

## **Critical Discourse Analysis of News Reports: A Case Study of Sarin Attack in Khan al-Assal**

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### **□ ABSTRACT □**

This paper attempts to investigate the manipulative role of media discourse through examining the coverage of the Syrian crisis in CNN, RT, and the Syrian Satellite Channel (SSC), taking the chemical attack launched by the terrorist groups in Khan al-Assal as an analytical example. The paper attempts to critically assess the way the Syrian Crisis is covered in media reports from a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, focusing on how a particular event is presented by different channels embracing different ideologies. In other words, it is more interested in examining the structure of the news report both schematically and thematically, on the one hand, and the way journalists construct their reports to serve their political agendas, on the other. Consequently, the main objective is to examine how power relations are manifested in the news report, and how media discourse plays a vital role in the construction and reconstruction of power relations and the shaping of the public agenda. Dealing with media discourse as a communicative event, the study will be mainly interested in the linguistic and structural properties of the media report. Aspects of televised news such as camera angle, images, videos, and tone will be ignored, and only the text of the news report will be analyzed.

The three news reports in the present case study will be analyzed both thematically and schematically. Using Macrorules, the ultimate objective of this paper is to extract, examine and analyze the discursive tools and strategies each of these channels uses to impose their ideologies and political agendas over the public.

**Key Words:** CDA, News Report, Syrian Crisis, Discursive Strategies, Power Relations, Thematic Structures, Schematic structures

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## تحليل الخطاب النقدي للتقارير الإخبارية: الهجوم بغاز السارين على خان العسل أنموذجا

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### □ ملخص □

يتناول هذا البحث دور التلاعب الذي يقدمه الخطاب الإعلامي خدمةً للأجندة السياسية لوسائل الإعلام من خلال دراسة تغطية الأزمة السورية في محطات السي إن إن و آر تي والقناة الفضائية السورية بالإشارة إلى الهجوم الكيماوي الذي قامت به المجموعات الإرهابية في خان العسل بوصفه أنموذجا تحليلياً. تسعى الدراسة - بإتباع مقاربة نقدية للخطاب الإعلامي - لتقييم آلية عرض محطات تلفزة مختلفة تتبنى إيديولوجيات متباينة لحدثٍ محدد. إن البحث معنيٌّ بالدرجة الأولى ببنية التقرير الإعلامي من الناحيتين الثيماتية (الموضوع) و التشرحية (المخطط) من جهة والآلية التي يتبعها الصحفيون في إعداد تقاريرهم الصحفية خدمةً لسياسات المؤسسات الإعلامية العاملين فيها من جهة أخرى. وعليه، يكمن هدف البحث الرئيس في إظهار آلية عمل علاقات الهيمنة في التقرير الإعلامي، والدور المحوري الذي يلعبه الخطاب السياسي في صياغة هذه العلاقات وإعادة صياغتها، من خلال التركيز على جملة من الأدوات اللغوية/الإعلامية مثل العنونة والحذف (الإلغاء) وغيرها من الاستراتيجيات. سيتم من خلال هذه الدراسة تحليل ثلاثة تقارير إعلامية من الناحية التشرحية والثيماتية بهدف استخراج وتحليل الأدوات اللغوية/الإعلامية التي تستخدمها كل من المحطات المذكورة سابقاً لفرض إيديولوجيتها على الرأي العام.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تحليل الخطاب النقدي، علاقات الهيمنة، البنية الثيماتية، البنية التشرحية.

