

Article

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Mediating sovereignty: a comparative latent semantic analysis of US newspapers and conflicts in Kosovo and South Ossetia

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Abstract

This article addresses the role of news media in mediating and legitimating sovereignty claims within the nation-state system. Given the performativity of sovereignty claims, the speech acts of political actors require mediation in order to achieve their intent. This mediation occurs through formal channels but requires dissemination via popular media to permeate the public consciousness. Journalistic practices play a key role in the degree to which sovereignty claims are narrated. The authors compare the ways in which US newspapers legitimated (or undermined) sovereignty claims by Kosovo and South Ossetia during their respective conflicts. Their research uses latent semantic analysis to reveal narrative emplotments of various actors in each conflict. The results indicate that, despite the potential to be narrated in similar ways, the Kosovo conflict was narrated as a humanitarian intervention, while the Russian intervention in South Ossetia was narrated as an imperialist intervention linked to larger geopolitical competition.

Keywords

Kosovo, latent semantic analysis, narration, newspapers, South Ossetia, sovereignty

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Introduction

Although claims regarding the importance of media in contemporary global politics are so ubiquitous as to be banal, recent events continue to reveal new spatialities in the ever-unfolding mediascape. This article adopts a comparative approach (Myers et al., 1996), using quantitative content analysis to compare the US newspaper coverage of the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia over the question of Kosovo (Operation: Allied Force, henceforth OAF) and the news coverage of the 2008 Russian invasion of Georgia over the question of South Ossetia (and other territories, such as Abkhazia). These two case studies were chosen because of the use of the 'Kosovo precedent' to legitimate Russian intervention in Georgia; that is, Russia claims that these events should be narrated similarly, and indeed there are at a minimum superficial similarities.[1]

Nevertheless, the journalistic narrative is contingent upon rather than determined by events. How were these conflicts narrated by US newspapers? In what ways were claims of sovereignty bolstered or undermined by the emplotment[2] of these places within journalistic narratives? By calling attention to this possibility for disjuncture, we hope to draw connections between the constitutive role of the media in international politics and the constitutive role of speech acts in determining territorial sovereignty claims such as those contested in Kosovo and South Ossetia. Such a focus draws attention to the ways in which US narrative structures, which often position Russia as an Oriental aggressor (Ó Tuathail and Agnew, 1992; Sharp, 2000), combine with US centrality in global media networks to shape geopolitical space in ways that favour the US. This media hegemony, combined with a neo-Cold War framing of Russia (Dalby, 1993), produces differential levels of 'state-ness' (McConnell, 2009) for polities such as Kosovo and South Ossetia.

This article proceeds by reviewing the literature on journalism, narrative and sovereignty. In doing so, we draw on poststructuralist theory to highlight the fundamentally discursive nature of international politics, which in turn prompts attention to the geographies of media production, circulation and consumption. These geographies are central to understanding the ways in which sovereignty claims are (de)legitimated in more traditional, formal sites of political power such as the United Nations and ministries of foreign affairs around the world. Following this theoretical section, we proceed to the case studies, showing how the narrative possibilities for OAF and the intervention in Georgia were constructed and contested by political elites in the involved states. These narratives, while incredibly flexible and contingent, nevertheless had to interact with already extant discourses of international law and human rights, and indeed with each other. This article then shifts to the empirical analysis, first outlining our method (latent semantic analysis) before discussing the results through statistical summary and a more qualitative use of exemplars from the sample. The article concludes with a more general overview of the performativity of journalism and sovereignty.

On narrative, media and constitution

Cultural and political geographers have contended for several decades that mediated representations not only shape ideas of space but are themselves constitutive of space (Mahtani, 2009). The notion of space as always in process, produced *through* mediation,

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is directly opposed to the common understanding of space as fixed and therefore capable of being meaningfully represented. We argue that the ability to shape spaces through representation, while not solely an elite practice, is nevertheless an unevenly distributed resource. Journalists have privileged access to 'the means whereby spaces are made inside networks of journalism' (Salovaara-Moring, 2009a: 87). Indeed, as Gasher (2009: i) argues:

> Journalists … are not simply innocent bystanders or detached witnesses capturing objective, mirror-like pictures or society. Rather, they are active participants in the construction of our realities. They tell us who we are, where we live and work, what we believe in, what we care about, and they draw boundaries between 'here' and 'there', 'us' and 'them'.

Since the late 1970s, scholars of narrative have argued that our identities, whether individual or collective, are predicated on our emplotment within unfolding (and repeating) narratives (White, 1973). These emplotments associate meaning with individual or collective actors, allowing for generalization and (mis)comprehension of a complex world. These narratives result from our inherently grounded and situated experience of the world; objective understanding of the world is an impossibility as the 'reality' near us, and seen from our own perspective, trumps other subjectivities and the realities they experience. Fundamentally, then, narrative is important in the context of this article because it allows for various scriptings to result from the same empirical experiences. As the world unfolds, some experiences and narrations become hegemonic over others, although this process is never complete and total. International politics is one arena in which these narratives can be seen to compete, with governmental elites attempting to promote their scripting of events over others, using the internet as well as conventional media. Thus, journalists are both tools in the strategies of conventional political leaders and active agents themselves, who shape the world's spaces through their working practices.

