"Today we use the term 'the world' with what amounts to brash familiarity. Too often in speaking of such things as the world food problem, the world health problem, world trade, world peace, and world government, we disregard the fact that 'the world' is a totality which in the domain of human problems constitutes the ultimate in degree of magnitude and degree of complexity. That is a fact, yes; but another fact is that almost every large problem today is, in truth, a world problem. Those two facts taken together provide thoughtful men with what might realistically be entitled 'an introduction to humility' in curing the world's ills."

— President Emeritus John Sloan Dickey,
1947 Convocation Address

World Outlook

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at Dartmouth College

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Editors' Note

As the architecture of global power continues to evolve, World Outlook's Fall 2025 issue turns toward a central question of our time: how states, institutions, and individuals justify authority, and how those justifications can conceal, contest, or corrupt the pursuit of justice. From the politics of intervention to the perils of information and the persistence of accountability gaps, this edition examines how ideals of order and freedom collide across international arenas.

In "Performance as Resolve: U.S. Intervention in Kosovo and the Politics of Credibility," Isabella Ginsburg reconsiders the 1999 NATO intervention not as a straightforward humanitarian mission but as a test of post–Cold War credibility. She argues that Washington's appeals to moral duty obscured strategic imperatives to preserve NATO's legitimacy and American leadership, revealing the uneasy alignment between humanitarian rhetoric and power politics.

The question of responsibility takes a contemporary turn in "Chains of Command, Chains of Violence: Private Military Contractors and the Nisour Square Massacre." Allison Markman dissects one of the Iraq War's darkest episodes to show how fragmented oversight and ambiguous authority made civilian harm almost inevitable, not simply profit motives or legal impunity. Her analysis underscores that preventing future abuses depends less on rewriting laws than on rebuilding unified, accountable chains of command.

Moving from the battlefield to the information sphere, Alexia Loiseau's "Bridging the Divide Between Rhetoric and Research: Media, Academia, and the Framing of Political Polarisation" explores how newspapers in the United Kingdom and France depict the causes of polarization. Analyzing media narratives and scholarly findings, Loiseau demonstrates how press coverage amplifies emotional, event-driven framings that obscure the deeper structural and social dynamics driving division.

This issue also features a conversation with Nicholas Opiyo, Senior Director for Human Rights at the African Middle Eastern Leadership Project and a Frontline Fellow with the Renew Democracy Initiative. A celebrated Ugandan human rights attorney and advocate for democracy, Opiyo reflects on his work defending free expression, electoral integrity, and LGBTQ rights amid state repression. His insights illuminate both the risks and the moral imperatives of civic activism.

Taken together, these contributions examine how institutions claim legitimacy, how narratives shape accountability, and how individuals sustain conviction in the face of coercion.
We are proud to share this collection of rigorous, courageous student scholarship and dialogue. As ever, World Outlook remains committed to amplifying voices that interrogate assumptions, bridge disciplines, and reimagine the possibilities of international understanding.

Sincerely,
Anika Mukker '26 and Brooke Nind '26
Editors-in-Chief

Interview with Nicholas Opiyo, Ugandan human rights lawyer, Senior Director for Human Rights at the African Middle Eastern Leadership Project, and Frontline Fellow with the Renew Democracy Initiative

The John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding hosted Nicholas Opiyo at Dartmouth College on October 27, 2025. Podcast Editor Victor Lago '26, Blog Editor Alex Rockmore '27, Publishing Editor Hannah McGee '27, and Staff Editors Amber Pascovici '29 and Victoria Webb '29 interviewed him for World Outlook's Podcast, The Outlook. The interview was edited for clarity and content. The views expressed in this interview are solely those of the guest and do not reflect the opinions of the Dickey Center nor Dartmouth College.

Nicholas Opiyo is an award-winning human rights attorney who advocates for civil liberties, democracy, and justice in Uganda, across Africa, and beyond. He grew up in Gulu, Northern Uganda, at the height of the deadly conflict between the government and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), trekking long distances to avoid abduction by the LRA. After attending law school, Opiyo channeled his childhood experiences into his commitment to defending human rights for all.

Between 2013 and early 2025, Nicholas founded and served as the Executive Director and Lead Attorney at Chapter Four Uganda, a charity working to defend civil liberties. He has been a visiting scholar at the Centre for African Studies, Stanford University, CA, USA, and the Global Health Program at the University of San Francisco (UCSF), California, USA. He is the recipient of the Human Rights Tulip Prize from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the German Africa Prize, the European Union Parliament Sakharov Fellows Prize, and the Voices for Justice Award from Human Rights Watch.

Victor Lago: Today, we're excited and honored to be joined by Nicholas Opiyo, Ugandan human rights lawyer and campaigner for civil rights and political freedoms. Nicholas Opiyo is the Senior Director for Human rights at the African Middle Eastern Leadership Project, and a Frontline Fellow with the Renew Democracy Initiative. He's an award-winning human rights attorney, democracy and justice advocate from Uganda, where he founded a civil rights charity and was targeted and attacked for his work. Nicholas has fought for electoral security, free speech, free press and LGBTQ+ rights in Uganda. Thank you for joining us.

Nicholas Opiyo: Thank you very much for having me. It is an absolute pleasure and privilege to share this afternoon with you all.

Victor: To start us off, we hope you might be able to share with our listeners a bit about your personal journey into human rights law and advocacy. How did you become interested in the field, and how have your interests developed throughout your career?

Opiyo: A lot of the things that I do now are really born out of my early childhood experience. Of course, I can articulate it now with the benefit of hindsight. I was born and raised in northern Uganda at a time when the region was engulfed in a brutal conflict, a civil war between the Lord's Resistance Army and the government of Uganda.

That conflict was characterized by mass abductions of young children into rebel captivity. Many

of those kids were turned into killing machines. My own siblings were abducted. My own friends were abducted. Our entire family was displaced into what were called internally displaced peoples camps, which were squalid conditions in which people died. Those conditions were described by the UN Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs at the time, Jan Egeland from Norway, as the world's most forgotten humanitarian crisis.

It was not uncommon for me to jump over dead bodies to go to school every day. I became part of the young group of kids that were called night commuters who would have to walk miles to go and sleep in open public places. Those experiences fueled in me a desire to do something about it. Believe me, I wanted to be a journalist and to write about it, but many years down the road, I found out that I could also go to law school and not just write but do something about it. That's how I found myself electing to go to law school. When I went to law school, I didn't want to do anything else but human rights. That's what inspired my work. That is what continues to inspire my work – the desire to give back, the desire to do something about human rights violations in my own community.

Alex Rockmore: I'm really interested in the vehicle that you chose to undertake this change. Obviously an incredible, very inspiring story of your childhood and what you went through just to go to school, just to get your education, you said, made you want to do something about it. Why is it that you chose the law as a vehicle to do something about that? The larger question here is, how do you see the rule of law and the role of law in actually creating this change?

Opiyo: First of all, it may sound pretty petty that I was inspired to go to law school, in part because I saw a well-dressed lawyer who was very articulate and engaged in a campaign in my country. We followed his campaign, and he was really impressive. That young lawyer is now the country's Minister of Justice, so we just wanted to be like him. I followed him in court. I saw him argue his cases in court. I heard courts giving judgments in favor of his clients and ordering government institutions and individuals to do certain things. I thought, "Wow, this is powerful that a judge can sit there and order a whole government, that a judge can sit there and order individuals and they comply." I said, "I want to have that power," and that just strengthened my belief to be a lawyer.

But I quickly realized when I became a lawyer that the law has its own limitations. The law is a powerful tool in the sense that it sets the normative framework for human interaction in a society. It sets the standard of behavior, and that in itself is powerful, but, on its own, the law has its own limitations in making sure that the rule of law is observed in a country. First, the law tends to be removed from the social realities of people. In many ways, others have argued that the law is an expression of the consensus of the ruling class to perpetuate its own systems.

And so you have to find first the creative elements in the law that you can use to ensure social change. The law in itself alone cannot ensure social change. It might actually perpetuate an injustice. The first thing that you have to do, in my view, is try and find the loopholes in the law and challenge those loopholes so that you can move the discussion a little bit farther because the law itself is framed in a way that represents a consensus of the ruling class, and you have to dismantle that consensus.

We believe in litigating every single provision of the law in our country and finding the extent to which that law can be applied—in a sense, trying to see the elasticity of the law and at what point it breaks and how much can one get away with. Challenging the limits of the law every single

opportunity gives us a chance to ensure that the law translates into actual benefits for the greatest number of people. We litigate the law. We challenge legislation passed by parliament. In some cases, we've been able to change them, you know, have courts nullify laws.

We also know that without social mobilization, positive court judgments are meaningless. You must ensure that a positive court decision is accompanied by intense social mobilization that forces people to participate in it and, once they do and realize an outcome, to be able to enforce it, to translate court decisions into active change in society. Social mobilization along with litigation is an important tool in making the law useful, in making the law realize its promise of a better life for the greatest number of people in society.

Victoria Webb: On a very similar note, though your experience lies mostly in the legal aspects of social change, we'd also love to hear your perspective on the global trend of youth-led demonstrations for democracy. We've seen across the globe, especially in South Asia, corrupt regimes have fallen under pressure from Gen Z-led protest movements, even though these governments are strictly cracking down on political dissent. How do you see the influence of the youth manifesting in Uganda's struggle for democracy? And how do you see these protests fitting into this emerging global pattern or Uganda's future?

Opiyo: First, just last week, the youth movement toppled the government in Madagascar. We are seeing today large protests led by young people in Cameroon, led by a good friend of mine, Aticki Kapson, to challenge what is clearly a manipulation of the results to allow a 92-year-old President Paul Biya to continue in office.

What we're seeing across the spectrum is that young people are becoming impatient. Young people are being let down by the systems in place. In other words, democracy hasn't delivered for the greatest number of people across the world. My country is no exception. Uganda's population is 46 million; 76% of those are people below the age of 35. These people want a better country and are protesting and are mobilizing and organizing to change the systems in their countries.

I think that this, in part, has been precipitated not just by their living conditions, but by the failures of their government and access to new media and systems for mobilization that allow them to mobilize. Youth-led movements are the new frontiers for pushing for a new wave of democratic change across the country.

In Uganda, we are seeing this happen every single day, young people taking to the streets to demonstrate, many of them involved in unconventional methods of protesting. The last demonstration in our country was a nude protest by young university students to protest what they saw as corruption in the National Assembly. In Kenya, they had the same thing, young people mobilized in what was called the Ruto Must Go movement.

And so young people are not sitting back. They are taking up the responsibility of shaping the future of their countries. The question is, what do we do with this youth energy? I think youth energy has got to be channeled constructively, not just to tear down repressive systems but to be ready to lead those countries post-revolution. If they don't get that preparation, we'll end up in the same situation that happened in Sudan, or indeed in Zimbabwe, where young people led to the overthrow of Omar Al-Bashir in Sudan and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe but had no idea what to do post-revolution. Those countries slid back in the hands of the military because young people were not prepared for the day after.

So, whilst demonstrations are important in that they might dismantle repressive systems, we must think about the day after and what we'll do when that system falls.

Alex: You've previously described Uganda as going through the birth pains of democracy. What developments or people have given you the most hope for Uganda's future?

Opiyo: It's young people. It's just young people who refuse to accept the conventional wisdom passed down by the ruling class. It is young people who are daring to reimagine their country, in the face of state repression. The Ugandan state has extrajudicially killed young people who were protesting. The Ugandan government has disappeared young people who were protesting and demanding for change, has imprisoned many and tortured and taken people through unspeakable pain. And yet, they never give up. People come out to demand a better country.

So, I have real hope in young people. The real hope for change lies with the young people in our country who are dismantling entrenched systems with such courage and conviction that we have not seen in our country for a very long time. Many of them have lived under one leader. This president has been in power since Ronald Reagan, since 1986.

He's in the campaigns again as we speak now, to be reelected to office in January. He does not want to go, but young people are reminding him that it is time to turn the page. And my hope lies really, not in any external factor or external support, but in the burning desires of young people across the country. I think that change will come from the greatest number of people in the country demanding better for their country.

Victoria: To focus on another facet of state repression, I wanted to ask you about your work with free speech, and specifically what you think the role of the state should be in protecting free speech, especially when definitions of what free speech and what dangerous speech are, are so politically malleable.

Opiyo: A democratic process must be a contestation of ideas. Ideas can only be contested if they are vigorously discussed, if people are allowed to present their viewpoints, if academic freedoms and institutions of learning are allowed to thrive so that theories are questioned, so that every idea is discussed and people are heard.

As a firm believer of free expression, I think the role of the state must be to moderate this discussion. Not in the sense of allowing one group over the other, but to provide a conducive atmosphere in which people are allowed to express themselves. I believe that the freedom of expression exists not to promote popular speech, but to allow the most difficult conversations to be had. But that difficult conversation must be had within certain parameters.

I certainly would not allow or support or defend anybody who is involved in hate speech. I certainly would never defend anybody who is involved in speech that incites violence against people. So, peaceful expressions must be allowed on any subject. The role of the state must be to protect people's rights to be able to have those conversations, however difficult those conversations are, however inconvenient or unconventional those conversations are.

And these expressions do not just limit themselves in words and expressions—for people who are in the creative industry, it also involves physical expressions. There are people who are using their

bodies as the only tool in their arsenal to push back against repression. A Ugandan professor, Dr. Stella Nyanzi, was involved in a nude protest. She now lives in Germany because of the unspeakable consequence that she has had to face because of her method of advocacy. A young Ugandan writer, Kakwenza, now lives in exile in Germany for authoring a book about his experience in the army safe house—his experience with torture.

So, the state must provide the conditions for people to be able to express themselves while limiting hate speech and speech that promotes violence.

Amber Pascovici: When you talk about the role of the state there, I can't help but think a little bit that there's more to it than just the way the state is regulating these things. I mean, when you talk about the consequences that Ugandan academics and authors have faced for expressing their opinions, it makes me think that there is something more deeply rooted in the society that is pushing these ideas down.

Opiyo: Well, if I can just push back—I don't think there's anything deeper in society pushing this repression, because if you look at African literature, I don't know how familiar you are with the books of people like Okot p'Bitek, one of Africa's most celebrated poets, there was very sexually explicit language that was celebrated as a means of expression. If you look at liberation literature in Africa, people like Okot p'Bitek, Chinua Achebe in West Africa, in Nigeria, used literary expressions to push back against African colonialism.

The use of expressions and strong language existed throughout African society and have been used to great effect. What we are seeing is the state pushing back against such expressions and refusing for them to be exercised.

Alex: Interesting. So do you think that it's more a question of changing the laws and changing the government or a question of changing the way that society views certain actions or certain beliefs?

Opiyo: I think it's just about challenging repressive tendencies in the state because the reason the state represses these expressions is because they view it as threatening their hold onto power. They view it as destabilizing the systems of repression that they have put in place. And we must look at it that way, that the reason—it is not because the state is showing strength; it's in fact showing fear of free expression. Because if you know your place and you're sure about your ideas, you debate the ideas, right? You don't imprison opponents.

The reaction of the state is an expression of fear. It's an expression of instability in its own hold onto power, and I think the response to that has to be that the state is only stronger if it listens to all its people.

Take, for example, media repression. Once you suppress media freedoms, in my country we call it underground information that is happening outside of the purview of the state, outside of the purview of the public. That can foment rebellious tendencies that can undermine the peace of society. Allowing people to speak allows you to hear what they're thinking, allows you to deal with it, allows you to hear their grievances than waiting for those grievances to just explode, to ferment underground and explode. That's how governments fall. That's how instability spreads.

Hannah McGee: After a corrupt regime has left or is forced out of power, how does a country ensure it is not replaced by an equally corrupt power, and how do these people ensure they don't

feel the same fear of speaking out against the government?

Opiyo: That work begins long before the regime has fallen. If you are engaged in dislodging a repressive regime, you also must be engaged in an enterprise of providing an alternative to that regime, articulating the things that you stand for, articulating the kind of institutions you'd want to build.

Part of the largest criticism against many opposition leaders is that they're consumed with regime change, but don't offer propositions for governance. Part of that process starts from the day you undertake an enterprise of challenging a regime. You must not just challenge it for the challenge's own sake. You must not only channel people's grievances, you must provide solutions for it, so that when that government changes, there is a template; there is a set of ideals to be able to hold the new leaders accountable to.

The second thing is that every struggle must be rooted in the aspirations of the people. It must have legitimacy, because if it has no legitimacy, you could replace one autocrat for another and the systems don't change. But if systems are rooted in legitimate people's expectations—they are popular movements, not just movements of a few elites—that system is capable of being held to account by people post-revolutions.

Victor: And for our final question, what advice would you give to students or young professionals hoping to pursue careers in international or national human rights law?

