying to find whether the hybrid war was mentioned (Caliskan, & Cramers, 2018) but rather how the hybrid attack was covered, in which terms and with which dominant themes and frames are presented by partisan, non-partisan and foreign news sources.

In this study, I explored the dominant themes used by U.S. partisan, U.S. non-partisan, and Russian English-speaking news sources and the frames constructed within these themes. In this study, a theme is a dominant broad storyline that is consistently repeating through the news coverage, has identifiable conceptual characteristics and language, and is commonly observed in journalistic practice (Linstrom & Marais, 2012; Kuypers, 2006). Some researchers argue that a theme is a dominant frame (Linstrom & Marias, 2012). In Linstrom and Marias' approach (2012), a dominant frame (theme) consists of secondary frames, which support patterns of a dominant frame (theme) and provide a deeper and more robust understanding of the dominant frame (theme). Secondary frames are supplementary ideas within the dominant frame (theme) and apply only to some news coverage parts (for example, in this study, some frames are familiar to liberal news and some to conservative news only). In the current thesis, to avoid confusion, I used the term *theme* to describe dominant frames and a term *frame* to describe secondary frames. A *Theme* is a broader overarching concept that describes major patterns across all news coverage. Simultaneously,

frames are narrower constructs that describe repeating patterns in news coverage in some of the news channels. One theme can produce different frames. This approach is also supported by previous research. For example, Kuypers (2006), in his research of framing of war on terror, found out that different frames exist within one common theme. The frames within one theme exist because, as there are some overarching themes, frames are constructed by different news sources and political agents. For example, during the war in Iraq, Kuypers (2006) found that within the Nature of War theme that was common for all news sources and the Bush administration led to the domestic war frame and the global war frame in different news sources.

Due to the power of frames to impact policies and audiences, it was vital to conduct a thematic analysis, which gives a deeper understanding of frames in contrast to quantitative content analysis. Unlike quantitative content analysis, the thematic analysis attempts to understand underlying social messages rather than summarize the content. This allows the researcher to determine which aspects of reality were chosen by journalists to influence audiences' perceptions of certain events and phenomena.

Thematic analysis was warranted for several reasons. First, Russian interference in the U.S. elections and the subsequent events were recent; therefore, there was not much research surrounding this event's communicational side. Further investigation was needed to understand the role news organizations and journalists play in framing hybrid war. Second, the term hybrid war is ambiguous. Scholars (Allen, 2017; Almang, 2019; Hoffman, 2007) have different approaches to the definition; therefore, quantitative approaches, including quantitative content analysis, would limit my research. A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to uncover the underlying twists, turns, and shifts in definitions and understandings of the idea of hybrid war. Further, a qualitative approach allowed the researcher to uncover emerging themes within differing terminologies and

definitions (Tracy, 2020). As it was hard to predict what kind of news frames (media-constructed interpretations and evaluations of the events and phenomenon) were going to emerge in media coverage of the hybrid war, the qualitative methodology helped find common definitions, categories, themes frames that emerged during news coverage.

Thematic analysis has also been used successfully by scholars who are looking for new emerging frames. For example, Moore et al., (2015) used thematic analysis to determine the main media frames during the Olympics coverage. For example, these authors stated that NBC News used a common theme of competitiveness but that the news outlet differed in its framing of Russian and American gymnasts. While these authors argue that certain repeating events instigate the same repeating frames, there is still room for new frames to emerge depending on the controversial nature of the events; therefore, thematic analysis is the best tool to analyze emerging frames like those related to hybrid war.

Thematic analysis has also been successfully used to analyze political content. As Merz (2014) argued in his analysis of political interviews and media coverage of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, thematic analysis helps identify the most salient themes within the vast amount of data, including various media frames. Here, I am looking into the media coverage of hybrid war and the production of themes and frames covering Russian interference elections. Because of the successful usage of the thematic analysis of media frames in prior research and the absence of qualitative analysis of media frames of hybrid war, thematic analysis is suitable.

Case Study

The Russian Election Interference case is an actual example of modern hybrid warfare waged on American soil (Chivis, 2017; Wigell, 2019). Russian interference into the 2016 elections was mentioned by political candidates, covered by journalists at the start of the 2016 elections, and

is still discussed today (Chivis, 2017; Gotev, 2017). However, the Mueller investigation elevated Russian interference cases from media and political speculations to official investigation with possible legal and political repercussions. The Mueller investigation was the first official investigation of Russia's act of hybrid war on American soil, even though it might not be discussed in those terms. Thus, the study will focus on covering the most important events during the Mueller investigation of Russian interference into the elections.

The events' choice was based on the criterion of constructed social significance in the mass media as defined by Jamieson and Campbell (1988). Jamieson and Campbell (1988) defined the characteristics that identify the social significance of an event, namely: (1) presence of the protagonist; (2) drama, the struggle of interests; (3) an action that attracts the attention of the audience; (4) an event that causes a chain reaction; (5) sensation, the exclusivity of the event; (6) violation of the usual course of everyday life; (7) unprecedented nature of the event; and (8) possibility to link the events to media coverage. If at least three of these characteristics can be attributed to an event, then an event is socially significant.

Given these criteria, for this analysis, I have chosen Paul Manafort and Mueller's publicly testifying before the House Intelligence and Judiciary committees. These events have at least three attributes of social significance. For example, the sentencing of Paul Manafort was sensational, unprecedented (i.e., it is rare that close advisors of the President would be charged with campaign fraud and other misdemeanors), and had a close correlation to the problems, like a Russian-Trump connection, which was actively covered in the media. Robert Mueller's testimony includes the presence of a protagonist, whether it is Robert Mueller for Democrats or Donald Trump for Republicans, conflict of interest between Democrats and Republicans, and the possibility of

linking the events to the media coverage, which was Russian involvement in the election and a question of the Russian campaign in general.

These events also happened during different periods of the investigation. Paul Manafort was indicted on 12 counts on October 30, 2017, which signified the first charges and arrests against Trump officials. Mueller's official promise of testimony on June 25, 2019, and final testimony on July 25, 2019, marked the end of the Russian election interference investigation. Therefore, the coverage of these events will be analyzed separately and then compared to see common frames in the analysis of the hybrid war coverage.

Sample

Episodes of broadcast and cable news programs will be used as data in this study. The study will include analysis of coverage of Russian election interference cases by such U.S. news programs as Hannity of Fox News, The Rachel Maddow Show of MSNBC, ABC World News Tonight, and Russian English-speaking news programs like News with Rick Sanchez, News. Views. Hughes. and The RT News. The U.S. networks were chosen because of their partisan differences, as MSNBC and FOX News represent opposite ideological camps, while ABC represents nonpartisan broadcast news. According to Pew Research (2012), Fox News is viewed as the most ideological network and "mostly conservative," while MSNBC holds a second place as the most ideological news source but is seen as a "mostly liberal" network. Both networks have a strong influence on their respective, ideologically divided Republican and Democratic audiences.

Moreover, Fox News proved to have a more substantial ideological influence on the general audience, affecting Democrats in their political views more than MSNBC influences Republicans (Matthews, 2017). ABC is perceived by both Republicans and Democrats as a "non-

partisan source," or equally conservative and liberal by diverse audiences (Pew Research, 2012). The news programs on the channels were chosen according to the Mueller investigation's high ratings, the release of the Mueller Report, and impeachment hearings. Hannity held the highest rating during 2018 – 2019 among all networks and, consequently, the highest rating on Fox News. The Rachel Maddow Show was third in the 2018 – 2019 period and held the first position during 2017. Finally, ABC World News Tonight was a leader in nightly broadcast news throughout the investigation (Katz, 2019).

As Russia Today is the primary multiplatform English-speaking Russian news source, subsidized by the Russian government, their programming was chosen for the analysis. The News with Rick Sanchez, News. Views. Hughes and The RT News are the only late-night news and news shows that air primetime on RT almost daily.

During the preliminary analysis stage, I watched and listened to the broadcasts' videos; however, I only analyzed textual material in the central part of the analysis. The transcripts of the U.S. news episodes were acquired through the Nexis Uni database. As transcripts of Russian news sources were not available in the U.S. database, I downloaded closed captions from the official Russia Today news website. Closed captions were presented as a text on the website, which I copied in a Word document.

A keyword search helped narrow the news content in the sample. The news episodes covering Paul Manafort's arrest were limited to the time frame of May 17, 2017 (when the existing criminal probe into Paul Manafort was appointed to the Russian interference case and Robert Mueller investigation) to October 30, 2017 (when Paul Manafort was indicted in 12 counts of money laundering and election fraud, which concluded an investigation into Paul Manafort's activities). The news segments (news stories that had a common topic and were

defined by news anchors as a separate topic) covering Mueller's testimony is limited to news coverage of June 25, 2019 (Mueller agrees to testify publicly) to July 25, 2019 (the last day when Mueller publicly testified before House Intelligence and Judiciary committees). The dates were adjusted depending on when the news programs aired (as some of the chosen news programs were not airing daily). Within these timeframes, I searched Nexis Uni database and Russia Today website by using keywords like "Paul Manafort," "Paul Manafort arrest," "election fraud," "Russian interference," "Mueller," "Mueller Report," "Mueller Investigation," "Mueller testimony," and "2016 elections". Irrelevant news segments, such as announcing the upcoming reports about the investigation or duplicates of transcripts, were removed from data analysis. In the end, I analyzed 105 news segments or approximately 215 pages of news transcript.

Data analysis procedure

The nature of frames is rooted in different categories and patterns of representation of information; therefore, a thematic analysis approach helps find different categories in the data and conceptualizes the categories into themes (dominant frame) and frames (supportive frames). Themes can include different media frames; in other words, media frames organize ideas within a dominant theme that emerged during the analysis (Balaban, 2008; Linstrom, & Marias, 2012).

Each news source episode was separately analyzed and coded to understand the emerging themes and frames within each news segment by using a first and second-order coding process (Tracy, 2020). First, the data were categorized by origins of the informational source (i.e., Russian media or the U.S. media) and partisanship (i.e., conservative, liberal, or non-partisan media). At the first stages, the content was analyzed separately because of my research questions concerning differences in partisan news coverage and difference in U.S. and Russian news coverage.

