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Setting the Standard? Revisiting the Unfolding Discourse in American and British Online News on the Snowden Revelations

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ABSTRACT

In Edward Snowden's surveillance revelations in 2013, online news media had an essential role in constructing discourse on mass surveillance, because sensitive documents were leaked straight to the press. To understand the role of online news in unfolding geopolitical discourses, this discourse analysis examined popular American and British online news reports at the time. The discourse analysis focused on selectivity, priming, and metaphors, while integrating notions on geopolitical code to understand whether online news mirrored the two involved governments' justifications of surveillance practices. The analysis demonstrated selectivity in which victims of surveillance got attention, and online news tended to prime opinions critical of the surveillance. The justifications of the governments were communicated, but often refuted by other sources quoted in the same stories. Journalists used critical metaphors to convey the scope of the surveillance practices to readers. The findings highlight the role of online news in unfolding discourse of novel geopolitical affairs.

Introduction

In June 2013, the Guardian's journalist Glenn Greenwald published the news article '*NSA collecting phone records of millions of Verizon customers daily*' that started a series of spying revelations involving the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA) and the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ). Edward Snowden, formerly contracted by the NSA, had disclosed documents to journalists in targeted countries that implied mass surveillance of communication data of citizens and institutions in the United States, United Kingdom, their allies in the European Union and beyond, Russia, China, Latin America and of adversaries, like North Korea and Iran. For a short period, these disclosures made headlines all around the world. Journalists and editors alike put the issue on the public agenda and they shaped how this 'espionage' was framed to the public. While readers of the news media may have been aware of states spying on enemies,

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the large-scale espionage of both allies and inhabitants alike may have been either unexpected or only feared by the public (Lischka 2015; Lyon 2015; Madison 2014).

Mass surveillance of digital spaces have become state-of-the-art practices for acquiring intelligence (Lischka 2015; Lyon 2004, 2014, 2015). The USA PATRIOT Act effectively enabled secretive surveillance laws in the wake of the 2001 9/11 events, but this did not necessarily justify these practices in the 2013 context (Burton 2005; Hayden 2013; Lischka 2015; Lyon 2004, 2014; Russell and Waisbord 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen, Bennett, and Taylor 2017). The surveillance of one's own citizens and allied countries on this scale had previously been unknown to the public, or even unimaginable. Journalists traditionally rely on government sources when reporting foreign policy topics, giving those in office the opportunity to present their views and potentially set the agenda (Baum and Potter 2008, 50). This begs the question whether news media themselves set the public and political agenda, or whether they are mere transmitters of the government (de Vreese 2005; de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Papacharissi and Oliveira 2008; Semetko and Valkenburg 2000). In the 21st century, changes in cyber-security, the prevalence of data leaks, and the rise of organisations like WikiLeaks and so-called 'whistle-blowers' have added a novel dimension, because traditional systems of agenda-setting are bypassed. This was the case in the Snowden affaire (Lyon 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, Bennett, and Taylor 2017). As the practices were secretive, the governments had no justifying discourse ready for their spying practices to fall back on once the revelations came to light. The governments were not in the lead in shaping the discourse either. While usually geopolitical discourses (Mamadouh and Dijkink 2006) are carefully laid out through the geopolitical codes of states, it is no given that online news would adhere to the repetitive cultural, diplomatic, economic or defensive bonds by which states identify themselves with other countries and reinstate their own positions, values and identity (Flint and Taylor 2007).

Edward Snowden leaked to journalists and they took the lead in informing both domestic and international audiences on these novel actions of their own governments (Di Salvo and Negro 2016; Lyon 2015; Russell and Waisbord 2017). News media had no existing discourse to fall back on either. American and British online news did have the reach and readership to affect public opinion around the globe. Because news media (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Entman 2003; Gamson et al. 1992; Harcup and O'neill 2001; Hearns-Branaman 2017; Mullen and Klaehn 2010) and ever more so online news (Price 2002; Wui Ng 2017) play a critical role in the construction of discourses, the first online articles on the Snowden Revelations became crucial in establishing the discourse of surveillance as a (inter)national security necessity, anti-privacy, or even breach of law. Initial news reports may also have affected how the public perceived subsequent revelations and new surveillance laws (Hearns-Branaman 2017; Madison 2014; Mullen and Klaehn 2010) because

new events build on an existing 'language or system of representation that has developed socially to make and circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic area' (Fiske 1987, 15). Scholars in *critical geopolitics* study these systems of representation and related state spaces (Agnew 2013; Moisio and Paasi 2013). The purpose of this study is therefore to understand how discourses on the 2013 Mass Surveillance Revelations were constructed in popular American and British written online news, and whether and how coverage mirrors geopolitical codes and justifications.

There has been debate on how to conceptualise discourse and measure it (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Krzyżanowski 2016; Müller 2008, 2010; Sharp 2000; Sharp and Richardson 2001). Some scholars in the field of *critical geopolitics* propose to include both language and practices (Müller 2008, 2010). This article focuses on selectivity, priming and use of metaphors, which are three practices at the heart of mass media communication (e.g. Scheufele 2000), and furthermore focuses on representations of geopolitical code (Flint and Taylor 2007). The study adds the perspective of representational geopolitics to a growing body of work on the Snowden revelations and the role of news (Di Salvo and Negro 2016; Madison 2014; Russell and Waisbord 2017; Wahl-Jorgensen, Bennett, and Taylor 2017).