Opiyo: When I went to law school in the US, there was a tendency to encourage us to tilt towards big law, to go towards getting into the big law firms in New York, and you could see this by the way that the school program was tilted. There's limited encouragement of people involved in public interest, so for any student who is really interested in taking part in public life, if you make that choice at the university in the US, I applaud you, because they encourage you to do other things. When you choose that path, two things are important. First, you have taken the choice to impact people's lives in a different way. Public interest law, public interest work may not be materially rewarded, but it is life-changing not just for yourself but for the people whose lives you're going to change by your work. That has been my experience. You must recognize that it's also difficult work – that you and only you alone will not change it. If you think about it as though you can solve the world's problems, you are really mistaken. You cannot on your own solve the world's problems, but you can contribute to it in a positive way. Find that space where you can contribute to broader change and do it so well, with all your dedication and hope. If every one of us will do our part, eventually the world will be a better place. It will help you to pace yourself and not be frustrated. I like to call that the rabbit mentality. You can put a huge cabbage before the rabbit. It doesn't care about the size of the cabbage. It nibbles away at the parts it can nibble off, so that by the end of the day that cabbage is gone. Find your spot, and nibble away. Be persistent. Be insistent. Do your best, and perhaps this world will be a better place.

Thank you.

Performance as Resolve: U.S. Intervention in Kosovo and the Politics of Credibility

Isabella Ginsburg

This paper examines the decision made by United States policymakers to enter into the Kosovo War, which resulted in Kosovo gaining diplomatic recognition from numerous UN states and ushering in a new era of Balkan tensions. I consider three main explanations for this decision: that the United States intervened to prevent ethnic cleansing and mass atrocities against ethnic Kosovars, that the United States intervened to maintain NATO's credibility as a security institution in the wake of the Cold War, and that the United States intervened to use NATO force to ensure regional stability in the notoriously unstable Balkans. I argue that the most compelling explanation is that Clinton used humanitarian rhetoric to justify an intervention motivated by a desire to preserve NATO's credibility in the face of "another Bosnia." Additionally, Albright designed the Rambouillet negotiations to ensure Serbian rejection and insisted on a NATO-led force over more neutral alternatives. This case underscores the importance of critically evaluating the gap between public justification and underlying strategic motive in international conflicts.

In March 1999, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) launched a seventy-eight day bombing campaign against FR Yugoslavia. The intervention in Kosovo, known as Operation Allied Force, was framed as a humanitarian necessity—a response to atrocities the international community could no longer ignore. While the claim of force as a last resort carried weight in the wake of Bosnia, it also made the intervention's terms harder to contest. At the same time, the White House publicly articulated three goals: protecting civilians, preventing regional instability, and preserving Alliance unity (U.S. Department of State Archive 1999). Yet government rhetoric heavily emphasised the humanitarian objective, casting America and NATO as Kosovar protectors. This plurality leaves scholars divided over the true motives behind the Kosovo intervention.

This paper asks why the United States intervened in Kosovo. Most existing scholarship on this issue falls into three camps: first, that NATO intervened for humanitarian reasons, to prevent ethnic cleansing and mass atrocities against Kosovar Albanians (Kosovars); second, that NATO intervened to maintain its credibility as a security institution at the end of the Cold War; and third, that NATO intervened to ensure regional stability and prevent wider regional conflict in the notoriously unstable Balkans. I argue that humanitarian rhetoric in Kosovo justified a mission less about rescue than about preserving NATO's credibility. This argument suggests that framing interventions as humanitarian can obscure the extent to which they are shaped by strategic concerns, complicating how we assess the legitimacy of future humanitarian

Isabella Ginsburg is a junior at Dartmouth College from Hong Kong majoring in Government and Anthropology. She is interested in ethnic conflict, forced immigration, and the influence of psychology and culture in decision-making. Outside of classes, she is a member of the rowing team and the club tennis team; she also enjoys playing Bananagrams. She serves as an editor for Dartmouth's Undergraduate Journal of Anthropology and has interned at Massachusetts General Hospital and a prominent human rights law firm in Hong Kong.

wars.

Three Schools of Thought

The humanitarian school argues that the U.S. acted primarily to prevent mass atrocities against Kosovars. After failing to act decisively during the Bosnian War, policymakers feared facing the moral and political consequences of inaction. Power portrays intervention as a moral imperative to prevent ethnic cleansing (Power 2005). Bellamy, Dunne, and Thakur argue that the United States intervened because of Miloševic's "sickening" human rights record and deceit in diplomatic dealings (Thakur 2016, 101). Daalder and O'Hanlon frame Kosovo as NATO's principal test in conducting military operations against a sovereign nation for humanitarian purposes (Daalder & O'Hanlon 2000).

The credibility school emphasizes Alliance cohesion and institutional imperatives. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO's primary raison d'être—the defensive mission against the Eastern bloc—appeared obsolete, leading to questions about its purpose in the post-Cold War world. Critics questioned whether NATO could adapt to new threats, and its inaction in Bosnia fueled Allied concerns about its reliability as a decisive security actor. According to this perspective, U.S. intervention in NATO aimed to preserve credibility and justify the Alliance's survival. Daalder and O'Hanlon argue that NATO "proved its capabilities and continued relevance" in Kosovo (Daalder & O'Hanlon 2000, 181). Lambeth sees Kosovo as a turning point, proving that NATO could operate decisively under pressure despite reluctance over intervention (Lambeth 2001). Gibbs argues that the intervention affirmed the hegemonic role of the U.S. in Europe, while Chomsky rejects the humanitarian framing altogether, casting it as a self-serving projection of power cloaked in humanitarian rhetoric (Gibbs 2009; Chomsky 1999b).

The geopolitical school frames intervention as driven by broader strategic aims: preserving influence in the Balkans, stabilizing Europe, and weakening FR Yugoslavia, a traditional Russian ally. Scholars in this school point to Kosovo as both an achievable test of post-Cold War American primacy and an opportunity to shape the political order of a notoriously-volatile region. Daalder highlights the need to provide a "credible hedge against a possibly resurgent Russia" (Daalder 2025); and Coppieters understands Kosovo to be a point of reference for all secessionist conflicts (Sell & Coppieters 2006).

More broadly, this school often underscores statements linking intervention to Europe's long-term stability and NATO's strategic mission. Taken together, this debate converges on two fundamental questions. First, to what extent was Clinton's decision to intervene in Kosovo driven by genuine humanitarian concern rather than strategic calculations? Second, if strategic considerations mattered, were they primarily about upholding NATO's credibility, or did they extend to other objectives, such as regional stability? I argue the ultimate motive for Clinton's intervention in Kosovo was to uphold NATO's credibility. While U.S. leaders did express a sense of moral

obligation as grounds for their rationale, humanitarian concern alone cannot explain the timing and extent of intervention. Second, the primary focus of NATO's coercive diplomacy was to create conditions justifying military action, as seen through the manufacturing of the Rambouillet Agreement to ensure diplomatic failure. Finally, I argue that U.S. actions reveal little fear of wider spillover of violence and treat the Balkan's strategic value as marginal to American interests, suggesting that it is unlikely that concerns over regional stability drove the decision to intervene. The United States intervened in Kosovo out of a desire to preserve NATO's credibility and assert American leadership in the post–Cold War order, not from a singular humanitarian impulse.

Humanitarian Motivation

Proponents of the view that NATO intervened in Kosovo primarily for humanitarian reasons argue that moral outrage over the atrocities in Kosovo compelled outside action. Power, Albright, Clinton, and other leaders argued that the United States intervened to prevent "another Bosnia." Yet the gap between NATO's humanitarian rhetoric and its actions suggests a different motive: preserving credibility.

The Clinton administration's initial justification for intervention utilized moral rhetoric that cast the United States as humanity's guardian. In his March 24 address announcing NATO airstrikes against FR Yugoslavia, Clinton described Kosovars as "a people without a homeland, living in difficult conditions in some of the poorest countries in Europe… a fate that the U.S. cannot tolerate for suffering people" (Chomsky 1999, 3). Clinton painted Kosovars as stateless, destitute, and helpless, and their survival as dependent on American resolve. This rhetoric positioned the United States as the sole guarantor of Kosovar safety. The White House worked carefully to embed this framing in a broader moral narrative. At the same event, Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel warned against "the perils of indifference," recalling Auschwitz, where, as he recalled, "we thought, surely those leaders would have moved heaven and earth to intervene. They would have spoken out with great outrage and conviction. They would have bombed the railways leading to Birkenau, just the railways, just once" (Clinton et al. 1999). The juxtaposition of Wiesel's testimony and Clinton's appeal in the exact moment where Clinton announced his intention to bomb FR Yugoslavia and Kosovo reframes Kosovo as a moment where the United States could redeem the failures of the past by acting decisively to save lives. This language created a sense of urgency that raised the political costs of inaction, making military intervention appear as the only credible option.

This moral framing was politically instrumental: with limited public support for Balkan intervention, policymakers elevated Kosovo into a universal test of values through historical analogy. By 1999, public opinion polls showed Americans reluctant to intervene, so policymakers worked to recast Kosovo from a peripheral struggle into a universal moral test to generate legitimacy for intervention (ABC News/Washington Post 1999). Madeleine Albright, herself a refugee, consistently drew analogies between Serbian repression and Hitler's campaigns in Europe. She explicitly likened Kosovo to

the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1939, warning against "another Munich" (Isaacson & Waller 1999). Albright's personal biography lent these claims a particular weight, but their strategic function was clear: to collapse the distinction between a local ethnic conflict and an existential threat, enabling the Clinton administration to frame intervention not as discretionary but as necessary.

Invoking Bosnia and Herzegovina's failures also served a strategic purpose: it allowed the administration to conflate humanitarian urgency with the need to preserve American credibility. The Clinton administration repeatedly cited the failures of the Bosnian War to justify a tougher stance against Milošević. Then-war correspondent and Professor of Human Rights Practice Samantha Power captured this retrospective logic when she declared that "given the affront genocide represents to America's most cherished values and to its interests, the U.S. must also be prepared to risk lives… in service of stopping this monstrous crime" (Power 2002, 514). The memory of Bosnia thus created intense pressure to act in Kosovo, since hesitation risked repeating the very failures that had already tarnished American credibility. At Rambouillet, Albright's main aim "was to push the European allies, American public opinion, and even her own government toward concerted action," underscoring how Bosnia functioned as a powerful analogy used to mobilize hesitant allies and publics (Daalder & O'Hanlon 2000, 28). Her rhetoric combined urgency with fatalism: force was undesirable, but delay or appeasement worse. After the Račac massacre in January 1999, Albright insisted, "we are determined to apply [the lessons from Bosnia] here and now" (Albright 1999). This framing depicted Kosovo as the culmination of a moral trajectory: Kosovo would be the arena where America would redeem its past indecision and "stop Milošević-style thuggery once and for all" (Albright & Woodward 2020). Clinton, too, embraced this narrative, warning that "we do not want the Balkans to have more pictures like we've seen in the last few days so reminiscent of what Bosnia endured" (The American Presidency Project 1998). By repeatedly invoking horrific images from Bosnia, Clinton situated NATO's action as a preemptive strike against history repeating itself.

Yet Washington's reluctance to act decisively in 1998 despite mounting atrocities undercuts the claim that humanitarian concern was decisive. By summer 1998, Kosovo had been described as "an empty country, a wasteland," after more than 100,000 people were forced to flee in August alone (Daalder & O'Hanlon 2000). Violence had escalated steadily since May, but Washington remained hesitant to act.

As late as July, policymakers insisted intervention was neither "imminent or even likely," since intelligence officials believed that intervention would strengthen the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), by then regarded as a terrorist force (Daalder & O'Hanlon 2000, 25). But NATO did not launch airstrikes until March 1999—conveniently, a month before its 50th anniversary—long after mass displacement was underway. If humanitarian urgency were truly the decisive factor, intervention would have occurred months earlier, when the scale of displacement was already vast.

U.S. leaders' expectation that airstrikes would intensify Serbian violence un-

derscores the strategic use of humanitarian rhetoric—forceful enough to legitimate action, but never binding enough as to constrain NATO's freedom of maneuver. Though David Scheffer, Clinton's Ambassador for War Crimes, warned of possible genocidal violence, the State Department and NATO distorted the number of casualties to only a few thousand (Rosenbaum 1999). No NATO country ever formally charged Yugoslavia with genocide or invoked the 1948 Convention Against Genocide, which would have imposed binding legal obligations (Daalder & O'Hanlon, 2000, 112). While U.S. leaders frequently invoked the language of genocide to legitimize intervention, their refusal to legally classify the atrocities as such suggests that this language functioned less as a binding description than as a rhetorical device.1 This selective seriousness reveals the degree to which humanitarianism was instrumentalized: invoked to legitimate action, but never consistently upheld as the guiding principle.

NATO Credibility

This section argues that NATO's intervention in Kosovo was driven less by humanitarian protection than by the imperative to uphold NATO's credibility as a post–Cold War security institution. In March 1999, Clinton stated that failure to act in Kosovo would "undermine the credibility of NATO, on which stability in Europe and our own credibility depend" (Clinton 1999). This linkage of NATO and American credibility underscores how institutional legitimacy lay at the core of the intervention. I begin by showing how the Rambouillet negotiations were structured unfairly, with terms deliberately crafted to be unacceptable to Belgrade and legitimize NATO's use of force. U.S. and NATO leaders framed the bombing campaign as a test of alliance resolve, even while acknowledging that airstrikes would likely worsen humanitarian suffering. I demonstrate how the reliance on "limited liability" warfare turned intervention into a symbolic performance of credibility rather than a strategy to halt atrocities. Finally, I examine how Washington's reclassification of the KLA from terrorist organization to legitimate partners underscores that institutional standing, not humanitarian principle, was the decisive priority.

Clinton's private excitement about the Kosovo war sharply contrasted his somber demeanor. Normally proud of his ability to negotiate with other leaders, he admitted that he had "no argument or deal to offer Milošević," who "taxed [his] confidence" (Branch 2009, 544). Yet Clinton "quivered with restrained excitement…[because a win in Kosovo] would be the first American war without a cheerleader in the press"(Branch 2009, 545). That he framed the absence of media support as a potential triumph suggests that Clinton believed that success in Kosovo was a form of narrative control. This tension reveals that beyond humanitarian rhetoric, Clinton saw Kosovo as an opportunity to reassert U.S. credibility and his own authority when both were under strain. The war thus offered not only a moral imperative but also a domestic political opportunity, exposing the mixed motives behind intervention.

The pre-Rambouillet Agreement negotiations show that U.S. policymakers employed coercive ultimatums to make intervention inevitable. In October 1998,

Clinton dispatched Richard Holbrooke to deliver Milošević an ultimatum: accept U.S. terms or face imminent bombing. General Wesley Clark made the threat bluntly warning, "if [he] didn't withdraw… I'm going to bomb you good." Holbrooke later acknowledged that NATO planners did not expect serious resistance; the air campaign was designed as leverage, not a long-term war plan (Gibbs 2009, 184). Washington had already prioritized coercion over negotiation: by leading with military threats, the U.S. effectively used diplomacy as a tool to manufacture consent for intervention rather than to reach a settlement. The "negotiations" were thus embedded in a broader strategy to legitimize NATO's resort to force.

The Rambouillet Agreement illustrates how U.S. diplomacy manufactured a pretext for NATO military intervention and Milošević's de facto surrender. Albright refused to accept anything other than full acceptance of the Agreement's Military Appendix B, which granted NATO "free and unrestricted passage and unimpeded access through the FRY," effectively authorizing a peacekeeping force to not only occupy Kosovo but potentially all of Yugoslavia (Interim Agreement for Peace and Self-Government in Kosovo 1999, Appendix B.8). For Belgrade, this amounted not to peacekeeping but to open-ended occupation, stripping FR Yugoslavia of practical sovereignty over a province it regarded as sacred—"to Serbs what Jerusalem and the West Bank are to the Israelis—a sacred homeland now inhabited largely by Muslims (Daalder & O'Hanlon 2000, 93). Aware of this fraught relationship and symbolism, Albright nonetheless warned Milošević to "sign it or get bombed," signalling that Rambouillet was never intended as genuine diplomacy (Hatchett 2009, 63). Her coercive terms were crafted less to secure agreement than to ensure refusal.

Contemporaries recognized the Rambouillet Agreement as a diplomatic trap designed to justify NATO intervention rather than secure peace. A close aide to Albright later acknowledged its purpose was "to get the war started with the Europeans locked in" (Daalder & O'Hanlon 2000, 89). John Gilbert, then Britain's Minister of State for Defence Procurement, called the terms "absolutely intolerable… how could [Milošević] possibly accept them; it was quite deliberate… [Albright] just provoked a fight" (emphasis mine) (British Parliament Select Committee on Defence 2000, Questions 1080–1092). Henry Kissinger likewise described the text as "a provocation, an excuse to start bombing" (Bancroft 2009). Even the Contact Group's meeting with the Serbian delegation captured this dynamic: the Serbs' retort—"Have you come to fuck us again?"—made clear they saw no room for genuine negotiation. Albright's refusal to negotiate the Agreement's terms further suggests the talks were less a diplomatic effort than a staging ground for legitimizing force. Had the U.S. been chiefly concerned with regional stability or preventing ethnic cleansing, it would have entertained revisions to key provisions—most notably the unprecedented demand that NATO forces enjoy unrestricted access throughout all of Yugoslavia, not just Kosovo. Instead, it insisted on conditions that virtually guaranteed rejection. In practice, this strategy ensured that once talks collapsed, NATO could claim it had "exhausted" diplomacy and present bombing as the only remaining option. Rambouillet thus reveals

how U.S. policymakers engineered conditions that made intervention appear inevitable.

