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# Russian Disinformation on the White Helmets

A discourse analysis

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## Abstract

The military intervention of Russia in Syria and the disinformation that accompanied this intervention have had a large influence on both the course of the Syrian war and on the Syrian population. This research assesses narratives regarding the White Helmets with the question: *'To what extent have the two narratives regarding the White Helmets changed between 2014 and 2021?'.* Three time frames were selected in which the data in the hashtag #WhiteHelmets on Twitter was analysed. Additionally, the YouTube videos and articles that are linked in those tweets were included in the analysis. A framing analysis was conducted to uncover the frames within the two narratives. In the first and third time period the pro-White Helmets narrative was dominant, which included praise for the White Helmets, calls to action to support the White Helmets and urging western governments to take action. In the second time period the anti-White Helmets narrative was dominant, which included marking mainstream media and western governments as sources of propaganda, labelling the White Helmets as terrorists and labelling attacks as staged or as false flag operations. Two shifts in the narrative were identified, which correspond to the shifts of the Russian military involvement in Syria, implying a correlation between Russian involvement and the disinformation. This supports the notion that Russia set up the disinformation campaign to cover for the systematic bombing of civilians in Syria. Limitations of the research include a focus on the English language and a focus on Twitter, as well as limited time frames. Future research might focus on including other languages and other social media platforms, assessing how the disinformation influenced the White Helmets and looking at the influence of the war in Ukraine.

*Keywords: Disinformation, White Helmets, Discourse Analysis, Framing, Russia, Syrian war*

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## 1. Introduction

My first encounter with the White Helmets was in a course where we discussed peacebuilding. The White Helmets are humanitarian aid workers who rescue people from the rubble after a bomb hits (White Helmets, n.d.). Their story engaged me, so I started searching more information about them. They received funding from many states and were praised internationally by Western audiences. They were even nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. Not much later many countries suspended their funding as there was controversy about how the White Helmets were spending the money they received. However, there is more to this story than it seems. In the years leading up to the controversy, the White Helmets had been subject to a disinformation campaign set up by Russian and Syrian officials (Chulov, 2020).

For most people, the influence of Russia outside of its national borders is often unknown. However, for experts on Russia or anyone interested in Russia's foreign affairs news about Russia spreading disinformation comes as no surprise (De Witte, 2021). Disinformation is information that is intentionally incorrect and is meant to be misleading (Jack, 2017). In spreading this disinformation, it is not Russia's aim to convince people this information is valid, but instead Russia aims to cause confusion (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). In 2020, Russia was able to spread disinformation about COVID-19 in Europe (Volkskrant, 2020), about the elections in the Central African Republic (Vlaskamp, 2020), and about the White Helmets in Syria (Coleman, 2020). And recently, the Russian media has been full of disinformation about the war in Ukraine (EenVandaag, 2022).

In addition to rescuing people from the rubble, the White Helmets, also known as Syrian Civil Defence, also aim to help in rebuilding Syria. To give an example, they do so through projects that provide essential services, such as repairing and maintaining electrical grids, sewage works and water mains. Most recently, they have also provided aid in the Covid-19 crisis. They aim to abide by the principles of humanity, solidarity and impartiality, which are based on international humanitarian law (White Helmets, n.d.). However, Russia's disinformation campaign paints a different picture, namely that of the White Helmets as terrorists. This campaign started in 2015 when Russia decided to support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad by intervening militarily (Solon, 2017). It used disinformation as a cover for its own actions, such as bombing civilians and carrying out chemical attacks (The Syria Campaign, 2017; Coleman, 2020). According to The Syria Campaign (2017), on Twitter, one of the main platforms where the disinformation is spread, content against the White Helmets is more prevalent than content supporting the White Helmets.

Information can be found as to how this disinformation is spread (The Syria Campaign, 2017; Starbird & Wilson, 2020; Solon, 2017), but publications analysing the discourse regarding the White Helmets can hardly be found online. Therefore, this research will try to study the conflicting narratives concerning the White Helmets and look at how they have changed over time.

## **1.1 Societal Relevance**

Reviewing these narratives is important, as it could uncover more about Russia and its power in the world. The intervention of Russia was a turning point in the Syrian war. The war in Syria started when the government became increasingly violent towards peaceful protesters. In response, the Free Syrian Army was formed in opposition to the al-Assad government. The conflict escalated further when al Qaeda became involved in Syria, eventually under the name Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (Hamilton, Miller & Stein, 2020). At the start of 2015, the government opposition, including both terrorist organisations and rebels, was gaining ground. If Russia had not interfered in September of 2015, the al-Assad regime might have been defeated (Eaton, 2017). However, from September 2015 on, the Syrian government and Russia were able to systematically retake cities all around Syria (Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), 2020).

The military intervention of Russia in Syria has prolonged the war and has had a detrimental effect on the population. According to CSIS (2020), Russia's approach in the Syrian war consisted of systematically targeting key civilian infrastructure in opposition-held areas, such as hospitals, schools, power plants, and electrical stations. In doing this, they weakened the military opposition, as well as reduced the support of the population for the opposition. A report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) (2017), published on the second anniversary of the Russian intervention, revealed that only 15% of its attacks were in terrorist-held areas, even though Russia claimed its aim was to defeat ISIS. In actuality, 85% of its attacks were in rebel-held areas, resulting in major material losses and many civilian casualties. SNHR (2017) reported a total of 5,233 civilian deaths and 707 attacks on civilian infrastructures, including mosques, medical facilities and educational facilities.

Not only has Russia's intervention had a significant effect on the population, but the intervention has also shown the increasing influence of Russia's power on the world stage and its ability to spread disinformation. Through filming their rescue missions, the White Helmets have collected evidence of Russia's attacks on civilians. This data, as well as their eye witness accounts,

have been used in investigations on war crimes by international organisations, such as the United Nations (UN), the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and by various human rights groups (The Syria Campaign, 2017). The Syria Campaign (2017) noted that continuing the disinformation against the White Helmets, allows Russia to call this evidence against them into question. To be precise, they claim the White Helmets are terrorists to discredit both the work they do and the evidence they collect. Due to this, Russia has obtained a *carte blanche* to continue its attacks in Syria. In light of this, it is important to better understand this disinformation campaign in order to bring into view how Russia has influenced the war in Syria. This will allow for a better understanding of the conflict in Syria and how foreign intervention can affect the course of a war. In addition, a better understanding of the disinformation campaign will allow social media companies to more effectively combat disinformation on their platforms.

In light of the war in Ukraine, this is more important than ever. As a consequence of the war, the Russian government passed a law making it illegal for citizens to spread information about the war that deviates from official reporting by the state media (EenVandaag, 2022). This means that creating a counter-narrative, one that will also reach within Russia, has become more challenging. Moreover, the war in Ukraine has increased the importance of dissecting the disinformation in the war in Syria, because history is repeating itself. As Lamensch (2022) points out, there are many parallels between the disinformation that is spread about Syria and Ukraine, namely disinformation is used to justify the war and to deny any war crimes.

## **1.2 Scientific Relevance**

The academic research regarding the White Helmets that has so far been done focusses mainly on how the disinformation is spread. Starbird and Wilson (2020) have researched how this disinformation campaign works across Twitter and YouTube specifically. They found that on these platforms content supporting the White Helmets is less common than content questioning the White Helmets. They further found that media sponsored by the Russian government bolsters content against the White Helmets through providing source content and through reinforcing videos of social media influencers. The Syria Campaign (2017) also conducted a Twitter-centred study with the help of Graphika, a social media intelligence firm. They focused on analysing tweets and were able to identify a few main actors who are responsible for spreading disinformation, such as Vanessa Beeley, Eva Bartlett and Sarah Abdallah. They assert that we should be aware that the

narrative against the White Helmets is currently dominant on Twitter, and they warn that this narrative could start spreading into mainstream discourse – if nothing is done.

This thesis aims to add to this debate by conducting an analysis that not only looks at the two narratives regarding the White Helmets, but also looks at how these narratives have changed over time. In this analysis, the aim is to identify what is being said about the White Helmets throughout three different periods of time. Additionally, this thesis aims to identify what methods are used in spreading disinformation about the White Helmets. In conducting this analysis, different types of sources will be included, such as broadcast media and social media, including various news websites, Twitter and Youtube.

### **1.3 Research Objective and Research Question**

This research intends to bring to light the discourse with respect to the two conflicting narratives regarding the White Helmets and how these narratives have changed over time. One narrative is put forward by Russia through an online social media campaign using media such as Twitter and broadcasting websites like Sputnik international and RT (formerly Russia Today) (The Syria Campaign, 2017). This narrative opposes the White Helmets and their claims of neutrality. The other narrative is put forward by the White Helmets themselves, and is reinforced by their supporters and Western media (Starbird & Wilson, 2020).

The question this research will aim to answer is: *‘To what extent have the two narratives regarding the White Helmets changed between 2014 and 2021?’* Four sub-questions have been formulated. The first question is intended to identify the actors involved in putting the two different narratives forward. When assessing the two narratives, it is important to look at who is advancing or influencing these narratives. The focus of this analysis will be non-state who actors are propagating the narratives. This includes, for example, owners of Twitter accounts on either side of the discourse or authors of articles on different news websites. The question posed is as follows: *‘Who are the actors in the two narratives regarding the White Helmets?’* The next two questions aim to make clear the two narratives regarding the White Helmets. In order to assess the way in which the narratives have changed, it is important to map out these narratives first. The second question is: *‘What is the discourse that Russia puts forward regarding the White Helmets in Syria?’* The third question is: *‘What is the discourse put forward by the White Helmets and their supporters?’* Lastly, this research aims to identify different methods that are used to spread disinformation about the

White Helmets. These methods of spreading disinformation are what Wilson, Zhou and Starbird (2018) call information operations. Therefore, the last question is: *'What information operations can be identified in the narrative opposing the White Helmets?'*

## **1.4 The Syrian War**

To understand the issue at hand, it is important to understand the context in which it takes place. Therefore, this subsection provides some background about Syrian war, including the timeline, the events and the actors that are involved.

Before the civil war broke out, Syria was struck by a highly destructive drought which sent two to three million people in rural areas into extreme poverty. Syria was unable to shield its citizens from the effects of the drought, which resulted in a population that was both hungry and impoverished. In March of 2011, protests started in order to bring attention to the lack of aid that the Syrian government provided in the crisis, as well as the general absolute power that the regime governed with (Polk, 2013). Swisspeace, Conflict Dynamics International and FarikBeirut.net (2016) note that local actors name both political and economic grievances when asked what they deem to be the causes of the conflict.

Ultimately, the civil war started in 2011 after several peaceful protest against the Assad government were violently disrupted by government forces (Hamilton, Miller & Stein, 2020). It was due to the violent disruptions of the regime that the protests gained widespread support (Malantowicz, 2013). The support for the movement was demonstrated through the riots that erupted all over Syria (Polk, 2013). According to Swisspeace et al. (2016), people were forced to take up arms against the government violence for their own protection. Additionally, due to high polarisation and weaponisation, it was impossible for citizens to stay neutral. Local actors remarked that not taking sides in the conflict would involve high security risks. As a consequence of polarisation and weaponisation, the war quickly escalated and became increasingly violent.

Several opposition forces were established, that were subsequently formed into coalitions in order to gain international support. The goal of this international intervention was to bring about a transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. Examples of the coalitions that were formed include the Free Syrian Army and the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. The Free Syrian Army was set up by former members of the government forces, who chose to support the protesting civilians (Malantowicz, 2013). Local actors pointed out that

involvement of the international community in the conflict was one of the drivers of conflict escalation. They specified that involvement of Iran, Russia, Turkey, the United States and Saudi Arabia had a negative impact on the conflict. Through financing weapons, they amplified weaponisation further, making the conflict all the more violent (Swisspeace et al., 2016). Van Dam (2017) describes how international support was fragmented and uncoordinated. He posits that due to this lack of coordination, the military opposition groups could not form a threat to the Syrian Armed Forces of Assad.

Some parties were not included in these coalitions, such as militant Islamist groups like the al-Nusra front, also known as the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda (Malantowicz, 2013). Where the civilian opposition opposed any elements of sectarianism in their demonstration, the Islamist and Jihadist opposition groups were heavily motivated by sectarianism and strongly added to the sectarian polarisation (Van Dam, 2017). In turn, the Assad regime used sectarianism to keep a hold on its power. The introduction of sectarianism in the Syrian war has had a negative impact, worsening the conflict, destabilising the rest of the Middle East and making it harder to negotiate a solution (Robinson et al., 2019). Additionally, the Islamist opposition was more coordinated and obtained more stable international support from countries like Qatar, which made these opposition groups more effective (Van Dam, 2017).

In April of 2013, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) became involved in the Syrian war, later renaming itself Islamic State (IS). IS became well known for its executions and excessive use of force, especially against minorities such as the Alawis (Van Dam, 2017). Even Al-Qaeda distanced itself from IS in 2014, labelling it as too radical (United States Institution of Peace (USIP), 2021). On the ground that IS had joined the fight, Western countries moved their focus to fighting IS. The opposition with whom they worked together was asked to shift their strategies correspondingly, despite the fact that for them the fight against the regime was equally as important. Ultimately, this strategy failed as the Syrian opposition wanted to determine its own plan of action (Van Dam, 2017).

By 2015, 1,500 armed groups took part in the war (Van Dam, 2017). At the start of that same year, the government opposition, including both terrorist organisations and rebels, was gaining ground. As mentioned previously, if Russia had not interfered in September of 2015, the Assad regime might have been defeated (Eaton, 2017). However, from September 2015 on, the Syrian government and Russia were able to systematically retake cities all around Syria (Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), 2020). Russia had been supporting the Syrian regime

throughout the war before militarily intervening in 2015. It provided material support for the purpose of suppressing the protest and publicly spoke out against the protests, labelling them as illegitimate (Rumer, 2019). Starting in 2015, it professed to be targeting terrorist groups such as IS with the aim of combatting extremism (USIP, 2021), but in spite of that have mainly targeted non-Islamist opposition to the regime through air strikes (ARK Group DMCC, 2016)

For Russia, interfering in the war meant returning as a player in the Middle East and resuming its involvement dating back to the era of Peter the Great (Rumer, 2019). The intervention was conducted on grounds of historical attachment, security and economic interest, but most importantly, had its roots in the political context of Russian foreign policy. It aimed to challenge the domination of the United States and its executive control over decision making in the Middle East, as well as show the United States and the European Union that Russia could not be marginalised nor isolated (Rumer, 2019).

