

News Values and the Media Coverage of the Syrian Crisis: Informational Relevance and National Framing in Georgian Television News (2012-2016)

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Abstract

This study examines how the Syrian crisis was represented in Georgian television news through the lens of news values, informational relevance, and perceptions of geographical and political proximity. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Galtung and Ruge's theory of news values, later refinements proposed by Montgomery, and scholarship on relevance and proximity, the study explores how global conflicts are translated into national news agendas within a small media system. The empirical analysis is based on expert assessments of the cumulative television coverage of the Syrian crisis by Georgia's two leading broadcasters—the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) and Rustavi 2—during the period 2012-2016. Using a mixed-methods design, the study combines qualitative in-depth interviews with political and media experts and a quantitative Thurstone-type scaling procedure. The findings demonstrate that experts perceived the Syrian crisis to have been predominantly reframed through domestic relevance—particularly via the figure of Tarkhan Batirashvili and the Pankisi Gorge—rather than through its geopolitical, historical, or humanitarian dimensions. According to the expert assessments, television coverage was fragmented, episodic, and largely deprived of broader analytical context, reflecting limited perceptions of the global relevance of the conflict within editorial decision-making. The study contributes to the literature on international news mediation by demonstrating how small media systems domesticate distant conflicts and how professional news judgments shape perceptions of informational relevance in foreign news coverage.

Keywords

Media Representation, Syrian Civil War, ISIS, Terrorism and Media, Visual Propaganda, Proximity and Distance in News, Georgian Television News, Pankisi Gorge, International News Mediation, Agenda-Setting, Extremist Communication, Journalism and Global Conflict

1. Introduction

The Syrian civil war and the rise of the so-called “Islamic State” (ISIS) constituted one of the most intensely mediated and covered conflicts of the 21st century. Between 2012 and 2016, global newsrooms were faced with an unprecedented volume of visual material, much of it originating not from professional correspondents but from social media platforms, user-generated content (UGC), and propaganda channels operated by extremist actors themselves. In this environment, journalism encountered a new communicative reality in which violent spectacle, ideological messaging, and news production became deeply entangled. Although ISIS has since lost territorial control, the phenomenon it represented has not disappeared. Rather, it has transformed into a model of how non-state actors can exploit media logic, visual framing and platform dynamics to achieve global visibility. The Syrian conflict thus became the first large-scale case in which traditional journalism operated in an environment saturated by algorithmically amplified propaganda. For this reason, examining media representations of ISIS is not a historical exercise but a means of understanding contemporary vulnerabilities of journalism to manipulative communication strategies, particularly in relation to visual extremism, agenda-setting, and news selection.

The study aligns with the classical theory of news values. Galtung and Ruge’s seminal model (Galtung & Ruge, 1965), later expanded by Montgomery (2007) and other scholars, explains how events become “news” through different factors, such as negativity, unexpectedness, personalization, proximity, and elite involvement, etc. ISIS communication strategies were deliberately constructed around these principles: highly visual violence, symbolic performances, and the participation of foreign fighters ensured that the organization fit seamlessly into the criteria of newsworthiness. In effect, ISIS learned how to create “good news” for global media.

As for the Georgian case, it provides a particularly revealing context for examining this process. Georgian broadcasters, lacking their own correspondents in Syria and relying primarily on international agencies, were compelled to construct their narratives of the conflict through mediated sources. As a result, the Syrian crisis entered the Georgian media agenda predominantly through themes of proximity and personalization—most notably through the involvement of Georgian citizens from the Pankisi Gorge and the figure of Tarkhan Batirashvili.¹ Rather

¹A native of Pankisi, a former military man, a hired militant.

than contextual geopolitical analysis, coverage frequently emphasized sensational visuals, episodic reporting, and domesticated narratives linking distant events to local identities. This pattern is not unique to the Syrian conflict. It remains characteristic of how Georgian media cover contemporary global crises, including the war in Ukraine and conflicts in the Middle East. Therefore, studying the media representation of ISIS in Georgian television news offers insight into a broader structural issue: how small media systems interpret distant conflicts through the lens of news values, and how this process may unintentionally amplify extremist narratives or distort public understanding of international threats. So, the study investigates how the Syrian crisis was mediated in Georgia through the logic of news values. In doing so, it contributes not only to the scholarship on media and terrorism but also to contemporary debates on the relationship between journalism, visual propaganda, and the global information environment.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The foundational framework for this inquiry is provided by Galtung and Ruge's (1965) influential study *The Structure of Foreign News*, which proposes that the transformation of events into news is ruled by systematic selection and distortion processes operating along a chain from world events to audience perception. The authors argue that foreign news selection is structured by a set of recurring factors, especially those related to elite nations, elite actors, personalization, and negativity. In their model, the world is stratified into "topdog" and "underdog" nations, and media representations reflect this hierarchy. Events connected to powerful countries, prominent individuals, and negative or conflictual outcomes are far more likely to become news. Galtung and Ruge identified a broad set of factors that increase the likelihood of news selection, including: frequency, threshold (intensity), unambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite nations, reference to elite people, personalization, and negativity (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). These factors are interdependent: the more criteria an event satisfies, the greater are its chances of news inclusion and prominence. Subsequent research on foreign news flow confirmed that news coverage correlates strongly with political, economic, cultural, and geographic proximity between countries (Rosengren, 1974; Ito & Koshinaga, 1983; Wu, 2003). Media tend to report more frequently on countries with which they trade, cooperate, or compete, as well as on powerful states capable of exerting influence.