To be more familiar with the data, an immersion phase was needed. Therefore, before starting the analysis, I first watched the videos of news programs. Videos were accessed through news networks' official websites (ABC News, FOX News, RT) and Hulu's streaming service (MSNBC). At this stage, I watched full videos of news programming and made notes of which news segments covered news Paul Manafort's arrest, Mueller's testimony, and Russian interference to make sure that I would not miss parts of hybrid war news coverage, in case the news episode covered not only these events but also some other elements of hybrid war (e.g., Russia Today covered Paul Manafort's arrest at the start of the program, then turned attention to Epstein scandal and then talked about "Russian trolls" – a story that was crucial for future analysis). Then, for the second time, I only listened to audio segments that covered Paul Manafort's arrest and Mueller testimony and deleted (or edited in case of Russia Today news transcripts) the unrelated content in the transcripts (deleted news segments that did not cover Paul Manafort's arrest, Mueller testimonies, or content connected to Russian interference). Lastly, I read through a shortened version of transcripts before moving to the coding process.

Within the first level of initial coding, I tried to formulate codes, which would capture the essence of the content. To produce these codes, I took the following steps: (1) I divided the transcripts into separate sentences. As the linguistic research suggests, journalistic texts and sentences are written in a way that aims to convey the information functionally, in contrast to everyday speech or any other literary style; therefore, it makes sense to analyze different phrases, rather than words or fragments of news episodes (Krippendorff, 2019). (2) Then, I assigned specific identifiers (codes) to capture the sentence's essence and described the phenomenon in the sentence. Some sentences did not get an identifier during the analysis as they did not state any substantial idea. Some sentences, however, got multiple identifiers. For example, for Rachel

Maddow's (2017) sentence, "Flynn seems to have received from his new Fox News lawyer is that he should try to blow up the federal criminal case that federal prosecutors were pursuing against Bijan Kian, against Flynn's former business partner," I used several codes like "cross-media mention," "possible corruption," "question of justice." (3) Codes then were reviewed and transformed into more specific codes, for example, code "Russia mentions" became multiple codes "Russian possible election involvement," "Russia as a nation" and "Putin as a representation of Russia," "Russian government as a criminal entity." (4) I compared how the same codes might encompass different meaning across news networks and revised the codes. For example, the code "Paul Manafort's criminal activity," depending on the news source became, "Paul Manafort's Trump campaign criminal activity" (MSNBC, ABC News), and "Paul Manafort criminal activities in Ukraine" (RT, Fox News). While all news channels talked about Manafort as a criminal, when comparing different news aspects, the description of the criminal activity was different. At this point, I was able to recognize differences in the same codes and, at the same time, some familiar patterns in different news channels. (5) After comparing, I created two code lists. The first list included the reviewed codes and the exemplars for separate channels. The second list included my preliminary thoughts on possible standard codes for some of the news channels.

During the second stage of focused coding, I interpreted the codes and synthesized some meaning within a theoretical framework. According to Tracy (2020), the second-level codes are produced by revaluing existing codes by identifying patterns, cause-effect relations, rules, and categories. At this stage, codes that emerged during the first stage were reviewed by the research questions listed above. The codes were organized into separate categories and analytical meanings or second-level codes rooted in the hybrid war concept of framing theory. For example, knowing the main elements of hybrid war (e.g., political influence, cyber-attacks, economic pressure,

misinformation campaigns), first-level codes “Russian troll factory” and “Russian hacking” became a second-level code “Hybrid war: cyber attack.”

During the last stage of axial coding, recurring categories were linked and grouped under the "umbrella" concept (Tracy, 2020). At this stage, the codes from all news programming were compared to find common and differing patterns that repeat across different news programming. Through this comparison process, I organized second-level codes into broader categories or how Tracy called them “thematic stories” (2020), which became the secondary frames. Here, my aim was not to generalize the data or presume a generalized truth about reality but rather illuminate how news media construct reality surrounding the phenomenon of hybrid war. After determining my main secondary frames, I investigated dominant language and main stories across the frames. Again, I compared now broader analytical categories, frames to see common patterns and relationships within frames. I made my last analytical step and determined the dominant theme that unites the media frames in one way or another.

Researchers’ Standpoint

I understand that my position could have impacted some parts of the research and analysis. I understand that politics, especially topics in international relationships, is a complicated and emotionally charged subject. Even though this research was not be conducted with participants, my identity as an international student, who is an outsider and not a constant consumer in the U.S. media system, might be both an advantage and disadvantage to my research. As an outsider, I noticed some novel things in media discourse. Still, at the same time, my ethnic identity of Ukrainian sometimes could have clouded my judgment during the analysis of Russian news sources. During the analysis process, I tried to consider alternative perspectives before making

final judgments by having upfront conversations with my advisors about specific topics to limit researcher political ideologies' seeping into this interpretation of this content.

Chapter 3: Findings

As I analyzed the data, major frames and themes emerged. My analysis goal was to find the answers to three research questions. However, the analysis showed that frames are intertwined and are united by one common theme. The differences between frames are subtle; however, they are important and demand more attention to details when describing the frames. That is why I will present my findings thematically to address my research questions. In the analysis below, in response to RQ1, I show that the term "hybrid war" was not used directly and was not mentioned once in any of the news sources. However, some news outlets, like ABC World News, Fox News, and MSNBC that were not addressing it directly, did describe the Russian interference case in categories essential to the hybrid war phenomenon. Coverage included three main elements of hybrid warfare: political influence, cyber-attacks, and misinformation. In terms of framing theory, a common *theme* was found in all news sources. For instance, in partisan, non-partisan, and Russian news, a conflict theme was dominant in hybrid war coverage. The answers to RQ2 and RQ3, which posed the questions about differences within news sources, are more complex. At the same time, *frames* that were produced within the conflict theme differed across the networks. Networks created a different definition of what kind of conflict the Russian investigation is and the sides of the conflict. As a result, the conflict theme produced two conflict frames: an external foreign attack frame and an internal disunity frame. The external foreign attack frame was adopted in non-partisan and liberal news coverage, while the internal disunity frame was adopted in Russia Today News and conservative U.S. news. Because of these differences in covering different conflict elements, partisan news also produced other news frames. Liberal and non-partisan U.S. news created a national security frame. Conservative news and Russian news created guilt-based

frames: a Liberal guilt frame and an American hypocrisy frame, respectively. First, the sections below detail the conflict theme, then they move to describe different frames in the news coverage.

Conflict Theme: External Foreign Attack Frame v. Internal Disunity Frame

The overreaching theme of the coverage present when talking about the hybrid was the conflict theme. Here, I view conflict as a phenomenon that includes disagreement, the tension between sides, incompatibility between viewpoints, and political attacks (Putman & Shoemaker, 2007). All news media used conflict language in some way or another. "Russian attack" (Maddow, 2019, July 25), "Russian meddling" (Muir, 2017, July 10), "ordering it [the attack] was motivated by animosity" (Muir, 2017, August 9), "Russian hysteria" (Hannity, October 23, 2017; RT News, 2017, July 24), and "foreign and domestic enemies" (Hannity, May 26, 2017) are just a few examples that describe the investigation surrounding the act of hybrid war in terms of some conflict. And it is not surprising. First, conflict is a crucial feature of democracy, and as a result, conflict content is prominent in political news coverage (Vliegenthart et al., 2011). Second, the war in its essence, even though it is a hybrid war, is a conflict between at least two sides, with tension among countries, incompatibility between viewpoints, and political attacks on leaders or the whole governing system of opposing countries. Therefore, the coverage of the investigation of foreign interference is logically described in conflict terms.

However, the analysis of the Russian 2016 Election Interference case showed that the news media channels, while using the same conflict theme, differed in their framing of the conflict. Two secondary frames emerged within the conflict theme. The main differences in the conflict framing lay like the conflict. News media created two conflict frames within the conflict theme: an external foreign attack frame and an internal disunity frame.

Fox News and Russia Today presented the conflict as internal ideological disunity within the United States. In contrast, MSNBC and ABC News presented the conflict as an external Russian attack on the United States. As a result, news networks differed in portraying two sides of the conflict and the causes of conflict. For example, Fox News' Hannity saw liberal dislike towards Donald Trump's administration as the reason for conflict as the Russian investigation was described mostly in terms like "liberal hysteria" (2017, July 24) or liberal "witch hunt" (2017, July 24). The two sides to the conflict were Donald Trump's administration and liberals on Fox News and RT. Alternatively, The Rachel Maddow Show called the investigation "Russia investigation" (2017, May 17) or "Trump-Russia investigation" (2017, May 17) and treated the conflict as Russian attack on United States democracy. ABC World News with David Muir and The Rachel Maddow Show acknowledged, to a different extent, the attack from Russia as a threat to U.S. national security. Fox News' Hannity and programming from Russia Today portrayed the Russian interference case investigation as a conspiracy and an internal partisan or ideological struggle. The next section expands on these specific conflict frames, and the attribution of blame in the news coverage.

External Foreign Attack Frame: The Rachel Maddow Show & ABC News with David Muir

One of the main characteristics of hybrid war is its ambiguity. The ambiguity lies not only in the meaning of the term but in the attack itself, as the attacker's aim is for a threat to stay unseen or misidentified. The ability of journalists to recognize sides of the conflict and not treat the hybrid attack as an internal disagreement within the country influences audience's perception of a foreign threat. Both MSNBC and ABC News framed Russian interference as an external conflict between the U.S. and Russia as two sides of the conflict. Throughout the whole timeline of analyzed events, MSNBC and ABC News, even when paying attention to different elements

of the events, still stressed that Russia attacked the United States in one way or the other. During the arrest of Paul Manafort and Robert Mueller's testimony, Rachel Maddow was still tying Russia's events and its interference, often using the phrase "Russian attack" (2019, July 25). In one of her programs, she states that Mueller's investigation is directly connected to Russia, as it was an "investigation into Russia intervening in our election to help Donald Trump into the White House" (Maddow, 2019, July 23). She argued that the previous administration took the threat seriously and that there is definite proof that Russia attacked the United States:

October 7th, 2016, if you remember any other date from the campaign because that is the single day in quick secession, the U.S. government officially announced that Russia was interfering in the election. That was that joint statement from the Department of Homeland security and the Director of National Intelligence. (Maddow, 2019, July 23)

Here, Maddow stressed that an attack from Russia indeed happened. The fact that Russia interfered in the election was supported by the Intelligence community and Homeland Security, which are supposed to be non-partisan entities. Maddow also stressed the announcement date to point out that the Russian interference was not invented to "harm Trump," but was acknowledged before becoming a President in a very close race. Maddow's assurance that Russia attacked the U.S. did not change through time. After the release of the report, while she mentioned that while Mueller testimony was not impressive (Maddow, 2019, July 23), the evidence proved that Russians did attack the U.S. electoral system: "But there is a couple of things I think are worth noting about this report over and above its emphatic public conclusion that Russia attacked the election in an unprecedented way."

