

# Comparing Russian, French and UK television news: portrayals of the casualties of war

Heywood, E.

Published PDF deposited in [Curve](#) January 2016

**Original citation:**

Heywood, E. (2015) Comparing Russian, French and UK television news: portrayals of the casualties of war. *Russian Journal of Communication*, volume 7 (1): 40-52

DOI: 10.1080/19409419.2015.1008940

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19409419.2015.1008940>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis

Gold Open Access funded by Coventry University

**Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.**

**CURVE is the Institutional Repository for Coventry University**

<http://curve.coventry.ac.uk/open>



## Comparing Russian, French and UK television news: portrayals of the casualties of war

Emma Heywood

To cite this article: Emma Heywood (2015) Comparing Russian, French and UK television news: portrayals of the casualties of war, Russian Journal of Communication, 7:1, 40-52, DOI: [10.1080/19409419.2015.1008940](https://doi.org/10.1080/19409419.2015.1008940)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19409419.2015.1008940>



© 2015 The Author(s). Published by Taylor & Francis.



Published online: 23 Mar 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 519



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Comparing Russian, French and UK television news: portrayals of the casualties of war

Emma Heywood\*

*Department of English and Languages, Faculty of Business, Environment and Society, Coventry University  
Coventry, CV1 5LW, UK*

*(Received 11 October 2014; accepted 28 December 2014)*

Focusing on the news value of compassion in war reporting, this article examines portrayals of victims in foreign conflict reporting by Russian, French and UK television news. It compares the reports of Russia's state-aligned news provider, *Vremya*; BBC's *News at Ten*; and France 2's *20 Heures* and explores the extent to which they draw on, or sideline, this news value to maintain the newsworthiness of their items. The article investigates coverage of the intra-Palestinian fighting in June 2007 and discusses representations of two very different forms of victimhood to determine how the broadcasters perceive "victims". The first concerns civilians caught up in the fighting and the emerging humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the second focuses on coverage of two hostage-takings.

**Keywords:** compassion; foreign conflict; news; news values; victims

### Compassion and conflict coverage

Public awareness of the civilian population as victims in times of war has gradually been raised in the media through the on-going and extensive reporting of global conflicts and the emergence of "journalism of attachment" (Bell, 1997, 1998), which describes a form of journalism which "cares as well as knows; [and] is aware of its responsibilities" (1997, p. 8). This has led to the concept of compassion, as a news value, being increasingly associated with media coverage of foreign conflict (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006; Silverstone, 2007; Tester, 2001). Yet, the Western mediation of human misfortune has extended to the point that portrayals of it as a "spectacle" have now become routine (Chouliaraki, 2006). Using news values as a framework (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), this article compares reports of the intra-Palestinian fighting in June 2007 by Russia's state-aligned news provider *Vremya*, BBC's *News at Ten* and France 2's *20 Heures*. It discusses representations of two different forms of victimhood to determine how the broadcasters perceive "victims" and explores how they draw on compassion for victims of fighting to add to, and maintain, the newsworthiness of their Middle East conflict reporting. The first, which is examined by parallel comparisons of the three broadcasters' coverage, concerns civilians caught up in the fighting and the emerging humanitarian crisis in Gaza; and the second, which investigates each broadcaster's reporting separately, focuses on coverage of two hostage-takings.

The news value of compassion, or "a painful emotion occasioned by the awareness of another person's undeserved misfortune" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 31), is a recent addition to the more

---

\*Email: [ab9395@Coventry.ac.uk](mailto:ab9395@Coventry.ac.uk)

familiar list of factors, devised by Galtung and Ruge (1965), which, in combination, are considered to increase the newsworthiness of broadcasts. Some of the more well-known news values, such as negativity value, are frequently encountered in foreign conflict reporting as the aggression and violence of war and fighting “sells”. Similarly, the actions of global leaders and their nations (power elite and elite nation values) also dominate as, once any potential interest in the fighting fades, solutions to the conflict can take centre stage and the focus of new items is switched to those in positions of power and to possible international intervention and peace deals. Yet, in addition to the protagonists and the so-called peacemakers, the sufferers – or victims – of war represent an often underreported but still crucially important group of individuals, who are caught up, however unwillingly, in the conflict and whose involvement cannot be overlooked. Compassion has the potential to elicit an emotional response amongst viewers to the plight of those in distant places who are suffering as a direct result of conflict. It involves both the viewers’ relationship with remote “others” and their recognition that these “others” are also part of one humankind, regardless of where, or who, they are. An element of morality is thus imposed on “us” – the viewer – to engage with ethics of care, or to imagine putting ourselves in the position of the victim (Silverstone, 2007). Yet, it has been debated that the sheer volume and similar nature of information broadcast to audiences provoke a lack of response to sufferers’ needs, resulting in “compassion fatigue” (Campbell, 2012; Moeller, 1999; Sontag, 2003; Tester, 2001). This, in turn, leads to broadcasters having to manage their portrayals of victims to highlight events that are dramatic and which occur over short periods of time to heighten the newsworthiness (Carruthers, 2000, p. 231).

Chouliaraki developed a typology of Western news discourse to facilitate analyses of victim portrayals. She determined three different cases of suffering: *adventure news* – reports in which the distant other is presented as no cause for concern or action; *emergency news* – news which produces pity and a demand or option for action for sufferers; and *ecstatic news* – in which the victim is considered to be “one of us” and the viewer can identify with the victim (2006, p. 94). Because cultural and geographical proximity, or relevance, is central in determining levels of compassion (we sympathise more with those we care for or relate to (Moeller, 1999), the media plays a key role here as they have the ability to determine not only what is shown to viewers but how it is portrayed and the extent of the graphic nature of the suffering.