In 2019 there was another noteworthy development in the war. American president Donald Trump decided to withdraw troops from northern Syria, resulting in military action by the Turkish government against the Kurdish militias in this area (Rumer, 2019). The Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People Protection Units (YPG) are the two main militia groups in northern Syria. Since the start of the war the Kurdish population in northern Syria was self-governing the area, after many years of marginalisation under the Assad government (ARK Group DMCC, 2016). Now that the Kurdish population was under threat of the Turkish government, the Kurds decided to work together with the government that long suppressed them. Together they were to combat the Turkish military action in the north of Syria. Later that month Russia brokered a peace deal between the Kurds, Turkey and the Syrian government, creating a buffer zone at the Turkish-Syrian border that acts as a safe zone. This buffer zone is still in force today (USIP, 2021).

Currently the Assad regime is not prepared to step down or negotiate any scenario in which it would depart and the opposition demands a solution in which power is shared within the government. This means that real peace negotiations are unattainable and that there is no end in sight for the war in Syria (Van Dam, 2017).

## **1.5 Considerations regarding bias and objectivity**

In light of the sensitive nature of the topic at hand, it is important to consider bias and objectivity. How do we determine what is true when two narratives put forward conflicting statements? How can we determine that the narrative countering the White Helmets is disinformation and the narrative supporting the White Helmets is rooted in truth? Those supporting the anti-White Helmet narrative would likely consider this research tainted by Western influences, while those supporting the White Helmet consider the other narrative tainted by Russian influences.

In this case, it is important to take into regard the evidence that exists to support the claims of the White Helmets and the lack of evidence to support the narrative put forward by the Russian and Syrian government. The White Helmets collect their evidence through filming their rescue missions, where they often capture evidence of Russia's attacks on civilians (The Syria Campaign, 2017). Bellingcat Investigation Team (2018) note that no evidence can be found that the White Helmets have been involved in any chemical attacks, whereas the Syrian government has been found guilty of committing 23 attacks using Chlorine and Sarin. Furthermore, 19 of the 22 claims that Bellingcat investigated surrounding the White Helmets' involvement in chemical attacks originated from sources controlled by the Russian government. For these 22 claims, only two pieces of verifiable evidence were provided, namely one photo and one short video. However, this supposed evidence cannot be directly linked to the White Helmets or to use of chemical weapons. All other evidence that was provided has been faked, manipulated or plagiarised (Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2018).

In addition to the evidence that exists, the way in which the anti-White Helmets narrative is built up also points to the intentional dissemination of false information. In the narrative countering the White Helmets circular reporting can be identified. Circular reporting comes about when one news outlet publishes information and another news outlet reprints this information. The first news outlet then cites the second news outlet as the original source for the information. Another form of circular reporting occurs when multiple news outlets report on the same piece of false information. This way it seems like this information is confirmed by multiple sources (Tavlin, 2015). Solon (2017) reports that in the anti-White Helmets narrative, the same small group of people are continually cited in articles. These people are regarded as experts by the community. The articles are then repackaged and connected to each other to make the information seem more reliable. Furthermore, The Syria Campaign (2017) found evidence of scheduled messaging regarding events

in the White Helmets narrative. Both of these facts point to the intentional dissemination of false information.

Thus, both the evidence and the way in which the information is disseminated point to a disinformation campaign against the White Helmets. It is for this reason that this research will continue to categorise the anti-White Helmets narrative as disinformation. In the chapter containing theoretical background, more research will be provided with regards to the Russian involvement and how this disinformation is spread.

## **2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review**

Chapter 2 will delve into the literature and provide a theoretical background for the topics discussed in the thesis. Firstly, theory on framing and how it relates to this research will be discussed. Subsequently, an inquiry will be conducted into disinformation and its spread online. Following that, the spread of Russian disinformation in particular will be discussed. The fourth subsection will examine the existing information on the disinformation regarding the White Helmets. Lastly, an overview will be provided of the different ways in which disinformation can be spread.

### **2.1 Framing**

To begin with, it is important to note that this thesis takes a constructivist approach. This ontology assumes reality is constructed and that people act based on these constructed convictions (Gregory et al., 2009). These convictions are formed and reproduced through certain frames; ‘frames are socially shared organising principles that meaningfully structure the social world’ (Matthes, 2010, p.124). Thus, frames are used when reality is constructed.

In large part, this research about the two narratives regarding the White Helmets is connected to framing. Frames enable individuals to apply structure to the world through socially shared principles, as frames allow one to detect, comprehend, and label events they experience. Furthermore, frames give significance to events. In doing this, frames can help to guide individuals towards certain actions (Benford and Snow, 2000). These frames are established through framing. Framing entails making certain facets of reality more salient in order to favour a certain narrative, thus creating those frames (Matthes, 2010). A narrative is a network of stories that enables individuals to give meaning to current events and aids in structuring information (Wilson et al., 2018). This means both narratives and frames aid in structuring information. However, a narrative is a large network of stories, whereas a frame is a socially shared organising principle that can be part of a narrative.

To show how narratives and framing manifest in society, we can take the example of the current conflicting narratives regarding refugees in the Netherlands. On the one hand, the narrative that is inclusive to refugees posits that all humans are equal and everybody should be welcome here. On the other hand, the narrative against refugees posits that refugees are harmful to our society and we should not let them in. Through framing, certain concepts within these narratives are made more

salient, thus creating frames. Those opposing refugees posit that these refugees are ‘stealing’ jobs and housing from people already living in the Netherlands, which makes them harmful to Dutch society. Thus, the refugees are stealing jobs is a way of framing within the narrative, as this concept is made salient. Alternatively, those who are inclusive to refugees emphasise humanity and human rights to argue that refugees are welcome here and point to the government systems as the cause for lack of housing. In this instance, the concept made salient, and therefore the frame, is the humanity and human rights.

Robert Entman theorised about the role of framing within news media. He posits that frames within news stories manifest in keywords, symbols, concepts or stereotyped images that are highlighted in a story, allowing people to gain understanding about the events that are reported. These manifestations of frames allow some facets of the event to become more salient, making sure that a specific interpretation of social life (an event, development, group) becomes recognizable and remembered in this way (Entman, 1991). According to Entman (1991), there are five ways to frame news stories: prioritizing conflicts, promoting personalisation, focus on consequences, moralising and ascribing responsibility. In his subsequent work, Entman (1993) elaborated on salience within framing. He states that frames point out certain fragments of information and emphasise this information. In doing this, the information is recognized quickly and remains for a longer period. This also means that the frame, meaning the way in which information is presented to an audience, influences how that audience processes the information they have received, and therefore, how they will act (Arowolo, 2017).

In this research there are two different narratives within which different frames can be identified. These narratives frame the events differently, creating contradicting frames. Therefore, two types of framing are especially important within this research. Benford and Snow (2000) mention *adversarial* framing. In this type of framing, protagonists and antagonists are moulded by outlining the boundaries between good and evil. They also talk about *counterframing*, which entails refuting the reasoning of another frame and providing alternative argumentation.

Matthes (2010) notes that framing is an ongoing process. This means that frames can change over time, not only in their frequencies, but also in their content. Gamson et. al. (1992) posits that this transformation of frames is embodied by social actors that compete with each other to advance their preferred frame. Within media, several groups and institutions go head to head to construct social reality. Benford and Snow (2000) shed light upon this as well, by emphasising that the processes inherent to framing cause frames to evolve constantly.

Framing analysis can be adopted when studying discourse by uncovering the frames that are used within the discourse. According to Gregory (as cited in Aitken and Valentine, 2014) discourse “refers to all the ways in which we communicate with one another, to that vast network of signs, symbols and practices through which we make our world(s) meaningful” (p. 303). Framing analysis is useful when looking at discourse, because framing aids in the construction of discourse and also helps one in processing the discourse (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Pan and Kosicki (1993) operationalise this method by laying out four dimensions that allow for gathering evidence of news and media framing of events. These four dimensions or structures are syntactical structures, script structures, thematic structures and rhetorical structures.

The *syntactical structures* are the way in which sentences are phrased and the way in which the new discourse is structured. For example, a headline is a powerful framing device, as it is the most salient and can nudge readers towards certain way of thinking about the event. Additionally, objectivity can be seen as a syntactical structure and can be used as a framing device in three ways: quoting experts or citing empirical data to claim validity, quoting official sources to assert authority and quoting a social deviant to dismiss other points of view (Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

As stated by Pan and Kosicki (1993), *script structure* is the way in which the narrative of the story is structured. In generic news articles this is commonly the ‘who, what, when, where, why and how’ of an event. In news media this is most used, because this way of structuring gives readers the idea that all the information about an event can be found in that text. Likewise, another example of script structure can be structuring the text chronologically.

*Thematic structures* refer to texts that do not report on one event. Instead they focus on an issue or topic and incorporate multiple events and statements that are connected to the topic. These types of texts contain an hypothesis that is tested within the story. Thus, a theme is presented and several pieces of evidence form the base of the article, while working toward a certain hypothesis (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Pan and Kosicki (1993) posit that a thematic structure “is a multilayer hierarchy with a theme being the central core connecting various subthemes as the major nodes that, in turn, are connected to supporting elements” (p. 61). An example of a possible theme within this study is terrorism, as this is a central notion in the discourse regarding the White Helmets. This theme can contain subthemes such as comparing the White Helmets to terrorist organisations or labelling the White Helmets as violent.

Lastly, *rhetorical structures* refer to the stylistic choices made by the author in relation to the effect they try to create. Examples of framing devices include metaphors, examples,

catchphrases, depictions, and visual images. Rhetorical framing devices are used to make stories more vivid, increase salience of an argument and to invoke images (Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

In addition to these four structures, *lexical choices* are also of importance. The lexical choices refer to the words that are chosen to represent an actor or event and can be part of both the syntactical structures or script structures (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). An example would be choosing to refer to Assad either as the president of Syria or referring to him as an authoritarian leader.

However, the operationalisation of framing analysis by Pan and Kosicki (1993) is not the only notable one. Snow and Benford (1988) also operationalise framing analysis through three framing tasks: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing and motivational framing. Where Pan and Kosicki (1993) focus more on form, Snow and Benford (1988) address function and content. *Diagnostic framing* concerns identifying an issue and determining the cause or responsibility. *Prognostic framing* deals with the solutions to these issues and discerning strategies, tactics and targets used. Often the diagnostic and prognostic framing correspond, as the proposed solutions flow from the causal attribution. Lastly, *motivational framing* refers to the way in which people are motivated to take action. This can be done through selective incentives, such as status, solidarity, material and moral incentives.

In this thesis, the operationalisations of Pan and Kosicki (1993) and Snow and Benford (1988) will be combined to uncover the frames within the narratives. How this will be applied in the analysis is discussed in section 3.3 'Data Analysis'.

## **2.2 Disinformation and its Spread Online**

As stated previously, framing entails making certain facets of reality more salient in order to favour a certain narrative, thus creating those frames (Matthes, 2010). Disinformation campaigns makes use of framing, since parts of information, albeit false information, are highlighted in order to create or advance their preferred narrative.

As mentioned before, disinformation is information that is intended to be incorrect and meant to be misleading (Jack, 2017). It is important to note that disinformation differs from misinformation. Whilst disinformation is intended to be incorrect, misinformation is accidentally incorrect (Lewandowsky et al., 2013). In this thesis the term disinformation will be used to describe

one of the two narratives studied, as there is evidence that the anti-White Helmets narrative is created with information that is intentionally incorrect.

Wilson, Zhou and Starbird (2018) use the term information operations to refer to the methods of spreading propaganda and disinformation that are used in order to influence others. Thus, information is used as a form of warfare. They argue that with the rise of social media, these information operations can be implemented more easily and are possibly more effective. For example, personal data is exploited in order to create exceptionally personalised posts which increases the appeal, making it more effective (Wilson et al., 2018). Garrett (2017) argues that another reason why information operations can be more effective using social media is because they can more easily manipulate polarisation and use the resulting extreme emotions for strategic purposes. Additionally, Mejias and Vokuev (2017) note that with the rise of technology, it is not only the state that is able to spread certain information through either broadcast or social media, but also ordinary citizens are able to do so through social media.

One of the reasons for using information operations or spreading disinformation is creating or manipulating a narrative on political grounds. Wilson et al. (2018) identified four types of narratives: strategic narratives, master narratives, counter-narratives, and anti-narratives. *Strategic narratives* are predominantly used in international relations and are meant to influence debates and mould behaviour of both international and domestic agents. *Master narratives* are focussed on the broader society. They are familiar to certain cultures and remain constant over time. Lastly, *counter-narratives and anti-narratives* are both narratives that conflict with an existing narrative. However, counter-narratives provide an alternative narrative in order to replace the current narrative. On the other hand, the anti-narratives aim to damage the existing narrative without providing a coherent alternative explanation.

Wilson et al. (2018) analysed narratives around the ‘Aleppo Boy’ who gained traction when he was saved from the rubble by the White Helmets after an airstrike by the Syrian government. In this case study they observed an anti-narrative, alternatively named an undermining narrative. The prevailing narrative was undermined through introduction of contrasting facts that were not compatible with the existing narrative. The aim was to cause confusion through an information operation tactic called ‘cognitive hacking’ (Wilson et al., 2018). Cognitive hacking involves altering a person’s perceptions of the world through the spreading of disinformation (Cybenko, Giani, & Thompson, 2002). The disinformation causes a disturbance as it contradicts existing

information, leading to distrust in those that provide information. The objective is to decrease trust in institutions, impair societies, and discourage political action (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014).

In addition to cognitive hacking, another type of information operation often used is questioning the authenticity or validity of information. This can be done through marking certain narratives as propaganda or through discrediting the source of information. This decreases the credibility of the source and therefore the narrative, which makes it possible to introduce an alternative narrative (Wilson et al., 2018).

Choudhury, Ng and Iamnitchi (2020) call attention to two more types of information operations: ‘spoofing’ and ‘astroturfing’. Spoofing can be subdivided into two categories, identity spoofing and information spoofing. Identity spoofing involves creating fake identities while information spoofing involves distorting information through falsification, suppression or amplification. Astroturfing concerns creating the illusion that there is a widespread support for a particular opinion or narrative through fabricating supporting messages. It is a very common disinformation strategy, as it can often be hard to distinguish fabricated support from authentic support.

Aside from understanding information operations, the ways in which disinformation is spread, it is also important to understand how information operations affect individuals, groups and societies. In their research, Nisbet and Kamenchuk (2019) explore the social and psychological side of disinformation, focusing on how and why people are influenced by disinformation. They examine three types of information operations: ‘identity grievance’, ‘information gaslighting’, and ‘incidental exposure’.