ABC World News with David Muir, used less radical language, but still talked about the investigation in terms of foreign involvement and foreign attack, as journalists on the news

program referred to the investigation as "Russian meddling in the U.S. elections" (2017, July 10) and mentioned the interference of Russian government in U.S. internal affairs: "it is very significant to have an official with any major presidential campaign admitting that they're working with the Russian government to hurt their opponent." Muir, even though mostly covering Trump's "possible collusion with Russians" (2017, July 10)—with stress on the word "possible"—implied that the President of the U.S. was trying to deny Russian involvement. In one of the episodes covering a Putin-Trump meeting about Syria, Muir was surprised that Trump was trying to move fast from the election meddling agenda, even though the "President's own intelligence community blames squarely on Russia" (2017, July 10). Therefore, it is clear that, while there are some other elements at play, like the involvement of Trump's administration, the Russian election interference investigation is seen as a conflict between two sides: the United States and Russia.

Thus far, I have argued that both Maddow and ABC World News use the external foreign attack frame by presenting the United States as the victim of the attack and Russia as the attacker. Still, the frame is more complicated than I have discussed at this point. In this thesis, I call the event "the conflict between the U.S. and Russia" for the sake of clarity in explaining the hybrid war. Neither ABC nor MSNBC use this phrasing to describe the conflict, however. Instead, Maddow usually called the investigation the "Trump – Russia investigation" (2017, September 20), and ABC World News called it the "investigation into Trump campaign and Russia" (Muir, 2017, May 17). That is, Trump and his administration are connected to Russia rather than the U.S. Both news programs ask whether the Trump administration "colluded with Russia." The term "collusion" shows that it is not the Trump administration that is a victim, but

rather an actor in the attack. Russians and Trump or the Trump administration look like criminals.

Despite the similarities in coverage aired by Maddow and ABC World News, there were differences in how the programs framed who was attacking the U.S. and who was being attacked. Both news sources were constructing an external attack frame despite some differences in coverage, as Russia was on the attacking side. However, the external attack frame's nuances are essential to highlight, as they show how liberal and non-partisan news might support one frame but differ the degree of President Trump's involvement versus his campaign's involvement. Whereas Maddow personalized the conflict by centering President Trump, himself, as an attacker alongside Russians; ABC personalized the conflict by focusing on members of President Trump's campaign who later became a part of Trump's administration (like Steve Bannon, Michael Flynn, Kellyanne Conway) as attackers, rather than Trump himself.

On The Rachel Maddow Show, the U.S. was attacked. However, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, was not portrayed as a victim of the attack, but rather as a crime perpetrator. Most of the time, she called the case as "Trump – Russia case" (Maddow, 2017, May 17) or "Trump – Russia investigation" (Maddow, 2017, September 20), even though the investigation events themselves were surrounding the Trump campaign and members of Trump campaign. Even when talking about the charges against Trump campaign officials, Maddow still turned to Trump. For example, when she was talking about the indictment of Paul Manafort, she portrayed him as a witness in a more massive case against Trump rather than a criminal in court (Maddow, 2017, May 17). Or when she was talking about charges against Michael Flynn, who failed to report himself as a foreign agent, she still led to Trump, saying, "Despite knowing Mike Flynn was under investigation, Donald Trump made him national security advisor with access to

all the nation's top intel secrets." (Maddow, 2017, May 17). This tendency means that while Maddow did cover Manafort's and Flynn's arrests, their involvement was portrayed through Trump's collusion with Russia and his possible crimes.

On the other hand, throughout most of the coverage, ABC World News distanced themselves from blaming Donald Trump directly. ABC World News also personified the conflict; however, it connected the external attack to Trump's administration and associates rather than Trump himself. For example, when covering Paul Manafort's case, the reporter from ABC World News stated, "today's [referring to Paul Manafort] indictment does not allege Manafort colluded with Russia on behalf of Trump campaign" (Muir, 2017, May 17). Moreover, he stressed that the charges against Manafort were about money laundering rather than his involvement with Russia as Manafort:

Manafort hid more than \$75 million they made from their overseas work in a number of foreign bank accounting, failing to pay taxes. According to the indictment, Manafort used the money to quote "enjoy a 'lavish lifestyle' spending nearly a million dollars on antique rugs and more than \$1.3 million on fancy clothes. Not to mention expensive cars and luxury properties gates allegedly used some of the money for his kids' tuition. (Muir, 2017, May 17)

ABC World News was cautious since it is a non-partisan news source. At first, when covering Paul Manafort's arrest (the first event in the timeline), ABC World News just insinuated possible Trump's blame throughout the whole investigation, as most of the time the reporters of ABC World News used the phrasing "possible collusion between Trump campaign and Russia" (Muir, 2017, July 10). However, with time and new facts during the Mueller report release, ABC World News was more comfortable specifying the blame. During Mueller's testimony, the ABC World

News connected Trump with the Russian government in more direct terms; by stating that the members of Trump's family, such as Donald Trump Jr., were involved in the talks with Russians ("and we now know Manafort was in the room for that Trump tower meeting with Donald Trump Jr. and the Russian lawyer who promised dirt on Hillary Clinton" [Muir, 2019, June 26]), or were friendly with Putin after questions by the press about the collusion, as the First Lady Melania Trump ["just hours later, cameras capturing these images of the First Lady and Putin chatting and smiling, and seated together for dinner" (Muir, 2019, June 26)]. Therefore, it can be argued that the Mueller's report findings changed non-partisan discourse as it proved at least some involvement of Donald Trump's administration in collusion.

A second difference across the liberal partisan and non-partisan U.S. news sources covering Russian election interference involved who was framed as being attacked within the U.S. In the ABC and MSNBC coverage, different representatives of the United States' political sphere are portrayed as under Russia's attack, be it Democratic politicians or the democratic institutions of the United States. ABC World News portrayed the attack as a personalized attack on Donald Trump's opponent Hillary Clinton. During coverage of Mueller's report, an ABC World News reporter stated, "The White House tonight says that is not the case. The two [Putin and Trump] moving on from the election meddling, which the President's intelligence community blames squarely on Russia. They say Vladimir Putin was ordering it, motivated by animosity towards Hillary Clinton." Here, the ABC journalists frame the conflict as personal. The non-partisan news argued that Russia is a country that attacked the United States, and also it is Putin who attacked Clinton. In this coverage, the motives of Russian interference are not connected to the attempts to discredit U.S. democracy but are driven by the personal dislike of Hillary Clinton. The statement implies that, because Vladimir Putin does not like Hillary Clinton,

he tried to help her rival during the elections. This narration minimizes the seriousness of the attack. It implies that if Putin did like Clinton or if, instead of Clinton, there was any other candidate, Russia would not meddle in the election.

MSNBC did not frame this conflict as a personal vendetta between Putin and Clinton but instead portrayed Russian interference as a broader Russian attack on American elections.

Rachel Maddow (2019, July 23) mentioned Hillary Clinton and the release of her emails by stating that Russian intelligence along with WikiLeaks "try to cause maximum harm to Hillary Clinton's campaign and to boost Donald Trump as best they could" (Maddow, 2019, July 23). However, Maddow did not stop at that. During the Mueller testimony, Maddow stated that Russia attacked American democracy through the American elections attack. She stated that, while the testimony itself might look weak, the report still holds value: "But there is a couple of things I think are worth noting about this report over and above its emphatic public conclusion that Russia attacked the election in an unprecedented way" (Maddow, 2019, July 25). Not only did she argue that Russia attacked the U.S. elections, she continued to argue that it was not just an attack on the elections but rather a massive attack on democracy itself. For example, when talking about Mueller's testimony, she stated:

Now, Robert Mueller, yesterday was at his most passionate and honestly his most coherent when he articulated the scale of the Russian attack on our election, its intentions, its implications, and how serious this was to our democracy. He said of all the things he has dealt with in his career, this is one of the most severe threats he has seen to our country. Remember, he was FBI director in the immediate wake of 9/11.

(Maddow, 2019, July 25)

Here, the MSNBC show's host amplifies the Russian attack's severity by bringing up this exact phrase from a lengthy testimony of Robert Mueller. Moreover, she is amplified his words by indirectly comparing the Russian interference with the 9/11 terroristic attacks. Trump and his campaign, in this case, are just collaborators, who might have been compromised by Russia, as she stated:

I mean, as blunt as Mueller was in explaining how members of the Trump campaign and the President himself were compromised by Russia or might have been compromised by Russia because of their secret dealings with the Russian government, which Russia knew about and they could leverage to compromise these folks, and extort things from them and put national security at risk, as blunt as he unexpectedly was about those things.

(Maddow, 2019, July 25)

Therefore, in MSNBC's use of the external foreign attacker conflict frame, Trump and his administration are seen as willing collaborators with the Russian attackers threatening the foundations of U.S. democracy.

Both ABC World News and MSNBC framed Russian interference into the elections as a Russian external attack on the U.S. However, some differences in the external attack coverage emerged as the severity and the sides of the conflict were presented differently. Rachel Maddow (2017, May 17) argued that Trump—along with his campaign, administration and some members of the family—is the main perpetrator of the attack by usually referring to the investigation as the "Trump-Russia investigation" (Maddow, 2017, May 17) across all of the news coverage. ABC World News (Muir, 2017, July 10) suggested some exchange between the Trump administration and Russia, motivated by Putin's dislike of Clinton. The ABC World News coverage, contrastingly, generally avoided tying President Trump himself to the collusion efforts by calling

this conflict the “Trump campaign-Russia investigation.” Moreover, the Russian involvement in the elections was presented as an attack that was personalized against Clinton and might not repeat in the future. Even though the news coverage happened at the same time when the conflict between Russia – supported Syrian government and the U.S. – supported forces in Syria escalated and was mentioned on ABC News, neither MSNBC nor ABC News discussed the Russian attack in terms of military conflict.

National Security Frame

While the conflict theme is dominant in the media discussion of election interference, different conflict frames within a conflict theme trigger other frames' creation. The argument that Russia is attacking the U.S. in some way or the other (be it a personal attack on Hillary Clinton or an attack on the U.S. electoral system) logically produced the national security frame on ABC World News and The Rachel Maddow Show. The national security frame used external foreign attack language and is embedded in the conflict theme. While the national security frame is connected with the external foreign attack frame, it is concerned more with how this attack can influence national security. The National Security frame is a logical choice when covering foreign threats. According to Boydston et al. (2013), security and defense frames appear in times of threat to the security of a person, family, and nation, and they are generally built as a call to action that can be taken to protect the welfare of a person, group or nation. In their programs, Rachel Maddow and David Muir cautioned about different hybrid threat elements that were not recognized by the Trump administration. Maddow even stressed in her coverage that there are implications of these threats for the future elections.

