



# Combining Qualitative and Digital Methods for Exploratory Framing Analyses: The Case of Alternative Video Coverage of the Syrian War on YouTube

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## INTRODUCTION

Analysing digital public discourses is an important research subject in media, communication, and political studies. Current issues in politics, economy, and culture trigger online communication that clusters into web discourses of varying sizes and scopes (Bruns 2017; Schneider and Foot 2006). A critical-analytical look at these web spheres reveals how stakeholders, observers, and commentators discuss and frame issues; they allow

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Indicators “USA” and “UN” were double-checked in the output, and instances that implied the comment did not refer to the country or organization respectively were excluded.

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for empirically mapping and assessing the digital public sphere. The plethora of publications that analyse web spheres share a central assumption: that communication about issues of public relevance on websites, blogs, vlogs, and social media platforms offers quick accessible and rich data about the structure, dynamics, and hierarchies of public discourses (Karatzogianni 2015). Research on digital discourses raises questions about methodologies for data collection and analysis, with online data opening roads for analysing public discursivity from a digital angle. Combinations of content and network analyses seem particularly fruitful: online communication consists of different (cross/hybrid) formats of text that can be scanned for recurring themes, topics, expressions, phrasings, metaphors, and so on, often contextualized and interpreted within frame and framing analyses (Matthes 2014). That covers the content and the sentiment level of online discourses. It is equally important to consider the networks between participants and the “flow” of online communication for mapping the scale and scope of web discourses. Hyperlink analyses and social network data can identify the set of communicators, that is stakeholders and commentators, involved in a discourse (Nguyen 2017).

The network factors addressed require a critical assessment of the platforms in use for online communication. The opportunities and limitations of large social networking media platforms and search engines play a crucial and ambiguous role, from both a political and research perspective; while they enable the formation of alternative public spaces, as seen in the various protest movements and political upheavals of the early to mid-2010s (Karatzogianni 2015), political activism and debates on popular social networking media take place on privately owned platforms whose primary goal is to generate and collect data that can be converted to advertising and marketing products, which in turn generate revenue (Smyrnaio 2018; Srincek 2017). Critique on how the algorithm-driven platform economy undermines journalism, exacerbates polarization, and contributes to the decay of democracy roots in a decade-old scepticism towards the emancipatory power of digital technology but has recently reached popular debates through high-profile commentaries (Zuboff 2019). While there are various challenges to freedom of expression in the commercial spaces that the predominant social media platforms are, they still provide windows to current debates and the web becomes a contested arena in which opposing groups put forward their preferred framing of the central issues at stake. They allow for communicators to take alternative

routes to global audiences and circumvent mass media channels. The spectrum of participants appears broader. Despite various pragmatic and epistemological limitations to the data that is retrievable for researchers, analysing online discourses via online platforms thus has a lasting appeal.

This chapter addresses the potential of analysing digital public spheres, while outlining the boundaries of what can be learned from the data that is retrievable from online platforms. The conflict in Syria is a primary example: it is extremely polarizing and highly mediated, with a strong resonance on the web. A tragic episode from the war that happened in April 2017, the chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun, serves as an example for this chapter, with focus on YouTube as an integral section of the Syrian War web sphere. It is claimed that the Syrian War is the most socially mediated war in history thus far (Lynch et al. 2013). This chapter explores framing practices and reactions in YouTube videos on the alleged chemical attack in April 2017 published by non-mainstream media YouTube accounts. Emphasis is placed on framing strategies in relevant videos and the content, as well as interlinks between comments on this content. By examining these non-mainstream videos on YouTube for this specific event within the broader context of the Syrian War, the analysis aims at providing an exploratory categorization of contributor types on the platform and to discern what topics, themes, issues, and viewpoints they communicate in their framing of the attack. The research design combines a qualitative-explorative framing analysis of the sampled videos with digital methods in the form of the data collection tool Netlytic, which uses YouTube's application programming interface (API) to access data about videos, including their comment sections. The following main research question guides the analysis: how do non-mainstream videos on YouTube frame the 2017 chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun? The theoretical framework draws from web sphere theory (Nguyen 2017; Schneider and Foot 2006) and framing theory (Entman 1993).

The empirical section comprises six relevant videos based on view counts and their comment sections that were not published by mainstream news media agencies. The analysis has two purposes: first, to explore how the conflict is being framed by alternative sources, and second, to examine how viewers reacted to this content, especially in regard to the level of activity, reciprocal communication among commentators, and the content of their messages. The two-level analysis employs a qualitative close reading analysis of the videos for the identification of dominant frames, while an automatized quantitative content analysis with Netlytic examines the

comments. By combining a qualitative and a quantitative approach a holistic in-depth view of the framing of the event is obtained.

Analysing online communication on platforms can reveal framing practices in a wider scope of communicators in online discourses about specific issues, but there are several practical challenges due to Application Programming Interfaces (API) restrictions, difficulties in data access, and reproducibility of findings. While automatized tools for data collection can help with accessing a quick overview, there is a strong need for traditional methods from media and communication research to make up for potential gaps and blind spots in the data collection. However, while often a pragmatic and sensible choice, this turn towards “old” methods is problematic as well, especially with regard to the representability of the data and reliability of methods. Combining digital and traditional methods is often necessary but does not come without its own pitfalls and research designs need to be clearly justified.

### THE SYRIAN WAR AND SOCIAL MEDIA: THE CASE OF KHAN SHEIKHOUN IN 2017

The Syrian War commenced at the height of the so-called Arab Spring, which swept Northern Africa and the Middle East in 2011. Initially peaceful protests against the Assad government triggered an extremely violent response and protesters’ calls for reforms were met with police crackdowns that initiated a spiral of violence which left much of the country in ruins. At the time of writing, the conflict had been raging on for almost eight years; intersectional warfare and foreign intervention, but also inaction, have torn the country apart and no end to the fighting is in sight. The death toll rose to hundreds of thousands, with many millions displaced and seeking refuge in Europe, the USA, and elsewhere.

Unsurprisingly, civilians suffer the most: they lose their homes and lives to artillery fire, bombings, chemical attacks, and other atrocities. Though simple in its outcomes for a majority of Syrians (meaning in many cases either death, displacement, or ruin), the war is extremely complex and difficult to understand for outsiders, not least due to the sheer number of actors and geopolitical stakes involved. The conflict has very local roots, but it is simultaneously inherently transnational-global; regional and global powers are heavily invested in the conflict and support different factions to advance their agendas (e.g. Turkey’s, Russia’s, Iran’s, Saudi

Arabia's, or the USA's involvement). The lines of conflict are complex and multiple, as are the dynamics of the actor constellations. Its asymmetry in various dimensions make the Syrian War a somewhat exemplary conflict for the twenty-first century, in which the lines between local, regional, transnational, and global are blurring and conflict configurations change at a high pace.