The unfolding discourse is analysed through popular written online news articles which cover five early NSA/GCHQ mass surveillance disclosures in June and July 2013. These five disclosures were, respectively: NSA PRISM Mass Surveillance, U.S. Surveillance of China, GHCQ TEMPORA Mass Surveillance, British and American Surveillance of the EU, and U.S. Surveillance of Latin America (particularly Brazil).[1] We shed light on how discourse in the American and British online news developed in the wake of these subsequent disclosures. The dataset comprises the initial news reports published on each disclosure by ten popular online news websites in the US and UK in 2013 (ComScore Data Mine 2012; EBizMBA 2014; Mediaweek 2014), namely the Mail online, the Guardian, the Telegraph, the Mirror online, and the Independent in the UK, and the Huffington post, CNN, the New York Times, Fox News and NBC online in the US. The following sections demonstrate the difficulty for journalists to cover such controversial revelations neutrally and comprehensively.

Theory, Methods & Data

Geopolitical Code and Discourses

Political entities have over time developed a way in which they orientate, act and represent themselves within the global community, a way of identifying with other countries based on shared meanings and common discourses, which is collectively referred to as a country's geopolitical code. Foreign policy

directions are rooted in these pre-existing codes of conduct. According to Flint and Taylor (2007) each country defines its geopolitical code through five main calculations:

> who are our current and potential allies? Who are our current and potential enemies? How can we maintain our allies and nurture potential allies? How can we counter our current enemies and emerging threats? How do we justify the four calculations above to our public, and to the global community? (Flint and Taylor 2007, 62).

The fifth calculation involves justifying geopolitical matters to the own public and global community, being the essence of representational geopolitics. If (foreign) enemies are to be fought, the basis of the animosity must be clear, and the necessity of foreign actions must be justified to the global community, which may be more complicated if it involves allies as targets. Flint and Taylor (2007) emphasise the ideological power involved in this justification. Communication of such codes is an influential strategic tool that establishes relations of power between the transmitter and the receiver (Hearns-Branaman 2017; Lonsdale 1999; Rose 2012, 93; Sharp and Richardson 2001).

Government's representational geopolitics can be found in speeches, policy papers, debates in parliament, and in the news (Mullen and Klaehn 2010; Tuathail and Agnew 1992). The internet has added a new geopolitical platform for strategic agents to communicate about actions, while it has empowered non-state actors in unprecedented ways as well. It has given rise to so-called whistle-blowers: activists, government workers, hackers or journalists who use the platform to disclose sensitive information (Lonsdale 1999; Lyon 2014, 2015). Governments are on back foot when news media decide to disclose sensitive information to the public. During the Snowden leaks, the US and UK government had no control over what was revealed or how. They could only respond and immediately argued that domestic and foreign surveillance of digital data is a necessary means in the global war on terror (ISC (Intelligence and Security Committee) 2013; U.S. Department of Defense 2013). However, the disclosures kept unfolding week after week and both governments could only act reactionary as the media formed and reflected public discussions. Uniquely for the case of whistle-blowers (e.g. Snowden, Panama Papers, Wikileaks) is that what is disclosed are government actions that were not meant to be public knowledge and therefore not publicly legitimised (as part of geopolitical code) either (Lischka 2015; Lyon 2015).

Studies in this field of *critical geopolitics* encompass different scales and scopes, but the concept of discourse has been popular from the field's inception (Agnew 2013; Müller 2008). Due to the repeated presence of a topic in communication – represented in a specific way – a common understanding and set of shared meanings on the topic evolves and power relations are established, thereby constructing a discourse. New information will be filtered through these cognitive frameworks (Hall, Evans, and Nixon 2013). From

a post structuralist perspective, the capacity of individuals to act independently and make free choices is limited by pre-existing structures of signification, domination and legitimation (Giddens 1984, 5–34) limiting unbiased construction of new discourses (Hall et al. 2004, 110).

In the ongoing debate on how to conceptualise discourse and how to measure it (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Krzyżanowski 2016; Müller 2008, 2010; Sharp 2000; Sharp and Richardson 2001), it has been proposed to move towards a conceptualisation of discourse that goes beyond *language* alone and includes related *practices* (e.g. Müller 2008). This paper theorises that in the case of the Snowden leaks selectivity and priming of coverage belong to the practices of news media, as they represent the tools used by geopolitical agents (journalists) to define the specifics of a desired message. Figures of speech, in particular metaphors, are in turn part of the language dimension of discourse, as these are embedded in the agent's cognition and vocabulary regardless of the topic that is discussed. Practices and language are both used by geopolitical agents to construct discourse, so analysing initial media practices and the language of news articles thus captures the unfolding geopolitical discourse of mass surveillance.