Building on this tradition, Montgomery (2007) systematizes and refines news values for contemporary broadcast journalism, pairing and redefining several criteria. He constructs them as follows: 1) Timeliness/Recency—news as a perishable product (Tuchman, 1978; Schlesinger, 1992); 2) Intensity/Discontinuity—sudden, sharply bounded events over slow processes; 3) Scale/Scope—magnitude of impact; 4) Conflict—bipolar oppositions structuring narratives (Hartley & Montgomery, 1985); 5) Personalization—focus on individuals rather than structures; 6)

Power—involvement of elites and powerful institutions; 7) Negativity—preference for crises, disasters, and war; 8) Unexpectedness—deviation from routine; 9) Consonance—fitting events into familiar narrative frames; 10) Proximity/Cultural relevance—geographical and symbolic closeness; 11) Meaningfulness/Unambiguity—clarity of interpretation; 12) Composition/Fit—balance within the news bulletin. Montgomery argues that television news, in particular, amplifies personalization, dramatization, and visual immediacy, transforming distant suffering into emotionally compelling narratives (Boltanski, 1999; Chouliaraki, 2006).

Later scholars challenged the epistemological status of news values. Rather than rigid rules, they function as frames or filters guiding routine journalistic decision-making (Glasgow University Media Group, 1980; Gitlin, 1980; Allan, 1999). These frames help journalists process vast mass of information quickly and present it in cognitively recognizable forms for audiences. News values thus represent both organizational necessity and ideological naturalization. Notably, most research on news values has focused on “hard news” (politics, economics, conflict), leaving aside softer content such as entertainment and celebrity culture, which also operate through similar value systems (McQuail, 1994; Harcup & O’Neill, 2001).

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant for analyzing the Syrian crisis as a foreign, conflict-driven, elite-involved, highly negative, and visually dramatic event. The Syrian war undoubtedly satisfies numerous classical news values simultaneously: conflict, scale, negativity, elite involvement (global powers), personalization (refugees, victims, leaders), unexpectedness, and geopolitical relevance. The present study therefore applies the news value taxonomies of Galtung & Ruge and Montgomery to assess how and why the Syrian crisis entered the news agendas of Georgian broadcasters. By examining empirical coverage from Public Broadcaster and Rustavi 2, the research identifies which informational values were most salient in shaping the representation of this distant conflict in the Georgian media context.

This study examines how the Syrian crisis (2012–2016) entered the news agenda of Georgian broadcasters—Public Broadcaster and Rustavi 2—through the prism of news values. The central question follows a long-standing concern in media theory: how do events become news, and which informational values enable foreign events to gain agenda prominence?

2.2. The Syrian Crisis, Key Actors, and Relevance for Georgia

The Syrian crisis began in March 2011 in the city of Daraa, when teenagers were arrested and tortured for anti-regime graffiti inspired by the Arab Spring slogan “*Ash-sha‘b yurīd isqāṭ an-niẓām*” (“The people want the fall of the regime”). The authorities’ violent response to peaceful protests, including the use of live fire against demonstrators and mourners, transformed localized unrest into nationwide protests demanding President Bashar al-Assad’s resignation. By mid-2011, the conflict militarized with the creation of the Free Syrian Army, and in 2012 the United Nations formally characterized the situation as a civil war. Over time, the

conflict grew increasingly complex. Moderate and secular opposition groups lost influence to radical Islamist organizations, including Jabhat al-Nusra and later ISIS. Multiple actors entered the battlefield: Syrian government forces, diverse rebel coalitions, Islamist factions often competing among themselves, Kurdish forces supported by the United States, and numerous foreign sponsors (Gachechiladze, 2014). Sectarian dimensions—particularly between Sunni groups and the Alawite-dominated regime—further intensified the conflict.

In 2014, ISIS proclaimed a caliphate across parts of Syria and Iraq. Under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the group established quasi-state structures, controlled territory, collected taxes, traded oil, and attracted thousands of foreign fighters from over 80 countries (Batiashvili, 2019). Syria became a focal point of transnational Islamist militancy and propaganda-driven recruitment. Despite its geographical distance, the Syrian crisis acquired direct relevance for Georgia through the participation of fighters from the Pankisi Gorge, predominantly ethnic Kists. At least 26 Georgian citizens died fighting under ISIS in that period. Scholars note that recruitment combined ideological, religious, financial, and historical factors. ISIS propaganda—distributed through social media, videos, and even a short-lived Georgian-language website—played a central role in radicalization (Goguadze, 2017). Religious narratives, promises of martyrdom, and images of a “pure Islamic society” proved persuasive, particularly among vulnerable youth.

A significant symbolic figure in this process was *Tarkhan Batirashvili* (*Abu Omar al-Shishani*), a Pankisi-native who became a senior ISIS military commander. Despite the lack of sympathy for ISIS itself, many young people reportedly perceived Batirashvili as a heroic figure, illustrating the power of personalization in radical narratives (Goguadze, 2017; Maisaia & Guchua, 2020). Researchers emphasize that ISIS’s communication strategy targeted three audiences: internal members, potential recruits, and Western adversaries. Recruitment routes for Georgian fighters often involved intermediaries in Georgia and Türkiye, with ISIS covering travel expenses (Goguadze, 2017). Historical memory of conflicts in the North Caucasus and refugee flows into Pankisi also contributed to susceptibility to radical messaging (Sanikidze, 2015).