This article applies these typologies to the broadcasters’ coverage of the events in Gaza 2007, and analyses and shows their reportage shifts from one typology to another depending on the proximity of the victims to the potential audience and the newsworthiness of the suffering in relation to other potentially more newsworthy aspects of events.

### The case study and the three broadcasters

The article draws on wider research, which compares the foreign conflict reporting of the Middle East (2006–2008) by three public (or state-aligned, in the case of *Vremya*) broadcasters, to examine their news values and the many influences on their coverage in the post-9/11 and post-Cold War era. The news providers were selected from the flagship channels of their reporting countries and represent the main evening news broadcasts on their channels. They are *Vremya*, from Russia’s Channel 1, a national state-aligned broadcaster; *News at Ten* from the nominally independent BBC, a British public service broadcaster; and the more centrally oriented *20 Heures*, representing France, another EU member and also a public service broadcaster, from a media system with a long history of state intervention.

The Middle East conflict, in contrast to other conflicts, was selected as the case study for the broader analysis of foreign conflict reporting because of the three reporting countries’ similar associations to the region. The conflict is on-going and pre-dates the collapse of the Soviet

system and the events of 9/11 and brings together many of the cultural, geopolitical and post-imperial struggles facing the three broadcasters' reporting countries. Internationally, they all support the so-called war on terror, with Russia aligning itself with the West as it confronts rising levels of Islamic militancy and nationalism at home and conflicts with Chechnya (Russell, 2009). Domestically, all three suffer from Islamophobia and anti-Semitism, incidents of which have witnessed increases both post-9/11 and following flashpoints in the Middle East. The UK and France also have the largest Muslim and Jewish populations in Europe, associating the two nations to the Middle East. Russia has a complex relationship with the region (Kreutz, 2007). It enjoys close links with Islamic countries through its own indigenous Muslim population and has strong trade and military links with states in the broader Middle East region. Russia also promotes relations with Israel, with which it is extending cultural ties, especially in view of the significant Russian-speaking diaspora in Israel, yet it also disparages the Israeli authorities, at times, perceiving them to be US allies.

The events examined here are taken from the wider two-year comparison period and focus on the intra-Palestinian fighting between Hamas and Fatah in June 2007. The hostilities had been ongoing since Hamas's victory in the January 2006 parliamentary elections and had led to severe economic and humanitarian crises in Gaza, resulting in victim representation being prominent on all three channels. The situation peaked in mid-June 2007 with hundreds of Gazan civilians being trapped at closed border crossings and restrictions being placed on deliveries of basic food-stuffs and medical supplies. The Palestinian territories were ultimately divided into Hamas-led Gaza and Fatah-led West Bank and the fierce fighting, which caused 130 deaths and 630 injured (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2007), received international condemnation for human rights violations by both sides (Amnesty International, 2007).

Drawing on news values (Galtung & Ruge, 1965) and Chouliaraki's typology of news values (2006), the article analyses the place of compassion as a news value and the extent to which it is sidelined by television broadcasters in their foreign conflict reporting by other aspects of news they may consider more newsworthy. The article queries whether the victims in Gaza are portrayed as a dehumanised group, distanced from the viewer, or whether the broadcasters' techniques attempt to bridge any remoteness between them and the viewer, in other words, whether a relationship is formed with the unfamiliar, or the other. It establishes who the broadcasters perceive to be victims and whether hierarchies in values and victims emerge, illustrating that compassion is always culturally constructed and may vary between different groups, societies and broadcasters (Höijer, 2004). Although the actual effect on the viewer, and how this effect is measured, fall outside the scope of this research, the various practices used by the broadcasters when covering the plight of suffering civilians can still be analysed and compared. A final aim of the article is to explore whether it is apparent from the coverage who, if anyone, is portrayed as accountable for the suffering and who is perceived as capable of providing relief. By discussing these areas of enquiry, two approaches, which are widespread in representations of compassion (Boltanski, 1999, pp. 46–48), emerge in the broadcasters' mediation of victimhood. One approach relates to feelings of empathy and the appropriate care to be given, and by whom; and the other concerns the injustice of the suffering and the condemnation, or denunciation, of those responsible.

To respond to these areas of enquiry, the study analysed news items recorded by the broadcasters between 12 and 25 June 2007. The period, which included the victim coverage, had clear start and end points and enabled chains of events and developments to be determined over a sufficient length of time. The data were taken from an existing archive of over 30,000 evening news programmes used for the broader research project. Visual images and verbal commentaries were studied quantitatively, drawing on news values and Chouliaraki's typology of news discourse, as outlined earlier. Chouliaraki's definitions of victim involvement (*motion* –

participation by the victim in useful activity; *gaze* – victim enters into active relationship with camera; and *condition* – the victim represents a universal human state of existence (2006, p. 124)) were used to explore the visual portrayals of sufferers. The effect of image juxtaposition was also analysed as were value judgements, descriptions or narrations in verbal commentaries concerning those involved (victims, those in authority, protagonists).