NATO's intervention in Kosovo prioritized demonstrating Alliance credibility over protecting civilians, making military action a symbolic performance rather than a humanitarian mission. Albright later recalled that Kosovo was "the key test of American leadership and of the relevance and effectiveness of NATO"—a candid articulation of the stakes in 1999 (Albright & Woodward 2009, 391). The Alliance's fiftieth anniversary, marked by the unveiling of the New Strategic Concept, was existential: created to counter the Soviet Union, NATO now faced obsolescence in the absence of its original adversary. Failure in the Balkans would cast doubt on its relevance in the twenty-first century. U.S. Defense Secretary William Cohen confirmed this logic, describing the air campaign's purpose as demonstrating "resolve on the part of the NATO alliance" or forcing Milošević to "pay a serious substantial price" (Smith 2009, 17-18). Credibility became the measure of success: what mattered was NATO's willingness to act, not whether intervention reduced atrocities. Albright's language was revealing—the danger was not simply a humanitarian catastrophe, but NATO "looking like fools" at its own anniversary (Albright & Woodward 2009, 391). The emphasis on reputation, not relief, defined the mission, turning intervention into a symbolic performance that risked compounding civilian suffering.

By knowingly pursuing a bombing campaign that senior military leaders predicted would escalate atrocities, Clinton treated Kosovar suffering as collateral to NATO's resolve. On March 27, 1999, General Clark conceded that Serbian retaliation was an "entirely predictable" outcome of intervention (Chomsky 1999). General Hugh Shelton, chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, likewise warned Clinton that "far from helping constrain the savagery of the Serbs… air strikes might provoke Serbs into greater acts of butchery. Air strikes alone… could not stop Serb forces from executing Kosovars" (Select Committee on Foreign Affairs 2000). These admissions made by senior military leaders were decisive: they transformed what might otherwise be characterized as tragic unintended consequences into an explicable political choice. In other words, Clinton knowingly pursued a course of action that, with high probability, would intensify the very suffering that he publicly pledged to prevent. By the war's end, nearly 850,000 Kosovars had been expelled—four times the number displaced before the bombing—and, including internal displacement, almost 90 percent of the population had been uprooted (Gibbs 2009, 198). If humanitarian protection had been the overriding concern, the "entirely predictable" escalation of massacres should have either stayed America's hand or prompted a strategy calibrated to prevent it. Instead, Clinton's decision cast mass suffering as collateral to the demonstration of resolve.

NATO's strategy of airstrikes without ground troops reveals that demonstrating Alliance resolve mattered more than ending humanitarian suffering or defeating Milošević. The war was conceived as one of "limited liability," in which risks to Americans were minimized while symbolic gains for NATO could be maximized.

This explains the central paradox of intervention: why pledge air power but rule out ground troops, despite General Shelton's warning that air strikes alone could not stop atrocities? Miloševic posed no direct threat to the U.S. and held only a "distinctly secondary" place in Western policy, yet the U.S. pressed ahead because credibility, nor protection was paramount (Gibbs 2009, 9). Clinton repeatedly ruled out deploying American ground forces even as cruelties escalated and the bombing campaign initially failed to staunch them. His refusal to reconsider this posture underscores that intervention was never about humanitarian relief at all costs, but about affirming NATO's resolve within carefully circumscribed means of victory.

Because NATO leaders expected a short campaign, Miloševic's defiance transformed the war into a contest of credibility, where backing down risked exposing Alliance weakness. U.S. officials assumed that a "few days of bombing" would suffice to bring Milošević to the negotiating table, but when he resisted, NATO's own framing gave no way out (Smith 2009, 16). Having justified intervention as a humanitarian necessity, halting the bombing would have looked like both strategic failure and moral abdication, as bombing often intensified the very violence it was meant to stop (Smith 2009, 17-18). This created a self-reinforcing cycle: ruling out ground troops spared Western publics the risk of casualties, but left NATO no option except to escalate airstrikes. What began as a mission to protect civilians became a test of NATO's credibility, where the imperative to demonstrate resolve steadily eclipsed the stated goal of alleviating human suffering.

By insisting on a NATO-led force rather than accepting UN or Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) alternatives, Washington prioritized Alliance credibility over humanitarian or regional concerns. Milosević objected to NATO presence in Kosovo but signalled that he might have accepted UN or OSCE forces, which already had limited monitoring roles and perceived to be more neutral actors (Smith 2009, 17-18). Yet the U.S. categorically rejected these options. Albright stated unequivocally, "It was asked earlier…whether the force could be anything different than a NATO-led force. I can just tell you point blank from the perspective of the United States, absolutely not, it must be a NATO-led force" (Rendall 1999). This position reveals the degree to which intervention was about NATO credibility. By the late 1990s, the Alliance was defining its post-Cold War mission; sidelining NATO in favor of the UN or OSCE would have left it a military bloc without a clear role in the new security order. Albright's insistence on NATO involvement made Kosovo a test of NATO's emerging role as Europe's security guarantor. Had stability and humanitarian protection been the overriding concern, the peacekeeping structure could have been flexible, especially given Milošević's opposition. By demanding NATO involvement alone, the U.S. rejected Milošević's bargaining overtures and ensured that credibility dictated the mission. What appeared on paper as a question of command structure was in practice a litmus test for American-led security in Europe. The terms of the Rambouillet Agreement, then, functions as a stage for demonstrating that NATO—not the UN or OSCE—would define the rules of post-Cold War intervention.

The United States' decision to ally with the KLA—initially labelled a terrorist group—as a legitimate negotiating partner underscores how strategic aims outweighed humanitarian consistency. As late as February 1998, envoy Robert Gelbard described the KLA as "without any questions, a terrorist group," adding that "[The U.S.] condemns very strongly terrorist activities in Kosovo" (Shenon 1998).At that time, the State Department viewed the organization as destabilizing; even British Defense Secretary George Robertson noted that "up until [January 1999], the KLA were responsible for more deaths in Kosovo than the Yugoslav authorities had been" (Gibbs 2009, 181).Yet in March 1998, when questioned by lawmakers on whether he still considered the group a terrorist organization, Gelbard retracted, saying that while the KLA had committed "terrorist acts," it had not "been classified legally by the U.S. government as a terrorist organization" (Henriksen 1998-1999, 86). Shortly thereafter, the U.S. involved the KLA directly in the Rambouillet negotiations, treating it as Kosovo's legitimate representatives. This rhetorical sleight of hand reveals more than semanting: it marked a deliberate repositioning of the KLA from liability to strategic instrument.

By recasting the KLA as a legitimate body, Washington insulated NATO from the reputational cost of partnering with an organization it had previously linked to terrorism. Collaboration with an organization widely perceived as extremist or criminal would have undermimed NATO's humanitarian rhetoric and
credibility as a collective security alliance. Legitimizing the KLA enabled NATO to frame intervention as enforcement of international norms against ethnic cleansing and genocide. This sudden elevation, contrary to the assessment of other international leaders, reflects a deliberate choice to create conditions enabling NATO to intervene without appearing complicit in terrorist violence. The genocidal framing of the conflict made this repositioning more urgent. Albright warned that failure to act echoed the appeasement of fascism in the 1930s and passivity during Bosnia; in this rhetorical environment, the U.S. could not afford to present the KLA as an obstacle to peace. Casting the KLA as representatives of a persecuted people—despite their perpetration of significant violence—allowed NATO to pursue military action while maintaining the appearance of a humanitarian mission. In doing so, Washington manufactured a credible partner whose very inclusion validated NATO's intervention framework.

While the U.S.' cooperation with the KLA can be interpreted as necessary for humanitarian objectives, the timeline suggests that NATO's credibility was the primary motivation. By early 1999, the KLA had become "the new voice…new power brokers" of Kosovars, making their exclusion from negotiations practically untenable (Hedges 1998, 26). From this perspective, the U.S. believed that collaborating with the KLA—even at the cost of reversing its terrorist designation—was seen as the only viable path to secure a peace that addressed the humanitarian emergency. Yet, if NATO claimed to be intervening on humanitarian principle, partnering with the group responsible "for more deaths in Kosovo than the Yugoslav authorities had been" exposed a striking contradiction (Gibbs 2009, 181). Credibility and strategic viability

clearly outweighed moral restraint and principle humanitarianism. NATO's willingness to overlook the KLA's terrorist-like behavior demonstrates how humanitarian rhetoric was employed to legitimize intervention, even when operational decisions prioritized political expediency and Alliance credibility.

Regional Stability

In this section, I explain why even though Clinton cited regional stability as a major catalyst for intervention, NATO's actions and surrounding context make it clear that this is an unlikely explanation for fighting in the war. By bypassing the UN and alienating Russia—a historical ally of the Serbian nation—Washington risked escalation with Moscow and undermined stability, suggesting that the U.S. was not concerned by possible Russian confrontation. The reactions of the states that Clinton identifies as vulnerable to spillover show little concern about destabilization, further refuting the claim that regional stability was a driving motivation. Together, these points suggest that while regional stability featured heavily in NATO's rhetoric, the United States was not as concerned about the Balkan "tinderbox" as it claimed (U.S. Department of State Archive 1999).

By bypassing Security Council authorization, Washington undermined the very regional stability it claimed to defend. Both Russia—a traditional ally of Serbians—and China threatened to veto the intervention (Nanda 2000, 321). While the primary argument in favor of doing so was that the emergency in Kosovo was "overwhelming in character and required an emergency response," the broader strategic message was that even the Security Council could not check NATO's power (Gibbs 2009, 196; Chollet & Goldgeier 2008, 230). Clinton, Chollet, and Goldgeier argue that the U.S. "purposefully avoided seeking UN Security Council authorization because of opposition from Russia and China," highlighting that external constraints were not seen as insurmountable obstacles or limits on action. Given Kosovo's "distinctly secondary place" in U.S. and Western policy, bypassing the Security Council was a bold, disproportionate response (Daalder & O'Hanlon 2000, 9). This choice transformed a localized humanitarian crisis into a strategic assertion of power, signaling that Washington valued the precedent of acting without international constraint more than actually stabilizing Kosovo.

The U.S.' handling of Russia during the Kosovo crisis reveals that appeals to multilateralism masked a priority to assert NATO authority, even at the expense of post–Cold War cooperation. Milošević assumed that Russia would "steadfastly support" FR Yugoslavia and pressure NATO not to intervene (Hosmer 2010). Albright, too, noted that "it was important to bring Russia into what we were doing. We didn't want Russia to be isolated (Isaacson & Waller 1999). This so-called "double-magnet" strategy aimed to secure Moscow to support NATO's decision and then "encourage them to tug Belgrade in that direction (Isaacson & Waller 1999). On the surface, this approach suggests a commitment to multilateral crisis management.

Yet, in practice, the U.S. prioritized NATO autonomy over genuine cooper-

ation with Russia. It bypassed the Security Council, fully aware that both Russia and China would block military action. Russian officials viewed this as a direct affront: Finance Minister Boris Fedorov called it a violation of international law and an attempt to "displace Russia in Eastern Europe (Brovkin n.d., 38). Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott described it as creating the "most severe, dangerous, and consequential crisis in the U.S.-Russian relations in the post-Cold War period (Talbott 2002, 297). Acting without Security Council authorization directly contradicted Clinton's unusually close ties to Yeltsin and undermined prior efforts to strengthen United States-Russian relations. If regional stability had been the primary concern, the U.S. would have negotiated with Russia to contain the crisis rather than risk undoing a new pattern of post–Cold War cooperation. This contradiction reveals the logic of the dual-magnet strategy: Russia's inclusion provided a veneer of legitimacy, while unilateral NATO action asserted the Alliance's autonomy. By acting against the Security Council, Washington signaled that demonstrating NATO's authority outweighed any substantive commitment to Balkan stability.

Although Clinton framed NATO intervention as necessary to prevent regional destabilization, the responses of key neighboring states indicate that he exaggerated the purported threat. He famously worried that if the U.S. "let a fire burn in this area, the flames will spread. Eventually, key U.S. allies could be drawn into the conflict," explicitly citing Greece and Turkey (Clinton 1999). Yet both countries' reactions undermined this claim. At a European Union summit, Prime Minister Costas Smitis asserted that he "disagreed… that this development could lead to a conflict…" and stressed that "Greece… is a stabilizing force in the area. There is no reason for anyone to fear that there will be implications with Turkey (Migdalovitz 1999, 4). Widespread anti-war protests and humanitarian aid to both sides further signaled that Greece had little interest in escalating or getting involved in the conflict (Witchell 1999).

Turkey's stance similarly undercuts Clinton's warnings. Foreign Minister İsmail Cem stated that "a state of war between Turkey and Greece due to the Kosovo crisis is only possible if Greece supports Milošević by leaving NATO and fighting against it. And I don't expect that such a situation will happen" (Migdalovitz 1999, 6). Cem's statement frames war as a remote and almost absurd prospect, imaginable only under extreme, unthinkable conditions. Together, these responses suggest that regional security concerns were likely overstated, casting serious doubt on whether U.S. intervention was genuinely motivated by fears for regional stability.

Conclusion

NATO intervention in Kosovo was driven primarily by concerns over the Alliance's credibility. While there can be no doubt that Serb oppression in Kosovo existed, as an allegedly humanitarian war, Operation Allied Force had major limitations. Far from restraining Serb atrocities, the NATO bombing campaign appears to have intensified them, with NATO attacks killing approximately the same number of civilians as the Serbian attacks that preceded NATO bombing—a fact that Clinton and his

advisors foresaw (Gibbs 2009, 202). Second, the U.S. used coercive diplomacy tactics, refusing compromises that might have ended violence. Third, NATO's claim of pursuing regional stability was undercut by its decision to bypass the Security Council in the face of Russian opposition and by its unsubstantiated warnings of spillover violence. In particular, my argument suggests that NATO's appeals to humanitarianism and regional stability belie their function as justification for intervention rather than decisive motives.

If this paper is correct in arguing that NATO's intervention in Kosovo was driven primarily by a desire to bolster Alliance credibility, the implications for understanding its post–Cold War role are profound. It suggests that the Alliance's legitimacy rested less on principled commitments to human rights than on maintaining cohesion and projecting strength among member states. This complicates the narrative of a "new humanitarian order" in the 1990s. Rather than representing a decisive break from Cold War logic, Kosovo demonstrates that Cold War concerns with prestige endured under the guise of moral rhetoric. The analysis also raises questions about the development of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine. R2P's legitimacy rests upon its altruistic aim, yet Kosovo shows that states are often unwilling to intervene on purely humanitarian grounds in the absence of self-interest. If intervention was meant to establish that ethnic cleansing is unacceptable, the divergence between NATO's rhetoric and its actions indicate that humanitarian concern alone did not drive decision-making.

While Clinton publicly emphasized the humanitarian and regional stability goals of Operation Allied Force, my paper suggests that his decision was truly motivated by a desire to preserve NATO's credibility in the face of "another Bosnia." Far from being a purely altruistic mission, the Balkans were a stage for demonstrating military power and alliance cohesion in the aftermath of the Cold War. An Irish Times article articulated this result after the intervention, noting that "for neutral countries in Europe, the conclusion is inescapable: NATO is the only military structure in the near future" (Eyal, 1999). That even neutral Europeans could not deny NATO's superior power suggests that Clinton achieved his primary goal: ensuring that NATO and America's hegemony would continue into the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. While NATO officials frequently invoked the term genocide to justify intervention, the atrocities in Kosovo were more consistently described at the time as ethnic cleansing. The distinction is legally and politically significant: genocide, as defined under the 1948 Genocide Convention, entails the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group, and would carry obligations for states parties to act. Ethnic cleansing, by contrast, denotes the forced removal of a population from a territory, often through violence and terror, but does not automatically trigger the same legal duties.

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Chains of Command, Chains of Violence: Private Military Contractors and the Nisour Square Massacre

Allison Markman

Blackwater's conduct in Baghdad's Nisour Square exemplified how fractured chains of command most directly enabled contractor violence. Operating under the State Department rather than the U.S. military, Blackwater guards navigated a fog of conflicting authority and inconsistent rules of engagement. Misjudgments by Blackwater guards quickly escalated into mass civilian casualties in the absence of a unified command structure. While legal immunity fostered a sense of post-hoc impunity and privatization introduced financial pressures, neither factor shaped real-time decision-making as powerfully as the lack of oversight. Congressional hearings and GAO reports revealed that military officers lacked the authority to restrain contractors, and coordination failures routinely endangered both troops and civilians. Incidents declined sharply when oversight cells and shared communication channels were established in 2008. Therefore, the most effective way to prevent contractor abuses is not through stricter laws or revised contracts, but through integrated command structures.

Introduction

On September 16, 2007, a convoy of Blackwater contractors escorting U.S. State Department personnel opened fire in Baghdad's Nisour Square, killing seventeen Iraqi civilians and wounding more than twenty others (Scahill 2009, 6). The incident ignited outrage in Iraq, triggering multiple U.S. investigations and fueling debates over the role and regulation of private military contractors (PMCs) in conflict zones (Scahill 2009, 11). Even before the shooting, Iraqis viewed the Blackwater guard as aggressive and heavy-handed. International and domestic critics viewed this reputation as emblematic of a broader unaccountability of foreign security forces operating overseas.

