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Journal Item

How to cite:

Crilley, Rhys and Chatterje-Doody, Precious N. (2020). Emotions and war on YouTube: affective investments in RT's visual narratives of the conflict in Syria. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33(5) pp. 713–733.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/09557571.2020.1719038>

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**Emotions and war on YouTube: Affective investments in
RT's visual narratives of the conflict in Syria**

Please find below our revised manuscript to address major revisions and comments from the reviewers.

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Abstract

Recent scholarship claims that narratives and images of war have political effects, not simply because of their content and 'form', but because of their affective and emotional 'forces'. Yet, International Relations scholars rarely explore how audiences respond to narratives and images of war in their research. Addressing this gap, this paper combines discourse analysis of RT (formerly Russia Today) 'breaking news' YouTube videos of Russian military intervention in Syria with analysis of 750 comments and social media interactions on those videos. Our findings demonstrate how RT layers moral and legal justifications for Russian intervention in multiple audio-visual formats, within a visual narrative of the conflict that relies on affective representations of key actors/events. Viewers largely approve of the content, replicate its core narratives and express emotions coherent with RT's affective representation of the Syrian conflict. Audiences' responses to these narratives and images of war were shaped by their affective investments in the identities and events portrayed on-screen. These affective investments are therefore crucial in understanding the political significance of images of armed conflict.

Introduction

In September 2015 Russia launched airstrikes intended to 'destroy militants and terrorists' in Syria (Vladimir Putin quoted in BBC 2015), one of its most far-reaching foreign policy actions in recent years. Russia's earlier military engagements in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014-) had been almost universally condemned internationally as neo-imperial aggression (Dyson 2014; Bayulgen and Arbatli 2013; Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2016). By contrast, despite international condemnation for supporting the Assad regime and contributing to civilian casualties, Russia's military involvement in Syria has ensured it a privileged position in the resultant conflict resolution process (Casula 2015). Various states effectively acquiesced to Russian intervention to thwart 'terrorism' and potential spillover (Abdenur 2016), and Russian involvement has extended well beyond the March 2016 announcement that troops would be withdrawn. Given this context of evolving international controversy, this paper explores how the Russian government justified its intervention by

visually narrating the Syrian conflict to international audiences through videos produced by the state-funded international broadcaster RT (formerly Russia Today).

The Syrian conflict was 'Russia's first live television war', in which the state and state-affiliated broadcasters collaborated over a series of semi-staged spectacles allowing audiences to experience a controlled and safe version of the action (Tolz and Teper, 2018: 219-220). This media campaign began by pre-empting the official commencement of Russian airstrikes in domestic television coverage; and ended symbolically with the famed Mariinskii Orchestra's live concert at 'liberated' Palmyra's Roman amphitheatre (Tolz and Teper, 2018: 219). Continued fighting, including for Palmyra, subsequently belied this 'endpoint'. Established to give a Russian perspective on global events (Miazhevich 2018), RT often claims legitimacy for Russian foreign policy activities (Hutchings et al. 2015; Orttung and Nelson 2018; Tolz and Teper 2018; Yablokov 2015). Since politically-significant changes to the *status quo* are in greatest need of legitimation (Reus-Smit 2007), our analysis focuses on three such critical junctures of Russian intervention in Syria. As international broadcasting and social media have been influential in shaping what people know and feel about the Syrian conflict (Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2013; Crilley 2017; Geis and Schlag 2017; Lynch et al. 2014; Matar 2012; Powers and O'Loughlin 2015), and because RT's dissemination strategy is reliant on YouTube (Orttung and Nelson 2018) RT YouTube videos are an important site of interest for understanding how Russia claims legitimacy for military intervention in Syria.

RT's visual narration of the Syrian conflict on YouTube contributes to the transnational online negotiation of meanings around the conflict, Russia's role within it, and Russia's wider place in the world. Given that emotional resonance is arguably more influential than appeals to logic and reason in shaping public opinion (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; Crawford 2000; Crilley 2018; Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2018; Davies 2018), this presents an important case for the study of emotion and affect, their evocation in visual media, and their resonance with audiences. Media representations are only effective to the extent that they resonate with their audiences (Hall 2005), yet research on media and global politics frequently neglects audiences as a site of analysis.

This paper addresses this gap by drawing upon theories of ‘affective investment’ (Solomon 2014) that can help us address the neglected question of how audiences respond to images of war and conflict, taking into consideration the ‘forces’ as well as the ‘form’ that such images take. The first substantive section of the paper introduces our theoretical framework and methods. We then survey the body of videos that RT uploaded to YouTube about the Syrian conflict, and draw upon discourse analysis to undertake an in-depth audio-visual analysis of how RT visually narrated breaking news about the conflict and Russia’s intervention within it. The third section of our paper presents an analysis of 750 YouTube comments made on these three videos, illustrating how audiences responded to and were emotionally invested in RT’s visual narratives of the Syrian conflict. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings.

Interrogating emotions and images of war

The recent ‘visual turn’ within International Relations scholarship (Bleiker 2018; Callahan 2015; Hansen 2011) draws attention to the importance of visual media within contemporary global politics. This scholarship recognises that visual media such as photographs, films, and cartoons, are central to contemporary communication because ‘how people come to know, think about and respond to developments in the world is deeply entangled with how these developments are made visible to them’ (Shim 2013: 23). Visual media thus shape the conditions of possibility in global politics as they ‘frame what can be seen, thought and said... they delineate what is and is not politically possible’ (Bleiker 2015: 874).

