

NORWAY'S NEW(S) WARS— SYRIA IN THE NORWEGIAN MASS MEDIA

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Abstract: *Through two case studies, this article will explore how Norwegian news media framed the Norwegian military presence in Syria. Earlier research by the author has shown how the legal aspects of NATO's out-of-area operations have been ignored by mainstream media. In this study, emphasis will be put on self-censorship among Norwegian journalists, ignoring the fact that Norwegian special forces took part in military operations inside Syria from May 2017 to March 2018. The hypothesis based on Johan Galtung's (2002) theory of peace journalism is that mainstream media refused to see the connection between Norway's bombing of Libya and the escalation of the 'civil war' in Syria. According to legal experts, the Norwegian military presence in Syria was a violation of international law, as it supported rebel groups in armed confrontation with the Assad government, recognized by the Norwegian state through diplomatic relations. The hypothesis of the study—based on an explorative investigation of selected Norwegian news media—is that Norwegian politicians, silently supported by the media, have changed basic principles of Norwegian security policy without an open public debate. Before 1999, Norway was a loyal NATO member based on the notion that NATO was a 'defense alliance'. After the change in NATO strategy to the new out-of-area policy, Norway has in practice become a 'military tool' in the geopolitical strategy of the US. This change of policy has, to a large extent, happened without critical investigation by mainstream media. The article presents two case studies of how Norwegian media dealt with the legal issues when Norway was asked to contribute in Syria, and how the Norwegian military presence was reported by Norwegian media in the periods December 2015 to January 2016, as well as May 2017 to March 2018.*


Keywords: *peace journalism; international law; Norwegian news media; Syria; Libya.*

Introduction

The main purpose of this article¹ is to investigate the manner in which the Norwegian press covered the presence of Norwegian troops in Syria in 2015–2016 and 2017–2018. Of special interest is how the legal issues connected to the operation were addressed. Another concern is how the military presence in Syria was seen in the context of the bombing of Libya in 2011, where the UN mandate was defined by UN Security Council Resolution 1973 as an operation within the framework of the UN principle of the 'responsibility to protect' (R2P)—although it was soon redefined by NATO as an operation for 'regime change' (Tunander 2018). My own research showed that Norwegian media paid scant attention to the legal aspects of the operation (Ottosen/Slaatta/Øfsti 2013). The article will examine how the Norwegian media dealt with the legality of the case when Norway was asked to send special forces to Syria in

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2015 (when the request was refused) and in 2017, when Norway ended up sending special forces.

Background—Norway and the ‘New Wars’

There has traditionally been a high level of consensus among Norwegian politicians and the mainstream media on security and foreign policy (Ottosen/Nohrstedt 2005; Ottosen 2005a; Ottosen 2005b; Ottosen 2010). NATO's out-of-area policy was established in 1999, and first implemented when the former Yugoslavia was bombed in the same year. During the Cold War, NATO's strategy was to deter potential attacks by the Soviet Union. After the Warsaw Pact was dissolved in 1991, NATO sought a new role. Where the ‘battle against radical Islam’ and the ‘threat of terrorism’ were crucial, a more offensive geopolitical role was introduced. Norway adopted this new policy, which was approved by *Stortinget*, the Norwegian Parliament (Helseth 2007).

Kristoffer Egeberg sheds some light on this change in NATO policy in his book *Fredsnaasjonen Norge* [*Peace Nation Norway*] (2017). Egeberg reviews all of Norway's military operations abroad, from the 1960s onwards, with or without a UN mandate. He has conducted in-depth interviews with all Ministers of Foreign Affairs and all heads of Norwegian defense forces and Ministers of Defense in the period since the change in NATO policy in 1999 with the introduction of this new out-of-area policy. In addition, he has talked to numerous leading politicians about their views on the ‘new wars’ outside Europe. In all this impressive empirical evidence, one key factor stands out as the most important reason for Norway's choice, over and over again, to take the crucial decision to send troops to other countries: the Norwegian Ministers' commitment to NATO membership and the fear of ‘disappointing’ the US leadership (Egeberg 2017). This is also the conclusion of the independent *Godal-utvalget*, mandated to evaluate the Norwegian military presence in Afghanistan. A government white paper of 2016 concludes that the Norwegian military presence in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014 has contributed little to positive or peaceful development in Afghanistan and that the main reason for the Norwegian military presence there in 2001 was to accede to the request of the US (*Godal-utvalget* 2016).

It could be asked whether it is in the long-term interest of Norway to continue taking part in new military adventures with uncertain and potentially dangerous outcomes. Norwegian security policy, according to Egeberg's book, seems to be preoccupied with the question of how a small country like Norway can be relevant despite its limited military resources. The crucial concern seems to be whether we are ‘in the warmth’ or ‘out in the cold’ in the eyes of ‘big brother’ US—seemingly a more important question than whether the ‘new wars’ are within the framework of international law (Egeberg 2017). Since the out-of-area epoch was introduced in 1999, Norway has declined all requests from the UN to contribute troops to UN peacekeeping operations—a clear policy change, as in the period before the ‘new wars’, Norway had taken pride in offering military contribution to numerous UN peacekeeping operations in the Middle East and in Africa. In recent years, all available resources have been used in living up to the expectations of our NATO allies (Egeberg 2017: 350–353). In this situation, a potential contribution by the media—in the spirit of peace journalism—could be to remind politicians and the public that the traditional Norwegian security policy, before the ‘new wars’, was that all decisions regarding Norwegian foreign and security policy

should have their basis in the UN Charter and the decisions taken in the UN Security Council (Ottosen 2005a).

Although Norwegian media have tended to support Norwegian war efforts in all NATO out-of-area operations, opinion polls suggest a divided public (Nohrstedt/Ottosen 2014; 2017). In the period 2007–2010, surveys show that around 35 per cent of the Norwegian people opposed the Norwegian military presence in Afghanistan, despite the fact that all the political parties in *Stortinget* voted in favor of the deployment there in 2002 (Eide/Ottosen 2002: 24). Critical voices against the ‘new wars’ have also been raised in debates, in letters to the editors, and in niche newspapers such as *Klassekampen* and *Ny Tid* (Nohrstedt/Ottosen 2014).

Theory—Propaganda, Enemy Images, and Peace Journalism

In this article, I will draw upon Johan Galtung’s theory of peace journalism and upon my earlier work (Ottosen 1995) on enemy images in journalism (see appendix I).