Identity grievance operations put emphasis on certain contrasting social identities in order to highlight grievances or lower trust in institutions (Nisbet & Kamenchuk, 2019). This is closely related to what Oberschall (2000) observed during the war in former Yugoslavia. He describes how nationalist leaders put focus on ethnicity and thereby created an environment of fear and hatred of the other. Nisbet and Kamenchuk (2019) call this phenomenon ‘affective polarisation’. They indicate that political actors, by means of their messaging, increase the salience of a certain identity while they evoke negative feelings towards the other group. This increases polarisation between the groups, which heightens the chances that negative disinformation about the other group will be acknowledged.

Affective polarisation is one way to explain identity grievances, but another psychological mechanism is at play as well, namely ‘motivated reasoning’. Motivated reasoning refers to the bias in selection, comprehension, and recollection of information which is created by a desire to avoid cognitive dissonance (Nisbet & Kamenchuk, 2019). Cognitive dissonance refers to the emotional discomfort that is felt when contradicting or inconsistent information is presented (Festinger, 1962). Festinger (1962) further posits that when dissonance occurs, meaning when someone is confronted with inconsistencies, the person will consciously steer clear of situations or information that could worsen dissonance. Thus, people will look for consistent information and simultaneously disregard, misconstrue or discredit dissonant information. This is especially important when talking about identity, since beliefs on the basis of identity are often held in high regard, even more so when made salient through an information operation. This will elicit strong emotions and thereby increase motivated reasoning. In turn, this increases the effectiveness of the information operation and its disinformation (Nisbet & Kamenchuk, 2019).

The second type of information operation Nisbet and Kamenchuk (2019) discuss is information gaslighting. This involves quick spreading of disinformation with the intention to make people confused and unsure. This is done through distracting them with a high amount of false information, which will make it difficult to tell fact from fiction. This can lead to what psychology calls ‘learned helplessness’. Learned helplessness is the acceptance of a situation that is uncontrollable and one is unable to fix or steer clear from. They give up on trying to avoid or alleviate the situation, because doing so is ineffectual (Maier & Seligman, 1976). This makes people vulnerable to disinformation as learned helplessness leads to cognitive fatigue, anxiety and reduced motivation. This will make them consider the messages in information less carefully, make them more susceptible to negative messages, as well as reducing their ability to rely on current attitudes or beliefs and reducing their ability to challenge the disinformation (Nisbet & Kamenchuk, 2019).

The last type of information operation Nisbet and Kamenchuk (2019) discuss is incidental exposure to disinformation. In this operation, the aim is to increase the number of times a person comes into contact with disinformation through usage of international state-controlled media. This can be broadcast media as well as online media. The exposure is then expanded by other media outlets when they share it on their platform, often without knowledge that the information is incorrect. This type of information operation works through heuristics, which can be defined as mental shortcuts in information processing. One of these heuristics works through repetition, as repeated exposure to information increases its accessibility. Increased accessibility means that the

information is retrieved easily, and as the information is repeated often by a number of different sources, the credibility of the original source is often not considered. Thus, the information will be retained without the knowledge that it is incorrect (Nisbet & Kamenchuk, 2019). Consequently, trying to correct these beliefs will prompt negative cognitive and emotional reactions, causing a counterproductive reaction, namely strengthening of the current beliefs (Brehm, 2013).

<b>Information operation</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Cognitive hacking	The disinformation causes a disturbance as it contradicts existing information, leading to distrust in those that provide information. The objective is to decrease trust in institutions, impair societies, and discourage political action.
Questioning authenticity or validity of information	This can be done through marking certain narratives as propaganda or through discrediting the source of information. This decreases the credibility of the source and therefore the narrative, which makes it possible to introduce an alternative narrative.
Spoofing	Spoofing can be subdivided into two categories, identity spoofing and information spoofing. Identity spoofing involves creating fake identities while information spoofing involves creating fake information.
Astroturfing	Astroturfing concerns creating the illusion that there is a widespread support for a particular opinion or narrative through fabricating supporting messages.

Identity grievance	Identity grievance operations put emphasis on certain contrasting social identities in order to highlight grievances or lower trust in institutions. This is done through affective polarisation and motivated reasoning.
Information gaslighting	This involves quick spreading of disinformation with the intention to make people confused and unsure. This is done through distracting them with a high amount of false information, which will make it difficult to tell fact from fiction. This can lead to what psychology calls ‘learned helplessness’.
Incidental exposure	The aim is to increase the number of times a person comes into contact with disinformation through usage of international state-controlled media. Increased accessibility means that the information is retrieved easily, and as the information is repeated often by a number of different sources, the credibility of the original source is often not considered.

*Table 1: Different information operations and their definitions*

### **2.3 Russian Disinformation**

As this thesis focusses on the Russian disinformation regarding the White Helmets, this next subsection will provide background regarding Russian disinformation in particular. With this focus on Russia, it is important to note that disinformation is a universal strategy, used by many other countries. However, as this thesis studies the Russian disinformation regarding the White Helmets, the focus will be on Russia.

Russia has been spreading disinformation and using information operations for a long time. In Soviet times, such operations were aimed at increasing the sphere of influence through spreading

disinformation on broadcast media, including print media, television, and radio (Wilson et al., 2018). Many Russians, both then and now, know that the news is fake or at least partly untrue, yet the goal of the information is not to convince that the information is accurate. Instead, the goal is to have control over the information and to have the power to determine which truth they want to condone. Essentially, the population may not believe the news, but are forced to pretend it is true. Thus, government asserts their power by taking control of information (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014).

In recent operations, the way in which the information is spread has changed, along with the aim of the disinformation. Since 2012, the Russian government has taken a more digital approach that consists of three elements (Lupion, 2018). Firstly, they established a growth in the amount of pro-government news sites and increased the social media presence for state-owned media outlets. Secondly, the Russian government counters those who post content that opposes the government by legally restricting them. This is done through prosecution of what the government calls ‘extremists’, who in reality are people that share opposing political views online. The last element consists of the internet trolls that the government utilises to spread the government’s political views and to counter those with opposing views (Lupion, 2018).

Additionally, the Russian media increase public interest in current affairs through sensationalising events. For example, they make use of staged interviews in which actors play victims with tragic life stories or they use ‘opposition’ politicians who are instructed on what they share with the media. The goal of these interviews is to make the Russian government, and above all President Putin, look good. To be precise, when Putin looks good in comparison to his opposition, it reinforces the power he holds (Pomerantsev, 2015). Social media makes this sensationalising of events even more easy, as posts with different types of aims are intermixed together on a platform. To be specific, since posts about news and about entertainment are shared in the same place, the different contexts are blended together, which makes it possible to blend entertainment and news together more effectively (Starbird, Arif & Wilson, 2019).

As for the aim of the current disinformation, Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014) posit that it is to cause confusion. This confusion is meant to generate cynicism (Pomerantsev, 2015) as well as eliminate the likeliness of debate and reality-based politics (Starbird et al., 2019). Wilson et al. (2018) argue that cognitive hacking is one of the strategies Russia uses to achieve this. According to Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014), the goal of this confusion and cynicism is to diminish trust in Western societies and democracies. Pomerantsev (2015), who worked inside Russian television for

five years, explains that because of cynicism created by disinformation, trust in institutions diminishes and values are re-examined. Due to this, it becomes easier to accept ideas that resemble conspiracy theories, such as the disinformation that is spread. At the same time, this conflict with the West and its institutions is also how Russia justifies its information campaigns. According to the Russian government, Russia is under attack of Western mass information which has the objective of destabilising Russia (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014).

In keeping with this, Lanoszka (2019) writes that the current Russian conflict is about using information as a form of warfare, mainly against the West. In doing this, they are fluid in their use of ideology. This means they will support both the right-wing nationalist movements in taking a stance against the EU and homosexuality, while also supporting left-wing and communist groups who take a stance against fracking and the political dominance of the United States. From the point of view of the Russian government, the collaborations arising from this support are not rooted in ideological affinity, but are established solely for political and economic gain (Pomerantsev, 2015). Additionally, the fluidity of ideology and supporting multiple viewpoints helps the Russian government in sowing division in the West (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014).

This same muddling of ideologies is done on Russian broadcast media. For example, it features George Galloway, a Scottish left-wing politician, next to Ryan Dawson, a Holocaust denier (Pomerantsev, 2015). Van Herpen (as cited in Lanoszka, 2019) explains how Sputnik News and RT, both broadcast media that are controlled by the Russian state, are used to push specific Russian narratives in foreign countries. It does so by putting down the West using people from the West, such as Galloway and Dawson. Additionally, Van Herpen (as cited in Lanoszka, 2019) posits that there is no objective truth, which it makes all views seem of equal importance. This allows them to make disinformation seem just as credible and important as information that is true. In order to get this information across to others, RT has a budget of more than 300 million dollars, broadcasts in four different languages and has a reach of about 600 million people. This is part of Russia's strategy to reach as many people as possible and muddle the available information with disinformation and conspiracy thinking (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014).

However, as mentioned earlier, Mejias and Vokuev (2017) note that with the rise of technology, it is not only the state that is able to spread information through broadcast media, but also ordinary citizens are able to do so through social media. Due to this, disinformation can be spread more widely and by an array of different actors. In their research, that focusses on the Russian disinformation regarding Ukraine, Mejias and Vokuev (2017) describe how Russia is

fighting a war against Western ideas. In this war, Russia tries to gain control over information by buying independent media outlets and making them state-owned or by letting state-friendly businesses purchase them. Additionally, Russia tries to respond to the rising power of social media by extending the information war to platforms like Twitter. Information flows between broadcasting media and social media; they often cite each other to make the information look more credible. This is the information operation discussed earlier, referred to by Nisbet and Kamenchuk (2019) as incidental exposure to disinformation. Although the existence of bots and trolls that are paid and supported by the Russian government is vehemently denied, it has been well-documented. These bots and trolls are deployed to put forward a specific pro-Russian narrative (Mejias & Vokuev, 2017). This is linked to an additional purpose of the Russian disinformation on social media, namely clouding the online information space (Pomerantsev, 2015). The more bots and trolls are actively posting, the harder it is for people to filter out this type of information (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014).

In order for these bots to be effective, they need to build an audience. One way to do this, is through the ‘pump-and-pivot method’. In the ‘pump’ phase, the account will build its audience through engaging in trending topics and using specific keywords. Subsequently, in the ‘pivot’ phase, the account is regenerated by changing its appearance and starts sharing disinformation. This way the account has already gained a substantial following, allowing a broader spread of the disinformation (Brian et al., 2020).

Accounts that are trying to undermine these pro-Russian narratives have emerged. They aim to delegitimise the narratives put forward by the Russian government and are effective in uncovering faults in their stories. However, those that believe the pro-Russian narrative are not inclined to listen to these arguments and are likely to accredit them to the notion that the West will do everything in their power to undermine anything pro-Russian (Lupion, 2018). Additionally, there are programmes that attempt to detect information operations in their early stages by identifying clusters of accounts that act as a coordinated network. This often indicates that bots or trolls are being used in order to push a certain narrative (Brian et al., 2020).

## **2.4 Disinformation Regarding the White Helmets**

In the case of the White Helmets, multiple studies uncovered that Russia is putting forward a pro-Russian narrative using internet bots and trolls. In this narrative, the White Helmets are

depicted as terrorists and are tied to chemical weapon attacks (The Syria Campaign, 2017; Starbird & Wilson, 2020; Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2018). This is part of a larger disinformation campaign that Russia started against the White Helmets. Partly due to this disinformation campaign, the conflict has been characterised as the most talked about conflict on social media, with the White Helmets as the focal point (Wilson et al., 2018). It is important to note that in regions affected by war, information about the conflict is scarce, as there are not many reporters on the ground. This makes the available news not only more valuable, but also less reliable because it is harder to verify the news. This creates a good foundation for disinformation (Brian et al., 2020).

Starbird and Wilson (2020) examined data from Twitter and YouTube and identified two clusters that are putting forward two different narratives, one pro-White Helmets and one anti-White Helmets. They found that on Twitter there are less attempts of people trying to support the White Helmets than there are attempts to undermine them. This finding is also corroborated by The Syria Campaign (2017). One of the reasons for this, is the ‘dog-piling’ technique used in the disinformation campaign. As part of this technique, many anti-White Helmet accounts reply to a tweet with a pro-White Helmet narrative. In doing so, they try to quash and push out those supporting the White Helmets (Starbird et al., 2019). According to Choudhury et al. (2020), this dog-piling technique is part of a bigger spoofing operation that contains three clear patterns: coordinated attacks, dog-piling, and automated message replication.

Additionally, the disinformation campaign tries to create an echo chamber through resharing the same content on multiple platforms. In doing this, they take charge of the conversation to make sure the anti-White Helmets narrative is dominant when searching online. Moreover, it also clouds the online information space, which diminishes trust (Starbird et al., 2019). This is an information operation that Choudhury et al. (2020) term ‘astroturfing’, in which the disinformation campaign aims to create the perception that there is a large group advocating against the White Helmets.

In addition to a large group advocating against the White Helmets, there is also a group that supports the White Helmets. The Syria Campaign (2017) found that the narrative supporting the White Helmets originated from the White Helmets themselves and mainstream media, whereas the narrative against them was shaped by Russian state media and non-mainstream media. Interestingly, they found that the majority of activity does not come from the bots, as often is in disinformation campaigns. Instead, the majority of activity includes actual people who are actively campaigning against the White Helmets. Part of these people also advocate for other causes, such as the Palestinian cause.

However, it is hard to distinguish those that have been influenced by disinformation from those that are influencing this narrative, as there is no clear management from the top. Instead, the campaign is managed through routines and a set of shared practices. For example, there are also accounts that appear to be from journalists, but are in reality sponsored by the Russian government (Starbird et al., 2019). According to Pacheco, Flammini and Menczer (2020) it is easiest to recognise these accounts in big numbers, as they show the same online behaviour due to their shared practices. Starbird and Wilson (2020) suggest that another way to recognize these agents is that their content is spread through Russian state media channels, such as RT. Through amplifying like-minded voices and providing content for them, Russia tries to further strengthen the anti-White Helmets narrative. Additionally, the cross-platform promotion increases the amount of people the information is able to reach (Starbird et al., 2019).

The Syria Campaign (2017) discovered that in addition to a pro-White Helmets group and a Russian and Syria support group, a group of conservatives and Trump supporters has also been active in the conversation around the White Helmets. This group is also critical of the White Helmets and copies stories that are advanced by the Russian and Syria support group. Furthermore, The Syria Campaign (2017) analysed the Twitter accounts that are putting forward the anti-White Helmets narrative and found that approximately half of them have been active in another Russian disinformation campaign, indicating that they are bots or trolls brought into play by the Russian government.

In this anti-White Helmets narrative many claims are made in order to undermine the White Helmets and the work they do. Bellingcat Investigation Team (2018) noted that most claims made by actors of the anti-White Helmets narrative are never backed up by evidence, even when those claims are made by the Russian government. Despite the lack of evidence, the claims that the White Helmets are connected to terrorist organisations and chemical weapon attacks are used by the Russian government to justify their bombings of the White Helmets facilities and used to cover up war crimes (The Syria Campaign, 2017; Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2018).