A wealth of scholarship has demonstrated that visual media help to shape possibilities in global politics (Hansen 2011; Heck and Schlag 2013; Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2010; Merrin 2018). Yet, despite this, very little IR scholarship engages with how people actually interpret, make sense of, and express emotions towards the visual media that they view (Beattie et al. 2019; da Silva and Crilley 2017; Eroukhmanoff 2019; Gillespie et al. 2010; O’Loughlin 2011; Pears 2016). This paper addresses this gap by demonstrating how the concept of ‘affective investment’ can benefit the study of visual global politics. Building upon broader work on emotions and discourse (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; Holland 2009; Hutchison 2016; Solomon 2012, 2014; Wetherell 2013), we posit that visual media have political significance

not simply because of their content, but because of the ways in which this content evokes an affective and emotional response in its audience.

The study of emotion and affect is also now prominent within IR (Åhäll 2018; Åhäll and Gregory 2015; Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; Crawford 2000; Fierke 2013; Hutchison 2016; Ross 2013). Following feminists and cultural theorists working on emotions and affect (Ahmed 2014; Massumi 2015), the study of emotions in IR has drawn upon discourse analysis to make sense of how emotions are represented in text and images. This is because ‘emotions become manifest through the media—the words, visual images, and gestures—in which they are expressed’ (Hutchison 2014, 4), and in the case of armed conflict, ‘we are all touched very directly by war through spectatorship’ (Sylvester 2013, 13). As audiences see conflict unfold through the media, and as they respond emotionally to what they witness, they experience conflict in a mediated form for themselves. Here, feeling and thinking are intimately related (Lisle 2017), so it is crucial to address how the audiences who view images of conflict respond emotionally to them.

Although the study of discourse is often focused on the ‘form’ in which discourse structures identities through language (Laclau 2004, 326), it is the ‘forces’ of discourse - their affective and emotional aspects - that make discourses appeal to audiences (Laclau 2007, 111). Ty Solomon suggests that ‘words alone often cannot carry the power that they often have — the force of affect is needed to explain how words resonate with audiences and have political effects beyond their mere verbal utterance as such’ (Solomon 2014, 729). Indeed, this is also true for visual media, which do not simply have political effects because of what is contained within their frames, but because of the emotive resonance that those representations have with those who view them. Solomon conceptualises the ‘anchoring forces that bind subjects to their identities and particular kinds of discourse’ as ‘affective investments’, and it is through such investments that constructed identities derive their ‘force’ in terms of potency and binding power (Solomon 2014, 729). Consequently, the political effects of narratives and images of war stem from audiences’ affective investment in the identities that are presented in media they view. Despite recognition of this fact, work on affective investments still tends to focus on representations of emotions within linguistic

media, rather than in visual media or on how those representations have been interpreted by audiences (Solomon 2014, 733).

In this paper, we build upon the nascent work on visual global politics and emotions by analysing how audiences of images of war are affectively invested in those images. The methodology we employ enables us to draw together analysis of audio-visual content with analysis of audience responses (Authors 2019). First, we examine RT's representations of war as conveyed in three breaking news videos from the network's most popular and current playlist of YouTube videos concerning the Syrian conflict at three critical junctures in their media campaign: 1) the commencement of Russian intervention (RT 2015); 2) the announcement that Russia would begin withdrawing its troops (RT 2016); and 3) the second retaking of Palmyra from ISIS (RT 2017).

We apply discourse analysis to the full spectrum of audio and visual information in these videos, taking into account the combinations of text, images, and audio soundtracks. We place particular emphasis on the kinds of sources that were prioritised or sidelined, and the ways in which particular identities and events were constructed at these crucial temporal moments, and the (power) relations that were implied between them (Hansen 2006; 2011). Additionally, narrative analysis of the broadcasts allows us to examine how the plot (portrayed on-screen) and story (inferred by the on-screen action, if not shown directly) reveals judgements about sequences and, crucially, consequences (i.e. suggestions of causality) (Bleiker 2015; Chatterje-Doody 2014). Our analysis takes account the ways in which RT's narration of the Syrian conflict represents the key actors in the story and their actions, and the ways in which agency was attributed (or concealed). It notes the chronology of events implied, and the causal relationships between them – especially, which kinds of information were explicitly set out as value judgements, or, conversely, presented as 'uncontroversial' background information (Miskimmon et al. 2013).

The second part of our research involves analysing a sample of 750 social media comments on these videos, to gain insights into "audience discourse" i.e., the statements and actions of audiences which serve as evidence about their experiences and uses of media' (Jensen 2002, 169). Notably, examining social media comments 'tells us more about what people *do*

in their monitoring of media coverage of war and conflict, compared to measures of exposure to radio or television broadcasts' (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010, 187 emphasis in original). By studying social media comments through discourse analysis, we begin to understand how audiences make sense of key issues in global politics (da Silva and Crilley 2017). We also see how they express emotions towards the visual media they consume, since 'online media facilitates political formations of affect' (Papacharissi 2015, 9). In order to study these affective investments, we scraped all comments on these videos using a publicly available YouTube comment scraper. Exporting these comments into a spreadsheet, we sorted them by popularity (number of upvotes). Given the large volume of comments, we coded a sample of 300 for each video, which included the 100 most popular, 100 least popular comments, and a random sample of 100 comments.¹ This sampling enabled us to gain insights into the kinds of interpretations that resonated more or less widely with viewing audiences (indicated by high or low numbers of upvotes on comments expressing such sentiments). It also allowed us to see the general spread of affective investments across the range of comments made in response to the videos.