The peace journalism section of Galtung’s model has a moral and ethical point of departure, acknowledging that media themselves play a role in the ‘propaganda war’ (Galtung 2002). Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick state that

[the peace-journalism approach] uses the insights of conflict analysis and transformation to update the concepts of balance, fairness and accuracy in reporting[.] [It also] [p]rovides a new road map tracing the connections between journalists, their sources, the stories they cover and the consequences of their journalism—the ethics of journalistic intervention[,] [and] [b]uilds an awareness of non-violence and creativity into the practical job of everyday editing and reporting (Lynch/McGoldrick 2005: 5).

All parties in modern warfare acknowledge the media as an essential factor in a ‘battlefield for propaganda’ (Herman/Chomsky 2002 [1988]; Zollmann 2019 [2017]). PR campaigns, propaganda campaigns and psychological operations (PSYOPS) for wars are well organized by PR firms, governments and the military (Nohrstedt/Ottosen 2014; 2017). It takes courage and professional skills to confront the narrative presented by governments during preparations for war—as is demonstrated by the example of false accusations of weapons of mass destruction before the war in Iraq in 2003 (Bennett/Lawrence/Livingston 2007).

The coverage of war, conflicts and security policy also reflects the views of the political elite (Hallin 1986). In their book *Manufacturing Consent* (2002 [1988]), Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky also make a point of the close relationship between the military-industrial complex, the media and political elites. There are both political and financial reasons why the media join forces with the political elite and the military in times of war: in many cases the companies producing and selling weapons also own news media. The two authors also introduce the concept of ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ victims. We know the names and faces of victims of acts of terror such as 9/11 but we hardly know the names or faces of the many thousands of Afghans who have died as a result of the so-called ‘War on Terror’ (WoT).

There is empirical evidence from previous research that propaganda and PSYOPS by the parties involved in a conflict influence the framing of stories (Ottosen 2009;

Nohrstedt/Ottosen 2014; 2017). One example could be before the illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003, when media labeled Saddam Hussein as the 'new Hitler' and at the same time redistributed false accusations that he possessed weapons of mass destruction (Ottosen 2009). The battle for hearts and minds thus starts before a reporter enters the battlefield. In earlier work I have made the point that reporters covering war must report on issues such as propaganda and PSYOPS to educate readers about the context where propaganda plays a role, even if the reporters do not talk about it. If they *do not* report about it, and keep the public ignorant of the influence of information warfare, journalists will be part of the problem (Ottosen 2013).

War propaganda is well known for its polarized discourse when it comes to how the main actors, motives, warfare and truths are treated. The 'enemy' is painted in black whereas the 'own' side is white. A paradox here was that Saddam Hussein fought with brutal methods against radical Muslims while he himself preferred a moderate trend in Islam, and he also tolerated minorities such as Christians. By invading Iraq in 2003, and leaving it as a 'failed state', the US made it easier for the so-called Islamic State (IS) to gain power.

There is a parallel here to the US/NATO campaign against President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Compared to Saudi Arabia—the US ally in the region—Assad was more respectful towards Christians and other minorities, and if the main aim was to fight radical Islam and IS, the rational approach would be to leave him in power. But power politics is not always rational. In Western propaganda about a potential military intervention in Syria, we saw enemy images of Assad in person and enemy images of Islam with reference to IS (Hellestveit 2015; 2017). In practical terms, the Norwegian forces in Syria supported militant Muslim groups in their struggle against Assad. During the bombing in Libya in 2011, NATO provided air support for the Islamist militants who toppled the Gaddafi regime in the end. These groups also brought their weapons to Syria, where they continued the battle against Assad (Tunander 2018). The destabilization of nations such as Libya and Syria was not part of an official Norwegian policy but, rather, an unintended consequence of our support for US policy and military operations. There are reliable sources that the destabilization of the Middle East is part of US Middle Eastern policy. In a sensational interview with Amy Goodman from *Democracy Now!* (as screened on March 2, 2007), retired General Wesley Clark talks about a visit to the Pentagon immediately after September 11, 2001, and how he heard that the Bush administration had a plan to attack not only Iraq but also six other countries in the region, including Libya and Syria (Goodman/Clark 2007). The reasoning behind this policy seemed to be that since it was impossible to control the region by permanent military occupation, the preferred tactic was to destabilize the regimes they disliked—such as Gaddafi's Libya and Assad's Syria—through limited military operations and military support to opposition groups (Nohrstedt/Ottosen 2014: 188). One theory is that enemy images of Assad and of IS in Syria drew attention away from potentially problematic legal issues in respect of Norway's involvement in out-of-area operations. Another is that if the media had learned from the shortcomings of earlier war coverage it could have played a constructive role by highlighting the legal concerns at the time of the discussion on whether Norway should be militarily involved in Syria. By building on earlier experiences in Afghanistan and Libya, the media coverage of the Norwegian war efforts in Syria could have used peace journalism by

going beyond the government propaganda and deliberating on the Norwegian military presence in such conflicts and whether it is counter-productive by contributing to the escalation of conflicts.

In the book *New Wars, New Media, New War Journalism* (2014), Stig Arne Nohrstedt and I examined how the legal issues were reported in Norwegian and Swedish coverage of the Gulf War and the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. Our conclusion was a criticism of the shortcomings in the way Swedish and Norwegian media deal with legal issues: “The conclusions of our projects during a period of more than 20 years of research are that there are a number of professional shortcomings in war and conflict journalism. [...] Generally and continuously, war journalism fails to provide the general public with relevant and correct information concerning both military interventions and catastrophic war adventures and the juridical and human rights implications of these new wars” (Nohrstedt/Ottosen 2014: 197–198).

Why are the legal issues so important? Norway’s traditional position has been that all warfare should be conducted within the UN framework; therefore all military interventions should be based on UN Security Council resolutions (Leira 2007). In the case of Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, there seems to have gradually been less and less attention to international law among politicians and in the media. While he was still alive, the professor of law, Ståle Eskeland (1943–2015), argued that the Norwegian participation in Yugoslavia in 1999, in Iraq in 2003 and the Norwegian warfare in Libya in 2011, were a violation of the Norwegian Constitution, which states in Paragraph 28 that issues of going to war should be dealt with in an actual meeting between the government and the King (Eskeland 2011). In the case of Libya, the leaders of the political parties did not meet but were consulted on mobile phones. Eskeland (2011) claimed that all the military interventions mentioned above represented a violation of international law because of the lack of a clear UN mandate. He warned that Norway could be held accountable by the International Criminal Court (ICC), even if Norway has not been linked to war crimes and atrocities (Ottosen 2009: 218–220).