This paper examines which factors explain the escalation of the Nisour Square massacre into lethal violence, and how the use of private military contractors affected the likelihood and nature of such abuses. Most existing scholarship on this issue falls into three camps. First, incidents like Nisour Square occurred because PMCs operated with limited legal oversight and accountability. Second, violent escalation happens because PMCs are ultimately driven by profit, not by professional norms, so an absence of ethical obligations often leads to violent escalation. The third view insists that incidents like Nisour Square are primarily the result of fragmented command and control systems that fail to integrate contractors into the military chain of command.

In the following sections, I use a combination of evidence from Government Accountability Office (GAO) oversight reports, congressional hearing transcripts, investigative journalism, and scholarly books and articles to argue that this failure pri-

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marily resulted from fragmented command and control. This argument suggests that the best way to avoid similar incidents in the future is to integrate PMCs into a unified operational chain of command with consistent rules of engagement (ROE) rather than focusing solely on post-hoc legal reforms or corporate contract restructuring.

Three Explanations for PMC Violence

The existing scholarship on PMCs and the accountability gaps they produce can be organized into three main schools. The first approach emphasizes the lack of legal and administrative oversight over PMCs. Contractors in Iraq operated in a "relative vacuum" of supervision, with contracting expanding far faster than the government's ability to oversee it (Singer 2007, 11).1 Order 17, signed by L. Paul Bremer, granted broad immunity to private contractors working for the United States in Iraq. This order effectively prevented the Iraqi government from prosecuting contractor crimes in its domestic courts (Welch 2008, 361).2 The order was signed just days before the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) formally handed over sovereignty to the Iraqi interim government. Industry representatives and U.S. officials have long argued that Iraq did not have a fair and stable judiciary system in place to handle prosecutions of foreign private contractors (Scahill 2009, 11). The immunity conferred was firmly in effect at the time of Nisour Square and presently remains intact.

To accept the reasoning that the escalation of violence in Nisour Square depended entirely on legal jurisdiction and enforcement, one would have to make two assumptions. First, that legal enforcement is the only or primary deterrent against misconduct, outweighing moral codes, professional norms, or internal oversight. Second, that contractors knowingly exploit legal loopholes or the absence of jurisdiction to act with impunity under the chaotic and ambiguous conditions of wartime. This argument risks oversimplifying the complex dynamics of accountability in conflict zones because of its contingency on these two factors.

A rival theory assumes that the profit motive in a competitive market systematically pushes PMCs toward cost-cutting and risk externalization, and that these pressures are strong enough to outweigh reputational incentives to maintain performance standards.3 For example, proponents point to the "Green Zone" mentality problem as a result of these incentives, where profit-driven expansions of secured enclaves physically and psychologically distanced contractors from the local population (Welch 2008, 355).

However, if either assumption fails (e.g., if competitive pressure is weak or reputational sanctions are severe), then the explanatory power of the privatization argument diminishes. If penalties are strong due to media scrutiny, government oversight, or the risk of losing future contracts, PMCs may be incentivized to maintain high standards of conduct and performance. As a result, market forces may also create conditions in which it is strategically beneficial for PMCs to act transparently and ethically instead of undermining accountability. The final explanation, which I group under a command-and-control argument, holds that private military contractors op-

erate under unclear chains of authority, inconsistent rules of engagement, and poor integration with regular military units.4 Proponents include journalists, military officials, and policy analysts who cite early concerns about jurisdictional confusion. One of these early concerns is evident through Maj. Gen. Hussein Kamal's, who headed the Iraqi Interior Ministry's intelligence directorate, attempt to implement tighter control of private security companies. U.S. military officials told the General that private security companies such as Blackwater were under State Department authority and outside their control (Fainaru 2007).

In order for this theory to hold, fragmented authority must directly produce oversight failures and delegating force to private actors must reduce loyalty to a mission and limit commanders' ability to adapt orders in changing conditions. Moreover, these organizational deficiencies must not be merely bureaucratic inconveniences but must also have tangible effects on operational discipline and ethical behavior in the field.

I posit that accountability failures surrounding private military contractors in Iraq, specifically the escalation of violence at Nisour Square, are best explained by breakdowns in command and control, not by the legal impunity or profit incentive theories. I develop this argument in three parts. First, legal and jurisdictional gaps, while significant, cannot fully account for the escalation of violence. Legal immunity may have fostered a culture of impunity after the fact, but it did not directly shape contractors' decision-making in the heat of combat, where immediate operational factors governed behavior. Second, although private military contractors operate with a profit-driven logic, their contracts include incentive structures and reputational risks that promote ethical conduct versus unchecked financial gain. Finally, the most compelling and proximate explanation lies in the fragmented chains of authority, inconsistent rules of engagement, and poor oversight structures that defined contractor-military relations in Iraq. Blackwater operated without effective real-time oversight or integration into the U.S. military's command system, which were conditions that directly contributed to unchecked escalation. By evaluating these three competing explanations, I conclude that the organizational dysfunction of decentralized force delegation most clearly explains the escalation in violence at Nisour Square. I show how greater integration and clearer lines of authority could have reduced confusion and strengthened accountability mechanisms in practice.

The Illusion of Legal Accountability

The lack of legal accountability for private military contractors significantly contributed to the escalation of violence at Nisour Square. Proponents of the legal immunity explanation argue that CPA Order 17, which shielded contractors from Iraqi prosecution, removed meaningful deterrence and fostered a climate of impunity. If contractors believed they would never face consequences, they would be more likely to employ excessive force as the absence of enforceable legal jurisdiction removes any meaningful check. Yet this explanation has limits: immunity may have created a per-

missive environment, but contractors rarely weighed legal risk in real time. Therefore, legal impunity was an enabling condition rather than the proximate cause of escalation at Nisour Square.

The lack of oversight and the legal immunity granted to private military contractors created a permissive environment that enabled unchecked abuses in Iraq. P.W. Singer, a leading scholar on private military contractors, argues that immunity causes laissez-faire environments. Singer notes that in the years leading up to Nisour Square, Pentagon defense service contracts rose by 78%, while the number of government officials overseeing them fell by over 40% (Singer 2007, 10). As a result, in every known case of contractor abuse in Iraq, no contracting officer was present to monitor operations. CPA Order 17 compounded this oversight gap by granting contractors immunity from Iraqi law (Scahill 2009, 15). Even if the order's legal standing was questionable, its perceived authority was powerful: in the three years following its issuance, not a single contractor was prosecuted or convicted for crimes involving Iraqi victims or battlefield conduct (Singer 2007, 10). In 2006, Andrew Moonen, a Blackwater armorer, got drunk at a Christmas Eve party inside Baghdad's Green Zone and fatally shot an Iraqi security guard assigned to the vice president. The U.S. State Department arranged for him to be flown out of Iraq, effectively evading Iraqi justice (U.S. House of Representatives 2007). One contractor told The Washington Post that if an incident occurred that might lead to Iraqi prosecution, contingency plans existed to remove the individual by car under the cover of night to avoid arrest (Scahill 2009, 10).

Under the State Department's purview, Blackwater faced minimal and largely ineffective oversight, unlike traditional military forces subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice. A panel of State Department representatives reporting on protective services in Iraq concluded in October 2007 that the legal framework for holding non-Department of Defense contractor employees accountable under U.S. law is inadequate (GAO 2008). This blurring of the line between law and soft policy instruments left contractors operating without fear of enforceable penalties. The result was not merely a legal loophole but a systemic abdication of legal authority in war zones.

Private military contractors operated in a legal gray zone in Iraq, shielded from both civilian and military accountability. Singer underscores this legal vacuum, observing that "there is a striking absence of regulation, oversight, and enforcement" for contractors, noting that "the owner and employees of a circus face more legal inspection and accountability than those of a private military firm" (Singer 2007, 13). Jeremy Scahill similarly observed that Blackwater operated "free from any oversight that would typically exist in a civilized society," highlighting a broader absence of systemic legal deterrence rather than real-time fear of legal retribution (Scahill 2009, 287). PMCs "fall through the cracks of legal codes," and this liminal status allows them to circumvent both civilian and military justice systems (Singer 2007, 11).

However, legal impunity fails to explain wartime decisions. In the moments leading up to and during the firing, contractors made split-second judgments shaped

not by legal oversight but by immediate battlefield dynamics, including perceived threats, weak real-time supervision, and inconsistent enforcement of rules of engagement. It is important to note that Blackwater officials were working in high-stress environments: Iraqi insurgents placed a $30,000 bounty on the life of any Blackwater contractors. Additionally, the United States government contracted Blackwater guards to protect Paul Bremer, the chief executive authority in Iraq for the Coalition Provisional Authority, whose life was valued at $45 million (Pelton 2007, 110). The contractors also described the streets of Baghdad as a place where high danger was assumed at all times. That sense of ever-present threat was magnified after the 2004 Fallujah attack, when four Blackwater contractors were ambushed, killed, and mutilated on camera (Pelton 2007, 5). The brutality of the incident, replayed constantly on television, convinced many contractors that they were no longer quasi-civilians but prime targets, making them quicker to interpret ambiguous movements as deadly threats (Pelton 2007, 116). Contractors guarding U.S. officials drove through Baghdad at high speeds, opening fire to push other vehicles aside and treating every car on the road as a potential suicide bomb (Pelton 2007, 109). This climate of fear shaped how they later defended their actions at Nisour Square: one contractor named Paul recalled in a sworn statement: "Fearing for my life and the lives of my teammates, I engaged the driver and stopped the threat" (Paul 2007).

When Market Meets War

This section challenges the assumption that profit motives drove the violent behavior of private military companies in Iraq, particularly in incidents like the Nisour Square shooting. While proponents of the privatization critique argue that firms such as Blackwater were primarily guided by the pursuit of revenue and incentivized to use excessive force, this view oversimplifies the dynamics at play. In reality, PMCs operated under contractual frameworks that often emphasized compliance with legal and ethical standards, and violations could result in significant financial and reputational consequences. Rather than encouraging misconduct, profit motives could actually promote restraint and accountability when shaped by structured contracts and performance incentives. I argue that while profit is a defining feature of PMCs, it does not automatically translate into increased violence; in many cases, it can function as a mechanism for discipline.

A common perception of contractors is that they are primarily motivated by profit, reinforcing the view that they are detached from public service values and solely driven by corporate logic. Journalist Robert Pelton described Blackwater founder Erik Prince as someone who did not "cite as his hero a famous soldier, mercenary or privateer, but rather a business man: Alfred Sloan, the man who originally built GM into one of the world's largest and most profitable corporations" (Pelton 2007, 2). Unlike civil servants, who are compensated with a fixed wage and expected to follow orders, contractors are paid for delivering a product or outcome (Avant 2005, 47). According to Singer, the privatized, profit-based structure of contracting also ties

contractor behavior to commercial calculations rather than duty or honor (Pelton 2007, 107). Blackwater's financial practices make this dynamic visible: In 2007, the IRS found Blackwater's classification of security guards as independent contractors "without merit," a move that let the company avoid over $30 million in taxes—unlike its competitors. When one guard challenged this, Blackwater paid him back wages but bound him with a nondisclosure agreement, barring contact with officials (Waxman 2007). Such actions highlighted a profit-driven ethos that prioritized revenue and self-protection.

In high-stakes environments such as Nisour Square, such profit-driven incentives can influence operational decisions, increasing the likelihood that contractors prioritize results and their own institutional interests over restraint (Blackwater USA 2007).5 It is believed that the privatization of and profit incentives for these services led to decreased functional control, and that "replication of a public bureau by a private firm, with or without the support of regulation, is impossible" (Avant 2005, 48). Critics argue that the profit motive undermines mercenary ethics, casting them as businessmen "whoring themselves by going to war." (Varin 2015, 20). However, dependency on the regulatory and institutional environment in which it is implemented complicates the effect of privatization. In the absence of robust regulation, this untraditional incentive structure intensifies the risk of misconduct by PMCs (Avant 2005, 47). This risk stemmed less from contractor opportunism than from structural conditions (Pelton 2007, 3). While profit motives do shape the structure of private military companies, this does not inherently lead to negligence or the abandonment of ethical conduct. Economic incentives can promote accountability and disciplined conduct. In fact, many PMCs operate under rigorous contractual obligations that include compliance with international laws, rules of engagement, and oversight by both clients and third-party monitors. The high stakes of losing future contracts or facing legal consequences incentivize these companies to ensure their personnel act with caution and restraint (Tkach 2019, 307).

The case of Blackwater illustrates that financial incentives are not a free pass for misconduct, as contractors can and have faced significant financial and reputational consequences for overstepping ethical or operational boundaries. Blackwater faced severe reputational sanctions following high-profile incidents, sparking widespread media outrage and political condemnation. These incidents led to contract terminations and increased government scrutiny (Estate of 2008). In 2005, after an incident involving Blackwater personnel, the State Department conducted an investigation, and the company fired the contractors involved, illustrating the Department's expanding role in enforcing accountability for security violations (Tavernise and Bowley 2007).6 After Nisour Square, Blackwater's reputation suffered significantly, resulting in loss or suspension of contracts and prompting rebranding efforts from Blackwater to Xe, later Academi, and more recently Constellis, to repair its image (Scahill 2009, 26). While Scahill argues that Blackwater's branding campaigns helped the company entrench itself within state structures, the U.S. State Department's refusal to grant

contracts to its rebranded successor, Xe, underscores how rebranding efforts often failed to erase reputational damage or secure continued access (Scahill 2009, 26). Although full accountability remained elusive, these incidents demonstrate that violations of protocol carried real financial consequences, from lost contracts to forced rebranding efforts.

These reputational consequences made Blackwater maintain a strong internal emphasis on reputation and discipline, terminating contractors who violated ethical or procedural standards. In 2005, Blackwater terminated around 122 armed guards in Iraq, roughly one-seventh of its workforce, for misconduct including weapons violations, drug or alcohol abuse, aggressive behavior, and inappropriate conduct; meanwhile, all expected bonuses were withheld (Broder and Knowlton 2007). In 2012, Blackwater contractors, Robert Winston and Allen Wheeler, were fired and subsequently blacklisted by the State Department, hindering future employment opportunities, because they delayed reporting an incident (United States ex rel. 2016).

Not only are there financial consequences for contractors who do not abide by their contracts, but contracts without efficiency incentives significantly increase the likelihood of contractor violence. Firms operating under contracts without performance incentives were more likely to be associated with higher levels of violence even when competition existed, suggesting that clear, financial incentives aligned with performance can help discourage violent behavior (Tkach 2019, 307). A report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies indicated that when contracts stipulate clear performance outcomes (e.g., the number of missions completed, compliance with regulations), contractors have more motivation to stay within acceptable conduct to avoid losing the contract or facing penalties (Congressional Record 2007, H11180). Furthermore, "contracts that set compensation constraints and service requirements force PMCs to provide services efficiently and ethically in order to profit" (Tkach 2019, 293). Clear incentive structures and punitive measures drive private military contractors to follow ethical and operational standards. The October 3, 2007 Congressional Record highlighted these incentives and that lack of proper financial incentives contributed to lapses in discipline and ethics (Congressional Record 2007, H11178). As Erik Prince testified before Congress, "if there is any sort of discipline problem, whether it is bad attitude, a dirty weapon, riding someone's bike that is not his, we fire them. We hold ourselves internally accountable, very high. We fire them" (Blackwater USA 2007, 57). Prince made clear that violating these directives could cost contractors their current contracts and jeopardize future opportunities with the government (Waxman 2007).

When performance-based incentives are built into contracts, profit can become a force for discipline. However, the Nisour Square massacre underscores the limits of financial incentives as a mechanism for regulating contractor behavior. These incentives were often rendered ineffective by structural flaws even while Blackwater's contracts included provisions for penalties such as termination or non-renewal in cases of misconduct. Chief among them was the political insulation contractors enjoyed:

Blackwater operated with the implicit backing of the U.S. government, reducing the likelihood of real accountability. As P.W. Singer notes, "It's not about economic cost savings; it's about political cost savings"—when things went wrong, the state could blame the company and deflect responsibility (Pelton 2007, 108). This arrangement created a gray zone marked by weak oversight and diffused accountability. Permissive conditions and blurred lines of authority overwhelmed profit motives that might otherwise encourage discipline. Nisour Square revealed not the failure of privatization alone, but the fragility of financial incentives when not backed by strong authority and enforceable consequences.

Command and Control: The Proximate Cause of Nisour Square

The Nisour Square escalation is best explained by failures of command and control. Unlike legal or profit-based explanations, which serve as background conditions, fragmented authority directly shaped contractor behavior. Operating under State Department authority but outside the military chain of command, Blackwater faced unclear rules and oversight gaps. Drawing on Petersohn's analysis, congressional testimony, GAO reports, and Avant's discussion of principal-agent problems, I show that the absence of unified authority enabled Blackwater's autonomy and escalation of force. Thus, it was the breakdown of command and control that most directly fueled the unchecked violence at Nisour Square.