Whilst upvotes and comments could result from bot or troll activity (in that they are automated and/or maliciously intended to provoke a reaction), our manual analysis suggests that they are not the work of bots: comments are closely relevant to the video content rather than being generic or spam; bot inflation of video viewing figures is more common than inflation of upvotes on audience comments; and YouTube has been aggressively targeting suspected bot activity (Keller, 2018; YouTube, 2018). Nonetheless, we cannot reliably determine whether the comments are from trolls or if they are sincere; and only the publisher of a YouTube video is able to see the sources of its upvotes. In light of this, and in line with other studies of social media comments (da Silva and Crilley 2017), we take the comments as aspects of discourse whose publishers will have varied intentions and motivations, which cannot be studied through their comments alone. Subsequently, we cannot - and do not attempt to - make any claims about audience members' intentions. What we can, and do, study is how those comments express emotions through the language used. From this we can infer whether/how an audience member is affectively invested in

¹ Given that the third video in our study had less than 300 comments we studied a sample of 150 comments: the 50 most and least popular, and a random sample of 50 comments.

the media they have viewed. Following the work of Solomon, we suggest that studying social media comments through discourse analysis can help to understand how the narratives of identity presented by elite and media actors resonate emotionally with those audiences who view them (Solomon, 2014, 735).

Our analysis and coding were inductively driven by video content. Given RT's Russian perspective on international events, its coverage of the Syrian conflict stressed the legitimacy of the Russian intervention. Consequently, we coded comments on the videos into three broad categories: 1) supportive of Russian intervention; 2) opposed to Russian intervention; 3) neutral/unclear views on Russian intervention. We separately coded for evidence of emotions in these comments. Due to the complex nature of emotions, as well as the difficulty in interpreting often brief online comments, we utilised three broad categories: 1) positive emotions (such as joy, excitement, respect, pride); 2) negative emotions (such as anger, sadness, disgust, confusion); and 3) neutral/unclear emotions. Combining audio-visual narrative analysis of social media content with analysis of audience comments on the content allows us to draw conclusions about audiences' affective investments in RT's visual narration of the Syrian conflict.

Affective and emotional messaging in RT's visual narratives of the Syrian conflict

RT has published over 1000 videos on the topic of the Syrian conflict to YouTube since January 2014, across 10 different playlists of videos focused on Syria. Many of these playlists consolidate videos about individual incidents or in particular formats, so we focused our analysis on the generalist 'Syrian conflict and war against ISIS' playlist. Containing 44% of all RT's uploaded Syria videos, and being continually updated, this is the centrepiece of RT's Syria output on YouTube and forms our primary dataset. We filtered this dataset by three media events marking critical junctures in the conflict (commencement; withdrawal announcement; and re-taking Palmyra), and analysed the videos that broke the news in each case: 'Russian military forces start airstrikes against ISIS in Syria' (RT 2015); 'BREAKING: Putin orders start of Russian military withdrawal from Syria' (RT 2016); and 'Palmyra recaptured by Syrian Army from ISIS (EXCLUSIVE)' (RT 2017). As well as claiming legitimacy for the shifts in Russian policy that they visually narrated, these videos elicited substantial audience engagement. Compared to the average of 65985 views and 1015 responses that

RT's YouTube videos receive (Orttung and Nelson 2018, 9-10), the first video we selected had over sixteen times the average views and more than seven times the average responses; the second video had roughly three times the average views and responses; whilst the final video had approximately average numbers of views and responses for RT's YouTube videos. These videos therefore provide an important source of YouTube comments to analyse the affective investments of viewers.

As with Russian domestic broadcasters (Tolz and Teper, 2018), RT foreshadowed the official commencement of intervention with preparatory reporting in the weeks before the approval of airstrikes.² Coverage intensified on the day Russian intervention was approved, with two extra videos uploaded in addition to the 'breaking news' item we now discuss in depth.³ An extract from one of RT's television news broadcasts,⁴ the opening subtitles and statements of this 13:49 minute report immediately frame the news around the Russian parliament's *approval* of air strikes rather than the intervention itself: this foregrounds validity in law. Russian intervention is presented as self-defence, since Russian-born militants in Syria 'would return to Russia' if unchecked (00:01). Senior politicians' statements reinforce officialdom and legality, as in footage of President Putin announcing Russia's continued support for 'the fight against terrorism', whilst stressing 'that this fight should be conducted according to international law' (00:45).

RT's second justification for Russia's intervention is moral. The correspondent, Lizzie Phelan, evokes just war notions of proportionality by explicitly highlighting that the intervention is targeted; it comes at Syria's request; and no ground troops are involved (01:13-01:47). Short interviews with Damascus residents reiterate this moral justification emotively, expressing gratitude and hope for the Russian intervention. Russia is portrayed as the only actor capable of resolving the conflict, and its moral obligation is indicated through references to Islamic State's (IS/ISIS) ongoing global threat. RT evidences this in a pre-prepared

² 'Are you Syrius? 'Putin admits Russia's aiding Syrian army in war'—western media claim' (05/09/15); 'We need to abandon double standards to combat ISIS'—Putin' (15/09/15); 'Russia to consider sending troops to Syria if requested' (18/09/15)

³ 'COMBAT CAM: First video of Russian airstrikes on ISIS in Syria' (30/09/15); 'Russian military forces start airstrikes against ISIS in Syria' (30/09/15)

⁴ RT: 'Russian military forces start airstrikes against ISIS in Syria', <https://youtu.be/r11oHeV92nU>, Length 13:49, Published 30th September, 2015. As at 9th January, 2018: 1,095,325 views; 2801 comments; 4116 upvotes; 341 downvotes

informational package which incorporates a world map gradually being covered in red 'hotspots' of planned attacks (2015, 04:31).

