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# **Implicit argumentation: Media and the shaping of public opinion about Russia**

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of explicit or implicit argumentation in explaining, and accounting for, the views people form about political events; events of which, necessarily, they generally have only mediated knowledge. The media do not only inform people of the events which happen, but also exercise a role in forming opinions about those events. This may occur through selection of what is printed, but also in editorial comments or indirectly through framing strategies, use of evaluative language, and so on.

The Skripal/Novichok case in 2018 offers a good opportunity to assess some of these points, since it provoked great press attention and public interest and, moreover, Britain's politicians advanced a specific theory relating to the guilt of the Russian state, and Putin's personal involvement. The paper attempts to probe how far people's opinions on the case depend on media exposure, and to explore patterns of evidentiality in the discourse of interviewees about the topic.

Keywords: argumentation, implicature, media, evidentiality, Novichok.

## **1. Introduction**

This study of the role of media in influencing public opinion originated in fieldwork conducted in the UK following the Skripal/Novichok affair in 2018 (Larina et al. 2019; Ponton 2019). The analysis focuses on the explicit/implicit argumentation speakers deploy, in responding to questions, to support their opinions on such complex public events, of which they will only have mediated knowledge. Use is made of theories of conversational

implicature (Wilson – Sperber 1998) and inference (Levinson 1987), as well as argumentation theory (Toulmin 1958; van Eemeren – Grootendorst 1984).

On 5 March 2018, British people were informed that a Russian ex-spy, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter Yulia had been found on a park bench in Salisbury in a confused state. Attention was immediately directed to possible Russian involvement by Metropolitan Police assistant commissioner Mark Rowley who, in a BBC interview the next day, compared the incident to the Litvinenko case (Guardian 06/03/2018). Later the same day Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, replying to a question in the House of Commons, directly accused the Kremlin of involvement (*Independent* 06/03/2018). On 11 March Prime Minister Theresa May told the House of Commons that the Skripals were poisoned by “a nerve agent of a type developed by Russia”. She identified the toxin as “Novichok”, and continued “there are therefore only two plausible explanations for what happened in Salisbury on the 4th of March: either this was a direct act by the Russian State against our country or the Russian government lost control of its potentially catastrophically damaging nerve agent and allowed it to get into the hands of others” (*American Rhetoric*).

The hypothesis of Russian involvement, therefore, was proclaimed by the British Prime Minister in an official context, a report to the House of Commons on the affair, and the story was afforded the media prominence granted to significant events.

At a distance of time from these events, the evidence of Moscow’s involvement in the attack has appeared slight. Instead of hard facts, the rest of the year saw the eruption of a full-scale diplomatic incident, a war of words between the British and Russian governments, the mutual expulsion of diplomats on a scale not witnessed since the Cold War (Washington Post 14/03/2018). The release of CCTV photos, in September 2018, of two Russian men supposedly involved in the attacks received a good deal of coverage in British media, ensuring that the Skripal case remained newsworthy. Other highlights in the story were the men’s identification as GRU agents (Guardian 28/10/2018) and their appearance on Russian television, where they claimed to be tourists wanting to visit Salisbury cathedral.

The Skripal case, therefore, was an episode which provided an opportunity to observe the discursive representation of Russia in British media and, in the summer of 2018, I conducted interviews with shoppers in Glasgow and Greenock to probe the formation of opinion about the case. In this paper, the focus is on the way some respondents use explicit or implicit argumentation to support their views.

## 2. The role of the press in forming opinion

As Lippmann long ago argued, the press exercises a fundamental role in determining our “cognitive map of the world” (Lippmann 1922, in McCombs – Reynolds 2002: 2; see also Cottle 2003: 4). Objectivity in the media has traditionally been seen as among the most important professional values in the sector (Schudson 1978: 9, in Hackett 1984: 229-230) and, though factors such as personal views or editorial stance may still influence the representation of events, most Western journalists still cherish the ideal of independence from the influence of powerful social actors such as corporations or governments (Berkowitz et al. 2004; Ryan 2009). Though the notion has been revised and re-evaluated within the profession (Gauthier 1993), in most Western countries journalists still subscribe to an ideology of objectivity that sees their role as that of “disinterested transmitters of the news” (Hanitzsch 2007: 372; see also Herman – Chomsky 2002: 2). However, their part in supporting hegemonic discourses has also received a good deal of attention within critical discourse studies (Fowler 1991; van Dijk 1991, 2007; Herman – Chomsky 2002; Larina et al. 2011; Ivanova 2016; Ozyumenko – Larina 2017).

There are two possible views of the role and function of the press; on the one hand, it acts as a bridge between events and the public, informing the latter of what is going on in the g/local community. On the other, as White (2000: 379) says, journalistic discourse is regarded with suspicion by critical analysts and media theorists as “value laden and ultimately ideological, as a social force typically acting to support the interests of various economic and political elites”, and by the public as purveying news that is “inaccurate, commercialised, sensationalist and biased” (see also Grabe et al. 2010).