Practice: mass Media Selectivity and Priming

The debate on mass surveillance of digital communication data was ignited by news sources, such as the Guardian, so here the practice dimension of geopolitical discourse relates to the way news works. Government communication reaches audiences oftentimes through national news reports (Hearns-Branaman 2017; de Vreese 2005, 52). The mass media can therefore impact public agency since news reports are usually the first to inform on a new topic, and mass media are accessed by many (Whitman and Voszczynski 2004, 231). News is a cornerstone in a two-way street between public and political debate which can contribute to policy agenda-setting (Entman 2003; Mullen and Klaehn 2010; Scheufele 2000).

Editors and journalists are gatekeepers that *select* to report on issues they feel are newsworthy. The identity of the news organisation and news factors (e.g. proximity, elite people, unexpectedness, and negativity) help these agents to select what events to report (Harcup and O'neill 2001; Harrison 2006). With regards to news scoops about hitherto unexpected or unimaginable government actions, news agents have the choice to publish or ignore, and they weigh their options. Moreover, to make news understandable and trustworthy to targeted audiences, news reports are placed within a frame of shared meanings. Journalists write from their own cultural, national, and geographical perspective (Kalogeropoulos et al. 2019; Maurer et al. 2019). Attention in news reports is usually focused disproportionally on one opinion or perspective, which is called *priming* (Chong and Druckman 2007; Scheufele 2000). It

can also work the other way around, as audiences may expect or want certain coverage in news they access. Gamson et al. (Gamson et al. 1992, 384) theorised that 'on the one hand, events and experiences are framed; on the other hand, we frame events and experiences.' Media selectivity and related practices are according to Slater (2007) 'dynamic, mutually influencing processes.'

The prevalence of selectivity and priming becomes evident when discussing three examples of how news media in separate national contexts reported on geopolitical topics. Firstly, the U.S. downing of an Iranian passenger plane was portrayed as a technical fault by American news, while the downing of a Korean Air Lines plane by the Soviet Union was portrayed as a moral outrage (Entman 1991, 2003). Secondly, a comparison of American and British news on counter-terrorism efforts found that U.S. media lacked coverage of military alternatives to their own policies, while the UK papers presented their readers with a vast selection of alternatives (Papacharissi and Oliveira 2008). Lastly, comparative studies of the Middle East coverage of CNN and Al Jazeera find that while CNN often provides a political perspective and primes the views of US Democrats, Al Jazeera uses a humanitarian perspective and primes victims' stories (e.g. Barkho 2008; Jasperson and El-kikhia 2003; Johnson and Fahmy 2008).

Language: metaphors to Approach Mass Surveillance

For the construction of mass surveillance discourses, it is important whether news outlets report about surveillance practices, as well as how and with what words they communicate it. As Stuart Hall (1992) demonstrated, choice of words is hardly neutral, especially in the context of geopolitics. Figures of speech are tools for journalists to communicate a message because familiar words can be used to describe something unfamiliar to audiences. This can however subtly shift the original meaning of the words or imply a link between the two (Conboy 2007; Kovecses 2005). A metaphor is a powerful figure of speech because metaphors affect the way we interpret new experiences and ideas. Metaphors are part of the way people describe and conceptualise new things, and they withhold alternative descriptions and conceptualisation. This sometimes leads to normalisation, so metaphors distort and construct reality (Agre 1994; Bednarek 2005; Conboy 2007; Richardson 2006). For instance, the war metaphor is used in several contexts, such as war on drugs, war on crime, and war on terror, through which the government and media try to convey easily to audiences why states are combatting otherwise abstract forces (Steuter and Wills 2008). Territorial and spatial metaphors influence the way people view nations and governments within the geopolitical sphere as these meta-phors become normalised (Lule 2004). Peter Vujakovic (1998) proposed to 'think about the following metaphors: spaceship earth, population explosion,

floods of immigrants, green lung or green belt' as such metaphors subtly but fundamentally steer perceptions in a specific direction.

Conceptual metaphors used in texts that seek to attract readers have a strong role in representing the world (Bednarek 2005; Lule 2004; Richardson 2006) and metaphors can become part of our collective national memory of shared meanings if repeated often enough (Agre 1994; Hoskins 2011; Lule 2004; Richardson 2006). Several studies demonstrated the effect of the repeated use of metaphors on public perception and even decision making (e.g. Steuter and Wills 2008; Thibodeau, Boroditsky, and Lauwereyns 2011). For instance, in the aftermath of 9/11, policy makers actively lobbied at newspapers for use of certain terms and words. Military officials spoke of 'cleansing' operations and Islam was frequently called a 'cancer' (Steuter and Wills 2008, xi–xv). Agre (1994) noted early on how computer surveillance is often approached with metaphors (e.g. information superhighway) due to novelty and a general lack of understanding of surveillance among the wider audience. Pen America (2014) showed that in the first two months of online news reporting on Snowden, 91.1% of American news articles contained metaphors for mass surveillance practices. The study found literary metaphors linking government data collection to Orwell's 1984, and moreover war, nautical and medical metaphors for data collection and spying. Because of their prevalence in news reports and their rhetorical potential, metaphors are fundamental to unfolding discourses.