These working practices shape the representation of political spaces in a multitude of ways. For instance, Myers et al. (1996) argue that coverage of the war in Bosnia was influenced by the common occupation of hotels and bars by journalists looking for social interaction; sharing of information led to a remarkable uniformity in perspectives and even turns of phrase. Similarly, the journalistic style of writing emphasizes detachment and the objectification of those featured in the story.

> Voice and access to define oneself are very seldom given to those who are objects of power. Thus, how the international media formulate an object of knowledge is crucial for the political and economic claims one makes about the object under inspection. (Salovaara-Moring, 2009a: 88)

However, given the short amount of time available for information gathering (itself an artifact of the capitalist system within which journalism operates in much of the developed world), this usually entails continually approaching the same governmental and elite sources that have their own vested interests (Tuchman, 1978). Fear of being 'cut off' from this (literally) free flow of information also conditions the ways in which reporters engage with the issues vital to these informants. Hence, 'news criteria are inherently built

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around the economic and political order of the Western world. News production is a particularly sensitive gauge of the power structure of the global arena' (Salovaara-Moring, 2009a: 88).

Salovaara-Moring (2009b) has argued that these elements of journalistic culture combine with journalists' individual subjectivities to create blind spots, both temporal and geographic, in news coverage. She refers to these blind spots as 'dead ground', and while she argues that journalists need to push through into these spaces, we are sceptical about the possibility of eliminating them entirely. The creation of subaltern news media with global reach, such as Al-Jazeera (Seib, 2004), has provided alternative viewpoints produced from new subjectivities and identities, which helps to highlight 'dead ground' for US media but does not eliminate it nor necessarily build bridges between these perspectives. Tumber and Webster (2006: 54) note that US news media are 'entertainment oriented, escapist and diverting, producing content that combines maximum popularity with least cost' as a result of their commercial orientation, a trend that has continued with the subsequent tightening of the newspaper market. These more material concerns shaping journalists' output include access to the conflict zone, whether for financial reasons or for more traditionally geopolitical ones (for instance, in the South Ossetia conflict, only Russian journalists had consistent access – see Nazarenko, 2009). Facing lack of access, journalists' reliance on official voices can be heightened.

As this article began by emphasizing, journalism is a key site for the representation *and constitution* of global politics. We now turn to the specifics of two case studies, chosen because of the role of the news media in enabling particular narratives of victimhood and aggression to dominate public discourse, thereby enabling or diminishing consequent claims to sovereignty.

Contestation of narrative

This section of the article will engage with the events that occurred in Kosovo/Serbia and South Ossetia/Georgia, illustrating how the narration of events in each place was contested by the major combatants to their benefit. In engaging with these events, we are not endorsing a particular narrative but rather we are interested in the interplay of these narratives with each other and with established norms of international law (which are themselves contested and reconstituted in the process). As Webber (2009: 449) has argued:

> What matters … is how the past has been relayed into the present, how an event obtains significance (or 'historicity') at the point of its occurrence and how the narrative of meaning which develops around it comes to inform present-day concerns.

The discursive relationship(s) between the US and Russia, countries that are both central to the conflicts whose news coverage is compared in this research, is one that has long roots and has been well documented (Dalby, 1993; Sharp, 2000). Following the Cold War, US newspaper representations of Russia during the contentious process of NATO expansion (which can be understood as a factor in both conflicts studied here) tended to describe Russia in one of three ways: (a) in an Orientalist fashion, harnessing Cold-War language of East versus West; (b) as fundamentally not different from the countries of

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'the West'; or (c) as a calculating, realist geopolitical actor (Dittmer, 2007). During the 2000s, US–Russian relations generally soured, and certainly the conflict in Kosovo was a key point in this process.

> The South Ossetian war, [therefore], was more an acceleration of already existing tensions in Russian Euro-Atlantic relations than a rupture … If the [resumption of long-range flights by Russia's aging strategic bombers] recalled the Cold War, the image of former Soviet T-72 tanks rolling into and occupying a sovereign country on its borders made that metanarrative irresistible to many, and marked a new low in relations for the post-Soviet period. (Ó Tuathail, 2008: 672)

Thus, the journalists covering these conflicts were not emplotting political actors in a narrative as if it were a tabula rasa; rather, the journalists and political actors were embedded in extant geopolitical imaginations within which their own agency could be performed.

Kosovo

The NATO intervention in Kosovo had its immediate roots in the rising violence between the Albanian ethnic Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the Yugoslav army (largely Serbian by this point in the breakup of Yugoslavia). In March 1998, US diplomat Richard Holbrooke delivered an ultimatum – that Serbia should agree to the Rambouillet document and cease operations in Kosovo or face NATO military assault. At the end of the month, NATO launched an extensive aerial bombardment of Serb air defences, military forces and strategic targets. Added to the previous demands were new ones for an international military presence in Kosovo and openness to negotiation over Kosovo's future status. The conflict ended with capitulation by Milosevic, who agreed to a plan offered by the EU and Russia that moderated the original demands by demilitarizing the KLA and specifying the provision of security in Kosovo by the UN.