The first form of command and control problems created by private military companies lies in their principal-agent relationship with the U.S. government, a dynamic that departs sharply from the traditional military chain of command. Unlike soldiers bound by duty, honor, and direct disciplinary authority, Blackwater operated as semi-autonomous agents hired to fulfill contracts without the institutional mechanisms to ensure compliance. Relying on independent contractors for security blurred the line between civilian and combatant (Avant 2005, 42). The problems were myriad: issuing IDs and weapons permits; chain-of-command ambiguity; contrary objectives; coordination of security convoys; and friendly fire incidents between contractors and other contractors, not only from coalition troops firing on contractors mistaken as potential insurgents (Tkach 2019, 307). This structural gap produced what Avant termed "agency slippage:" a classic principal-agent dilemma, where contractors, as agents, often pursued their own interests—risk avoidance, operational convenience, even profit protection—rather than faithfully advancing the state's objectives (Avant 2005, 47). Moreover, Blackwater operated within the purview of the State Department, not the Department of Defense, thus creating coordination problems when Blackwater guards and traditional soldiers fought alongside one another. Military officials complained that PMCs failed to coordinate with them regarding convoy movements and security operations, which ultimately eroded mission effectiveness, threatened the lives of troops, and caused disputes between the DoD and State (Avant and Sigelman 2010, 246-247). The absence of common rules for coordination and restraint meant that PMCs "reduce[d] effectiveness in a coalition" (Petersohn 2013,

470).

These structural gaps also eroded basic control over contractor conduct. One lawsuit alleged that Blackwater "knew that 25 percent or more of its 'shooters' were ingesting steroids or other judgment-altering substances, yet failed to take effective steps to stop drug use" (Estate of 2008, 7). Further, employees "repeatedly fail[ed] to report wrongful use of force, and consistently lie[d] about excessive uses of force" (Estate of 2008, 9-10). The dysfunction of Blackwater contractors proved especially apparent on the ground, where Marine Col. John Toolan observed that contractors lacked even basic knowledge of the military communication system, impairing their ability to coordinate convoy movements (Petersohn 2013, 469). Such coordination failures went beyond inconvenience: they endangered troops and contributed to the broader pattern of contractors firing first in ambiguous situations. The Oversight hearing found that these coordination failures translated directly into patterns of excessive force. Blackwater contractors discharged their weapons 195 times between the beginning of 2005 and September 2007, averaging 1.4 times per week; in over 80 percent of those incidents, they fired first (Blackwater USA 2007, 141; Blackwater USA 2007, 21). Oversight Chair Henry Waxman cited Brigadier General Karl Horst, who lamented that private security contractors "run loose in this country and do stupid stuff. There is no authority over them, so you can't come down on them when they escalate force. They shoot people, and someone else has to deal with the aftermath. It happens all over the place" (Blackwater USA 2007, 74). U.S. Army Colonel Peter Mansoor, a leading strategist of counterinsurgency, warned in early 2007 that security contractors often acted in ways that undermined the larger mission by pushing traffic off the roads, firing at suspicious cars, and alienating the very population the U.S. was trying to win over. He argued that the only way to prevent such harm was to place all armed actors in a counterinsurgency under a unified military chain of command (Singer 2007, 7).

The Nisour Square massacre demonstrated how fragmented command and control directly translated into lethal escalation. Blackwater convoys operated under the State Department rather than the U.S. military and did not share movement plans with nearby military units. A 2008 GAO report entitled Rebuilding Iraq DoD and State Department Have Improved Oversight and Coordination of Private Security Contractors in Iraq, but Further Actions Are Needed to Sustain Improvements, concluded that prior to the Nisour Square incident, the "DoD and the State Department did not maintain regular communication or coordination on the departments' efforts related to PMCs in Iraq, and neither the DoD nor the State Department coordinated on a regular basis with the Government of Iraq on issues related to PMCs" (GAO 2008, 20). It concluded that such gaps in coordination routinely left commanders unable to monitor or restrain contractors in real time, as "PSC movements were not always coordinated with U.S. military units, which increased the risk of incidents between military forces and PSC" (GAO 2008, 5).7 Congressional hearings after the shooting confirmed that military officers lacked authority to enforce rules of engage-

ment on private guards, even when their actions threatened broader operations. As Petersohn argues, coalition effectiveness depends on common rules and procedures that reduce friction and miscommunication—yet in Baghdad in 2007, those rules were absent (Petersohn 2013, 469). When Blackwater guards at Nisour Square misinterpreted civilian vehicles as hostile, there was no unified authority capable of halting the escalation once firing began. The resulting bloodshed was not simply a product of poor individual judgment but of a structural failure: without integrated chains of command, misperceptions spiraled into mass violence.

Incidents of excessive force could have been dramatically reduced if all armed actors operated under a single command structure with shared rules of engagement and real-time communication. After Nisour Square, by early 2008, six Contractor Operation Cells were set up, allowing for increased military control over contractor movements and better coordination with PMCs (Petersohn 2013, 477). Since the office began oversight over PMCs in October 2007, weapons discharges by PMCs have decreased approximately 60 percent (GAO 2008, 12). Radio communications with convoys, which had previously been monitored from the embassy but not recorded or archived, began to be preserved, and Secretary Rice ordered "the expansion of existing communication links to the U.S. military" to ensure that State and military personnel "have good connectivity" (Deyoung and Tyson 2007). Indeed, incidents involving contractors dropped as coordination improved over time, a pattern Petersohn attributes to the institutionalization of oversight and clearer chains of authority (Petersohn 2013, 478).

Implications

Ultimately, while legal loopholes and profit incentives created permissive background conditions for contractor misconduct, it was command and control failure that most directly enabled the lethal violence seen at Nisour Square. Legal ambiguity may have shielded Blackwater from immediate prosecution and profit motives may have shaped their broader institutional behavior, but neither of these factors fully explains why force was escalated in conflict. Fragmented oversight structure rooted in divided authority between the State Department and Department of Defense, the lack of disciplinary mechanisms, and the absence of a unified chain of command allowed contractors to operate with violence on the ground. Unlike profit motives, which are inherent to any private actor, and legal gaps, which primarily affect post-hoc accountability, command and control determines whether a contractor pulls the trigger in a volatile situation. As Petersohn notes, "rules and procedures provide a reference framework for coordination… and increase effectiveness by reducing friction, that is, the risk of failure through misunderstanding or lack of communication" (Petersohn 2013, 468). The absence of such structures in 2007 meant there was no consistent framework guiding behavior in high-risk situations.

If this paper is correct in contending that the escalation of violence at Nisour Square was primarily the result of fragmented command and control, rather than legal

immunity or profit incentives, then this has important implications for how private military contractors are managed in future conflicts. Reforms aimed at closing legal loopholes or restructuring contracts are not irrelevant, but they do not address the most immediate source of escalation identified here. Clear authority and consistent rules of engagement can reduce violence and prevent contractors from acting autonomously in ways that undermine broader mission goals.

Unified chains of command, consistent rules of engagement, and real-time field oversight are not optional—they are essential. Without clear chains of command and consistent rules of engagement, contractors in conflict zones will continue to face situations where ambiguous threats turn into unnecessary escalation. PMCs should be incorporated into military chains of command and ROE when used alongside conventional forces in combat. Improving command and control mechanisms not only mitigates legal and profit-based risks but serves as the most effective lever to prevent contractor violence; in volatile environments like Baghdad in 2007, it is the presence or absence of integrated command structures that determines whether force is restrained or spirals into violence.

Notes

1. For arguments emphasizing the centrality of legal accountability gaps in explaining Nisour Square, see Jeremy Scahill, Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army (2009); P.W. Singer, Brookings Memorandum, "Can't Win With 'Em, Can't Go to War Without 'Em" (2007); Michael Welch, "Fragmented Power and State-Corporate Killings: A Critique of Blackwater in Iraq," Crime, Law and Social Change 51 (2008): 351–64; Deborah Avant and Lee Sigelman, "Private Security and Democracy: Lessons from the US in Iraq," Security Studies 19, no. 2 (2010): 230–65. Between the late 1990s and mid-2000s, the number of Pentagon defense services contracts rose by 78 percent, while the number of officials tasked with oversight fell by over 40 percent, meaning that in every documented case of contractor abuse, no contracting officer was present.

2. Bremer himself relied on private security firms such as Blackwater during his tenure as head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, underscoring the irony that the same official also signed the order insulating contractors from Iraqi prosecution. Order 17 granted immunity to members of coalition military forces, foreign missions, and contractors operating in Iraq.

3. For accounts stressing profit incentives and political economy as drivers of PMC behavior, see Deborah Avant, The Market for Force (2005), esp. p. 49; Jeremy Scahill, Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army(2009); U.S. Congress, House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Blackwater USA Hearings (2007); P.W. Singer, Brookings Memorandum, "Can't Win With 'Em, Can't Go to War Without 'Em" (2007); Oversight and Government Reform Hearings on Blackwater USA (2007); Christopher Kinsey and Malcolm Hugh Patterson, Contractors and War (2020); David Isenberg, Shadow Force: Private Security Contractors in Iraq (2009); Benjamin Tkach, "Private Military and Security Companies, Contract Structure, Market Competition, and Violence in Iraq," Conflict Management and Peace Science 36, no. 3 (2019): 291–311; Several of these authors appear in multiple camps, with Avant, Scahill, and Singer in particular writing across both economic logics (profit, competition, commodification of force) and governance failures (weak oversight and accountability gaps).

4. For arguments that private security companies (PSCs) undermined coalition effectiveness by fragmenting command and control, see Ulrich Petersohn, "The Effectiveness of Contracted Coalitions," Armed Forces & Society 39, no. 3 (2013): 467–88, at 469–70, 477–78; Deborah Avant, The Market for Force (2005), 41–43, 68; Deborah Avant and Lee Sigelman, "Private Security and Democracy: Lessons from the US in Iraq," Security Studies 19, no. 2 (2010): 246–47; U.S. Government Accountability Office, Rebuilding Iraq: DOD and State Department Have Improved Oversight and Coordination of Private Security Contractors in Iraq, but Further Actions

Are Needed to Sustain Improvements (2008), at 2, 9; Blackwater Oversight Hearings, 110th Cong., 1st Sess. (2007); Jeremy Scahill, Blackwater: The Rise of the World's Most Powerful Mercenary Army (2009), 58, 287. Several of these sources appear in multiple camps, with Avant, Scahill, and GAO reports cited not only for coordination failures but also for their insights into weak oversight and accountability gaps.

5. In House Oversight Committee hearings following Nisour Square, Chairman Henry Waxman questioned the wisdom of outsourcing security to PMCs from both strategic and financial perspectives. "Privatizing is working exceptionally well for Blackwater," he remarked, "but the question for this hearing is whether outsourcing to Blackwater is a good deal for the American taxpayer, whether it is a good deal for the military, and whether it is serving our national interest in Iraq." The October 2 hearing took place just weeks after the Nisour Square massacre, which had thrust concerns about PMCs into the center of national debate. The hearings questioned the efficiency of PMCs vis-à-vis the traditional military. He then explains that Sergeants in the Military cost six times less than a comparable position at Blackwater.

6. On February 16, 2005, four Blackwater guards escorting a U.S. State Department convoy in Iraq fired 70 rounds into a civilian vehicle, claiming they felt threatened when the driver failed to stop. A State Department investigation later concluded the shooting had no justification, and the guards provided false statements to conceal the truth.

7. Throughout this paper, I use the terms PSC (Private Security Contractor) and PMC (Private Military Company) interchangeably. While U.S. government reports generally use PSC, academic literature more often employs PMC to describe the same firms, including Blackwater.

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Bridging the Divide Between Rhetoric and Research: Media, Academia, and the Framing of Political Polarization

Alexia Loiseau

In recent years, a deepening divide between political ideologies has been noticeable in contemporary democracies in the West. While academics have researched the causes of polarisation extensively, studies examining how the media discusses this phenomenon remain limited. Moreover, research on media narratives suggests they often diverge significantly from scholarly findings. To shift the research away from a US-centric and Anglophone focus, this study analyzes the French and UK context, conducting a comparative content analysis of six newspapers from both sides of the ideological spectrum. By examining coverage from 2014 and 2017 (pre- and post-Brexit/Trump), this paper assesses how media narratives differ over temporal, geographical and ideological spheres, and whether they align with or contradict academic literature.

Findings indicate that social media and economic, social and political factors were frequently cited causes of polarisation in media discourses, aligning with general themes in academic literature. Nevertheless, notable differences were perceived in the way the newspaper articles framed these issues through event-driven and superficial narratives, contrasting the more nuanced and structural analyses of scholarly research. Moreover, polarisation was discussed significantly more in 2017, with left-leaning outlets emphasising systematic inequalities and right-leaning papers focusing more on national identity threats. UK newspapers were more event-driven than French narratives, although both discussed Brexit and Trump extensively. Finally, media narratives were found to somewhat exaggerate social media's role in political division, contrasting academic perspectives. This study contributes to discussions on media influence, highlighting its role in shaping and sometimes distorting public understanding of political polarisation.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

Abbreviation/Acronym	*Definition*
UK	United Kingdom
FR	France
EU	European Union
US	United States
SNS	Social Networking Sites
RRP	Radical Right Parties
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and others.
WEF	World Economic Forum
OECD/OCDE	The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
FN	Le Front National / The National Front
UoE	University of Edinburgh

Section 1: Introduction

The Issue

Polarisation has emerged as a defining feature of contemporary political landscapes across Western democracies in the 21st century. The 2016 Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, the election of Donald Trump in the United States, and the rise of populist parties throughout Europe (e.g. France's National Front Party) exposed intensifying ideological divides. Political divisions have drastic consequences on democratic integrity and institutional trust; therefore, studying polarisation is vital to protecting our society and democratic values. Polarisation, defined as the ideological distancing between political groups, is widely studied in academic literature as a multifaceted phenomenon with a variety of drivers (Russo 2021). However, while extensive academic research has revealed a nuanced understanding of the structural causes of polarisation, public discourse diverges from scholarly findings, instead simplifying the complex process to fit ideological narratives (Berning 2023).

The media plays a critical role in democracy as a platform for the exchange of ideas, criticism of authority, and shaping of public opinion (Andrau 2008). Accordingly, it is an important dimension to study in order to better understand political polarisation. Thus, this paper investigates how media narratives in the UK and France portray the causes of polarisation by conducting a comparative content analysis of broadsheet and tabloid newspapers across ideological leanings. By investigating media coverage preceding and following the Brexit and Trump elections, this research eval-

uates how media narratives evolve in response to major political events and examines the extent to which they align with or contradict established academic theories. Finally, by comparing media discourse alongside academic findings, this research contributes to on-going debates about the role of the press in contributing to political divides and whether media narratives align with or challenge scholarly understandings of polarisation. Subsequently, my research question is:

To what extent does media discourse on political polarization reflect or diverge from concerns raised in academic literature?

Paper Overview

In the subsequent section, I present a critical review of the topic of polarisation, providing key definitions, introducing relevant academic literature, and outlining its primary causes as identified by scholars. I further explore the relationship between media and polarisation, highlighting the gaps in existing research.

In Section Three, I present the theoretical framework and research design underpinning my study. I discuss Entman (1993) and Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (2009) application of framing theory and moral panics to systematically evaluate media narratives on polarisation. This section also outlines how the UK and French sources were selected, and it explains the methodology used for analysing the data.

In the fourth section, I present the findings, structured around the key causal factors of polarisation, identified both from the data and academic literature. This section examines media discourse on economic inequality, social factors, political dynamics, and social media, highlighting temporal, geographical, and ideological differences. Then, I assess whether media narratives align or diverge from scholarly research for each causal factor.

In Section Five, I situate these findings within the broader context of the media's role in polarisation. I highlight discrepancies between media and academic narratives and explore the implications of these divergences for democratic discourse and public understanding of polarisation. Finally, I identify future research, which could supplement the existing understanding of polarisation. I emphasize the need to further investigate how media narratives influence public perceptions and policy debates in polarised societies.

This research is significant due to its contribution to on-going debates on news media's role in contributing to and discussing polarisation, by offering a systematic comparison between newspaper narratives and academic literature. It highlights the potential drastic consequences of the media's event-driven framing and divergence from scholarly research, providing a deeper understanding of how public discourse may either reflect or misrepresent complex societal phenomena.

Section 2: Literature Review

In the following section, I define 'Polarisation' and its societal and political impacts. Then, I provide a critical discussion of existing literature on its causes. Next,

I review the relationship between the media and polarisation, before highlighting the gaps in the research and how this study addresses these unanswered questions.

2.1 Conceptualising Review

2.1.1 Definitions

Over the past 50 years polarisation has been on the rise in Western countries, with partisans becoming increasingly hostile towards one another (Lelkes, Sood and Iyengar 2015, 5; Maher, Igou and van Tilburg 2018, 205). Sartori (1976, 116-117) introduces the theory of 'Polarised Pluralism,' wherein a highly fragmented party system with entrenched ideological divisions, exacerbates polarisation. He describes how this aggravates the political spectrum by pushing parties towards ideological extremes (Sartori 1976, 119-120). These parties undermine the stability of the system by refusing to engage in healthy political discussion and rejecting the legitimacy of the existing democratic order (Sartori 1976, 124).

Unlike Sartori's (1976) focus on parties, Russo (2021, 9) widens the scope, defining polarisation as "the distance of political positions among citizens and elites on public policies and relevant political issues." Therefore, polarisation can be categorised into three types:

Political polarization refers to clear ideological divisions between parties, often resulting in a decline in compromise and a rise in partisan hostility (Oosterwaal and Torenvlied 2010, 261; Sartori 1976, 120).

Elite polarization occurs when political elites, such as politicians and influential figures, adopt increasingly extreme ideological positions, shaping public opinion and deepening political divisions (Callander and Carbajal 2022, 829).