The analysis considers two very different groups of victims in two sections: the first provides a parallel comparison of the broadcasters' coverage of Palestinian civilians, who represent "the other" and are trapped in Gaza, affected by the emerging humanitarian crisis; and the second discusses each of the new providers' coverage, one after the other, of two hostages who differ from the first group by not only being individuals rather than the masses, but also because they can be perceived as being "one of us", especially as they are citizens of the countries of two broadcasters.

### Compassion news value in portrayals of Palestinian civilians

The humanitarian coverage of the Palestinians exemplifies Chouliaraki's *emergency news* category and all three broadcasters initially acknowledge that the hostilities have resulted in victims, but the manner in which the latter are perceived in the reports differs greatly. Three extremes of proximity emerge, ranging from *Vremya*, where there is little doubt about the extent of those involved. Auslander, its reporter, vaguely states that the "civilians, and there are more than a million of them, are the real victims of the warring factions" (13 June 2007), emphasising a lack of cultural proximity and reducing them to faceless masses (Moeller, 1999). *20 Heures* is more specific and the anchor provides daily tallies of fatalities, yet there is no further information about them, and the focus remains on the negativity value of the fighting. At the other extreme is *News at Ten*, which homes in on the sufferers and immediately shows a gunshot victim who is now in hospital. Rather than going unnoticed, this man becomes the focus of the scene as Matthew Price, the correspondent, followed by the camera, walks into the patient's space – the hospital room – bringing the viewer with him, and sits alongside him at the same level. Price, who provides extensive personalised reporting of humanitarian events, acts as the mediator linking the victim to the viewer, a stark contrast with the situation on *20 Heures* where the reporter is mostly absent from the screen. This victim is now humanised, he has a name, he has a description, his injuries are described, the viewer knows how he has been shot, and, what is more, he is given a voice and is able to express his opinion about the injustice of his suffering. It is clear that this is not a unique occurrence and the danger of the on-going nature of the fighting is rendered more apparent through Price's urgent real-time reporting.

*20 Heures* also broadcasts hospital images with footage of a baby connected to many machines, casualties being treated on the floor and pools of blood, seemingly bringing the audience into close proximity with the action, but does so at a distance emotionally. The wider research project characterised *20 Heures*' conflict reporting as being fact-based coverage with few, if any, vox pops or interviews with the actors in news items. In line with this, there are no interviews with these people or their relatives and the verbal information is provided by the voice-over, as a factual account, with the sweeping statement "the injured are far too numerous". Techniques, which could raise compassion amongst the viewers, and which prevail on *News at Ten*, are disregarded, allowing the victims to remain unfamiliar and dissociated from the viewer. This approach does not encourage viewers to engage with the sufferers, rather releases them from any responsibility to participate emotionally. Instead, compassion values are sidelined and potential opportunities to dwell on victim coverage are replaced by images of fighting and violence.

Although both *Vremya* and *20 Heures* initially portray the sufferers as dehumanised, these individuals are not completely stripped of their identities as details about them do emerge, but

not to the extent seen on *News at Ten*. The depth of the coverage increases and the victims appear in multiple scenes at food markets, in streets, at passport controls and hospitals, making them more credible and shifting them from the one-dimensional portrayal shown at the start. The extra detail continues through the news providers' use of clichéd images of queues, donkey carts used for transport and backstreet shops. Yet these attempts to unite the victim and viewer in a universal humanity, in which both are fellow citizens of the same world and in which the viewer is morally challenged to come to the aid of the victim, only serve to accentuate cultural differences between the Palestinians and the reporting countries, and the remote sufferer remains a cultural other. At times, the universality of the suffering succeeds in overruling these cultural differences as the broadcasters focus on iconic images of women and their children, representing motherhood, and the elderly as the victims. According to both Moeller (1999) and Christie (1996), these groups make ideal victims and create greater newsworthiness than had images of men been broadcast. But it is *News at Ten* which particularly engages with them by zooming in on their faces, their gaze looking directly into the camera, thus bestowing on the victims an element of distinctiveness and identity.

The complexities of using compassion as a news value appear when *Vremya* and *News at Ten*, rather than engaging with the Palestinians as sufferers, focus on how children are used in the fighting. Drawing on negativity value, *Vremya* shows disturbing images of children playing with machine guns and questions the concept of childhood innocence, which is being lost during the conflict. This does not highlight concern for the children but acts as a contrast between the inhumanity of the fighters, portrayed as aggressors, and the innocence of the young, challenging on-going attempts to promote representations of the culturally and geographically "other" as part of the same humankind. Their portrayals instead reinforce, and confirm, the distance between the viewer and the unfamiliar.

Although the broadcasters use compassion to increase the newsworthiness their emerging humanitarian crisis reports, they still pursue certain prevailing narratives concerning the Middle East, revealing a hierarchy in both new values and victims. By 18 June 2007, *News at Ten*'s Price shifts from his more prevalent individualised portrayals to a dehumanised view of "several hundred people" at the border crossing and states that "eighty percent depend on aid hand-outs". But this approach is used to emphasise the enormity of the crisis and thus serves a purpose and enables the broadcaster to report on the role and involvement of external agents. On one hand, Price states, "the UN and Israel are in talks to try and avert a humanitarian crisis". Whilst, on the other, he emphasises the scale of the suffering, emphasised by the gap in standards of living between the East and West in Gaza, and suggests that it is a result of the West's dilatory actions.