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## Introduction

This paper aims to investigate the manipulative role of media discourse through examining the coverage of the Syrian crisis in CNN, RT, and the Syrian Satellite Channel (SSC), taking the chemical attack launched by the terrorist groups in Khan al-Assal as an analytical example. The paper attempts to critically assess the way the Syrian Crisis is covered in media reports from a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective. The study does not tackle the common questions of impartiality and bias; rather, it focuses on how a particular event is presented by different channels embracing different ideologies. In other words, it is more interested in examining the structure of the news report and the way journalists construct their reports to serve their political agendas. Consequently, the main objective is to examine how power relations are manifested in the news report, and how media discourse plays a vital role in constructing and reconstructing power relations and shaping the public agenda. Dealing with media discourse as a communicative event, the study will be mainly concerned with the linguistic and structural properties of the media report. Aspects of televised news- such as camera angle, images, videos, and tone- will be ignored, and only the text of the news report will be analyzed.

## Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis is a fairly new term mainly concerned with the way power relations and ideology shape discourse and, conversely, with the constitutive role of discourse in producing and reproducing knowledge, social identities, and social relations. van Dijk (1998: 1) defines CDA as "a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context". In this sense, CDA views discourse as a social phenomenon which not only presents social practices, but also constitutes, constructs, and reconstructs them. However, unlike noncritical approaches to discourse analysis focusing primarily on form-function correlations (see Brown and Yule 1986, Paul Gee 1999 and Wodak and Mayer 2008), CDA is mainly preoccupied with social practices not merely in terms of social relations, but rather in terms of their "implications for things like status, solidarity and distribution of social goods and power" (Paul Gee 1999: 68). Thus, the aim of any CDA analysis is to systematically explore the often opaque relationships of causality and determination between discursive practices, events, and texts, on the one hand, and the wider social, cultural and political structures along with the relations and processes pertaining to them, on the other (Fairclough 1993: 135). Hence, the aim of CDA is to uncover the hidden relationships holding between a given society and the language of its members.

## Media Power

The study of power relations and how they are enacted and reproduced in discourse, media discourse in particular, constitutes an essential part of CDA research. Being largely linguistic and discursive in nature, power relations can be exerted in daily life through any kind of communicative events (see Foucault 1980). However, power is not, as most people believe, a possession owned by individuals or institutions; it is rather perceived as a network of connections and relations among individuals, groups or institutions manifested in practice in the form of social and political dominance and control. As Dijk (1995: 10) puts it, such networks of power relations entitle a more powerful group to dominate and control not only the actions but also the minds of a less powerful one by virtue of their "privileged access to socially valued resources, such as force, wealth, income, knowledge, or status". These practices naturally and necessarily lead to the inevitable emergence of

Centers of Power controlled by the elites. As a result of its undeniable pervasive power of persuasion and its role in shaping the public opinion and setting the agenda, the media form one of the most important Centers of Power that continuously strives to control and dominate the minds and actions of the *less privileged groups* through its unlimited, mostly exclusive, access to the socially valued resources. However, it is always worthwhile to analyze power in relation to various forms of counter resistance by the dominated groups. The present study adopts this view in order to uncover the forms of social and political power abuse exercised by the western media centers represented by CNN reporting the Syrian crisis and the discursive linguistic structures used to achieve this goal. It also aims at investigating the counter discursive structures used by the national Syrian media agencies, represented by SSC, in order to resist this social and political power abuse. RT is included in this study as a neutral media agency that could be considered as a no man's land regarding the Syrian crisis.

As a significant center of power, media is undoubtedly a valuable, and sometimes the only source of knowledge for hundreds of millions around the globe. This very fact makes it an important tool for the setting and resetting of the public agenda, and manufacturing public consent. This can be activated and enacted in discourse, according to Dijk (1995, 2012), primarily by means of two essential strategies, namely: control and access. Control, as an act of exercising power, is characterized by being indirect and symbolic when it targets the minds, not the actions, of the controlled group. Nonetheless, it becomes direct when it influences the attitudes and opinions of people and persuades them to take action. For instance, the massive influx of thousands of fundamentalist Jihadists into Syria has been mediated by the biased extensive, mostly fabricated, coverage of the Syrian crisis by dozens of Arab and Western media agencies. While claiming their right of informing their audience, media institutions such as the **BBC**, **CNN**, **France 24**, **The Washington Post**, **The Times**, among others, have manipulated the truth and reality to suit their political agendas and serve their own ideologies.