Because they select newsworthy items from among the mass of daily world events, the press set a public agenda for discourse about them. An influential and still relevant early study of news reporting was Galtung – Ruge (1965), who drew up a list of criteria involved in the process of selecting what to print. As an example, consider the BBC’s coverage of Boris Johnson’s claim on 16th March that Vladimir Putin was personally involved in ordering the attack. The decision to cover the story satisfied Galtung – Ruge’s criteria 9-12 (1965: 68): it concerns élite nations (Britain and Russia), and élite people (Britain’s Foreign Secretary and the Russian president); it is therefore personalised and finally, it is a negative story. These aspects are all reflected in BBC coverage of the story: “our quarrel is with Putin’s Kremlin, and with his decision – and we think it overwhelmingly likely that it was his decision – to direct the use of a nerve agent on the streets of the UK, on the

streets of Europe, for the first time since World War II. That is why we are at odds with Russia" (*BBC News* 16/03/2018).

There are several features of this statement that merit critical inspection. Pronoun reference is vague: who are the referents of "our" and "we", for example? Possible answers include the British government, the Conservative Party, British intelligence, the foreign office, and so on. The verb *to think* does not construe the same level of certainty as *to know*, while the phrase *overwhelmingly likely* appears to leave little room for any doubt, but nevertheless stops short of construing certainty. The reference to World War II places the Novichok episode in a military frame, thus positioning Russia as an enemy state that has committed an act of war. In the current paper, these aspects are not followed up; it is simply noted that negative perceptions of Russia and its president were common in the Western press generally, in the period following the attacks.

Johnson's comments received widespread newspaper coverage (*Financial Times* 16/03/2018; *Telegraph* 16/03/2018; *Guardian* 16/03/2018). The *Telegraph* online version, for example, also embellishes Johnson's words with a striking lexical choice. It carries a picture of Johnson and Putin above the caption: "The Foreign Secretary said it was "overwhelmingly likely" that the Russian President was behind the *attempted murder*" (*Telegraph* 16/03/2018). By printing the views of a named social actor (Johnson) through a device known as attribution (Martin and White 2005: 111) typical of press discourse (Fowler 1991), the paper avoids possible accusations that they are spreading unfounded rumours about Russia or its president. Such reporting was not confined to right of centre media sources; the most prominent representative of Britain's left leaning press, the *Guardian*, has also published a series of articles that imply Russia's involvement in the affair (*Guardian* 19/04/2018, *Guardian* 03/05/2018, etc.).

These comments about the press background are included because, in mediated public space in Britain following the Novichok events, a negative picture of Russia, and especially of Vladimir Putin, was common. It was a persistent feature of comments of politicians and other influential social figures about the case, repeated across various forms of media, as in the instances just cited. On BBC television's *Newsnight* programme, for example, reporter Gabriel Gatehouse spoke of the government's "circumstantial evidence", referred to the Litvinenko case, and used the loaded expression "the Russians have form".

That the media have the ability to influence public opinion is not a proposition that is seriously doubted, and much research has been devoted

to the question.<sup>1</sup> It is not impossible that careful readers may disambiguate the nuances in meaning in Johnson's comments above, but it is more likely that what will remain are the broad contours of his accusation. As Gilbert et al. (1993: 222) say: "repeated exposure to assertions for which there is no evidence increases the likelihood that people will believe those assertions".

Thus, in questioning members of the public about the Novichok affair, I was also interested to see how far this negative picture was reflected in the opinions of consumers of news, and also how far what they suggest as "evidence" in support of their views derives directly from mediated information. One striking feature of the answers provided, in fact, was the apparent willingness of respondents to enlarge on their replies, to state their views, and then add their grounds for holding them. It was this aspect of the interaction that became a focus for subsequent analysis. The questions asked concern the identification of covert patterns of argumentation, of the reliability of one's sources of information, and of *evidentiality* (Aikhenvald 2004).<sup>2</sup> The perspective on evidentiality used in this paper is that described by Bednarek and Caple in their study of journalism in an Anglo context, "As its name suggests, expressions of Evidentiality give information about the bases (or "evidence") of statements and information. "Evidential" expressions answer questions such as "How do we know? What is the basis of journalists' and others' knowledge? What kind of evidence do we have for this?" (Bednarek – Caple 2012: 148-149).

<sup>1</sup> See Gershkoff – Kushner 2005; who explore the role of media in convincing public opinion in the US of the link between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda; other works on the same topic are Kull et al. 2003; Jamieson – Waldman 2003. The consensus appears to be that public opinion is dependent on media representations to a considerable degree, though much also depends on pre-existing patterns of thought.