The OAF intervention in Kosovo was hardly uncontroversial, in NATO member states or elsewhere. Indeed, the violation of Serbian state sovereignty without a UN Security Council resolution, and the subsequent re-drawing of Serbian borders, recall the past colonial era in which European (and latterly US) leaders gathered in Berlin (in 1884) or Paris (in 1919) to parcel out territories to each other. 'From the perspective of a decade on, NATO's intervention in Kosovo appears not so much a harbinger of future trends as a high-water mark of western power' (Cottey, 2009: 601). The international opposition to the intervention was largely rooted in international law. The UN Charter rejects the invasion of sovereign states without a Security Council authorization or the justification of self-defence. This kind of resolution was not forthcoming as Russia threatened a veto because OAF immediately followed NATO expansion to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, and the announcement of a new Strategic Concept widened the scope of NATO's potential operations to include rapid responses to crises in the (rather indefinite) Euro-Atlantic area (Averre, 2009). In fact, OAF was exactly the kind of 'out of area' military operation that Russia feared. Further, Russia argued that the aerial bombardment of Serbia (President Clinton had ruled out the use of ground troops) violated the Geneva Convention on the protection of civilians and the Helsinki Final Act. Thus,

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the possibility of OAF being deemed a 'legal' war was minimal in the face of Russian opposition.

However, the NATO case for war was not couched in the specifics of the law, but instead in the emerging 'consensus' on human rights as a new international standard (Haines, 2009: 477):

> This assessment of the poor chances of success in obtaining a UN mandate for intervention had prompted an early admission that such a use of force could well depart from the strict law of the Charter. The government accepted that there was 'no general doctrine of humanitarian necessity in international law', but qualified this statement by asserting that 'a limited use of force was justifiable in support of purposes laid down by the Security Council but without the council's express authorization when that was the only means to avert an immediate and overwhelming humanitarian catastrophe'.

In this formulation, a moral argument for 'humanitarian intervention' supersedes international law. Previous humanitarian interventions in Bosnia, Haiti and Somalia can be seen as uncontroversial (yet precedent setting) as a result of their UN authorization (Dunn, 2009); Kosovo serves as a limit case in which UN authorization was bypassed, unhinging the violation of state sovereignty from any legal framework.

> For many in the West, Kosovo was about a world that had moved beyond state sovereignty, one in which the cause of humanitarian intervention outweighed the traditional non-interventionist norms. In Russia, by contrast, OAF was widely viewed as a challenge to international order premised precisely on the centrality of sovereignty principles. (Cottey, 2009: 601)

A further Russian criticism of OAF drew on a different branch of international law, one that highlights the territorial elements of claims to sovereignty. The principle of *uti possidetis juris* argues for the maintenance of borders when new sovereign countries are recognized; that is, new states should emerge from previously existing administrative districts. This legal restriction on the principle of self-determination is an important part of the international system, predisposing it to the status quo (Berg, 2009). This legal principle was upheld in the Helsinki Final Act, which confirmed the importance of territorial integrity over self-determination. Russian opposition to Kosovar political demands stemmed from Kosovo's status as a district within Serbia, rather than a constituent republic within the Yugoslav federation. As such, it more directly contradicted *uti possidetis juris* than other secessions had, and paralleled quite aptly Russia's own struggle to keep Chechnya within the Russian Federation.

Kosovo's declaration of independence in February 2008 was the culmination of almost a decade of international administration that had not assuaged the concerns of the original opponents of OAF. However, at the time of writing, this statehood is caught, like many other territorial formations, in a quasi-sovereign state, recognized by about 76 states (including the dominant Western powers that helped create it) but not recognized by almost twice as many, including Russia, China and India as well as some EU countries that have their own separatist regions (e.g. Cyprus and Spain – see Mertus, 2009). Kosovo, like Taiwan, Northern Cyprus, Transnistria and many others is caught in the

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interstitial spaces of the sovereign/non-sovereign binary – functionally independent but still seeking the recognition of its would-be peers (McConnell, 2009).

The possibility of a domino effect, what Berg (2009) refers to as 'Kosovo Syndrome', resulting from the recognition of Kosovo is however dependent on the emplotment of Kosovo within other territorial formations' narratives as a 'precedent'. There are multiple possible meanings associated with the Kosovo precedent, including the doctrine of humanitarian intervention and the overturning of *uti possidetis juris*. This is important because although international law is framed in specific texts that can be returned to, the ways in which those texts are interpreted and related to one another is fundamentally open and contingent. Thus, how Kosovo gets incorporated into this body of law is central to any poststructuralist analysis. We now turn to a brief discussion of recent events in South Ossetia/Georgia, with a particular focus on how Kosovo was invoked as a precedent by Russia in their narration of events.

South Ossetia/Georgia

The origins of the 2008 conflict in South Ossetia/Georgia can likewise be found in many events over a long period of time, but can perhaps most fruitfully be identified in a 1991 conflict between the relatively new central government of Georgia and the local authorities in South Ossetia. Support for the ethnically Russian South Ossetians flowed across the border from Russia, and Russian peacekeepers dispatched to the region in the aftermath of the conflict were not viewed as impartial by the Georgian authorities. Georgian control over this territory was nominal from 1991 onwards, with Russia increasing its military presence in South Ossetia (and Abkhazia, as well) over time. In 2004, Saakashvili was elected President of Georgia with a promise of reintegrating these regions into Georgia. In April 2008, Russia established direct relationships with the local administrations of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which appeared to the Georgian authorities to be a preamble to annexation (Allison, 2008).

