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2015

MH17 Tragedy: A Comparative Analysis of Cold War and Post-Cold War Media Framing of Aviation Disasters

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MH17 Tragedy: A Comparative Analysis of Cold War and
Post-Cold War Media Framing of Aviation Disasters

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Thesis submitted
to the Reed College of Media
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in
Journalism

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Morgantown, West Virginia
2015

Keywords: Cold War, *The New York Times*, *The Moscow Times*, Malaysian Airlines,
MH17, media framing

ABSTRACT

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Abu Daud Mohammad Isa

This research builds on similar studies that examined newspaper coverage of airline disasters during the Cold War in the 1980s. It explores "new Cold War" frames in *The New York Times* and *The Moscow Times* coverage of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17, which was shot down over Ukraine in 2014. The research reveals an absence of hostile Cold War assertions, but found frames were consistent with the respective U.S. and Russian diplomatic positions.

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Introduction

Media coverage of international events during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was an issue of interest for mass communication researchers (e.g., Entman 2004; Hallin, 1986; Meyer, 1995). With two super powers engaging in a fierce competition in every field of knowledge and science along with ground battle in proxy wars across the globe, framing theory had been an important tool to understand if American and Soviet media were used as propaganda tools. The collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) or Soviet Union in 1991 moved many researchers' attention from Cold War events.

However, the Ukraine crisis that began in 2014 has been an opportunity to look back at the pre-1991 world order as some observers (e.g., Urban, 2014; Will, 2014) compared the latest West-Russia tension to the Cold War. Some analysts (e.g., Oskanian, 2014; Bishara, 2014) opposed the Cold War comparison and termed it an exaggerated interpretation of events. However, they agree that this is the most intense confrontation between Russia and the West since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

During the Ukraine crisis, two particular incidents infuriated the West that prompted harsh actions against Russia – downing of the Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 and the annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. The MH17 incident on July 17, 2014, drew global attention and a prompt response from the West, which accused the pro-Russian separatists of killing 298 people on board. The U.S. said that Russian-supplied missiles might have been used to shoot down the plane. However, the U.S. intelligence officials later said they believed that the separatists did it by mistake (ABC, 2014).

The MH17 incident is interestingly similar to two separate incidents during the Cold War – the downing of a Korean passenger plane by a Soviet fighter jet in 1983 and the downing of an

Iranian passenger plane by a U.S. cruiser in 1988. Entman (2004) found that the American media overwhelmingly used "murder" frame in the coverage of Korean Airlines incident while used "technical glitch" frame in the Iran Air coverage. According to Entman (2004), it was dissimilar coverage of two structurally similar incidents that had significant political impacts at that time.

This thesis investigated the coverage of MH17 incident by a U.S. newspaper – *The New York Times* – and a Russian newspaper – *The Moscow Times* – to understand if the Cold War framing exists two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It was examined if the newspapers' coverage reflected the official diplomatic positions of Washington and Moscow. *The New York Times'* Cold War-time coverage was also compared to MH17 incident to understand changes in media framing over the last few decades.

Literature Review

In the following literature, media framing research and the West-Russia relations will be discussed followed by specific background about the three incidents this study will examine: 1983 Korean Airlines (KAL) Flight 007, 1988 Iran Air Flight 655, and 2014 Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17.

Theoretical Considerations

The concept of framing has become common to understanding mass communication and the patterns of media coverage. People understand an event through the eyes of the media that tell them what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and sometimes in what way. Different media can interpret an event in different ways that may ultimately have dissimilar impacts on the audience depending on how that event was framed.

Goffman (1974), who introduced framing theory, believed that interpretation of an event depends on "primary frameworks" that we use to explain that event (p. 24). Gitlin (1980) defines

media frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation of selection, emphasis and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual" (p. 7). Entman (1993) emphasized the importance of "selection and salience" (p. 52) in the framing process. He argued that the political communication is affected by the media frames, which "call attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements, which might lead audience to have different reactions" (p. 55).

Kendall (2005) believes frames are used by the media to emphasize some events and ignore others. According to Gamson (1989), "Facts have no intrinsic meaning. They take on their meaning by being embedded in a frame or story line that organizes them and gives them coherence, selecting certain ones to emphasize while ignoring others" (p. 157). Dimitrova and Connolly-Ahern (2007) describe media frame as a process to select, emphasize, and exclude some ideas. Norris (1995) asserts that "the term *news frame* refers to an interpretive structure that sets particular events within a broader context" (p. 357).

This study is grounded in the media framing theory. Given that previous literature (e.g., Entman, 1993; Gamson, 1989; Kendall, 2005; Dimitrova & Connolly-Ahern, 2007) found "selection," "exclusion," "emphasis," and "ignoring" at the core of framing theory, this study focused on the developments and shifts of Cold War frames to understand how global events are highlighted and downplayed. Particularly, changes in media coverage and diplomacy in the U.S. and Russia were given more attention. During the Cold War, media frames divided the world in "friends" and "enemies" of the U.S. and Soviet Union (Norris, 1995). This researcher anticipated that the end of the Cold War would result in a change in media framing since the Cold War frames were based on the rivalry between the two superpowers.

Though previous research (e.g., Tuchman, 1978; Entman, 2004; Carragee, 2003; Hallin, 1986) have studied Cold War media framing, little attention has been paid on whether those frames have been changed in the post-Cold War era. Moreover, few of those focused on Soviet media's Cold War frames, though U.S. media framing was examined extensively. These gaps in existing literature raise certain questions considered in this article that help us to understand framing process in both American and Russian media. This thesis attempted to address two particular issues. First, it asks if the "new Cold War" debate (Urban, 2014; Will, 2014; Legvold, 2014; Shuster, 2014; Oskanian, 2014; Bishara, 2014) is relevant more than two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Second, the study explores if changes in the U.S. and Russia had effects on media frames over the last few decades.