<sup>2</sup> In her book *Evidentiality* (2004), Aikhenvald distinguishes between the layman's understanding of the term and that of the linguist, pointing out that for the former, but not for the latter, it does not necessarily refer to the speaker's attitude towards the truth value of the proposition. For her, the term refers to the source of information, and she speaks of visual evidentials ("I saw it") and reported evidentials ("they told me") (Aikhenvald 2004: 3-4). She says there are some languages where there is no relation between such linguistic resources and the truth value of utterances. However, she also cites authors who maintain a different position, for example Dendale – Tasmowski (2001: 343), who claim that "in the evidential systems of many languages, the forms marking the source of information also mark the speaker's attitude towards the reliability of that information". The clearest example they provide refers to the Wintu language: "The Wintu never say it is bread. They say, 'It looks-to-me bread' or 'It feels-to-me bread' or 'I-have-heard-it-to-be bread' or 'I-infer-from-evidence-that-it-is-bread' or 'I-think-it-to-be-bread', or, vaguely and timelessly, 'according-to-my-experience-be bread'" (Lee 1959: 137, in Dendale – Tasmowski 2001: 1).

Sapir was among the first to trace the grammatical sources of knowledge about the world, according to whether something is known “by actual experience, by hearsay, by inference” (1921: 108-109, in Aikhenvald 2014: 4). If our only source of information about the Novichok affair, for example, is via a report in the media, then it is correct that the status of such “knowledge” should be de-constructed. One could say correctly, for example, that one *knows* only that one heard a certain report, but not that one possesses the kind of knowledge that derives from first-hand experience of the actual event. Unless they live in the immediate area, people will know about the episode only because of what they read in the newspaper or see on television or other media.

### 3. Methodology

Data were collected from several sources: among the general public in Greenock shopping centre, with community workers in Port Glasgow, and outside the Caledonian University, Glasgow, in several visits during summer 2018. Where people were happy to be interviewed, recorded personal interviews were used with fixed questions, of which the main ones were:

- What’s your general opinion of Russia and Russians?
- What factors affect your opinions about Russians?
- Do you think the British government are telling the truth about what happened in Salisbury?
- What do you think really happened?
- Do you think President Putin personally ordered the operation?

The answers were later transcribed, and the same questions were handed out as a questionnaire when people did not wish to speak. 25 recordings of conversations on the topic, and 40 questionnaires were collected. The audio data is much richer than the written, since people expressed themselves more freely and at greater length in this context; written answers were frequently monosyllabic or consisted even of dashes. The following discussion is therefore based on the oral data.

As well as from the notions of evidentiality already outlined, the analytical methodology derives from pragmatic theory, beginning with Grice (1989), exploring meanings that are inferred (Levinson 1987; Wilson – Sperber 1986; Wilson – Carston 2007) in a dialogic perspective (Kecskes 2014, 2016). Reference is made to notions of communicative salience (Kecskes 2014,

2016) and relevance (Sperber – Wilson 1986; Wilson 1994). Meaning is teased out through the application of a Gricean perspective, as in Shiro (1994), but applied to interactive contexts rather than continuous text. The data is analysed from the interactive or dialogic, pragmatic perspective promoted by Kecskes (2016: 27), who explains that:

the speaker-hearer not only interprets but also reacts to the other interlocutor’s utterance. The basic dialogic principle is that human beings are dialogic individuals (social individuals) who communicate in dialogic interaction not only by producing and understanding utterances but also by acting and reacting.

The analysis will include reference to Grice’s cooperative maxims (for convenience, indicated by the abbreviations G1, G2, etc.). These are:

1. The maxim of quantity, where one tries to be as informative as one possibly can, and gives as much information as is needed, and no more.
2. The maxim of quality, where one tries to be truthful, and does not give information that is false or that is not supported by evidence.
3. The maxim of relation, where one tries to be relevant, and says things that are pertinent to the discussion.
4. The maxim of manner, be clear brief and orderly avoid ambiguity. (Grice 1989)

These maxims are at the heart of explorations in discourse pragmatics (Levinson 1983: 100; Wilson – Sperber 2012: 1), since they allow for the investigation of a range of non-surface meanings, and thus afford a richer picture of discursive interaction. To give a brief example, consider the following exchange:

- (1) Question: Do you think the British government are telling the truth about what happened in Salisbury?  
 Answer: I think to an extent they are I think the evidence we’ve got it’s more likely that these two guys were possibly responsible for it in whatever way

In terms of G1, a sufficient answer could consist of the first clause alone, “I think to an extent they are”, which would leave it to the questioner to follow up this qualified statement, or not. This would be more satisfactory than the



simple “Yes”, since it is clear from the speaker’s qualification (*to an extent*) that he does have reservations. The response thus flouts the quantity maxim, and Kecskes (2014, 2016: 33) would explain this in terms of the notion of “salience”, i.e. that the speaker imagines his interlocutor to be interested in his reasons for thinking the way he does; in other words, a follow-up “*why*”? is anticipated. It is also of interest that the responder continues with the phrase “the evidence we’ve got”. In the light of Grice’s third maxim, on relation, this allows us to connect the two phrases by understanding the speaker’s conversational implicature (Wilson – Sperber 1998: 2) to be that this “evidence” has affected his own “thinking”, i.e. he can be understood as saying something like “this is what I think, and here are my grounds for thinking it”.