Of course, these events were not occurring in isolation, but rather were playing out alongside the events in Kosovo, and indeed alongside the wider NATO–Russia relationship. Just as the expansion of NATO in central Europe had sparked Russian opposition to OAF in 1999, the 2008 declaration of NATO prospects for both Ukraine and Georgia fed into Russian anxieties of encirclement (Averre, 2009). Although there is much confusion regarding the exact order of events in South Ossetia during the summer of 2008, it appears that South Ossetian separatist fighters sparked the conflict, with sporadic attacks in July escalating into a general conflict by August. If Russia was not using the South Ossetians as proxies to begin with, it was soon actively involved via the arrival of Russian volunteers to join the fighting. Georgia accused Russia of therefore supporting the rebellion, while Russia accused Georgia of attacking the South Ossetians and endangering the Russian peacekeepers. A Russian intervention routed the initial Georgian advance into South Ossetia and the major conflict was over within 5 days. Shortly thereafter Russia recognized the sovereignty of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Following the end of combat and the withdrawal of Russian troops back into South Ossetia, the main contest between Russia and Georgia has been fought discursively (Allison, 2008: 1145–1146):

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> Two quite contrary narratives are in circulation. Russia claims that its operation and subsequent security measures in Georgia have been *sui generis* and essentially retaliatory – an ad hoc, exceptional, though large-scale, response to a Georgian attack on South Ossetia. Critics of Moscow's offensive argue, on the contrary, that Russia's ostensible commitment to protect 'Russian citizens', a core justification of the intervention in Georgia, has principally served as a means of coercion and a device to expedite military intervention in that country for other strategic purposes.

If these narratives seem familiar, it is because the Russian narrative of its intervention in South Ossetia is a re-run of NATO's narrative of humanitarian intervention in Kosovo, with different emplotments, and the criticism, largely from Western powers, mirrors the Russian narrative of imperialism in the Balkans (see Tables 1 and 2). Indeed, it appears that this was quite intentional on Russia's part, as it drew on the idea of Kosovo as a precedent for its actions in the Caucasus. Without irony, during the Caucasus conflict the Council of the European Union called for Russia to show 'full respect for the principles of independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity recognized by international law, the [Helsinki] Final Act … and United Nations Security Council resolutions' (cited in Averre, 2009: 590), and Russia couched its intervention in the 'responsibility to protect' doctrine (also known as R2P) that was originated in Western capitals in the 1990s (see Haines, 2009).

Russia's intervention in South Ossetia/Georgia not only draws on the blurring of sovereignty accomplished by the NATO powers in 1999, but also reinforces it and discursively shapes customary international law, which is fundamentally discursive through its production of, and constitution through, international 'norms'. By invoking the precedent of Kosovo, Russia was able to harness discursive resources to legitimate what would otherwise be a seemingly illegitimate use of force. However, Russia's narration of events does not proceed of its own power through a vacuum; rather, it must be mediated to the world's population via the journalistic practices outlined in the previous session, with that process structuring public understandings of events in Georgia. The remainder

Table 1. Comparative emplotments of humanitarian intervention narratives in Kosovo and South Ossetia

	1999 Balkans conflict	2008 Caucasus conflict
Oppressed minority	Kosovar Albanians	South Ossetians
Oppressors	Serbs	Georgians
Protectors	NATO	Russia

Table 2. Comparative emplotments of imperialist narratives in Kosovo and South Ossetia

	1999 Balkans conflict	2008 Caucasus conflict
Imperialists	NATO	Russia
Local victims	Serbs	Georgians
Larger rivals of imperialists	Russia	NATO

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of the article turns to the outcomes of that process, comparing the US newspaper coverage of Kosovo and South Ossetia with reference to the narrative emplotments shown in Tables 1 and 2. These tables represent the two narratives offered by the US and Russia in both wars:[3] humanitarian intervention (claimed by the US in Kosovo, and Russia in South Ossetia); and imperialism (claimed by Russia in the case of Kosovo, and the US in the case of South Ossetia). The methodology introduced in the next section seeks to determine which narratives dominated US news coverage in each conflict, shedding light on the context in which subsequent claims of sovereignty (by Kosovo and South Ossetia) are made.

Methodology

To find semantic relationships between newspaper articles and the words they employ, we employed Latent Semantic Analysis (LSA, also known as LSI, latent semantic indexing). LSA is a textual content analysis technique that uses statistical machine learning to model meaning between texts (Deerwester et al., 1990). LSA has been shown to be a powerful tool to relate word co-occurrence (not simply word counts, but how they occur together) and natural language (for another example, see Simon and Xenos, 2004).[4] Unlike other corpus-based content analyses, LSA does not use citation information, bibliographic information (authors, dates, etc.), or researcher-chosen keywords to derive meaning from text. LSA can handle large numbers of documents which allows us to review more articles than other methods. LSA also provides a numerical value (a correlation) relating any two documents or any two words. By providing this, we have a method of measuring the semantic relationships. These new correlation matrices provide the means to measure patterns inside the corpus and suggest which terms appear most often together and which articles are most similar in their word choices. We extend this method to find central articles from the corpus that share the highest correlations with other articles.