Media coverage off- and online reflects and even contributes to these dynamics, especially on the web, where different formats, channels, and platforms are instrumentalized for framing the conflict from different political angles. The global web sphere (Nguyen 2017) that emerged over the duration of the war is in considerable parts driven by contestants that expand the battlefield into the many interconnected domains of Internet-based communication. The war has been heavily mediatized and documented, not only by traditional print and broadcasting media outlets but particularly with the help of widely available digital communication devices and online media (Lynch et al. 2013). Social media in particular played a central role in communication in and about the conflict; they serve either as allegedly "unfiltered" windows to events on the ground or, often at the same time, as extended stages for framing the conflict and its participants from ideologically loaded perspectives. On the one hand, this includes the various factions directly involved in the fighting; most combatant groups use online media and social media networks to recruit members and distribute their views as well as interpretations of conflict-relevant developments. Participants on all sides display a 'high-level of e-literacy' (Powers and O'Loughlin 2015, 174) and make professional use of the communicative opportunities provided by web technology and digital device (especially mobile technology).

On the other, there are also various observers and commentators from outside the local-regional context that topicalize, discuss, and frame the conflict in their web content, which is potentially reaching a virtually unlimited audience. This is the other characteristic that makes the Syrian War a primary example for contemporary warfare of the early twenty-first century: the integral role of digital, web-based communication as part of the war effort among all relevant conflict parties and global observers. Audiovisual online content is a central item on the public communication agendas of different political groups. Images can resonate quickly and profoundly with viewers' emotions and steer opinions. Ubiquitous mobile technology makes it easy to take shots or film videos that are instantly shareable with audiences through dedicated video content sites such as

YouTube. Participants construct, share, and preserve their own views on the conflict with the use of these technologies (Smit et al. 2017; Wessels 2017). Some of the most controversial examples include videos of infamous acts of violence against civilians and opponents, including execution and mutilation videos produced and distributed by government troops, rebel groups, and Islamic extremists.

Mass media and journalistic organizations are still primary sources for information about the conflict, but mainstream news is not only supplemented but often challenged by alternative channels on the web. The type, content, and purpose of these non-mainstream videos vary depending on the intentions of the originators behind them. A quick search on YouTube yields results lists that include mainstream media content and alternative video content of different types and quality; some is seemingly unfiltered footage, while other relevant videos appear as professionally produced media coverage, with different hybrid types in between.

Distinguishing between authentic and fabricated, neutral and opinionated, or downright biased content is often difficult. If the Internet and social media platforms broaden access to wide-reach media production, then this also comes with an increase in complexity and confusion, as well as an increased potential for deception, propaganda, and misinformation. Though research on the issue of social media communication for the specific case of Syria is growing (Lynch et al. 2013; Meis 2016; Smit et al. 2017; Saif et al. 2017; Cunningham et al. 2015), there are still some blank spots in categorizing and understanding various non-mainstream media contributors to the web sphere discourse and their framing strategies on video-focused online platforms.

## YOUTUBE AS A DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE FRAMING OF CONFLICT

Founded in 2005, YouTube reached in excess of one billion individual users in 2017; it is (officially) accessible in 88 countries and most viewers are between 18 and 34 years old. In addition, 300 hours of video is uploaded every minute. Content is connected by suggesting videos with similar content, which provides a myriad of personalized paths to follow (YouTube 2018). The video hosting services is part of Alphabet; it is the parent company of the tech giant Google, which dominates the search engine business and also is heavily involved in the design of YouTube's algorithm-based infrastructure. YouTube offers cheap and easy to

maintain fast lanes to audiences. Though much of the offered content would fall into the entertainment category, it has gained in relevance as a channel and site for politics and political activism—not only in the global West but also in other world regions including the Middle East (Radcliffe and Lam 2018; Jarbou 2018).

YouTube provides immediate access to the perspectives of political movements and groups, including combat parties in warzones, who circumvent the filtration processes of mass media organization; such groups instrumentalize online platforms and social networking media, to share their perspectives in the “information wars” that are integral to modern conflicts and the inevitable clash of framings. Modern Internet technology facilitates the creation of counter discourses and alternative public spheres that are not detached from mainstream media discourses but frequently challenge and/or circumvent established hierarchies for global public communication. The situation is ambivalent: more views and more direct, unfiltered coverage of events are available, but at the same time there is increased potential for misinformation, distortion, and plain propaganda.

The struggle for meaning and public opinion on local, regional, and global levels is integral to modern war efforts, especially in an asymmetric setting where efficient communication strategies level out differences in military power. Cyberconflict theory (Karatzogianni 2006, 2015) is based on the assumption that the very infrastructure of the Internet potentially enables the formation of alternative political movements that contest existing political hierarchies. The rhizomatic, centre-less build-up of online networks offers alternative political agencies to apply more flexible strategies, and the relative low costs of online media allow to circumvent monopolies on communication in the global public sphere. Karatzogianni (2006, 2015) argues that the Internet has become both a tool and a site for political conflict and contestation, which includes at least three distinct yet often closely interwoven areas of political activity.

- First, networking, as online media and social media networks in particular allow like-minded individuals to convene and forge social, as well as cultural and political ties that can translate into concrete political actions. An example is the European protest movements that emerged during the heights of the Eurozone crisis between 2007/08 and the present (Ferra 2016).

- Second, framing as a competitive discursive strategy in the digital public sphere (Nguyen 2017; Karatzogianni 2006). Political groups can share windows to their political programs and reach audience with their narratives and contest mainstream as well as oppositional framings.
- Third, reach, as modern conflicts have a transnational-global scope. They are both local and global and the media's affinity for the exceptional makes it relatively easy for extreme organizations to attract their attention. The features of many online platforms allow viewers/readers/users to react to the content, to share, and to discuss on site or in third places on the web. In a convergent media environment, public reach has multiple sources and is quickly generated. Aside from YouTube various other video platforms provide equally accessible portals to a global public (e.g. Liveleak).