Such legal and moral justifications are consistently layered within audio-visual narratives which characterise key actors in morally unambiguous ways. RT presents as perpetrators of the conflict a homogenous anti-government force: 'anti-government militants'; oppositional 'groups like Islamic State'; and 'terrorists'. These are implicitly contrasted to groups possessing legal or moral authority: the 'Syrian government', and suffering 'refugees'. International actors face similar characterisations, with the US military and militant 'extremists' being elided in RT's reports that US-trained fighters have defected to IS with their weapons (2015: 11:43-12:07).

Figure 1: RT 'Syrian rebels gone rogue' screenshot from 'Russian military forces start airstrikes against ISIS in Syria' video

RT layers visual images, audio soundtracks, oral commentary and textual summaries to construct its narrative of the Syrian conflict. Core legitimisation claims are repeated by the anchor, correspondent, politicians, and Syrian citizens, and within ostensibly objective pre-prepared audio-visual packages – which nonetheless explicitly incorporate summaries of the '[t]hreat from foreign fighters and the '[l]egitimacy of strikes'. RT's narrative sees the legitimate Syrian government primarily fighting IS terrorists and their affiliates. Its efforts are undermined by US interference, motivated by a strategically questionable and politically-motivated desire to oust President Assad. To strengthen this narrative, RT quotes international media criticisms of the 'West's' failure to tackle IS (2015, 05:00). However, overtly partisan sources are seamlessly integrated within the mainstream news digest,⁵ and RT employs populist communication logics by summarising serious matters in puns (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley 2019): 'Getting "Syrious": Fighting both Assad and ISIL makes no sense' (2015: 12:20). RT's narrative portrays Russia as the only power capable of quickly

⁵ It includes as if comparable to mainstream US and UK newspapers, a headline from the right-wing US political website, Daily Signal. This is an overtly politically partisan site funded by conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation <https://www.dailysignal.com/daily-signal/>

and effectively ending the conflict, in accordance with popular wishes, moral imperatives, and international law.

Equivalent legitimation claims are made in RT's coverage of the 2016 announcement of Russia's withdrawal⁶, with two notable additions: the incorporation of consequentialist moral legitimacy surrounding the purported success of Russia's intervention; and an increased focus on Putin. Here, the legal authority for Russia's intervention comes via multilateralism and international law: a withdrawal agreement between Presidents Putin and Assad, and their hopes for the new Geneva peace talks; Putin's claim that Russian intervention prompted these talks (00:00-00:41); and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov emphasising Russia's decisive role in achieving cooperative agreements backed by two UN security council resolutions (04:02-04:24). Moral authority derives from repetitions of the brevity and proportionality of Russian involvement throughout.

Figure 2: 'Putin orders withdrawal' screenshot from 'BREAKING: Putin orders start of Russian military withdrawal from Syria' video

Additionally, consequentialist claims to moral legitimacy cite benefits to civilians and the state. Thus, '[h]uge gains on the humanitarian front' (2016: 03.48) are accompanied by militants' agreement to cooperate with the government 'for security to return to Syria' (2016: 03.18). The correspondent explicitly lists 'the achievements' Russian forces have made to realise such breakthroughs (05:31). Putin is personally emphasised in the very title: 'BREAKING: Putin orders start of Russian military withdrawal from Syria'; a series of rolling subtitles all emphasising his activities and perspectives;⁷ and Lavrov's explicit credit to Putin for the resumption of peace talks (2016: 04.34).

⁶RT: 'BREAKING: Putin orders start of Russian military withdrawal from Syria', <https://youtu.be/5rCwhYshgw8>, Length 9:30, Published 14th March 2016. As at 9th January, 2018: 183,345 views; 2017 comments; 1600 upvotes; 140 downvotes.

⁷ "Putin: internationally-agreed ceasefire in Syria is having a positive effect"; "President Putin orders bulk of Russian military force to start withdrawing from Syria"; "Putin: Russia's military mission in Syria has been accomplished"; "Putin: Russian military withdrawal from Syria should facilitate peace process there"; "Putin: permanent Russian military sites in Syria will remain and will be defended"; "Putin: Syria pullout agreed with President Assad who thanked Russia for help".

Russia's withdrawal announcement is contextualised around the fifth anniversary of the war (2016, 07:59), with a pre-prepared package summarising the conflict to date. Textual timeline points are combined with short video fragments of Western political leaders criticising Assad or announcing their own plans for involvement, and images of escalating social violence. This gives an unambiguous visual narrative of a parallel chronological escalation of 'Western' actors' antipathy to Assad and incompetent intervention; increasing chaos and violence on the ground; and resultant gains made by IS. Where Lavrov briefly appears, it is to illustrate the security gains from Russian multilateral leadership (09:00).