Developing a Discourse Approach to Online Reporting of Mass Surveillance

It is possible to break down whether online news media, as mouthpieces of information and geopolitical actors, represented certain justifications of actions to allies and enemies in the global public sphere or remained neutral (Flint 2011; Müller 2008). Textual material is important to consider when researching discourse in the context of geopolitics (Müller 2008), as 'the construction of claims to truth lies at the heart of intersection of power/ knowledge' (Rose 2012, 193). In the summer of 2013, written online news reflected the unfolding geopolitical discourse as Snowden leaked the information on mass surveillance through journalists, and they decided what to publish and how. The larger the target audiences reached, arguably the more influential the transmitter is on unfolding discourse. While readership of printed media is dwindling, online news is accessed more and more. In 2012, making up about 43% of the overall internet community, 644 million people around the globe accessed online news websites, mostly English-language based (ComScore Data Mine 2012). This makes the influence of online news reports significant in the Snowden leaks.

Following this and the respective governments' involvement in the revelations, we conducted a discourse analysis of the most-accessed British and

Table 1. Popular American and British news sources in 2013 taken into analysis.

British news	American news
Mail Online	Huffington Post
The Guardian	CNN
Telegraph	New York Times
Mirror Online	Fox News
The Independent	NBC News

(ComScore Data Mine 2012; EBizMBA 2014; Mediaweek 2014).

American online news sources at the time. We compared several statistics on top online readership, and we selected ten online news sites mentioned most commonly in indexations (ABC (Audit Bureau of Circulations) 2013; Digital News Report 2013; ComScore Data Mine 2012; EBizMBA 2014; Mediaweek 2014), namely the Mail online, the Guardian, the Telegraph, the Mirror online, and the Independent in the UK, and the Huffington post, CNN, the New York Times, Fox News and NBC online in the US (Table 1). It is worthwhile to note that the Guardian was the first to report the revelations and their critical stance on the surveillance practices was clear from their initial headlines (Table 2).

The unfolding geopolitical discourse might vary as new disclosures suggested several (other) countries and regions as surveillance targets. The research thus investigates five different disclosures of mass surveillance on different geographical scales, in different targeted (inter-) national contexts (Table 2). These five disclosures align with the first six weeks following the first disclosure by the Guardian on June 6 (e.g. Al Jazeera 2013): NSA PRISM Mass Surveillance, U.S. Surveillance of China, GHCQ TEMPORA Mass Surveillance, British and American Surveillance of the EU, and U.S. Surveillance of Latin America (particularly Brazil). As news cycles are relatively short (Downs 1972), especially for online media (Neuman et al. 2014), we selected all news reports published in the first week after each disclosure. Articles were accessed through the online search engine of each news website, using the keywords *Snowden, surveillance, NSA,* or *GHCQ*. Except for the Guardian, news sources typically dedicated one news item to each disclosure, though Mail Online, the Telegraph, the Mirror, the Independent, CNN, New York Times and NBC skipped reporting on at least one disclosure altogether. The set of news articles in the dataset was 53 in total, 24 British articles and 29 American articles. The dataset provided a snapshot of initial reporting on Snowden's disclosures, when discourse was

Table 2. Scoops in accordance with whom broke the story, per date, week and headline in 2013.

Newspaper	Date	Week	Headline
The Guardian	June 6, 2013	23	'NSA Prism program taps in to user data of Apple, Google and others.'
SC Morning Post	June 14, 2013	24	'US has Hong Kong and China under surveillance'
The Guardian	June 21, 2013	25	'GCHQ taps fibre-optic cables for secret access to world's communications'
Der Spiegel	June 29, 2013	26	'NSA spies on EU, UN and embassies'
O Globo	July 9, 2013	28	'NSA taps Latin American calls'

Table 3. Approaching unfolding mass surveillance discourse through four key concepts.

Key concept	Approached as	Following
Selectivity	Comparing the total number of online articles and the total numbers of words, and analysing the attention spent on each disclosure.	Harcup and O'neill (2001)
Priming	Counting and analysing cited or paraphrased sources defending or condemning mass surveillance in each news article and between articles.	Scheufele (2000)
Geopolitical code	Analysing whether articles present governments' justifications and comparing the geopolitical scope presented in the online articles.	Flint and Taylor (2007)
Figures of speech	Counting and analysing metaphors for surveillance practices in seven thematic categories (collecting, authoritarian, war, nautical, medical, digging and literary themes)	Agre (1994), Pen America (2014)

Table 4. Reports and word count on five surveillance disclosures in largest British online news media June 6 and July 16, 2013 (n = 24).

	Mail online		Guardian		Telegraph		Mirror online		The independent		Total	
Disclosure	N	Words	N	Words	N	Words	N	Words	N	Words	N	Words
Prism	2	3111	1	1763	1	514	1	350	1	1037	6	6775
China	0	0	2	1803	1	967	0	0	1	732	4	3502
Tempora	1	1042	2	3922	1	405	1	768	3	1165	8	7302
EU	1	847	1	638	1	307	1	286	1	255	5	2333
Brazil	0	0	1	844	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	844
Total	4	5000	7	8970	4	2193	3	1404	6	3189	24	20756

Table 5. Reports and word count on five surveillance disclosures in largest American online news media between June 6 and July 16, 2013 (n = 29).