Application in this research

The data collection and preparation began with collecting newspaper articles from the Lexis-Nexis database in January 2009. Newspapers selected for this methodology were *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, the *Christian Science Monitor* and *The Washington Post*. These were selected for their national reputation in regard to international news and because they reflect a range of institutional contexts (for example, *The New York Times* maintains a global presence in both news production and consumption, while the *Christian Science Monitor* is a newspaper highly respected for its international news and is linked with the Church of Christ, Scientist).[5] The search criteria were limited to the year in which each conflict occurred. The search resulted in the complete body of articles from 1 January 1999 to 31 December 1999 containing the term 'Kosovo'. A similar search was conducted for articles dated 1 January 2008 to 31 December 2008 with the term 'Ossetia'. The terms 'Kosovo' and 'Ossetia' were chosen as candidates as they were likely to include all articles on the Kosovar or Georgian conflicts. In all, the search returned 1054 articles. After collecting all the articles, each was placed in an individual

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file. Metadata were stripped from each article and placed into a database. Duplicate articles and those not pertaining directly to the conflicts were removed. The longest newspaper article has 3968 words, while the average article has 1096 words.

After this pre-processing, we ran the LSA. LSA begins by forming a text-matrix of articles-by-words with word counts as the values. Terms with less than 4 letters and more than 14 were omitted, as were 602 common terms: pronouns, articles, common verbs, etc. Stems of terms ('bak-' instead of 'baking', 'bakes', or 'bake') were avoided in favour of the whole term. LSA performs a weighting on each value, based on the number of total words in each article, to compensate for articles of differing lengths. In this project, three sets of text-matrices were created: one for articles containing the term 'Kosovo', one for articles containing the term 'Ossetia', and one for all articles containing either term. A latent semantic analysis was run on each of these three groups of articles. Once the text-matrix was built, a singular value decomposition (Golub and Van Loan, 1996) broke the text-matrix into the three component matrices.

After generating a latent semantic index, we ran a Pearson correlation to create two new matrices, one of the correlations of each term to term and a similar one of each article to article. A correlation between two terms represents their co-occurrence within the corpus. For example, within the texts containing the term 'Ossetia', 'peacekeeping' and 'force' have a correlation of .433; in the 'Kosovo' texts, 'peacekeeping' and 'force' have a stronger correlation of .682. Taken in context, these correlation values begin to expose common wordings and phrasings within the US newspapers' narration of these conflicts.

To further expand the capabilities of media analysis using LSA, we considered the terms separated out by the LSA, based on the strength of the singular values. Each singular value represents an independent theme in the literature, and the highest positive and negative terms will represent two sides of the theme. For example, in Table 3, the largest singular value (relative strength = 644.6) for the dataset containing all articles shows a clean separation between the articles about the Kosovar conflict and the Georgian/South Ossetian conflict. Positive terms ('Kosovo', 'Serbian', 'Yugoslav' and 'Milosevic') are not likely to appear in articles with negative terms ('Georgia', 'Putin', 'Russia', 'Ossetia'). Note that the positive/negative values do not indicate a fixed direction but only differentiate one set of terms from the other.

Results and discussion

Themes discovered from the corpus

Table 3 illustrates the four strongest themes in each of the three datasets of articles. Each theme represents a divergence of terms used in the literature. For example, the second strongest theme of the dataset containing all the articles presents reporting on families, children and villages (refugees or civilians) against the negotiating political and military forces on the other hand. Articles that present the point of view of refugees are less likely to discuss the political aspects of the conflicts.

Of the articles in the 'Kosovo' dataset, four major themes emerge: refugees/civilians vs diplomatic action, options in Kosovo vs their effect on the US political realm, Serbian

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Table 3. Clustered terms and thematic dichotomies from the corpus