Similar to this study, previous research (e.g., Entman, 2004; Kothari, 2010; Meyer, 1995; Evans, 2010) used framing theory to examine newspaper coverage. A theoretical framework developed by Entman (2004) was used in this study because a common ground was required to compare the coverage of Cold War and post-Cold War events. Entman's model worked for this study because all three incidents investigated by him and this researcher were significantly similar. Considering the impacts of media coverage on diplomacy (Bahador, 2011), framing theory would also help us to better understand history and shifts in the U.S. and Russian foreign policies.

Cold War and Media Framing

The Cold War is defined as the political, military, and economic tension and competition between the United States and the Soviet Union that began after the end of the World War II in 1945. After four decades of tensions and proxy wars abroad between the two superpowers, the Cold War came to an end with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 (Carragee, 2003). The

journalists were not out of the influence of this rivalry as the world media were divided into two

different ideologies- capitalism and communism.

The Cold War has been an issue of interest for the researchers, particularly for those who

are interested in media framing. With American media heavily dependent on the official version

of the international events, news framing during the Cold War followed American foreign policy

rather than journalistic norms (Entman, 2004). Tuchman (1978) writes that the Americans who

refused to fight in Vietnam War were branded by the media as "draft evaders" though they

preferred to be called as "draft resisters" (p. 2). Moreover, the media coverage were used to

prevent the global expansion of Soviet influence (Carragee, 2003). Nohrstedt (2009) explains,

"Journalists are drawn into the conflict, either voluntarily or under orders, or even unawares"

(pp. 95-96).

American journalists widely used Cold War framing to define wars, conflicts, and

movements including Vietnam War (Hallin, 1986) and conflicts in El Salvador (Anderson,

1988), and Nicaragua (Herman, 1985). Studies on the American media coverage of international

events during the Cold War indicate that the news contents served the purpose of the U.S.

foreign policy. According to Carragee (2003):

> It was the outcome of a number of factors, including skillful news management by
>
> successive American administrations during the Cold War, the shared worldview of
>
> government and media elites, and the routine dependency of reporters on American
>
> government officials for information on international events (p. 290).

With different countries defined by common stereotypes like "friends" and "enemies" of

the United States, the American media prioritized conflicts connected to Cold War over events

unrelated to U.S. interests (Norris, 1995). The media attempted to provide a narrow definition of

Cold War and related events. For example, *The New York Times* defined Cold War as an "unexplained fact" and "a product of Soviet Expansionism", which were similar frames used by the American officials (Carragee, 2003, p. 294). Popularity of Cold War paradigms among American journalists made the line between the media and the U.S. foreign policy blurred. Carragee (2003) writes, "By drawing on and articulating values associated with the Cold War, American journalists framed foreign events by placing them within the context of the global competition between the Soviet Union and the United States" (p. 289).

Post-Cold War Conflicts Framing

The end of the Cold War bolstered the influence of the American media as the journalists took a more critical stance towards U.S. foreign policy (Entman, 2004). It began during the Vietnam War when reporters started challenging government narratives of war (Carragee, 2003). An in-depth investigation by Hallin (1986) into newspaper and television coverage of Vietnam War found that it was the first *uncensored war* for American journalists, who for the first time covered a major international event independently.

However, the journalists had difficulties in explaining post-Cold War conflicts because there was no longer "a clearly structured conflict between the West and the communist East" (Evans, 2010, p. 211). The western journalists, however, could not come out of the skepticism over the former Soviet Union as the Cold War frame still dominated the coverage of conflicts that involved Russia in the last two decades. Although the Cold War officially ended in 1991, the Cold War assertions reignited in post-Cold War conflicts including 1999 Kosovo war and 2003 Iraq war (Bayulgen & Arbatli, 2013).

The end of the Cold War ignited much hope in the international politics about peace and stability in the world. As an important tool of soft power, the media coverage of international events was expected to have significant changes. The expectation about soft power was caused

by the way the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Bahador (2011) explains, "it was not tanks and cruise missiles, after all, that brought down the Soviet Empire, according to soft power advocates, but rather fax machines, blue jeans and television" (p. 37). However, this expectation was hardly met as conflicts among nations, ideologies, and races increased after 1991. In a world with no imminent threat to international security, the media seemed reluctant to cover conflicts in the 1990s. Though the U.S. intervention in Somalia in 1992 and the Bosnian War in 1992-1995 drew some coverage by American media, the 1994 Rwanda genocide, civil wars in Sudan and Afghanistan, and conflicts in DR Congo received little media attention (Bahador, 2011).

The media coverage of post-Cold War conflicts took a new shape after the Sep 11 terrorist attacks in 2001. The first of such conflicts was the 2003 Afghanistan War, initiated by the U.S. after the Taliban refusal to hand over Osama Bin Laden, whom the Americans accused of being the mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks. An attempt to control the media narrative was evident from the U.S. government as the pictures of civilian casualties emerged during the war. Then National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice urged the media not to telecast Bin Laden's interview while CNN was directed to balance the Afghan casualty images by reminding the viewers about the 9/11 attacks (Nohrstedt, 2009). Qatar-based Al Jazeera TV channel, which gained global popularity for its exclusive reports on Afghan war, came under harsh U.S. criticism. American missiles destroyed its local office in Afghanistan after Kabul was captured while it was reported in the newspapers that President Bush even wanted to bomb its headquarters in Doha, Qatar (Nohrstedt, 2009).