It is worth noting the discrepancy in views between Norwegian politicians and legal experts on the juridical issues related to Norway and the ‘new wars’. According to one of the most prominent Norwegian experts on international law, professor Geir Ulfstein, it can be questioned whether any of the abovementioned military interventions by Norway were within the framework of international law (Ulfstein 2015a). The contradictory views of legal experts and politicians could have been used by the media in the spirit of peace journalism to raise critical issues on the agenda in the public debate. One explanation of the absence of critical journalism could be the consensus of the elite over these issues. A unified elite often means less critical news journalism (McCombs 2004 [2001]). Another point could be that the use of enemy images in journalism could be to avoid criticism and defer attention from the mistakes and wrongdoing of your own government by blaming ‘the other side’, as Galtung suggests (Galtung 2002).

The Experience of Libya

When the case of Syria came on the agenda in 2015, the Norwegian mainstream media missed the opportunity to use the recently published *Godal-utvalget* report on Afghanistan condemning the use of humanitarian rhetoric to explain Norway’s presence

in Afghanistan. The *Godal-utvalget* report frankly admitted that the 'real reason' for Norwegian participation in Afghanistan was to secure the close relationship with the US. When humanitarian rhetoric was used again in the propaganda for intervention in Syria, the media could have asked a simple question: When 'humanitarian rhetoric' in the Afghanistan case was based on the false assumption that the Norwegian military presence was helpful, and the same mistake was made in Libya, why should it be different in the Syrian case? And why did the media not ask critical questions about the relationship between Norway's bombing of Libya and its effect on the 'civil war' in Syria? It is well known that radical Muslims after the fall of Gaddafi brought the weapons they took from the Libyan military to Syria and continued the fighting there (Tunander 2018). Why were Norwegian politicians not confronted with these questions?

As Johan Galtung has shown in his model of 2002, mainstream war coverage at present is violence-and-victory oriented. This is often linked to a dualistic method, a zero-sum game where the winner takes all (as in sports journalism). A potential consequence is that war journalism can contribute to escalating conflicts by reproducing propaganda and promoting war. In section IV of Galtung's table (see appendix I), the aftermath of a conflict, in peace journalism terms, should put emphasis on "conflict resolution, reconstruction [and] reconciliation" whereas the 'war journalism' position would be "leaving for another war, return if the old war flares up again" (Galtung 2002: 272).

When Norway was asked to send special forces to Syria, the media could have taken the peace journalism approach and reminded Norway of its responsibility for leaving Libya as a failed state after Norwegian aircraft had dropped 588 bombs in 130 bombing raids (Ottosen/Slaatta 2015). To this day, the targets of these bombs are classified information, and the Norwegian public does not know the effect of the bombing and how much infrastructure was ruined and how many civilians were killed (Heier/Ottosen/Tvedt 2019).

The NATO bombing had an ambiguous UN mandate through Resolution 1973: a request for an immediate ceasefire, an end to the violence against civilians and the implementation of a 'no-fly zone' over Libya. The resolution gave permission to use 'all possible means' to protect civilians. When NATO took over the operation, it was clear that 'regime change' and the toppling of Gaddafi were the main purpose. This caused negative reactions from the major powers—Russia and China felt betrayed when 'regime change' came on the agenda and have since blocked all attempts to implement 'the responsibility to protect' (R2P) in Syria. The long-term outcome of the bombing of Libya could be that, through its own interpretation of Resolution 1973, NATO has forever undermined the possibilities of future action by the UN in the prevention of humanitarian disasters and attacks on civilians under the principle of R2P (UNGA 2005; Lippe 2019). In February 2012, Russia used its veto to stop a UN resolution from imposing sanctions against the Syrian government (Ottosen/Slaatta/Øfsti 2013).

Peace journalism is people-oriented in the sense that it focuses on the victims (often civilian casualties). It is also truth-oriented, in the sense that it reveals untruth on all sides and focuses on propaganda as a means of continuing wars (Galtung 2002: 261–270). Norwegian media have shown little interest in looking critically at the propaganda (before the bombing started); claiming that the main purpose of the military intervention was to 'protect the civilian population' in Benghazi. However, Norwegian media could

have referred to a report of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the British Parliament, which concludes that the propaganda about Benghazi was a lie and that the British government had “failed to identify that the threat to civilians was overstated and that the rebels included a significant Islamist element” (as quoted in Norton 2016). In his book *Libyakrigen* (2018), Ola Tunander documented that the attack on Libya was prepared months in advance and that Qatari security forces were on the ground preparing the invasion.

As there are clear parallels between the propaganda for ‘humanitarian intervention’ in the Libyan and Syrian cases, I will argue that it would have been constructive and helpful for the Norwegian public to discuss Norway’s role in light of the summary of the British Parliamentary investigation which concluded that the propaganda myth of NATO support for a ‘democratic nonviolent Libyan opposition’, often repeated by Norwegian politicians, was a *lie*. Ben Norton (2016) provides the following summary:

[i] The uprising—which was violent, not peaceful—would likely not have been successful were it not for foreign military intervention and aid. Foreign media outlets, particularly Qatar’s *Al Jazeera* and Saudi Arabia’s *Al Arabiya*, also spread unsubstantiated rumors about Gaddafi and the Libyan government (see Norton 2016).

[ii] The NATO bombing plunged Libya into a humanitarian disaster, killing thousands of people and displacing hundreds of thousands more, transforming Libya from the African country with the highest standard of living into a war-torn failed state (see Norton 2016).

Connection Between Libya and Syria

In a study, Sjur Øvrebø and I investigated whether Norway’s newspaper *Aftenposten* looked to the Libyan experience when a parallel situation occurred in Syria on August 21, 2013, with claims that the civilian Syrian population should be protected from a ‘gas attack’ by the Assad government through military intervention (Ottosen/Øvrebø 2016). This is often referred to as ‘Obama’s red line’—if the Assad government crossed the ‘red line’ by ‘attacking its own people’, the US would consider military intervention. The military intervention halted because the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, lost a historic vote in Parliament to join forces with the US. An analysis of Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*’s coverage revealed that it supported military intervention, although to this day it has not been proven that ‘Assad’ was responsible for the ‘gas attack’. There was contradictory information available at the time. In a December 2013 essay in the *London Review of Books*, the Pulitzer prizewinner and US-based investigative reporter Seymour M. Hersh blamed the media for too easily buying President Obama’s conclusion that the Assad government was behind the attack (Hersh 2013). Even though the Assad government was identified as the most likely perpetrator at the time, Hersh’s arguments only became known to the readers of *Aftenposten* several months later. In an interview with Hersh on April 15, 2014, *Aftenposten*’s US correspondent Kristoffer Rønneberg quoted him going even further than he had in his article in the *London Review of Books*, identifying the rebels and Turkish intelligence

and military as most likely to be responsible for the 'sarin gas attack' (*Aftenposten*: April 15, 2014; as quoted in Ottosen/Øvrebø 2016).