Dataset	Singular value strength	Positively skewed terms	Negatively skewed terms	Interpretation
ALL	644.6	Kosovo (.144), Serbian (.119), Yugoslav (.107), Milosevic (.102), refugees (.093)	Georgia (−.255), Russia (−.185), Ossetia (−.156), Saakashvili (−.146), Putin (−.124), Bush (−.109)	Kosovar vs Georgian conflicts (natural break)
ALL	304.2	Family (.111), children (.098), village (.096), city (.087), town (.076), houses (.074), burned (.069)	Milosevic (−.126), Clinton (−.097), talks (−.09), Chernomyrdin (−.079), administration (−.076), force (−.076), NATO (−.075)	Refugees/ civilians vs political forces
ALL	263.2	Georgian (.117), Gori (.098), Russian (.083), fire (.08), Pentagon (.076), armored (.075), forces (.074), cease (.074)	Obama (−.088), party (−.083), McCain (−.079), democratic (−.073), America (−.072), opposition (−.07), world (−.068), economy (−.065)	Military situation vs US domestic politics
ALL	228	Talks (.096), independence (.079), agreement (.078), peace (.065), autonomy (.065), ethnic (.063)	Pentagon (−.14), aircraft (−.117), missiles (−.101), targets (−.093), pilots (−.086), planes (−.085), attack (−.085)	Negotiations vs force
KOSOVO	520.4	Family (.115), children (.1), village (.082), town (.075), refugee (.075), houses (.069), camp (.069), Pristina (.067), burned (.067), border (.066), people (.065)	Russia (−.092), talks (−.085), administration (−.077), Milosevic (−.069), agreement (−.066), resolution (−.064), force (−.063), allies (−.062)	Refugees/ civilians vs diplomacy
KOSOVO	243	Allied (.022), Pentagon (.021), Clark (.017), border (.016), agreement (.015), talks (.014), force (.013), refugees (.011)	Republicans (−.176), Democrats (−.166), vote (−.074)	Options in Kosovo vs US political system
KOSOVO	201.2	Opposition (.117), party (.096), Draskovic (.092), Milosevic (.08), Djindjic (.078), leader (.071), elections (.063)	Pentagon (−.112), aircraft (−.082), allied (−.079), tanks (−.074), planes (−.074), border (−.073), Clark (−.072), missiles (–0.063)	Internal Serbian politics vs NATO military force
KOSOVO	193.8	Aircraft (.104), Pentagon (.1), missiles (.099), targets (.099), attack (.092), planes (.077), bombs (.073), weather (.071)	Talks (−.119), agreement (−.109), withdrawal (−.087), peacekeeping (−.077), Russians (−.075), Albright (−.068), delegation (−.067)	Military force vs negotiations/ strategy

(continued)

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Table 3. (*continued*)

Dataset	Singular value strength	Positively skewed terms	Negatively skewed terms	Interpretation
OSSETIA	385.2	Georgian (.075), Russian (.065), Gori (.065), military (.056), forces (.054), Saakashvili (.054), Tblisi (.053)	Obama (−.171), McCain (−.07), federal (−.067), voters (−.06)	Georgian/ Caucus issues vs US politics
OSSETIA	212.3	Plumber (.065), Fannie (.059), Freddie (.059), taxpayers (.058), Iowa (.058), Hillary (.057), caucuses (.056)	Election (−.058), senator (−.054), Obama (−.015), McCain (−.008), voters (−.005)	US elections
OSSETIA	177.4	NATO (.077), Iran (.074), Putin (.074), Ukraine (.072), Kosovo (.072), policy (.071), Europe (.069)	Gori (−.11), city (−.102), Tskhinvali (−.09), soldiers (−.089), villages (−.088), Ossetian (−.084) killed (−.082), village (−.081)	Global politics vs localized conflict
OSSETIA	171.3	Rice (.072), statement (.056), Pentagon (.054), administration (.044), Bush (.043), missile (.035)	Georgians (−.068), Ossetians (−.066), ethnic (−.065), orthodox (−.054), people (−.053), home (−.053), family (−.049), residents (−.046)	Military force vs civilians

politics vs NATO military forces and military force vs the peacekeeping/negotiation. For the themes belonging to the second singular value in the Kosovo dataset, reporting on the US political parties ('Republicans' and 'Democrats') and process ('vote') oppose a set of options on events in Kosovo ('Pentagon', 'agreement', 'talks', 'force' and 'refugees'). As terms are clustered using LSA, so are the articles, and the associated articles discuss the vote on the House floor to first reject (30 April 1999) and then fund (7 May 1999) the US military effort in the Balkans. Articles clustered on the positive aspect of this singular value are in-depth discussions of options in the Balkans. The third singular value in the Kosovo dataset finds several key actors from the crisis: Vuk Draskovic, leader of the SRO (Serbian Renewal Movement), who formed a coalition with Slobodan Milosevic; and Zoran Djindjic, who was the mayor of Belgrade and main opponent of Milosevic. These local political themes are narrated as distinct from the NATO military power in the region.

In the articles in the 'South Ossetia/Georgia' database, the four themes are military force vs US electoral politics, US electoral populism vs US general election, the larger geopolitical frame vs the Ossetian conflict and the political/military space vs the civilians affected by the Ossetian conflict. The singular values in the 'South Ossetia/Georgia' articles flatten quickly; that is, there are no sharp drop-offs from one theme to the next as there are in the 'Kosovo' and 'all articles' datasets. This suggests that US media did not construct as strong a narrative around the conflict as they did in the Kosovar/Serbian conflict. The first and second thematic groupings also strongly suggest this. The issues of the South Ossetia/Georgian conflict are often couched in articles discussing the views

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Table 4. Closely correlated terms