Price also manages the humanitarian theme in his reports, and its priority position in the news values hierarchy is ceded to that of power elite and elite nation values to promote a "shift from America" discourse which prevails on *News at Ten* (18 June 2007). He thus transfers the focus from the humanitarian theme of pity to a theme of denunciation (Boltanski, 1999). Allying Israel to the USA, Price states, "the US and Israel both say they'll work with [an emergency government]" and that "the US and Israel are in talks to try and avert a humanitarian crisis but there is no agreement yet", with the implication, as the camera focuses on closed crossing points, that a solution could be found by simply opening the border and accelerating the agreement process. He hints that the West is hiding behind displays of high-minded concern advocating Western universalising democracy and principles, whilst it too is contributing to the widespread indifference to the victims.

*News at Ten* continues to portray the events as emergency news by juxtaposing images, which highlight differences in cultures between Hamas-run Gaza and Fatah-led West Bank, the latter being represented as a more realistic option to pursue the peace process. On 18 June 2007, and



in contrast to the previous individualised portrayals of hospital victims, the Gazans are now shown waiting helplessly at the closed crossing points and are stripped of any identity. Hundreds of civilians are shown. They do not look at the camera, let alone speak to it and they appear to be passive, with no agency at all. All they can do, in a subsequent visual, is help off-load the above-mentioned humanitarian aid from a truck. These images are contrasted with visuals of a comparatively safer, calmer West Bank. It is only with the support of international agents that such suffering, on such a scale, could be alleviated. Rather than focusing the narrative on just the plight of the sufferers, the broadcaster shifts spatially between images of the victims and images of potential international agents who, through this juxtaposition of images, are portrayed as the possible solution to the crisis.

*20 Heures'* use of compassion as a news value is least evident of the three broadcasters. It provides few attempts to engage with civilian sufferers and the compassion news value appears to be given lower priority than negativity values, to the extent that this approximates *adventuristic news* reports in which the distant other is presented as no cause for concern and emotion is blocked. *20 Heures* combines coverage of events, which could have sympathy as their dominant theme, with more shocking visual images, particularly of the injured in hospital. This marks a notable difference between *News at Ten's* and *20 Heures'* reporting, challenging expectations of similarities based on the geographical proximity of the two reporting countries. This difference could be partially attributed to traditions concerning graphic images of death and violence in Protestant and Catholic countries: the former favouring an "antivisualist coverage of pain" in contrast to the latter, which is more open to graphic representations (Hanusch, 2012, pp. 658–660). Throughout, *News at Ten* does not show lurid images of violence, preferring higher levels of emotional engagement with the audience, compared with *20 Heures'* reluctance to dwell too long on the unpleasantness of the humanitarian crisis but readiness to show explicit images of violence. For example, *20 Heures'* footage of civilians at the Israel–Gaza border crossing on 17 June 2007 is quickly replaced with images of a lynching of a Fatah member by Hamas. In the same item, when another opportunity to focus on the civilian victims arises, it is instead framed to highlight, negatively, the role of Hamas in creating this situation, which in turn highlights the aspects of the conflict prioritised by *20 Heures* in its news value hierarchy.

The French broadcaster's on-going negative reporting of Hamas during the fighting – which all but replaces possible airtime for compassion – reinforces its prevailing message that Gaza is now an Islamist republic and it pursues a theme of denouncing Hamas for the injustice of the suffering. Whilst the victims on *20 Heures* are not totally dehumanised as they appear in multiple scenes with a gradually increasing depth of reporting, the French broadcaster's coverage is still characterised more by its lack of empathy than its abundance. Because there is little interaction with those shown to be suffering (few are given a voice, few appear in close-ups, little if any attention is paid to the victims' gaze), there is little information about potential protectors or rescuers, and possibly more importantly, there is little demand or option for action from the viewer.

*Vremya's* role as state-aligned broadcaster is evident after 18 June 2007 as it shifts to a discourse of ecstatic news. Like *News at Ten*, it emphasises the Gazans' plight and uses similar techniques. Yet, a news value hierarchy emerges and these victims are no longer portrayed as the principal sufferers and any pity potentially elicited amongst viewers for them, and any support the victims may have been accorded by the news provider within the framework of Russia's relations with the Arab world (Bagno, 2009), has been diverted. This role is, instead, assumed by the hundred or so Russian-speaking expatriates relying on Russian state help for their evacuation.<sup>1</sup> So, from 18–24 June 2007, the emphasis shifts and – corresponding to Chouliarki's third regime of pity (2006, p. 94) – nearly half of the reports focus on a few Russian compatriots, which helps determine *Vremya's* hierarchy of victims. The Gazans are reduced to distant and anonymous "masses of refugees" contrasted with many individual, named Russian speakers



who directly address the camera and provide exaggerated praise of the Motherland's assistance to its citizens, declaring: "Russia has not abandoned its own" and "thanks to our Russian state". This use of compassion by *Vremya* is very much instrumentalised and it has a strong nation-building function, contrasting starkly with how compassion is used for the suffering other. That this broadcaster diverts its audience's attention from the Palestinian civilians to the ostensibly significant aid provided to the Russian speakers by the Russian state is hardly surprising in itself, yet the speed with which this shift occurs and its blatancy is striking. The real-time storytelling, as on *News at Ten*, suggests the indefinite nature of the crisis and the pressing need to evacuate these individuals. Their story is played out in a dream-like scenario reminiscing about their hopes of living in "faraway Palestine", yet *Vremya* instantly updates the viewer with visual images of the present crisis. The suspense continues over several days as "we" – the viewer – watch these evacuees as they are subject to "tortuous waiting". We accompany them as they move from Gaza to Jordan and finally to Russia when coverage of them is only complete once they are in the arms of their loved ones in Russia, images of which are in frankly bizarre, slow motion accompanied by upbeat, reassuring music appropriate for a "happy-ending", inviting viewers to engage with their ordeal through reflexive contemplation. The Russian-speaking victims have moved spatially from a position of danger to one of safety and the Palestinians, who were the focus of *Vremya*'s humanitarian coverage, have long since been replaced in the hierarchy and their status as the other is confirmed.