YouTube as an online platform provides different levels for communication: there is the video clip itself and there is the comment section in which users engage with the uploaders of a clip and/or with each other. In both levels framing of issues happens through communication, and the richness of this communication depends on the possibilities of the platform in use and the level of digital media literacy displayed by the participants. The concept of frames and framing was introduced in 1970s to describe how individuals include, exclude, and organize experiences (Karlsberg 1997, 23).

Goffman (1974, 21) defines a frame as 'schemata of interpretation' and 'basic cognitive orderings of the world'. Frames serve as an organized framework, within which an audience cognitively interprets events and issues presented in the media. In a comprehensive body of research several types of frames have been proposed. Iyengar and Simon (1993, 369), for example, propose 'episodically' (events as concrete issues) and 'thematically', that is, frames that use sentences that form thematic clusters to create meaning (Entman 1993, 53; Iyengar and Simon 1993, 369). Events or issues are often framed as a single frame—consider, for example, the 'Cold War Frame'—or in multiple frames (Entman 1993, 53; Watkins 2001, 83). Shen (2004, 404) highlights the impact of framing, especially politically framed events are less powerful than originally anticipated: citizens are not passive recipients of news; they draw on individual sources as well as media messages and often hold differing views and values, with the result that public opinion on issues remains fluid.



Characteristic of social media networks is the amount of extreme content posted, which frequently raises urgent questions about hate speech, the limits of freedom of speech, and censorship. Powers and O’Loughlin speak of a ‘data glut’ (2015, 175) in the Syrian case. Participants upload and share their media products for specific strategic aims and targets (Powers and O’Loughlin 2015, 175); the web becomes a contested site to which the conflicts expand and the images reflect a high level of brutality. Due to the data flood the social media side of the conflict becomes analysable in real time and various organizations have mapped the fault lines and participating groups in great detail (Powers and O’Loughlin 2015, 175). Powers and O’Loughlin (2015) rightfully ask: can all this data help with the peace process? So far, a sobering assessment must be given: all that data and analysing have not stopped the escalation of the conflict.

Especially ethnic and religious identity became a relevant issue in the conflict. Sectarian lines define information output and lead to fragmentation of “public discourse”; no credible, impartial coverage of the conflict seems available (Powers and O’Loughlin 2015, 177). The result has been multiple fragmentation of global discourse on the Syrian conflict. Meis argues ‘that media aesthetics, in their interplay with public discourse, are crucial for how a war or conflict is perceived and interpreted’ (2016, 2). Video can be seen as an ‘aesthetic weapon of protest and resistance’ (Meis 2016, 13). A key factor in this regard is the ambivalent quality of mobile phone video content that posits subjectivity versus authenticity (Meis 2016, 4).

## METHOD AND DATA

The methodology comprises a qualitative close text reading of videos and framing for an in-depth analysis of framing techniques per identified video type and a quantitative analysis of comments and networks with the data collection tool Netlytic. The sample for this study includes six YouTube videos published in the direct aftermath of the April 2017 chemical attacks. Key phrases “Syria chemical attack 2017”, “khan shaykhun/sheikhoun chemical attacks” and “khan shaykhun/sheikhun gas” were entered in YouTube’s search engine to identify and select the videos. One problem with the sampling arose already at this stage: the different ways in which the Arabic name of the town is written in Roman letters forced the researchers to try different combinations. Eventually, most hits were found with the spelling “Khan Shaykhun”. Focus was placed on non-mainstream

content and where required a minimum view count of 100,000 was used as additional filter. “Non-mainstream” is defined as video content not being uploaded by a mass media organization or governmental institution. All videos were published in April 2019, while the timeframe for the collected comments on the videos expands to July 2019, as comments can be left on a video anytime if enabled.

In view of the clear limitations of an automatized tool such as Netlytic when it comes to complex audiovisual content and complex concepts in framing research, it was deemed necessary to conduct a qualitative analysis of the content of the videos, to reveal the detailed, often concealed, tools that give a particular text stylistic consistency and rhetorical effect. Where the focus of the quantitative analysis was on the audience, thus the viewers of the videos and their response/s to the content of the videos, the focus of the qualitative analysis was on the rhetor, or the author of the text and the message itself. This relates close reading to hermeneutics defined by Zimmermann (2015) as the theory and methodology of interpretation and in a modern context can include the interpretation of verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as semiotics, presuppositions, and pre-understandings. Within the paradigm of hermeneutics a four-tiered model of visual framing, developed by Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011)—(1) visuals as denotative systems, (2) visuals as stylistic-semiotic systems, (3) visuals as connotative systems, and (4) visuals as ideological representations—was used as the primary categories to explore and describe the content of the videos in the selected videos in a structured manner. The four categories for analysis have been marginally adjusted to account for an audiovisual rather than merely a visual analysis and are described as follows:

*Level 1: Denotative systems*

- This relates to the first layer of meaning: “who or what”.
- The “blueprint of the scene”.
- Included are objects and discrete elements in visuals.

*Level 2: Stylistic conventions and technical transformations*

- Hall’s (Hall 1963) concept of proxemics; six values: intimate, close personal, far personal, close social, far social, public.
- Visual modality, for example colour, representational detail, depth, and tonal shades.
- Additional pictorial style variables such as tightness of cropping, camera shots, and position.

*Level 3: Connotative systems*

- This level is beyond the denotative and includes ideas and concepts attached to the denotative level.
- Includes types of signs: iconic, indexical, symbolic.
- Furthermore secondary or conventional subject matter such as the presence of symbols (abstract and figurative).
- Finally visual and audio metaphors.

*Level 4: Audiovisual ideological representations*

- This level relates to the ideological meaning, for example the basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion.
- It draws together the symbols and stylistic features of an image to provide the “why” and provides answers to whose interests are served by these representations, whose voices are heard, and which ideas dominate.

For the quantitative content analysis, data was collected with Netlytic, an API-based tool for automatized content and network analysis. While dependent on the terms and conditions of the various social media platforms, the tool allows for a quick data collection from a variety of popular platforms, including YouTube. The analysis focuses on the comment sections and includes a customizable automatized content analysis and network analysis between commentators. However, it does not automatically analyse the actual video content in any form relevant for a framing analysis; data about the videos themselves includes title, views, uploader, comments, likes/dislikes, content type, length/duration, and date of upload. The automatized content analysis has two stages. First, it provides frequency counts for recurring terms and phrases visualized in a word cloud. While not of great informative value about more complex framing practices and also limited in regard to the representability, these simplistic visualizations still provide a general overview for topics raised in the respective comment sections for each video. Additionally, Netlytic includes a customizable automatized content analysis of the comments based on categories defined by the researcher. Similar to a simple keyword-based code book, the researcher can create categories and assign indicators in the form of specific keywords.