While neither of these news programs name the conflict as a hybrid war or the attack as a hybrid attack, what is interesting is the notion that both news channels address at least two

possible threats that are inherent to hybrid war. Among economic pressure, military action, political pressure, misinformation campaigns, and cyber-attacks, two-hybrid war elements were mentioned in both news sources: cyber-attacks and political pressure. A misinformation campaign as a threat was also mentioned in *The Rachel Maddow Show* in close connection with cyber-attacks.

The cyber side of the hybrid war was the one that was mentioned most of the time in the coverage and portrayed as an external threat. For example, ABC News, when talking about the elections, mentioned that Russia "hacked" the U.S. election, making a parallel with Russian actions against Clinton's campaign, where Russians "hacked her emails" (Muir, 2017, May 17). Through the coverage, ABC News stressed that the intelligence community indeed proved that Russia is a threat to U.S. national security (Muir, 2017, May 17). However, ABC News used only the examples of Russia hacking Clinton and DNC emails as a potential cyber threat to the election.

Rachel Maddow also talked about hacking. In one of her programs, Maddow also referred to Russian cyber attacking Clinton emails and the DNC server as "the Russian hacking of Democratic Party" (2017, May 17). However, compared to the ABC World News, she did not limit the attack only to Clinton's campaign or Democratic Party. She states that "Russian government-affiliated cyber actors conducted activity against state elections infrastructure in the run-up to the 2016 elections" (Maddow, 2019, July 25) to amplify that it is not only the Democratic Party or Clinton who was under the attack but rather the whole system of democratic elections. During Paul Manafort's arrest, she stated that "Russia intervened in the elections in a massive way" and that massive way included cyber-attacks as "21 states were – had their election systems attempted to be hacked" (2017, June 27). Interestingly, Maddow moved from

generalizing Russia as a nation and specified that the cyber threat was coming directly from the Russian government and people affiliated with it.

In Maddow's perspective, cyber-attacks were also closely linked to the informational attacks as she stated that "McCarthy and Paul Ryan had met with the prime minister of Ukraine, who's been telling them about this sophisticated propaganda tactics the Russians were using in Ukraine and the way they were supporting specific populist politician" (Maddow, 2017, May 17). Moreover, later she adds, as "Russians already got the data," it is possible that they will use it further in media manipulation (Maddow, 2017, May 17). Here, Ukraine was an actor who tried to combat the hybrid war, more specifically, an informational threat from Russia. Interestingly, while ABC News acknowledges the possible cyber threat to national security, misinformation is not present in ABC News' framing.

Political pressure was another element of hybrid that was covered in the news. Even though it is not stated as a direct attack by ABC World News, political pressure was implied during both the arrest of Paul Manafort and the Mueller Report hearings. For example, the reporters implied that Trump's first foreign speech with an emphasis on Russia and "easing of tensions, and improved relations with Russia from the position of strength only, is possible" (Muir, 2017, May 2017) came after Papadopoulos—the unofficial Trump campaign adviser—tried to set up a meeting with Trump and Putin or another Russian lawyer. During this meeting, it was implied that Russia not only "had dirt on Clinton" (Muir, 2017, August 9) but also was blackmailing Trump or members of his family. While ABC World News did not directly say that Russia applied political pressure, this implication means that Russia might have used political tools on both candidates in the U.S. elections.

Maddow also acknowledged that the Trump campaign and Russia's possible collusion, specifically the possibility of political pressure on the Trump administration, could be a part of the Russian attack. For example, she calls Michael Flynn's appointment as a White House advisor a "danger to the country" because of his "compromise with Russia as he was lying about the interactions with the Russian government while he was holding a very sensitive national security position" (Maddow, 2017, July 25). Then she moves to Donald Trump himself:

Mueller was explaining how members of the Trump campaign and the President himself were compromised by Russia or might have been compromised by Russia because of their secret dealings with the Russian government, which Russia knew about, and they could leverage to compromise these folks. (2019, July 25)

However, in her argumentation, it is not that Russia "had dirt" on someone, but rather the mere fact of knowing that Trump cooperated with the Russian government could be used as leverage. Therefore, it does not matter if Trump received any help. His communication with Russians meant that he and his campaign staff could be used in Russian attacks on the United States.

The national security frame with a stress on the threat became incredibly dominant when the Mueller report came out, and Mueller promised to testify in front of the Committee. Maddow was concerned about the future implications of Russian actions, "what Russia did was bad, and yes, it was serious, and yes maybe, we ought to start thinking about how to stop that from happening again" (2019, July 25). Here, Maddow made a critical leap. She moved from viewing this issue only in terms of Trump's impeachment to acknowledging the threat in all its seriousness by arguing that it was not a political party that brought up this issue but the bipartisan commission that talked about the threat. By mentioning the future threat, she implies that interference can

happen in the future. Later in her programs, she specifies the possible Russian cyber threat during the 2020 Presidential elections by stating:

What if it comes down to a hand recount in one state, and the presidency is on the line based on that recount? That could never -- yes, that happened. 2000 Florida, right? Then it turns out as we're doing that hand recount, and the whole country is riveted, turns out that's one of the states where Russia didn't want just probe and prod. They accessed, they got their hands on all the voter data from that state. Now, the question arises in the country as we're wondering to find out what will happen with this recount, hmm, Russia got in there. Did they mess with any of that voter data? Did they tilt it in one direction or another? How would we know if they did? (Maddow, 2019, July 25)

While she still comes back to Donald Trump as she asks the audience whether they would trust the recount or the results that "might determine whether or not Donald Trump gets four more years in office," her sentiment about the possible future distrust in election results is strongly connected to the aim of any hybrid war (Maddow, 2019, July 25).

ABC News did not cover how Russian interference might influence future elections, but that might be because, in external foreign attack framing, the Russian attack was portrayed as an isolated attack that was mainly driven by Russian's distaste towards democrats and Clinton. Therefore, it is logical that ABC News would try to strike a more moderate tone when discussing future national security implications. However, Maddow raised the security issues, where the U.S. electoral system is under attack by Russians, dictated by liberal framing of external foreign attack, where Russia systematically attacked the United States. However, even though Rachel Maddow and ABC News do not mention the term of hybrid war, they verbalize the threat and its implications for national security.

Internal Disunity Frame: Hannity and Russia Today

The internal disunity frame is another conflict-based frame that draws heavily from the conflict theme. However, compared to the external foreign attack frame, this conflict is not between two different states but rather exists within U.S. society. Be it social conflict or ideological one (depending on the news source), the attackers and victims exist in the United States society. Conservative media like Fox News and Russia Today used an internal disunity frame to describe the Russian interference investigation.

The Secretary of State Rex Tillerson (Stanglin, 2018) and some other prominent Republicans like John McCain (Diaz, 2017; Schleifer & Walsh, 2016) and Lindsey Graham (Mattingly & Duster, 2019), when talking about possible Russian interference in the U.S. elections during and after the 2016 Presidential campaign, stressed that if the interference indeed happened that would mean that Russia attacked the United States in some capacity or another. The threat was recognized by some members of the Trump Administration and members of the Republican Party; however, the conservative partisan news outlet Fox News almost entirely ignored the Russian threat by paying most of the attention to the internal partisan or even ideological conflict—what I label an internal disunity frame. Even more impressive is that Russia Today—the Russian government's English news source—promoted the same internal disunity frame by portraying Russian interference, not as an external attack but rather as an internal conflict within the United States. Although there are slight differences in portraying the internal disunity frame between Fox News and Russia Today, the overarching internal disunity conflict frame is used across media channels.

Both Russia Today's programming and Hannity's show are quick to disregard the Russian threat. For example, RT America News argued that Manafort's arrest "has nothing to do

with Trump or Moscow" (RT America, 2017, October 30). One of the contributors to the program stated that "all of these accusations are related to [Manafort's] lobbying for a Ukrainian political party" (RT America, 2017, October 30), and that the accusations "do not mention Trump or Russia" and that Senate Intelligence Committee found "no sinister connection with Russia" (RT America, 2017, October 30, 7:30). The RT stressed that the investigation was ordered by Robert Mueller, who was appointed by the Democrats. This argument implies that, even though Democrats started the investigation, the Special Counsel appointed could not find anything that would prove Russia's involvement with Trump. RT News and opinion pieces like News.Views.Hughes. And Late Night News with Rick Sanchez usually addressed Russian interference as none other than "hysteria" (RT America, 2017, September 30), an "alleged Russian interference" (Sanchez, 2019, 27 July) and a "witch hunt for Russian trolls" (RT News, 2017, October 30).

What is more interesting is that the Fox News host Hannity (2019, July 23; 2019, July 19) also used the terms "hysteria," "liberal hysteria," or "Russian collusion conspiracy hysteria" when talking about Mueller's investigation. This usage of language diminishes the notion that the Russian threat is even real, as the word hysteria usage shows that at least one side was exaggerating the threat. In contrast, the usage of conspiracy means that the threat is made up. The hysteria, conspiracy terminology is used to show that there is no conflict between Russia and the United States.

If the United States is not under attack, how does the conflict frame still function in both news media? Who started the hysteria, and who created the Russian collusion conspiracy? Looking at the language of the show Hannity, Sean Hannity, and the show's contributors, there is little to no doubt who is attacking whom. In Hannity's (2019, July 23) framing, the

broad left attacks the Trump administration, Trump himself, and Trump's family. Through the whole process of the investigation, Hannity is saying that the "left continues their Russian collusion conspiracy hysteria" (2017, July 13). One of the contributors to the show, Michael Malkin, amplified Hannity's statement by saying:

I do not envy the Trump administration folks who have to deal with this every day. It's enough that they have to combat our international and foreign enemies and the domestic enemies within this country, specifically, Kimberly, within the fourth estate.

(2017, May 26)

While foreign enemies are not specified, the state's enemies are clearly defined, but not limited, to the liberal press. Hannity's program amplified that it was an internal conflict by directly stating that:

There's no treason, as all of these Democratic lawmakers, including Pelosi, seem to imply because we're not at war with Russia. It's not a conspiracy to defraud the government because there's no deceit here. It's undoubtedly collaboration because that's only anti-trust law. Finally, as Pelosi said, it is not a violation of election laws because the law specifically allows foreign nationals to volunteer information and their services. (2017, July 14)

Hannity (2017, July 14) also stated that it was the conspiracy against the President himself as the left did not want to believe that the American people chose Donald Trump to be the President. This argument directly points to the internal aspect of the conflict. It diminishes any attempt to question the possibility of foreign attack, as it shows that it is not the foreign government attacking the U.S., but the political actors inside the country who cannot agree with the American people's choice.