*Vremya* therefore perceives the main victims to be the Russian-speaking compatriots but the reporter also clearly frames the Israelis to be the persecutors despite the main cause of the conflict being the intra-Palestinian fighting. The Israelis are presented as accountable for the injustice of the suffering and *Vremya* casts doubts on Israeli actions, questioning whether they will keep their promises to allow the Russians to leave. This enables the broadcaster to boost Russia's agency in the evacuation process by highlighting the embassy's role through repeated reports and pieces-to-camera which provide updates on their actions against the persecutor. The footage and the verbal commentary cooperate to emphasise the comfort in which these individuals are treated as they are transported on luxury coaches to hotels, to the airport and finally flown to Moscow.

The broadcasters do not use compassion in isolation within the news value hierarchy but alongside, and in competition with, other news values. Rather than being portrayed as a universal moral value, compassion towards the anonymous masses of civilians is represented differently by the broadcasters and is constructed in order to suit, or reflect, their own narratives. Although the broadcasters' overarching moral values appear at least comparable, and although they are united in their approach from their "Western transnational zone of safety" towards "human life in the zone of suffering [which is the] West's 'Other'" (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 10), their representations of the victims remain culturally constructed (Höijer, 2004). Regardless of endeavours by *Vremya* and *News at Ten* to elicit an emotional response amongst viewers towards the victims, their reports only serve to reinforce the us/other divide.

### Compassion news value in portrayals of the hostages

This part of the analysis now investigates compassion new values encountered within the third of Chouliaraki's typologies – ecstatic news – where the victim is no longer represented by the foreign masses but is – in the case of two of the broadcasters – an individual from the same nation, and even the same organisation in the case of Johnston, and therefore considered "one of us". It explores the broadcasters' reports separately and discusses how the coverage elicits empathy for the victims (the hostages), on one hand, and denounces their captors, on the other.

The hostages are Alan Johnston, a BBC journalist and British citizen who was non-military but in Gaza as a result of his own professional decisions and now involved in the conflict as a

direct victim; and Gilad Shalit, an Israeli-French IDF soldier, in the Middle East through direct military involvement. Johnston was kidnapped in Gaza by the Army of Islam in March 2007 and was held captive for 114 days with various unconfirmed claims and videos of him being issued. His kidnapping provoked many days of action for his release by colleagues in the UK and abroad, leading up to events to mark his hundredth day in captivity, which coincided with the kidnappers' video being aired. His abduction was associated with releasing Muslims jailed in Britain (BBC, 2007). These reports are broadcast approximately three weeks before his release. Shalit was captured by Hamas militant wing fighters in June 2006 near the Israel–Gaza border. He was held for five years during which time communication with him was sparse, including only a few letters and the audiotape broadcast as part of these events.

Coverage of the hostage-takings by the broadcasters differed in that *Vremya* and *20 Heures* reported on Johnston and Shalit, whilst *News at Ten* focused solely on Johnston. Similarities emerge between *20 Heures'* and *News at Ten's* reports as, rather than being onlookers on the action in the Palestinian territories, which has been the case so far, these broadcasters now have to report on the plight of their own country's citizens in the knowledge that their broadcasts may also be watched by the hostage-takers. The inclusion of the kidnappers' footage in the news programmes enables viewers to witness not only the suffering of these individuals, but also the distress of the extended family to this footage. The viewers are therefore united as they observe the hostages' human rights being clearly infringed, a situation which would be denounced by the international community of civility. Each of the broadcasters' coverage will now be discussed in turn.

### *News at Ten*

*News at Ten's* reporting contains two aspects which demonstrate that compassion as a news value is not sufficiently newsworthy in isolation and must be boosted by other news values. The first focuses on a sentiment of care and compassion towards Johnston, and the second concentrates on the denunciation of his suffering and those involved in inflicting it. The first aspect may produce empathy for Johnston by regularly broadcasting the viewpoints of his family, the BBC, the British Foreign Office and the UK. By gradually providing these separate groups with voices throughout the reports, the victim no longer remains anonymous and the audience views him as "ours". The footage of Johnston, issued by the kidnappers, is juxtaposed with calls for his release from BBC colleagues, on one hand, and archive images of the journalist, when free, filming a previous report from Gaza, on the other. The vocabulary used by Johnston in the first half of the kidnappers' video, for example "death zone", "by force" and "threat" as he repeats his captors' intentions, is contrasted with the many words of compassion ("love" and "care") uttered by the BBC World News Editor as he supports the journalist. These are terms which convey intimate emotions as they can be expressed to, or about, individuals with whom close relations are either understood as existing (by the viewers, for example, with regard to Johnston and his family) or which do exist between the viewer and the individual being viewed.