From a perspective of security, analysts argue that ISIS viewed the Caucasus, including Georgia, as strategically important. References to the Caucasus appeared in extremist rhetoric and propaganda. The creation of the so-called “Caucasus Vilayet” in 2015 and later references to a distinct “Gurjistan” unit underscored perceived regional ambitions (Maisaia & Guchua, 2020). Experts suggest Georgia’s geographic position made it attractive as a transit corridor for fighters moving between the Middle East and the Caucasus. The 2017 counter-terrorism operation in Tbilisi involving Ahmed Chatayev, a militant figure with Caucasus ties, reinforced these concerns (Batiashvili, 2019). Georgian security services responded with intensified counterterrorism measures, including operations against suspected extremist networks and illicit trafficking of radioactive materials potentially usable for “dirty bombs.” Analysts interpret these developments as indica-

tors of the transformation of terrorist threats in the region. Scholars such as Maisaia argue that extremist Islamist ideology frames the Caucasus as part of a broader historical and religious geography of struggle, linking the Caspian region, North Caucasus, South Caucasus (including Pankisi), and the Middle East into a single ideological space. This perspective, combined with the participation of Georgian citizens in the Syrian war and explicit references to the Caucasus in extremist Islamist discourse, elevated the Syrian conflict from a distant war to a matter of national security relevance for Georgia.

Thus, the Syrian crisis is not only a case of international conflict but also an example of how transnational extremist movements intersect with local vulnerabilities, propaganda channels, historical memory, and regional geopolitics—making it a salient issue within the Georgian media and security agenda.

2.3. Representation of the Syrian Crisis in “Elite Nations” Media and Political Manipulation

The Syrian crisis occupied a central place in both global and national media agendas, particularly in countries directly involved in the conflict, such as the United States and Russia. Research into media coverage demonstrates not only how the crisis was reported, but also how media framing interacted with foreign policy debates and public opinion in these “elite nations.”

The CNN Effect and the U.S. Media. A study presented at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (Werman, 2015) examined whether the Syrian chemical attacks of August 2013 triggered the so-called CNN Effect—the theory that intense 24-hour news coverage can pressure governments into humanitarian intervention. Using Robinson’s (1999) policy-media interaction model and analyzing coverage by CNN, Fox News, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*, the study concluded that the CNN Effect did not operate in the Syrian case. Despite high political uncertainty in Washington and intense media attention following the chemical attacks (over 130 articles in major newspapers within a short period), media framing shifted from humanitarian and empathetic narratives toward legal and constitutional debates. Coverage focused primarily on questions such as: whether President Obama had the legal authority to strike Syria without Congress, or whether international law justified intervention without a UN Security Council resolution, or whether U.S. involvement would destabilize relations with Russia, Türkiye, Iran, and Israel. This legalistic framing replaced the moral-humanitarian framing that historically enabled the CNN Effect. As a result, media discourse did not mobilize public pressure for intervention but instead amplified political hesitation. The study argues that Obama’s decision to refer the issue to Congress effectively displaced the humanitarian frame with a constitutional one, neutralizing the conditions necessary for CNN-driven policy action.

Comparative Media Framing: U.S. vs. Russian Press. A comparative study conducted at the Higher School of Economics (In Russian with romanized letters: *Vyshshaya Shkola Ekonomiki*, Russia) analyzed how leading newspapers—*Ros-*

siyskaya Gazeta, *Izvestiya*, *Kommersant*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Daily Mail*—covered the crisis during September 2013. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (Van Dijk, 1995; Fairclough, 1995), the research demonstrated that media in both countries reflected and reinforced their governments' foreign policy positions. American media emphasized humanitarian catastrophe, Assad's illegitimacy, and the moral necessity of punitive strikes. Assad was described as a "killer," a user of "poison gas against his own people," and compared to Hitler and Saddam Hussein. Rhetoric relied heavily on emotional triggers, especially references to murdered children and chemical victims. Russian media framed the situation through the dangers of Western intervention, historical parallels to disastrous foreign campaigns, and the legitimacy of the Syrian government. Articles questioned whether U.S. strikes could trigger a "Third World War" and praised Damascus for cooperating with international inspectors. Referring to linguistic and discursive manipulation, both media systems employed similar persuasive techniques:

1. *Metaphors and comparisons* (Assad as Hitler; the U.S. intervention as a "shady enterprise").
2. *Rhetorical techniques such as repetition, parallelism, and emotional appeals* (e.g., John Kerry's speeches).
3. *Gray propaganda through references to unnamed sources* ("diplomatic sources," "intelligence leaks").
4. *Selective statistics to intensify emotional response* (e.g., 300 vs. 1429 deaths; frequent emphasis on child casualties).
5. *Presuppositions and framing that naturalized one interpretation while delegitimizing alternatives*.

American media often framed the U.S. as a moral authority ("strict father morality"), while Russian media framed Russia as a stabilizing force preventing chaos. In both cases, language functioned as a political instrument, shaping perception before formal policy announcements.

The studies conclude that media in both countries acted as a political actor rather than a neutral observer. Coverage aligned with national geopolitical interests: 1) U.S. media rationalized potential intervention; 2) Russian media rationalized non-intervention and defense of sovereignty.