Interestingly, the divide and the conflict is between the broader liberal left and the Trump administration. While he mentioned the Democratic Party, the party itself is a part of the broader liberal Left, including the liberal elite and liberal media. Republicans and Republican Party are rarely mentioned, while Donald Trump and his administration are mentioned as the other side of the conflict. The media and the Democratic Party play the most crucial part in representing those who attack the American people's choice. The Democratic Party is the one who is "pushing the conspiracy theories" and is determined to "hurting President Trump" with their "disgusting display" as the Democrats were "the one who's been talking about the President and the impeachment" (Hannity, June 12, 2017). Liberal news sources seem to be the main perpetrators of the crime, as Hannity referenced the media in every program analyzed. CNN and MSNBC, according to Hannity (2017, July 14), are the main attackers and villains, who are aiming to destroy Trump and the Trump administration, who are portrayed as heroes. For example, when talking about Mueller's investigation, Hannity describes the situation when one of the representatives of the Trump administration went to the press conference in the following terms:

So this week, one brave member of the Trump administration went into the lion's den over and over again to do battle with the destroy-Trump media. Now, whether he appeared on CNN or MSNBC, Dr. Sebastian Gorka took the President's message to some pretty dark corners of the fake news sphere, and he came out on top.

(Hannity, 2017, July 14)

Moreover, to Hannity, the "leftist media" not only attacked the Trump administration or Trump himself but was also so immoral that it attacked Trump's family members. While members of the Trump administration are described in more heroic terms (e.g., brave members

of the Trump administration), President himself and his family are portrayed as victims of a "left-wing conspiracy." As the "left-wing agenda" and its purpose is "hurting President Trump," "news organizations going after President Trump," they are "going after the First Lady, the First Daughter. They have gone after even an 11-year-old kid, 10 at the time. They've gone after both brothers" (Hannity, 2017, July 14). The DNC was "trying to sabotage Trump," who in turn is portrayed as a person who needs to "defend America from foreign and domestic enemies" (Hannity, 2017, May 26). Moreover, Sean Hannity frames himself as a victim, stating that the "liberal media went after the people that support the President and agree with his agenda like me" (2017, July 14). These fragments of the Hannity program illustrate how Hannity portrays the conflict as one internal to the U.S. It is not the Russians or the Russian government that is the villain, as usually foreign enemies are vilified in the war discourse (Powell, 2011), but the so-called journalists, the fake news, the leftists. They will not stop until they destroy Trump, his administration, and his family. Although Hannity mentioned possible external influences (e.g., Ukrainian, Russian) into U.S. elections, he dismissed the external influences pretty quickly and did not mention Trump as one of the people involved.

Russia Today also framed the investigation in terms of internal disagreement. The main actors of the conflict within the U.S. society changed as the investigation progressed. In contrast to Hannity, when covering Paul Manafort's arrest RT, argued that the conflict is deeply rooted in American society's fabric, which goes beyond the partisan or ideological divide. For example, in one of the episodes of RT News, Russia Today showed "a supposed Russian troll," who was banned by Twitter. It later turned out to be a Black woman from Georgia, who was "just voicing her opinion" and "trying to stop government propaganda" (2017, October 30). Twitter is called

"the government entity," which is described by a woman (who was blocked by Twitter) as a "threat to free speech" (RT News, 2017, October 30).

Another episode of the news program showed a sister of murdered Black Lives Matter activist Tawanda Jones. In the news episode, a story about her activism connected to her murdered brother was used to respond to the allegations that Russian trolls were instigating the racial tensions on Twitter and infiltrating a BLM group. In her interview, Jones emotionally said that "My fight was always against police brutality" and "We have other problems without Russians" and finally stated that "Last time I remember, it is not Russians who killed my brother" (RT News, 2017, October 27). One of the commentators of the story Eugene Puryear noted that even just saying that Russian hackers infiltrated the BLM movement is hurtful to the movement and that the allegations made by the media should stop (RT News, 2017, October 27). These examples show a typical pattern, where Russia Today when addressing some of the allegations, used an example of internal group tensions within American society. Be it racial tensions, or question of freedom of speech, or partisan divide, the same pattern of fending allegations against Russia was used in almost every episode of Russia Today Night news. Therefore, Russia Today has not only diminished the possibility of interference by showing that the "supposed threat" is just hysteria; it provides argumentation that the real conflict is within American society.

While conflict within American society was still a dominant argumentation from RT, the Mueller report was covered in terms of the ideological and partisan divide. Russia Today covered the interference as a U.S. partisan issue, where "the Democrats' hope that it [the report] will bring down Trump didn't pan out" (RT News, 2019, July 24). In the words of Russia Today's news anchors, Mueller's report does not only exonerated Trump but also does not prove Russian

interference. In the same episode of RT News following the Mueller testimony, one of the contributors of RT Murad Gazdiev argued that all of the evidence provided by Muller did not prove anything (RT News, 2019, July 24). First, he argues that one of the most prominent elements of hybrid attack cyber-hacking and spreading misinformation is not connected to the Russian government at all, stating:

What if there is any evidence tying the alleged Russian troll farm to the Kremlin? The report ties it to the Russian government. For background, Mueller alleged that Moscow interfered in the election in two ways: intelligence agents who hacked Democratic emails and a troll factory that spread disinformation and fake news. Surprisingly, the troll factory decided to fight back and defend itself in the U.S. courts. And the judge ruled that there was no evidence presented to tie the Russian government to this alleged troll farm. And ordered Mueller and the Justice Department to stop linking it to the Kremlin. How is that for dozy? Second, was it Russian hackers? Really? You don't seem to be so sure. (RT News, 2019, July 24)

The contributor continued to argue that Mueller did not provide enough evidence about the hackers, as Mueller language is not concrete in making the allegations, as the contributor stated:

Mueller's Unit 26125 APPEARS to have sent spearfishing emails, and the GRU appears to have compressed and exfiltrated data. What does it mean "appears to"? I might appear 30 or 31 or older. It appears that it's going to rain. But you don't say: "he looks like he committed murder," or he appears to rob a bank. (RT News, 2019, July 24)

Later in the episode, another contributor to the program continue to argue that the testimony is insignificant and that the whole investigation is led by a partisan divide in the country, as he stated:

You are going to see a man [talking about Mueller] who is thinking, "I don't want to be here. I am loathed by everyone. The Democrats hate me because they gave me a job to do, namely, indict the President, remove the President, embarrass the President and so far I indicted people nobody's known about and 17 or more imaginary Russians for something that's it". (RT News, 2019, July 24),

Here, it is evident that RT downplayed any allegations that the Russian government was connected to the attack made in Mueller's report and stressed that it is internal disunity and Russia-hate that drives this investigation with partisan differences. RT argued that the U.S. court, which is not connected to the partisan investigation, ruled out that the troll factory is connected to the Russian government and that Russian nationals' indictment is an imaginary accusation. RT content also suggested that the Mueller argumentation did not prove anything substantial by sowing doubt in Mueller's findings' legitimacy. Later the contributor even stated that the security organization that provided evidence on troll farms "was co-founded by a vocal critic of the Russian government" (RT News, 2019, July 24).

Another Russia Today host, Scottie Hughes, in her final remarks about Mueller's testimony, said that it is not Russians who divided the society. It is the parties and the partisan committees "that created this circus," and the divide is actually happening "right here, at home" and "we need first to fight the enemies at home" (Hughes, 2019, July 25). Interestingly, in her program, Hughes criticizes some of Fox News hosts, who are even mentioning possible Russia's involvement. In one of the news fragments, Hughes responded to Fox News host Trish Reagan's monologue about how Vladimir Putin made Americans question the foundation of democracy in this statement:

Most of her monologue was right on target, except for her saying Putin is the one who won this round. I did not even know that we were in this boxing match with any country. And considering the rest of her monologue, rightfully pointing out that it was the antics of partisan politics and the choices made by our own Justice Department, which created this circus. So let's give credit to this divide where it is due. Right here. At home.

(Hughes, 2019, July 25)

While Hughes and other contributors maintain that Russia has nothing to do with the election interference and the investigation, they try to shift attention from Russia at all. Unlike previous coverage (Paul Manafort's arrest), which tried to use the U.S. investigation results to prove no Russian involvement (e.g., Manafort charges in money laundering), here, during Manafort's hearings, the investigation was seen as negligible even if it proved something. Even if Russia was proven guilty in some aspects as Mueller's investigation concluded (troll factories, hackers), and as Fox News host Trish Reagan implied, the investigation was seen as a tool for an internal power struggle. Overall, the RT news programming is concentrating not on Russian involvement but rather on internal partisan and societal disunity in the U.S.

Even though it had some differences, both channels' internal disunity frame was embedded in the conflict theme. However, because the conflict was portrayed as an internal conflict within U.S. society with no outside actors to blame, the guilt frames were constructed within both R.T. and Fox News coverage. However, while Fox News and its programming see the blame in the divide within the country, more specifically ideological divide, the Russian English-speaking news produced the frame of American hypocrisy, where Russia became a victim of anti-Russia hysteria. Both of these frames can be seen as possible tactics of diverting

attention from their blame. I will explore these two different frames that stem from the internal disunity frame in the following sections.

Liberal Guilt Frame

According to Kepplinger et al. (2012), media, when covering a scandal or a conflict, provide information that creates an impression of guilt and an impression of excuses. Fox News is a partisan, right-leaning news channel. Hannity is a program that mainly supports President Trump; as Hannity's host stated on his show and in public multiple times, the guilt production during the coverage of Russian interference is complicated. The investigation itself revolves around the question of Russian interference. However, the Trump administration may have colluded with the Russian government, making it impossible not to mention Donald Trump when talking about Russian guilt. Hannity, however, by portraying Russian interference as internal disunity, assigned the guilt to the liberal left. During his Mueller investigation coverage, Hannity produced a Liberal guilt frame based on internal disunity conflict, where the left "attacked" Trump.