Having established that Johnston is "one of us", *News at Ten* can then pursue a theme of denunciation, similar to that encountered in the Palestinian victim coverage. On one hand, this reflects the BBC guidelines to provide reports which are balanced, independent and which "consider the broad perspective" (BBC, 2013) yet, on the other, it results in the reports being re-directed so that the persecutor of Johnston's unjust suffering becomes clear and a wider political message emerges regarding the necessity of the war on terror, whichever conflict is involved. The broadcaster imposes its own interpretation and value judgements on the material supplied by the Army of Islam and exemplifies the power exerted by news providers over those they portray as terrorists: whilst they broadcast the kidnapper's footage they "omit the propaganda message that

terrorists would like to see accompanying reporting of their exploits” (Martin, 1986, p. 1). This approach contributes to the overarching narrative concerning the war on terror which pervades the BBC schedule (Hoskins & O’Loughlin, 2009; Thussu & Freedman, 2003) and not only reduces the desired impact of the original videos but also ensures that there is no doubt amongst viewers who the abductors are and how they, and their actions, should be perceived.

*News at Ten*’s coverage also illustrates the influence of domestic events on conflict reporting. During the Johnston video item, *News at Ten* shows images of Abu Qatada, a Palestinian-born Islamic cleric, suspected of links to Al-Qaeda and held by the UK government as a threat to national security. The lengthy appeal process against Abu Qatada’s deportation to Jordan was well-publicised and its inclusion increases the cultural proximity of these reports. The negativity value of the captors is clear in the video images of them as hooded masked gunmen brandishing AK-47s, images which support the religious association, permeating these items (“we will get closer to God by killing this journalist”) and contribute to the portrayal which links these individuals to terrorism. Yet, there is no specific statement about the hostage-takers’ demands. All the reports are framed from the viewpoint of Johnston and his supporters, illustrating how the kidnapers have only partially achieved their presumed publicity aims.

## 20 Heures

A similar approach prevails on *20 Heures* where there is a strong sentiment of empathy towards Shalit and Johnston – albeit to a lesser extent regarding the latter – and the broadcaster, like *News at Ten*, is clear about who the victim is. However, any potential emotional reaction amongst the audience towards Johnston is reduced as only a blurred still of the video of him wearing an explosive belt is played. In contrast to *News at Ten* and despite using the alleged terrorists’ footage, *20 Heures* offers little information about their demands. On 20 June 2007, the anchor states that Johnston’s “abductors [...] are calling for the liberation of several Muslims held in Great Britain”. The focus then transfers to Shalit and his family and, in contrast with *News at Ten*, the broadcaster does not dwell on denouncing the abductors. Instead, the brief airtime allocated to its hostage reports, which are the shortest of all three broadcasters, is dedicated to the victims. There is a hierarchy between the reports on Johnston’s video message and the taped audio message from Gilad Shalit (greater airtime is given to the Shalit item, presumably because of his dual French-Israeli nationality). *20 Heures* also increases the relevance of its Shalit coverage to the audience by providing accompanying flows of information about him, shown as photographs and videos, as a healthy soldier prior to his capture. As noted earlier, there is little personalisation of items by journalists and there are no direct interviews with members of Shalit’s family. Despite this, the technique of showing family images assembled informally in domestic surroundings are used with the potential aim of uniting viewers behind Shalit as a fellow citizen.

The video of Johnston’s physical and mental suffering is not shown on *20 Heures* with the vague disclaimer from the anchor that, “we did not want to broadcast this live image of this disturbing video”. This contradicts its Charter which states that it is not the function of France Télévisions to show a “sterilised and, therefore, erroneous representation of the world we live in” but “simply banning the representation would culminate in misinforming the public” (France Télévisions, 2010, Section 2). This appears the case here, which challenges the airing of many graphic images during the fighting, all of which highlights inconsistencies in *20 Heures*’ reporting. Certain tensions between France and UK are apparent as *20 Heures* allocates little airtime to the British journalist’s predicament although it does grant him far greater attention than *News at Ten* does to Shalit, where the latter’s abduction is not covered at all. But in both cases, the broadcasters replace coverage of the Palestinian victims with Western victims. The impact of this sudden shift in focus is wide-ranging and must surely, amongst others, affect the work of NGOs, who not only act as

information sources for the media but also rely on the latter to amplify their own messages to decision-makers and the public (Otto and Meyer, 2012). If coverage of the distant other is so quickly replaced by the media, then the compassion elicited by these same reports may be dismissed just as promptly by those in a position to take action.

### *Vremya*

*Vremya*, like *20 Heures*, reports both events but it does not reveal any particular stance towards the UK or France (Shalit is, however, described as an Israeli and not a French citizen). Details relating to the kidnappings comprise photographs of the two men prior to their capture and also the full Johnston videotape and Shalit audiotape. Although it broadcasts similar images to the other two news providers, *Vremya* offers no additional background about the hostages. Because there is no direct association between Russia and the two hostages, there is no useful purpose in *Vremya*, as a state-aligned broadcaster, eliciting any feelings of care towards them and, instead, it diverts this airtime to convey a denunciatory message regarding the Israeli state and indirectly the USA.

The main theme is to condemn those responsible for the hostage-takings and *Vremya* continues to accuse both the terrorists and Israel. Boltanski describes the denunciation of unjust suffering as a means of drawing on additional emotions to unite a community (of viewers) behind victims (1999). On one hand, viewers can identify with the victims themselves through compassion and on the other, they can come together to express a further emotion: that of anger. This sentiment against the actions of the hostage-takers may be elicited by *Vremya* by broadcasting carefully chosen archive images of hooded armed fighters and unrelated Palestinian demonstrations, alongside the kidnappers' demands for the release of several hundred prisoners from Israeli prisons in return for the hostages, enabling *Vremya* to pursue its anti-terrorist narrative.