Rather than critically addressing the uncertainty around the 'gas attack', the enemy images of president Assad and of IS were used to make a case for Western intervention in Syria (Ottosen/Øvrebø 2016).

Norwegian Parliamentary Report

In 2017, the Norwegian Parliament appointed a group led by former Foreign Minister Jan Petersen to evaluate the warfare in Libya. The report was presented in September 2018 (*Libya-utvalget* 2018). On January 8, 2019, the Foreign Minister Ine Marie Eriksen suggested sending the report to the Foreign and Defense Committees, to prepare a discussion in Parliament. This means that seven years after Norwegian planes dropped bombs over Libya, this war experience has still not been properly debated by Norwegian politicians. For some reason, the above-mentioned crucial facts in the British report were not mentioned in the Norwegian report. When the Norwegian report passed *Stortinget* in April 2019, it was almost without critical debate. The same political parties which went to war and bombed Libya to a failed state 'freed themselves' from any wrongdoing (Ottosen 2019).

Syria as a Case Study

The unrest in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' of 2011 escalated into a full-scale 'civil war' in 2012. More than 5,000 [*sic*] armed groups tried in vain to 'unite' their forces (Hellestveit 2017). When all efforts to launch a R2P operation with a UN mandate failed, Russia sent troops to support the Assad government (2015–). The US countered by establishing 'Operation Inherent Resolve' (2014–; without a UN mandate) to fight IS and other Islamist groups in Iraq and Syria. Norway joined 'Operation Inherent Resolve' and was to contribute by sending forces to Iraq in 2014. Norwegian troops supported the Iraqi defense forces with training. There was no UN mandate for this, but since the Norwegian forces were sent at the request of the Iraqi government, most legal experts say this operation was legal and complied with the UN Charter (Hellestveit 2017).

In this article, I only discuss the Norwegian operation in *Syria*, as its legal status is much more controversial and thus more relevant to the research question. The timeline looks like this:

[i] In 2014, Prime Minister Erna Solberg publicly makes it clear that Norway will *not* send troops to Syria.

[ii] In December 2015, the US and France ask for Norway to contribute aircraft and pilots. After some hesitation, Norway *declines*.

[iii] In May 2016, upon request from the US, as part of 'Operation Inherent Resolve', Norway sends 60 special forces to train opposition groups in bases in Jordan *near* the Syrian border.

[iv] In July 2016, the government takes a new decision (with little public attention and no transparency), allowing the Norwegian forces to *cross* the border from Jordan to Syria.

[v] On May 20, 2017, several foreign news reports claim that Norwegian forces had *crossed* the border between Jordan and Syria. There is no official statement from the Norwegian government and little media attention.

[vi] In February 2018, the Norwegian troops *return* to Jordan with little media interest.

Two Case Studies

The two case studies are relevant to the research question. Case 1 covers December 2015 to January 2016, when Norway was asked to send aircraft and pilots to Syria. After hesitating for a few weeks, the Norwegian government said ‘no’. Case 2 covers May 2017 to March 2018, when a new request was sent to Norway to contribute troops in Syria. There was little public debate around this, and the Norwegian people learned from a few news reports that Norwegian troops had crossed the border to Syria in May 2017.² The outcomes of case 1 have recently been published as a journal article in Norwegian in *Internasjonal Politikk* (Ottosen/Rudsengen 2018).

Case 2 has been published as an exam assignment at Oslo Metropolitan University (Bing 2018). The theory, method, research design and the results of these two projects are not directly comparable. As the method and design are explained in detail in the two publications, I will not go in detail here. Interested readers can consult these two publications (Ottosen/Rudsengen 2018; Bing 2018). What the two projects have in common is, that in different ways, they address the legal issues involved in Norwegian participation in Syria. I will use the results from the legal analyses in these publications and place them in a new context here, and then relate them to the research question in this article.

Case Study 1—The Coverage of the Request to Send Norwegian Planes and Pilots in the Period from December 2015 to January 2016

The question is: Could the media have played a more independent and critical role, based on the principles of peace journalism, when Norway was asked to contribute militarily to Syria in 2015? The few weeks before Norway turned down the request could be the most appropriate period for a discussion of the legal principles involved.

I will argue that the Norwegian media should take an independent stand in the case of Syria, based on the principles of the UN Charter. The Norwegian media should also address the principles of peace journalism and the long-term consequences of potential new military interventions by Norway, rather than automatically be loyal to the Norwegian government.

² Both these cases have been part of my ongoing research on Norway’s role in ‘new wars’. Both projects have been conducted by my research assistants under my supervision.

Case Study I—Background

When France and the US asked Norway to participate in the bombing of Syria, professor Geir Ulfstein reminded us of Norway's lack of respect for international law in connection with the Afghanistan war in 2001, the Iraq war in 2003 (when Norwegian soldiers supported British troops towards the end of the war) and in Libya in 2011 (Ulfstein 2015b). The Norwegian Foreign Ministry claimed in a declaration that the Norwegian contribution in Syria was 'legal' (UD 2016). This was contested by another legal expert, Gro Nystuen, who stated: "When you use military force on another country's soil against the ruling government, you must have a [UN] mandate or be invited. Assad has not invited Norway to Syria. The UN resolution to fight IS does not authorize ground forces in Syria" (as quoted in Melgård/Prestegård 2016). With these statements, Norwegian journalists were given a solid juridical background for asking critical questions of the government.

As part of an ongoing research project called 'Norway and the New Wars', my research assistant Belinda Jørandli Rudsengen and I investigated how the Norwegian newspapers *Aftenposten*, *Dagbladet*, *Dagsavisen*, *Klassekampen*, and *Verdens Gang* [VG] covered the request from the US to participate with troops in the war against IS in Syria in 2015–2016.³ As mentioned earlier, the main focus in the study is how the media dealt with legal issues.