### **Dijk's Macrostructures**

Dijk's model of text structuring (Dijk and Kintch 1983, Dijk 1986, 1988 and 1992) operates at both the Microstructure and Macrostructure levels. The Microstructures operate locally and involve the analysis of words, sentences, and connectedness between sentences. The Macrostructures, on the other hand, are concerned with analyzing the themes or topics of a text; they define the overall global coherence of discourse. This global level of discourse captures and represents the two essential types of conventional knowledge structures that exist in memory, namely, the semantic (thematic) and formal (schematic) structures of discourse. The former is concerned with organizing the content of the text, while the latter with its schematic form.

The three news reports in the present case study will be analyzed both thematically and schematically. Using Macrorules such as Deletion, Generalization and Reconstruction, the Macropropositional structures, themes, of each news report will be identified and analyzed. As for news schema defined by Dijk (1986: 155) as the "abstract structural properties of discourse, as representations, and as socially shared systems of rules, norms or strategies for the use of news", the conventional hierarchical organization of the news report is shown in Figure-1 below.

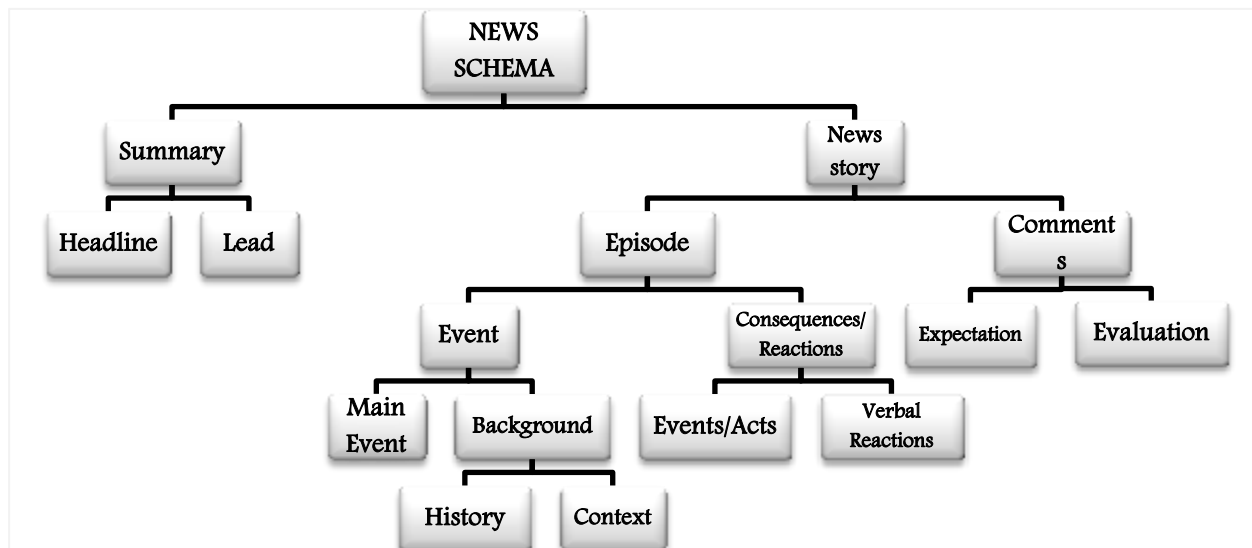


FIGURE-1: van Dijk's news schema

As Figure-1 illustrates, the news report consists primarily of a Summary and a News Story. The Summary includes Headline, typically marked by large bold letter type and placed on top of the news report to attract the attention of the reader and signal the most important information of the report, and Lead, the function of which is to add additional details to the Headline. The News Story, on the other hand, includes Episode and Comments. Each Episode has its Events and Consequences. The Event, in turn, encapsulates the Main Event and Background. As a salient feature of any news report, the Main Event constitutes the most recent news related to the report. It is usually followed by the Background section which subsumes both present and past related experiences. This present-past dichotomy is represented in terms of History and Context, respectively. While History deals with the past context that leads to the actual situation and its events, Context, as Dijk (1986: 164) points out, "covers all the information in the news report about the actual situation in which the main news event takes place". Consequences as a subcategory of Episode, further consists of Events/Acts and Verbal Reactions. It is concerned with how the news event affects the actual world. The Verbal Reactions category deals with information on the quoted declarations and statements of the immediate participants who have opinions or comments on the news event the report is covering. Events/Acts category helps cover any other relevant reactions. The final section of any news report is Comment, which consists of Expectation and Evaluation. It is concerned with the speaker's evaluative opinions about the actual news event and the formulation of possible expected consequences.