Collusion, Russia, and election interference, however, is not absent from Hannity's discourse. In Hannity's coverage, election interference might have happened. Russia might have tried to have political influence; however, it was not the Trump administration involved, but the Democratic Party and its representatives. Hannity denied any wrongdoing by the Republican Party by pointing out that Democratic Party and liberal politicians themselves are guilty of crimes that they accuse the President. Hillary Clinton, her husband, her campaign, and her deals as a Secretary of State are dominant categories that describe the Liberal guilt frame. However, two dominant stories were mainly used: Ukrainian involvement interference into the U.S. elections and Uranium One Deal. Interestingly, when talking about the collusion, Hannity does

not mention Trump or his dealings with Russia during the Mueller investigation, which was exclusively about Russian involvement in the elections; instead, he talks about Hillary Clinton, the DNC and their collusion with the Ukrainian government. In his program, when Paul Manafort was arrested, Hannity stated:

Now, in the article, Politico explains how a DNC operative paid and Ukrainian government officials – they worked to aid the DNC and the Hillary Clinton campaign to hurt Donald Trump during the 2016 election. Now, the report details how this Democratic operative, who used to work in the Clinton White House, led this effort, even met with Ukrainian diplomats at the Ukrainian embassy to talk about ways to expose former Trump campaign manager Paul *Manafort* and hurt the campaign. (2017, July 18)

Hannity (2017, July 18) never mentioned the arrest of Paul Manafort in terms of what it can mean for the Trump administration, but instead used it to argue that the accusations against Trump's campaign, in reality, should be accusations against Hillary Clinton. Noticeably, Sean Hannity did not mention the accusations against Paul Manafort and the fact that he was arrested on money laundering charges, implying that the possible charges against Manafort resulted from DNC's plot to damage Trump's campaign. While he argued that Trump did not collude with Russia by telling that Trump is entirely innocent, he argued that it was the Democrats who committed the crime as he stated in his segment: "We know that the Democrats colluded with Ukraine. It's incontrovertible" (Hannity, 2017, July 18). Hannity (2017) acknowledged that collusion with a foreign government is illegal. Yet, he did not, at any time, talk about the threat that the involvement of foreign government in the internal relationship, be that a Russian or Ukrainian government, poses. Possible collusion with Ukraine was mentioned only once in

Hannity's program. It was used to argue that Democrats are more guilty of collusion with other governments, but they [Democrats] ignore their scandals.

Hannity did not dismiss the U.S. dealings with Russia. However, he shifted attention from the latest scandal of interference in the electoral process. He brought up Democrats' involvement with Russian, like Clinton's Uranium One Deal and Loretta Lynch's involvement with a Russian lawyer under Mueller's investigation later. Hannity did not limit himself to arguing that only Hillary Clinton's campaign and the DNC were the ones who did something illegal. Hannity stressed that during Clinton's time in the Obama administration, she, as Secretary of State, transferred up to 20 percent of American Uranium to Vladimir Putin and Russia, which benefited Clinton Foundation and personally Hillary Clinton and Bill Clinton (Hannity, 2017, October 23). While he acknowledged the threat to the national security from this dealing, the guilt is assigned not to Russia. Still, the Clintons were the ones to blame, as Hannity said: "Now, the Clintons stuffed their pockets while putting America's national security in jeopardy." The specific danger of selling Uranium to Russia is not discussed; however, Hannity went into details in explaining that Clintons "stuffed their pocket with money," made "a criminal quid pro quo," and "violated the law by using her [Clinton's] office of Secretary of State to her benefit in exchange for money" (2017, October 21). Therefore, Clinton's dealings were portrayed as corrupt rather than dangerous to the national security of the U.S.

Another example of the liberal guilt frame is when Hannity mentioned Obama's administration, which included then-Secretary of State Clinton and Attorney General Loretta Lynch, and former President Bill Clinton as the ones who had dealings with Russia long before the scandal. Lynch and the Obama administration were also assigned the program's guilt, diverting attention from Donald Trump Jr. and his meeting with a Russian lawyer, who was later

under investigation by Mueller's team. Hannity, when talking about the Donald Trump Jr. meeting, did not cover why Trump Jr. met with the lawyer and quickly shifts attention to how this lawyer was connected to the Obama administration:

It is a complete defense of what Donald Trump did. It's clear from John's excellent reporting here that this Russian lawyer had an agenda. She pursued it under a false pretext, and it was then exposed. There is no crime here. However, did Loretta Lynch let infamous Russian lawyer into the country? (2017, July 13)

Therefore, Hannity argued that there was nothing criminal in what was Trump Jr. was doing, but rather it is the Obama Administration's fault, who let the lawyer in the country in the first place. While national security matters were mentioned in the argument, this argumentation was used more as a background to blame the Clintons and Obama administration. It was never brought up again in later coverage.

By creating a Liberal guilt frame, Hannity created an alternative coverage to the Russia Election interference investigation frame constructed by The Rachel Maddow Show and ABC World News. Hannity was talking about Russia and collusion, but with different actors of the conflict. First, Hannity (2017, July 18) shifted attention from Michael Flynn and Paul Manafort's charges to the Clinton campaign's possible collusion with the Ukrainian government. While he still covered the possible collusion, it was not connected to Russia's interference of Robert Mueller's investigation. Moreover, while he invoked a sentiment that foreign interference is terrible for the county's security, Ukrainian "collusion" is not stable across his coverage. It was mentioned only once in the coverage that was analyzed. Second, while still keeping Russia in the coverage, Hannity covers the Obama Administration's foreign dealings. As a result, Hannity covers Russia's possible collusion and election interference but constructs a vision where liberals

(which includes Democratic Party, Obama Administration, and Clinton) have a double standard when it comes to their faults. Even though Hannity acknowledges the threat of dealing with Russia, his argumentation is mainly used to stress the DNC, the Clintons, and the Obama Administration's guilt. Both the Uranium One Deal, mentioned in the coverage, and possible "Ukrainian collusion," were proved to be fake, proving that Hannity's coverage used Russian/Ukrainian interference to build up Democratic guilt, rather than concern among the audience about the security issue.

Framing American Hypocrisy

Just like Hannity, Russia Today framed guilt while covering Russian interference. Hannity's language and argumentation shifted focus from Trump's guilt to Liberal guilt by assigning all the offenses of Donald Trump to the political elite of the Democratic Party. Russia Today, alternatively, assigned guilt to the United States, shifting focus from Russia's dealings to United States' missteps in domestic affairs and foreign policy. Although hosts of multiple shows on the network mentioned Manafort's ties with Ukraine, Russia Today did not frame "Ukrainian guilt." Russia Today, framing the hybrid war as an internal U.S. conflict, disregarded Russian interference entirely, as the RT News claimed that Robert Mueller's final report does not provide proof that Russia is involved in the meddling. Moreover, in Russia Today's coverage, it is not Russia who is guilty. It is the United States who are guilty of interfering in the affairs of other countries and is guilty of producing an "anti - Russian hysteria."

The argumentation of hysteria was evident in the coverage of Mueller's testimony. For example, one of the anchors of the R.T. Night News, when talking about the conclusions of the Mueller report, said that the FBI used information about cyber-attacks from the firm that was founded "by a vocal critic of the Russian government," implying that the report was subjective

(RT News, 2019, July 24). The prominent anchor of RT and former CNN employee Rick Sanchez argued that U.S. media is by default "pushing war voices" (2019, July 24). Sanchez had a segment on his program covering media bias in the United States. Interestingly, while most of the criticism of U.S. media on RT is concentrated on liberal media, FOX News did not get a pass either. For example, Rick Sanchez in one of his programs when discussing the U.S. coverage of Russian election interference investigation, stated: "Tonight we look at NBC News, right. Remember, they almost, as much as FOX pushed the war in Iraq, they had much to gain from it" (2019, July 24). Therefore, Sanchez implies that all U.S. media is aiming to push war narratives whether the war is warranted or not.

Scottie Hughes even compared the investigation of Russian interference to the harassment and unfairness that African Americans face in modern America. She argued that Russian is the American "governmental monster" just like other groups. Interestingly it is not the Russians who need to take this responsibility, but the Americans, as she stated: "We, as Americans, should take responsibility for letting a government monster go for so long unbridled" (Hughes, 2019, July 25). In her segments, she later stated:

I also know that when a society encourages hateful rhetoric targeting a group, whether it is race, sexual preference, gender, or even nationality, we end up with painful scenes, like those from an African American church in Charleston, South Carolina, or a night club in Orlando Florida. I understand that we live in a society where we must have a villain. But we in America will never fight the true villains of the world unless we eliminate and do our best not to create or encourage the villains here at home. (2019, July 25)

Therefore, R.T.'s programming shifted attention from Russian involvement and shamed the United States for hate towards Russia and internal injustices.

Another part of the American hypocrisy frame was its discussion of foreign affairs. In this case, the blame was not assigned to a representative of a specific party. On the one hand, Sanchez criticized Obama's administration and Democrats. In one of the episodes of Rick Sanchez, when talking to Congressman Ron Paul, mentioned Obama's visit to the U.K. before the Brexit vote and his advocating against Brexit. When Ron Paul talked about Obama's visit to the U.K., he said, "Isn't it a double standard? Isn't it an election interference too?" (Sanchez, 2019, June 11). On the other hand, in another episode, Rick Sanchez mentioned how Trump's administration members tried to influence other countries' elections. During one of his programs, Sanchez stated how U.S. media was talking about election interference:

Turn on some of your favorite news channels, other than this one and maybe a few others, and you are gonna hear the story that goes something like this, right. Russia and, more directly, someone with direct ties with President Putin influenced the U.S. election in some way. The word that they are going to use is not influenced is meddled. Then, they will suggest that it was done in a very orchestrated way, which includes one or all of the following. Polling. To find out which groups are more susceptible in which states in America. Sophisticated data analytics, then messaging. Why? To target and influence specific demographic news using, for example, social media. (2019, June 11)

After describing what Russia presumably did, he moved on to compare this definition of meddling (provided by U.S. media) with United States actions in other countries by saying: "Well, you are about to hear a very powerful person with ties to the President talking about the very same techniques [meaning election interference] to choose who become the next leader any or all European countries" (Sanchez, 2019, June 11). After that, the episode showed Steve Bannon's interview, where Bannon confirmed that he would "offer populist parties across Europe

fundamental blocks for winning, including expertise for polling, data analytics, messaging and get-out-to vote efforts" (Sanchez, 2019, June 11). Sanchez then argued that Steve Bannon "who has ties to President Trump" as "he was his chief strategist and remain his chief defender today" (Sanchez, 2019, June 11) was close to President Trump who tried to influence some or all the European elections and did the same thing that the U.S. implied Russia did:

Let's go through what he said, so the "right people" are elected in Europe. Here, let me check it out for you. Polling, data analytics, messaging, using media surrogates, using media surrogates, campaign war rooms, war rooms, and even rapid response teams.