In the Syrian case, elite nations' media did not merely report events but constructed competing realities through framing, language, and selective emphasis. In the U.S., legal framing diluted humanitarian urgency and prevented CNN-style policy pressure. In Russia, historical analogies and sovereignty narratives justified resistance to intervention.

3. Method and Materials

Research Design

During the period under investigation (2012-2016), Georgian television broadcasters did not possess the institutional or logistical capacity to maintain regular on-site reporting from Syria. Consequently, their coverage of the Syrian conflict

relied predominantly on international news agencies and broadcasters, including Reuters, Associated Press, BBC, CNN, and NBC. As a result, Georgian television functioned primarily as a gatekeeper of foreign news, selecting, translating, and reframing information originating from global media organizations.

This structural dependence on common international news sources might be expected to produce relatively homogeneous news coverage. Rather than conducting a direct content analysis of television broadcasts, however, the present study investigates how this cumulative television coverage was perceived and evaluated by experts possessing extensive professional knowledge of Georgian television journalism, foreign policy, and international security.

This methodological choice reflects the dominant role of television in Georgia's information environment. According to the Caucasus Barometer (2015), 73% of respondents identified television as their principal source of information about current affairs. Television therefore plays a central role not only in transmitting information but also in shaping public perceptions of international conflicts.

The study integrates two complementary theoretical perspectives. The first is the theory of news values developed by Galtung and Ruge (1965) and subsequently refined by Montgomery, which explains how news organizations determine the relevance and newsworthiness of international events. The second draws on agenda-setting and gatekeeping theory to examine how editorial selection and framing shape the domestic interpretation of foreign conflicts within a small national media system.

To address these theoretical assumptions, the study formulated the following research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: *How did Georgian television news construct the news value and relevance of the Syrian crisis, and to what extent was this relevance determined by domestication through national proximity rather than by the geopolitical and humanitarian magnitude of the conflict?*

H1: *Perceived news value of the Syrian crisis in Georgian media significantly increases when the conflict is connected to Georgian actors (Pankisi Gorge, Georgian fighters, Batirashvili), compared to when it is presented as an international geopolitical and humanitarian process.*

RQ2: *To what extent is the domestication and episodic representation of the Syrian crisis in Georgian media associated with structural professional limitations, analytical deficiency, and dependency on international media sources?*

H2: *Higher reliance on international media sources is significantly associated with lower levels of analytical depth, contextualization, and professional accuracy in Georgian media coverage of the Syrian crisis.*

Participants

The study employed a mixed-method research design combining qualitative expert interviews with a quantitative Thurstone-type scaling procedure.

Purposeful expert sampling was used to recruit participants possessing substantial professional expertise in foreign affairs, international security, political com-

munication, journalism, and media studies. Selection was based on participants' long-standing professional engagement with Georgian television media as commentators, analysts, interviewees, authors, or researchers, rather than on institutional affiliation with the broadcasters under investigation.

The final sample consisted of twelve experts. Given the relatively small and highly specialized professional community in Georgia that combines expertise in international affairs with sustained experience of television journalism, this number was considered sufficient to provide analytical depth and a broad range of informed professional perspectives. The objective of the study was not statistical generalization but an in-depth examination of expert evaluations of Georgian television coverage of the Syrian crisis.

Although none of the participants represented or was employed by either broadcaster, all possessed extensive professional experience in evaluating or contributing to television coverage produced by the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) and Rustavi 2. **Table 1** summarizes the professional backgrounds of the experts who participated in the study.

Table 1. Professional background of the expert participants.

Professional Background	Participants (n)
University professors	5
Foreign policy experts	3
Security analysts	2
Senior journalists/media experts	2

Data Collection and Thurstone Scaling

Twelve semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with the selected experts. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' permission and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Following the interviews, the transcripts entered the statement-generation stage of the Thurstone equal-appearing interval scaling procedure. Eight independent judges—graduate students specializing in Media Studies—reviewed the interview transcripts individually. None of the judges participated in the interviews or in the subsequent expert evaluation.

Each judge independently extracted evaluative statements reflecting the experts' assessments of Georgian television coverage of the Syrian crisis. Statement selection followed an exclusion strategy: duplicate, overlapping, ambiguous, or semantically equivalent statements were removed, whereas statements representing distinct evaluative positions were retained.

Following the independent extraction stage, the judges' selections were systematically compared and consolidated under the supervision of the principal investigator. Through this comparative review, redundant statements were eliminated, producing a final pool of 44 unique evaluative statements.

The use of multiple independent judges reduced the influence of individual re-

searcher bias and strengthened the methodological rigor of the statement-generation procedure.

In accordance with the classical Thurstone equal-appearing interval scaling method, the quality of the scale construction was evaluated through the distribution of judges' ratings and measures of central tendency rather than through formal inter-rater reliability coefficients, which do not constitute a standard component of this methodological tradition.

The 44 statements were organized into two analytical domains:

1. Motivation to seek and use information about the Syrian crisis;
2. Evaluation of the quality of Georgian television coverage.

Each statement was evaluated on an eleven-point Thurstone scale, where 1 represented an extremely negative evaluation, 6 a neutral evaluation, and 11 an extremely positive evaluation. Ratings were subsequently normalized to a scale ranging from -5 to $+5$, enabling quantitative comparison across all statements and subsequent statistical analysis.