The time of the analysis was December 8, 2015, to January 22, 2016. The articles were identified by searching in the *Retriever* database, covering most Norwegian newspapers. The search words and the process of choosing the relevant articles for the study are explained in more detail in the above-mentioned publication (Ottosen/Rudsengen 2018). The articles were categorized in a quantitative content analysis—whether they are 'critical of participation without a UN mandate', 'critical anyway', 'positive with a UN mandate', 'positive anyway', 'neutral', or 'other'. The research questions were intended to see how the media dealt with the legal issues when Norway was formally asked to send troops to Syria:

[RQ1]—Did the media take a position when Norway was asked to contribute to the warfare against IS in Syria [in December 2015]?

[RQ2]—Did the media address the legal aspects when Norway was asked to contribute troops in Syria in December 2015?

Case Study I—Findings

A total of 30 articles in the five newspapers (see appendix II) were identified as relevant for the research questions. Most were news articles. Only two editorials took a clear stand on the request of Norwegian military support for the war against IS in Syria. The following is a short summary of the results (for more details, see Ottosen/Rudsengen 2018):

³ The full report, with more detailed empirical evidence is published in Ottosen/Rudsengen 2018.

Aftenposten is Norway's biggest newspaper, with a conservative-centrist orientation. In the period under investigation, it carried only four texts dealing with Norwegian participation in the war against IS in Syria. The articles were evenly divided between criticism and neutrality. This was surprising, as *Aftenposten* has traditionally been supportive of US warfare.

Dagbladet is a traditional liberal newspaper. Of the three articles *Dagbladet* published about Norwegian participation in Syria during the period of the survey, none shows any clear tendency. Two were in the 'neutral' category, while one is placed in the category 'others'.

Dagsavisen has a background as a social-democratic party newspaper with a liberal/left-wing orientation. Of its seven articles, five were 'neutral', one critical of 'without a UN mandate' and one editorial commentary was 'critical, regardless of a UN mandate'.

Klassekampen has a left-wing orientation and has traditionally been the newspaper with the most critical attitude towards Norway's participation in the global 'War on Terror' (WoT). With a total of twelve, *Klassekampen* was the newspaper in the sample with the most articles in the period under investigation. Five of these were 'neutral' and five 'critical'. One was 'positive, regardless of a UN mandate', and one 'negative'. *Klassekampen* had two editorials, both 'neutral', with no clear position.

Verdens Gang, or *VG*, is a tabloid with a conservative pro-US orientation, and the only daily in Norway supporting the invasion of Iraq. Of the four published articles in the period, three were news articles with 'neutral' framing and one was 'positive, regardless of a UN media mandate'.

Case Study 1—Summary

The majority of the articles were news articles with no clear position on the issue of Norwegian military presence in Syria. This can be explained partly by the fact that most of the articles in the sample were news articles, and the news genre in traditional journalistic norms is expected to be balanced and neutral (McCombs 2004 [2001]). *Dagsavisen* was the only newspaper with an editorial commentary which took a clear stand against the military presence in Syria, regardless of a UN mandate.

A separate investigation of the use of sources shows a clear over-representation of elite sources such as military officials, experts and politicians (for details, see Ottosen/Rudsengen 2018). The conclusion is that the selected newspapers hardly used the window of opportunity to undertake a critical investigation of Norwegian participation before the Norwegian government decided to send troops in June 2016.

Case Study 1—Could Peace Journalism Have Made a Difference?

I will discuss below whether the media used the 'window of opportunity'—in the period before the decision to send troops to Syria in June 2016—to consider earlier military

interventions, including the bombing of Libya. As it was an open question whether Norway would send troops this time, the opportunity could have been used to raise critical awareness in the public mind about possible negative consequences. The UN Charter is the most important document for regulating the behavior of nation states in relation to issues of war and peace—and it seems highly relevant to me that journalists and the media should draw attention to legal issues when a country is being asked to contribute to a war. Besides the ‘big questions’ relating to article 33 about conditions for war and the role of the Security Council, the issue of respect for the sovereignty of member states mentioned in article 2 is relevant. In article 1 of the UN Charter, respect for the sovereignty of other states is essential to maintaining peace and security as the overall most important goal of the member states (Ebbing 2017).

In the 30 articles analyzed (see appendix II), this kind of constructive legal and principled approach is almost totally absent, except for the one editorial commentary in *Dagsavisen* clearly opposing Norwegian participation in the warfare. Overall, the need for a UN mandate to take part in military activities is vaguely mentioned—if at all. How can this lack of principled approach be explained?

Case Study 2—The Coverage of Norwegian Military Presence in the Period from May 2017 to March 2018

In 2017, a new request was made, and Norway sent special forces from Jordan to Syria without drawing much public attention.

The research question in this case study was: How did the Norwegian press address the legal aspects of the coverage of Norwegian forces in Syria? The investigation conducted by my research assistant Ida Bing covered the period from May 20, 2017, to February 18, 2018, when the Norwegian soldiers were withdrawn from Syria. Relevant keywords in the *Retriever* database covering most Norwegian newspapers identified 59 articles relevant to the research question.⁴

The method in this part of the study was a quantitative content analysis based on Teun A. van Dijk's (1988) ‘main story’ (‘title’, ‘lead’ and ‘beginning’ of an article). As a research tool, pre-defined positions on the legal issues were introduced; then the article was read and placed in the most relevant category. The options were: ‘supportive, regardless’ (SU); ‘supportive, based on international law’ (SF); ‘critical, regardless’ (KU); ‘critical, based on international law’ (KF); ‘neutral’ (N) and ‘other’ (A). Each category is explained in table 1:

⁴ For more details on coding, empirical findings etc., see Bing 2018.

| Tendency | Code | Explanation |
|--|------|---|
| ‘Supportive, regardless’ | SU | Supportive of Norwegian soldiers in Syria, regardless of whether the contribution is rooted in international law. |
| ‘Supportive, based on international law’ | SF | Supportive of Norwegian soldiers in Syria, given that it is rooted in international law. |
| ‘Critical, regardless’ | KU | Shows a critical trend, regardless of whether the contribution is rooted in international law. |
| ‘Critical, based on international law’ | KF | Critical to the presence of the soldiers or to Norwegian participation in general. |
| ‘Neutral’ | N | Articles with no clear tendency. The sources do not take a stand, or the different sides are discussed in a balanced manner. |
| ‘Other’ | A | Articles that deal with Norway’s military contribution in Syria, but do not take up intl. law or show any position, for or against. |

Table 1. Categories of the second case study.