### Sarin Attack in Khan al-Assal

The following reports cover the press conference of Russia's UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin (for full conference, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6yVqO4iYEuM>). In this conference, Churkin announces that Russia has submitted an analysis by Russian experts to the UN confirming that the Syrian opposition used chemical weapons in Khan al-Assal near Aleppo. The analysis was sent to the UN on the ninth of July 2013, though the actual attack took place on March 2013. The channels CNN, RT, and SSC covered this event, and they were chosen for analysis because of their different ideological backgrounds. CNN, the American channel, is anti-governmental, RT, the Russian channel, is pro-governmental, while SSC, Syria's state-run TV is obviously governmental. What

follows are the actual reports downloaded from the official website of each channel CNN: <https://www.cnn.com>, RT English: <https://www.rt.com> and the Syrian Satellite Channel: <https://www.syriaonline.sy>.



## Russia to U.N.: Chemical weapons 'clearly' used in Syria

By CNN Staff

July 10, 2013 -- Updated 1132 GMT (1932 HKT)

### Chemical weapons used by Syria?

#### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Russia's U.N. ambassador says evidence shows sarin was used in Syria
- "Every reason to believe" it was the rebels, he says
- Syria's government and rebels have accused each other of using chemical weapons
- Last month, the White House said Syria crossed a "red line" with use of chemical weapons

(CNN) -- A team of Russian experts has found that chemical weapons were "clearly" used in Syria, Moscow's U.N. ambassador said Tuesday.

"There is every reason to believe that it was armed opposition fighters who used the chemical weapons in Khan al-Assal," Vitaly Churkin said.

The experts visited Khan al-Assal, where Syria claimed rebels had used chemical weapons in a March attack. At the time, rebels **accused Syria** of using chemical weapons in another part of the country. Both sides denied the claims.

"The results of the analysis clearly indicate that the ordnance used in Khan al-Assal was not industrially manufactured and was filled with sarin," Churckin said Tuesday.

In April, U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said the "United States has evidence that the chemical weapon sarin has been used in Syria on a small scale."

Last month, the White House accused Syria of **crossing a "red line"** with its use of chemical weapons against its people.

Throughout the crisis in Syria, Russia has been **at odds with** the United States and many other countries calling for tough action against the Syrian regime.



## Russian inquiry to UN: Rebels, not Army, behind Syria Aleppo sarin attack

Published time: July 09, 2013 16:22

Edited time: July 10, 2013 09:05

Samples taken at the Syrian town where chemical weapons were allegedly used indicate that it was rebels - not the Syrian army - behind the attack, Russia's UN envoy Vitaly Churkin has said.

Russia has handed over the analyzed samples to the UN, he added.

*"I have just passed the analysis of samples taken at the site of the chemical attack to the UN Secretary General (Ban Ki-moon),"* Churkin said on Tuesday.

Evidence studied by Russian scientists indicates that a projectile carrying the deadly nerve agent sarin was most likely fired at Khan al-Assal by the rebels, Churkin pointed out.