Sounds familiar? Actually, it goes beyond what has been reported here. (Sanchez, 2019, June 11)

Here, Sanchez argued that Bannon had ties to the Trump administration, which makes Trump an accomplice not of Russia interference, but the main perpetrator of the interference in European countries. By contrasting what the U.S. considers to be Russian interference and what Bannon said, Sanchez tried to provide evidence not only that the U.S. has a double standard but also that the U.S. is guilty of practicing much more severe meddling.

However, it is not only Steve Bannon, who was trying to interfere in other countries' political process. Sanchez provides another example of what he called "our shameless hypocrisy when it comes to the question of election meddling" (2019, June 11). Sanchez argued that official representatives of the U.S. government like Mike Pompeo, a part of the Trump administration, "doing pretty much the same thing [meaning meddling and interfering mentioned by Bannon] maybe, even more, the blatantly and he is, doing it officially. Officially! And I guess it would behoove me to ask, where is the outcry?" (2019, June 11). Later in the episode, the reporters of Nick Sanchez show play clips where Trump calls for the support for Boris Johnson

during the U.K. election and Mike Pence supporting message for Venezuela's government. The report concludes with the reporter stating: "What the U.S. wants in a special relationship is one where it pulls all the strings" (Sanchez, 2019, June 11). Sanchez's program specified the United States' hypocrisy and stressed that interfering in internal affairs of foreign" governments was a common practice for the United States. United States interference, however, is much broader and worse than what Russia did. This line of argumentation and Sanchez's examples illustrate the difference between Hannity's guilt frame, where he tries fully exonerating Trump, and the RT frame, where Trump, just like any other representative of the U.S., is guilty of interference in foreign affairs of other countries. By doing it, he puts Russian and American actions on the same scale, which provides a second line of argumentation, which could have been used in case Russian interference was proven.

Chapter 5: Discussion

To conclude this manuscript, I will discuss how the previous chapter's findings contribute to our understanding of the hybrid war's framing. In this thesis, I raised three questions; how do US news sources frame an act of hybrid war? Do patterns of coverage differ across US partisan news channels? And do US news sources use common frames with Russian English language news sources? At first, I will revisit my research questions and explain how my analysis has answered these questions. Next, I will move on to this research's contributions by articulating both theoretical and practical implications of the study. Lastly, I will discuss the study's limitations and propose future directions for the research regarding media framing of hybrid war.

Dominant Theme and Frames

Overall, this study's goal was to describe major media frames that emerged in the 2016 Russian Election Interference case coverage as an example of an act of hybrid war. The results of the thematical analysis of news coverage show interesting answers to all questions. The data collected and analyzed allowed me to distinguish the main theme and media frames produced across a hybrid war media coverage. The conflict theme emerged as the dominant frame that was present across all the news sources. All news content analyzed in this project stated clearly that the Russian interference investigation is a case of conflict with a disagreement between two sides, tension, and incompatibility with the opinion of one another on a particular question. The conflict theme was a dominant frame across all the coverage. It produced two different conflict-based frames (external foreign attack and internal disunity) and other frames that stem from conflict-based frames (national security frame, liberal guilt frame, and American hypocrisy frame). Interestingly, other frames found during the analysis, while different, are closely tied to

the nature in which conflict was portrayed in the news coverage. The difference in framing is covered further in the discussion.

I will begin by answering the first research question about how U.S. news sources frame an act of hybrid war, like the 2016 Russian interference investigation. Hybrid war as a term was not mentioned once in any coverage. The lack of definition of hybrid war in the coverage lines up with the previous findings that show that hybrid war is either misidentified or not defined at all in the news, even though the previous research stated that news sources became better at identifying hybrid war (Caliskan & Cramers, 2018). U.S. news media's tendency can be attributed to various reasons connected to both broader factors of hybrid war and specific reasons of U.S. media and political climate. First of all, the ambiguity of the term and non-linear essence of hybrid war (meaning not traditional military involvement) means that it is still harder for U.S. news sources to recognize and identify the attack as a hybrid. As hybrid war is not as easy to recognize and is a relatively recent concept, U.S. media might be hesitant to use this term.

Second, it might be more challenging for the U.S. media to acknowledge the hybrid war, as it is the U.S. that is under attack. The presidential administrations clearly defined previous wars; the U.S. always had some official framing and was always on the offensive side of the war, be it war in Vietnam, Korea, or even more ambiguous "war on terror" (Schubert et al., 2002). In these cases, however, the U.S. was on the side of the offense. In the case of Russian interference, the U.S. was playing defense. Further, like the Trump administration, some official sources denied the involvement of Russian interference and continued to cooperate with Russia on other issues (ABC World News, 2019). The Trump administration showed very different attitudes towards the Russian interference case. The official position of the White House was stated during some of the broadcasts of news (ABC World News, 2019; Hannity, 2019). The official

position did not specify whether Russia was interfering in the 2016 elections. However, this position did argue that the administration had nothing to do with Russia and that Hillary Clinton was the one who needed to be investigated.

A final potential reason for a lack of use of the hybrid war term is that Russian interference was not an attack at all. As some state that Russian election interference is not entirely proven, it may be why media does not cover Russian election investigation, not in terms of hybrid war. However, this last scenario is doubtful. Although it was not the aim of this study to argue that Russian interference happened or that it is an act of hybrid war, multiple academic studies and U.S. government investigation do make more substantial cases that Russia interfered in the U.S. elections and that it does have every element of modern warfare (Lukito et al., 2019; Jamieson, 2018). Therefore, the reason for an unclear definition of hybrid war can probably be attributed to the first two factors.

The qualitative analysis, however, showed that U.S. media is not entirely oblivious to the hybrid threat. Thematic analysis showed that U.S. news media exhibited at least some level of awareness concerning the attack. While the content of frames differed from network to network, the overall tendency towards attempts to identify the threat was present in some partisan and non-partisan U.S. news networks. The Russian interference case was discussed in terms of conflict, a possible threat to security, and possible guilt for the actions. To different extents, news networks were concerned with the consequences of foreign government interference, be it Russian or Ukrainian government, into U.S. internal affairs. Some networks were even able to acknowledge some of the main, non-military elements of modern hybrid warfare, like cyber-attacks, disinformation campaigns, and political pressures. While these elements were not addressed using the specific phrase "hybrid war," the conflict frame and the more specific frames

that emerged from the coverage demonstrate at least some level of understanding of the threat, even if the news media did not use hybrid war terminology. This brings hope that U.S. journalists can still recognize a possible threat and inform the audiences about it.

The first research question is closely connected to the second research question as the difference in partisan coverage brings more understanding to the overall coverage. However, the conflict frame proved to be a multilayered construct as the sides of the conflict, the type (internal or external) of the conflict, and the people and groups to blame for the conflict differ in the news coverage, which brings the study to the conclusion that conflict can serve as an overarching theme. The news episodes that I analyzed showed that the dominant conflict media theme produced external foreign attack frame, internal disunity frame, national security frame, liberal guilt frame, and American hypocrisy frame and security frame U.S. news coverage.

The partisan news sources differ on presenting what type of conflict is the 2016 Russian election interference investigation. Hannity framed the conflict as internal disunity rather than an external foreign attack, which was favored on MSNBC's Rachel Maddow Show and ABC World News with David Muir. Logically, the conflict's sides differ depending on the conflict's essence (internal disunity vs. external attack). For FOX News Hannity, the Russian investigation is a conflict between the Trump administration and liberals and Democrats. Moreover, sometimes, Hannity's coverage portrayed the conflict as solely an attack on Trump Administration, which needs to be defended. However, Rachel Maddow and ABC World News argued that the conflict was an external attack, with Russia, who attacked the American electoral process by interfering in the elections or hacking the Democratic party. However, Trump's administration is seen not as a part of the American democratic institution but rather as one of the crimes' attackers or perpetrators.

The difference in the conflict framing can be partially explained by the partisan nature of the U.S. media. Guilt and security frame are also strongly connected to the partisan divide. As the involvement of U.S. political leaders, Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump, in the Russian interference case is evident, partisan media treated it as a possible conflict and as a scandal. Therefore, while liberal media like MSNBC were paying attention to the Republicans and their role in the scandal, Fox News, as a right-leaning news media source, has to pay more attention not to the Russian side of a conflict but instead to Democrats and liberals as a side of the conflict. This aligns with previous research that states that Democratic-leaning media give more coverage to scandals involving Republicans and Republican-leaning news media do the opposite (Peterson & Iyengar, 2019). As this scandal followed Trump and his administration since day one, left-leaning media paid more attention to Trump's involvement in the scandal and possible implications for the country's security.

On the other hand, the right-leaning news media shifted attention from Donald Trump and, as a result, from Russian interference. Instead of covering Trump's involvement by denying his guilt, Conservative media concentrated on the Democratic Party, the Obama Administration, and Clinton campaign scandals. Like Ukrainian interference into U.S. elections, some of the scandals did not have much proof, and some, like the Clinton - Uranium One deal, further proved to be wholly fabricated.

A national security frame in liberal media coverage is connected to viewing the conflict as an external foreign attack. According to prior research, the existence of security frames is dictated by the perceived feeling of possible or existing threat (Boydston & Glazier, 2013). Some argue that security frames have changed since the Cold War. Every threat was seen in constant communist or capitalistic threats to security frames, where every threat is seen in terms of a

possible terrorist attack (Hotchkiss, 2010). For example, Americans might view Europe's migration crisis and the civil war in Syria as a possible terroristic threat. However, the security frame present on MSNBC deviates from this pattern. In her program, Maddow is mostly concerned not with a terrorist threat but with a possible threat to the future of democracy and democratic elections. Hybrid war includes terrorism but is not limited to this concept. It is possible that a hybrid war also produced a new security frame, where the threat is seen not in terms of terrorism. As there are different elements of hybrid war, there is a possibility that possible security frames will not be limited to only one aspect of hybrid war.

To answer my last research question, I analyzed Russian English-speaking news programming on Russia Today and compared it with the U.S. news sources. Russia Today and U.S. news sources used the same conflict theme and internal disunity frame; however, the internal disunity frame engendered two different frames: the American hypocrisy frame (RT) and Liberal Guilt (Fox News). Like Hannity, Russia Today constructed an internal disunity frame when covering the 2016 Russian election interference. Russia Today stressed that the partisan divide is the cause of the investigation, while Russia is entirely innocent. While Hannity uses the same argumentation, that Russian interference investigation is blown out of proportion attack on Trump administration, to divert attention from Donald Trump, Russia Today diverts attention from Russia. Russia Today used multiple strategies, including accusing U.S. of anti-Russian hysteria and U.S.'s hypocrisy in foreign affairs to avert the attention from Kremlin and Russian involvement through the whole time of Russian investigation.