The use of sources was addressed by identifying and counting the sources used in each article. Also considered was whether the experience of Libya was mentioned in the article. The whole coding is presented in a separate report, available upon request. In the following, I only present a short summary.

Case Study 2—Background

That for several months from 2017 to 2018, Norway had troops on the ground in Syria created little attention in the media. This should normally be a major news issue, but the Norwegian media was astonishingly quiet. A number of critical questions should have been raised to the government. Why are the troops there, who are they fighting for, and who are they fighting against? And, most importantly, is this presence justifiable according to international law?

Those who followed international websites covering Syria could read that on May 20, 2017, Norwegian special forces crossed the border from Jordan into Syria.

My research assistant Ida Bing has investigated how the Norwegian media covered this.⁵ As background, we refer to an interview with the Norwegian News Agency (*NTB* [*Norsk Telegrambyrå*]: September 5, 2014; see *NTB* 2014), in which the Norwegian Prime Minister, Erna Solberg, said that it was unacceptable for Norwegian forces to

⁵ Many thanks to my research assistant Ida Bing. The research report is also available in her thesis, where the methodological and theoretical issues are explained in more detail (Bing 2018).

participate militarily in Syria. Just a month later, it became known that the extended foreign and constitutional committee in *Stortinget* had changed its position and was now open to Norwegian military participation in Syria. We can only speculate about what kind of pressure from the US persuaded Norwegian politicians to change their position. The 'civil war' in Syria had started in 2011 as a 'political rebellion' against Bashar al-Assad's government. It was hoped that a 'democratic opposition' would win, but we know now that it were Islamist rebels who took the initiative in the armed struggle against Assad, and that they were supported by countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. After control of large parts of Syria for some time by the terrorist organization IS, the country is fragmented. In practical terms, the major powers Russia and the US took part in a 'proxy war' in Syria. The question, then, is how Norwegian forces could contribute in this chaos. The US launched 'Operation Inherent Resolve' to drive out IS and secure its own geopolitical interests in the region. Norway has traditionally held the position that we take part in military action where there is a UN mandate. In Syria, most experts said there was no legal mandate. Norway has diplomatic relations with the Assad government, and has protested against foreign military presence in the country. A normal interpretation of international law is that Norway thus violates international law when it supports armed struggle on the ground in Syria. In a note from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry, it was stated that the Norwegian authorities believe UN Security Council Resolution 2249 gives the right to fight against IS in Iraq *and* Syria according to the principle of self-defense. However, the situations in Iraq and in Syria are quite different. The Iraqi government *invited* the Norwegian forces, whereas the Assad government has *protested* against their presence. Belinda Jørandli Rudsengen (2016) has demonstrated in a Master thesis that Norwegian media tend to avoid dealing with such complex issues of international law.

The Norwegian government was silent about the presence of Norwegian special forces, and at the time there was no debate in *Stortinget*, and scant media attention. The left-wing newspapers carried some critical reports about the Norwegian soldiers after they had returned to their bases in Jordan. One story claimed that Norwegian soldiers had trained Islamist groups involved in human rights violations (*Klassekampen*: August 29, 2018; see Shanmugaratnam 2018). The Norwegian Minister of Defense, Inge Marie Søreide, publicly stated, after the troops were withdrawn, that 'of course' Norway's presence was within the framework of international law (*Klassekampen*: June 16, 2017; see Braanen 2017). The legality is however disputed by experts. In her book *Syria* (2017), Cecilie Hellestveit writes that Norwegian forces might end up supporting armed struggle against the Assad government, which would clearly be a violation of international law since Norway still has diplomatic relations with Assad's regime (Hellestveit 2017).

Case Study 2—Findings

The total overview of the coding based on the predefined positions on the conditions for Norwegian military presence in Syria can be found in table 2:

| Tendency | Count | Per cent |
|--|-------|----------|
| ‘Critical, regardless’ | 22 | 37.3 |
| ‘Neutral’ | 19 | 32.2 |
| ‘Critical, based on international law’ | 11 | 18.6 |
| ‘Other’ | 4 | 6.8 |
| ‘Supportive, based on international law’ | 2 | 3.4 |
| ‘Supportive, regardless’ | 1 | 1.7 |

Table 2. Findings of the second case study: Coding.

Investigating the whole sample, we found that 22 articles referred directly to the presence of Norwegian forces in Syria. Our conclusion is that this is a low number, given the controversial fact that the troops were there without a UN mandate. Half of the articles were critical to the Norwegian presence because of the lack of a UN mandate (see table 2). Three articles showed different degrees of support for the Norwegian presence and 19 were ‘neutral’.

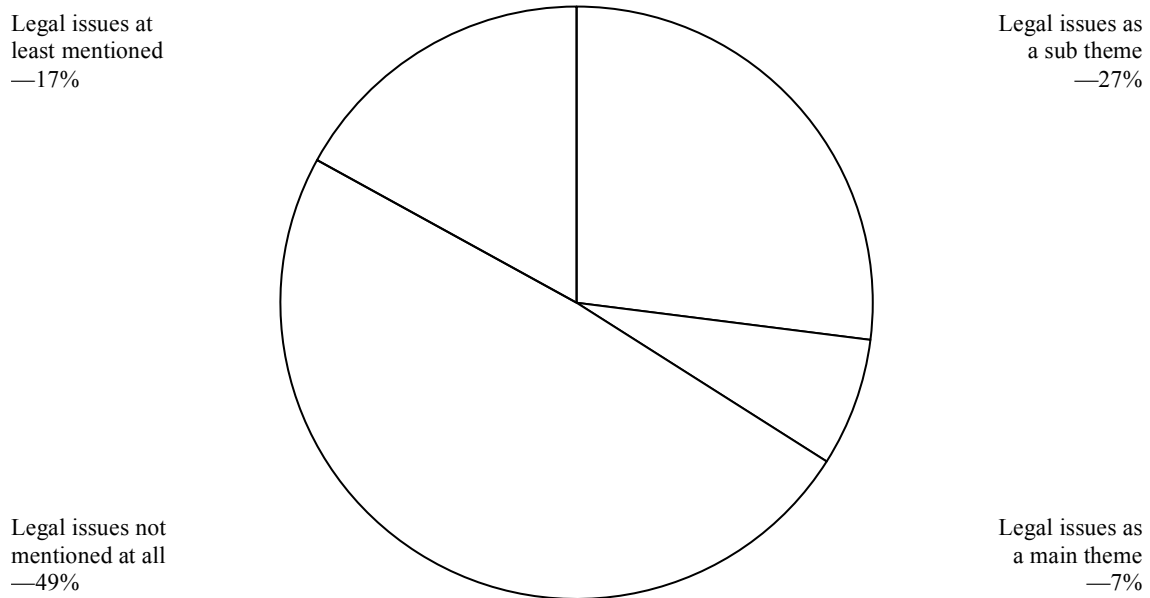


Figure 1. Findings of the second case study: International law as a theme.