Mass polarization describes the widening of societal divisions, often exacerbating cultural conflicts, leading to declining social cohesion and heightened tensions between groups (Oosterwaal and Torenvlied 2010, 261).

Allcott et al. (2020) emphasize two more distinctions: **Affective polarization** occurs when people develop strong negative feelings toward members of an opposing group, while feeling greater attachment to their own party (Allcott et al. 2020, 640); **Issue polarization** refers to the increasing division of opinions on specific political or social issues (Allcott et al. 2020, 641). While recognising that polarisation, radicalisation, and populism are distinct, Russo (2021) emphasizes how these processes are deeply interconnected. Russo (2021, 12-14) defines **populism** as a political approach that creates a binary opposition between 'the people' and 'the elite,' turning issue-based divides into identity conflicts and fuelling polarisation. **Radicalization** is a phenomenon where deep polarisation escalates into a violent political environment (Russo 2021, 10). Assessing these concepts is necessary to understanding the intricacies of polarisation.

2.1.2 Consequences

Polarisation has significant consequences in weakening governance, democracy, and social cohesion. Firstly, it undermines political stability by eroding bipartisan

communication and making coalition building difficult (Maher, Igou, and van Tilburg 2018, 205). As parties grow ideologically distant, moderate voices lose influence, and radical discourses rise (Sartori 1976, 119). Governments struggle to maintain stable coalitions, leading to frequent elections and ineffective governance (Sartori 1976). Increased division also weakens legislative efficiency, shifting power toward executive roles and causing political deadlock (Barber and McCarty 2015, 40, 42; Maher, Igou, and van Tilburg 2018, 205).

Secondly, polarisation threatens democratic integrity and institutional trust. The rise of anti-establishment parties can result in democratic backsliding or authoritarianism (Sartori 1976). As compromise becomes rare, citizens lose faith in democratic processes and perceive outcomes as illegitimate (Allcott et al. 2020, 649; Barber and McCarty 2015). Declining institutional trust further weakens government effectiveness and liberal-democratic norms (Maher, Igou, and van Tilburg 2018, 205; Russo 2021, 8, 12).

Lastly, polarisation deepens societal divisions, hindering cooperation and dialogue, features essential for healthy democracies (Maher, Igou, and van Tilburg 2018, 210). Entrenched beliefs make individuals less receptive to opposing views, fostering in-group superiority, hatred, and racism (Maher, Igou and van Tilburg 2018, 210). Overall, a fragmented society weakens social cohesion and compromise, highlighting the necessity of studying polarization to prevent these negative consequences.

2.2 Causes

Political polarisation has been widely studied across disciplines, with scholars identifying various dimensions and drivers. Although there is significant scholarly consensus that polarisation is a prominent feature in Western democracies, considerable debate persists regarding its causes.

2.2.1 Economic Inequality

Existing literature consistently links economic inequality to rising political polarisation. Barber and McCarty (2015, 31) highlight how growing inequality over the past 50 years correlates with increasing polarisation in the U.S., suggesting a causal relationship. Rolník (2023) supports this, arguing that the higher the economic well-being, the less likely a place is to experience political polarisation. Moreover, Barber and McCarty (2015, 31) reveal how wealthy individuals influence parties to adopt conservative economic policies and push candidates toward extreme positions, exacerbating inequality and boosting popular support for extremist parties. Russo (2021, 8, 19) adds that the concentration of power among the wealthy weakens democratic accountability and links the rise of populist parties to the failures of globalisation. Furthermore, Benedek and Moldovan (2015, 192) argue that rapid urban growth has left rural areas behind, creating an economic cleavage that fuels political and social polarisation. As the middle class shrinks, poverty and austerity levels rise, deepening these cleavages (Benedek and Moldovan 2015, 200). Norris and Inglehart (2019, 50) further assert that economic grievances—such as unemployment, welfare dependency,

and national security concerns—exacerbate polarisation, arguing that demographics play a significant role in widening divisions.

2.2.2 Social Factors

Some scholars emphasize social factors in exacerbating polarisation. Norris and Inglehart (2019) assert that while economic conflicts matter, cultural divisions and social inequalities play a larger role. They highlight how shifts in traditional values are seen as threats to national identity, alienating conservatives—especially older generations—on issues like immigration, LGBTQ+ rights, and gender equality (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 34-36). They argue that this fuels a 'cultural backlash,' which drives support for populist parties that promise security and the return of traditions and conformity (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Norris and Inglehart (2019, 48) identify how radical right parties (RRPs) across Europe have gained legitimacy by exploiting cultural anxieties around immigration. Oosterwaal and Torenvlied (2010) reinforce this, noting the correlation between rising polarisation and increasing immigration; they argue that parties are growing more divided on issues of migration, pushing them towards the extremes. Moreover, Putnam's (2000) Social Capital theory highlights how weakening social ties reduce ideological bridging, fostering division. As social capital declines, political identities harden; people engage less with those who have different views, and opponents come to be seen as enemies rather than fellow citizens (Putnam 2000).

2.2.3 Political Factors

Academic literature significantly emphasizes the role of political factors in exacerbating ideological divides. Levy and Razin (2022, 113) argue that competitive electoral systems exacerbate polarisation, as parties must appeal to both ideologically extreme and moderate voters. Barber and McCarty (2015, 51) emphasize that ideological overlap between parties is at a historic low, eroding bipartisan coalitions and pushing voters toward stricter party alignment. Callander and Carbajal (2022, 828) suggest this polarisation begins with elites, who adopt extreme positions and force parties and voters to align with these stances. They highlight how this dynamic creates a 'missing middle': as moderate voters are forced to pick a side, cross-party animosity intensifies and voters become more negative towards opposing parties, even if their preferences for their favored party do not improve significantly (Callander and Carbajal 2022, 828-829). Moreover, some scholars blame specific elites, citing Trump's populist rhetoric and Macron's failure to address class divides, for deepening mass polarisation (Feré 2020; Russo 2021, 10). Russo (2021, 8, 16, 22-23) argues that personalist leaders and populism reinforces an 'establishment vs. anti-establishment' divide, fostering an 'us vs. them' logic, eroding trust in institutions, and shifting democracies from party- to leader-based systems.

Nevertheless, some scholars contradict this claim, noting that voter polarisation does not systematically follow elite polarisation. Oosterwaal and Torenvlied (2010, 272-274) argue that polarisation follows partisan divides, while elite and mass fragmentation remain moderate. Vrânceanu (2024, 2-3, 11) suggests elite dissensus

may reduce polarisation among non-partisans by fostering ambivalence, instead blaming RRPs for increasing issue salience and triggering polarisation. Caamaño and Bértoa (2019) reemphasize this, arguing RRPs reinforce ideological divides, undermine democracy, and erode trust in traditional parties. Furthermore, Maher, Igou, and van Tilburg (2018) explore how political disillusionment can act as a catalyst for polarisation, pushing voters to seek reassurance in extreme, anti-establishment parties and worsening fragmentation.

2.2.4 Social Media

The role of the Internet and social media on polarisation remains a contested issue. Many scholars argue that homophilous sorting on Social Networking Sites (SNS) increases ideological segregation (Conover et al. 2021; Farrell 2012; González-Bailón et al. 2023; Halberstam and Knight 2016; Levy and Razin 2022; Sunstein 2007; 2017; Zhuravskaya, Petrova and Enikolopov 2020). Sunstein (2007; 2017) argues that filtering and echo chambers reinforce individuals' pre-existing views, exacerbating social divides. Moreover, scholars highlight how homophily increases exposure to like-minded information, facilitating the spread of misinformation and fake news, creating misconceptions, and deepening political divides (Halberstam and Knight 2016; Zhuravskaya, Petrova and Enikolopov 2020). Conover et al. (2021) argue that retweets and mentions on Twitter foster filter-bubbles, while González-Bailón et al. (2023) show how algorithms and sharing behaviours amplify polarisation on Facebook. Scholars also argue that the internet benefits the populist rhetoric, enabling targeted campaigns that manipulate public opinion (Levy and Razin 2022, 113-115, 118). Moreover, Lelkes, Sood and Iyengar (2015) link broadband access to greater partisan hostility and Gajewska et al. (2023) show how SNS reinforce in-group/out-group dynamics through rhetorical strategies.

Nevertheless, most scholars reject the assumption that SNS amplify polarisation more than traditional media. Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2017) find that polarisation increased the most among demographic groups with the lowest Internet use, arguing that other factors are more influential. Barberá (2014, 28-29) argues SNS reduce polarisation by exposing users to diverse opinions, fostering tolerance and weakening partisan identities. Overall, academic literature recognises that segregation online occurs primarily within users with high levels of political interest, while exposing the general population to a diversity of ideologically crosscutting viewpoints (Farrell 2012; González-Bailón et al. 2023; Nguyen and Vu 2019). Guess et al. (2023) counter claims that reshares increase polarisation, finding no significant impact on users' opinions. Additionally, Bakshy, Messing and Adamic (2015) argue that individual choice, not algorithms, limits one's exposure to diverse viewpoints. Moreover, they argue that while ideological segregation online exists, offline networks remain more fragmented, and that deactivating SNS reduces issue polarisation but not affective polarisation (Allcott et al. 2020; 2024; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010; Zhuravskaya, Petrova and Enikolopov 2020). This suggests SNS may not drive political divisions, shaping this paper's first hypothesis.

H1: News media overstates SNS's role in political polarization.

2.3 Media and Polarization

2.3.1 Media Effects on Polarization

News media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions. Prior (2013) argues that the media plays a role in encouraging stronger partisan attitudes. He highlights how outlets have begun providing increasingly ideological content, exacerbating polarisation as people consume media that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (Prior 2013, 102-103). Despite these shifts, Prior (2013, 122) notes that most mainstream newspapers remain centrist, with partisan media having a limited impact; while selective exposure exists, the electorate still consume ideologically diverse content. Nevertheless, Berning (2023, 144) argues that the media shapes discourse by prioritising polarising topics for their high negativity and shock factor, influencing the information readers see. Moreover, Leruth et al. (2017, 97) highlight the role of print media in shaping political ideology, arguing that the two are deeply interlinked. Prior (2013, 107) also suggests greater media choice allows the moderate population to avoid political news entirely, shrinking the political center and fuelling polarised elections.

Existing research that compares media discourse on polarisation to academia is limited, with only one study discussing this topic. Berning (2023) argues media discourse both influences and reflects polarisation through language, framing, and ideology, significantly shaping public perception of polarisation. He demonstrates how media discourse on polarisation tends to be simplified and emotionally charged, often reinforcing ideological divides through partisan framing and sensationalised narratives rather than being informed by empirical evidence (Berning 2023, 30).

H2: This suggests public discourse on polarization diverges from academic findings.

It is therefore relevant to build upon existing research to bridge this gap.

2.3.2 Comparing Political and Media Systems

This paper compares France and the UK, two highly polarised countries with distinct political and media systems (case selection rationale is outlined in Section 3). Asekun-Olarinmoye et al. (2018) argues that the media is influenced by political systems and ideologies. He outlines the differences between the UK's liberal model, which favors self-regulation, and France's polarised pluralist model, which values high state intervention to maintain pluralism (Appendix A) (Asekun-Olarinmoye et al. 2018, 17, 21). Andrau (2008, 180-186) highlights how the state is viewed as the protector of media freedom in France, contrasting the UK's concern over financial influence. Moreover, Leruth et al. (2017, 106-111) argues that UK readership aligns significantly with political views (right-wing voters are more likely to read The Telegraph and left-wing voters, The Guardian), whereas French media has more cross-ideological readership.

H3: This suggests that political and media contexts shape portrayals of polarization.

H4: Left- and right-leaning newspapers frame polarization narratives differently.

The UK's media market makes it an interesting case, due to the popularity of tabloids when compared to broadsheet circulation (Johansson 2007, 22; Leruth et al. 2017, 101). With no equivalent in France, UK tabloids focus on sensationalism, personal narratives, and celebrity gossip using simplified language and personal focus to engage audiences (Johansson 2007, 7-8). Tabloids often contrast elite media, resonating with working-class frustrations, while broadsheets cater to more affluent and educated readers (Johansson 2007, 24). Moreover, Johansson (2007, 130) compares The Sun and The Mirror, claiming that the latter is more politically motivated and aligned with the labor party.

H5: Tabloids' tendency toward provocative and emotional content suggest polarization narratives will be emphasized more than in broadsheets.

2.4 Gaps in Literature

2.4.1 Media and Academic Narratives

Notable gaps remain within research on polarisation and media discourse. While studies recognize that media narratives and academic literature on polarisation do not always align, few papers explore this disconnect. Consequently, this research addresses the gap by analysing how popular newspapers portray polarisation and compares them with academic perspectives to understand where they diverge.

2.4.2 Geographical Focus

Furthermore, most research on political polarisation studies the U.S. case. This essay shifts the focus to a European context, examining the UK and France, where polarisation has risen in recent years. France's 2024 legislative elections marked a new era of polarisation between the RRP (Le Rassemblement National), the left-wing coalition, and centrist presidential coalition (Gougou 2024, 724). Moreover, Feré (2020, 216) describes France's political landscape as split between an 'elite bloc' and a 'popular bloc.' Similarly, the UK's 2024 general elections exposed deep political rifts, with Brexit-related divisions persisting along socioeconomic lines (Heath et al. 2025). Consequently, more cross-national studies are needed to explore context-based, media-driven political divides. Studying the French context introduces a Francophone perspective, broadening the scope of research beyond the dominant Anglophone focus.

2.4.3 Contextual Analysis

A historical and contextual perspective is needed to understand how media narratives on polarisation have evolved. Research rarely compares polarisation discourse across different periods, restricting our understanding of how the topic has been propagated in the media. This limits discussions on moral panics and the broader dynamics that have contributed to the current state of polarisation. In 2016, major political events like Trump's election and Brexit exposed deep divisions in public opinion and highlighted the growing influence of populist movements (Levy and Razin 2022, 106). Such issues had previously been largely overlooked or not viewed as significant threats in the West. Comparing media coverage from 2014 (pre-Trump/

Brexit) to 2017 would provide insights into shifting narratives and their impacts.

H6: Therefore, Western media discourse about polarization significantly increased from 2014 to 2017.

This literature review has explored scholarship on polarisation and media discourse, showing that newspapers often exaggerate political events, while academic literature presents a more nuanced perspective. Moreover, gaps were identified, including the need for a more European focus and historical analyses of polarisation narratives. Drawing on this deficiency, I seek to analyze and compare media discourse in the UK and France across two periods to assess their alignment with academic work. The subsequent section develops the study's methodological framework.

Section 3: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1 Case Selection

This paper examines how news media identifies the causes of polarisation and how this aligns or diverges from academic research through a comparative analysis of French and UK newspapers over two distinct timeframes. These cases offer a compelling basis for comparison, as both societies are experiencing significant political polarisation (see section 2.4.2), yet differ in their media landscapes, in terms of state involvement, and political systems, with the UK's first-past-the-post system contrasting France's two-round majoritarian system (Leruth et al. 2017, 100). The newspapers were selected based on circulation popularity (Table 1), including one left-leaning (The Guardian and Libération) and right-leaning (The Telegraph and Le Figaro) paper per country to capture different ideological perspectives. To reflect the UK media landscape, where tabloids surpass broadsheets in circulation, The Sun and The Mirror were incorporated. As French magazines do not reflect the readership or political focus of British Tabloids, no equivalent was included (Andrau 2008). The timeframe was chosen to explore evolving narratives on polarisation. The Trump and Brexit elections in 2016 were used as a benchmark, due to these events exposing deep ideological divides and bringing the topic of polarisation to the forefront of discourse (Maher, Igou and van Tilburg 2018, 205). Both the UK and France were notably affected by these events, making 2014 and 2017 ideal for comparison. Due to practical constraints, sources were limited to January to ensure a manageable yet representative dataset. These cases provide a strong basis for analysing how narratives on polarisation evolve across national, ideological, and temporal contexts.

Table 1: Newspaper Circulation (Leruth at al. 2017, 101-102)

Country	*Name*	*Daily Circulation (2014)*	*Political Orientation*
UK	*The Guardian*	179,146	Center-Left
	The Telegraph	498,484	Right
	The Sun	1,978,324	Right
	The Mirror	936,577	Left
France	*Libération*	97,933	Center-Left
	Le Figaro	325,459	Right

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Theoretical Framework

In Section Two, I explored key academic debates on political polarisation and media discourse, however, framing theory, and moral panics are also fundamental to my argument. Entman's (1993) **Framing Theory** argues that media 'frames' shape public perception by selecting and emphasising specific aspects of reality while ignoring others. This influences how events are defined, discussed, and portrayed, using language, imagery, and structural emphasis, allowing audiences to interpret them based on pre-existing beliefs (Entman 1993). In the context of polarisation, media framing constructs narratives that assign blame and highlight conflicts, reinforcing ideological divisions.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009) define **Moral Panics** as disproportionate public fear over social issues, driven by exaggerated and distorted media narratives. They argue that media narratives manufacture crises, scapegoat certain groups, and serve political elites' interests, further deepening ideological divides (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009). This framework helps analyze whether media coverage of polarisation heightens social tensions. By integrating these theories, this paper offers a comprehensive framework for analysing media narratives on political polarisation.