By the time of RT's 2017 video breaking the news of Palmyra's 'liberation', a clear pattern emerges to the legitimisation of Russian intervention in Syria. Legal authority and moral legitimacy are again signalled with value-judgments intrinsic to key actors' descriptions, as in the contrast between the 'Syrian and Russian officials reporting the two allies' successful 'mission' to liberate the 'historic Syrian city of Palmyra'; and the 'terrorists' and 'jihadists' whom they have forced out (00:01-00:30; 06:01). Russia's involvement is described as decisive, but in a fully-sanctioned supporting role: "pro-government forces, with the support of Russian attack helicopters..." (02:10).

The breaking news is again given context through a pre-prepared informational package (04:22-06:55), which provides a clear audio-visual narrative of how events in Palmyra developed, pinned primarily to before-and-after photographs and aerial footage of historic monuments in the city, accompanied by textual and audio commentary. RT's narrative presents Palmyra as a site of global cultural importance, which became almost unrecognisable following the 2015 IS takeover. Blown up, and used as an execution site, it was only when 'Syrian troops, again with the help of its allies, managed to gain control of Palmyra' in March 2016 (05:07) that order was restored. The Mariinskii Orchestra's May 2016 concert – from which the package includes a lengthy excerpt – was the 'beautiful response' to this. Yet, due to a combination of Syrian military overstretch, an overwhelming jihadist re-grouping, and US-led coalition incompetence, IS re-took Palmyra. Whilst it is once again under Assad's control, the site will take time to comprehensively secure.

These three breaking news videos demonstrate marked differences between RT's representation of the actors and events of the Syrian conflict and 'Western' news coverage. The concept of 'affective investment' helps explain RT's approach to imbuing this alternative narrative with force. A pre-emotive response, affect is triggered before audiences formulate their conscious responses to stimuli (Clément and Sangar 2018, 5; Hutchison 2016, 6). It is associated with immediacy, whereas emotions are formed intersubjectively and are culturally contingent (Crawford 2000, 125; Mercer 2014, 516). RT's YouTube videos breaking news on the Syrian conflict incorporate multi-sensory affective and emotive stimuli calibrated to increase their resonance with audiences. Visually, striking red and white 'breaking news' branding replaces RT-green for chyrons and information bars; aurally, dramatic 'whoosh' sounds accompany red and white intertitles designating the live reporting segments (2016, 01:35). Reported developments are ascribed significance as being 'exclusive' (2017, 01:47) or 'huge news...' (2015, 01:15-03:33) that 'prior to Russia launching its campaigns, almost seemed unthinkable' (2016, 03:25). Such immediacy is reinforced through first-hand perspectives: the correspondent's oral descriptions of witnessing key developments are illustrated with split-screen video and audio recordings of mortar attacks, explosions and ground battles (2015, 01:15-03:33; 2016, 06:38; 2017, 02:56-03:25). *Vox populi* with Damascus residents emphasises their weariness of the conflict, gratitude to Russia for stepping in, and hopes for a quick end to the war (2015, 02:32). Observing that many 'have friends and relatives who are fighting in the army, or in pro-government militias who are fighting groups like Islamic State', Phelan aligns the people with the government, and the opposition with IS.

Even factual claims are made using affective stimuli to build narratives and characterise actors. For instance, RT's informational audio-visual packages (2015, 04:07-05:20; 2016, 08:37; 2017, 04:22-06:55) incorporate dramatic, pounding music, overlaid with sounds of gunfire and explosions. Rapidly changing visual montages convey the immediacy of problems, articulated in text, such as 'People fleeing in hundreds of thousands' (2015, 04:35), illustrated by rapidly changing images of a gridlocked dusty road; women and children marching along a railway line; civilians packed onto a crowded boat. Threat is evoked via images: 'ISIL spread uncontrollable' is superimposed over silhouetted fighters on a barren landscape; 'ISIL attacks every week' is superimposed over flames; and 'hotspot'

maps evidence the global reach of IS. RT's factual claims summarising the conflict's chronology are superimposed over black visual 'explosions', and interspersed with footage of Western leaders' statements and escalating violence since 2011. In this context, an emotive video fragment of David Cameron declaring that 'It's quite clear that this is a regime that is hell-bent on killing, maiming and murdering its own citizens' (2016, 08:37) works like self-condemnation within a visual narrative that emphasises Western culpability for conflict exacerbation over time.

RT's breaking news coverage, therefore, presented legal and moral legitimisation claims for Russian military intervention in the Syrian conflict. Such claims were set within an audio-visual narrative of the conflict which contrasted longstanding unwanted Western intervention and violent escalation with invited, targeted Russian effectiveness. Together, RT's descriptors for key actors and its presentation of background information subtly subverted Western assumptions about the morality and legitimacy of those involved. These representations were not made dispassionately, but were layered through a comprehensive range of affective stimuli, to create a multi-sensual evocation of threat, chaos, suffering and Russian capability to resolve these.

Audience affective investments in Russian intervention in Syria

In order to understand how this narrative of the Syrian conflict resonated with RT's audiences, our study into audience affective investments in the Russian intervention began by coding a sample of 300 comments from the first two videos and 150 comments from the third video (that only had a total of 213 comments) in regards to whether they were supportive, in opposition to, or neutral/unclear about the Russian intervention. At the commencement of Russian intervention, 71% (n=213) of comments analysed were supportive; 17% (n=51) were opposed; and 12% (n=36) were neutral or expressed no clear sentiment towards the intervention. Of the most popular 100 comments on this video 98% (n=98) were supportive of the intervention and there were no comments opposed to it. This indicates that the audiences of RT's Syria coverage in this instance were affectively invested in RT's narration of their intervention and expressed their support by liking other comments that expressed the feelings they felt.