Half of the articles (49 per cent) did not mention the legal issues at all; only 7 per cent had legal issues as a main theme; further 44 per cent do at least mention legality, or have it as a sub-theme. The conclusion is that the small amount of coverage through all these months did not draw attention to the legality of the Norwegian presence in Syria. This supports findings from previous research which show that Norwegian media under-report legal aspects of Norway's warfare abroad (Nohrstedt/Ottosen 2014; 2017).

Because the 'Syrian rebellion' started around the time of the bombing of Libya in 2011, we also look into whether the media covering Syria drew any connection between the war in Libya (where Norway participated actively in the bombing) and the rebellion in Syria. A minority of the articles (20 per cent) mentioned such a connection, but the majority did not. Of the articles, 60 per cent were news articles and the rest were commentaries and letters to the editor. One of the findings of the survey is that critical reflections on the Norwegian military presence are found in commentaries rather than in news articles. The day Norwegian soldiers crossed the border, there was only one news article mentioning it. In most of the articles, the Norwegian military presence was not the main story (van Dijk 1988). One important reason was of course that there was a great deal of secrecy around the operation, but as it was controversial that should be a reason for informed politicians to raise a public debate. The *Godal-utvalget* white paper summarizing the Norwegian military presence in Afghanistan from 2001 (*Godal-utvalget* 2016) points out as a problem that there was a lack of debate and too much consensus in the security policy.

Case Study 2—Summary

We can conclude that the coverage in the Norwegian media of the Norwegian forces in Syria has barely provided basic facts about what the forces have been involved in on the ground. Although most of the articles were critical of the Norwegian presence in Syria, the coverage of legal issues was too superficial to create a public discourse. In the period after our investigation period, the newspaper *Klassekampen* documented that the Norwegian soldiers gave practical support to so-called 'moderate Islamist' groups. Although the 'main purpose of the mission' was to fight IS, these forces said openly that they were also fighting against the Assad regime (*Klassekampen*: August 29, 2018; see Shanmugaratnam 2018). Why did this not create a huge public debate? Independent legal experts claim that Norway could, potentially, be involved in military incidents, including confrontation with Syrian—and even Russian—forces that could spiral out of control. A relevant question from a critical journalist could be about the harm this could cause to bilateral relations in the tense situation of 'the new cold war' on the border between Russia and Norway. The official Norwegian position is to endorse the 'moderate Syrian supporters'—independent commentators, on the other hand, claim that it is no longer realistic to talk about a 'moderate Syrian opposition'. In practice, the opposition against the Assad government consists of Islamist groups, in many cases with links to al Qaeda and IS (Hellestveit 2017). Could it be that enemy images of Assad and IS made it possible for the Norwegian government and the media to ignore the legal issues? Rather than discuss problems such as the lack of a UN mandate, and military actions that could cause violations of human rights, the focus is on the 'evil-doers', Assad and IS. The paradox that Norwegian forces have ended up on one 'evil

side’—Islamist groups— against ‘the other’—Assad—must be made a key part of the follow-up investigation, with in-depth interviews with editors and journalists.

Case Study 2—Could Peace Journalism Have Made a Difference?

In his 2002 model for peace journalism, Johan Galtung makes a point of transparency. The secrecy and lack of openness of the Norwegian government could have been a gift for Norwegian journalists. When legal experts were so clear about the lack of a legal mandate, and with the recent experience of Libya in mind, they could have raised some tough questions to the government. Galtung warns against a lack of historical context and ‘leaving for another war’ without evaluating the consequences of previous ones. It is hard to understand, after the lack of results in Afghanistan and the damage done in Libya, that Norwegian journalists were not alert and ready with searching questions when the Syrian case came up.

Conclusion and Discussion

The two case studies presented here reveal that Norwegian media seemed unable to adopt peace journalism when Norway was asked by ‘our ally’—the US—to take part in new ‘out-of-area operations’. When President Trump decided to bomb Syria in response to a ‘gas attack’ on April 6, 2017, the US fired more than 50 cruise missiles at a Syrian airfield—even though there was no clear evidence that the Assad regime⁶ was responsible for the attack. Rather than taking the peace journalism approach, contextualising the event and recalling earlier events such as the Libyan bombing and the unsolved August 21, 2013 ‘gas attack’, *Aftenposten* supported Trump’s bombing in an editorial (*Aftenposten*: April 8, 2017; see Eilertsen 2017). Professors Malcolm Langford and Geir Ulfstein had to remind *Aftenposten* that the bombing was a violation of UN Charter’s article 2, point 4 (*Aftenposten*: April 11, 2017; see Langford/Ulfstein 2017). *Aftenposten* does not live up to the expectations of critical journalism (Galtung 2002).

The Norwegian media could have used the window of opportunity before the troops were sent in order to warn against the danger, including the risk of breaking international law. In a letter to the editor of *Klassekampen*, Cecilie Hellestveit (2015) suggests several scenarios that the media could have picked up on, or—even better—suggested themselves, in light of the negative experience in Libya. Hellestveit reminds us of three possible Norwegian military contributions that are within the framework of international law:

[i] An invitation from the Assad regime⁶ to support the fight against IS (the most unlikely scenario as it could imply an alliance with Russian forces against NATO) (see Hellestveit 2015).

⁶ *Editorial comment* by Christian Beyer: Throughout the text, expressions such as ‘Gaddafi regime’, ‘Gaddafi’s Libya’—referring to the [Great] Socialist People’s Libyan Arab Jamahiriya—; or ‘Assad regime’, ‘Assad’s regime’, ‘Assad’s Syria’—referring to the Syrian Arab Republic—appear by choice of the author; and in line with the terminology and vocabulary of certain referenced bibliographical sources.