*"It was determined that on March 19 the rebels fired an unguided missile Bashair-3 at the town of Khan al-Assal, which has been under government control. The results of the analysis clearly show that the shell used in Khan al-Assal was not factory made and that it contained sarin,"* he said.

Churkin added that the contents of the shell “*didn’t contain chemical stabilizers in the toxic substance,*” and therefore “*is not a standard chemical charge.*” The RDX - an explosive nitroamine commonly used for industrial and military applications - found in the warhead was not consistent with what the armed forces use.

According to Moscow, the manufacture of the ‘Bashair-3’ warheads started in February, and is the work of Bashair al-Nasr, a brigade with close ties to the Free Syrian Army. Churkin stressed that unlike other reports which have been handed to the UN, the samples were taken by Russian experts at the scene, without any third party involvement.

More than 30 people died in the **Khan al-Assal incident** in the northern province of Aleppo in March. Damascus was the first to ask for the UN investigation, accusing opposition fighters of launching a chemical weapon attack. Syrian rebel groups denied the accusations, in turn blaming government forces.

However, the UN investigation has largely become stalled after a group of Western nations insisted on launching an inquiry into a separate case of alleged chemical weapons use in Homs in December 2012. The inquiry requires access to military objects, which Damascus has been unwilling to give.

The UN has also decided to exclude Russian and Chinese experts from the investigation team, with **Syria protesting** this decision.

So far, the UN commission of inquiry for Syria **has not found** any conclusive evidence proving that either side of the conflict used chemical weapons. This is despite several reports submitted by the US, UK and France, which claim to show that Syrian President Bashar Assad’s forces used such weapons.



### **Moscow: Russia submitted to UN analysis confirming Syrian opposition's use of chemical weapons**

Russia's Permanent Representative to the UN, Vitaly Churkin, said on Tuesday that Moscow is exerting efforts with the UN Security Council to facilitate UN experts' access into Syria to investigate the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian opposition on March 19th in Khan al-Assal in Aleppo countryside.

At a press conference following the UN Security Council's session, Churkin said that Russia has submitted its analyses to the UN, adding that the analyses confirm that the Syrian opposition fighters had used chemical weapons in Aleppo.

He stressed that issue of granting access to the UN experts into Syria is up to the Syrian authorities and not the Security Council.

Churkin considered Syria's invitation to the UN experts to visit Syria as a "positive act."

He pointed out that there is progress in communication between the Syrian government the UN concerning granting the UN experts access into Syria, stressing the necessity of translating this progress on the ground.

Churkin noted that Russia and China are in agreement on the issue of the use of chemical weapons.

He said that the issue of the use of chemical weapons in Aleppo countryside will not affect the U.S.-Russian efforts to hold an international conference on Syria, and Moscow will not halt its efforts with its allies to hold the conference.

The Russian official pointed out that the G8 Summit's statement last month stated that there must be an investigation into the use of chemical weapons in Syria and then referring to the UN Security Council for assessment.

Churkin added that the Sarin gas which was discovered in Khan al-Assal was used via locally-made rockets and it did not comply with the traditional industrial standards, pointing out that it was made inside the Syrian territories.

As noted earlier, the above news reports will be analyzed both thematically and schematically along the following lines.

### **Thematic Analysis**

In Discourse Analysis, the theme or topic of a given discourse subsumes the sum of propositions expressed in that discourse. In order to establish and analyze the thematic structure of the three news reports in this study, the Macrorules of Deletion, Generalization and Construction will be used, whereby certain propositions will be deleted, others will be substituted by more general and abstract ones, and, where necessary, new ones will be constructed to describe a complex event. In this context, however, it is important to mention that the construction of themes is mostly a subjective endeavor in which we usually focus on the propositions that best serve the purpose of this study. Based on this, the thematic structures of the three news reports are constructed in Table-1, 2, and 3 below.