3.2.2 Method

To compare media discourses on polarisation with academic literature, this study conducts a qualitative content analysis of articles from six newspapers in France and the UK. All articles were sourced from 'Factiva,' except for the Libération texts, accessed via 'Europress' (Libération archives were inaccessible via the UoE's 'Factiva' access). Relevant articles were identified using predefined search terms (Appendix B), with irrelevant content excluded (e.g. book reviews, lifestyle, war commentary) (Appendix C). Appendix D lists all materials used in the dataset. This paper systematically analyzes media framing of political polarisation to assess its alignment with academic themes.

This study follows established guidelines for content analysis, which was chosen for its ability to systematically examine media discourse patterns (Halperin and Heath 2020; Krippendorff 2019; Saldaña 2016). This permitted a detailed comparison of numerous documents, identifying shifts in media narratives over time, nations, and ideologies. Using both inductive and deductive approaches, a structured coding framework on the causes of polarisation was developed (Appendix E). Key themes (Social and Economic Inequality and Political Factors) were drawn from the literature, followed by a preliminary review of the articles, using semi-open coding to confirm predefined concepts and identify emerging themes (Saldaña 2016). The resulting codebook guided the content analysis (Appendix E). NVivo was used, facilitating systematic analysis and coding (Lewis 2004). To enhance reliability, subcategories were created, and the codebook was refined to include both explicit and implicit themes. Manual and latent coding allowed implicit meanings and underlying narratives to be identified, recognising the nuanced nature of qualitative data, and ensuring all

relevant quotes were codified to their appropriate node. Extracts referring to multiple themes or sub-category were assigned to each corresponding node. In order to focus on narratives, extracts were coded only if they presented an opinion; neutral quotes reporting on research about polarisation were excluded. Lastly, the coded extracts were reviewed to ensure accuracy.

3.3 Data Collection

Keyword searches were used to systematically identify media discussions on polarisation. Terms, informed by the literature, included 'Polarisation,' 'Partisanship,' 'Extremism,' and 'Populism,' to ensure all aspects of the topic were covered (see 2.1.1). Due to an excessive number of results, the search was refined to focus on triggers of polarisation, using terms such as 'drivers,' 'causes,' 'rise,' and 'influence.' To analyze media narratives across temporal and geographical contexts, articles were sourced from four UK newspapers (The Guardian, The Telegraph, The Sun, The Mirror) and two French newspapers (Le Figaro, Libération) from 2014 (pre-Brexit/Trump) and 2017 (post-Brexit/Trump). To mitigate the risks of partisan bias and acknowledge ideological diversity, texts were sourced from left- and right-leaning outlets (Table 1). Appendix B provides an overview of the search codes used in this study and Appendix D outlines the articles discussed.

To ensure validity, qualitative content analysis identified recurring themes and frames in media discussions on polarisation. Texts were coded by references to social, economic, political, and social media influences. Reliability was ensured through crosschecking UK and French datasets to identify narrative commonalities and differences. Additionally, findings from the media analysis were compared with academic literature on political polarisation to evaluate whether media discourse aligned with or diverged from scholarly perspectives. A quantitative word count was conducted to identify the most frequent terms used in each language, highlighting key themes and linguistic patterns. This approach systematically examined the evolution of media narratives on polarisation contributing to a broader understanding of the role of media in shaping public perceptions of political division.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

As in all qualitative research recognising positionality is crucial, as content analysis involves subjectivity (Prasad 2019). As a French national having lived in the UK for 8 years and political science student, my cultural and academic background provides a unique perspective. This enables me to grasp idiomatic expressions, implicit meanings and cultural references in French and UK discourses, enriching my analysis. Subjectivity is especially relevant during coding, where the researcher may be susceptible to confirmation bias (Prasad 2019). To mitigate this, I used both inductive and deductive coding, allowing themes to emerge from media sources while incorporating existing academic research to ensure the entire scope of political polarisation was addressed in the study (Appendix E).

To ensure content validity, themes were informed by established scholarly research on polarisation, enhancing replicability. As shown in Section 4, themes identified in the UK and French media broadly aligned with the literature, reinforcing the reliability of the findings. The coding frame was made to be as detailed and unambiguous as possible, and was peer-reviewed by a student to ensure replicability (Krippendorff 2019). To strengthen consistency, I finally reviewed the coding, to refine the categorisations and minimize errors and discrepancies. This process ensured thematic consistency across time periods and sources.

Regarding external validity, this research provides valuable insights into how media shapes polarisation narratives. However, it is important to acknowledge that media discourse is shaped by national political and journalistic cultures. While this study provides a comparative perspective between the French and UK contexts, the findings cannot be assumed to be universally applicable to all media systems. Moreover, the constrained sample size limits external validity and given global developments, like rising populism in Europe and the US, media narratives on polarisation cannot be entirely disentangled from the global political climate in which it was produced. Despite these limitations, the study ensures a systematic approach, enhancing the reliability and validity of its findings.

Section 4: Findings and Discussion

4.1 Results

The search yielded fewer results for tabloids than broadsheets, indicating differences in the issues prioritised (Appendix C). The UK press also returned significantly more articles than the French, suggesting a greater focus on political division in the former. Moreover, left-leaning newspapers returned more articles than right-leaning ones, reflecting their stronger emphasis on polarisation. These variations may also suggest that these newspapers use different vocabulary, not captured in the scope of this study. Overall, 'Economic Inequality' was the most cited cause of polarisation (74 mentions), followed by 'Politicians' (73) and 'Social Inequality' (65) (Table 2). Social media ranked sixth, with 43 references.

Table 2: Number of References to Each Theme

Theme	*Number of Files*	*Number of References*
Social Inequality	43	65
Education	6	9
Environment	7	10
Migration	33	46
Technological Change	6	7
Total:	**95**	**137**
Economic Inequality	44	74
Globalisation	11	16
Rural/Urban Divide	4	11
Total:	**59**	**101**
Politics	7	7
Disillusionment	39	56
Governments	20	22
Elites	12	16
Politicians	57	73
Left/Right Divide	19	23
Total:	**154**	**197**
Social Media	21	43
Fake News	12	26
Echo chambers	12	16
Total:	**45**	**85**
News Media	13	20

In the following sections, I discuss the findings and evaluate how the media portrays the drivers of polarisation. Organised by key causal factors, I examine temporal, geographical, and ideological differences, then compare these findings with academic research. The section concludes with a comparison of broadsheets and tabloids, discussed separately due to the limited results, which made integration into the main themes impractical.

4.2 Economic Crisis

4.2.1 Temporal Differences

Economic crisis emerged as a key driver of political polarisation with 59 newspapers linking economic issues to rising polarisation (Table 2). In 2014, discussions focused on the lingering effects of the 2008 financial crash, such as income inequality, stagnating growth, and anger towards the increasing wealth gap, and how these risk leading to political division. Moreover, political divides and economic issues were discussed in terms of nationally focused concerns, with French articles highlighting the EU Free Trade agreement and economic stagnation, and the UK articles discussing austerity and poverty.

By 2017, coverage became more global, discussing the WEF, the Greek crisis, and Brexit. Unlike the 2014 articles' vague references to polarisation, the 2017 articles explicitly linked economic struggles to Trump's election and Brexit, citing weak economies, deindustrialisation, and unemployment. They highlight how populism's promise of economic reforms has contributed to its success, appealing to middle and lower income classes who feel left behind by the liberal economic policies of their governments. The 2017 coverage placed greater emphasis on globalisation as a source of discontent fuelling these political upheavals. The Sun discusses how "frustrations with globalisation [...] is sweeping through British market towns and the US Rust belt (Harvey 2017)," while The Telegraph highlighted how populations supported populist movements "because globalisation had had very mixed results (Stanley 2017)", leading to a "growing sense of 'isolation and detachment (Chan 2017a).'" The WEF's warnings about rising populism and polarisation dominated the 2017 discourse, with increased discussion on economic solutions to mitigate these divides. Additionally, new economic concerns emerged, including the housing crisis, the failures of capitalism, and crippling national debt. Compared to 2014, the 2017 articles provided a much deeper analysis of how economic struggles drive contemporary political polarisation.

4.2.2 Geographical Differences

French and UK newspapers framed economic issues differently. French media focused on national economic struggles, portraying France's relative decline compared to other countries, as pushing the electorate towards populism. Another recurring theme was dissatisfaction with the EU's economic policies, notably its free trade agreement, driving division within its own politics, with French articles noting that "a large part of society is haunted by [...] the takeover of Brussels and the global economy (Louis 2014)." Deindustrialisation's political impact was also highlighted, with Libération noting, "Trump won in the states that had suffered most from deindustrialisation (Quatremer 2017)." Overall, French articles were more reflective, linking polarisation to broader systemic economic issues such as capitalism and the rising cost of living.

In contrast, the UK press took a pragmatic tone, focusing on immediate events and policies, like austerity measures and Brexit. UK articles cited WEF and

ILO reports to link polarisation to economic crises and directly blamed failed policies for Brexit and Trump's election, claiming that "the gap between wealthy and poor had been behind the UK's Brexit vote and Donald Trump's election victory in the US (Allen 2017)." Moreover, UK articles framed economic inequality through more direct political consequences, notably how current economic policies have left the middle and lower classes behind to stagnate, despite economic growth. Overall, both UK and French newspapers agreed that economic inequality fuelled polarisation, linking it directly to the Brexit and Trump elections.

4.2.3 Ideological Differences

Left- and right leaning newspapers revealed distinct approaches to economic polarisation. Left-leaning outlets focused on the human cost of inequality, portraying it as a systemic failure and criticising populist economic policies for worsening disparities. They blamed major banks and "billionaires controlling the state (Frank 2017)" and linked economic inequality to social unrest, noting poverty, unemployment and lack of financial security "generated fear and anger and polarised one of the most unequal countries in the rich world (Planel 2017)." Libération notes "the increase in social distress and economic suffering is so acute that it can be a factor in radicalisation (Suaudeau 2014)." Left-leaning articles identified how increasing populism, in the form of Trump and Brexit, appealed to the white working classes "who from the outside may seem like [they've] got all the advantages, but who's seen [their] world upended by economic [...] change (Smith 2017b)." The rural-urban divide was another recurring rhetoric, highlighting how the recent US elections "accentuated this divide in political culture, bringing a national spotlight to urban-rural tensions (Uberti 2017)." The Guardian and Libération highlighted how these geographical divides exacerbate polarisation, as economic advantages are felt in cities, while rural areas are left to face deindustrialisation and austerity. The Guardian noted that populist parties exploit this divide, framing it as "a false, zero-sum game (Uberti 2017)" where one region's gain is another's loss, further deepening polarisation along economic lines.

Contrarily, right-leaning newspapers focused on revitalising the economy, advocating for reforms to boost competitiveness and reduce polarisation. Their concern about polarisation centered on national strength and market stability, as reflected in Le Figaro: "[The French people] see that we are sinking into decline, while other countries are recovering (Bonavita 2017)." Unlike left-leaning outlets, The Telegraph and Le Figaro were less critical of populist leaders, offering ambivalent opinions and diffusing blame, suggesting populism is disruptive but also occasionally justified. This may be due to populist parties often aligning with right-wing ideologies. These differences highlight competing interpretations of the role of economic crises in political polarisation, with right-leaning papers stressing national strength and competitiveness, while left-leaning ones focus on systemic failures and human costs.

4.2.4 Contrast to Academic Literature

The media narrative on economic inequality aligns with academic research on polarisation. Both academic and media discourses addressed issues such as unemployment, economic decline, wealth inequality, deindustrialisation, globalisation, and

the rural-urban divide. Barber and McCarty (2015) show that party divides about economic issues have fuelled polarisation, while Norris and Inglehart (2019) argue that rising wealth and income inequalities erode citizens' trust in institutions, pushing them toward populism. They also explain how grievances towards deindustrialisation and wage stagnation contribute to populist success, creating 'losers' of globalisation who vote for Brexit and Trump in order to counteract their financial insecurity (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 33-34, 47). Academics also highlight urban-rural inequalities, where "richer regions are becoming even richer and the poorest ones poorer (Benedek and Moldovan 2015, 200)," and that the economic instability of a region correlates with the polarisation experienced, confirming the media's claims (Rolník 2023). Overall, academic work aligns more closely with the left-wing newspapers' emphasis on the social harm of economic inequality, rather than the right-wing emphasis on inefficiency and the need for economic dynamism.

A key distinction, however, is that academic literature prioritises long-term structural factors, assessing the broader impacts of policies, globalisation, and generational inequality on polarisation. In contrast, media discourse tends to focus on recent political events, such as the Trump and Brexit elections, framing them as primary causes while oversimplifying the deeper economic processes behind segmentation. Moreover, while most 2017 articles framed economic inequality as the principal driver, scholarly work argues that economic factors alone cannot fully explain global polarisation (Norris and Inglehart 2019). This reveals how, despite overlap in identifying economic inequality as a contributing factor, media narratives remain more immediate and politically segmented, whereas academic discourse provides a broader, more nuanced exploration of polarisation.

4.3 Social Factors

4.3.1 Temporal Differences

Ninety-five articles cited social inequality as a key driver of political polarisation (Table 2). Between 2014 and 2017, the narrative shifted, with 2014 articles addressing polarisation more subtly. These articles emphasized cultural tensions and social unrest, focusing significantly more on education, highlighting how schools are a tool to combat ideological extremism and how unequal access contributes to polarisation. These articles also underscored rising social distress from contemporary changes as a factor in eroding social cohesion and fostering radicalisation.

In 2017, media narratives shifted significantly, explicitly linking social discontent to the rise of populism, emphasising how cultural gaps, identity conflicts, and social fragmentation deepened political divides. The generational divide, exacerbated by shifting cultural values, was highlighted as increasing the appeal of RRPs. Issues like gender equality, racism, LGBTQ+ rights, and political correctness were seen as dividing generations, pushing some to reject "nutcake weirdness [to regain] normalcy (Smith 2017a)." Articles also discussed how centrist parties are adapting to a changing, more "multicultural, less white, less religious, [and] more educated (Planel 2017)" electorate, causing social hostility as certain groups feel their cultural values are under

threat. Moreover, new topics like environmental conflicts and technological change were introduced in 2017, with the media suggesting that difficulty in reaching compromises on these issues fuelled populist support.

4.3.2 Geographical Differences

Overall, there were very few differences in narratives between the French and UK press. Both emphasized class divides, cultural divisions and social inequality as important factors in polarisation. Both the French and UK newspapers identified links between social inequality and the appeal of Trump, Brexit and the rise of RRPs, who emphasized changes in cultural values as a national threat. A slight difference was noted in the scope of focus with French articles framing social divisions largely in relation to the European union, highlighting how concerns about national identity and multiculturalism were exacerbating social divides. The UK press on the other hand took a more global approach, discussing both national (Brexit) and intercontinental social divides. The UK articles also highlighted how lack of social mobility was a significant cause of frustration within the lower and middle working class worldwide, a grievance capitalised on by populist parties. Nevertheless, both French and UK newspapers highlighted how the perceived loss of national identity and cultural values was contributing to the increasing trend of political polarisation.

4.3.1 Ideological Differences

Left-wing outlets, such as Libération, The Guardian, and The Mirror, focused on social justice and structural inequalities, while right-leaning papers like Le Figaro, The Telegraph, and The Sun highlighted threats to national identity and the erosion of traditional values as causes of rising populism. Unlike the right-leaning press, The Guardian and Libération identified technological and environmental change as significant drivers of political divides and stressed the role of "social services and welfare systems [which] offer ways of restoring missing links in politics: community cohesion and solidarity (Truell 2017)." They also framed social movements, such as the Women's March, as responses to the divisive political climate. In contrast, The Telegraph and Le Figaro attributed polarisation to cultural disintegration and identity loss (in the form of diversity and sexuality), arguing that "'decades of rapid social and economic change' had 'widened generation gaps in values, disrupted traditional patterns of affiliation and community, and eroded the support of mainstream political parties (Chan 2017b).'"

Moreover, immigration was a significant point of contention between left- and right-leaning newspapers. Left-wing narratives blamed political leaders for using hatred towards migrants as a "rhetorical prop to feed [their] populism (Shariatmadari 2017)," while right-leaning papers criticised policymakers' failure to address rising immigration as a cause of political division. While both sides covered Trump's 2017 anti-immigration law, left-leaning articles were critical, highlighting how "this decree 'erodes our democracy and contributes to turning us into a divided nation, plagued by fear and hatred (Autran 2017).'" Contrastingly, right-leaning articles cited it as proof that uncontrolled immigration drives support for populist parties. The Telegraph, for

instance, pointed to Germany's elections to exemplify how "voters have been bitterly divided by Mrs Merkel's 'open door' immigration policy (Rothwell and Huggler 2017)." These differences reflect how each side interprets the social causes of political polarisation through its ideological lens.