Term	Closely correlated terms (correlation values)
Kosovo (1999)	'Province' (0.63), 'forces' (0.53), 'Albanian' (0.52), 'ethnic' (0.51), 'liberation' (0.51)
Ossetia (2008)	'South' (0.95), 'Georgian' (.70), 'Russian' (0.65), 'peacekeepers' (0.57), 'forces' (0.56), 'capital' (0.54), 'troops' (0.50), 'territory' (0.50)
Serbia (1999)	'Milosevic' (0.51), 'leader' (0.42), 'opposition' (0.41)
Georgia (2008)	'Russia' (0.66), 'Ossetia' (0.59), 'military' (0.55) , 'Tblisi' (0.51)
Russia (1999)	'Moscow' (0.84), 'constructive' (0.58), 'solution' (0.53), 'resolution' (0.53), 'foreign' (0.51)
Russia (2008)	'Georgia' (0.66), 'Moscow' (0.66), 'Soviet' (0.52), 'Vladimir' (0.52), 'relations' (0.51), 'foreign' (0.51), 'actions' (0.51)
NATO (1999)	'Military' (0.66), 'forces' (0.62), 'bombing' (0.59), 'alliance' (0.55), 'troops' (0.53)
NATO (2008)	'Membership' (0.72), 'alliance' (0.65), 'Ukraine' (0.58), 'expansion' (0.56), 'encirclement' (0.52)

of Barack Obama or John McCain, and the second singular value themes bear almost no relation to the South Ossetia/Georgian conflict, even though these articles mention the conflict. Note that Obama (–.171) is over twice less likely than McCain (–.07) to be connected in an article about the conflict in the first singular value set. Clearly, the coincidence of the South Ossetia conflict with the US election campaign had a major impact on its coverage, which included a strong strand of narration that viewed events as integral to the presidential 'horse race'.

Closely correlated terms

In Table 4, we show the terms that are most often linked with the emplotted actors in the narratives identified in Tables 1 and 2. Through these data we can see some evidence for the general narration in US newspapers of the 1999 OAF as a humanitarian intervention, while the South Ossetia conflict is narrated as an imperial intervention. This can be seen through the words associated with OAF: Serbia is reduced to its authoritarian 'leader', 'Milosovic', while Kosovo is correlated with words that foreground its separation from Serbia, such as 'Albanian', 'province' and 'ethnic'. NATO is correlated with military terms that emphasize the lack of grounding of the 'alliance' in local territories or groups. This emphasizes an instrumental purpose of NATO's intervention.

NATO's beneficent scripting in 1999 can most fruitfully be compared to Russia's scripting in the 2008 conflict. Russia attempted to couch its intervention as justified by the Kosovo precedent, but was unable to achieve this emplotment in US newspapers. Instead, words correlated with Russia link the country to its enigmatic and authoritarian leadership ('Vladimir'), the object of its intervention ('Georgia'), and its past occupation of the Caucasus as a superpower antagonist of the US ('Soviet'). This can be fruitfully compared with the words correlated with 'Russia' in 1999, which are largely positive ('constructive', 'resolution' and 'solution') and with the way NATO is described in 2008; NATO is then correlated with terms such as 'expansion', 'encirclement' and 'Ukraine'.

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These terms situate the Russian invasion of South Ossetia as part of the larger rivalry with NATO rather than as a humanitarian intervention by highlighting Russian perceptions of NATO expansion (and the potential membership of Ukraine). It is of interest that the 'villains' of each narrative (Serbia in 1999 and Russia in 2008) are at least partly understood through reference to their presidents.

Conversely, Georgia (the 'victim' in the imperialist narrative) is primarily correlated with its opponent ('Russia' and 'military') and South Ossetia (the oppressed minority in a hypothesized humanitarian intervention narrative) is nonetheless linked foremost to 'Georgia' and only secondarily to terms such as 'Russian', 'peacekeepers' and 'territory', thus foregrounding the link to Georgia (compare to 1999's 'Kosovo', which is not strongly correlated with 'Serbia'). Together, these word associations hint at the specific emplotments of the major political actors and foreground the role of the US media in legitimating sovereignty claims in each case, confirming the sovereignty of Georgia while rendering contingent that of Serbia.

Highly connected articles

In Table 5, we show the articles with the largest number of correlations above .5 in each dataset. In a correlation network, these articles would have the highest number of links to other articles in the dataset. Correlation does not imply causation, and thus these articles have not necessarily inspired other reporters' writing, but we can suggest these articles are as representative as possible of the journalistic language surrounding these conflicts. Table 5 can be understood as the result of a quantitative analysis that allows for a qualitative assessment; that is, it allows a more 'user-friendly' face for the research by indicating key articles. From the Kosovo dataset, the most connected article is 'Talks on Kosovo wind up as only the Albanians sign' (Whitney, 1999), from the 19 March 1999 edition of *The New York Times*. This was published three days before Richard Holbrooke was sent to Serbia to deliver an ultimatum and less than a week before the NATO air attacks began. The article exhibits the characteristics of the humanitarian narrative: Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic 'stands in the way of peace' and is 'in violation of pledges'. The Russian foreign minister Igor S. Ivanov urges Milosevic to sign. The remainder of the article describes NATO's military strategy for deployment with a quote from General Wesley Clark: 'forces are prepared to act.'