*Vremya* does not direct the viewers' assumed anger just against those it perceives to be terrorists but uses this journalistic space to disparage Israel and emphasise the latter's untrustworthiness by attaching some of the blame to it for the hostage-takings. The anchor states that despite an agreement being reached regarding the release of prisoners in Israel, the Israelis have reneged on it. Moreover, the reporter comments on rumours that a large-scale Israeli incursion into Gaza is imminent, highlighting *Vremya's* on-going theme concerning the Israeli authorities, their lack of reliability and associations with the US-led West. There is general discordance between the anchor's and reporter's texts and the images. The footage may not be Russian-produced but one area still within the state-aligned broadcaster's influence is the verbal commentary which is shaped to promote a "positive" image of Russia and a less "positive" one for any potential adversaries. This discordance, found throughout the broader research project, contributes to understanding the lack of balance and objectivity encountered in, and even sought, then and now, from, Russian television news providers (Aruntunyan, 2009; Oates, 2007). Key information is supplied verbally and the associated footage is not explained to the viewer nor are there any apparent links between segments of images. Yet, the important message, which prevails, is that Israel appears equally responsible for the hostage situation and, if compassion is not to be directly elicited from viewers for the hostages given that they are not directly related to Russia, then another emotion, here anger, must be kindled for a purpose of interest to the broadcaster.

The hostage-taking analysis illustrates how the broadcasters shift, to differing degrees, from an emergency news discourse to one of ecstatic news. Because of their cultural proximity to *20 Heures'* and *News at Ten's* audiences, the hostages appear more newsworthy than the masses of Palestinian victims raising the moral dilemma of which victims should be prioritised and how long each should remain on the screen. Both broadcasters dedicate significant airtime to raising concern for their "own" kidnapped citizens. Differences in journalistic practices among

the broadcasters also emerge with *News at Ten* providing personalised reports which increase the proximity to the viewer and *20 Heures*' providing reports which are more factual. On *Vremya*, any potential use of compassion was sidelined and the focus of the coverage shifted to reflect the state's political agenda against terrorism and the Israeli authorities as a US ally. The broadcasters' footage also illustrates the power of the media in portraying kidnappers. Although the latter chose this opportunity to reiterate their demands and to publish these videos and audiotapes via the mass media, they have no influence over how they are finally broadcast. The terrorists' position is thus compromised because the media are interested in the newsworthiness "of the violence, but are hardly interested in the long communiqué that goes with it, explaining the reason why" (Kelly and Mitchell, 1981, p. 288).

## Conclusion

This paper examined compassion as news value in the foreign conflict reporting of Russian, French and UK broadcasters, with the objective of determining the extent to which this news value was sidelined by other values, considered more newsworthy. Focusing on the intra-Palestinian fighting in June 2007, the analysis drew on Galtung and Ruge's news values and Chouliaraki's typologies of Western news discourse to illustrate significant divergences in many areas: the broadcasters' portrayals of victims; the way in which they used compassion news values; and their denunciation of those parties represented as being responsible. *Vremya* assumed its principal role of promoting Russia as it switched abruptly from covering the emerging humanitarian crisis in Gaza to the evacuation of Russian-speaking expatriates. Humanitarian coverage dominated on *News at Ten* and was emphasised by personalised reporting from the correspondent, whilst *20 Heures* avoided focusing on the unpleasantness of human suffering, remaining detached, and concentrated on Hamas's creation of an Islamic republic.

Two main groups of victims emerged, one being within an emergency news discourse where the techniques used by the broadcasters elicited compassion in their representations of the Palestinian victims, as the distant other, enabling viewers to identify with them by increasing their cultural proximity. The second was within an ecstatic news discourse in which the hostages – and the Russian evacuees in the case of *Vremya* – were portrayed as "one of us". Reports on these two groups were not aired in the same programmes but followed one another temporally. Indeed, the prompt displacement of the Palestinian victims by the hostages (and also by the Russian evacuees on *Vremya*'s programmes), which revealed a hierarchy of suffering for all three broadcasters, raises a particular moral dilemma. The "emergency news" typology provides an option for action amongst viewers and, because no specific distance is created between them, encourages viewers to consider themselves part of the same humanity as the victims. If this discourse is displaced, potential public action, resulting from the moral obligation to respond to the suffering, may correspondingly no longer be prompted.

Compassion as a contemporary news value proved insufficiently newsworthy in isolation and needed the additional support of other news values for an item to gain airtime. All three therefore also included its counterpart – denunciation – targeting those responsible for the suffering. Coverage of the victims was therefore exploited to foreground an on-going narrative concerning the necessity for the war on terror.