Another major post-9/11conflict was the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 that toppled the Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. According to Dimitrova and Connolly-Ahern (2007), *The New York Times* heavily relied on U.S. government officials to report on the war and mostly used

"military conflict" and "rebuilding Iraq" frames while non-U.S. media focused on the

humanitarian costs of the war. Studies on the 1990-1991 Gulf War (e.g., Topoushian, 2002)

found that the American media widely followed U.S. foreign policy in its coverage. Fried (2005)

studied *Times* and *Newsweek* issues published before the beginning of the 2013 Iraq War and

found that the magazines continuously pushed the U.S. government to go to war by wrongly

linking Al Qaeda to the then Iraqi ruler Saddam Hussein. According to Boydstun and Glazier

(2013), the loss-based coverage of 9/11 attacks pushed people to accept wars in Afghanistan and

Iraq." As U.S. president George W. Bush told the world that the nations are either with or against

the Americans, the Cold War framing of "friends" and "enemies" or "us-versus-them" principle

returned to the media coverage (Nohrstedt, 2009).

The 2003 Iraq war is particularly known for the introduction of the concept of "embedded

journalism." Under this program, some American journalists covered the war being embedded

with the invading soldiers. Before the war began, the U.S. trained some 600 journalists to teach

them how to conduct themselves during the war. Nohrstedt (2009) observes that the motive of

the training program was to spread the war propaganda. Introduction of "embedded journalism"

can be seen as a desperate move by the U.S. government, which was no longer in a position to

control media narrative of conflicts like those during the Cold War.

West-Russia Relations

The euphoria of bringing Soviet Union under western influence did not last longer

because the West did not abandon its Cold War policies after 1991. North Atlantic Treaty

Organization or NATO, which was formed to prevent Kremlin's influence, continued to expand

after the end of the Cold War. Though Russia was always a European country, the Western

media as well as the western governments were unwilling to include Russia in European matters.

A study of American newspaper by Dittmer (2007) found that though sometimes media use the

term "Western" to describe Russia, other terms such as "oriental," and "sleeping giant" dominate

the discourse (p. 58). Charvin (2014) argues that the 2014 Ukraine crisis is an example that the

West has not changed its anti-Russian rhetoric since the end of Cold War. He writes:

> The Ukrainian crisis is but an element of global policy of pushing Russia aside and
>
> cutting short its ties with the neighboring Soviet successor-states. This policy is part of a
>
> wider project of blocking Russia's full-fledged return to the international arena, a natural
>
> right of any sovereign state (p. 46).

However, the Russian side is not blameless either for the deterioration of relations with

the West. With an aim to recover some of its influence in Europe, Russia has invested heavily in

the London Stock Market, German businesses, and in some other countries making them heavily

dependent on Russia. Moscow also signed bilateral gas deals with some countries including

Hungary, Bulgaria, and Ukraine, which was beneficial for these countries but was seen by the

European Commission in Brussels as a breach of EU law (Pomerantsev, 2014). European

concerns further deepened over Russian involvement in the internal politics of its east-European

neighbors. Particularly, Moscow's role in 2005 Kyrgyzstan revolution, 2004-2005 Ukrainian

protests, and during 2008 Russia-Georgia war dashed Russia's hope of rebranding itself as a

thriving democracy (Ortmann, 2008).

On the other hand, Russians have also been skeptical about the West in the post-Cold

War period. According to Shlapentokh (2011), a 2009 survey found that two-thirds of the

Russian population considers the United States a hostile nation as the anti-American sentiment

among Russians increased from 22 percent in 2000 to 50 percent in 2009. Shlapentokh (2011),

however, argues that this anti-American sentiment is limited to the Russian ruling elites and that

it's not widespread among ordinary people. Russians were also found to be distrustful about its neighbors who broke away from the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. A survey by Levada Center in 2009 found that almost half of the Russian population considers Georgia and Ukraine as vital threats (Shlapentokh, 2011).

Increasing popularity of conspiracy theories in Russia is one of the key reasons behind these adverse sentiments among Russians towards other nations. For example, the post-election unrest in 2011 and the famous Pussy Riot Protest in 2012 by the Russian punk rock band were framed as western conspiracies (Yablokov, 2014). Media play a significant role in spreading these sentiments among ordinary Russians. More than 90 percent of Russian media receive government subsidy while President Vladimir Putin has tightened his grip on media through consolidations and new laws (Schenk, 2012; D'Amora, 2014).

Korean Airlines Flight 007

One of the major international incidents during the Cold War was the shooting down of Korean Airlines (KAL) Flight 007 by a Soviet fighter jet on September 1, 1983, which killed 269 passengers and crews. Sixty-one Americans and 28 Japanese were on board while majority of the victims were South Koreans (Thomas, 2013). KAL007 was on its way from New York to Seoul, with a stopover in Anchorage, Alaska. The plane reportedly entered into the Russian airspace by veering away from its route and flew nearer to a Soviet military installation in Kamchatka Peninsula. A recorded conversation between the fighter jet pilots and the ground stations suggests that the Soviets tried to contact the KAL007 but failed to receive any response. One of the interceptor fighters then fired missiles and the plane plummeted into the Sea of Japan (Pearson, 1987).

According to Thomas (2013), the Soviet pilots believed that it was a U.S. spy plane, not a passenger flight. A report by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) indicated that it was a direct result of missile attacks (Pearson, 1987). U.S. President Ronald Reagan harshly criticized the Soviet action as he told a press briefing,

> In the wake of the barbaric act committed yesterday by the Soviet regime against a commercial jetliner, the United States and many other countries of the world made clear and compelling statements that expressed not only our outrage but also our demand for a truthful accounting of the facts. (as cited in Peters & Wooley, 1999-2015a)

However, the Soviet Union dismissed any wrongdoing and defended its action. After years of denial, Boris Yelstin, the first post-Cold War Russian President, apologized to South Korea in 1992 (Los Angeles Times, 1992).