	Huffington post		CNN		New York Times		Fox news		NBC		Total	
Disclosure	N	Words	N	Words	N	Words	N	Words	N	Words	N	Words
Prism	1	1374	2	2540	2	2804	1	991	1	1248	7	8957
China	1	474	1	1452	2	1917	1	484	1	719	6	5046
Tempora	1	784	1	422	0	0	2	947	0	0	4	2153
EU	1	315	1	1289	3	2546	2	1341	1	666	8	6157
Brazil	2	2161	0	0	1	1413	1	128	0	0	4	3702
Total	6	5108	5	5703	8	8680	7	3891	3	2633	29	26015

unfolding from the first scoop onward (Tables 4 and 5). The unfolding discourse was analysed by operationalising *selectivity, priming, figures of speech* and *geopolitical code* (Table 3).

Results

Selectivity in Coverage and Geopolitical Scope

Over the course of weeks 23 till 28 in 2013, online news discussed new disclosures almost every other week (Table 2), but the differences in American and British news show *selectivity* in what was regarded as important to cover for audiences (Tables 4 and 5). British and American online news covered surveillance of their own citizens by their own governments most extensively (just above one-third). British journalists placed specific attention on the potential effects of US surveillance for Britons. While the impact on their own national readership was an

important news value, the alleged spying on Latin American countries was not reported in six of the ten online news sources. This is particularly notable for the US, as *proximity* is an important news factor (Harcup and O'neill 2001) and the US and some targeted Latin American countries are considered allies (Flint 2011). Initial reports on spying in Latin America were written in Portuguese, which may help explain the relative silence in English-language online news. The revelation of U.S. surveillance of China gained slightly more coverage in American news than British news. The revelation stirred criticism as the U.S. had been publicly accusing China of digital espionage for years (Flint 2011, 56; Goldsmith and Wu 2006, 29–125). Due to the timing of the allegations, American news paid extensive attention to Snowden documents leaked to Der Spiegel alleging U.S. intelligence had targeted EU offices in Brussels. These revelations came as the United States and the European Union (including the U.K.) were in the midst of negotiating a Transatlantic trade-agreement. In British news, the revelations on EU targeting gained less attention. Throughout the whole period, The New York Times and the Guardian ran the most articles on all the disclosures, and the most extensive ones. The Guardian was deeply involved in leaking the disclosures and often served as a source in the derivative articles of other online news sources. The Mirror and Telegraph are on the other side of the spectrum in terms of overall coverage. These two published only a few short news updates on the disclosures (Tables 4 and 5). Some selectivity is the consequence of swift online news cycles (Neuman et al. 2014), because reporting that first published new revelations was lengthier and provided the basis for the derivative articles that quickly appeared thereafter in other online news. Most online news explicitly linked to the first Guardian article of June 6.

Selectivity in the news reports is as much about what is covered as it is about the geopolitical scope that is sketched. An article by the Guardian on U.S. surveillance mentioned 22 nations as targets of spying, as did a subsequent citation by the Huffington Post. Other online news sources mentioned fewer foreign targets by name, ranging from 7–6 in British news and 6–19 in American news. The alleged spying of allied countries India, Japan, Mexico, South Korea, and Turkey was only mentioned on the side-line of six news articles focusing on EU surveillance (CNN 2013b; Fox News 2013a; Guardian 2013b, 2013c; NY Times 2013b, 2013a). Additionally, the Guardian was the only one to report the close intelligence partnership of New Zealand, Australia, U.K. which could be deduced from the leaked documents on British surveillance. All the aforementioned targets and partners are considered allies of one another and they have close institutional and trade relationships (Flint 2011). The limited coverage in American and British news can partly be explained by the sensitive nature of the disclosures. Editors may find it difficult to discuss potential malpractices of the own government towards a friendly foreign target (de Vreese and Boomgaarden 2006; Flint and Taylor 2007;

Hearns-Branaman 2017). This becomes even more evident when we turn to priming of opinions and the presented justifications.

Priming of Opinions and Justifications

Journalists oftentimes hid their own opinion – they did not take a stance explicitly, but they did present their readers with a selective ranch of people that commented on the disclosures. Regarding overall priming, most of the news sources do not align with their government's geopolitical justification, because views critical of mass surveillance were primed throughout the six weeks (Figure 1). CNN and NBC are notable exceptions priming more sources justifying mass surveillance. CNN quoted mostly U.S. Democratic Party officials, and their allegiance with the Democratic U.S. policy agenda has been noted before (Barkho 2008; Jasperson and El-kikhia 2003). NBC provided comparatively more space for U.S. officials as well, and NBC was the only online source extensively reporting on the laws and regulations that are the legal basis for surveillance practices (NBC News 2013b). Journalists overall quoted NSA and GHCQ officials, White House officials, EU officials, civil liberties advocacy group Liberty, government-sceptic campaigning organisation Big Brother Watch, and a variety of legal experts. Members of the *political elite* were an important news factor (Harcup and O'neill 2001; Harrison 2006). It appears that online news at least gave officials the platform to explain themselves.