The tool then puts the comments in these customized categories, which basically is a form of quantitative content analysis. While the flexibility of

a human coder in interpreting complex language is lost—and thus all findings must be read and interpreted with utmost caution and stark limitations in mind—it provides a quick and general categorization of large amounts of textual data. The following categories were created: political actors and countries, media actors, actor labels, and political actions. Originally, a fifth category, moral assessment, was included, but since the automatized content analysis cannot clearly differentiate between the subtle modes in which such a complex sentiment may be expressed, the data collected for the designated keywords was deemed too limited (e.g. relevant keywords like “bad”, “righteous”, and “unjust” can be used in a variety of context and the actual meaning evades the automatized analysis with the chosen tool).

The first category counts how often global and regional stakeholders occur in the comments, which can indicate what responsibilities are expressed in the YouTube debates. The second one searches for references to media actors from mainstream news. The third category scans for how commentators use specific labels for groups affected by the incident (e.g. “victims”, “terrorists”, and “soldiers”). The fourth one counts how often specific political actions are mentioned, including military ones. For the descriptive analysis, counts for synonymous indicator are collapsed into one final category (e.g. “USA”, “America”, and “Washington” are part of one category “USA” in political actors and countries). The quantitative part of the analysis is completed with a network analysis of commentators with the main goal of mapping if commentators respond to each other and thus engage in some form of discourse.

The sample comprises of six videos in total:

**Video 1:** *Trump Just Confirmed He is Illuminati—Will finish what Bush and Obama started or get IMPEACHED:* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBR7im5W\\_c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBR7im5W_c)

This video is 3.54 minutes, received 552,669 views, and was posted by Xendrius, an atheist who converted to Christianity, lives in Sweden, Europe, and runs an educational channel.

**Video 2:** *CNN SHOCKED SPEECHLESS When Congressman Questions Syria Chemical Weapons Story:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YgPbFjUL3dk>

This video is 3.53 minutes, received 229,633 views, and was posted by the Corbett Report Podcast, a weekly, hour-long documentary focused on the world of politics, history, science, and economics from an alternative perspective.

*Video 3: False Flag Chemical Attack in Syria:* [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qr\\_ByQH2QY0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qr_ByQH2QY0)

This video is 8.24 minutes, received 92,878 views, and was posted by Kevork Almassian, a Syrian journalist/political commentator, who lives in Germany and is a prominent apologist for the Assad regime.

*Video 4: Syria Chemical Attack: Push For Ousting Bashar al-Assad:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQcPZrBbb2Q>

This video is 39.20 minutes, attracted 175,040 views, and was posted by Stefan Molyneux, a far-right, white nationalist Canadian podcaster and YouTuber with white supremacist views (Evans, 2018).

*Video 5: Chemical Weapons Devastate Syrian Town. Who is responsible:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFATuzOhwJQ>

This video is 22.35 minutes, received 173,376 views, and was posted by the Young Turks, an online news show hosted by Cenk Uygur, a Turkish-American broadcaster, lawyer, businessman, columnist, journalist, and activist, and Ana Kasparian, an Armenian-American political commentator and university instructor (Kasparian, 2007).

*Video 6: Graphic scenes of chemical attack in Syria [viewer discretion]:* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQqSCzMfpl0>

This video is 2.14 minutes, received 141,965 views, and was posted by Robin Sage, a fictional American cyber threat analyst, and created by Robin Casey and Thomas Ryan, two controversial security specialists and hackers from New York City (Goodchild, 2010).

## RESULTS

### *Qualitative Results*

The overall aim of the qualitative analysis was to provide an exploratory insight into the framing of the content of the selected videos posted in the aftermath of the Syrian chemical attacks in 2017. The qualitative framing analysis draws on the four levels of visual framing (Dimitrova and Rodriguez 2011), which provided insight into the content, whereafter the quantitative analysis clarified the viewers' reaction to the content.

#### *Level 1: Denotative Systems*

In this level where the focus is on the literal and concrete meaning that can be derived from the videos, several findings emerged. First, as far as video

commentary is concerned, both off and on camera commentaries were used in the construction of the content of the majority of the videos. The only video that contained visual material and no narration was posted by Robin Sage. The primary focus of this video was the chaos, terror, and suffering in the direct aftermath of the attacks.

The content in the videos of Xendrius, the Corbett Report, Kevork Almassian, and the Young Turks include personal crafted narratives, with strong elements of storytelling, inclusive of narratives and graphic visuals and selected video clips, accessed mainly from Western mainstream media such as CNN and BBC, to lend credibility to the arguments formulated. The video of Stefan Molyneux consists of an emotional, ideologically laden personal address, in which the left-winged politicians in the USA are criticized and blamed for the chaos in the Middle East. The videos (with the exception of Robin Sage) all focus on the notion of attributing responsibility and blame, in this context the Assad regime, the rebels, Russia, the USA, and also with references to Iran and Turkey as secondary stakeholders. Salient frames in this level include human suffering, terror, and responsibility and accountability.

### *Level 2: Stylistic Conventions and Technical Transformations*

The stylistic and technical aspects in the videos are presented in the context of the construct literary realism, more specifically “Verisimilitude”—an aesthetic effect, seldom limited to a single device or technique, applied to create an impression of reality and realness (Oddie 2013). Elements of verisimilitude such as visual, social, and acoustic modality are explored in the content of the videos. Overall, as is typical of user-generated content, the selected videos generally reflect a lack of artifice such as artificial lighting or a setup of elaborate arrangements; the videos are simple and uncomplicated, and the use of jargon is absent. As far as visual modality is concerned, the use of space and camera angles indicate that the videos posted by Kevork Almassian, Stefan Molyneux, and the Young Turks reflect a close personal distance; the camera is at eye level, which can be described as one of the conventions in the performance of what can be described as “vlogs” among YouTube creators (Burgess and Green 2018).