To assess the robustness of the scaling procedure, three alternative indicators of central tendency—mean, median, and mode—were calculated for every statement. The resulting normalized distributions were highly similar, confirming the internal consistency and stability of the scaling model. The complete scaling procedure and statistical validation are presented in the Appendix.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the fundamental ethical principles governing research involving human participants. Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the intended use of the data, and their right to decline participation or withdraw at any stage without any consequences. Participation was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all interviewees before the interviews commenced. Permission to audio-record the interviews was obtained in advance. To protect participants' privacy, all interview data were anonymized during transcription and analysis, and no personally identifiable information is reported in this article. According to the institutional procedures applicable at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, this type of interview-based research did not require formal approval by an institutional ethics review board.

4. Results

The empirical findings based on expert assessments indicate that a total of 44 statements extracted from the interviews with experts could be divided into two parts: 1) motivation/interest and 2) evaluation of the quality of media coverage. Below we represent the extracted statements. The statistical results for the first analytical block, concerning motivation to seek and use information about the Syrian crisis, are presented in Appendix **Table A1** and the statistical results for the second analytical block, evaluating the quality of Georgian television coverage, are presented in Appendix **Table A2**.

Block 1. Attitudinal statements reflecting respondents' motivation to seek information about the Syrian crisis

1. My interest was driven by professional engagement with the region.
2. I am required to study ongoing processes in Syria, Iraq, and Libya and to write analytical articles about them.
3. I relied on Georgian media, particularly television, in cases when a Georgian citizen joined a terrorist organization.
4. My motivation was to become informed out of general interest in the event as a global phenomenon.
5. My motivation was to obtain information necessary for my daily professional activity.
6. When the issue of ISIS involved a Georgian citizen, I followed Georgian media closely; therefore, it had informational value for me.
7. The transmitted messages had limited informational value; the coverage often appeared to be motivated.

Block 2. Assessment of Media Coverage

8. I received information primarily through international media, as it provided a more comprehensive, accurate, and relatively coherent picture.
9. I rarely relied on Georgian media.
10. The main source of information for Georgian media was Western media.
11. Coverage of events in Syria in Georgian media was rather superficial and fragmented.
12. The focus was primarily on the criminal actions of Bashar al-Assad's regime.
13. Ongoing processes in Syria and the attempts of the Caliphate to expand were not sufficiently perceived by Georgian media as a potential threat to Georgia.
14. The Pankisi Gorge required more detailed coverage, given that Wahhabis who relocated during the Second Chechen War reside there.
15. Information delivered by Georgian media was of limited value.
16. Georgian media demonstrated weak knowledge of developments in the Middle East, particularly in Syria.
17. Connections were not made between events and the situation in the South Caucasus and Georgia specifically.
18. There was no analysis of processes.
19. Factual and terminological errors were frequent.
20. Coverage by Georgian media had an impulsive character.
21. When the issue was covered directly by field specialists using scholarly methods, the information was coherent and comprehensive.
22. The issue required deeper and more balanced coverage.
23. Coverage tended to be either strongly pro-Western and/or strongly pro-Russian.
24. The religious, political, economic, geopolitical, geostrategic, and historical aspects of the conflict were almost entirely absent.
25. The issue deserved more airtime.
26. Problems of the Pankisi Gorge were covered superficially, even in connection

with ISIS.

27. If key words were considered, coverage emphasized the involvement of external actors rather than the intrinsic nature of the Syrian conflict.
28. The Syrian crisis was portrayed as events happening somewhere far away.
29. Only from 2015 onward were these processes presented as posing significant risks and threats to Georgia, as if extremism and terrorism had not been relevant before.
30. Practically all materials related to the Pankisi Gorge were consistently linked to extremism.
31. The image of Batirashvili in Georgian media was portrayed more as a hero than as a terrorist.
32. The Pankisi Gorge was presented almost exclusively in connection with ISIS.
33. Georgian media maintained a certain balance between romanticizing and demonizing Batirashvili.
34. A variety of sources from international media were used.
35. There were instances when Russian media served as a primary source.
36. I hardly recall any analytical report prepared according to high professional standards.
37. Georgian media, especially television, did not cover events in Syria very intensively.
38. In one report, an expert referred to the “Islamic State” as if it were a real state. This is a big error.
39. Greater emphasis was placed on Georgian citizens fighting in Syria, sometimes unintentionally granting them more importance than was necessary or relevant.
40. I recall several reports in which the coverage and evaluation were catastrophic; almost every possible mistake in covering such issues was made.
41. At times, the use of powerful visuals may even have contributed to the propaganda of the terrorist organization.
42. Parallels with the Pankisi Gorge were drawn according to political orientation.
43. Proper and objective coverage of the ongoing conflict is essential for the Georgian population.
44. Despite errors and episodic character, the coverage was regular.