The quoted officials from the NSA and GHCQ and the cited American and British politicians tried to develop five distinct justifications for mass surveillance. The geopolitical discourse that unfolded justifies espionage by stating that (1) everybody does it, e.g. *'What all intelligence agencies do, not just in Britain but throughout the world … is to obtain intelligence and they use the most modern technology in order to do that,'* (Malcom Rifkind, British GHCQ
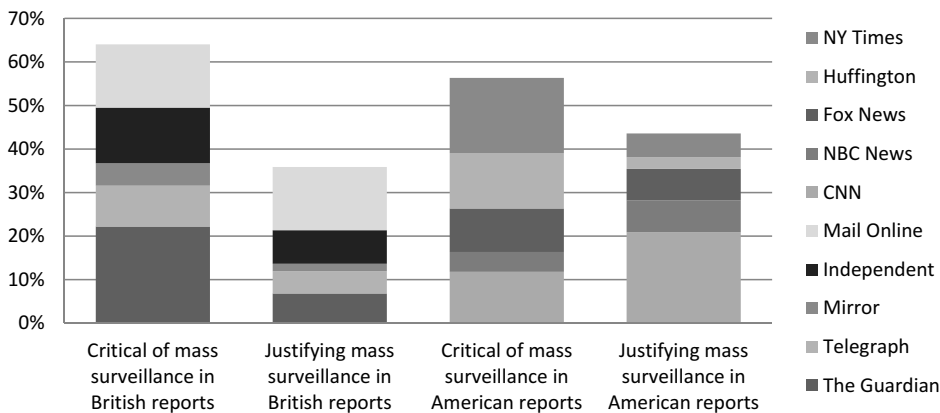

Figure 1. Primed opinions as % of total quotes and paraphrases within each national frame (n = 117 and n = 110).

official in Fox News 2013b), or by, (2) attacking the leaks as a threat to national security – thus diverting the attention, e.g. *'The unauthorized disclosure of a top secret U.S. court document threatens potentially long-lasting and irreversible harm to our ability to identify and respond to the many threats facing our nation'* (James Clapper, American NSA official in CNN 2013a; Mail Online 2013c). Barack Obama was cited or paraphrased in 17 (32%) online news reports. News presented his arguments that (3) privacy and security are a complicated balance, e.g. *'I think it's important to understand that you can't have 100% security and then have 100% privacy and zero inconvenience . . . . We're going to have to make some choices as a society'* (Barack Obama, US president in CNN 2013a) or *'You can complain about "big brother" and how this is a potential program run amuck … but when you actually look at the details, then I think we've struck the right balance'* (Barack Obama, US president in Mail Online 2013c). The suggestion that (4) news overexaggerated the matter was also voiced by NSA official Clapper: *'The program is subject to oversight by the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court, the Executive Branch, and Congress … It involves extensive procedures, specifically approved by the court, to ensure that only non-U.S. persons outside the U.S. are targeted, and that minimise the acquisition, retention and dissemination of incidentally acquired information about U.S. persons.'* (James Clapper, American NSA official in Fox News 2013c). This later argument can also be read as an attempt to downplay the disclosures. Lastly, (5) The war on terror or terrorism was mentioned as a justification for mass surveillance, either by the news outlets themselves, or by citing the NSA, e.g. *'The collection is broad in scope because more narrow collection would limit our ability to screen for and identify terrorism-related communications. Acquiring this information allows us to make connections related to terrorist activities over time'* (James Clapper, American NSA official in NBC News 2013b). A larger share of American articles (14/48%) primed this last opinion than British articles (7/29%). These five justifications emerged in the first two weeks and were maintained throughout the other disclosures.

The share of quotations of persons that are critical of mass surveillance is much larger than those justifying it, particularly in British online news (Figure 1). In the first week British news viewed Britain as a victim of U.S. surveillance rather than a collaborator, which emerged two weeks after. Both British and American news quoted opponents of mass surveillance, particularly political advocacy groups. These groups were quoted to present four interrelated justifications against mass surveillance: (1) breach of law, e.g. *'This appears to be dangerously close to, if not exactly, the centralised database of all our Internet communications, including some content, that successive governments have ruled out and parliament has never legislated for'* (Nick Pickles, Big Brother Watch in Fox News 2013b), (2) breach of privacy, e.g. *'These reports suggest a breach of trust on the grandest scale with the US Government, Internet*

Service Providers and our own UK intelligence community showing contempt for privacy, legality and democracy itself' (Shami Chakrabarti, Liberty in Mail Online 2013b), (3) lack of transparency, e.g. *'Those demanding the Snoopers' Charter seem to have been indulging in out-of-control snooping even without it – exploiting legal loopholes and help from Uncle Sam'* (James Welch, legal director in Independent 2013a) and, (4) double-standards, e.g. *'the hypocrisy of the US government when it claims that it does not target civilian infrastructure, unlike its adversaries'* (Edward Snowden, Whistle-blower in Guardian 2013a). These four critical justifications to reject mass surveillance were evident throughout the whole dataset. Together with the five justifications for surveillance, these form the nine presented justifications within the unfolding geopolitical discourse.