The comparison of broadcasters' coverage of these events leads us to certain conclusions about the use of compassion within a journalistic framework and its capacity to raise the newsworthiness of foreign conflict reporting and bridge any remoteness between war victims on the screen and the viewer. Three contrasting broadcasters were analysed from three different reporting countries yet their use and inclusion of compassion as a news value had overarching similarities and outcomes. Despite significant efforts by some to portray victims as part of a single common



humanity, it was “precisely by appealing to “our” essential commonality that practices of mediation fail to recognize the radical plurality of [...] cultures and ultimately exclude those who do not fit [our] cultural norms” (Chouliaraki & Orgad, 2011, p. 345). This could be perceived as a reflection of the constant stream of human suffering continually available for viewing in the media and the fact that the emotional and physical distance between the sufferer and the observer widens as a result. It is as though the broadcasters’ coverage of the victims is little more than an acknowledgement of their plight: there is an intrinsic value in showing suffering but this has its place and, given a possible and even increasing desensitisation of viewers, this value is quickly replaced by new and different themes, which might prove more newsworthy. However important this group of Palestinians is when discussing foreign conflict reporting, and however much they must not be overlooked, they remain distanced from the viewer and unequal power relations remain between the viewer and victim. The Middle East conflict is no longer currently alone in being considered a long and drawn-out affair and, although it, together with many other on-going conflicts, triggered after the comparison period under discussion, is of major global interest, its reporting could almost be classed as predictable. Coverage of victims seems to have become such routine components of news items that their inclusion is guaranteed, yet after a suitable period of time, they are swiftly cast aside and replaced with a potentially more newsworthy theme, which might also be more in line with the overarching narrative.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### Note

1. This broadly defined group, which requires Russian aid, includes individuals from Ukraine, Moldova and other countries which the state considers to be within its sphere of influence. The value attached to covering this varied group reflects how Russian national identity is now constructed, and its relationship with Soviet identity.

### References

- Amnesty International. (2007, October 24). Occupied Palestinian territories: Torn apart by factional strife. Retrieved from <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE21/020/2007/en/642b5fe4-d363-11dd-a329-2f46302a8cc6/mde210202007en.pdf>
- Aruntunyan, A. (2009). *The media in Russia*. Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill.
- Bagno, O. (2009). Russia in the Middle East: An unlikely comeback. *Strategic Assessment*, 12(2), 91–104.
- BBC. (2007, October 25). Alan Johnston: My kidnap ordeal. *BBC News Channel*. Retrieved from [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from\\_our\\_own\\_correspondent/7048652.stm#jihadi](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/from_our_own_correspondent/7048652.stm#jihadi)
- BBC. (2013). Editorial guidelines: Section 4: Impartiality. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/page/guidelines-impartiality-introduction/>
- Bell, M. (1997). TV news: how far should we go? *British Journalism Review*, 8(7), 7–16.
- Bell, M. (1998). The journalism of attachment. In M. Kieran (Ed.), *Media ethics* (pp. 15–22). London: Routledge.
- Boltanski, L. (1999). *Distant suffering*. Politics, morality and the media. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Campbell, D. (2012). The myth of compassion fatigue. Retrieved from [www.david.campbell.org](http://www.david.campbell.org)
- Carruthers, S. L. (2000). *The media at war: Communication and conflict in the twentieth century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Chouliaraki, L. (2006). *The spectatorship of suffering*. London: Sage.
- Chouliaraki, L., & Orgad, S. (2011). Proper distance: Mediation, ethics, otherness. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 14(4), 341–345.
- Christie, N. (1996). The ideal victim. In E. A. Fattah (Ed.), *From crime policy to victim policy* (pp. 17–30). London: MacMillan Press.



- France Télévisions. (2010). Charte des antennes de France Télévisions. Retrieved from [http://www.francetelevisions.fr/downloads/charte\\_des\\_antennes\\_web.pdf](http://www.francetelevisions.fr/downloads/charte_des_antennes_web.pdf)
- Galtung, J., & Ruge, M. (1965). The structure of foreign news: The presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus crises in four Norwegian newspapers. *Journal of International Peace Research*, 2(1), 64–91.
- Hanusch, F. (2012). The visibility of disaster deaths in news images: A comparison of newspapers from 15 countries. *International Communication Gazette*, 74, 655–672.
- Höijer, B. (2004). The discourse of global compassion: The audience and media reporting of human suffering. *Media, Culture & Society*, 26(4), 513–531.
- Hoskins, A., & O'Loughlin, B. (2009). *Television and terror*. Conflicting times and the crisis of news discourse. Hants: Palgrave Macmillan.
- International Committee of the Red Cross. (2007, June 6). Gaza and West Bank: 19–06–2007 Operational update. Retrieved from <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/news-release/2009-and-earlier/palestine-news-190607.htm>
- Kelly, M. J., & Mitchell, T. H. (1981). Transnational terrorism and the Western elite press. *Political Communication and Persuasion*, 1(3), 269–296.
- Kreutz, A. (2007). *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or foe?* Praeger: Westport.
- Martin, L. J. (1986). The media's role in international terrorism. *Terrorism*, 8(2), 127–146.
- Moeller, S. D. (1999). *Compassion fatigue: How the media sell disease, famine, war and death*. New York: Routledge.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (2001). *Upheavals of thought*. The intelligence of emotion. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oates, O. (2007). The neo-Soviet model of the media. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 59(8), 1279–1297.
- Otto, F., & Meyer, C. (2012). Missing the story? Changes in foreign news reporting and their implications for conflict prevention. *Media, War & Conflict*, 5, 205–221.
- Russell, J. (2009). The geopolitics of terrorism: Russia's conflict with Islamic extremism. *Eurasian Geography and Politics*, 50(2), 184–196.
- Silverstone, R. (2007). *Morality and the media*. On the rise of the mediapolis. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Sontag, S. (2003). *Regarding the pain of others*. London: Penguin.
- Tester, K. (2001). *Compassion, morality and the media*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Thussu, D. K., & Freedman, D. (Eds.). (2003). *War and media*. London: Sage.