In an empirical study comparing native speaker vs. second language users’ interpretations of inferences, Shiro (1994: 177) speaks of inferential processes supplying “missing links” across different parts of a text. Parenthetically, it may be that this phenomenon of not only answering the question but also providing unasked-for grounds for one’s opinions, a frequent occurrence in the data, is linked to the area of face. As Brown and Levinson point out, “being in the right” is socially valued, while being seen as one who has wrong opinions, or who takes their views directly from the media, is stigmatised. In their words, being “wrong, misguided or unreasonable about some issue” is “associated with disapproval” (Brown – Levinson 1978: 66). Therefore, it is possible to see what is going on in the above fragment as the responder anticipating an objection from his interlocutor, attempting to discursively construct a social image that is positively valued, i.e., that of one who is in the right. The same perspective allows us to explicate the presence of hedging (Hyland 1996, 1998), in the response, construed through various linguistic devices (*more likely, possibly, in whatever way*). The speaker has also covered himself against the possibility of losing face through being proved wrong at some future date.

Thus, connected to the question of evidentiality is the notion that such fragments of text may be seen to contain implicit argumentation – in support of the speaker’s views, warding off contrary views, and so on. In a context of studies of formal argumentation, Toulmin (1958: 11-12) speaks of the necessity to provide “backing, data, facts, evidence, considerations, features” that support a particular view. The complete citation is as follows:

Whatever the nature of the particular assertion may be – whether it is a meteorologist predicting rain for tomorrow, an injured workman alleging negligence on the part of his employer, a historian defending

the character of the Emperor Tiberius, a doctor diagnosing measles, a businessman questioning the honesty of a client, or an art critic commending the paintings of Piero della Francesca – in each case we can challenge the assertion, and demand to have our attention drawn to the grounds (backing, data, facts, evidence, considerations, features) on which the merits of the assertion are to depend (Toulmin 1958: 11-12).

The suggestion, therefore, is that something similar may occur in many contexts of everyday interaction, at an implicit level, whenever the speaker feels prompted to justify a stated opinion. While recognising the differences between contexts of formal argumentation and informal discursive interaction, some of Toulmin’s mechanisms of argumentative structure are found to be relevant for the explication of a kind of implicit argumentation. The discourse may concern epistemic propositions – the real-world situation under discussion, as in our example – or propositions of the deontic type, proposals for what should be done about it (Searle 1969: 175).

## 4. Data: Some analysis

### 4.1 Speaker One

The following is an application of this methodology to some extracts from the data, beginning with one subject’s response to the question *How far do you think the British government are telling the truth about what happened in Salisbury?*:

Table 1. Speaker One

1.	I think they are unless they’re making it up and the CCTV evidence you know you
2.	could say that they could be actors but to be fair then they appeared on Russian TV
3	and it was quite comical really and then of course what they’ve done now they’ve
4.	tracked one of them down there and I think they even got a picture of Putin with his
5.	arm around him and so there’s some truth there of course there’s timelines from

6.	Salisbury train station they were seen not too far from where the victims were they
7.	said they were going to Salisbury Cathedral and there was no CCTV results of them
8.	doing so and they were back to the train station within about an hour or 30 minutes
9.	I've been to Salisbury Cathedral you spend 3 hours just walking around the place I
10.	think they are telling the truth I know there's a lot of things lately about fake news and
11.	Trump and everything you see now on YouTube so but but you got to make your own
12.	mind up what's out there and then decide I think they are telling the truth

This extract does not show a person whose mind is in the process of being made up, but someone expressing opinions they have already formed, a process which may account for an element of (self)justification, responding to implied questions such as *Why do you think this? What grounds do you have?* This is plain from the first sentence [1]:

(2) I think they are unless they're making it up [1]

Grice's second maxim says: "Be truthful" (G2). At the surface level, then, the speaker's answer is tautological. The notion of people making things up connotes the semantic field of *untruthfulness*, and it is therefore redundant of the speaker to add this comment. In the ordinary way, we do not flout Grice's Quantity maxim (G1) by adding explanatory comments of the following kind:

(3) She's a beautiful girl; that is, she's not ugly

Since Grice's relational maxim (G3) suggests that speech will be both relevant and meaningful, part of conversational interaction regards the sifting by interlocutors of a range of possible meanings, and eventually selecting one which will satisfactorily explain the other's statement. This will generally be determined according to the principle of mutual salience outlined by Kecskes, by which the hearer selects the meaning that is felt to be the "most probable out of all possible" (Kecskes 2014: 176).