Iran Air Flight 655

Iran Air Flight 655 (IR655) was shot down by USS Vincennes in the Strait of Hormuz on July 3, 1988, killing all 290 passengers and crews on board. All but 38 passengers were Iranian nationals. The incident happened few minutes after the plane took off from Bandar Abbas Airport in southern Iran, bound for Dubai. At that time three U.S. ships – USS Vincennes, USS Montgomery, and USS Sides – were patrolling the Persian Gulf amid an ongoing Iraq-Iran war (The Islamic Republic of Iran, 1990). The U.S. claimed that the plane was descending towards its ship and the soldiers thought that it was an F-14 fighter jet. Before firing missiles, USS Vincennes tried to contact the plane through military channels, but since it was addressed to a non-existing F-14, it did not receive any response (Fisher, 2013). An ICAO report concluded that the airliner was destroyed by two surface-to-air missiles (Cenciotti, 2012). On the day the plane was shot down, U.S. President Reagan issued a statement justifying the action:

The course of the Iranian civilian airliner was such that it was headed directly for the

U.S.S. Vincennes, which was at the time engaged with five Iranian boats that had

attacked our forces. When the aircraft failed to heed repeated warnings, the Vincennes

followed standing orders and widely publicized procedures, firing to protect itself against

possible attack. (as cited in Peters & Wooley, 1999-2015b)

An investigation by the U.S. Department of Defense (1988) branded the incident as "a

by-product of the Iran-Iraq war" (p. 7). Eight years after the incident in 1996, the U.S. paid $61.8

million in *ex gratia* compensation to the Iranian victim families to discontinue a case in the

International Court of Justice initiated by Iran (Crowley, 2013). Some American analysts (e.g.,

Maier, 1989) argued that such action is unnecessary because the U.S. had no responsibility to

Iran under international law. However, the U.S. has never admitted responsibility, rather

awarded the Vincennes crews (Ghasemi, 2004).

Though many expected a harsh Soviet reaction, Moscow responded to IR655 incident

with a simple brief statement where no tough words were directed towards the U.S. (Kuypers,

Young, & Launer, 2001). This response was consistent with improving Soviet-U.S. relations

during the final days of the Cold War. However, the Soviet government and newspapers rejected

American media's comparison of IR655 to the KAL007 incident to keep "focus upon U.S. Gulf

policy, not upon ideological bantering" (Kuypers et al., 2001, p. 308).

Ukraine Crisis and the MH17 Air Incident

The Ukraine crisis, which has turned into a conflict between the West and Russia,

unfolded in East Europe in late 2013 and early 2014. Protests began in November 2013 when

Ukrainian President Yanukovich abandoned a trade agreement with the European Union seeking

a closer tie with Russia. In a bid to quell the protests, Russia announced to buy $15 billion in

Ukrainian government bonds and cut in cost of Russia's natural gas for Ukraine (Al Jazeera, 2014). However, the measures failed to control the situation because of the government's heavily-handed action that killed scores of opposition activists (BBC, 2014). Amid violent protests, President Yanukovich fled capital Kiev on February 21, 2014, and the parliament overwhelmingly voted to remove him from his post the next day.

Meanwhile in Crimea, a south eastern region of Ukraine, pro-Russian activists seized government buildings to protest against the new Kiev administration. They also held a referendum where 95 percent people voted for separation from Ukraine. On March 18, 2014, Russian President Putin signed a treaty annexing Crimea into Russia (USA Today, 2014). The U.S. and EU responded with imposing new sanctions against Putin's inner circle and by excluding Russia from the meetings of the G-8, a group of the world's eight strongest economies. The Russian move was also snubbed by the United Nations General Assembly, which approved a resolution declaring the annexation of Crimea illegal (Al Jazeera, 2014).

Inspired by Crimea's success, pro-Russian separatists in Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine region began demonstrations to demand a referendum on independence. Ukraine responded by sending troops unfolding a full-fledge battle in the eastern region (The Washington Post, 2014). Amid this ongoing conflict, Ukraine elected Petro Poroshenko as its new leader. Shortly after taking office, the new President rejected a Russian gas deal further escalating tensions with Russia (Dearden, 2014).

However, the conflict reached to a new international height after the downing of the Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17. The plane was shot down in the Donetsk region of eastern Ukraine on its way from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, killing all 298 passengers and crews. It was downed near the rebel-controlled village of Grabove close to the Russian border (BBC,

2014). Of the victims, 192 were from the Netherlands, 44 from Malaysia, 27 from Australia, 12

from Indonesia, 10 from the United Kingdom, four from Germany, four from Belgium, three

from the Philippines, and one each from Canada and New Zealand (Westcott, 2014). Among

them were six prominent AIDS researchers who were on their way to attend the 20th

International AIDS Conference in Melbourne, Australia, scheduled for July 20-25, 2014

(Samarasekera, 2014).

The incident sparked outrage and condemnation from across the globe, particularly from

the Netherlands, which accounts for two-thirds of the total number of victims. Dutch Prime

Minister Mark Rutte called on Russian President Putin to take responsibility for the actions of

the east Ukrainian rebels (Gunn & Bhatti, 2014). Ukrainian President Poroshenko tweeted: "MH-

17 is not an incident or catastrophe, it is a terrorist attack" (Time, 2014). On the other hand,

Russian President Putin put blame on Ukraine. On July 18, 2014, Putin began a pre-scheduled

official meeting by standing in silence for a minute to mourn the deaths of the MH17 victims. In

his speech at the meeting, Putin said that the "tragedy would not have occurred if there were

peace in that country, or in any case, if hostilities had not resumed in southeast Ukraine. And

certainly, the government over whose territory it occurred is responsible for this terrible tragedy"

(President of Russia, The Presidential Press and Information Office, 2014). In his first reaction,

U.S. President Obama issued a statement indirectly linking Russia to the incident:

> Evidence indicates that the plane was shot down by a surface-to-air missile that was
>
> launched from an area that is controlled by Russian-backed separatists inside of Ukraine.
>
> We also know that this is not the first time a plane has been shot down in eastern
>
> Ukraine. Over the last several weeks, Russian-backed separatists have shot down a
>
> Ukrainian transport plane and a Ukrainian helicopter, and they claimed responsibility for

shooting down a Ukrainian fighter jet. Moreover, we know that these separatists have

received a steady flow of support from Russia. This includes arms and training. It

includes heavy weapons, and it includes anti-aircraft weapons. (The White House, Office

of the Press Secretary, 2014)

The pro-Russian rebels, however, denied having Russian-made missiles capable of

shooting down airplanes flying on high altitude (Deutsch & Baczynska, 2014). As the blame

game continued, so did the sanctions and counter-sanctions. Within two weeks of the incident,

the European Union and the U.S. announced new sanctions against Russia, targeting its oil sector

and defense technologies while Russia hit back at EU with an embargo on exporting fruit,

vegetables, meat, fish, milk, and dairy (BBC, 2014). A preliminary investigation report

submitted to the ICAO concluded that the MH17 "broke up in the air probably as the result of

structural damage caused by a large number of high-energy objects that penetrated the aircraft

from outside" (Dutch Safety Board, 2014). Though the event was widely reported in global

media, it received little attention in Russia where the state-run media highlighted numerous

conspiracy theories (Dewey, 2014). According to Koshkin (2014), the Western and Russian

media covered the MH17 incident differently and it was like a media battle between Kremlin and

the rest of the world.

Research Question

The tragedies of KAL007 in 1983, IR655 in 1988, and MH17 in 2014 have similarities in

the ways the incidents took place and their potential to strain the Washington-Moscow relations.

With U.S.-Russia relations hitting a new low amid a "new Cold War" debate (Urban, 2014; Will,

2014; Oskanian, 2014; Bishara, 2014), it is important to study possible changes of Cold War

frames to expand academic conversation on media framing and to better understand history.

Thus, this thesis considered three following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does *The New York Times* coverage of MH17 incident differ, if at

all, with *The Moscow Times*?

RQ2: To what extent do *The New York Times* and *The Moscow Times* coverage of MH17

incident seem to reflect, if at all, official U.S. and Russian positions respectively?

RQ3: To what extent does the *The New York Times* coverage of KAL007 and IR655

differ, if at all, with that of the MH17 incident?

Methodology

This thesis incorporated a framing analysis of the coverage of MH17 incident by *The*

New York Times and *The Moscow Times* between July 17, 2014 and September 10, 2014.

Qualitative method was used in this study because it allows researchers to interact with content

relevant to the study topic (Altheide, 1996). The sample period begins from July 17, 2014, as the

MH17 was downed on that day. An international investigation report was released on September

9, 2014. To analyze newspapers' initial reaction to the report, this study extended the sample

period to September 10, 2014.

The New York Times articles were found in Lexis Nexis search while *The Moscow Times*

stories were downloaded from www.themoscowtimes.com. "Malaysia," "Malaysian Airlines,"

and "MH17" keywords were used to search for the articles. The initial search yielded 187 *New*

York Times and 160 *Moscow Times* articles. After eliminating duplications, agency reports,

blogs, editorials, opinion columns, and some other irrelevant articles, 78 hard news stories on the

MH17 incident were identified. Of those, 53 were *New York Times* stories and 25 *Moscow Times*

stories. Agency reports were excluded because those are not original stories filed by the

newspapers' reporters. This thesis covers almost the entire MH17 coverage by *The New York Times* and *The Moscow Times* as few news reports were published in these two newspapers beyond this study's 56-day sample period.

The New York Times* was selected for this research because it is one of the largest U.S. dailies (Pew Research Center, 2013) and has been described as the "newspaper of record" with high influence on decision makers (Kothari, 2010, p. 213). Another reason is its extensive coverage of international events including the Cold War (Carragee, 2003). Moreover, *The New York Times* was studied in previous research related to Cold War framing and international conflicts (e.g., Tuchman, 1978; Entman, 2004; Carragee, 2003; Bayulgen & Arbatli, 2013; Evans, 2010). *The Moscow Times* was selected because this is Russia's only daily newspaper in English (BBC, 2013) and it is not recognized as a state-owned or government affiliated newspaper (Matlack, 2014).

This research depends on Entman's (2004) coding framework used to analyze American media's coverage of the KAL007 and IR655 incidents during the Cold War. Though his research had both quantitative and qualitative approaches, this study focused on qualitative analysis only. This is because it would be naïve to compare Cold War situation to a 2014 incident simply by counting the words. For example, Entman counted the number of times the words "attack" and "tragedy" appeared in *The New York Times* to understand U.S. media framing in KAL007 and IR655 coverage. For KAL007, "attack" means it was downed by the Soviet Union only, while for IR655, it means it could have been downed only by the Americans. For MH17 incident, the word "attack" means the Malaysian Airlines was downed either by the pro-Russian separatists or the Ukrainian military. This is why this study conducted a qualitative comparison of "Russia

Guilty vs. Tragedy" frame while Entman's research focused on "Attack vs. Tragedy" frame. Otherwise, the frames developed by Entman were used.

Therefore, for comparison between *The New York Times* and *The Moscow Times* coverage (RQ 1), three sets of frames were examined: (1) Russia Guilty vs. Tragedy (2) Humanizing vs. Neutral (3) Mistake vs. Deliberate. (As noted above, these frames were used by Entman (2004), except for the first one, which was partially modified for the purpose of this study.) "Russia Guilty" implies any direct or indirect Russian link to the downing of MH17. Terms like "pro-Russian separatists," "Russian-backed rebels," and "pro-Russian separatists accused of shooting down the plane" were considered to imply Russian guilt. Contextual use of the words "tragedy" and "downing" was considered to imply that the MH17 was simply a tragedy where reasons are either unknown or not established. It is evident that Russia preferred the use of the term "downing" instead of "shot down" in the text of an UN Security Council resolution (Sengupta, 2014) which verifies that "downing" is a neutral term.