The geopolitical sensitivity of matters involving allies became particularly evident when the targeting of EU offices by the NSA was reported. Journalists provided a platform for European officials Martin Schultz, Laurent Fabius, Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger and Jean Asselborn to voice their concerns. Several online news articles primed the complaints raised by these EU officials, who were unanimously critical, particularly as the EU was in the middle of negotiating a trade deal with the United States:

> *'I was always sure that dictatorships, some authoritarian systems, tried to listen . . . but that measures like that are now practiced by an ally, by a friend, that is shocking … If the revelations prove to be true, it would be an extremely serious matter which will have a severe impact on E.U.-U.S. relations'* (Martin Schultz, EU official in CNN 2013b; Fox News 2013a; NBC News 2013a; NY Times 2013a, 2013b; Mail Online 2013a; Mirror Online 2013a; The Telegraph 2013)

> *'The US would do better to monitor its intelligence services instead of its allies'* (Jean Asselborn, EU official in Fox News 2013a; NY Times 2013a, 2013b; Mirror Online 2013a; The Telegraph 2013)

> *'These acts, if they are confirmed, would be absolutely unacceptable'* (Laurent Fabius, EU official, in CNN 2013b; NY Times 2013b, 2013a; Mail Online 2013a)

> 'If the media reports are correct, this brings to memory actions among enemies during the Cold War. It goes beyond any imagination that our friends in the United States view the Europeans as enemies … . [surveillance is] like a Hollywood nightmare' (Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger, EU official in CNN 2013b; NBC News 2013a; NY Times 2013a, 2013b; Guardian 2013b; Mail Online 2013a; The Telegraph 2013)

The EU officials in their responses seemed surprised by the revelations and exercised caution: they condemn the espionage only when proven to be true. The British Intelligence Services remained silent in the media and during the Tempora leaks it was argued by the CHCQ that *'It is longstanding practice that we do not comment on intelligence matters'* (GCHQ spokesman in Independent 2013b). The outcry in Europe did draw criticism cited from US officials, who accused European counterparts of being hypocritical and

dramatic, pointing at their long-standing cooperation in intelligence. These US officials again underpinned the justification that everybody does it:

> *'Any European who wants to go out and rend their garments with regard to international espionage should look first and find out what their governments are doing'* (Michael Hayden, former CIA director in CNN 2013b; NY Times 2013a)

> *'Ultimately, we work so closely together that there's almost no information that's not shared between our various countries'* (Barack Obama, U.S. President in Fox News 2013a)

> *'Those are some of our closest intelligence partners, so it's worth noting that the Europeans work very closely with us. We have very close intelligence relationships with them'* (Ben Rhodes, White House Official in CNN 2013b; Mail Online 2013a)

Metaphors – the Language Dimension of News Reports

Metaphors coloured the unfolding discourse, though oftentimes rather subtly. In 85% of the investigated articles, metaphors were used to describe mass surveillance practices. The overall use of metaphors was 70% for US online articles and 88% for British online articles. This concurs with earlier research by Pen America who found similar metaphors used in news articles on mass surveillance (Pen America 2014). British tabloid the Mail Online used metaphors for surveillance practices in all its initial reports. Liberal-leaning online news, such as The Guardian, Huffington Post and the Independent, used metaphors most frequently. It appears again that journalists did not express their own opinions explicitly, but they were not neutral in their choice of words either. In choosing words to break mass surveillance to their readers, both American and British reporters made choices that highlight a critical approach to mass surveillance practices.

Notably, metaphors for surveillance were most frequently used in reports critical about the own governments' practices. The Guardian article that broke mass surveillance of the GHCQ to the domestic audience used references to intelligence collection, including [the data collection program makes] *'GCHQ an intelligence superpower'*, and [that the GHCQ is] *'scooping up as much online and telephone traffic as possible'*, and that [the GHCQ is] *'sucking up every form of communication from the fibre-optic cables that ring the world'*. Nautical metaphors were used as well: [the program enables them to] *'to sift through the flood of data'* [and] *'trawl for information,'* and [allegedly showing] *'how broad the dragnet can be'* (Guardian 2013c). The first reports by the Huffington Post used similar metaphors to describe the process of data collection and analysis: *'snooping data'*, *'sweeping data'*, *'vacuum up data'*, *'cobble data'* and twice *'data mining'* and the *'government turning into Big Brother'* (e.g. Huffington Post 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). Huffington Post's first article about U.S. mass surveillance contained 67% of the overall metaphors

used by its authors throughout the period, likely because surveillance targeting of US nationals was alleged.

Some of the metaphors attempted to express the magnitude of the surveillance practices. An author for the Independent argued that "*In theory, when the Tempora project is completed, GCHQ will have access to a daily flow of data equivalent to 192 times the British Library's entire book collection*" (Independent 2013b). Mail Online ran a very critical article specifically on U.S. surveillance of Germany under the metaphorical title '*the ghosts of America's Cold War surveillance network pictured crumbling in Berlin as it's alleged the NSA still bugs Germany on the same scale as Communist China.*' (Mail Online 2013a). Potential British involvement is not mentioned in the article, and this was the only article directly re-awakening Cold War notions of espionage.

Discussion

The previous sections showed how a critical discourse was unfolding in initial popular online news articles through journalists' selectivity of coverage, priming of opinions, and use of metaphors for mass surveillance practices. By focusing those three concepts on representations of geopolitical code, the analysis provided an approach to unfolding geopolitical discourse as a product of sensitive government leaks, particularly in online news. Unfolding discourse reflected in popular online British and American painted a negative image of mass surveillance practices by the US and UK government. There was notable variety in whom discussed what, and which geopolitical scope of the matter was pictured. Although journalists gave room to both proponents and opponents, most articles quoted critical voices and arguments more than those justifying mass surveillance. The news reports did present the American and British geopolitical codes which justify mass surveillance as a way to provide security, track terrorists, and as something done by every nation, among others (ISC (Intelligence and Security Committee) 2013; U.S. Department of Defense 2013), but these arguments were counterbalanced by quoting voices condemning the alleged mass surveillance. Journalists moreover used critical metaphors to convey surveillance practices.