I suggest that the above conundrum (why the speaker adds this apparently unnecessary clarifying remark), may be explained in terms of an

attempt to provide discursive justification for the first part of the comment. The response is viewed as part of a covert argumentative strategy, as follows:

Statement	Assumed knowledge / unstated proposition	Implicit argumentation
I think they are unless they're making it up	The British government never make things up	<p><b>Since:</b> There are only two possibilities; either the British government are telling the truth or they are not</p> <p><b>And Since:</b> The British government never make things up</p> <p><b>Therefore:</b> The British government are telling the truth</p>

Figure 1. Speaker One, implicit argumentation

The implicit arguments are displayed using a standard model (Damer 2005; Sinnott-Armstrong – Fogelin 2010) for such “categorical syllogisms”, i.e. major premise / minor premise / conclusion (Corbett 1965: 50).

The speaker’s comment may be seen as an enthymeme, which Kennedy (2007: 21; see also Charteris-Black 2019: 56) explains as the drawing of a conclusion from premises which may be stated or, as here, implied. From a dialogical point of view, the addition “unless they’re making it up” entertains a contrary view; to a degree the speaker opens the dialogical space to a view which he doesn’t hold (White 2003). Once more, the distinction between contexts of formal and informal argumentation should be remembered. The speaker is probably not trying to engage in some kind of improvised debate here; his words may even be taken as a form of phatic communication (Zegarac – Clark 1999); nevertheless, this paper suggests that the perspective of implicit argumentation is a relevant one. There does appear to be an element of implied argumentation present in these lines, as what follows is a series of statements that appear to be backing (Toulmin 1958) for the speaker’s contention. The fact that his response commences with the statement that he thinks “the British government are [telling the truth]” [line 1], and concludes in line 11 with the reiteration of the proposition, would support this interpretation.

He enumerates many items to which his term “evidence” apparently applies:

- (4) The CCTV evidence [1]  
 They appeared on Russian TV [2]  
 They’ve tracked one of them down there [3-4]  
 They got a picture of Putin with his arm round him [4]  
 There’s timelines from Salisbury station [5]  
 They were seen not too far from where the victims were [5-6]  
 They said they were going to Salisbury cathedral and there was no  
 CCTV results of them doing so [6-7]

Moreover, the speaker’s explicit reference to truth (so there’s some truth there, [lines 4-5]) further confirms that these statements can be viewed as contributing to an argumentative frame, of the type where what is at stake is a descriptive version of reality (*this is/is not the way things are*).

Each of these short sentences could be broken down in a similar way to uncover their potential roles within an argumentative framework with a different focus and conclusion, for example:

- (5) They got a picture of Putin with his arm round him [4].

This is another enthymeme, where the implicit argumentative structure is:

- (6) Since: (implicit assumption) the government is right to say that Putin ordered the attacks

And since: Putin is shown embracing the man

Therefore: the man was involved in the attacks

Or:

- (7) They were seen not too far from where the victims were [5-6]  
 Since: (implicit assumption) the men are guilty  
 And since: they had the opportunity to commit the crime  
 Therefore: the men are guilty

Following pragmadialectical conventions (van Eemeren – Grootendorst 2004), the inferences involved in these two fragments could be connected, as follows:

- (8) 1. The British government is right, i.e. Putin is guilty
  - 1.1a one of them features in a picture with Putin
  - 1.1b CCCT pictures show two Russian men close to the place

The grounds for deducing, in the second statement, that the speaker’s underlying assumption is that the men are guilty are as follows: if this is not the implicit assumption, why is the speaker telling us that they were seen near the scene of the crime, something that was also true of thousands of other people in the area that day? This extract is thus an instance of the question-begging logical fallacy; in other words, the conclusion is included in one of the premises (Walton 1995; Hazlett 2006). To sum up, the speaker offers a wide range of circumstances, which he represents as evidence to support the correctness of his view, that the British government are telling the truth.

**4.2 Speaker Two**

In the second extract, below, a speaker with a different view answers the same question:

Table 2. Speaker Two

1.	Do I think Britain are telling the truth? Highly unlikely. I think I’m very wary of you
2.	know what we’re told by our government and I think that in years gone by when data
3.	has been released freedom of information we find out that most governments give out
4.	one minuted information skewed information so no I’m not overly trustworthy of my
5.	government so no

Though the expressed opinion (van Eemeren – Grootendorst 1984: 5) is different, some of the same linguistic devices and rhetorical patterns are noticeable. The opinions are hedged: “I think I’m very wary” [1], “not overly trustworthy” [4]. One rhetorical and pragmatic effect of this strategy is, by stopping short of expressing certainty, to leave a certain space for face saving in the event that her view be proved incorrect.