Overall the tone is persuasive and informative and backed by rational arguments. Both Xendrius and the Corbett Report Podcast construct a narrative with the use of graphic images from the victims of the attack, and selected video clips from CNN and BBC, by means of a voice over. The video posted by Robin Sage is created as a blend of visual and acoustic sounds: the viewer is exposed to the raw unfiltered footage of victims foaming at the mouth and old and young being attended to by bystanders. The content includes haunting sounds of terror and human suffering, which is captured effectively by means of a bird's-eye view of camera shots. The camera hovers and moves to cover the scene of the almost surreal event with its devastating consequences.

### *Level 3: Connotative Systems*

In this level the ideas and concepts attached to the denotative level in the previous section are explored, to elicit possible value judgements and symbolic meaning. The denotative level revealed frames comprising personal narratives, selected information, persuasive storytelling, and graphic visuals that contribute towards an intricate web of plausible scenarios of assigning responsibility and accountability to the attacks, in the context of direct role-players such as the USA, Russia, and the Syrian rebels and indirect role-players such as Turkey and Iran. It can be argued that these plausible scenarios framed in a seemingly credible fashion can cause doubt, in this context with regard to the responsibility and the rationale behind the attacks. This brings to the fore the notion of agnotology and the social construction of ignorance. Agnotology in its broadest form refers to the neo-classical Greek word for ignorance, or “not knowing”, and ontology, the branch of metaphysics which deals with the nature of being.<sup>1</sup> It can further be described as the study of wilful acts to spread confusion and deceit (Kenyon 2016). According to Knobloch-Westerwick (2009), the media with its influence can be a driving force of culturally induced ignorance through misrepresentation, secrecy, suppression of information, inherent or avoidable culture or political selectivity, inattention, and forgetfulness.

Kenyon (2016) claims that the internet is a contributing force towards propagating ignorance—it is a place where everyone can be their own expert, which can make them prey for powerful interests wishing to deliberately spread ignorance. In the denotative level, several of the factors

<sup>1</sup> Agnotology is derived from “agnosis” which is the neoclassical Greek word for ignorance.

proposed by Knobloch-Westerwick (2009), for example selectivity of information, the use of authoritative sources such as CNN, and secrecy (the conspiracy theory of the Illuminati), emerged in the content. Whether these aspects will create doubt in the minds of the viewers is debatable. The quantitative analysis, for example, indicates that the level of reciprocal communication that may be interpreted as direct engagement in dialogues and actual discussions appears low.

Furthermore, the availability of large amounts of knowledge in this information age may not necessarily be producing a knowledgeable citizenry. Knobloch-Westerwick (2009) claims in this regard that the availability of large amounts of information, or knowledge, may facilitate viewers to cherry-pick information in blogs or news that simply reinforces their existing beliefs. Ignorance can further be propagated under the guise of balanced debate and by creating politically motivated doubt. The video posted by the Young Turks is a debate in the form of a panel discussion, and as is typical of this tactic there is no rational conclusion. Several examples of the creation of political doubt emerged in the findings.<sup>2</sup> President Trump, for example, blames former President Obama for the chaos in Syria in the mainstream media and<sup>3</sup> President Trump is accused of being a puppet of the CIA. Several other influential world leaders from countries such as Russia, Turkey, and Iran are also indirectly implicated in the attacks.<sup>4</sup> Stefan Molyneux claims the fall of the West in an emotional plea and directly implicates the democrats as the “left-winged” and the<sup>5</sup> mainstream media in this process.

The content posted by Robin Sage signifies a clear connotative meaning with its uncensored footage, typical of user-generated content in the aftermath of the chemical event. It brings to the fore the suffering of the innocent on a physical level, the apparent lack of resources, and the infrastructure which has been destroyed, which is symbolic of the struggle of the war-torn underdeveloped countries. This is a Eurocentric view of the Middle East as weak, with victims of yet another attack, in an already-war-torn country.

<sup>2</sup>Video 5: “I think the Obama administration had a great opportunity to solve this crisis.”

<sup>3</sup>Video 1: “If Trump is indeed an illuminati puppet, which is the most probable.”

<sup>4</sup>Video 4: “The left (democrats) want the ring, they want power”, “commit war crimes”, “you don’t have to leave the borders to make the arrests”

<sup>5</sup>Video 4: “New York Times claim that the rebels have used chemical weapons 50 times—madness.”



#### *Level 4: Ideological*

The number of direct and indirect transnational stakeholders (the USA, Russia, Iran, Turkey, ISIS, and the rebel factions) and their complex interrelationships contributed towards a complex construction of worldviews in the videos. In the ideological level the values, beliefs, and worldviews portrayed in the videos are explored. Generally, the videos all focus on the notion of responsibility—who was responsible for the chemical attacks and why. Not surprisingly, perhaps also due to the diversity of nationalities involved in the production of the videos (Turkish, Syrian, Canadian, and the USA), the content reflects clear dichotomous constructed identities in the form of the perceived enemy that committed the crime and also the victim. This makes the model of Carpentier (2011), with its dichotomized identities of the “Enemy”, the “Self”, and the “Victim”, a suitable framework to explore the antagonistic relationships and identities that emerged in the aftermath of the chemical attacks. The construction of the enemy is accompanied by the construction of the identity of the self, clearly in an antagonistic relationship to the enemy’s identity. In this manner the “radical otherness” is portrayed and the enemy is depicted as a threat to “our own identity”.

Due to the political complexity of the stakeholders involved in the Syrian War, the enemy and the self are fluid and the only constant is the victim, namely the civilians involved in the attack. In the videos posted by<sup>6</sup> Kevork Almassian and<sup>7</sup> the Young Turks the self is constructed as President Bashar al-Assad, who is absolve of blame, by means of producing what they see as constructed reason, or allegedly “logical” arguments, for example that he had too much to lose, that his relationship with Russia and the USA has improved and that he was on the verge of defeating the rebels in Aleppo, and that he does not have weapons of mass destruction. In this way they attempt to challenge what they perceive as the dominant narrative in the mainstream news media. The enemy is fluid and elusive and fluctuates between the rebels, the USA, and Russia, and there is also reference to the CIA. The most prominent tactic deployed in the construction of the self and the enemy is the extreme use of propaganda in forms such

<sup>6</sup>Video 3: “WMD were destroyed,” “Syrian rebel groups have Sarin,” “Why would Assad invite US to Syria to inspect WMD and then use it to launch an attack on civilians?”

<sup>7</sup>Video 5: “Right now Assad is winning, he has the upper hand. He has Russia and the US on his side.”

as<sup>8</sup> conspiracy theories, presenting<sup>9,10,11,12</sup> selected slices of information, unbalanced reporting,<sup>13</sup> strong emotional appeals, and the use of authoritative figures to lend credibility to frames.