On the video announcing the withdrawal of Russian troops from Syria, 60% (n=179) of the comments were supportive of the Russian intervention and suggested it had been a success, and only 18% (n=56) were opposed to it or suggested it had been a failure. There was again strong support for the intervention in the 100 most popular comments where 93% (n=93) were in favour, and only 3% (n=3) opposed. In RT's video announcing the recapturing of Palmyra, 67% (n=100) of comments supported Russian intervention compared with only 7% (n=11) of comments being opposed to it. Once more, the most popular comments were overwhelmingly in support of Russian intervention in Syria as 74% (n=38) of them supported it and only 2% (n=1) explicitly opposed it. The contrast in the high volume of popular comments expressing support for Russian intervention and the small number of those opposing it demonstrate that the audience of these RT videos accepts RT's narration of the Syrian conflict and Russia's role in it.

Table 1: Support and opposition to Russian intervention in comments on RT videos

Video 1	Support Intervention	Oppose Intervention	Neutral/unclear about Intervention
Total comments	71%	17%	12%
most popular	98%	0%	2%
random	76%	17%	7%
least popular	39%	34%	27%
Video 2			
Total comments	60%	18%	22%
most popular	93%	3%	4%
random	43%	32%	25%
least popular	43%	21%	36%
Video 3			
Total comments	67%	7%	26%
most popular	76%	2%	22%
random	58%	10%	32%
least popular	66%	10%	24%
Total comments (video 1, 2 and 3)	65%	16%	19%

Having coded the comments for whether they expressed positive, negative, or neutral/unclear emotions, we found that audiences were far more likely to engage emotively than neutrally with the videos. Of the comments we studied, 77% expressed an emotion whether that be positive (pride/happiness as in 'Great job, Russia!') or negative (sadness in statements such as 'Palmyra....such sorrow comes to an ancient city') compared to 22% that were neutral or unclear in the emotions felt by the commenter (for example 'Russia's strategy is hard to follow for the West'). Those who supported Russian intervention were more likely to express positive emotions towards Russia, whilst those opposed to intervention were more likely to express negative emotions towards Russia. However, of those supporting Russian intervention, almost a fifth expressed this not through positive emotions towards Russia, but through negative emotions, predominantly concerning other actors such as the US and IS (see Table 2). This suggests that whilst audiences may have been affectively invested in Russian intervention, this was not necessarily because they felt positively about Russia, but rather because they felt so negative about other actors involved in the Syrian conflict.

Table 2: Emotions towards Russian intervention (combined comments on video 1, 2 and 3)

	Positive Emotions	Negative Emotions	Neutral/Unclear Emotions	Total
Support Intervention	39%	18%	8%	65%
Oppose Intervention	2%	12%	2%	16%
Neutral/unclear about Intervention	1%	6%	12%	19%

Our findings suggest that the audience of YouTube viewers who viewed these videos supported the Russian intervention in Syria. The large number of upvotes for the most popular comments on the videos that were overwhelmingly supportive of Russian intervention suggest that the sentiments expressed in these comments were felt by a broader audience than those who made the original comments. In order to understand the

audiences' affective investments in RT's representation of the Syrian conflict in more detail we used discourse analysis to examine the comments on these videos. We studied the comments by focusing not only on whether they expressed support for Russian intervention or not, or whether they expressed positive/negative emotions, but by analysing how the comments produced meanings and attached these meanings 'to various social subjects and objects, thus constituting particular interpretive dispositions that create certain possibilities and preclude others' (Doty 1996, 4). Emotions 'become manifest' (Hutchison 2014, 4) in how they are articulated through discourse – such as social media comments – and our study accounted for how comments expressed emotions for certain actors, actions, and identities. Through our analysis we identified four important affective investments in RT's characterisations of the actors involved in the Syrian conflict, which support RT's representation of the Russian intervention as legitimate. We now discuss these in turn.

Anger towards the United States

The first affective investment that reveals important dynamics about how audiences interpreted Russian military intervention concerns the emotionally-loaded engagement with the identities of the United States government and military. There was a feeling of anger towards the US and its foreign policy prevalent across our data. Comments that stated the US 'created terrorists' and 'is out of goddamn control' suggest that RT's visual narratives of the Syrian conflict resonate with their audiences. The breaking news videos we analysed, and audience responses to them, reveal the clear questioning of American foreign policy interests and actions that has been observed in RT's broader media output (Orttung and Nelson 2018). RT's narration of America and the 'West' - as imperial actors who meddle in other states through nefarious means - resonates with the audience's emotions of anger.

The sense of anger to the US was expressed in comments on the first video, and were seen to be prominent across the comments on all three videos. In response to the first video, commentators suggested that the US 'created terrorists', and in reply to the second video the US was perceived to 'illegally invade'. Whilst the most popular comment on the third video suggests support for president Trump, others such as 'Trump for prison with Obama and Bush' and references to 'US-backed terrorists' demonstrate once more an anger

towards the US and their foreign policy. Such sentiments highlight how emotions underpin the audiences 'predisposition' for RT's anti-West/American narratives (Miazhovich 2018, 3).