[ii] The UN Security Council has ruled that self-defense against IS could be legal. But IS has not attacked Norway, and Norwegian forces cannot fight in Syria against the will of the Assad regime⁶ (which has, in fact, protested against Norway's involvement) (see Hellestveit 2015).

[iii] A mandate from the Security Council could make it legal to fight in Syria, according to Chapter VII. No such mandate exists, however, as the US decided to start bombing in September 2014 before a meeting in the UN Security Council. In a separate ruling on Resolution 2249, the Security Council did authorize strikes against IS on Syrian territory, but the conditions are limited and unless the Norwegian government is open about their activities this ruling cannot be used (see Hellestveit 2015).

Hellestveit warns that Norwegian troops might end up in a conflict with Syrian and Russian forces, and thereby support Saudi Arabia—and the US by proxy. This could create a potentially dangerous situation with our neighbor Russia (Hellestveit 2015).

To avoid putting Norway in a dangerous situation, the Norwegian media could have chosen a peace journalism approach by defining 'conflict/war as a problem' and suggested negotiations (Galtung 2002). By being *proactive* and suggesting peace talks, Norway could return to its traditional position on foreign and security policy within the framework of the UN—but it seems, instead, that the media passively watch Norway trapped in a destructive pattern, almost sleepwalking into a situation with the potential to contribute to a conflict escalating out of control.

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Appendix I—Peace/Conflict Journalism; War/Violence Journalism (Galtung 2002)

Peace/Conflict Journalism

War/Violence Journalism

I—Peace/Conflict-Oriented

Explore conflict *formation*;
x parties, *y* goals, *z* issues;
 general 'win-win' orientation.

Open space, open time;
 causes and outcomes anywhere,
 including in history/culture.

Making conflicts transparent.

Giving voice to all parties;
 empathy and understanding.

See conflict/war as a problem;
 focus on conflict creativity.

Humanization of all sides
 (regardless).

Proactive: Prevention before any
 violence/war occurs.

Focus on invisible effects of violence
 (trauma and glory, damage to structure/culture).

I—War/Violence-Oriented

Focus on conflict arena;
 2 parties, 1 goal ('win'), 1 issue ('war');
 general 'zero-sum' orientation.

Closed space, closed time;
 causes and exits in arena,
 'who threw the first stone?'

Making wars opaque/secret.

'Us–Them' journalism;
 propaganda, voice for 'Us', only.

See 'Them' as the problem;
 focus on who 'prevails' in war.

Dehumanization of 'Them'
 (more so the worse the weapon).

Reactive: Waiting for
 violence before reporting.

Focus only on visible effects of violence
 (killed, wounded and material damage).

II—Truth-Oriented

Expose untruths on all sides.

Uncover all cover-ups.

II—Propaganda-Oriented

Expose 'their' untruths.

Help 'our' cover-ups and lies.

III—People-Oriented

Focus on suffering all over:
 on women, the aged, children,
 giving voice to the voiceless.

Naming all evil-doers.

Focus on peacemakers among the people.

III—Elite-Oriented

Focus on 'our' suffering;
 on able-bodied elite males,
 being their own mouthpiece.

Naming 'their' evil-doers.

Focus on 'elite peacemakers'.

IV—Solution-Oriented

Peace = non-violence + creativity.

Highlight peace initiatives
 to prevent more war.

Focus on structure, culture,
 the peaceful society.

Aftermath: Sincere interest;
 resolution, reconstruction, reconciliation.

IV—Victory-Oriented

Peace = victory + ceasefire.

Conceal peace initiatives
 before victory is at hand.

Focus on treaty, institution,
 the controlled society.

Aftermath: Leave for another war;
 return if the old war flares up again.

Appendix II—The Analyzed Articles of Case Study 1 (Ottosen/Rudsengen 2018)

| Newspaper and Date | Source and Title |
|------------------------|--|
| I—Aftenposten | |
| | Retriever search; n=4, N=30 |
| December 8, 2015 | “Stortingspolitikere advarer mot å bidra militært i Syria” |
| December 8, 2015 | “USA ber Norge gå inn i krigen mot IS i Syria” |
| December 9, 2015 | “Militært bidrag må være [en] del av en bred strategi” |
| December 14, 2015 | “Stor skepsis til norske flyangrep” |
| II—Dagbladet | |
| | Retriever search; n=3, N=30 |
| December 9, 2015 | [quote] “Farligere enn bombingene i Libya” |
| December 10, 2015 | “Vil ha syriske flyktning[s]-soldater” |
| December 17, 2015 | “Frykter et rære samfunn” |
| III—Dagsavisen | |
| | Retriever search; n=7, N=30 |
| December 9, 2015 | “Advarer mot militærmakt” |
| December 9, 2015 | [quote] “Vanskelig for Norge å si nei” |
| December 14, 2015 | “Syria etter bombene” |
| December 16, 2015 | “Bør Norge bidra mer i kampen mot IS?” |
| December 23, 2015 | [NTB] [quote] “Ikke norske fly til Syria” |
| December 29, 2015 | “Norge, Syria og Libya” |
| January 19, 2016 | [NTB] “Norge utelukker ikke økt innsats mot IS i 2016” |
| IV—Klassekampen | |
| | Retriever search; n=12, N=30 |
| December 9, 2015 | “Russisk rulett i Syria” |
| December 10, 2015 | “De kan bli lovlige IS-mål” |
| December 10, 2015 | “Norge må si nei” |
| December 11, 2015 | “Frp kvier seg for krigen” |
| December 11, 2015 | [sic] “Stortinget” |
| December 12, 2015 | “Vil sende bakkestyrker” |
| December 12, 2015 | [sic] “Syria-bidrag” |
| December 15, 2015 | “Syria-krigen og folkeretten” |
| December 19, 2015 | “Vil ikke krige i Syria” |
| December 21, 2015 | “Folket er delt om Syria” |
| December 22, 2015 | “Vil ikke sende kampfly” |
| December 23, 2015 | “Må holde flyene hjemme” |
| V—Verdens Gang | |
| | Retriever search; n=4, N=30 |
| December 8, 2015 | “USA ber Norge delta i krigen mot IS” |
| December 9, 2015 | “Dette kan bli Norges IS-bidrag” |
| December 22, 2015 | [quote] “IS er ikke en gruppe vi kan forhandle med” |
| January 16, 2016 | “Norge sier[:] Nei til jagerfly i IS-krig[en]” |