According to Entman (2004), "humanizing" frame include any term that humanize the victims. He defined phrases like "innocent human beings," "loved ones," and "298 people" as humanizing while "travelers," "civilians," "passengers," "298 lives," and "those who died" were described as neutral terminology. This study also considered the stories "humanizing" if those described personal details of the victims compassionately. In Entman's (2004) research, words like "atrocity," "kill," "massacre," "barbaric," "deliberate," "brutal," and "murder" represented "deliberate" frame while words like "mistaken," "tragic," "justified," and "understandable" defined "mistake" frame. This study did not count the appearance of these words, rather examined how these words and terms were used contextually in the news reports.

President Obama and President Putin's first reactions to MH17 incident were analyzed and compared to *The New York Times* and *The Moscow Times* coverage to understand if the newspapers were independent from the U.S. and Russian government positions (RQ 2). First presidential statements were selected for this analysis because initial official rhetoric is crucial in setting media framing of an event (Entman, 2004). Moreover, it was counted how many times the American, Russian, and other officials were used as news source by these two newspapers. The counting was done by using the search function in the Microsoft Word document. Terms such as "American officials," "American intelligence officials," "Russian officials," "Ukrainian officials," "Malaysian officials," "Dutch officials," "separatist leader," "separatist commander," "Obama said," and "Putin said" were used in the search options. For comparing *The New York Times'* coverage of KAL007 and IR655 with that of the MH17 incident (RQ 3), Entman's (2004) research was compared to the findings of RQ 1 and RQ 2 of this study.

All samples were coded by the researcher. In order to verify the reliability of the coding scheme, 21 news articles (or approximately 26% of the total sample) were independently evaluated by a second coder. Intercoder reliability, calculated using Cohen's Kappa coefficient, are as follows: Russia Guilty vs. Tragedy: .89, Humanizing vs. Neutral: .75, and Deliberate vs. Mistake: .70. According to Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken (2002), these agreements are considered acceptable.

Findings

This study has found that *The New York Times* used "tragedy" frame in 22 of 53 news stories (41.5%) while Russian guilt was implied in 31 stories (58.5%). On the other hand, *The Moscow Times* used "tragedy" frame in 22 news stories (88%) while three stories (12%) implied Russian guilt in the downing of MH17. In *The New York Times,* the most common words and

phrases that described the reasons behind the MH17 incident were "shot down," "downing,"

"pro-Russian separatists," "pro-Moscow separatists," "separatists," and "pro-Russian rebels." On

the other hand, the most common words and terms used by *The Moscow Times* were "downing,"

"crash," "tragedy," "separatists," "pro-Russian separatists," and "pro-Russian rebels." This study

also investigated how these words and terms were used contextually.

TABLE 1 (Entman, 2004, p. 39) *Comparison of Russia Guilty vs. Tragedy frames*

	Russia Guilty	*Tragedy*	*Total*
Moscow Times	12%	88%	100%
n	3	22	25
New York Times	58.5%	41.5%	100%
n	31	22	53

As Table 1 reveals, the majority of *The New York Times* reports held Russia responsible

for the MH17 incident. However, these accusations against Russia were mostly indirect.

American and other Western officials were quoted or cited in these reports, where Russia was

accused of supporting and training separatists. For example, a report states:

> The plane was shot out of the sky by a surface-to-air missile that American intelligence
>
> officials say was fired by pro-Russian rebels not far from Torez. The United States has
>
> said it suspects that Russia trained the rebels to use the weapon, known as a Buk, a
>
> charge that Russia has denied. (Tavernise & Sneider, 2014, p. 1)

The Moscow Times used more neutral terms depicting the MH17 incident as a crash or a

tragedy. As Table 1 shows, some of the news reports carried the sense that Russia was indirectly

linked to the MH17 incident mainly because of its support for the separatists. However, 14

stories (56%) attempted to hold both Ukrainian military and the separatists equally responsible.

For example, one story states, "The Ukrainian government and a rebel group that controls the region have each blamed the other side for downing the plane" (The Moscow Times, 2014).

TABLE 2 (Entman, 2004, p. 39) *Comparison of Humanizing vs. Neutral frames*

	Humanizing	*Neutral*	*Total*
Moscow Times (MT)	32%	60%	92%
n	8	15	23
New York Times (NYT)	60.38%	26.41%	86.79%
n	32	14	46

Note: Dominant frames were absent in 8% of MT and 13.21% of NYT stories

In *The New York Times,* "humanizing" frame dominated in 32 stories (60.38%) while "neutral" frame was highlighted in 14 stories (26.41%). No "humanizing" or "neutral" frame was found in seven stories. *The Moscow Times* used "Humanizing" frame in eight stories (32%) while 15 stories (60%) were dominated by "neutral" frame. This framing pattern was absent in two other news stories.

In *The New York Times,* the most commonly used humanizing term was "298 people." In some stories, personal details of the victims were described while few stories reported on the remains of the victims lying on the ground or about the mourning of Malaysians and Dutch people. One such description was,

> It seemed as if everyone in the Netherlands, a country of 16 million people, knew someone among the 189 Dutch nationals killed in the crash, whether personally, or as a friend of a friend, or simply by the familiarity of celebrity, as with Senator Willem Witteveen and the AIDS specialist Joep Lange. **(**Erdbrink, 2014, p. 10)

The Moscow Times mostly used neutral terms such as "passengers," "passengers and crew," "298 lives," and "298 on board." In some cases the newspaper used humanizing term

"298 people." However, as Table 2 reveals, the domination of neutral terms almost doubles the

number of humanizing terms in its news stories. Attempts were made to emphasize consequences

of the MH17 incident and political actions taken by the U.S., Russia, Ukraine, Netherlands,

Malaysia, and other stakeholders. But the stories seemed to downplay human stories by depicting

it as a political incident rather than a humanizing one.