Respect and Gratitude for Russia

The comments we studied also suggest an affective investment in the identity of Russia as legitimate guarantor of security, personified in the character of Putin. This is expressed through comments professing respect and gratitude for Russian intervention and Putin's actions in Syria. Statements such as 'Thank God for Putin. I don't even believe in God, but it sure seems like he was sent by a good force to stop this fucking insanity... Go hard like Vladimir Putin' highlight positive feelings for Russian military intervention. Ultimately comments reveal that the audience feels affectively invested in supporting the Russian state as personified by the celebrity leader persona of Putin (Goscilo 2013). It also implies that the audience of these videos accepts and consents to RT's legitimization claims for the Russian state to be acting legally and morally in Syria.

In comments on the first video there is a feeling of respect and gratitude for Putin's actions in Syria which some commentators feel will 'end terrorism'. In reply to the video announcing the withdrawal of Russian troops in Syria we see similar affective investments. Following the narrative presented on screen, comments imply a feeling of respect and pride for what the Russian intervention has achieved in Syria. Here, this support is expressed by stating that Russia 'has helped' in an effective, limited, and quick way and is leaving Syria without occupying the country like the 'West' has. Comments on the third video such as 'MUCH LOVE TO RUSSIA. THANK YOU FOR CLEANING UP OUR MESS. THANK YOU FOR TRUE WORLD LEADERSHIP. GOD BLESS YOU ALL' once again exclaim gratitude, pride and respect for Russia. Not only does RT represent Russia as a positive force (Ortung and Nelson 2018, 2) but audiences of these videos are emotionally attached to this view and express their thanks, respect, and even love for Russian military force in the comments they make online.

Conspiracy Theories and Mistrust in International Actors

The third affective investment apparent in RT's representation of Syria concerned the audiences lack of trust in international institutions and belief in conspiracy theories in Syria. Previous research has pointed to conspiratorial framing within RT's content (Yablokov

2015), and our study suggests that RT's audience is affectively invested in conspiratorially-framed identities. These included negative emotional characterisations of actors designated as 'zio-servants', 'globalist NWO [New World Order] trash', alongside overtly anti-Semitic and Islamophobic claims. The mistrust in international actors and institutions underpins negative responses to their actions, suggesting an openness to RT's narrative of the Syrian conflict and Russia's role within it.

In response to the first video, the audience express a lack of trust in international institutions such as the UN and NATO and express a belief that such institutions and 'Western' actions are part of an Israeli or Jewish conspiracy in Syria, as one comment claims that 'Western' support for certain Syrian groups is being done 'just so Israel can steal the oil and claim the land'. Comments on the second video also express a mistrust for international institutions and a belief in conspiracies such as the 'NWO [New World Order]' as well as using anti-Semitic tropes of Jewish responsibility for 'Western' intervention. In comments responding to the third video the feeling that there is an international conspiracy now becomes focused not on Israel and Jews but on Saudi Arabia and Muslims who are denounced as deploying troops and being terrorists respectively. This shift is perhaps best explained by the third videos' focus on the Syrian and Russian fight against ISIS rather than on 'Western' intervention in Syria. The 'stimulus' of conspiracy theories as projected by RT's news coverage (Miazhevich 2018, 15) is invested in by audiences and reproduced through their comments online.

Support for Russia as a Masculine Actor

The fourth major affective investment in support of Russian intervention in Syria was a feeling that the US and the 'West' are feminine whereas Russia is masculine. This gendered expression of support was expressed in statements like 'US gays can go home now to their boyfriends, real men are taking over :)' alongside negative descriptions of American politicians as 'bitching' and positive descriptions of Putin who was viewed to 'go hard' in Syria. Such expressions of support for a Russian military masculinity (Duncanson 2013; Higate 2003; Higate and Hopton 2005) suggest that RT's claims that Russian intervention in Syria is legitimate are not only accepted by audiences because of their visual content, but because of how that content resonates with how they feel about gender. As Cynthia Enloe

(2014; 2017) has pointed out, patriarchal ideas derive their sustainability from the ways in which they are interwoven, unrecognised, into the fabric of everyday life. Visual media online are one such important everyday space for shaping understandings of gender (Rowley, 2010), and our study highlights how support for Russian intervention in Syria and consent to RT's legitimisation claims is closely related to how RT's audio-visual narration of the Syrian conflict resonates with how they feel about gender and masculinity.

Comments on the first video use homophobic language to refer to the US, whereas Russian soldiers are perceived to be 'real men'. Comments on the second video also imply an affective investment in the masculinity of Putin and Russia who are deemed to set a positive example for 'the boys'. In response to the third video these affective investments in the gendered identities of the US and the 'West' as feminine and Russia as masculine are also apparent in comments such as 'hell yeah man they [the Russian military] are badasses' and references to the US as 'bitches'. Here, comments made online express support for the military masculinity of Russia based on an affective investment in 'ideas of physical strength and aggression' (Duncanson 2009, 65) as portrayed by RT's representation of Russian intervention in Syria.