### 3. Methodology

This chapter will go into the methodology that will be used in this research to answer the main research question ‘*To what extent have the two narratives regarding the White Helmets changed between 2014 and 2021?*’. First the methodological approach will be discussed. In this approach discourse analysis and framing analysis will be combined. The second subsection focusses on the data collection, the reasoning behind the way the data was collected. The third section will look into how the data is analysed and the last subsection focusses on methodological reflections.

#### 3.1 Methodological Approach

This research aims to study two conflicting narratives regarding the White Helmets and look at how they have changed over time. One narrative being anti-White Helmets and one supporting the White Helmets. It aims to analyse the discourse through conducting a framing analysis. First, it is important to provide some background regarding discourse analysis. According to Gregory (as cited in Aitken and Valentine, 2014), discourse “refers to all the ways in which we communicate with one another, to that vast network of signs, symbols and practices through which we make our world(s) meaningful” (p. 303). In a discourse analysis the aim is to investigate how discourses create meaning and thereby shape or represent social realities. Discourse analysis encompasses examining multiple textual or verbal sources to understand the evolution of the discourse (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2015). In this research, three different moments in time were picked in order to assess if the discourse has changed over time. This demarcation will be explicated in section 3.2. Additionally, various different media platforms are examined to ensure the relationship between the discourse and the social reality is correctly represented. These various different platforms include social media platforms (namely Twitter, Facebook and YouTube), Russian state-sponsored media, Western media, and alternative websites. In the next subsection the motivation for choosing these platforms will be explained.

Discourse analysis covers various different approaches, consequently there is not one course of action that needs to be adhered to. One of the most prominent approaches is the critical discourse analysis. This approach not only takes language into account, but also considers the social and political context. This means the production, distribution and consumption of the texts also plays a role (Gregory et. al., 2009). Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015) note that discourses shape the world in many ways, but not all discourses have an effect on the social construction of the world.

Which discourses have an effect on social construction depends on power relations and characteristics of the social aspects that is being construed.

When speaking about discourse, a distinction should be made between ordinary discourse and media discourse. According to O’Keeffe (2011), media discourse is distinctive as it “is a public, manufactured, on-record, form of interaction” (p. 441). As this research examines multiple media sources, it is important to note this difference. In this article, O’Keeffe (2011) also delves into the importance of online media discourse. Through critical discourse analysis, online media can be studied to uncover how issues or events are repeatedly framed over time. Additionally, critical discourse analysis allows for one to understand the cultural and ideological meanings that are spread frequently, as it takes into account the social reality that the discourse takes place in.

Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015) describe three dimensions that are important when conducting a critical discourse analysis. The first of these dimensions is the analysis of the text or discourse. One way to analyse the text or discourse is through framing analysis, thus framing analysis is used as a tool. Framing can also be seen as a social process, in which framing is the object of analysis. In this thesis, framing analysis is used as a tool in order to study discourse to uncover the frames that are used within that discourse (Pan and Kosicki, 1993). The framing analysis by Pan and Kosicki (1993) and the framing analysis by Snow and Benford (1988) will be combined to map out the discourse regarding the White Helmets. Uncovering the frames within the two narratives regarding the White Helmets and assessing how they have changed over time will be the main focus of the data analysis. Subsection 3.3 will provide an in depth description on how the analysis will be carried out.

The second dimension, according to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2015), is an examination of the nature of discursive practises. Discursive practises refer to the way in which the reality is shaped. Lastly, the analysis of the social reality that discourse takes place in is of importance according to Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2015). Unfortunately, it is outside the scope of this study to analyse the impact of the discourse on the social and political context. However, as the research on discourse shows, we can infer that the discourse does impact the social reality. Specifically in the case of the White Helmets, the anti-White Helmets discourse has been used as justification for bombing White Helmet facilities and has allowed the Russian government to cover up war crimes (The Syria Campaign, 2017; Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2018).

In addition to a discourse analysis, this thesis also makes use of a case study design, namely the case of the Russian disinformation about the White Helmets. A case study approach allows for a

deeper and multifaceted understanding of a topic. The current case study can be characterised as an instrumental case study. This type of case study uses a specific case in order to get a deeper understanding on a particular issue or phenomenon (Crowe et al., 2011). By focussing on the case of the Russian disinformation about the White Helmets, this thesis could reveal something about the broader information war Russia is engaging in. As this thesis assesses this case over time, the results of this study could also reveal something about Russia's priorities regarding the (information) war in Syria.

### **3.2 Data Collection**

This research focusses on online media, since this is where the Russian disinformation is spread. As Twitter is the main platform where the disinformation about the White Helmets is spread (The Syria Campaign, 2017), this will be the main focus of data collection. Through a preliminary scope of the Twitter hashtag '#WhiteHelmets' it became clear that other websites are often linked in tweets, such as YouTube and news websites. To fully comprehend the discourse that is put forward in such tweets, the videos and articles that are linked in those tweets will also be included in the analysis. This examination across different platforms will allow for a more complete view of the narratives and will aid in uncovering the frames within the discourse. As tweets are short in their essence, Twitter does not allow for complex argumentation in different narratives to be brought to light.

Furthermore, this research focusses on data written in English. It is not within the scope of this thesis to include data languages such as Arabic or Russian, as translating every data point is time consuming. Moreover, studying English data, means studying the part of the discourse that is also accessible to people from the West, allowing for a better understanding of how the narratives are framed for these audiences.

In addition to determining how the data is collected, a demarcation of the timespan was considered. The White Helmets became active in 2013 (White Helmets, n.d.), but unfortunately it is outside the scope of this research to review the entire nine years of discourse regarding them. As one of the aims of this study is to uncover if there has been a shift in the discourse over the years, three points in time were picked.

- The first moment covers the period before the Russian intervention in Syria. This intervention started in September 2015 and was a crucial turning point in the war. If

Russia had not interfered in September of 2015, the al-Assad regime might have been defeated (Eaton, 2017). However, from September 2015 on, the Syrian government and Russia were able to systematically retake cities all around Syria (Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), 2020), thus changing the course of the Syrian war. As the White Helmets' Twitter account was established in 2014, the period of September 2014 was chosen. This is when the conversation about the White Helmets started to be picked up on twitter.

- The second moment in time is after the Russian intervention, specifically the period of 4 April 2017 until 9 April 2017. On the 4 April 2017 a sarin gas attack was carried out on the town of Khan Sheikhoun. The White Helmets were blamed for this chemical attack. In the five-day period after this attack, there was a lot of conversation regarding this attack on Twitter. Additionally, there was a large amount of activity by Russian and Syrian account (The Syria Campaign, 2017). Furthermore, none of the academic articles that review the disinformation regarding the White Helmets have examined this event.
- Lastly, the period of September 2021 was chosen. There is exactly a seven-year difference between the first period analysed and the last period analysed, which could tell us something about the difference in discourse over time. Moreover, this period is interesting to assess as the discourse regarding the White Helmets might have adapted, due to sharp rise of Covid-19 cases in Syria from the start of September 2021. In addition to helping save people from the rubble, the White Helmets also aid in the fight against Covid-19. For example, they use ambulance services to transfer people to quarantine facilities and hospitals, they help to disinfect public spaces, and they in supplying Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to healthcare professionals (White Helmets, n.d.). It would be interesting to assess if the discourse has changed due to their involvement in containing the spread of Covid-19.

As is evident, these periods in time are not of equal length. This is due to the fact that during the preliminary scope of the research data, it became clear that the period after the Sarin gas attack in April 2017 contained much more data than the other two moments that were picked. Unfortunately it is outside of the scope of this research to review an entire month of data in April 2017, as time is limited.

It is important to mention the amount of data that was analysed for each time frame, as this portrays how active the discourse was during each period of time. In the first time frame, September 2014, 613 tweets, 16 articles and 6 YouTube videos were analysed. In the second time frame, from

4 until 9 of April 2017, 1098 tweets, 65 articles and 20 videos were analysed. Another 6 videos were meant to be analysed in this time frame, but these were videos posted on the RT channel on YouTube, which has now been banned. Therefore, these videos could not be included in the final analysis. Lastly, in the time frame September 2021, 255 tweets, 15 articles and 4 videos were analysed. In this time frame there was one video from the RT channel that was not available at the time of analysis. This division of data shows that in 2017, discourse regarding the White Helmets was widespread. The second time frame contains most data points despite the fact that it only spans 5 days, whereas the other two time frames encompass a month's worth of data.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

As mentioned in paragraph 3.1, the focus of the data analysis will be to uncover the frames that are used within the discourse. To assess this, the four dimensions as described by Pan and Kosicki (1993) and the three types of framing by Snow and Benford (1988) will be used. Firstly, the framing by Pan and Kosicki (1993) as applied to this research will be explained. Subsequently, how the framing analysis by Snow and Benford (1988) will be applied to this research. Lastly, an overview will be provided of how these two framing analyses will merge into the current research.

Firstly, the script structures of each data source will be examined, meaning the who, what, when, where, why and how will be assessed. This research will make use of the same categories as for analysing the script structures as Morin (2016). In their research, the data was organised by using the categories actor, event, and subsequent discourse. The 'who' referring to the actors, the 'what, when, where, and how' referring to the event, and the 'why' referring to the subsequent arguments that are made. As Pan and Kosicki (1993) point out, the 'what, where and how' referring to the event will not always be present in every data point. However, these are categories of information that provide a framework for assessing discourse in news media. Furthermore, the 'why' will not be present in every data point. Most tweets are too short to be able to include arguments made, whereas the articles will likely include this type of information more frequently. Additionally, the 'when' is already predetermined through the sampling, as three different points in time were selected for analysis.

Second, the syntactic and rhetorical structures will be assessed. In doing this, the way in which the discourse is structured and the stylistic choices of the author will be revealed. Stylistic choices can include metaphors, examples, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images. These

choices can reveal which part of the discourse the author wants to emphasise and which arguments the author wants to make more salient. The syntactic and rhetorical structures will be different for each medium that is used, and thus cannot easily be compared across different platforms. For example, tweets are inherently short and make use of hashtags, while videos are longer form that makes use of depictions.

Lastly, the thematic structure will be examined, where common themes visible in the narrative will be studied. Using the existing literature on the White Helmets, a list of themes was composed. However, this list was not exhaustive, thus themes could also be obtained from the data inductively. In creating the themes, salient concepts in the data that were relevant to the research question were identified. The predetermined codes for the themes were: terrorism, heroes, mentions of the 'west', and using 'evidence'.

The framing analysis by Pan and Kosicki (1993) is less suitable for the social media data, as this data has less information per data point and there is not always an event that can be identified. Therefore, the framing analysis by Snow and Benford (1988) will be more suitable to map out this data. In addition, the framing analysis by Pan and Kosicki (1993) focusses more on form, whereas Snow and Benford (1988) address function and content, making these operationalisations complementary.

In applying Snow and Benford's (1988) operationalisation of framing analysis to the current research, each data point will be analysed through asking a few questions based on the three framing tasks they propose. Diagnostic framing concerns identifying an issue and determining the cause or responsibility. The two corresponding questions asked for each data point are:

- What is projected as the problem?
- Which actors are involved?

Prognostic framing deals with the solutions to these issues and discerning strategies, tactics and targets used (Snow & Benford, 1988). The two corresponding questions asked for each data point are:

- What solutions or actions are suggested?
- What strategies and tactics were used?

Lastly, motivational framing refers to the way in which people are motivated to take action (Snow & Benford, 1988). The following question will be asked for each data point:

- Why should action be undertaken?

There is some overlap in the questions posed based on these two types of framing analysis. The table below will provide an overview of how the data analysis will be conducted. As previously mentioned, not every data point will have the information to answer all questions, but this approach to framing analysis will provide a structured framework that allows the frames within the discourse to be uncovered.

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Pan &amp; Kosicki (1993)</b>	<b>Snow &amp; Benford (1988)</b>
Which actors are involved?	Script structures	Diagnostic framing
What is projected as the problem/ event?	Script structures	Diagnostic framing
What are the subsequent arguments?	Script structures	-
What solutions or actions are suggested?	-	Prognostic framing
Why is should action be undertaken?	-	Motivational framing
What stylistic choices, strategies, and tactics were used?	Syntactic and rhetorical structures	Prognostic framing
Common themes in the narrative	Thematic structures	-

*Table 2: Framework for analysis*

### **3.4 Methodological Reflections**

It is important to note that due to the nature of this research, true objectivity is not possible. As stated by Gregory et. al. (2009): “the researcher’s social cultural and subject positions affect: the questions they ask; how they frame them; the theories they are drawn to; how they read;

interpretations they place on empirical evidence; access to data” (p. 556). The motivation for talking about the subject matter from this perspective was previously clarified, and can be found in section 1.5 ‘Considerations regarding bias and objectivity’. Due to the nature of this study, it is essential to look at the positionality of the researcher.

Positionality is twofold and describes both the researcher’s position regarding research tasks and their social political context, and it describes the researcher’s world view (Holmes, 2020). Gregory (2009) describes how addressing positionality is creating a path to attaining objectivity, instead of an indication of subjectivity. When assessing positionality, the researcher reflects on the position they have chosen within their research. This position has an influence on topic they have chosen to research, on how the research itself is conducted and on the outcome of research. Furthermore, a researcher’s positionality also influences their beliefs in the reliability and validity of other research (Holmes, 2020).

There are three ways in which a researcher should establish their positionality: locating themselves about the topic, the participants and about the research context and process (Holmes, 2020). Locating themselves about the topic entails addressing the personal position they have, which could influence their research. For this study that means addressing why certain information is labelled as disinformation, as was outlined in section 1.5. Additionally, it is important to note that due to my personal and political views, I condemn the actions that are taken by the Russian and Syrian governments. Both the bombing of civilians and the spreading of disinformation to cover for their actions is something I disapprove of. This is relevant, since this research discusses the disinformation extensively and analyses data regarding events in which bombing of civilians has taken place. However, I try to be aware of these judgements, not actively allowing them to interfere with the analysis that I carry out.

Locating themselves about the participants is not directly relevant to this study, as no interviews were conducted. However, it is important to note that although no participants are part of this study, indirectly I am studying people who are active in spreading disinformation. My opinions regarding these actors can be classified as disapproving and adversarial. However, just as with my general stance in these issues, by being aware of these opinions, I actively try to not allow them to interfere.