**TABLE-1:Thematic Structure of CNN's Report**

- 
- (1). Chemical weapons clearly used in Syria
  - (2). Churkin: Armed opposition fighters used chemical weapons in Khan al-Assal
  - (3) a. Syria claimed rebels used chemical weapons
    - b. Rebels accused Syria of using chemical weapons in other parts
    - c. Both sides denied
  - (6). Churkin: the ordnance was not industrially manufactured
  - (7). Hagel: US has evidence that sarin is used in Syria
  - (8). White House: Syria crossed a "red line"
  - (9). Russia is at odds with the US and many other countries regarding the Syrian crisis
- 

**TABLE-2:Thematic Structure of RT's Report**

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- (1). Rebels –not Syrian army- behind the sarin attack in Khan al-Assal
  - (2). Russia handed analyzed samples to UN
  - (3). a. rebels fired 'Bashair-3' missile containing sarin in Aleppo
    - b. the shell was not factory made
    - c. the RDX is not consistent with what the Syrian army use
  - (4). The manufacturer is an ally brigade of the Free Syrian Army
  - (5). The samples were taken by Russian experts at scene
  - (6). 30 people died in Khan al-Assal incident
  - (7). a. Damascus asked for UN investigation accusing rebels
    - b. rebels denied and blamed the government forces
-



- weapons
- (8). western nations call for an inquiry with access to military objects and Syria refuses
  - (9). UN excludes Russian and Chinese experts
  - (10). UN commission hasn't found evidence for the use of chemical weapons
  - (11). US, UK and France claim Assad's forces used such weapons

**TABLE-3: Thematic Structure of SSC's Report**

- UN
- (1). Russia facilitates UN experts' access to Syria
  - (2). The experts will investigate the opposition use of chemical weapons in Khan al-Assal
  - (3). Russia submitted an analysis confirming the Syrian opposition use of chemical weapons
  - (4). Granting access to UN experts is up to the Syrian government
  - (5). Syria's invitation to UN experts is a "positive act"
  - (6). Progress in communication between the Syrian government and the UN
  - (7). Russia and China are in agreement
  - (8). Chemical weapons will not affect the US-Russian efforts
  - (9). G8 summit states that there must be an investigation
  - (10). Locally-made rockets with sarin were used in Khan al-Assal

### **Schematic Analysis**

The thematic Macrostructures and schematic properties form an interface representation of the news report in the sense that the Macropropositions flesh out the schematic categories of the report. In other words, the former captures the content, while the latter reflects the form. Schematic categories such as History, Circumstances, and Verbal Reactions assign functions to Macropropositions. This can be clearly seen in Figure-2, which represents the news schema of the CNN, RT and SSC reports.