4.3.4 Contrast to Academic Literature

Academic research supports media claims that social fragmentation drives political polarisation. Putnam (2000) argues that declining civic engagement and weakened community ties reduce mutual trust, exacerbating societal divides. Declining participation in community activities leads individuals to retreat into like-minded groups, aggravating polarisation and undermining democratic discourse (Putnam 2000). Norris and Inglehart (2019) link polarisation to cultural backlash, where rapid cultural shifts alienate older, conservative groups who perceive these shifts as a threat, leading to a decline in institutional trust. They describe a 'tipping point' where cultural change, beyond a certain threshold, triggers backlash against political systems, highlighting how debates on feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and multiculturalism in Europe has "reinforc[ed] the impression that one no longer lives in the society in which one was born," fuelling support for RRPs by fostering fears of losing national identity and traditional values (Norris and Inglehart 2019, 47). Putnam (2000) further identifies technological change and individualisation, while Benedek and Moldovan (2015, 196) point to the shrinking middle class, as drivers of political segregation, factors also reflected in the articles.

Contrary to media narratives, scholars argue that public fears about social decline are often exaggerated. Media discourses not only amplify fears but also shape misconceptions about immigration, contributing to moral panics (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009). This is significant given that Oosterwaal and Torenvlied (2010, 273) find public opinion on immigration has remained relatively stable, despite increasing partisan divisions, suggesting migration does not drive ideological polarisation. This contrast underscores how media representations tend to sensationalise cultural and demographic shifts, whereas academic literature presents a more measured and evidence-based perspective.

4.4 Political Factors

4.4.1 Temporal Differences

Discourses surrounding politics' role in polarisation shifted between 2014 and 2017, corresponding to notable changes in the political landscape of both countries during that time. In 2014, articles framed polarisation as a structural issue rooted in political institutions, citing the widening gap between the elite and the masses and flaws in the electoral system. Moreover, these articles emphasized how party conflicts fractured mainstream parties, destroying the traditional left-right divide.

By 2017, media narratives on polarisation shifted to a crisis-driven focus, highlighting the effects of specific political events on political polarisation. Unrestrained populism, political realignment and growing disillusionment with institutions were prominent issues discussed in relation to Brexit, Trump, and the rise of the

FN. They described how populist politicians gained success by presenting a drastic opposition to the failure of existing leaders and argued that unrepresentative political systems alienated groups who felt 'left-behind' by the ever-changing political landscape, pushing them toward ideological extremes. Moreover, festering resentment and loss of faith in institutions, such as the EU, were linked to populist backlash and increased Euroscepticism. This shift from structural narratives in 2014 to crisis-focused discussions in 2017 reflects increasing alarm about polarisation in the media, driven by contemporary political crises.

4.4.2 Geographical Differences

UK newspapers were more likely to attribute polarisation to recent political events and prominent figures, while French articles focused on systemic issues and ineffective institutions. This is evident in the frequency of the words 'Trump' and 'Brexit' in UK articles, ranking 2nd and 13th most used words, compared to 6th and 414th in French texts. UK media framed Brexit as both a cause and consequence of polarisation, highlighting how past governments "failed to build affordable housing, failed to fund our public services, and failed to ensure growth is felt outside London (Slawson and Sparrow 2017)." Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn were referenced regularly as polarising figures blamed for exploiting political discontent, and Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron were criticised as "dismiss[ing] the concerns of ordinary voters as 'parochial and illegitimate (Hope and Swinford 2017)'" contributing to the rise of populist parties.

Similarly, the French press linked polarisation to the public's rejection of the political elite, however the francophone media placed greater importance on dysfunctional institutions and the weakening party system in creating political divides. The widening gap between the left and right and their "inability to work together" is blamed for creating a "zero-sum game" where any gain for one, is a defeat for the other, amplifying the appeal of populist parties like the FN (Mandeville 2014). Despite these differences, both UK and French newspapers identify disillusionment with contemporary politics as a key driver of polarisation.

4.4.3 Ideological Differences

Although both left- and right-leaning newspapers blame politicians for polarisation, right-leaning articles focus on mainstream politicians, while left-leaning ones criticize the rhetoric of populist leaders. The Telegraph and Le Figaro highlight how disconnected politicians failed to address public concerns, using "chauvinism and scaremongering (Waterfield 2014)" on immigration, deepening polarisation. Moreover, they claim centrist and left-wing politicians, such as Obama, alienated voters through an 'excessive' emphasis on diversity and political correctness, amplifying Trump's appeal. Le Figaro identified how public "trust in governments has never been so low (Le Figaro 2017)," due in part to their failure to take effective measures following the 2008 financial crisis and because "decisions are taken elsewhere, at European level or by the heads of multinationals (Louis 2014)." Unlike left-leaning outlets, these newspapers discuss this topic with less alarmist tones, presenting populist success as a necessary realignment in the face of the current state of politics.

Contrastingly, The Guardian and Libération highlight how populist rhetoric undermines cross-party cooperation, pushing voters towards the extremes. They explain how governments' failure to find consensus, undermines traditional left-right divides, allowing populist narratives to capitalize on the public's anger towards traditional parties. These outlets also stress public frustration with political systems that prioritize elite interests over stability. This contrast in ideological framing highlights competing narratives on the root causes of political polarisation between the left- and right-leaning media.

4.4.4 Contrast to Academic Literature

Both media and scholarly discussions acknowledge the decline of traditional parties, failed bipartisan cooperation, and political elites in exacerbating polarisation. Barber and McCarty (2015) emphasize how an 'us vs. them' narrative emerges as people grow resentful of self-serving elites. Similarly, Feré (2020) identifies specific politicians, such as Macron, as deepening elite-mass divides by failing to address pressing issues faced by citizens. Caamaño and Bértoa (2019, 388, 401) argue that weaker democracies are more prone to polarisation, as instability and public distrust in traditional parties creates a political vacuum for RRPs. Furthermore, Maher, Igou, and van Tilburg (2018, 210) echo media narratives, demonstrating that disillusionment with the outcome of elections intensifies commitment to individuals' pre-existing political views, and rejection of the elite and political institutions drives support for populism, strengthening political divides.

Unlike the media's focus on blaming the elite, scholars highlight the disconnect between politics and society and the role of party polarisation in deepening political divides. They argue that despite the population remaining largely moderate, party competition, realignment and polarisation over issues like immigration has forced voters to align with party ideologies (Oosterwaal and Torenvlied 2010; Vrânceanu 2024; Callander and Carbajal 2022). They explain how voters incrementally adopt their parties' ideological positions, creating a self-reinforcing cycle as parties adapt their policies to accommodate the increasingly ideological values of voters, gradually "shift[ing] towards polarised extremes (Levy and Razin 2022, 107)." Levy and Razin (2022, 112) argue parties are incentivised to do this due to competitive electoral systems exacerbating political divisions as politicians "are motivated to accommodate their voters' preferences in order to be re-elected." Nevertheless, Pattie and Johnston (2016, 486) note how, in the last 50 years, there has been "substantial policy convergence between the major parties in the [UK], as all have moved closer to the ideological centre ground," despite media rhetoric arguing the opposite. While both the media and scholars converge on identifying institutional factors, the press reduce divisions to ideological conflicts, while academics emphasize structural issues, such as the decline of centrist politics and the failure of existing systems, in exacerbating divides.

4.5 Social Media

4.5.1 Temporal Differences

A significant number of articles (45) linked SNS to political polarisation (Table 2). The 2014 articles focus on media bias and ideological framing in tabloids and the Internet, exploring how they portrayed political news. For instance, The Telegraph critiqued the media for unfairly categorising nationalist and anti-EU positions as 'far-right' to delegitimize them. Another article noted the rise of partisan blogs and online talk shows, signalling a shift in the media landscape.

By 2017, the focus shifted to SNS and their role in political polarisation, notably in response to allegations of its involvement in the Trump and Brexit elections. Misinformation, 'Fake News,' algorithms, and echo chambers became central concerns, seen as fracturing audiences and fostering distrust in institutions. The 2017 articles highlighted how SNS undermined balanced debate and challenged traditional journalism, fostering social divides.

4.5.2 Geographical Differences

A national comparison of newspapers reveals differing narratives on SNS. UK media was heavily centered on Brexit, emphasising SNS's role in shaping the referendum outcome. British articles blamed SNS for promoting alternative narratives that challenged traditional news, noting how "the internet has loosened government's historical and collective grip on trust [...] transform[ing] [their role] as providers of information (Wintour 2017)." Another article warned that "fake news risks damaging public debate (Armstrong 2017)," highlighting how misinformation and partisan content fuel division and undermine democracy.

Similarly, French media noted how SNS accelerated the decline of traditional party politics, enabling populist politicians to bypass media constraints and reshape narratives. They also expressed concern about misinformation, predicting a "war of information (Glad 2017)" propelled by partisan networks and 'fake news.' Moreover, they highlighted how SNS' rapid communication is "much faster than governments can respond (Le Figaro 2017)" creating incoherent noise and hindering consensus.

4.5.3 Ideological Differences

Left-leaning papers particularly focused on 'fake news,' warning of populist manipulation increasing polarisation. Libération noted that some fake news during the US presidential campaign "achieved higher engagement rates on Facebook than the best-performing press articles (Glad 2017)." The Guardian echoes this, stressing concerns about "the lack of education provided to ensure people can distinguish what is a fact and what's not (Yuhas 2017)" shaping voter perceptions. Left-leaning articles also emphasized how algorithms and echo chambers shape opinions and fuel polarisation. The Guardian notes how "extreme views can appear more mainstream when algorithms amplify them (Wintour 2017)," making people vulnerable to "motivated ignorance (Wilson 2017)." Libération reinforced this, identifying how echo chambers trap people in ideological bubbles, undermining debate and deepening polarisation.

While Le Figaro noted that Trump's spread of misinformation "gave him a form of validity (Polony 2017)," right-leaning articles discussed 'fake news' and algorithms significantly less. They acknowledged SNS's role but viewed it as reflecting

public sentiment rather than driving division. The Telegraph also highlighted how networks influence information spread, noting that people often judge a story's credibility based on their relationship with the sharer rather than objective judgment.

4.5.4 Contrast to Academic Literature

Academic research on SNS and political polarisation is divided. Echoing media narratives, Sunstein (2007) highlights how echo chambers and filters insulate individuals from opposing views, reinforcing their own beliefs and exacerbating political divides. Halberstam and Knight (2016, 82) and Conover et al. (2021, 95) support this, noting Twitter's hyper-partisan environment, where homophily, retweets, and hashtags increase exposure to like-minded information. Levy and Razin (2022, 107) highlight how SNS overwhelms users with information, forcing "voters to develop simple methods of processing and comprehending these multiple sources of information" leading them to ignore opposing opinions which do not align with their own. Furthermore, they note the correlation between the increase in polarisation since the 1990s with the rise of SNS, aligning with media narratives (Levy and Razin 2022). González-Bailón et al. (2023, 396) argue that "Facebook [...] is substantially segregated ideologically," with conservative audiences consuming significantly more misinformation, which may explain why right-leaning newspapers addressed the issue less. They also found that SNS groups, not individual networks, contribute to the spread of misinformation, challenging The Telegraph's claim (González-Bailón et al. 2023).

Nevertheless, most scholars reject the idea that SNS significantly impacts political polarisation. Academics argue that these concerns may represent moral panics, overstating SNS's role (Boxell, Gentzkow, and Shapiro 2017; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010; Nguyen and Vu 2019). Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro (2017) found polarisation increased least among demographics with the highest SNS use and Pattie and Johnston (2016, 495) noted that while echo chambers foster 'group think,' "it does not seem (for most people) to push them into ideological ghettoes." Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic (2015, 1131-1132) challenge the view that algorithms have any substantive impact, arguing that individual choices are more important in reinforcing beliefs. Guess et al. (2023, 4) and Barberá (2014, 28-29) highlight how SNS expose users to diverse views through weak ties and cross partisan reshares, while Allcott et al. (2024) found deactivating Facebook and Instagram had no significant effect on polarisation.

Compared to academic literature, the articles largely ignored the press's role in polarisation, with only one Guardian article directly criticising mainstream media for focusing on SNS while overlooking its own contribution. Leruth et al. (2017) emphasizes how newspapers shape public opinion, while Prior (2013) highlights how the increasingly ideological content in the media disengages moderates and makes elections seem more partisan. Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010, 24) also found that the Internet is considerably less ideologically polarised than national newspapers. Most scholars suggest other factors, such as offline media consumption, socialisation, education, and generational differences, are more likely drivers of polarisation than SNS (Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro 2017; Pattie and Johnston 2016). Moreover, Farrell

(2012, 43) and Nguyen and Vu (2019) argue that pre-existing political biases play a more important role in fragmentation online, with the highly engaged more likely to become ideologically polarised than the general population.

4.6 Tabloid Comparison

Overall, tabloids produced fewer results, with only 8 articles identified, and primarily cited political factors as exacerbating divides (Appendix C). Aligning with Johannson's (2007) findings, the tabloids used more emotive and simplistic language compared to the broadsheets' more analytical approach. Moreover, Johansson (2007) suggests that tabloids construct narratives around public grievances and elite failures, as reflected in The Sun's portrayal of Obama as showing "lofty disdain for millions of ordinary, working-class Americans (Kavanagh 2017)."

Johansson (2007) also argues that tabloids simplify complex socio-political issues by framing them in ways that resonate with readers' experiences, emphasising blame and conflict. As such, both tabloids framed populism as a reaction to inequality and shifting values, frequently linking high immigration to public discontent. The Mirror stressed how government failures to address immigration fuelled public anger and a sense that British "identity is under threat (Blanchard 2017)," while The Sun criticised political parties for their "implied belief that all immigrants are angels and that all minorities are infallible (Callan 2017)," further polarising the debate. Consistent with the literature, The Sun reinforced a populist narrative by highlighting public resentment toward politics, while The Mirror placed greater emphasis on economic hardship and austerity, arguing that "the depression, banking crisis [and] poverty (Wynne-Jones 2017)" have fuelled populism, aligning with Labour perspectives (Johannson 2007, 18-20).

While both broadsheets and tabloids discuss polarisation, the latter address it less explicitly, likely due to its lower perceived relevance or appeal to their target audience. Moreover, Johansson (2007) suggests that tabloids are less likely to explore such issues in depth, as their readership favors digestible and provocative content. This explains why, in discussing polarisation, tabloids focus on immediate grievances and populist rhetoric rather than structural causes. Overall, tabloids used punchier, more emotive language, framing polarisation through blame-oriented narratives that appeal to readers' frustrations with elites, while broadsheets offered a more nuanced and broad examination of the causes of polarisation.

Section 5: Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the ways in which media narratives portray the causes of political polarisation, and how these align or diverge from academic findings. Through an in-depth analysis of UK and French newspapers across ideological spectrums, this study revealed that while media discourse engages with explanatory factors of polarisation, it often oversimplifies or selectively emphasizes certain aspects, diverging in important ways from scholarly findings.

This research found significant differences in how left- and right-leaning media discussed the causes of polarisation (H4). The right-leaning articles tended to emphasize threats to national identity, and the failures of centrist and left-wing parties, moving discussions away from the harms of populism. In contrast, left-leaning newspapers aligned more with academic narratives, focusing on structural, economic and societal inequalities as primary causes. Moreover, despite their emotive approach, findings returned fewer tabloids, contradicting Hypothesis 5 and suggesting they either cover polarisation less or use different vocabulary to discuss this topic. Additionally, the findings highlighted a shift in narratives from 2014, where polarisation is viewed as a future risk, to 2017, where polarisation is framed as an urgent crisis (H6). Moreover, while there were similarities in the way both UK and French newspapers identified the drivers of polarisation, they diverged in the framing of these causes (H3). UK newspapers were more event-driven, linking polarisation directly to Brexit, Trump and political leadership failures. In contrast, French newspapers highlighted structural issues and tensions within the EU as causal factors.

The key finding of this study is the disparity in analytical depth between academic literature and media narratives (H2). The media overstates the immediate and event-driven nature of polarisation, rather than recognising the deeper structural causes that the literature identifies. In doing so, the media creates a moral panic around polarisation, exacerbating perceptions and distorting reality. Moreover, the media portrayed SNS as a driver of polarisation on multiple occasions, contrasting academic findings, however discourses more often identified other factors, such as economic inequality and disillusionment, as playing a more significant role, disproving Hypothesis 1. Overall, academic research highlights a more nuanced understanding of polarisation, including long-term socioeconomic trends, elite political strategies, and evolving voter trends. This discrepancy reflects a broader issue in how news media analyze and present complex social phenomena, prioritising immediacy and emotional resonance rather than critical examination. This suggests that the divergence may extend beyond solely discussing polarisation to other political issues.

This has significant implications, particularly given the media's influence on public perceptions and its role in reinforcing divisions. Media narratives play a crucial role in shaping how individuals understand political phenomena, therefore by misrepresenting the causes of polarisation, the media contributes to moral panics that heighten societal anxieties and deepen partisan divides. This is particularly evident in the media's sensationalist and event-driven narratives, which distort public understanding and shape policy responses that fail to address the underlying causes of polarisation.

Overall, this study contributes to existing research by providing a comparative perspective on how media narratives about polarisation differ from academic literature. Nevertheless, limitations remain. The sample size and the restricted timeframe of the study may not allow for the generalisation of findings, as coverage may vary over longer periods and in different newspaper outlets. Additionally, while this study

focuses on print media, future investigations could analyze digital platforms, where discussions about trends in polarisation are rapidly evolving.

To conclude, further research is needed to expand our understanding on the extent to which media narratives actively influence public perceptions of polarisation and whether these discussions contribute to the deepening of partisan divides. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for fostering balanced public discourse on these topics, notably as misinformation and ideological fragmentation increasingly threaten democratic values.

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