Lastly, locating myself about the research context and process allows me to reflect on how I came to study this topic. As previously mentioned, I was directed towards this research topic when I came across the Netflix documentary about the White Helmets. This also means that immediately

upon starting, I already favoured their side of the story. However, it is important to reflect on how I looked into both sides of the story. For example, I read the UN document '*The White Helmets: Fact or Fiction*' that Vanessa Beeley submitted to the Security Council, as well as the studies by authors such as Starbird, who tries to uncover more about the disinformation regarding the White Helmets.

Nonetheless, for me the conclusion was to disagree with the anti-White Helmets discourse and believe the evidence as proposed by Bellingcat Investigation Team (2018), therefore labelling the anti-White Helmets discourse disinformation. However, this research has a systematic approach to data generation and analysis that is rooted in academic literature, rather than taking an unnuanced approach that is rooted in preferences. This will aid in creating a balanced account of the two narratives.

## 4. Results

In this chapter, the results of the analysis of this data will be discussed. To structure the data the questions outlined in table 2 will be used. Each subsection will answer one of the questions posed in this framework for analysis. The chapter will be concluded by providing a summary of the findings discussed below.

### 4.1 Who are the actors?

Firstly, every data point was categorised into content in support of the White Helmets, content against the White Helmets, and those who were neutral. This was done using the codes ‘Anti WH’, ‘Pro WH’ and ‘Neutral’. The results of this analysis can be found in table 3 and table 4. When looking at the raw data from April 2017 and September 2021, the amount of tweets supporting the White Helmets seems to have stayed virtually the same, as can be seen in table 3. In contrast, the amount of tweets opposing the White Helmets has decreased by 96%. However, it is important to note that the time frame in April 2017 only spans 5 days, whereas the time frame in September 2021 spans a month. This means that, if we take the raw data and account for this difference in time span, the amount of tweets supporting the White Helmets has decreased by 85%. Additionally, if the amount of time within the time frame is accounted for in the anti-White Helmets content the decrease in people opposing the White Helmets is even bigger, namely 99,1%.

	<b>Sept 2014</b>	<b>4-9 April 2017</b>	<b>Sept 2021</b>
<b>Anti WH</b>	-	834	43
<b>Pro WH</b>	580	237	210
<b>Neutral</b>	5	9	-

*Table 3: Code prevalence for different actors from twitter data in the different time frames*

	<b>Sept 2014</b>	<b>4-9 April 2017</b>	<b>Sept 2021</b>
<b>Anti WH</b>	-	59	16
<b>Pro WH</b>	21	30	4
<b>Neutral</b>	-	7	-

*Table 4: Code prevalence for different actors from article and YouTube data in the different time frames*

When looking at this data throughout the three time frames, it is striking that in the first period no actor was indicated as 'Anti WH'. This means that nothing negative has been said about the White Helmets on these platforms during September 2014. In April 2017, there is a clear increase in actors generating the anti-White Helmets narrative. During this period, 77,2% of tweets were by actors against the White Helmets, whereas just 21,9% was in support of the White Helmets. This same trend can be seen on other platforms where 61.5% of the data was by actors against the White Helmets, whereas 30.9% was in support of the White Helmets. Lastly, in September of 2021, most actors spoke out in support of the White Helmets on Twitter. However, in the articles and YouTube content we can see that the anti-White Helmets actors were more prevalent. This means that just 17% of tweets, produced 80% of content for the articles and YouTube videos.

Within each of these categories, there was one actor especially prevalent, these actors are shown in table 5. The remaining data was made up of individuals or organisations who did not come into view enough to make an individual impact on the narrative. In the narrative supporting the White Helmets, this actor was the White Helmets themselves. In total there were 125 tweets by the official White Helmets account with 35 tweets in September 2014, 0 tweets in 4-9 April 2017 and 90 tweets in September 2021. Thus, during the period in which the anti-White Helmets narrative prevailed, the White Helmets were absent in the discourse. There are two factors that could have influenced this absence. Firstly, since this analysis only encompasses tweets in the hashtag #WhiteHelmets, it could be that the White Helmets themselves were not entirely absent, but simply did not use this hashtag in their tweets. Another possible explanation is that the White Helmets were simply focussed on other matters during this time. The attack on Khan Sheikhoun caused many deaths and even more were wounded, meaning their attention was directed at helping these people.

In the narrative opposing the White Helmets, Vanessa Beeley stood out. In the articles and YouTube videos she was author or co-author of 13 of 73 articles, of which 9 were in the second time frame and 4 were in the third time frame. This included many articles on the website of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Wire, where she posted her first anti-White Helmets article in September of 2015. This suggests that she became active in the White Helmets discourse around the same time the disinformation campaign started. This leads to believe that she may not be acting as an individual, but on behalf of Russia. This concept will be further investigated in section 5.2. In addition to authoring articles, Vanessa Beeley also appeared in the twitter data. In the second time frame she appeared 18 times and in the third time frame she appeared 16 times. This includes both tweets by her and tweets in which she was mentioned.

	<b>Sept 2014</b>	<b>4-9 April 2017</b>	<b>Sept 2021</b>
<b>White Helmets</b>	35	-	90
<b>Beeley (Twitter)</b>	-	18	16
<b>Beeley (Articles)</b>	-	9	4

*Table 5: Prevalence of the White Helmets and Vanessa Beeley in the different time frames*

## **4.2 What projected as the problem/ event?**

In the two narratives, different problems or events were identified as central. For each data point an assessment was made if a problem could be identified. When a problem was identified, a code was given that summarised the problem in a few words. In addition, an assessment was made if there was an event discussed in that data point. If an event was found, the questions ‘what, where, and how’ were asked for this data point. The codes were determined through summarising the answer to these questions. As these problems and events changed over time, each time frame will be discussed separately.

### *4.2.1 September 2014*

In the first time frame, the anti-White Helmets narrative did not yet exist, meaning all events and problems are from the pro-White Helmets narrative. One event that is mentioned often is a rescue action by the White Helmets. They saved a two- week old baby from under the rubble in a rescue that took about twelve hours. In total this rescue mission was mentioned in 126 out of 613 tweets in the first time frame. There was one particular standardised tweet that was shared by 118 different users.

*“Baby pulled alive from under 3 stories of rubble. The #WhiteHelmets are heroes.*

*<https://youtube.com/watch?v=6h0VDhENotI...> #Syria”*

Besides this rescue action, multiple other rescue missions were also mentioned during this first time frame. As shown in table 6, the code ‘Rescue’ was allocated a total of 216 times, making it one of the most prevalent codes in this time frame. Furthermore, there was another standardised tweet that was shared 52 times.

*“Get the heroes of the #WhiteHelmets the critical life-saving support they need.*

*[https://whitehelmets.org/?utm\\_source=tw&utm\\_content=whtp](https://whitehelmets.org/?utm_source=tw&utm_content=whtp)”*

This showed a problem the White Helmets faced in September 2014, namely lack of funding. Due to this lack of funding, the White Helmets were not able to buy the proper equipment and training, which they needed when providing their aid. Besides this standardised tweet, the need for support was coded an additional 119 times.

	<b>Sept 2014</b>	<b>4-9 April 2017</b>	<b>Sept 2021</b>
<b>Rescue</b>	216	29	32
<b>Support WH</b>	171	71	-

*Table 6: Dominant codes regarding problems and events in the first time frame*

#### 4.2.2 4-9 April 2017

In the second time frame, the main event that was discussed is the chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun on 4 April 2017. In total the chemical attack was mentioned in 359 tweets and coded 125 times in the articles and videos in this time frame. When looking at the code cooccurrence table (table 7) for ‘Chemical attack’ in the tweet data, some notable overlap can be found. Firstly, in tweets regarding this chemical attack 220 were anti-White Helmets, 129 were pro-White Helmets, and the remaining tweets were neutral. Once more, there was a standardised tweet part of the discourse. This tweet was shared 40 times:

*“#Syria Chaos in front of #WhiteHelmets headquarter in #KhanShaykhoun #Idlib after airstrike Sarin toxic gas. [twitter.com/janatulnaeem02](https://twitter.com/janatulnaeem02)...”*

	<b>Chemical attack</b>
<b>Pro WH</b>	129
<b>Anti WH</b>	220
<b>Terrorism</b>	77
<b>Staged/ False flag</b>	76

<b>Fake news</b>	45
------------------	----

Table 7: The code cooccurrence table for the code 'chemical attack'

Lastly, three codes that emerged as part of the anti-White Helmets discourse co-occur with the code 'Chemical attack' a considerable amount. These three codes are 'Terrorism' cooccurring 77 times, 'Staged/False flag' cooccurring 76 times and 'Fake news' cooccurring 45 times. These codes form an impression of the problems outlined in the anti-White Helmets discourse regarding the chemical attack. In the second time frame these codes were found to play in a big role in the discourse, forming the top 4 of most used codes together with 'Chemical attack'. 'Terrorism' was coded 486 times, 'Staged/False flag' was coded 339 times and 'Fake news' was coded 140 times.

Many twitter users opposing the White Helmets believe that the White Helmets are part of al-Qaida or IS and that it was the terrorists, and thus the White Helmets, that carried out this chemical attack. In tandem, many also believe that the chemical attack was staged and that it was a false flag. A false flag is "a hostile or harmful action (such as an attack) that is designed to look like it was perpetrated by someone other than the person or group responsible for it" (Merriam-Webster, n.d., para 1.). They theorise that the attack was staged with the goal of putting the blame on Assad and that the mainstream media is falsely reporting that Assad was responsible. The words fake news and propaganda are frequently used when referring to this reporting. The code 'Propaganda' was allocated 87 times in tweet data and 59 times in the articles and videos. Some even go as far as to say that the West is working together with the White Helmets, and thus the terrorist, in order to attain regime change in Syria.

#### 4.2.3 September 2021

In the third time frame, the discourse of those supporting the White Helmets focused on two issues. The corresponding codes and their prevalence can be found in table 8. Firstly, it focused on those that were wounded or killed in airstrikes and those that were hospitalised or passed away due to Covid-19. The code 'Casualties/ wounded' was allocated 92 times. In tandem, the conversation focused on the aid that the White Helmets provided. Both in saving people from under the rubble and in assisting the Covid-19 crisis through awareness campaigns, disinfection operations and providing transportation to quarantine centers. The code 'WH providing aid' was allocated 157 times in the data, of which 101 times in the third time frame. Secondly, the focus was on the involvement of Russia in the war and condemning both Russia and the Syrian government for the

airstrikes on civilian targets. ‘Involvement Russia’ was coded 91 times and ‘Condemning gvt Syria’ was coded 41 times in the third time frame. Overall, ‘Involvement Russia’ was coded 184 times and ‘Condemning gvt Syria’ was coded 137 times. Both of these problems were already present in the second time frame, but did not emerge as main problems as they were overpowered by the anti-White Helmet discourse. For reference, in the second time frame ‘Involvement Russia’ was allocated 92 times in 1176 data points, whereas in the third time frame it was allocated 91 times in 273 data points. This also applies to the code ‘Condemning gvt Syria’.

	<b>Sept 2014</b>	<b>4-9 April 2017</b>	<b>Sept 2021</b>
<b>Casualties/ wounded</b>	55	76	92
<b>WH providing aid</b>	39	17	101
<b>Involvement Russia</b>	-	92	91
<b>Condemning gvt Syria</b>	27	69	41

*Table 8: Dominant codes regarding problems and events in the third time frame*

In the anti-White Helmets discourse, the same narrative prevailed as in the second time frame. The codes ‘Terrorism’, ‘Mentions of the West’, ‘Propaganda’, ‘Staged/false flag’, and ‘Campaign’ were noted most often. Additionally, there was some upheaval about a BBC podcast about one of the co-founders of the White Helmets. According to the people opposing the White Helmets, the podcast contained propaganda and spread fake news regarding the chemical attack on Douma on 7 April 2018.

### **4.3 Subsequent arguments**

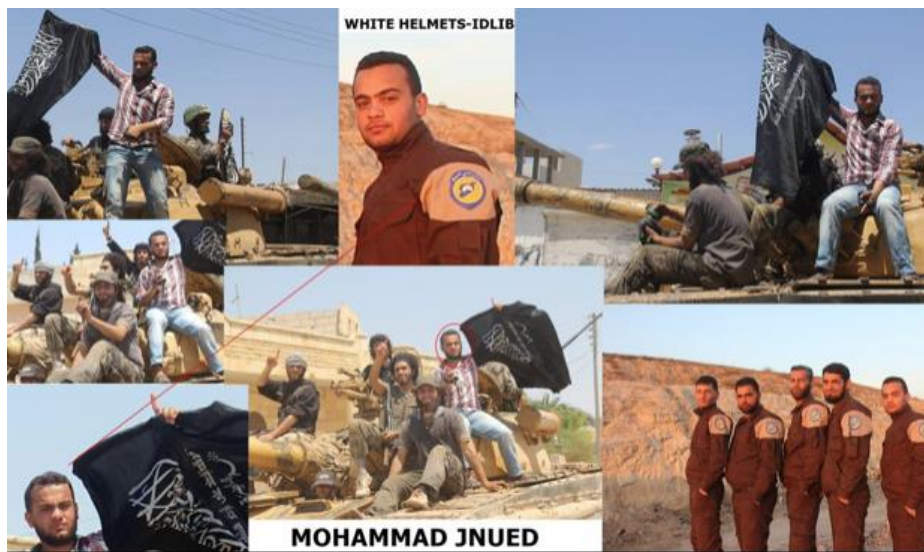
For most of the events and problems detailed in the previous subsection regarding the pro-White Helmets narrative, no subsequent arguments were present. Subsequent arguments give answer to the question ‘why’ regarding an event or problem. In the case of the anti-White Helmets discourse it explains why we should be in support of the way they see the events in the discourse.

The focus in the pro-White Helmets narrative was more on the subsequent actions than on arguments, as will be shown hereafter. However, as described above, in the discourse for those opposing the White Helmet arguments were provided to support the theory that the White Helmets

are terrorists that set up false flag operations and the theory that the west is involved in this campaign in order to actualise regime change.

Those opposing the White Helmets provide much evidence to support this theory. In total the code ‘Using ‘evidence’’ was allocated 184 times in tweet data and 234 times in the articles and videos. The word evidence is between quotes, since the evidence is often not as solid as presented. For example, the argument was made that the White Helmets are Oscar winners and therefore must be actors in their staged videos. The code ‘Oscar winners’ was allocated 78 times. However, the White Helmets won an Oscar for best documentary, thus they did not win the Oscar because they were good at acting.

I first discuss arguments that affirm that the White Helmets are terrorists according to those that oppose the White Helmets. To start with, they claim to show that the White Helmets are affiliated with terrorists by sharing pictures of what they believe to be the White Helmets alongside terrorists, as shown in picture 1. They identify these White Helmets by putting pictures of two people, one terrorist and one White Helmet, next to each other and showing that they look alike.