TABLE 3 (Entman, 2004, p. 39) *Comparison of Deliberate vs. Mistake frames*

	Deliberate	*Mistake*	*Total*
Moscow Times (MT)	0%	4%	4%
n	0	1	1
New York Times (NYT)	1.89%	5.67%	7.56%
n	1	3	4

Note: Dominant frames were absent in 96% of MT and 92.44% of NYT stories

However, both *The New York Times* and *The Moscow Times* seem to agree on the

question of whether the Malaysian Airlines was downed deliberately or mistakenly. As Table 3

reveals, no *Moscow Times* report portrayed it as a deliberate action while only one story (4%)

implied that it was shot down by pro-Russian separatists mistakenly. On the other hand, three

New York Times stories (5.67%) implied that it was a mistaken action by the separatists.

Deliberate frame was found in only one *New York Times* story (1.89%) where the incident was

compared to "murder," but it was done only after an ICAO investigation report was published.

This absence of "deliberate" frame was likely influenced by the U.S. intelligence officials' early

explanation that the plane might have been shot down mistakenly (ABC, 2014).

This study asked how differently the MH17 incident was covered by *The New York Times*

and *The Moscow Times* (RQ1). The results show that majority of *The New York Times* stories

highlighted it as a humanizing incident and found Russia guilty because of their support for the

east-Ukrainian separatists. On the other hand, *The Moscow Times* downplayed Russian guilt and

reported the incident as a tragedy. However, both newspapers apparently agree that the MH17

was not downed deliberately.

        To understand if *The New York Times* and *The Moscow Times* echoed their respective

countries' political administrations' frames (RQ2), this study first sorted out important words

from the statements of the U.S. and Russian presidents (noted on page 17-18) in their first formal

reactions after the MH17 incident. The strong words and terms found in U.S. president Obama's

speech was "shot down," "Russian-backed separatists," "surface-to-air missile," "anti-aircraft

weapons," and "support from Russia." The term "shot down" appeared three times and "Russian-

backed separatists," twice in his speech (The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, 2014).

These words imply that Russia was indirectly linked to the MH17 incident mainly because of its

support to the separatists. Interestingly, as one might suspect from political agenda setting

studies (e.g., Thesen, 2014; Dalen & Aelst, 2014), this research has found that *The New York

Times* extensively used the same or similar words and terms including "shot down," "pro-

Russian rebels," Russian-backed separatists," "surface-to-air missile," and "Buk missile" in its

reports. As Table 1 reveals, contextual use of these words imply that majority of *The New York

Times* stories indirectly held Russia responsible, as did President Obama in his speech. For

example, a report states: "Suspicion has fallen on pro-Russian rebels - a suspicion further fueled

by American reports Friday that the missile that downed the jet came from rebel territory"

(Buckley, 2014, p. 10).

        Moreover, *The New York Times* prioritized American official sources over others in its

coverage of MH17 incident. It was found that the newspaper quoted or cited unnamed American

officials and intelligence officials 41 times while unnamed Ukrainian officials were quoted 22

times, unnamed Malaysian officials six times, unnamed Dutch officials twice, unnamed Russian

officials twice, and unnamed pro-Russian separatists five times. However, it was found that the

Ukrainian officials were more aggressive in anti-Russian rhetoric than American officials while

Malaysian officials refrained from blaming Moscow. *The New York Times* quoted or cited

President Obama 21 times while President Putin was quoted or cited only four times.

In the statement of President Putin, the strongest word was "tragedy" and it appeared

twice in his brief speech. He also apparently held Ukraine responsible for MH17 incident saying

". . . the government over whose territory it occurred is responsible for this terrible tragedy"

(President of Russia, The Presidential Press and Information Office, 2014). His statement implies

that Russia sees MH17 incident merely as a tragedy and that the Ukraine government is

responsible for it. As Table 1 reveals, *The Moscow Times* portrayed MH17 incident as a

"tragedy" in most of its news stories, an indication of pursuing a pro-Moscow line in its

coverage. However, the newspaper was not found to blame the Ukraine government entirely.

In *The Moscow Times,* Russian Foreign Ministry, Defense Ministry, Russian experts, and

rebel leaders were quoted frequently while Western officials were quoted or cited fewer times.

"Donetsk People's Republic," a term officially used by Russia and the separatists to describe a

rebel-controlled area, appeared 10 times in the Moscow-based newspaper. *The New York Times*

used the term a few times, but identified it simply as the self-proclaimed name of a rebel group

in Ukraine's Donetsk region. In *The Moscow Times,* President Putin was quoted or cited 12 times

while President Obama was quoted or cited only twice.

The RQ 2 attempted to explore if *The New York Times* and *The Moscow Times* followed

U.S. and Russian official positions in the MH17 coverage. The results show that *The New York

Times* indirectly held Russia responsible because of its support for the separatists, like what

President Obama did in his statement. The newspaper mostly relied on American and other Western officials to cover the incident. Though *The Moscow Times* was found to downplay Russian guilt in the MH17 incident, the newspaper did not attempt to hold Ukraine solely responsible, unlike President Putin.

To compare the MH17 incident with KAL007 and IR655 (RQ3), the researcher first looked into how Entman (2004) compared the coverage of those two Cold War incidents in American media. Entman found that the U.S. media gave an extensive coverage of the KAL007 incident, defined it as a murder, and held responsible the Soviet Union as a whole. On the contrary, IR655 received half of KAL's coverage and it was defined as a "technical glitch" (p. 29) and a "no-fault accident" (p. 39). However, in both cases the U.S. media were found to follow pro-government stance. According to Entman (2004), framing patterns of most of the American media were similar in the coverage of these two incidents.