The speaker focuses attention on the content of the question by repeating it in a rhetorical question [1]. However, like the first speaker, she does not limit her response to the yes/no answer grammatically encouraged by the question,

but goes on to provide the grounds for her view. These grounds amount to a generalised mistrust of the government, construed in a series of sentences:

- (9) Highly unlikely [1]  
 I'm very wary of what we're told by our government [1-2]  
 In years gone by when data has been released, we find out that most governments give out skewed information [3-4]  
 I'm not overly trustworthy of my government [4]  
 No I don't believe they're giving us the right information [5]

This extract too may be analysed in terms of an implicit argument that is added in support of the speaker's view:

Expressed opinion	Assumed knowledge / stated proposition	Implicit argumentation
It is highly unlikely that the government are telling the truth	The British government have made things up in the past	<p><b>Since:</b> The British government are telling us something</p> <p><b>And Since:</b> In the past they have made things up</p> <p><b>Therefore:</b> It is highly unlikely that the British government are telling the truth</p>

Figure 2. Speaker Two, argumentation

The speaker does not simply state the second premise in this argument. Fleshing out her less than coherent discourse in lines [2-4], she appears to be saying: *in the past, when data that has been classified for many years under the Official Secrets act is finally released, governments have been found to have lied, or at least provided unreliable information.* This is the stage of argumentation Toulmin (1958) calls "backing", where support is given to the grounds for advocating the expressed opinion. To the extent that the backing is credible, the argument is convincing. However, though the speaker's remarks here may be true, there is a logical fallacy in this argument too. It would be coherent only if the speaker asserted that the government *always* provide skewed information; there is a chance that the government's communications about the Skripal episode fall into that category of government statements in which the truth is told.

To give the speaker her due, she is not attempting to provide a watertight syllogism and, as already pointed out, through hedging and other linguistic resources for construing uncertainty, she gives discursive recognition to the limitations of her position.

### 4.3 Speaker Three

Table 3. Speaker Three

1.	Do you think the British government are telling the truth about what happened in Salisbury?
2.	No absolutely not
3.	Why not?
4.	The biggest cache of Novichok in Europe is is seven miles away from Salisbury
5.	yeah? the way that the whole investigation has been conducted is reported as having
6.	been conducted and as of them finding a shampoo bottle or whatever it was you know
7.	like a perfume bottle that some two randoms have found it's like if Russia is going to
8.	conduct an operation like that I'm sure as hell they'd be a lot more careful than just
9.	dumping it behind the bin
10.	So what do you think happened?
11.	What I think really happened is it's a failed MI5 hit that's what it looks like that's what
12.	it smelt like when I first saw it there's been nothing that's changed my mind that it's a
13.	British secret service hit that's what it looks like

In a pragmadialectic reconstruction, this complex of argumentation would appear as follows:

- (10) 1. The British government are not telling the truth about what happened in Salisbury, and therefore another explanation, such as that it is a British secret service hit, is plausible
  - 1.i.a There is a big cache of Novichok in Salisbury
  - 1.i.b The Russian secret service would dispose of evidence more carefully



In this case, the speaker does limit his answer to the yes/no alternative suggested by the grammar of the question, leading to a follow up [3], which means that the following argumentation is of an explicit kind. Thus, the dialogue which follows [4-12] can be uncontroversially identified as the speaker's grounds for his opinion, since these have been explicitly requested [3].

There are three main arguments provided in support of this opinion:

- (11) a) The biggest cache of Novichok in Europe is in nearby Salisbury [4]
- b) The Russians would have been more careful than to just dump the bottle behind a bin [5-8]
- c) It looks like/smells like a British secret service hit [10-12]

The first of these grounds relies heavily on the disambiguation of implicatures, since it is simply a factual statement, inviting the hearer to apply G3; the comment is intended to be construed as an answer to the question in [3], i.e. *why do you think the British government are not telling the truth about what happened in Salisbury?* The hearer thus has to know that the British government's own chemical weapons programme is located at Porton Down, near Salisbury, and to construct a possible response from this knowledge, as follows: *I think it was the British government who are responsible, because Porton Down is just down the road from Salisbury.* The speaker initially stops short of making this accusation, digressing in lines [5-8] to give grounds for exculpating the Russians of involvement, but returns to it in [10-12]. The argument is therefore as follows:

Expressed opinion	Assumed knowledge / stated proposition	Implicit argumentation
The attack was a British secret service hit	Porton Down is very close to Salisbury	<p><b>Since:</b> The British government have a nerve gas facility at nearby Porton Down</p> <p><b>And Since (implied premise):</b> The British secret service had ready access to nerve gas</p> <p><b>Therefore:</b> It was a British secret service hit</p>