To statistically validate this tendency, hypothesis testing was conducted (See *Methodological Note 1. Hypothesis Testing Procedures in Appendix*). The null hypothesis assumed that the mean score of all statements was greater than or equal to zero. Across all three scaling metrics, results were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), with 95% confidence intervals consistently located within the negative range. The overall mean score fell between -2.7 and -1.1 , regardless of the metric applied. Frequency distribution further confirmed this pattern: over 59% of all evaluations fell into the extremely negative and negative categories, while only 11% corresponded to medium or high assessments. This statistical procedure demonstrates a high level of expert consensus and confirms that the perceived informational value, analytical depth, contextualization, and professional standards of Georgian

television coverage of the Syrian crisis were evaluated predominantly negatively. The normalized scores subsequently served as the empirical basis for the factor analysis, allowing latent dimensions of newsroom logic and news value selection to be identified. The frequency distribution of the judges' evaluations across the original 11-point Thurstone scale is presented in Appendix **Table A3**. Appendix **Table A4** presents the measures of central tendency (mean, median, and mode) calculated for each statement prior to normalization. The interpretation thresholds used to classify the aggregated evaluation index are presented in Appendix **Table A5**. The grouped frequency distribution of Thurstone responses according to interpretive evaluation levels is shown in Appendix **Table A6**. The transformation of the original 11-point Thurstone scale into the normalized -5 to +5 scale is presented in Appendix **Table A7**.

5. Discussion

The generalized statistical picture can be translated as follows: it means that experts show very high consensus and there is almost no polarization of opinion. As Thurstone-type scaling logic requires, if we sort the means conceptually, three interval zones appear very clearly. In the first zone, marked as very high means (7.5 - 10), the following statements reached near-maximum agreement:

1. Information was mainly obtained from international media
2. Georgian media used Western sources
3. Coverage by specialists was good when it happened
4. Correct and objective coverage is necessary
5. When ISIS involved Georgian citizens, coverage had news value

In this zone, experts fully agree that Georgian media was dependent on foreign media agenda, and audiences perceived foreign media as primary and more trustworthy.

In the second zone, marked as medium means (4 - 6), the following statements reached this benchmark and show a high degree of correspondence with factors 1 - 4 and 7 - 8:

1. Coverage was impulsive
2. Pankisi was over-connected with extremism
3. Coverage needed more time
4. Batirashvili was sometimes heroized
5. Events became "dangerous for Georgia" only after 2015
6. Focus was on Georgian fighters rather than the Syrian conflict itself
7. Russian media was sometimes used as a source
8. Political framing (pro-West/pro-Russia)

This zone describes the logic of selection in Georgian TV newsrooms: Syria became relevant only when it could be domesticated through: 1) Pankisi; 2) Georgian citizens; 3) political orientation; 4) sensational elements. This is a direct empirical confirmation of Montgomery's "near vs far" news relevance and Galtung & Ruge's proximity and reference to elite persons.

The third zone, marked as very low means (1 - 3), shows the statements that received near-unanimous strong agreement:

1. No analytical stories remembered
2. Processes were not analyzed
3. Terminological and factual errors occurred
4. Religious, geopolitical, historical aspects were not discussed
5. Syrian crisis was treated as something “far away”
6. Terrorist propaganda was sometimes unintentionally amplified
7. Coverage was not intensive
8. Pankisi discussion was superficial
9. New-involved persons called ISIS a “state” (major error)

Experts state that Georgian coverage was characterized by: absence of analysis, context, continuity, and professional depth, which reveals a structural newsroom competence problem.

Gradation data as a coherent cognitive map of how experts perceive Georgian media logic is able to reconstruct the model of media logic: Georgian media does not understand the full context → Therefore, foreign conflicts are placed at the end of broadcasts → They become relevant only when domesticated (Pankisi, Batirashvili, Georgians) → Coverage is fragmentary, event-driven, not process-driven → Analytical journalism is nearly absent → Dependence on Western media creates secondary agenda-setting → Occasional sensational visuals distort perception.

Hypothesis 1 is directly supported by Block 1, Statements 3 and 6 (very high scores), Medium-zone scaling cluster (4 - 6 means), and Experts’ consensus that Syria became relevant only when domesticated. This logical chain represents operationalization of Galtung & Ruge’s theory in the sense of *proximity* and *personalization*, and Montgomery’s vision in the sense of *near vs. far relevance*.

Hypothesis 2: This is supported by very high means in the sense of portraying international media as a primary source (Block 2: 1, 3, 27); very low means: no analysis, errors, lack of context (Block 2: 9, 10, 11, 12, 17, 29, 31, 33); Experts statements about lack of understanding of global context. This is a direct operationalization of Agenda-setting dependency theory, weak international journalism capacity, and newsroom competence problems. So, the Syrian crisis did not become news in Georgia because of its geopolitical or humanitarian magnitude, but only when it could be reframed through domestic proximity and sensational personalization.

The scaling results demonstrate an exceptionally high level of expert consensus that Syrian war coverage in Georgian television was characterized by dependency on Western media sources, episodic and impulsive reporting, lack of analytical depth, and domestication of the conflict primarily through the Pankisi Gorge and Georgian fighters, rather than through contextual understanding of the conflict itself.

We find it interesting to pay more attention to the representation of Batirashvili (items 23 - 26, 32)

Regarding Batirashvili experts’ statements were articulated as follows:

- He was overemphasized
- Connected constantly to Pankisi

- Sometimes heroized
- But also some balance existed

This is exactly the personalization + proximity + elite-person news value combination.

Expert assessment reveals that Georgian media representation of the Syrian crisis was characterized by domestication of foreign news through proximity and personalization, fragmentation of geopolitical context, reliance on external sources without analytical processing, and episodic attention triggered by Georgian involvement.

6. Conclusion

Importantly, the study depicts that Georgian media did not actively distort the Syrian crisis for political purposes. Rather, the distortion occurred through omission: lack of continuity, lack of context, lack of thematic knowledge, and overreliance on external sources without editorial processing. This resulted in fragmentary, event-driven coverage in which the global logic of the conflict was lost.