Entman (2004) counted the number of times the words "attack" and "tragedy" appeared in *The New York Times,* where "attack" represented direct Soviet guilt in the KAL007 incident. Two-thirds of his sample (67.3%) indicated Soviet guilt while 32.7% sample depicted it as a tragedy. In the case of IR655 incident, 48.4% sample implied American guilt while 51.6% sample interpreted it as a tragedy. Using a qualitative method, this research has found that *The New York Times'* MH17 framing (58.5% Russia Guilty vs. 41.5% tragedy) can be placed in between KAL007 and IR655 coverage. As Table 1 shows, this study found that almost three-fifths of *The News York Times* stories implied Russian guilt in MH17 coverage while the rest presented it as a tragedy. However, unlike the KAL007 incident, this time the implication of Russian guilt was indirect as Moscow was mainly accused of supporting and training the separatists who were blamed for downing the MH17.

In Entman's (2004) study, 48.4% of *The New York Times* sample were "humanizing" and 51.6% "neutral" in KAL007 coverage while in IR655 coverage, 39.3% of the sample were "humanizing" and 60.7% "neutral." This study found that the number of *New York Times* MH17 stories having dominant humanizing assertions more than doubled the neutral ones. This means the MH17 coverage was similar to the KAL007 than IR655 coverage.

However, dramatic changes were found in the question of whether these events were "deliberate" or "mistakes." Entman's research reveals that 92.9% of *The New York Times* sample interpreted KAL007 incident as "deliberate" while only 7.1% implied that it was a "mistake." On the other hand, 23.1% sample indicated that the IR655 was downed deliberately while two-thirds of the sample (76.9%) implied that the incident was a "mistake." Interestingly, these frames were almost completely absent in the coverage of MH17 incident. Though few news articles (5.67%) interpreted it as a "mistake," the only story that used the "deliberate" frame was published after an investigation report was disclosed that indicated a surface-to-air missile might have caused MH17's downing.

Entman (1991) found that *The New York Times* used some adjectives and adverbs repeatedly to describe the KAL007 and IR655 incidents. The most common words used to describe the KAL007 incident were "brutal," "horrible/horrifying," "wanton," and "deliberate" while in the IR655 coverage, the most often words were "tragic," "mistaken," and "understandable" (p. 20). This study found that no *New York Times* story used "brutal", "horrifying," and "wanton" in the coverage of MH17. "Deliberate" appeared few times but was not used to determine the reasons behind the downing of the airliner. The word "horrible" appeared four times, twice quoted by Dutch officials and one each by Russian President Putin and a pro-Russian separatist. This means the word was not used to define if MH17 was a

deliberate incident or not. "Tragic" appeared four times and "mistaken," twice during the sample period. The careful use of the adjectives and adverbs indicates that *The New York Times* refrained from labeling MH17 a deliberate incident, unlike KAL007, and that its coverage was more similar to the IR655 incident than KAL007.

The RQ 3 attempted to explore difference between *The New York Times'* coverage of MH17 incident and that of KAL007 and IR655. The results show that Cold War assertions were mostly absent in MH17 coverage, unlike KAL007 and IR655. While the KAL007 coverage directly accused Soviet Union, the MH17 coverage was indirect and less critical against Russia. In MH17 coverage, *The New York Times* was found to be more careful about its choice of words and frames. Perhaps the most interesting result is that in all three incidents – KAL007, IR655, and MH17 – *The New York Times* was found to follow White House cues.

Discussion

This analysis of *The New York Times* and *The Moscow Times'* coverage of Malaysian Airlines Flight MH17 refines the debate over the "new Cold War" and media's role in Russia-U.S. relations. Past approaches emphasized the American media's role in Washington-Moscow relations, while this study focuses more on both countries' reporting to understand frames that may shape diplomacy in the U.S. and Russian capitals. Based on the literature, the researcher's expectations were: both newspapers would maintain pro-government stance but would refrain from spreading the 20th century Cold War bitterness. These expectations were largely supported by the results of the study.

The findings of this study confirmed that the mainstream U.S. and Russian newspapers prioritize national interests in the coverage of an international event where both Washington and Moscow have a stake. *The New York Times* and *The Moscow Times'* dependency on government

officials is an indication of support for their respective governments. However, one important result about *The Moscow Times* was that it did not agree with Kremlin's claim that Ukraine was solely responsible for the MH17 incident. This finding is significant because we have been led to believe that Russian media coverage almost completely comply with Kremlin's line.

There were significant changes of Cold War frames and assertions in *The New York Times* coverage of MH17 incident. In particular, there was a clear shift of frames that are critical to Russia. The newspaper has now shifted its focus of criticism from the people or the nation as a whole (Entman, 2004) to the current Russian regime. Findings of this study suggest that media frames of an international event depend on: (1) the type of sources used (2) the extent of government involvement, and (3) the national and geopolitical interests.

There are at least three limitations to this study. First, the analysis is limited to English-language newspapers. Different results might have been obtained if the study included broadcast and online news sources and Russian-language media. Second, this study could not investigate changes in Soviet media's Cold War frames because of the unavailability of any English daily in the Soviet Union during the 1980s. Third, this study could not measure the influence of social media and the 24-hour news cycle on the MH17 coverage, a situation absent during the Cold War.

Despite these limitations, the research provides several insights for analysts and policy makers both in the media and diplomatic circles. First, it provides them an opportunity to distinguish between Cold War and post-Cold War media framing. Second, it provides a better understanding of how independently the U.S. and Russian media cover an international event in the present time. Third, it provides an opportunity to rethink the rationales behind the "new Cold

War" debate. Moreover, the study contributes to the existing literature where research focusing on the changes in Cold War media frames is limited.

Future research may include wide range of news sources including non-traditional media and investigate incidents linked to different geographical locations. It may also focus on media framing of an issue where traditional powers such as U.S. or Russia is at confrontation with an emerging nation or a developing country. Such knowledge may help us to better understand how modern media balance national and international perspectives during potential politically contentious events.

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