Figure 3. Speaker Three, argumentation

Again, it is not hard to identify the flaw in this argumentation, which is essentially a form of argument from possibility — since something was possible, it must therefore have happened — however, what is relevant here is the extent to which the argument leans on shared context knowledge between speaker and hearer, and on the correct interpretation of conversational nuances. This is also observable in the speaker’s other comments, where he argues that Russia could not have been responsible. This, too, assumes that speaker and interlocutor share knowledge concerning the details of the case. The context knowledge assumed is briefly summarised on Wikipedia as follows:

On 30 June 2018, in Amesbury, two British nationals, Charlie Rowley and Dawn Sturgess, were admitted to Salisbury District Hospital in Wiltshire, England. Police determined that they were poisoned by a Novichok nerve agent of the same kind used in the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury, 8 miles (13 km) away, almost four months prior.

The couple had found a perfume bottle thrown away in a park, and sprayed themselves. From these events it was claimed that the Russians allegedly involved in the Skripal attack were also responsible for the death of Sturgess. Home Secretary Sajid Javid, for instance, accused Russia of using Britain as a “dumping ground” for poison, and in the same BBC article reporting on this statement, security correspondent Gordon Corera said that the most likely hypothesis was that “the Novichok was left over from an item discarded after the attack on the Skripals” (*BBC News* 05/07/2018).

This is the argumentative pattern in this case:

Expressed opinion	Assumed knowledge / stated proposition	Implicit argumentation
The Russians were not involved	Russian secret service personnel are highly efficient	<p><b>Since:</b> The Russian secret service is famously efficient</p> <p><b>And Since:</b> To toss away a piece of incriminating evidence is a demonstration of incompetence</p> <p><b>Therefore:</b> It could not have been the Russian secret service who were responsible</p>

Figure 4. Speaker Three, argumentation (ii)

To the extent that the backing is believed, this is a coherent argument. What it does not do, of course, is support the speaker's main contention here, that the British secret service were responsible. To attempt to use it for that purpose would be to offer another instance of the "false alternative" logical fallacy (Damer 2005: 143). The case is not one where, if Russians were not responsible, it must have been the British; there are many other possibilities. However, in terms of providing an answer to the question "why don't you believe what the government are telling us?", this line of thinking is entirely understandable since, as we have seen, one key aspect of the British government's message about the Skripal case was that responsibility for it lay with Russia.

## 5. Discussion

In the case described in our study, all speakers, whose primary source is either visual or reported information, attempt to provide implicit or explicit reasons to support the truth value of opinions about the way things are. Both of these kinds of information come from media sources. This seems an inescapable feature of post-modern societies where, under pressure from globalisation, personal or collective subjectivities are distributed across remote spatio-temporal areas, in patterns that are controlled by mass media and, increasingly, by information technologies (Lyotard 1984; Kellner 1995; Arnett 2002). Our period has seen an explosion in the phenomenon of infotainment (Thussu 2007), so that it is possible to follow — indeed, it is hard to escape doing so — the development of dramatic events such as wars or natural disasters, in real time, across a variety of media (Carruthers 2000; Tumber – Palmer 2004; Esser 2009). The Skripal case is another instance of this, an episode which involves events and characters whose milieu is constituted by complex geo-political realities entirely detached from the day-to-day realities of the wo/man in the British street.

All this means that, at the very least, there has been a general broadening of perceptions, so that citizens of post-modern societies now receive information about a range of global issues. This information is constantly updated, modified, confirmed or denied; facts are presented in intertextual patterns which borrow information from other relevant stories (Fass – Main 2014). They may disappear from the public consciousness for a period, to resurface in dramatic fashion as some new facts emerge.

Questions like those in the questionnaire used in this study are typical of chat show formats that shape opinion on whatever affairs are currently

in the public domain. Thus, it is not surprising that people do have opinions about what is going on, not just in their local communities. Rather, it is surprising when they do not, as in this example from the data:

- (12) Do you think the British government are telling the truth about what happened in Salisbury?  
 I don't know anything about it  
 You don't know anything about the Novichok thing you don't know anything about the Salisbury thing?  
 No

As mentioned above, to display ignorance about current affairs is socially stigmatised. After some further probing, this interviewee revealed that she knew something about the events, and also that she had formed an opinion about them:

- (13) so what do you think really happened in Salisbury?  
 I'm guessing maybe they've been into a trouble or maybe got into a fight a disagreement or something or just some person just dipped it in and poisoned them but it's not particularly the Russians that's done it

The speaker's expressed opinion, then, is oriented towards an implicit accusation: *do you think the Russians were responsible for the attack?* Her response would appear to reflect the way the case had been framed in British media, and by government figures such as May and Johnson, in terms of Russian guilt/innocence.