In conclusion, it is necessary to highlight two perspectives on the topic, theoretical and practical. From a theoretical perspective, this case demonstrates how news value theory operates in small media systems with limited international reporting capacity. Proximity is not merely geographical but constructed through personalization and national relevance. When such proximity cannot be established, even conflicts of global historical significance may fail to achieve sustained agenda presence. From a practical perspective, the findings highlight the need for stronger thematic education of editors and producers in international politics, improved analytical processing of foreign news, and greater awareness of visual ethics in conflict reporting. Without these improvements, small media systems remain vulnerable to fragmentary representations of global crises and to unintentionally amplifying the communicative strategies of extremist actors.

Ultimately, the Syrian crisis serves here not only as a case study of past media coverage, but as a diagnostic model for understanding how contemporary Georgian television mediates distant wars today. The structural patterns identified in this research remain visible in coverage of current global conflicts, demonstrating the continuing relevance of studying ISIS-era representation for present-day journalism practice.

Author Contributions

Maia Shamanauri: Data collection, literature review and writing. Khatuna Maisashvili: Conceptualization and methodology.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Appendix

Table A1. Thurstone scaling results: motivation for media use.

Statement No.	Mean	Median	Mode
1	6.08	6	6
2	6.00	6	6
3	5.08	5	5
4	6.00	6	6
5	6.17	6	6
6	7.42	7	7
7	4.42	4	4

Table A2. Thurstone scaling results: evaluation of georgian television coverage.

Statement No.	Mean	Median	Mode
8	9.50	10.00	10
9	3.08	3.00	3
10	8.67	9.00	10
11	1.75	1.50	1
12	1.67	1.50	1
13	1.33	1.00	1
14	2.08	2.00	2
15	1.58	2.00	2
16	1.42	1.00	1
17	2.50	2.00	2
18	7.42	7.00	7
19	5.08	5.00	5
20	3.42	3.00	3
21	1.42	1.00	1
22	4.33	4.00	4
23	2.75	3.00	3
24	7.58	8.00	8
25	10.08	10.00	10
26	3.83	3.50	3
27	1.33	1.00	1
28	2.33	2.00	2
29	1.33	1.00	1
30	5.00	5.00	5
31	1.00	1.00	1

Continued

32	1.17	1.00	1
33	5.75	6.00	6
34	2.83	3.00	3
35	4.33	4.50	5
36	5.00	5.00	5
37	4.25	4.00	4
38	3.58	3.50	3
39	4.42	4.00	4
40	1.83	2.00	2
41	4.00	4.00	4
42	2.50	3.00	3
43	4.67	5.00	5
44	8.83	9.00	9

Note. Mean, median, and mode were calculated from judges' ratings using the original 11-point Thurstone scale prior to normalization.

Testing 1 (through mode)

Null hypothesis (H_0): The mean score of all statements ≥ 0 .

In this hypothesis test, we use scores calculated from the derived scaling procedure. Each statement was evaluated by 12 judges on a scale from 1 to 11, where 6 represents a neutral response, 1 represents an extremely negative assessment, and 11 represents an extremely positive assessment. The scale value for each statement is defined as the mode of these evaluations. The final score is a normalization of this scale to a range from -5 to $+5$.

Testing of the null hypothesis demonstrates that the mean score of all statements is less than zero (p -value < 0.01). The 95% confidence interval for the mean score is $[-2.7; -1.1]$.

Alternative hypothesis (H_1): The mean score of all statements is less than zero.

Hypothesis Test Parameters

Parameter	Value
Type of test	One-tailed (less than)
Hypothesized mean	0
Sample size	44
Sample mean	-1.886
Sample standard deviation	2.643
Standard error of the mean	0.398
Test statistic (t)	-4.734
Degrees of freedom	43
p -value	0.000

Since p -value < 0.05 , the null hypothesis is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis.

Confidence Interval

Parameter	Value
Confidence level	95%
Critical value (t)	2.02
Lower bound	-2.7
Upper bound	-1.1

In this hypothesis test, we use scores calculated from the derived grading scale. Each statement was evaluated by 12 judges on a scale from 1 to 11 (where 6 represents a neutral response, 1 represents an extremely negative assessment, and 11 represents an extremely positive assessment). The scale value for each statement is defined as the mode of these evaluations. The final score is a normalization of this scale to a range from -5 to +5. Testing of the null hypothesis shows that the mean score of all statements is less than zero (p -value < 0.01). The 95% confidence interval for the mean score is [-2.7; -1.1]. The statistically significant negative mean confirms that expert evaluations consistently tend toward a negative assessment of the informational value, analytical quality, and professional standards of Georgian media coverage of the Syrian crisis.

Testing 2 (through mean)

Null hypothesis: The mean score of all statements is ≥ 0 .

In this hypothesis test, we use scores calculated from a grading scale derived through arithmetic means. Each statement was evaluated by 12 judges on a scale from 1 to 11 (where 6 represents a neutral response, 1 represents an extremely negative assessment, and 11 represents an extremely positive assessment). The scale value for each statement is defined as the arithmetic mean of these evaluations. The final score is a normalization of this scale to a range from -5 to +5 (scale value -6 corresponds to the score).

Testing of the null hypothesis demonstrates that the mean score of all statements is below zero (p -value < 0.01). The 95% confidence interval for the mean score is [-2.5; -1.1].