News schema

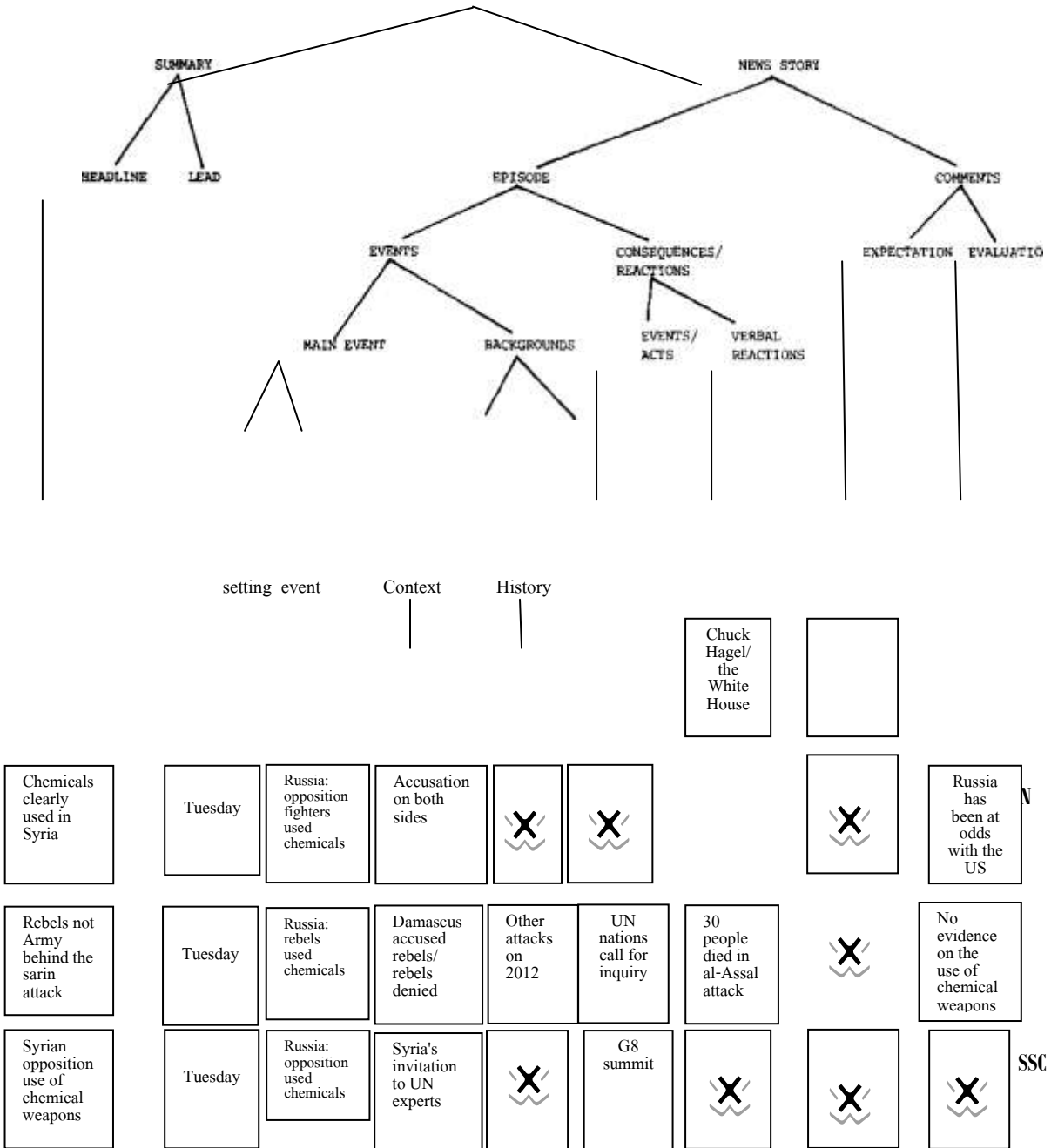


Figure-2: News schema of CNN, RT and SSC reports

**Critical Analysis**

The ultimate objective of this paper is to extract, examine and analyze the discursive tools and strategies each of these channels uses to impose their ideologies and political agendas over the public. A critical examination of the thematic and schematic structures of the three reports reveals that Headlining, Prominence and Elimination are the most essential discursive tools used by the three channels. As manifestations of Dominance, these three strategies will be examined in the three reports.

**A. Headlining****CNN: Russia to U.N.: Chemical weapons 'clearly' used in Syria****RT: Russian inquiry to UN: Rebels, not Army, behind Syria Aleppo sarin attack****SSC: Moscow: Russia submitted to UN analysis confirming Syrian opposition's use of chemical weapons**

The CNN's headline mentions one part of the main story; the use of chemical weapons; and excludes the second which blames the armed groups for launching the chemical attack. Conveniently, the passive construction serves to conceal the identity of the agent. Furthermore, the use of the word "*clearly*" marked between inverted commas cues the audience to read the report in a particular way, casting doubts on the credibility of the Russian investigation from the very beginning. In other words, the CNN headline conceals the responsibility of the armed groups for launching the attack, on the one hand, and invites their audience to perceive the report from their own perspective, on the other.