If we return to the first speaker, it is plain that every circumstance he adduces in favour of his hypothesis comes from some form of media, from newspaper or television reports:

- (14) 1. The CCTV evidence  
 2. They appeared on Russian TV  
 3. They've tracked one of them down there  
 4. They got a picture of Putin with his arm round him  
 5. There's timelines from Salisbury station  
 6. They were seen not too far from where the victims were  
 7. They said they were going to Salisbury cathedral and there was no CCTV results of them doing so

In Aikhenvald's (2004) terms, this consists partly of "visual" evidentials. The man saw, via the medium of TV, actual images of the suspects. He saw the men on Russian TV, and a photo of Putin with his arm around one of them. Reported evidentials are also present [3, 5, 6, 7]. Therefore, it is on the basis of such "evidence" that this person has reached their opinion on the case. Naturally we need to distinguish between what might count as proof in a legal context, and the more informal nature of conversational evidentiality, where what is meant is simply the grounds for holding an opinion, however sound they might be. To take a legal perspective on the speaker's "evidence" here would be to show up the weakness of the grounds. For example, some of the CCTV evidence [1] consisted of shots of the two Russians doing nothing more sinister than walking around Salisbury in broad daylight, something thousands of other people also did that day (YouTube 23/11/2018). Again, in [7], the fact that the men apparently did not go through with their design of visiting the cathedral could have many other explanations than the one insinuated. However, as said above, the context of the interactions reported in this paper was not a formal legal one, and analysis has focused on the conversational strategies, and patterns of implicit argumentation that may be observed when people are asked for their opinions on such matters.

What is also plain is the degree to which the grounds for those opinions are based on information drawn from media sources, which may or may not be reliable, but in any case will never consist of the kind of first-hand knowledge referred to above, in the discussion on evidentiality.

## 6. Conclusion

From the mass of mediated impressions that surround them, people construct their view of the social world. As we have seen, they use implicit patterns of argumentation to justify their assertions about epistemic or, in Halliday's (1994) terminology, *ideational* realities. It appears that the same lexical / grammatical resources for construing evidentiality that speakers use in support of opinions about the realities of their daily lives, are also used when they focus on complex geo-political issues of which they can have no first-hand knowledge. The study highlighted the way that Grice's maxims allow for the identification of covert patterns of meaning that provide support for the speakers' stated positions.

Speakers tend to resist the idea that they simply absorb views passively: all three of the interviewees represent their views as the result of independent thought about the case:

- (15) Speaker One: You got to make your own mind up what's out there and then decide  
 Speaker Two: I'm very wary of you know what we're told by our government  
 Speaker Three: There's been nothing that's changed my mind

The above discussion has underlined the fact that the formation of opinions about epistemic realities depends to a considerable degree on mediated information, which is sifted by consumers and shaped into a more or less coherent picture or world view. One participant responded simply:

- (16) Where do you get your opinions about Russia from?  
 The telly and the papers

As we saw, the first responder repeats many circumstances of the case which could only have come from media reports. On the basis of their consumption of such mediated information, many people feel able to give their views on complex public events such as the Novichok affair, representing them as their own opinions rather than as, for example, a party line, or what the government wishes them to think.

This paper has tended to represent people as able to make up their own minds, rather than as an uncritical mass subject to processes of media brainwashing. As mentioned above, the fact that, in our society, the capacity for independent thought is positively valued, and mental conformism stigmatised, may explain why some respondents feel it necessary to give answers that go beyond a simple "yes" or "no".

It is also clear that consumers respond to news on the basis of a body of already formed ideas, prejudices, ideological assumptions, political orientations and the like (Ensink et al. 1986: 15; Grimshaw 1990; Ohara – Saft 2003), which constitute a sort of interpretative lens that is likely to determine, and guide their responses to any fragment of news. It is plain that Speaker Two has an ingrained mistrust of the government, since she says as much, and this makes her resist government and media claims of Russian guilt. It is possible that Speaker Three has some ideological issue with the British government, since the opinion that the attack on the Skripals was the work of MI5 is a sort of conspiracy theory, and hence presupposes some inherent mistrust of official versions of events.

This study has not addressed the question of whether mass media manipulate populations (Chomsky 1989, 1997), though critical perceptions

of the role of the press have also been raised. Governments do much to set the agenda for public debate through their responses to events, and media play their part in opinion formation by passing government frames on to readers or viewers. The Novichok affair was framed by May as a possible attack by Russia against Britain, and this interpretation was heavily mediated in the following months. It is therefore understandable that people had pro or contro views regarding the proposition and, as we have seen, they appear to recognise the necessary role of argumentation in forming and defending their opinions.

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