*Picture 1: ‘Evidence’ that the White Helmets are terrorists (Clarity of Signal, 2017)*

In addition, they provide pictures of terrorist in which some of the people pictured are wearing white helmets, insinuating that these are part of the group of the White Helmets, as shown in picture 2.



*Picture 2: 'Evidence' that the White Helmets are terrorists (Clarity of Signal, 2017)*

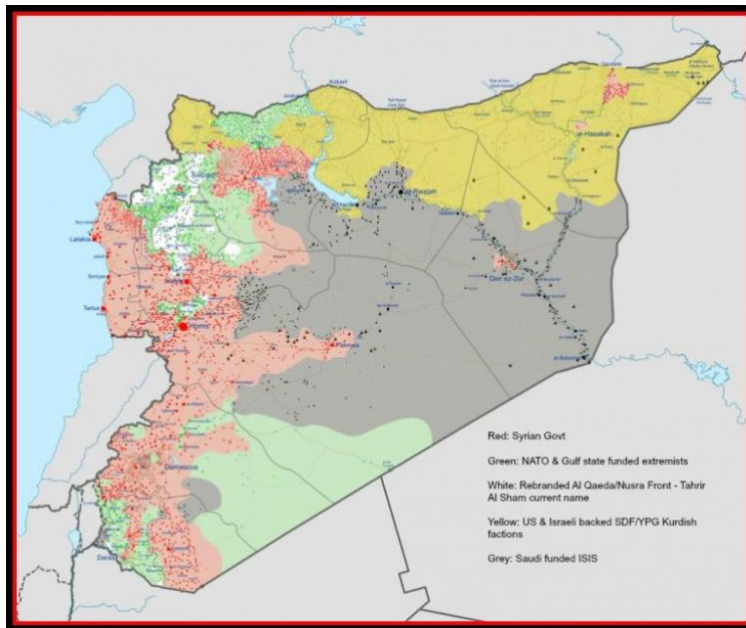
They also provide pictures of White Helmets holding weapons and videos of them shouting 'Allahu Akbar', such as in picture 3. This feeds into the narrative that the White Helmets are violent and that the White Helmets are terrorists.



*Picture 3: 'Evidence' that the White Helmets are terrorists (Clarity of Signal, 2017)*

Lastly, they say the White Helmets are affiliated with terrorism because the White Helmets only operate in terrorist-held areas and also provide aid to these terrorists.

“The following map taken from Wikipedia, was updated three days ago, it shows [...] the NATO & Gulf state-funded White Helmets who operate exclusively in the terrorist and extremist held areas, shown in green, white and grey on the map” (Beeley, 2017)



Furthermore, they supply evidence demonstrating that the videos by the White Helmets are staged. In pictures the White Helmets can be seen handling victims of a sarin attack with bare hands, even though sarin is a poisonous gas that can damage through the skin. Picture 4 below was shared many times on twitter as evidence for this argument.



Picture 4: ‘Evidence’ that the White Helmets stage their rescue videos

In addition, fragments of White Helmets' videos of victims of attacks that look alike are put side to side to show that these 'actors' are playing a part multiple videos, as shown picture 5. Lastly, those opposing the White Helmets use the 'Mannequin challenge' video, which was staged by the White Helmets, as proof that other videos are also staged.



Picture 5: 'Evidence' that the White Helmets stage their rescue videos

In conjunction, they believe that the goal of these staged videos is to falsely blame the Syrian and Russian governments for the chemical attacks. Therefore, they provide arguments as to why Syria and Russia could not have been involved. They posit that the Syrian government does not have any chemical weapons, as they were destroyed as part of a program by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).

*“In 2013, a report from the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons-UN Joint Mission in Syria, concluded that all chemical weapons have been removed from Syria. The mission was overseen by both the United States and Russia with the cooperation of the Syrian government.”* (Garrie, 2017)

They also use a statement put forward by the Russian government evidence that they were not involved. In this statement they declare that planes of the Russian air force had not carried out in Idlib. Lastly, the anti-White Helmet narrative calls the involvement of the Syrian government into question. They question why the government would carry out a chemical attack on their own

civilians, especially since the government was making advances across the country. A chemical attack at this stage would be a risk and simply illogical according to them.

*“And this of course begs the question. With the Syrian Army and its allies in a comfortable position in Syria, making advances across the country, and recovering lost points in rural Hama, why would they now resort to using chemical weapons in Nusra Front occupied Idlib? It is a very simple question with no clear answer. It defies any logic that on the eve of a Syria conference in Brussels and a week before peace negotiations are to resume, that the Syrian government would blatantly use the non-existent stock of chemical weapons.”* (News Wire, 2017)

Lastly, the claim that West is working together with the White Helmets and in order to attain regime change in Syria is backed up by a ‘follow the money’ method. They show that the White Helmets received funding from many western governments. According to those opposing the White Helmets, this shows that the White Helmets are greatly influenced by these governments. Moreover, to them is demonstrates that these governments are funding terrorism in Syria. As the west has been a proponent of regime change in the past as part of their democratisation campaigns on foreign soil, they believe this is a sign these western governments want to attain regime change in Syria as well.

 **Mr Malky** @MrMalky · Apr 7, 2017  
 Replying to @CharleyGlasgow  
 It's a #WhiteHelmets production  
 The White Helmets are funded by loads of Govts

Government Entity	Country	Year(s)	Dollar Amount
US AID (via US State Dept.)	US	2014-2015	\$23 million
British Foreign Office	UK	2014-2015	\$24 million
EU	EU	2015	\$4.5 million
Netherlands	Netherlands	2016	\$4.5 million
British Foreign Office (round 2)	UK	2016	\$32 million
British Foreign Office (round 3)	UK	2016-2017	\$24 million
German gov't	Germany	2016	\$7.6 million
Danish gov't	Denmark	2016	(undisclosed sum)
Qatari source (seed funding)	Qatar	2014	(undisclosed sum)
Japan	Japan	2015	(undisclosed sum)
DG-ECHO	EU	2015-2016	(undisclosed sum)
Crowd funding campaigns		2014-2016	(undisclosed sum)
Website donations		2014-2016	(undisclosed sum)
Jo Cox Fund	UK	2016	\$2.4 million
		<b>EST. TOTAL:</b>	<b>\$123 million +++</b>

**NOTE:** Much of the White Helmets incoming finances are funneled through a Netherlands registered NGO vehicle called **Mayday Rescue**. Additional funding rounds from EU member states, including the Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, Luxemburg, Ireland, Spain and others, may also be concealed behind the generic heading of "Emergency Health and Relief Support to the Population Affected by the Crisis in Syria", with money distribute through the **Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG-ECHO)**, formerly known as the European Community Humanitarian Aid Office.

Picture 6: ‘Evidence’ that the White Helmets are influenced by western governments

#### 4.4 What solutions or actions are suggested?

In the anti-White Helmets narrative solutions or actions were not often suggested. These suggested solutions and actions are part of the prognostic framing, as posed by Snow and Benford (1988). Prognostic framing deals with the solutions to the problems identified during the diagnostic framing. The action ‘Watch video’ was coded 18 times in the anti-White Helmets narrative and ‘Find the truth’ was coded 29 times. ‘Find the truth’ pertains to finding out what actually happened instead of believing the reporting by the mainstream media. To be precise, it means that according to this narrative it was not the Syrian government that carried out a chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun, but that there is an alternative explanation that must be identified.

On twitter in the pro-White Helmets narrative, many actions are suggested that lead to two main solutions to the problem identified in subsection 4.2.1, lack of resources. These solutions are getting funding and creating more awareness for the White Helmets. A small campaign was set up by The Syria Campaign, a human rights organisation that works together with the White Helmets. On twitter they requested people to tweet to celebrities in order to create awareness for the White Helmets. In total ‘Tweet to celebrities’ was coded 133 times. There were eight standardised tweets which users tweeted at many different celebrities. Below three examples can be found:

*“@[celebrity] Meet the heroes of the #WhiteHelmets digging survivors out from the rubble in #Syria. Please RT. bit.ly/savingsyria”*

*“@[celebrity] Support the unarmed volunteers saving thousands of lives in Syria. Stand with the #WhiteHelmets. RT. bit.ly/savingsyria”*

*“@[celebrity] First responders in the most dangerous place on earth. Will you help support the #WhiteHelmets? RT. bit.ly/savingsyria”*

On top of this, there were also other ways in which awareness was raised, all of which were requests from one twitter user to another twitter user. Requests that were often made were to retweet a tweet (114), go to an event involving the White Helmets (72), read an article (53), watch a video (28), share the story of the White Helmets (12) and follow the White Helmets (4). Furthermore, there were also suggested actions would help with increasing funding for the White Helmets. The request to give money was coded 46 times and the request to sign a petition that would call on governments to provide financial aid to the White Helmets was coded 7 times. This request to the government was solely made in the first time period.

In the second and third time frame, the government was also called upon to take action. In the second time frame this entailed the request for a no-fly zone in Syria. The no-fly zone would create a safe area for civilians where they are not subjected to bombings from the regime. The request came from the White Helmets after a chemical attack by the Syrian government. This standard tweet was shared 43 times.

*“Urgent call from the White Helmets for a no-fly zone. Regime used chlorine gas on children after UN ban @whitehelmets whitehelmets.org/?utm\_source=tw...”*

According to the anti-White Helmets discourse, the chemical attack was a false flag that was part of a campaign to establish a no-fly zone. The implementation of this zone would be a disadvantage to the Syrian government and is part of the plan by the west to topple the regime and attain regime change.

In the third time frame, those supporting the White Helmets urge the government to take action against the governments of Syria and Russia and the war crimes they committed in Syria. In total, the code ‘Government should act’ was allocated 65 times.

#### **4.5 Why is action promoted?**

In the case of the anti-White Helmets narrative, action must be taken to uncover the truth. This subsection will look at why action should be taken, as part of the motivational framing by Snow and Benford (1988). Motivational framing looks at why people are motivated to take action. According to the anti-White Helmets narrative, one must take action to investigate what happened by searching the internet for alternative explanations. They assert that mainstream media cannot be trusted and that it contains false information. Thus, research must be done to find out what actually happened.

The main reason in which people are motivated to take action in the pro-White Helmets narrative is that the work that the White Helmets do in Syria is invaluable and can only be continued with funding. They need funding for equipment, to be able to go to the bombing sites and to get material that will make their work safer. They also need funding for training, to be able to rescue more people in a safer manner. Additionally, the reasoning for spreading awareness is that more people should know about what is happening in Syria, so more people can help. This reasoning circulated mostly within the first time frame.

The overarching reasoning behind pro-White Helmets narrative is that an end should be brought to the war in Syria. This argument appeared mostly in the third time frame alongside the statement that the western governments should take action against the Syrian and Russian governments, although it was present throughout all three time frames. The code ‘This must stop’ was allocated 33 times, out of which 8 times in the first time frame, 9 times in the second time frame and 16 times in the third time frame. This call to stop violence often mentioned the attacks on civilians and condemned the Syrian and Russian governments for carrying them out. It is possible that those in the anti-White Helmets narrative also want the war to end, albeit in a different way. However, this is not explicitly mentioned in the discourse and therefore cannot be confirmed based on the data that was analysed.

#### **4.6 What stylistic choices, strategies, and tactics were used?**

The previous sections describe the main problems and solutions identified in the discourse regarding the White Helmets. This section will delve into the stylistic choices, strategies and tactics used to convey this discourse. According to Pan and Kosicki (1993) stylistic choices influence how arguments in text come across and can invoke certain images in the readers’ mind. An author can intentionally use stylistic choices in order to better support an argument, or stylistic choices can be part of the platform that the message is posted on. In addition, strategies and tactics will be laid out. These are part of both prognostic and motivational framing as proposed by Snow and Benford (1988). They posit that strategies and tactics can be used in order to mobilise support for the proposed action and in order to support arguments regarding why action should be promoted.

On twitter there were some features inherent to Twitter that can be classified as stylistic choices in the discourse. Links to articles, videos or websites were often used, as Twitter is a medium on which only short texts can be posted. In total, ‘Link used’ was coded 900 times, of which approximately two thirds in the pro-White Helmets discourse. This can be attributed to the fact that in this narrative, tweets more often contained a call to action for which a link was included. Additionally, pictures and videos were frequently used to add more details or information to the tweet. The code ‘Picture used’ was allocated 365 times and ‘Video used’ was coded 50 times. In the articles, videos and pictures were also used at times. However, here they mainly served a role to provide visuals to the story that was being told, whereas on twitter the main purpose was to be able to provide additional information. In the articles ‘Picture used’ was coded 190 times and ‘Video used’ was coded 58 times.

Two other functions that are distinctive to Twitter are hashtags and the ability to mention other users. Hashtags were often used to make a tweets appear in searches for multiple topics. They were used in the anti-White Helmets narrative more frequently. The code ‘Hashtag’ was allocated 136 times in the anti-White Helmets narrative and 81 times in the pro-White Helmets narrative. Furthermore, users often mentioned other users in their tweets. This was done either with the goal of attracting attention from other Twitter users, as in the case of the tweets to celebrities, or to reply to another user. ‘Linking other users’ was coded 390 times in the twitter data, of which 257 times in the first time frame, 105 times in the second time frame and 28 times in the third time frame. Additionally, 71,5% of cases were found in the pro-White Helmets narrative.

There were two main stylistic choices that surfaced, namely anecdotes and quotes. ‘Anecdotes’ was coded 84 times, of which 72 times in the first time frame. Anecdotes were also nearly exclusively part of the pro-White Helmets narrative and often contained anecdotes from the White Helmets themselves. The anecdotes gave an idea of what the work of the White Helmets is like and often cooccurred with quotes, especially in the twitter data where they cooccurred about half of the time. The code ‘Quotes’ was allocated 128 times, of which 74 times in the first time frame. In the twitter data, the quotes were mostly part of the pro-White Helmets narrative, whereas in the articles 50,6% of the times it was coded was in the anti-White Helmets narrative. In this narrative quotes were used to quote experts or eye witnesses in order to substantiate evidence or politicians were quoted to provide political context. In addition, visual imagery was also used in 19 of 22 cases in the pro-White Helmets narrative. It was mostly used in articles to describe bombings or victims of bombings to create a mental picture of the troubling situation. Visual imagery was not found in the twitter data.

Moreover, visual imagery can not only be described as a stylistic choice, but can also be identified as a strategy. This difference lies in what the author aims to achieve by using visual imagery. When using it as a stylistic choice, the aim is to make arguments more salient (Pan and Kosicki (1993) and when used as a strategy, the aim is to try to motivate people to take action (Benford and Snow, 1988). When visual imagery is used as a strategy, the author aims to intentionally invoke images in the readers’ mind in order to motivate action. For example in an article by the Syria Campaign (2014) this strategy was used.