Prominent conspiracy theories, for example, include the alleged existence of the Illuminati, a “mysterious force” or “the powers that be” supposedly headed by the CIA<sup>14</sup>; Presidents Trump, Obama, and Bush are depicted as puppets of this mysterious force, which is suggested to be in operation globally. Another example is the questioning of the actual occurrence of the attack itself by Kevork Almassian, who claims that the absence of wearing gloves could be indicative of a fabricated event. Stefan Molyneux brings to the fore the theory that stability on the USA will result in a migration back to Syria, which will negatively impact on the voting base of the left-winged party. In conclusion, each of the levels of visual framing proposed by Rodriguez and Dimitrova (2011) can be used as a framework to structure the analysis of the content of the selected videos in a structured manner. It is imperative to distinguish between different types, worldviews, and therefore goals and aims among “alternative” or, better, non-mainstream media YouTube content. While some YouTube creators use the platform to disseminate plain conspiracy theories (e.g. Xendrius) others use it to share relatively common anti-war narratives among political progressives (e.g. Young Turks) or to promote their right-wing perspectives (e.g. Stefan Molyneux). They can thus not be viewed as a uniform genre in any way.

### *Quantitative Results*

The main goal of the quantitative analysis is to provide an overview of comment activity and their content. Overall, the comment activity varies

<sup>8</sup>Video 3: “The white helmets are not using gloves while carrying the dead and the wounded.”

<sup>9</sup>Video 3: CNN Hersh: “The most radical Jihadi has sarin.”

<sup>10</sup>Video 5: NBC News, President Trump: “Let’s say you get rid of Assad, who is going to replace him?”

<sup>11</sup>Video 5: BBC, Igor Konoshenkoy (Russian Defence Military Spokesman) “Which produced chemical warfare munitions.”

<sup>12</sup>Video 2: CNN, Republican Massey: “It is hard to know what is happening in Syria right now.”

<sup>13</sup>Video 4: “Today is the day that we decide if the war ends or goes on forever. Today is the day that we decide whether millions live or die.”

<sup>14</sup>Video 1: “If Trump is an illuminati puppet like Bush and Obama.”

between the videos but is rather small compared to the number of views with a total of 8474 comments made by 5951 users across all six videos. This implies that a majority of comments are isolated and not part of longer strings of message exchanges and that the potential for reciprocal communication was not fully realized. V1 had 1659 comments left by 1046 users, V2 had 1636 comments from 1313 users, V3 had 652 comments from 437 users, V4 had 2320 comments from 1726 users, V5 had 1997 comments from 1280 users, and V6 had 210 comments from 149 users.

It is not surprising that most comment activity happened right after the publication of the videos, which were posted very shortly after the incident made the news. The moment a video is published and makes its way into the recommendation system, it receives most exposure and attention, which becomes basically two metrics: views/clicks and comments (Fig. 1).

However, in several comment sections, activity increased again roughly a year after the incident, most notably on V2 posted by the Corbett Report. Comments from the period of April 2018 for this video are partly very critical towards CNN news and the coverage of the war in general. Most videos continued to receive comments up until July 2019 though in decreasing frequency. This implies that videos may retain a level of decreasing topicality over time.

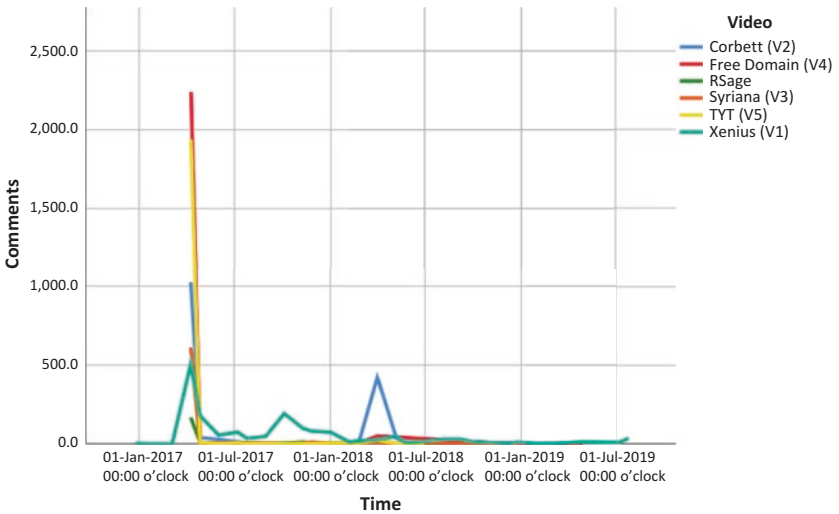


Fig. 1 Comments over time

**Table 1** Main category distribution in all comment sections

<i>Video</i>	<i>Political actors and countries</i>	<i>Media</i>	<i>Actor labels</i>	<i>Political actions</i>
V1	676 (41%)	73 (4.4%)	28 (1.7%)	66 (4%)
V2	549 (33.5%)	195 (12%)	57 (3.5%)	162 (9.9%)
V3	255 (39.1%)	22 (3.4%)	40 (6.1%)	78 (12%)
V4	1126 (48.5%)	39 (1.7%)	93 (4%)	342 (14.7%)
V5	1038 (52%)	44 (2.2%)	186 (9.3%)	306 (15.3%)
V6	56 (26.6%)	1 (0.5%)	12 (5.7%)	13 (6.2%)

Looking at the distribution of main categories for the customized and automatized content analysis, it stands out that a considerable amount of comments directly refer to political actors and countries but to a lesser degree mention international mainstream media outlets; the latter are still represented but not as visible in the discussions as other actors. Comments on all videos refer to affected groups and political actions. The set of actors referred to in all comment sections looks very similar; the top ten are almost identical across the sample but vary in frequency per actor: 1121 comments mention Assad, 1550 refer to Trump with another 1195 include the USA; another 272 refer to Obama and a small number of 34 mentions Bush (Table 1).

This shows that the role of the USA is a central aspect in the discourse on the incident. However, it is also noticeable that 440 mention Russia and 168 refer to Putin. Only 293 refer to ISIS and 299 to the rebel forces, while 94 include the UN. For the affected groups, the situation looks similar with the most often mentioned groups being victims/civilians, refugees, and terrorists (Fig. 2).