The notion of guilt is thematically common for both Fox News and Russia Today and stems from the internal disunity frame; however, the frames based on the guilt differed. Fox News builds a Liberal guilt frame, while Russia Today builds an American hypocrisy frame.

What is interesting is that the American guilt frame also changed during the investigation. Through the coverage, RT argued that investigation into Trump's connections with Russia was due to post - Cold war anti-Russian hysteria. Yet, when the most sensational discoveries in the investigation happened, like the Mueller report's release, the arrest of Paul Manafort and Michel Flynn, RT argued that the United States is also guilty of the same crimes accusing Russia. By saying that Obama's remarks before the Brexit in the UK or that the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's remarks about European elections were acts of interference - both examples were taken out of context and are not comparable with Russian systemic interference in the U.S. elections, Russia Today is trying to both minimize the importance of Russian interference and simplify the dangers of hybrid war and the following attacks. While it seems that RT built it's own independent and different coverage, the familiarities of framing with U.S. news sources like FOX News Hannity are disturbing. There is no proof that there is a direct connection between Hannity and Russia Today, but some reports and testimonies of former journalists working for Fox News state that Fox News was pressuring journalists to stop probes into Russia-Trump ties (Cohen et al., 2020). Other reports connect Sean Hannity directly to Russia through Michael Cohen (Gold, 2018). These claims do not directly prove that Hannity's journalism is affected by a foreign government. In the light of Hannity's coverage of the Russian interference investigation, it shows a disturbing tendency for a U.S. news source to share similar frames to those broadcast on Russian news sources.

Implications

Why does the framing of hybrid war matter? It might seem that framing is just a way in which freedom of the press and democracy works. However, while the plurality of opinions is essential, constant media polarization and a growing divide on how national security issues are

presented can influence the audience's perception of hybrid war during this investigation and future cases. Prior scholarship on partisan media showed that the audience's polarization on abortion and climate change is a product of a systematic difference of media coverage by partisan news (Carmichael et al., 2017; Carmines et al., 2010). This means that the difference and the divide in coverage of the hybrid war in Russian election interference cases and future cases may create a divide between audiences and their awareness of the attacks.

Furthermore, according to studies, the depiction of political polarization, like Hannity's depiction of the Russian interference election as an attack on Trump's administration from Democrats or Maddow's depiction of Trump administration as the main perpetrators of crime, means that audiences will continue to polarize even more. According to Levedusky and Malhorta (2015), media depictions of a polarized society increase citizens' belief that society is polarized and increases the opposing party's dislike. This means that even though, according to the research (Kearns et al., 2018; Kuypers, 2006), people are usually united in the face of a common enemy, it will probably not be the case with this hybrid attack. Here, I can see that hybrid attacks as a part of ambiguous warfare will continue to cause polarization, as U.S. media still portrays the conflict through the partisan lens. This means that some audiences will doubt the fact of hybrid attacks now and in the future.

Moreover, not only can partisan polarization can influence public knowledge or awareness, but also it can influence future support of future foreign policies and hypothetical response to the attack. As the studies suggest, citizens form significantly different policy views in emotionally charged partisan news environments (Gardian, 2010). Citizens concerned with terrorism or war are more likely to adopt more hawkish foreign policy views about the attack's response, for instance (Gadarian, 2010). This means that even in the future, if Trump's

Administration or any other President will decide to change their policy towards possible Russian interference, there will likely still be a large part of citizens who were already primed to see the hybrid attack as an internal, partisan issue.

Future reframing complications also line up with other findings that suggest that in a partisan media climate that some people see as hostile, other sources, like Russia Today, might become a primary source of information. Arceneaux et al. (2012) argue that a fragmented media environment leads to viewers to tune out of the programming they disagree with and leads to the tendency to tune out of the news altogether. This might lead them to the need to find alternative news. This alternative news could become Russia Today, which means that U.S. viewers will be exposed to Russian manipulation and disinformation. Although Russia Today has relatively a relatively small audience, its availability (all programming is available on their website for free), its constant stress on non-partisanship and the ideological diversity of contributors and hosts on the channel (e.g., former CNN anchors Larry King and Rick Sanchez and more conservative voices like Scottie Hughes and Jesse Ventura) might look like an alternative for the U.S. viewer (Orttung, 2019). Their advertising and algorithm practices on YouTube proved that their strategy was effective among global English and Spanish audiences (Orttung, 2019). There are a lot of different alternatives to partisan news sources. It is important to remember that Russia Today is a news alternative that could change how U.S. citizens think about foreign policy.

Theoretical Contributions

As was expected, the qualitative analysis provided a broader understanding of the framing of the hybrid war. While there is undoubtedly support of previous theories and types of frames, as conflict frame seemed to be found in quantitative analysis, the qualitative and interpretive approach showed that:

1. Conflict can not only be a media frame but a broader theme when describing war.

The analysis shows that media frames can exist within one theme (Kuypers, 2006).

However, in contrast to Kuypers (2006), this research shows that a theme is not limited to the production of two separate frames (official and competitive) but can produce multiple interdependent frames. While the tendencies of the conflict theme were expected, there were apparent differences within the one theme. This means that there is an existence of standard theme frames and smaller frames that explain reality but differ in their main components.

Therefore, this finding broadens the understanding of frames and their relationships to themes in the media coverage. However, I distinguish theme and frame, as frames look like larger overarching language patterns used, while frames are about selecting the information within one theme. For example, while Clinton's possible involvement with Ukraine, Trump's involvement in Russia, possible Ukrainian and Russian interference all happened simultaneously, and conflict was an overarching theme of these events, it was a choice of journalists on which information to select and amplify. Therefore, there is a possibility of an overarching theme, which in turn can engender different frames. Framing suggests that journalists make sense of the events through selecting, organizing, amplifying, minimizing, including, or excluding the information. In the case of hybrid war - conflict served as the main theme (Entman, 2010). However, different news sources decided to include and amplify different elements of the conflict.

2. One theme encompasses a complex system of intertwined frames.

While the theme of the frames might be the same (e.g., the conflict theme), that theme can, in turn, engender very different types of frames (e.g., external foreign attack, internal disunity). The conflict theme provided internal and external conflict frames that became internal disunity and external attack frames. National security frame, Liberal guilt frame, and American hypocrisy

frame even though, independently existed in the coverage were engendered from either internal disunity (Liberal guilt and American hypocrisy) or external foreign attack (national security frame). This finding contributes to the understanding of frames produced in the news coverage. Frames are not only presented as separate media constructs but as a system of interdependent frames.

3. Frames can influence the production of other frames, which creates a hierarchy of frames. The relationship between the external attack frame and the national security frame, where the national security frame probably would not exist without the external foreign attack frame, shows that there might not only be dominant and secondary frames, but rather a hierarchy of media frames.

4. Despite not being defined, journalists are still able to acknowledge the elements of hybrid war. The qualitative approach to the framing of hybrid war addressed the gaps of quantitative studies of framing of hybrid war. While journalists did not mention the term “hybrid war,” which supports the previous findings (Caliskan & Cramers, 2018), the qualitative research showed that journalists had a much deeper understanding of elements of the hybrid attack. Political pressure, cyber-attacks, and misinformation were mentioned in the news coverage, which means that U.S. news sources are aware of different influences. Therefore, this finding demonstrates that a qualitative approach gives a better understanding of the essence of a frame and provides a better understanding of journalists’ response to a hybrid threat.

Limitations & Future Directions

Despite the findings, there are some limitations to the study. First of all, the study is limited by the scope of the Russian interference investigation. Even though I chose the main events at the start of the investigation and the end of the investigation, some different themes and

frames emerged during that time period. Moreover, while the Mueller investigation is an essential part of investigating possible hybrid attacks, Russian election interference was mentioned in the news coverage as far back as the start of the 2016 Presidential campaign and continues to be a prevalent topic today. Second, the study was limited only to certain cable news and opinion news programs. While the findings of Russia Today programming were based on both emotionally charged political shows and night news, due to time constraints, there was no possibility to study both news and political shows on U.S. television, which made me limit my sources to political shows on the FOX News and MSNBC and nightly news on ABC News. The broader scope might have provided a better understanding of frames. Third, there is a limitation connected to the hybrid war and the ambiguity of the term. Even though some consensus within the U.S. intelligence community, some political officials, and scholars about what hybrid war and hybrid attacks are, the term is not clearly defined to this day (Caliskan & Cramers, 2018). Because of this, there is a possibility of unclarity concerning the coverage of hybrid war and, as a result, the analysis.

Future research can use different methods to triangulate the findings from this study. Semiotic methods, for example, would have helped with the analysis of visuals, which are also crucial in the research of misinformation and propaganda. Further, the analysis also does not examine the actual effects of framing of hybrid war on audiences. It would be interesting to see how these frames could be reproduced in audiences' consciousness or public discourse. Surveys and experiments could have all addressed these questions. For example, the survey is an opportunity to learn what audiences know about hybrid war and their general perception of the hybrid threat. The experimental design could also help learn how and whether media frames influenced the public perceptions of hybrid war and a hybrid attack. It might also show whether

people are more alert about the hybrid attack and hybrid threat after viewing the news programming. Moreover, experiments could provide an excellent opportunity to see how Russian news programming can potentially affect U.S. audiences.

Future research also can extend the findings by studying the Trump administration and the Russian administration's official political discourse. While this study mentioned some of the official positions of both the White House and Kremlin, a more thorough study of political speeches and their coverage in the media would be crucial in understanding how frames are formed in the first place. Such a study could address the differences or similarities between media framing and official framing. Still, an analysis of official discourse also will contribute to the understanding of creating competing frames within different cultural contexts and political systems. The analysis can also be extended to Russian U.S. news sources in Russia, like Voice of America, and to Russian domestic channels to see how both news sources address the Russian audience compared to how the U.S. audience has been addressed.

Another possibility of future research is the analysis of citizen's discourse of hybrid war. For example, a thematic analysis of social media comments and posts can show the audience's immediate and not manipulated by the researcher's reactions to the news broadcast. This qualitative analysis is an important step to understanding audiences' reactions to media frames.

There is a lot of potential in studying the hybrid war and its media coverage. The typical conflict theme suggests that there is some unity in the news coverage; however, further discussion of frames shows that the U.S. media landscape is not united in their coverage. That means that U.S. citizens are still getting fragmented information about a hybrid attack. The limitation of this study and multiple limitations mentioned earlier prove that there is a lot of work

to understand the concept of hybrid war. However, while the news, political leaders, and scholars cannot reach a consensus, hybrid warfare brings more devastation to people everywhere.

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