Alternative hypothesis: The mean score of all statements is less than 0.

Hypothesis testing

- Type of test: One-tailed (less than)
- Hypothesized mean: 0

Indicator	Value
Sample size	44
Sample mean	-1.799
Sample standard deviation	2.461
Standard error of mean	0.371
Test statistic (t)	-4.850
Degrees of freedom	43
p -value	0.000

Since $p\text{-value} < 0.05$, the null hypothesis is rejected in favor of the alternative hypothesis.

Confidence interval

- Confidence level: 95%
- t-multiplier: 2.02
- Lower bound: -2.5
- Upper bound: -1.1

In this hypothesis test, we use scores calculated from a grading scale derived through arithmetic means. Each statement was evaluated by 12 judges on a scale from 1 to 11 (where 6 represents a neutral response, 1 represents an extremely negative assessment, and 11 represents an extremely positive assessment). The scale value for each statement is defined as the arithmetic mean of these evaluations. The final score is a normalization of this scale to a range from -5 to $+5$ (a scale value of -6 corresponds to the score). Testing of the null hypothesis shows that the mean score of all statements is below zero ($p\text{-value} < 0.01$). The 95% confidence interval for the mean score is $[-2.5; -1.1]$.

Testing 3 (through median)

Null hypothesis: The mean score of all statements ≥ 0 .

In this hypothesis test, we use scores calculated from a grading scale derived using the median. Each statement was evaluated by 12 judges on a scale from 1 to 11 (where 6 represents a neutral response, 1 represents an extremely negative assessment, and 11 represents an extremely positive assessment). The scale value for each statement is defined as the arithmetic mean of these evaluations. The final score is a normalization of this scale to a range from -5 to $+5$.

Testing of the null hypothesis shows that the mean score of all statements is below zero ($p\text{-value} < 0.01$). The 95% confidence interval for the mean score is $[-2.7; -1.1]$.

Alternative hypothesis: The mean score of all statements is less than zero.

Hypothesis testing parameters:

- Hypothesis type: Two-tailed (not equal to)
- Hypothesized mean: 0
- Sample size: 44
- Sample mean: -1.875
- Sample standard deviation: 2.559
- Standard error of mean: 0.386
- Test statistic (t): -4.860
- Degrees of freedom: 43
- $p\text{-value}$: 0.000 (since $p < 0.05$, the null hypothesis is rejected)

Regardless of which metric is used to calculate the grading scale, the mean score is below zero and, with 95% confidence, lies within the interval $[-2.7; -1.1]$.

In this hypothesis test, we use scores calculated from a grading scale derived using the **median**. Each statement was evaluated by 12 judges on a scale from 1 to 11 (where 6 represents a neutral response, 1 represents an extremely negative assessment, and 11 represents an extremely positive assessment). The scale value is

defined as the arithmetic mean of these evaluations. The final score is a normalization of this scale to a range from -5 to $+5$ (a scale value of -6 corresponds to the score). Testing of the null hypothesis shows that the mean score of all statements is below zero (p -value < 0.01). The 95% confidence interval for the mean score is $[-1.1; -2.5]$.

Methodological Note 1. Hypothesis Testing Procedures

Table A3. Frequency distribution of expert evaluations on the 11-point thurstone scale (Normalized to $-5 \dots +5$).

Scale Value	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Score	-5	-4	-3	-2	-1	0	1	2	3	4	5
Frequency	8	6	7	5	6	5	2	1	1	2	1
Frequency	9	5	7	5	6	5	2	1	1	3	0
Relative Frequency	0.182	0.136	0.159	0.114	0.136	0.114	0.045	0.023	0.023	0.045	0.023
Percentage Frequency	18.2	13.6	15.9	11.4	13.6	11.4	4.5	2.3	2.3	4.5	2.3

Table A4. Measures of central tendency on the original and normalized scales.

Measure	(Original Scale)	(Normalized Score)
Mean (average result)	4.25	-1.75
Median (middle value)	4	-2
Mode (most frequent value)	5	-1
Maximum value	10	4
Minimum value	1	-5

Table A5. Threshold ranges for interpreting the aggregated evaluation index.

Category	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
High	133	220
Medium	45	132
Low	-44	44
Negative	-132	-45
Extremely Negative	-220	-133

Observed result: -81 (falls into the Negative range).

Table A6. Grouped frequency distribution of thurstone responses by interpretive evaluation levels.

Category	Count	Proportion
Extremely negative (1 or 2)	14	0.318
Negative (3 or 4)	11	0.273
Low (5, 6, or 7)	14	0.295
Medium (8 or 9)	3	0.046
High (10 or 11)	2	0.068

Table A7. Transformation of 11-Point thurstone gradation into a normalized –5 to +5 score scale with frequency distribution.

Scale (Gradation)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	Total
Score	–5	–4	–3	–2	–1	0	1	2	3	4	5	-
Frequency	8	6	7	5	6	5	2	1	1	2	1	44
Frequency (alt.)	7	7	5	6	7	4	3	0	3	2	0	44
Relative Frequency	0.182	0.136	0.159	0.114	0.136	0.114	0.045	0.023	0.023	0.045	0.023	1.00
Percentage Frequency	18.2	13.6	15.9	11.4	13.6	11.4	4.5	2.3	2.3	4.5	2.3	100%