On the contrary, both RT's and SSC's headlines use the active voice to emphasize the identity of the agent, i.e., the perpetrator of the chemical attack. This has been further emphasized in the RT's headline by using the focusing structure of exclusion "Rebels, not Army.". The use of this structure not only focuses attention on the opposition groups as the perpetrators of the attack but also excludes the army's responsibility at the same time. Similarly, the SSC's headline stresses the fact that the opposition groups used chemical weapons in Aleppo. The use of "*analysis*" and "*confirming*" create the impression that the evidence provided is undoubtedly beyond contestation.

Such disparity in the headlines of the three channels indicate that headlines are often ideologically loaded with implications that verbalize the channel's viewpoint and cue the audience to view or read the news from a particular standpoint.

**B. Prominence**

As a strategy, prominence is used by news channels and other media institutions to give salience to certain issues or events so that they become part of the public agenda. A closer look at the thematic structures of the reports (Tables-1, 2 and 3) reveals that the hierarchical organization of the topics varies drastically from one channel to another. After announcing the main topic, the CNN report directly moves to list a series of accusations against the Syrian government for allegedly using chemical weapons in other parts of the country. The same topic has been covered by the RT report; nonetheless, it is downplayed by the Russian channel to occupy the seventh position. Not surprisingly, these allegations are not mentioned at all in the SSC report, being considered as baseless allegations or more as hearsay.

It is also noticeable that in the Verbal Reactions section the CNN report cites only the anti-government statements of American officials and ignores any other reactions, including those of Syrian officials.

The RT report gives prominence to the analysis and findings of the investigation. Topics 1-5 all focus on the inquiry of the Russian experts. The use of credibility strategies and precision in presenting details- such as the name of the missile "Bashir-3", the date of manufacture, the name of the brigade and the number of casualties after the attack- serve to create the impression that the report is an objective scientific account of the event, compared to the highly politicized western version. This has emphatically been reinforced through the use of high profile scientific lexis. The occurrence of "studied", "scientists", "projectile", "nerve agent", "analysis", "chemical stabilizers", "toxic" and "chemical charge" is clearly indicative of the scientific nature of the report and the procedures followed in the analysis.

The SSC report , however, gives prominence to Churckin's responses to the questions raised by journalists after the report rather than to the main story of the report handed to the UN. In other words, prominence is given to Churckin's political statements rather than to the content and the findings of the analysis cited in the report. The main event of the Russian analysis featured only in two of the ten topics discussed in the Syrian report, the third and the last (see Table-3).

### C. Elimination

Elimination gives any news agency the power to eliminate undesirable news stories that are inconsistent with their political agenda. As a strategy of dominance, elimination can be applied both thematically and schematically. Thematically, the SSC report, for instance, eliminates the accusations leveled against the Syrian government. Schematically, the channel eliminates the History, Verbal Reactions, Expectations and Evaluation categories as unnecessary information.

### Conclusion

The paper focuses on how a particular news event is presented in the news reports of different media channels embracing different ideologies. By focusing on the structural and linguistic properties of the news report, it critically demonstrates the manipulative role of media discourse in the construction of power relations and the shaping of the public agenda.

This manipulative role can be clearly seen in the hierarchical organization of the themes in each report. In each report, certain themes are given salience while others are demoted and, at times, eliminated altogether. The discursive strategies of dominance (Headlines, Prominence and Elimination) are used by the three channels in order to impose their ideologies on the public. In this regard, SSC has been found to rely heavily on Elimination, while CNN and RT seem to rely more on Headlines and Prominence.

Schematically speaking, many of the schematic categories of the news report were found to be missing in the SSC report. In spite of the fact that the report deals with a major issue in the Syrian crisis, the alleged use of WMDs, the SSC seems to lack access to valuable information from influential sources both at the national and international levels, and consequently relies heavily on Elimination as a discursive tool. This might be attributed to lacking experience and training and not having a firm grip on the structural properties underlying the news report as well.

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