Notwithstanding the overall critical position of the online news media, the disclosures did not result in a huge outcry overall. A new revelation only seldom led to more than one news article. Five subsequent surveillance disclosures resulted in only a total of 53 articles of on average 882 words in these ten incredibly popular online news sources at the time. Few journalists attempted to sketch the complete geopolitical scope of close intelligence partnerships (for example between the U.S., U.K., Australia and New Zealand) or the targeting of friendly nations worldwide by NSA and GCHQ programmes, such as Japan, South Korea and India, which received limited

attention. The disclosures of the NSA spying on Latin America received little to no attention. For the UK based news media this could be explained by distance (geographically and culturally) to Latin America, but this cannot explain the relative silence in American online news. More coverage on espionage of allies was expected because existing friendly bonds between countries and proximity are known to generate news value (Harcup and O'neill 2001; Hearns-Branaman 2017). There was extensive coverage of the targeting of EU nations though, likely due to the simultaneous discussions on a free trade agreement. Geographical selectivity stood out.

The online news media seem to strike a balance between assuming the role of democratic watchdogs by questioning the legitimacy of the practices, while also trying to generate clicks. This was for instance reflected in their choice of words. Although often not directly criticising mass surveillance, the metaphors journalists used for surveillance practices subtly showed their own critical stance, and such metaphors were used in over four-fifth of articles. This pinch of sensationalism within headlines and news articles may have as well been a by-product of interpretative journalism, as it was up to journalists to convey in a simple way the immensely complex details of these then-novel government surveillance practices, in a short timeframe, even as the revelations were still developing. It seems that drama sells (Harcup and O'neill 2001; Madison 2014) and news articles would in great length detail how surveillance targeted anyone, anywhere, anytime, without being all that specific. These attempts to link the surveillance practices to the reader's own life may have been economical, as readers more likely read what they consider affecting their own lives. In the case of the Guardian, there appears another motive, namely a political one, as it was this news outlet leaking most of the Snowden material to the public.

The selected news sources reached millions of readers domestically and internationally online. The impact of these online news articles is considerable. Despite the huge international audiences of these reports, the selected media might operate within a national news frame (e.g. Entman 1991) – particularly as the topics of the disclosures deal with actions of their own secret services and governments. The research therefore cannot draw conclusions about the discourse that unfolded in other countries that were involved in the mass surveillance. Extending the research to online news media in Europe and China might provide additional perspectives. German outlet der Spiegel leaked the documents concerning the EU revelations and covered the mass surveillance disclosures extensively. In the Chinese case, this government has been frequently criticised by the U.S. for conducting digital espionage including by Barack Obama in 2013 right before U.S. digital surveillance of China was disclosed (e.g. Di Salvo and Negro 2016; Goldsmith and Wu 2006). Furthermore, the linkage between government and media is much tighter in the Chinese political system (Lorentzen 2014), making transmission of certain

geopolitical code more direct but also more complex due to the revelations from both sides.

This study of online news reports on mass surveillance of friends, allied nations and inhabitants focused on British and American news because these countries were implicated in the allegations. The discourse analysis focused on five initial disclosures by Snowden and included news reports published in weeks 23 till 28 of the summer of 2013. We demonstrated that the unfolding discourse did present the geopolitical code of US and UK, but that the discourse was overall critical of the mass surveillance practices uncovered. Since then, new disclosures have followed and some leaks have further uncovered sensitive close intelligence partnerships, such as the Five Eyes and Nine Eyes alliances. There is a need to keep exploring how unfolding discourse becomes normalised to both the public and news media during leaks (Di Salvo and Negro 2016; Madison 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen, Bennett, and Taylor 2017) and how this affects perception of subsequent allegations. This research could not extend to the actual interpretation of audiences nor the debates held about the disclosures in for example the Oval office, Downing Street 10 or the national parliaments of targeted states in the years after. Multiple nations have continued implementing tighter surveillance laws in the wake of perceived dangers. On the other hand, the following years saw the implementation of various tightened privacy laws, like the European GDPR directive and similar laws around the West. What the ultimate and long-term effects of these disclosures and discourses were on collective perception and debate of mass surveillance, in the United States, the United Kingdom or beyond, is to be further assessed, but it is apparent from online news discourse that the summer of 2013 was an important turning point.

Note

1. The dataset was established in 2014 by logging all the topical articles on ten high-traffic American and British news websites each week after each of five initial Snowden scoops from June 6 till July 16, 2013. The key words were *Snowden, surveillance, NSA*, or *GHCQ*. It is important to point out that the NSA's and GHCQ's programs were global in scale and scope, but British and American media initially focused on alleged spying of their own citizens, hence the names of the first and third disclosure.

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Declaration Of Interest Statement

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