Table 5. Highly connected articles

Dataset	Title	Date	Author	Paper	Links/total articles
KOSOVO	'Talks on Kosovo wind up as only the Albanians sign'	19 March 1999	Whitney, C	*New York Times*	39/660
OSSETIA	'Russia takes Gori'	14 Aug. 2008	Editorial	*New York Times*	58/394
ALL	'Russian troops take down some Georgian checkpoints'	14 Sept. 2008	Bilefsky, D	*New York Times*	13/1054

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From the South Ossetia dataset, another *New York Times* article is the most highly connected: 'Russia takes Gori', an editorial from 14 August 2008 (603 words; no author given). As an editorial, the language is stronger than a straightforward news article, but the perspective coincides with reporting on the Georgian conflict, which is to say that it follows the imperialist narrative. The editorial is written after Russia agreed to halt its advance in Georgia, while at the same time capturing the town of Gori, 40 miles outside the capital Tbilisi. Russian policy (whether embodied in Medvedev or Putin) is rendered in terms of morality: 'more aggression and lies will not be tolerated.' 'Sovereign' territorial actors are emphasized – Russia is mentioned 12 times, Georgia 10, and South Ossetia only twice. US President Bush is also chastised for 'hop[ing] that his old pal Mr. Putin was just blowing off steam'. The local conflict is set in terms of the larger geopolitical conflict, and the main actors are the US, Russia and the oil-dependent countries of western Europe. The central question of sovereignty is unequivocally decided in favour of Georgia: 'Georgia's sovereignty must be guaranteed. It will almost certainly have to give up its hopes of asserting control over the two breakaway regions – but Moscow must not be allowed to annex them by force.'

Together, these most highly connected articles illustrate the ways in which US journalistic coverage of the two conflicts contributed to the dominance of narratives in which NATO intervention on behalf of Kosovo against Serbia was legitimated while Russian intervention on behalf of South Ossetia was de-legitimated. The importance of this result for subsequent claims to sovereignty by Kosovo and South Ossetia are discussed in the following conclusion.

Conclusions

Poststructural accounts of the state have moved away from an institutional perspective and have shifted attention to the performance of stateness and claims to sovereignty (e.g. McConnell, 2009). As Berg (2009: 221) argues, the concept of sovereignty has shifted over the course of the last 50 years from something emphasizing the control of territory to something more insubstantial. Thus, the corresponding acts of claiming sovereignty, and recognizing it, are performances of statehood not only by those seeking that status, *but also by those granting it*. This fundamentally insubstantial, discursive understanding of sovereignty highlights the flexible and contingent nature of much customary international law, which depends on common understandings of established rules and how they function. Of course, these elite decisions of sovereignty (non)recognition and the interpretation of international law do not occur in a vacuum; not only do journalists influence popular opinion on the topic but they also inform political elites (at least, in relatively open, democratic states). In the cases of Kosovo and South Ossetia, similar bids for autonomy or independence, aided by powerful outside states, were nevertheless narrated differently by US newspaper reporters, whose coverage was structured by their own subjectivities, cultural/economic milieu and practices.

In this article, we have highlighted the role that journalists play in the constitution of the field of international relations through their mediation of claims to/recognition of sovereignty. In particular, we have connected the international performance of sovereignty and customary law with journalistic practices, such as reliance on official

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governmental sources and state-centrism. In the comparative study presented here, the effect of these practices has been an uneven recognition of sovereignty, with narratives of humanitarian intervention dominating US newspaper coverage of NATO's bombing campaign in Kosovo but narratives of geopolitics and imperialism dominating the same newspapers' coverage of Russian intervention in South Ossetia. While we have tried to show that these conflicts *could* be narrated in similar ways in order to highlight the openness of geopolitical events to scripting, we have not sought to make the claim that these conflict were *in reality* similar (if such a thing can be said to be true at all). Although the Russian Government clearly tried to foster that narration, it failed to have that perspective taken up, at least by the US media. This is important because the performance of sovereignty (or of others' lack thereof) is accomplished through governmental speech acts that are performative in nature and yet require mediation to enter into the popular consciousness. Thus, the framing of conflicts within journalistic practices embeds understandings of sovereignty as (il)legitimate for various actors, with those actors' relationship to Russia being a key variable. Within this theoretical framework, the difference between Kosovo's and South Ossetia's international recognition as sovereign states can be traced, at least in part, to these territories' discursive framing during the conflicts that produced them as de facto autonomous states. At present, 69 UN member-states recognize Kosovo, while only 4 have recognized South Ossetia. While even Kosovo is not recognized by a majority of UN member-states, this only highlights the salience of post-structuralist visions of sovereignty as uneven, contingent and performative.

Notes

1. This comparative approach is not unproblematic; the 2008 conflict occurred during a US presidential election, which impacted the news coverage. Still, the odds of finding two conflicts that are so clearly linked in regard to narrative, with neither of them coinciding with a US election year, are slim.
2. Emplotment refers to the slotting of a person or place into a role within a narrative (as aggressor, victim, etc.).
3. This information was distilled from public statements by both governments rather than from journalistic sources.
4. This research used LSA and factor analysis to see how newspapers represent partial-birth abortion. They were able to predict support of partial-birth abortion bans based on four out of eight factors.
5. Taking up a reviewer's helpful suggestion, we conducted an initial LSA including Canadian and UK newspapers, namely *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), *The Guardian* (UK) and *The Times* (UK). Identical selection criteria were utilized, but the results were not significantly different. Exploring the distinctions would require engagement with questions of distinction between US English and UK English. While such fine-grained methodological honing would be useful for future research, we feel that vis-à-vis this article, it distracts from our macro-scaled analysis.

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