Table 3: Top 5 comments on each RT video

Top 5 comments on video 1: 'Russian military forces start airstrikes against ISIS in Syria'	Total Upvotes	Total Replies
McCain was bitching that Russians bombed civils in Syria. What a fucking dumb fuck.	499	152
US gays can go home now to their boyfriends, real men are taking over :)	417	120
Game over for the zio-servants.	369	36
USA interference in Iraq created Terrorists, while Russia interference in Syria will end terrorism. Russia is much more powerful than the USA could ever dream off and INSH-ALLAH Russia will eliminate all the terrorists very soon Ameen!	365	140
Thank God for Putin. I don't even believe in God, but it sure seems like he was sent by a good force to stop this fucking insanity. The United States is out of goddamn control, arming random terrorist groups to destroy legitimate governments in the middle east just so Israel can steal the oil and claim the land. Fuck that. Go hard like Vladimir Putin.	363	165
Top 5 comments on video 2: 'BREAKING: Putin orders start of Russian military withdrawal from Syria'		
Putin, can you send your forces to London now please?	404	71
It's just a prank bro they will use nukes	178	41

He was invited there by the legitimate government... He was asked for help He helped He's leaving He did not illegally invade and or occupy the country well fuck a doodle doo	84	8
That's how you do it boys. Get in, get the job done, get out.	58	7
Nice move Mr Putin, keep the globalist NWO trash guessing and confused...	58	4
Top 5 comments on video 3: 'Palmyra recaptured by Syrian Army from ISIS (EXCLUSIVE)'		
Trump for 2 Terms	75	13
eh, the suadis will just deploy more troops to that location in about a week and they'll take it over again. if you want to extinguish the fire, you'll have to aim for the core, not the flame.	66	16
Now don't get your asses kicked out again	28	6
fuck Muslims	27	27
Daesh=Pigfucks	21	0

Conclusion

Our analysis of RT's visual narratives of Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict on YouTube revealed the use of a range of affect and emotive stimuli, which were layered across the visual, textual and audio features of the broadcast, and reiterated in different formats, by different commentators. Affective investment was stimulated in the first place by a clear framing of the events under report as significant, immediate and personalised: rational statements about the importance of the latest developments were complemented by 'breaking news' branding; violent visual imagery; dramatic audio soundtracks; and personalised eye-witness accounts. Emotional appeals were made with a similar layering of production techniques. The identities of actors involved in the conflict on the ground were normatively loaded, and their visual representations on-screen were similarly emotively resonant – represented clearly as victims (refugees) or perpetrators (anti-government forces) of violence. In a broader sense, such actors were slotted within an unambiguous narrative where RT implied that the Syrian conflict was stoked by extremists and their 'Western' apologists, but tempered by the proportional, legally-based and rational involvement of Russia.

Russia's intervention in the conflict was further represented by means of clear emotional-rationalist argumentation, based primarily on claims to legal and moral legitimacy. At the start of the conflict, this was based around the procedural propriety and proportionality of Russia's intervention. At the withdrawal announcement, their basis was Russia's role (personified in Putin) in stimulating multilateral peace talks, and effectively achieving humanitarian and state security objectives. By 2017, the focus was on Russia's resolute involvement in securing a site of global cultural significance, in the face of significant impediments.

The results of our social media analysis demonstrate that RT's YouTube audiences were affectively invested in RT's visual narratives of the Syrian conflict. Crucial affective investments were shown to be anger towards US foreign policy in the Middle East; respect and gratitude for Russia and Putin; distrust of 'Western' institutions and openness to conspiracy theories; and finally, a feeling of support towards Russia's military masculinity. These respond to RT's affective and emotive visual narrative of the Syrian conflict, whereby the audience's comments reflect RT's characterisations of actors, events, actions, and their attribution of blame and causality for conflict in Syria. This suggests RT's YouTube audience accepts and consents to Russian claims to be legitimately intervening in Syria.

Affective investments constitute one of the core mechanisms by which narratives come to influence peoples' understandings of contemporary global politics. Our research has contributed to research in this area in several ways. First, conceptually we have built upon the work of Solomon by placing our focus not on linguistic narratives in the realm of traditional print and broadcast media but on visual narratives projected on social media sites. In bringing work on visual global politics into conversation with work on affective investments we have highlighted the importance of analysing the intersections of multimedia and emotions in the digital age. Here, we have demonstrated how the study of visual media can be enriched by studying not only its content but also the site of its audience. As audience interaction and comments are integral to the function of social media sites, studying what people say in response to media they view online provides an important insight into the everyday spaces of meaning making and affective investment that shape how people perceive some actors and actions in global politics to be legitimate and others

as not. Second, we have furthered contemporary research by providing a framework for studying digital multimedia content and audience affective investments: one that other studies of narratives and visual media can hopefully draw and build upon. Third, studies of affective investment have so far been focused on the US and support for the War on Terror (Solomon 2012; 2014), and our analysis of RT's visual narration of the Syrian conflict and how audiences feel emotions towards Russian military intervention provides a novel empirical contribution beyond the US.

RT's visual narration of the Syrian conflict was effective not only because of what their YouTube videos contained but because of how that content resonated with the audiences' feelings about the world and the actors within it. In the digital age, social media comments on digital visual media can provide insights into how audiences are affectively invested in war and conflict, particularly when it comes to claiming legitimacy for key actors' courses of action. Research at the intersections of IR, media, and audience studies (da Silva and Crilley 2017; Gillespie et al. 2010; Pears 2016) provides a foundation for investigating the political significance of visual narratives of global politics. Given that the power of narratives and visual media lies not only in their content, but in how they make audiences feel, it is imperative that future studies account for the site of audiences and their affective investments in the media they view.

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Table 2: Emotions towards Russian intervention (combined comments on video 1, 2 and 3)

Table 3: Top 5 comments on each RT video