Concerning media actors, the most internationally renowned new media outlets such as BBC, Al Jazeera, DW, and Reuters occur in the data set but mostly in very low frequencies of less than ten times. The most often and widely mentioned news outlet is CNN, which is the focus of V2 by the Corbett Report. Comments across all videos also talk about fake news but with only 119 the total number is low. Still, a closer look at these comments reveal that the label “fake news” is employed as a framing device for different purposes such as questioning the factuality of the chemical incident itself, discrediting the content of the YouTube video and its creator, or undermining the credibility of mainstream news media. Overall, fewer comments make references to specific groups that are relevant in the context of the incident with the exception of postings on V4

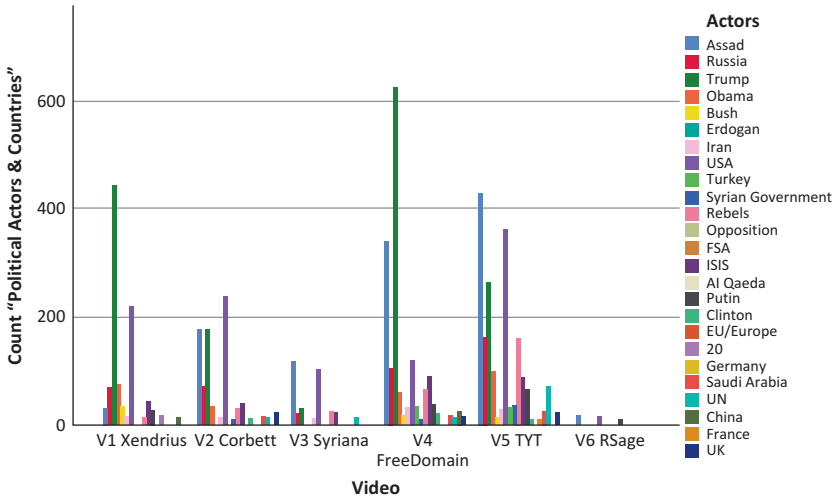


Fig. 2 Political actors and countries per comment section

and V5, and, to a lesser degree, V2 and V3; “civilians” and “terrorists” are frequently referred to. However, in the case of “terrorists”, commentators used this label to frame different political actors involved in the Syrian War, such as the Assad regime, the USA, and ISIS; the term “terrorists” is therefore a framing device deployed to communicate usually resentment for variable political actors. Other noticeable categories are soldiers/army, refugees, and victims, though all occur in relatively small numbers. Concerning political actions, few comments make a clear reference to any specific military or diplomatic action; most comments speak of war in general rather than conflict when it comes to the incident and its place in the Syrian War. The second largest group of comments in this category speaks of different forms of support, either for or against the different political actors involved. Some comments speak of intervention and or military action but to only a very limited degree. Even fewer discuss diplomatic or non-violent solutions.

The network graphs for communication between commentators further illustrate that there are few clusters of mutual connections based on who-mentions-whom, that is making a direct reference to another user in a comment. A reference is indicated via a line between two users, indicated as a node in the graph; the node size indicates how often a node was

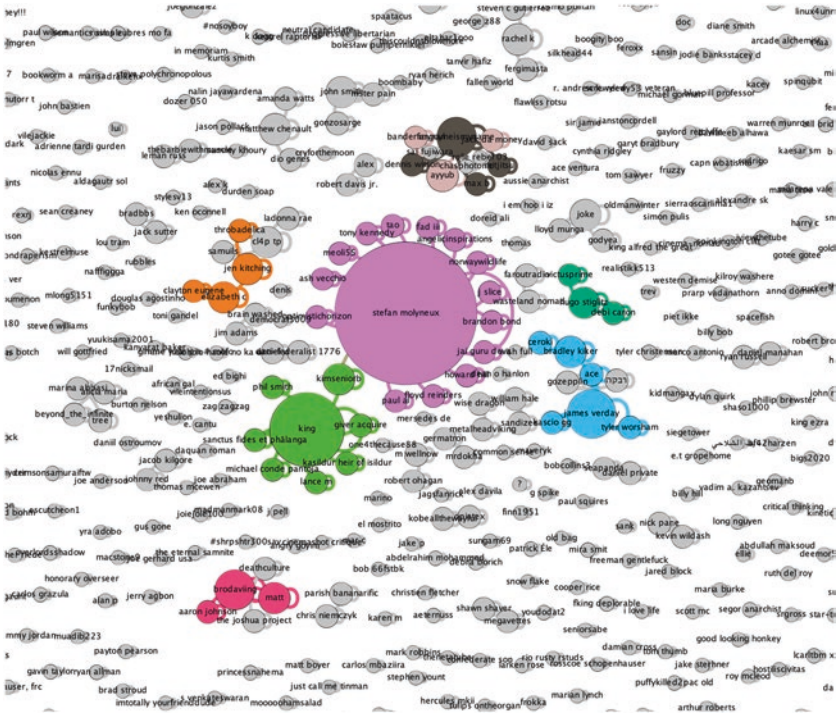


Fig. 3 Network of who-mentions-whom in V4

mentioned/replied to and the colours show if it is part of an identifiable cluster of related nodes. The small grey nodes represent users that left a comment but do not refer to any other user directly (Fig. 3).

The snapshots from the network graphs for V2 are exemplary for the other videos and show this clearly: the vast majority of comments appear isolated and mainly connected by the fact of reacting to the same video. When changing the angle for the network graphs based on who-replies-to-whom directly, more clusters emerge, which also appear much denser. The explanation for the difference is that certain comments attract follow-up comments and thus basically turn into sub-threads (Fig. 4).