*“Abdo, the little boy who was playing with me last night was gone. I collected the pieces of him I could find and put them in this blanket. [...] Please share Ibrahim's story with the world. Stand with the unarmed and impartial rescue volunteers of the White Helmets.”*

Where stylistic choices were identified more in the pro-White Helmets discourse, strategies and tactics emerged more within the anti-White Helmets discourse. In the anti-White Helmets discourse, these strategies and tactics had the aim to convince people to take action, namely to uncover the truth. Conversely, in the pro-White Helmets discourse stylistic choices were employed to make arguments more salient, such as emphasising the hardships that the White Helmets experience.

These strategies and tactics give an insight into how the disinformation in this narrative was created and supported. In the discourse on twitter two different strategies or tactics were identified, while the articles and videos provided an additional six strategies. This is due to the length of the medium. On twitter the word count is limited, therefore users are not able to provide substantiated arguments as would be possible in an article or video. Thus, in total eight strategies and tactics were uncovered. As these devices were only part of the anti-White Helmet discourse, they were only found in the second and third time frame. First, the strategies and tactics only found in the articles will be discussed.

The first strategy is conflating information with misinformation. This is when factual information is used in combination with false information, which makes the false information seem part of the verified information. It may not be the intention of the author to spread false information, meaning actors may not intentionally be using this strategy. However, in some cases we can suppose this is intentionally done, such as in the Russian state media. In that case we can speak of conflating information with disinformation. An example of this strategy was presented earlier in an article by Beeley (2017). Namely, the White Helmets only operate in areas that are held by terrorist, therefore the White Helmets must also be terrorists. Or the White Helmets are funded by western governments, therefore they must have an interest in regime change in Syria and cannot be impartial. Here the information, that the White Helmets operate in areas held by terrorists and not by the regime and that the White Helmets are funded by western governments, is conflated with the disinformation, that the White Helmets are terrorists and want regime change.

Another tactic is the cross referencing of articles. This is when information from one article is linked or mentioned in another article as a means of evidence. The first article is cited as a source, to make the information seem more credible. In some cases, the cited article will cite yet another article, which makes it harder to track down the primary source while also making the information seem more credible as it is published in multiple articles.

The third strategy used to make the disinformation more compelling is discrediting sources from the pro-White Helmets narrative. There are three ways in which this is achieved. Firstly, by simply saying that the source is not reliable without giving reasoning as to why. Secondly, by discrediting the person itself because of their alignment to terrorist organisations or western governments. Lastly, the source was discredited by pointing out inconsistencies in the story or argument.

Conversely, the disinformation is made more credible by legitimising information through institutions. One institution that is often mentioned is the Swedish Doctors for Human Rights (SWEDHR). This organisation analysed a video in which the White Helmets provided aid to victims of a chemical attack. According to the doctors from this organisation, the video was staged as aid was not provided properly. This strategy linked to another strategy that was identified, namely using authority figures to make arguments more credible. The doctors who analysed the video are highly educated and know a lot about medical procedures, thus they can be trusted to correctly analyse the video. Emphasis was put on the expertise of these doctors:

*“An examination of a White Helmet video, conducted by Swedish medical doctors, specialists in various fields, have revealed that the life-saving procedures seen in the film are incorrect – in fact life-threatening- or seemingly fake (Article 97, TF2)”*

Use of authority figures was also used in the political context. For example, as stated previously, statements by Russian government officials and the Russian military were used as evidence that they were not involved in the chemical attack on Khan Sheikhou.

Another way in which the disinformation is made more credible, is through providing eye witness accounts of what happened. Often these eye witness accounts contradict the eye witness accounts in the pro-White Helmets narrative, creating two opposing reports of the situation. In countries where conflict is present it is hard to verify which account is legitimate, making it an easy way to substantiate false information. This means that the eye witness accounts from both the pro-White Helmets narrative, as well as from the anti-White Helmets narrative are hard to verify. The same can be said for the information provided by experts, as this information was drawn from videos and such experts were not present on the ground. To be precise, this thesis merely describes the strategies that emerged from the data, without commenting on if the facts stated are true or false.

On Twitter the character limit restricted the ability to substantiate arguments, which could be seen in the strategies that were used. One tactic mostly used on Twitter was simply asserting

something is a fact, without demonstrating why or describing implications of the fact, or stating that something seems suspicious without additional reasoning. At the same time, the anti-White Helmets narrative is questioning the logic and information of the pro-White Helmets narrative and thereby planting the seed that this information should not be believed. For example:

*“Why on earth that every attack happened steps away from #WhiteHelmets?!!! & the camera is always ready & rolling?! #SyriaChemicalAttack” – Quotation 4:189*

*“Why would a nation who will easily beat rebels use chemical weapons? Back to vilification like the #whitehelmets again as its not our side” -Quotation 4:4*

Thus, on the one hand, those generating the anti-White Helmets narrative are asserting facts without substantiating them or simply declaring something is suspicious, while on the other hand they are declaring the information in the pro-White Helmets narrative as illogical and thereby refuting it.

#### **4.7 Themes in the narrative**

Previously the main problems and solutions of the discourse were identified and the stylistic choices, strategies and tactics that are used to get this across were expounded. This section will focus on the themes. Pan and Kosicki (1993) posit that a thematic structure “is a multilayer hierarchy with a theme being the central core connecting various subthemes as the major nodes that, in turn, are connected to supporting elements” (p. 61). According to Pan and Kosicki (1993) these central themes are a way to convey a premise or a concept that is central to the discourse. In the data three main themes were identified, of which two were part of the anti-White Helmets discourse and one was part of the pro-White Helmets discourse.

The first theme that was identified, was projected before the analysis took place, namely ‘terrorism’. Terrorism was thought to be a central concept in the discourse as those opposing the White Helmets, label the White Helmets as part of al-Qaeda. This classification of the White Helmets as terrorists informs their arguments that the White Helmets carry guns and are violent and that they carried out the attack on Khan Sheikhoun. These can be identified as subthemes. This notably includes the codes ‘WH are violent’, which was coded 70 times, and ‘Attack by WH’, which was coded 57 times. Those in the anti-White Helmets narrative claim the chemical attack was carried out by the White Helmets. They use circular reasoning to link this claim to terrorism.

To be precise, they link terrorism with carrying out attacks. They use this reasoning to claim that the White Helmets are terrorists, because they carried out the attack. At the same time, they also use this reasoning to indicate that it was the White Helmets who carried out the attack, they did it because they are terrorists. In addition, they use argumentation that the White Helmets are violent, to give substance to the claim that they are terrorist. As terrorism and violence are inherently interconnected.

Another projected theme was mentions of the west, however this proved to be a subtheme of the theme ‘scepticism of mainstream media and western governments’. This premise was central to the discourse, as this argument informs not only the anti-White Helmets discourse, but also a general pattern of thinking for many that oppose the White Helmets. Besides mentions of the West, this theme encompassed multiple other codes. What follows is a list of codes that were fall under this theme followed by how many times these themes were coded: Staged/ false flag (369), Propaganda (177), Fake news (170), Funding (82), Campaign (53), WH are fake (32) and Regime change (25).

The last theme that was identified is ‘praise for the White Helmets’. This premise was central to the White Helmets discourse and informed the way of thinking of those supporting the White Helmets. The code ‘Praise WH’ itself was allocated 117 times in the data. Moreover there are several codes or subthemes that are part of this theme as well. The first is a theme that was projected to be a theme in the preliminary exploration, namely ‘Heroes’. This code was allocated 319 times in the data. Other important codes that are affiliated to this theme are Rescue (277), WH providing aid (157), Baby saved (135) and Give money (45).

#### **4.8 Summary of the findings**

This last subsection of the chapter consists of a summary of the results. The main findings of each previous subsection will be shortly articulated.

Every data point was categorised into Anti WH, Pro WH or Neutral. Findings of this categorisation include an absence of Anti-White Helmets content in the first time frame, a strong dominance of Anti-White Helmets content in the second time frame and a significant reduction in anti-White Helmets content in the third time frame. The pro-White Helmets content showed a slight decrease between the second and third time frame, but came to be dominant in the third time frame.

In each narrative, one actor was especially dominant. For the pro-White Helmets content this was the White Helmets themselves and for the anti-White Helmets content this was Vanessa Beeley.

Events central to the first time period were the rescue missions by the White Helmets and a central problem included lack of funding. In the second time period the central event was the Khan Sheikhoun chemical attack. The main focus of content was labelling the White Helmets as terrorists who carry out false flag operations in order to blame president Assad for these actions. The third time frame focussed on the White Helmets helping those wounded or killed by airstrikes or those affected by Covid-19. Additionally, it focussed on the involvement of Russia in Syria and condemning both the Russian and Syrian government for the airstrikes on civilian targets.

Subsequent arguments included providing evidence that the White Helmets are terrorists, supplying evidence that videos shot by the White Helmets, which show attacks on civilians, are staged and trying to prove that the Syrian and Russian governments are falsely blamed for these staged attacks. Lastly, they claim that since the White Helmets are financially backed by Western government, these governments must be using the White Helmets as a prop in order to attain regime change in Syria.

Actions suggested by the anti-White Helmets narrative include finding the truth as to what is really happening in Syria, while actions suggested by the pro-White Helmets narrative include creating both funding and awareness for the White Helmets. Reasoning for calls to action in the anti-White Helmets narrative includes emphasis on the importance of uncovering the truth, whereas the pro-White Helmets narrative calls to action by emphasising the importance of the work of the White Helmets and stressing that the war needs to be brought to an end.

Several stylistic choices, strategies and tactics were identified. On twitter stylistic choices include the use of links, pictures, videos and hashtags and mentioning other users. In addition, anecdotes, quotes and visual imagery were identified as stylistic choices. Strategies and tactics that were identified include conflating information with misinformation, cross referencing of articles, discrediting of sources, legitimising information through institutions or authority figures, providing eye witness accounts, asserting something as a fact and questioning the logic of the opposing narrative. Lastly, three main themes were identified in the narratives, namely terrorism, scepticism of mainstream media and western governments, and praise for the White Helmets.

## **5. Discussion**

In this chapter, the results discussed in the previous chapter will be connected to the literature discussed in chapter 2. Firstly, the type of narrative in the current study will be identified. Subsequently, the information operations within this discourse will be detailed. Third, agents within the discourse will be considered in light of the literature. And lastly, a remark will be given regarding the evidence that came forward in the anti-White Helmets discourse.

Wilson et al. (2018) discerned four different types of narratives that can be identified in disinformation discourse. Two of those, namely counter-narratives and anti-narratives, are narratives that conflict with an existing narrative and aim to undermine that narrative. The difference between these types is that counter-narratives provide a coherent alternative explanation of the story, whereas anti-narratives can provide alternative explanations but these do not come together as one coherent story. The anti-White Helmets narrative in the current study can be categorised as an anti-narrative. Alternative explanations are provided, but they do not come together as one narrative, as facts in the anti-White Helmets narrative often contradict. For example, some posit that the terrorists carried out a chemical attack on Khan Sheikhoun, whereas others say the whole attack was staged.

### **5.1 Information operations**

Of the seven types of information operations identified in the theoretical framework, five were found in the current analysis. The first information operation identified is cognitive hacking. In cognitive hacking, the disinformation contradicts with existing information, causing a disruption. This decreases trust in those that provide information, which leads to distrust in institutions, discourages political action and impairs society (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). The conflicting facts posed in the anti-narrative make people call the pro-White Helmets narrative into question. The distrust this creates is already visible in the discourse opposing the White Helmets, where people voice their scepticism of the mainstream media and western governments. This is in line with what Pomerantsev and Weiss (2014) posit. They suggest that the goal of Russian disinformation is to cause confusion in order to diminish trust in western societies and democracies. As there are many conflicting facts, without a coherent alternative narrative, there is confusion about what is true. This can be seen in the discourse, as the anti-White Helmets narrative formed a call to action in order to find the truth regarding what happened in Khan Sheikhoun.

This information operation goes hand in hand with the information operation question the authenticity or validity of information. According to Wilson et al. (2018), this can be done through discrediting the source of information or through labelling a narrative as propaganda. Both of these strategies were used in the discourse in the current study. The code 'Propaganda' was found 146 times and often referred to the reporting by mainstream media channels or official statements by western government officials. The discrediting of sources was done by pointing out inconsistencies in arguments, by pointing out alignment of the source to terrorist organisations or western governments and by simply stating a source was not reliable without reasoning. These ways of questioning authenticity or validity of information makes the source less credible, making it easier to propose an alternative explanation (Wilson et al., 2018).

In addition to challenging existing information, new false information was created. Choudhury, Ng and Iamnitshi (2020) call this information spoofing. Information spoofing entails deceiving through falsification, suppression or amplification of information. One example is a statement made by the Russian government, in which they declare that the Syrian Air Force has destroyed a warehouse containing chemical weapons. Higgins (2017a) has since provided verifiable evidence that this claim is false.

Another way in which information is manipulated is information gaslighting. This information operation, discussed by Nisbet and Kamenchuk (2019), involves spreading disinformation quickly in order to create confusion and uncertainty. A high amount of false information is dispersed swiftly, which makes it hard to tell which information is true and which information is false. Very quickly after the attack in Khan Sheikhoun, false information started to appear. The attack took place around seven in the morning and the conversation on Twitter started to come to life around nine in the morning, while the first article on RT appeared at noon. By this time much false information could be found on Twitter and many alternative explanations were reported.

The last type of information operation identified is incidental exposure to disinformation. According to Nisbet and Kamenchuk (2019), increased exposure to information leads to that information being retrieved more easily. When the information is seen multiple times, the reader is more likely to assume the information is true, without considering the original source. The information is then retained as true, even though it might be incorrect. The state-controlled media makes use of this by sharing disinformation on multiple platforms. In the current study, the cross-referencing of articles was seen, where information from one article is linked or mentioned in another article. This contributes to this phenomenon where it is hard to track down the primary

source of the information, while making the information seem more credible by repeating it. In some cases, even whole articles were duplicated and posted on a different website. Additionally, information moves between social media and broadcasting media, where each cites the other to make information look more credible (Mejias and Vokuev, 2017). In the current study, Tweets were often cited in articles and many Tweets contained links to articles, meaning this flow between platforms was clearly visible.

## **5.2 Agents**

In addition to the manipulation of information through information operations, agents were deployed in order to push the anti-White Helmets narrative. As explained previously, Vanessa Beeley was one of the actors that stood out in the anti-White Helmets narrative. In a report by The Syria Campaign (2017) she was highlighted as ‘the Queen of disinformation’ (p.22). The Syria Campaign (2017) discusses that she has met with several Russian and Syrian government officials and that she was often quoted and interviewed by the Russian state-owned media companies, such as Sputnik International and RT. Van Herpen (as cited in Lanoszka, 2019), explains how these media companies, that are controlled by the Russian government, are used to push certain pro-Russian narratives in countries abroad. They do this by commenting negatively on the West, using people from the West, such as Vanessa Beeley.