When replying to another comment, users make the attempt to engage directly with each other but that does not mean that the other commentator always reacts to messages addressed as a reply to hers; indeed, most

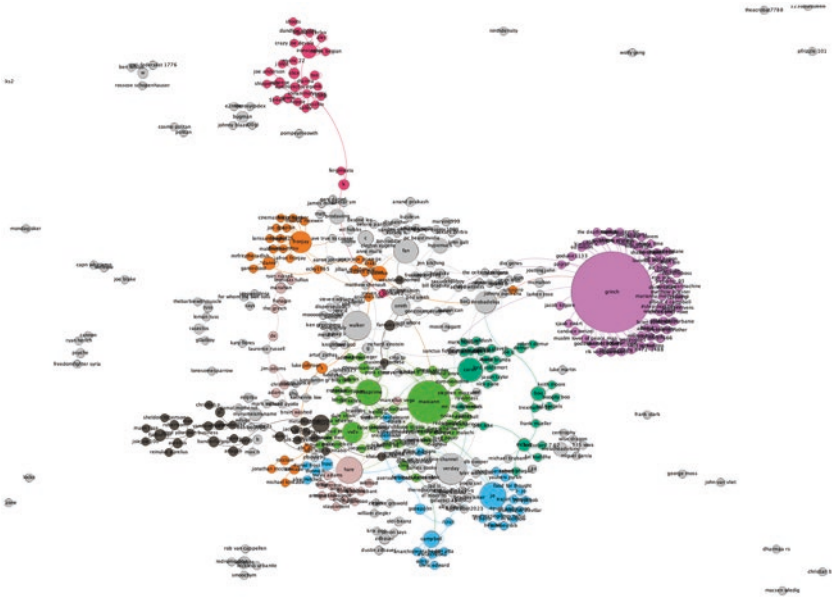


Fig. 4 Network graphs centre of who-replies-to-whom (V4)

comments that were posted as a reply to other comments appear to be one-directional. User comments that receive a lot of reactions may reveal though what sentiments or opinions attract viewers' interest. However, overall, the scope of direct replies to other comments is also limited compared to the quantity of total comments. Given the ratio of total comments per commentators (i.e. 8474 left by 5951 users) and the findings from the network graphs, it seems that only some limited dialogue and/or direct discussion is happening between users.

To sum up, the quantitative analysis of the comment data enables a quick mapping of associations and issues raised in the reactions on each video. It is noticeable but also little surprising that there is overlap in the political actors, media agencies, affected groups, and political actions across the comment sections given the topic in focus; there is a limited set of actors and issues that are deemed relevant in the overall discourse on the Syrian War and the incident in particular, which is reflected in this data. The primary actors are the Syrian government and the USA, followed by Russia and, in a much lower frequency, local parties such as ISIS,

rebel forces, and civilians. The number of media actors mentioned in the comments is relatively low but diverse, which implies some overlap between the platform and other news outlets. Few political actions are explicitly raised with differences noticeable between platforms. Finally, while some videos attracted over 2000 comments, the level of reciprocal communication that may be interpreted as direct engagement in dialogues and actual discussions appears low.

## CONCLUSION

The guiding research question for the case study was how do non-mainstream media videos on YouTube frame the 2017 chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun? From the findings it is clear that user-generated content such as YouTube videos attract a large viewership for newsworthy events such as the chemical attacks in Syria, but the engagement rate is low, thus indicating that such videos do not facilitate ongoing debate. Furthermore, the fact that the focus of the content is mostly on the political actors and countries rather than the media (only selected clips were used to construct arguments) and the fact that the mainstream media is discredited, for example as being fake, by several of the authors and producers of the videos and the comments of the viewers bring to the fore the notion of the role of the mainstream media as influencers of opinion in the future.

Alternative YouTube content and mainstream news do not exist in seclusion from each other but there is overlap in content and referencing. However, alternative views tend to make much stronger ideological statements in their coverage and commentary on conflicts such as the Syrian War and thus reframe issues by linking them to different political discussions that go beyond the immediate context. For example, some YouTube videos in the sample expanded the discussion to partisan politics in the USA and/or used the coverage of the chemical attack as an opportunity to discredit mainstream news outlets. Focus of the main frame shifts here from the Syrian War to questions of public and political culture in a different country.

It is not only the role of the mainstream media that requires consideration but the role of YouTube as a platform for political discourse should also be raised. The platform's motto of "Broadcast yourself" invites influencers to propagate their views and ideologies outside the confines of legacy media outlets and has led to a rise in right-wing and supremacist content in which many of these influencers openly support racism,



misogyny, and white nationalism on the platform (Karlis 2018). At the more mainstream end of the network, according to Lewis (2018), are self-described members of the intellectual dark web and at the end of the spectrum white nationalists such as Canadian right-wing influencer Stefan Molyneux, who openly promotes scientific racism and advocates for the men's rights movement. This raises aspects such as the extreme use of propaganda in the frames of user-generated content in the form of selected information, conspiracy theories, and rife speculation, not backed by reliable sources.

The notion of YouTube Utopianism can also be raised and explored in the context of political discourses, such as the selected videos related to the chemical attacks. Described as a conception of “systematic otherness” and the imagining of an “alternative society” (Jameson 2005, 36), utopianism can be linked to political views where notions of change towards a better society can be expressed. In the political arena, however, utopias are frequently associated with ideologies such as socialism, communism, and totalitarianism (Levitas 2007, 290). Kozinets (2019) claims that YouTube Utopianism can contribute to the construction of polarized politics. In the analysis of the videos and the comments there exist clear examples of divisive discourses, conspiracy theories, and pragmatism (Kozinets 2019): divisive discourses—accountability for the attacks in the broader context of the complex political environment; conspiracy theories—responsibility and the actual occurrence of the attacks; and pragmatism—in view of the fact that the comments reflect the seriousness with which the videos are perceived.

Overall, the quantitative and qualitative analyses contributed towards an interesting spectrum of findings as far as the framing of content in YouTube videos is concerned. The question whether the methodology is conducive for such a study can be debated. As far as the methodology of this exploratory study is concerned, several advantages and disadvantages can be raised. First, this mixed method design provided pragmatic advantages for the exploration of an exploratory research project. The quantitative data presented a description of the overview of issues and associations in terms of the political actors, media agencies, affected groups, and the political actions and the consequent interaction with the content. The qualitative data elaborated on the issues and the associations and also the political actors involved, and the four levels of framing presented a semi-structured and flexible framework for analysis and allowed for the integration of theoretical elements such as the ideological model of war and the

construct agnotology. This theoretical incorporation provided some context and depth to the findings. However, the framework used, and the small sample size, does not allow for the generalization of the results of this mixed method approach. Also, automatized content analyses with a tool such as Netlytic allow for quickly deriving an overview of larger text data sets but the level of depth is inevitably delimited.

Finally, the notion of ethics in digital spheres needs to be considered. In the context of this study, for example, where usernames on YouTube often do not reveal the actual identity of a poster outside of the platform, users were not consulted before their comments were subjected to the analysis, which may be regarded as an ethical issue. Overall exploratory research studies such as this can provide a quick solution for mapping discourse in alternative public sphere and can contribute towards the body of knowledge in this rich and emerging, and ever-evolving, field of digital communication.

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