Additionally, Starbird et al. (2019) explains that it is difficult to distinguish those influencing the narrative from those who have been influenced by it and believe the information to be true. They mention that in Russian disinformation campaigns, there are often those who appear to be journalists, but are in reality sponsored by the Russian government. Starbird and Wilson (2020) further suggest that the content of these agents is often spread through Russian state media channels. Since Vanessa Beeley is closely linked to the Russian state media and actively propagates the pro-Russian narrative, it is probable that she works for the Russian government.

## **5.3 Evidence**

When looking at the evidence presented in the anti-White Helmets discourse, it becomes easy to believe some of the arguments made. However, as Bellingcat Investigation Team (2018) states, the claims made by those in the anti-White Helmets narrative are never backed up by

verifiable evidence, whereas most claims made by the White Helmets can be backed up by verifiable evidence. In countries affected by war it is often hard to verify information. Brian et al. (2020) discuss how the information scarcity in conflict areas makes for a good foundation for disinformation, as information cannot easily be verified by independent parties. Despite the difficulty of finding verifiable information, Bellingcat has collected an array of evidence that can refute claims made by the anti-White Helmets narrative. They discussed a summary of claims made by different actors (Higgins, 2017a), talked about the theory that the attack was staged because White Helmets showed no signs of sarin exposure (Higgins, 2017b) and refuted claims regarding a Khan Sheikhouh conspiracy theory (Bellingcat Investigation Team, 2017). At the same time, claims made by the White Helmets can often be verified, as they collect evidence through filming their rescue missions, where they often capture evidence of Russia's attacks on civilians (The Syria Campaign, 2017).

In addition to this evidence provided by those who support the White Helmets, the missing 'evidence' from the RT YouTube channel should be touched on. Due to the war in Ukraine, part of the 'evidence' provided by RT has been blocked, because the RT YouTube channel has been banned. The channel was part of Russia's strategy to create widespread support for the Russian narrative. As Van Herpen (as cited in Lanowska, 2019) stated, it is Russia's aim to push these narratives in foreign countries, which it does through online channels such as RT and Sputnik international. Since the start of the conflict in Ukraine, social media websites have been putting more effort into blocking disinformation where possible. YouTube has blocked channels associated with the Russian state (Perrigo, 2022), Facebook has appointed fact-check teams to monitor posts on its platform (Nix, 2022) and Twitter has put limits on more than 300 Russian government accounts and plans to change its search and explore features to stop boosting tweets containing false information (BBC News, 2022). This change in the way social media platforms handle disinformation could influence the way in which Russia approaches information operations in the future.

## 6. Conclusion

In this last chapter, the main research questions will be answered and the research will be reviewed. Subsequently, the implication of this thesis will be outlined. Lastly, a note will be made regarding the limitations of the study and recommendations for further research will be discussed.

### 6.1 Research question

In the previous chapters answers have been given to the four sub-questions. The first sub-question '*Who are the actors in the two narratives regarding the White Helmets?*' was answered in chapter 4.1. In the anti-White Helmets narrative the most prevalent actor was Vanessa Beeley, whereas in the anti-White Helmets narrative the most prevalent actor was the White Helmets themselves.

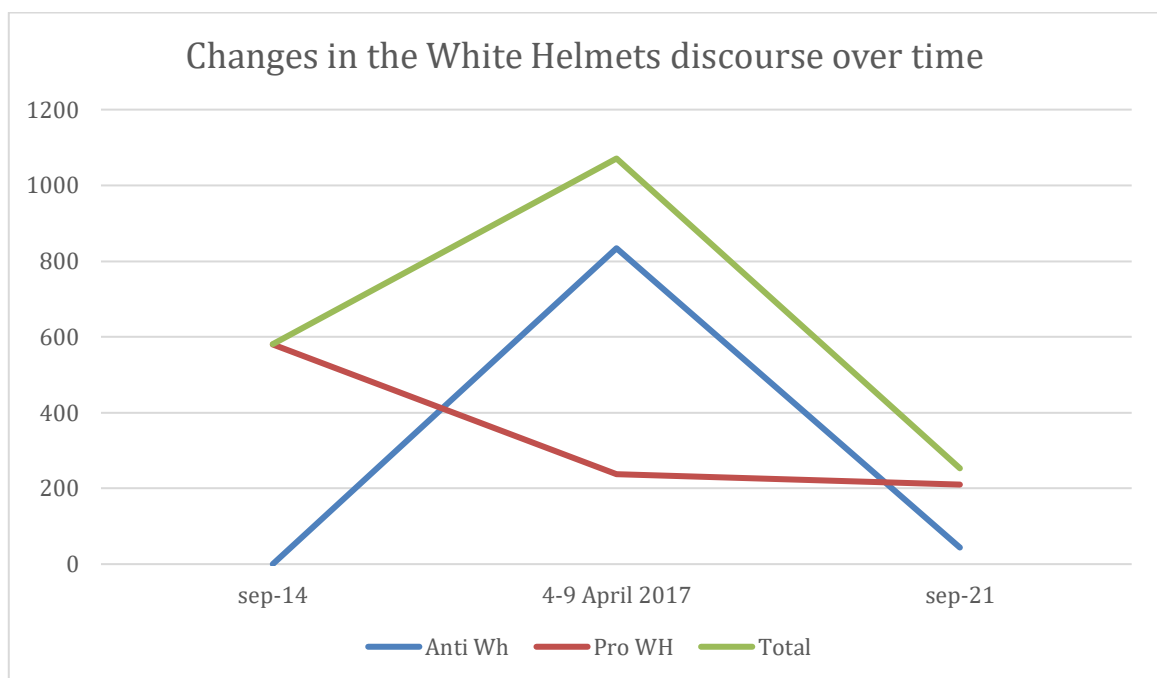
The second and third sub-question '*What is the discourse that Russia puts forward regarding the White Helmets in Syria?*' and '*What is the discourse put forward by the White Helmets and their supporters?*' were answered throughout chapter 4. The anti-White Helmets discourse, meaning the discourse that Russia puts forward regarding the White Helmets, consisted of people claiming the White Helmets are terrorists that either carried out chemical attacks or are staging these attacks as false flag operations. These statements are accompanied by calling information that contradicts their view propaganda or fake news. Some even say that the West is working together with the White Helmets, and thus the terrorist, in order to attain regime change in Syria. On the other hand, the pro-White Helmets discourse is comprised of praise for the White Helmets and the work they do, urges to support the White Helmets and calls to take action against Syria and Russia for the war crimes they committed and the humanitarian crises they have caused.

The last subquestion, '*What information operations can be identified in the narrative opposing the White Helmets?*' was answered in the previous chapter. Out of seven information operations discussed in the theoretical framework, five were found in the current analysis: cognitive hacking, questioning authenticity or validity of information, information spoofing, information gaslighting and incidental exposure to disinformation.

This brings us to the main research question '*To what extent have the two narratives regarding the White Helmets changed between 2014 and 2021?*'. First, the change over time will be addressed. Here it is interesting to note that both The Syria Campaign (2017) and Starbird and

Wilson (2020) found that on Twitter content against the White Helmets was more prevalent than content supporting the White Helmets. For Starbird and Wilson (2020) this regarded content posted between 27 May 2017 and 15 June 2018, and for The Syria Campaign (2017) this regarded ten key moments in 2016 and 2017. The data in this thesis research showed that in the second time frame, 4 to 9 April 2017, it is indeed the anti-White Helmets content that was more prevalent on Twitter. However, September of 2021 this is not the case anymore. In this time frame there was more content in support of the White Helmets than content opposing them.

This means that over time there have been two shifts in the conversation regarding the White Helmets on Twitter. The first shift was between September 2014 and 4 to 9 April 2017. This shifted from no anti-White Helmets content in the first time frame, to a clear dominance of anti-White Helmets content in the second time frame. In the second shift, between 4 to 9 April 2017 and September 2021, where anti-White Helmets content subsided and the pro-White Helmets content took the upper hand. These shifts are visualised in graph 1 below, where the blue line represents the anti-White Helmets discourse and the red line represents the pro-White Helmets discourse. Additionally, this graph shows that the White Helmets discourse as a whole shows a similar pattern to the anti-White Helmets discourse, with an increase between the first and second time frame and a decrease between the second and third time frame. This means that the quantity of the discourse was heavily influenced by the anti-White Helmets narrative and thus by the disinformation campaign.



Graph 1: Changes in the White Helmets discourse over time

This change in who dominates the conversation also influences the framing within the discourse. As Matthes (2010) and Benford and Snow (2000) note, framing is an ongoing process, which means frames evolve constantly. Framing entails making certain facets of reality more salient in order to favour a certain narrative, thus creating those frames (Matthes, 2010). Additionally, Gamson et al. (1992) posits this evolution of frames takes shape through social actors that compete to push forward their preferred frame. Thus, several groups or institutions compete simultaneously to construct social reality.

So, coming back to the main research question *'To what extent have the two narratives regarding the White Helmets changed between 2014 and 2021?'*. In the first and third time frame the group supporting the White Helmets was dominant in the discourse, meaning the narrative and frames they posited were dominant. Salient concepts in this narrative include praise for the White Helmets and the work they do, calls to action to support the White Helmets and urging governments to take action against Syria and Russia for the war crimes they committed and the humanitarian crises they have caused. In contrast, in the second time frame the group opposing the White Helmets was dominant in the discourse. Salient frames in this narrative include marking reports by western governments and mainstream media as propaganda, calling the White Helmets terrorists and labelling attacks as staged or as false flag operations.

## **6.2 Implications**

This thesis added to the current debate by conducting an analysis that looks at how the narratives regarding the White Helmets have changed over time. In doing this, two shifts in the discourse were identified. In September 2014, a year prior to the military intervention by Russia in Syria, there was no discourse that opposed the White Helmets. In contrast, in April of 2017, when the anti-White Helmets discourse was widespread, military involvement of Russia in Syria was especially prominent. According to Hopkins (2017), there was a large rise in attacks involving Russian planes starting in March of 2017, signifying an escalation in Russia's air campaign during that time. Thus, Russia's increased involvement in Syria was accompanied by a rise in anti-White Helmets content. In March of 2020 a ceasefire agreement was brokered by Russia and Turkey, which caused a decrease in active fighting in Syria (Hatahet, 2022). In the same token, a large decrease in anti-White Helmets content was found between April 2017 and September 2021. On the grounds of this information, it seems that the Russian disinformation regarding the White Helmets followed a similar pattern to that of the involvement of Russia within Syria.

Thus, from this a conclusion can be drawn that the disinformation regarding the White Helmets and the Russian military intervention in Syria are correlated. This conclusion supports the notion that Russia has set up this disinformation campaign smearing the White Helmets, in order to cover for the systematic bombing of civilians in Syria. As Levinger (2018) notes, this strategy has also contributed to other Russian objectives in terms of foreign policy. To be precise, the war in Syria, and especially the bombing of civilians, has resulted in a large influx of refugees into Europe. This influx of refugees, in turn, caused a destabilisation of European democracies as well as decreased unity and solidarity within organisations such as the European Union and NATO.

Consequently, it is important for governments to reflect on the effects of their policy, both in terms of disinformation and in terms of foreign policy. Not only to prevent another influx of refugees which could further destabilise Europe, but also to avoid further suffering or humanitarian emergencies in countries in conflict. In terms of policy on disinformation, governments could focus on promoting digital literacy, teaching people to develop critical thinking about content they see online and informing people how to spot false information. In terms of foreign policy, governments should review their policy on Syria in light of the conflict in Ukraine. This reflection should be twofold. Firstly, there are many parallels between Syria and Ukraine, regarding both the Russian tactics used in the war and the disinformation that accompanies it (Lamensch, 2022). Therefore, it is vital to reflect on the war in Syria in order to gain knowledge on how to handle the situation in Ukraine. Secondly, governments, and Western governments especially, should reflect on the difference in policy regarding the reaction to the invasion of Ukraine and the reaction to the invasion of Syria. Moreover, they should reflect on the difference in policy regarding the refugees that fled to Europe after conflict erupted. This difference in treatment should be addressed and clarified.

In addition to assessing the narratives regarding the White Helmets over time, this thesis also identified which information operations were used to promote the anti-White Helmets narrative. This research shows how information operations can be recognised in a disinformation narrative, allowing for a deeper knowledge on how disinformation is spread. When understanding the way in which disinformation is spread, it becomes easier to recognise and combat disinformation. As mentioned previously, social media websites have been putting more effort into countering disinformation. Knowledge on how this disinformation is spread on their platforms should be implemented in order to combat disinformation in a more effective way.

In terms of methodology, this research added to the debate by using a framing analysis to analyse online media. Similar studies make use of programmed tools in order to examine larger quantities of data. This has the advantage of being able to include more data to get a broader view of the issue at hand. However, using a human factor to analyse a social and human phenomenon, namely framing, has allowed for a deeper understanding of the way in which issues in the narrative are discussed and brought to one's attention. For example, the use of a framing analysis brought to light suggested actions in the narrative and revealed how people were motivated to take action.

### **6.3 Limitations and recommendations for future research**

There are three main limitations to this research. The first is that this study was based on media written in English. No data written in Russian or Arabic was included, so it remains unknown if the discourse is similar in these languages.

Second, the focus of this study was mainly on Twitter, as the articles also stemmed from links used within Tweets. As mentioned in the methodology, Twitter is the main platform where the disinformation about the White Helmets is spread (The Syria Campaign, 2017), therefore this was the main focus of data collection. Recommendations for future research include focussing on non-English data or focussing on certain news websites or other social media platforms.

The third limitation is the time frames that were selected. The three time frames were not of equal length, as it was outside of the scope of this research to include all data from the month of April. This made comparison between the time frames more complex. Future research could make use of Twitter's Application Programming Interface for academic research in order to analyse larger amounts of data more easily (Twitter, n.d.). This would allow for a more comprehensive overview of the changes within the discourse over time.

Other avenues for future research include an assessment of how the disinformation regarding the White Helmets has influenced the work they do and influenced their principles of humanity, solidarity and impartiality. Furthermore, future research could entail an analysis of the influence of the war in Ukraine on the disinformation regarding the White Helmets. As Russia's focus is pulled away from Syria at this moment, this could influence their disinformation campaign in Syria or more generally their involvement in the Syrian war. This, in turn, can have a great influence in the situation on the ground in Syria and the ability of the international community to provide assistance.

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