Great Britain? Constructing great power status through online news reporting of foreign conflict

By Natalie Jester, University of Gloucestershire/University of Bristol[1]

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Abstract

This article argues that online news coverage of foreign conflict depicts Britain as holding special responsibilities on the world stage, reproducing its status as a "great power." Taking a discourse-theoretic approach – focusing on meaning making – the article examines British coverage of Libyan government violence in response to pro-democracy protests during the 2011 civil war. The Libyan people are constructed as aspiring democrats ultimately unable to "do" democracy correctly, while Muammar Gaddafi (who led the country for 42 years following a coup) is shown to be a 'tyrant' and a 'dictator.' In contrast, Britain is shown to have a special responsibility to champion human rights and democratic processes abroad, especially during conflict. Overall, in a context in which British military power is often perceived to be declining, an emphasis upon special responsibilities (re)confirms Britain's status as a great power, with a core role on the world stage.

Keywords: state identity, great power status, online news, Britain, social construction, Libya

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[1] This article began as a chapter of my PhD, which was undertaken at the University of Bristol. It has undergone significant revisions and reframing at my current institution, the University of Gloucestershire, to publish it as a standalone journal article. As a result, both affiliations are listed here.

Introduction

Britain has a complex shared history with many states, of which Libya is one. In 1988, a plane exploded over the town of Lockerbie in Scotland killing all onboard. Libya officially accepted responsibility and paid compensation for the bombing in 2003, after which there was a significant improvement in relations between Libya and Britain. This culminated in the 'Deal in the Desert' between Blair and Muammar Gaddafi in 2004, whereby Libya pledged to renounce terrorism and nuclear weapons to aid the West in the 'War on Terror' (Turner, 2011). In 2011, Libya faced a wave of pro-democracy protests, resulting in civil war. Starting mid-February, demonstrations initially began over housing and swiftly morphed into attempts to oust Gaddafi. This came in a wider context of the "Arab Spring" where neighbouring states (e.g. Egypt) had successfully deposed leaders. The Libyan context is especially interesting as Gaddafi had dubbed Libya a Jamihiriya, which was notionally a system controlled by the people, through popular committees (in practice, Gaddafi and his associates controlled decision making). During the "Arab Spring," the British government made a wide range of statements supporting protesters, making clear that Libya would be theirs once more. In addition, Gaddafi had also sought to position himself as anti-Western and anti-imperialist during his rule, which added another layer to 2011 condemnation by Britain and other states.

Simultaneously, riots occurred in Britain, with thousands of participants and bountiful images of flame-filled streets splashed across the country's morning papers. It was at this point that something revealing occurred: the Libyan government gave comments to the press about British unrest. As explained in Lang (2011a), 'Libya has used the events as an excuse to call the British government illegitimate and demand it go - an echo of comments made by Britain about Col Muammar Gaddafi's regime. "[Prime Minister] Cameron and his government must leave after the popular uprising against them and the violent repression of peaceful demonstrations by police."' This is a good example of how state identities are relationally constructed through discourse and interplay.

Focusing specifically on coverage of the 2011 Libyan civil war, this article argues that news reporting on foreign conflict is constitutive of Britain's *own* global political identity. I trace Britain's relationship with the idea that it holds "great power" status, and explore the performative construction of state identity in a context of online news reporting. Within analysis, I argue that Muammar Gaddafi is constructed as a dictator, while the Libyan people are aspiring towards democracy while simultaneously incapable of doing it "correctly." What I am concerned with here is not what is "true" but what such representations might do politically. The final

section of this article therefore examines the construction of Britain itself. Relying for contrast upon the other two subject positions, I show that Britain is represented as a modern-day great power through a responsibility to champion democracy and human rights.

This article makes two contributions. Firstly, it demonstrates the importance of the media within the discipline of international relations specifically. Online news is receiving growing numbers of readers, but there is a comparative lack of work on this area in IR. Secondly – and more specifically – this work demonstrates how Britain understands itself at a time of change. It shows how domestic representations of British state identity have reoriented to emphasise alternative aspects of "great power" status at a perceived time of military power decline. This matters because such status has enabled Britain to claim a place on the world stage.

Britain and "great power" status

There are many components to great power competition but this article focuses on status. Bull (1977: 201-2) argues that great power status requires two components, the first of which is a strong military. Secondly, the state is 'recognised by others to have, and conceived by their own leaders and peoples to have, certain special rights and duties' (see also Morris, 2011), which often centres around the issue of ethics and claims to moral authority (Wohlforth et al., 2018). Whilst I treat these as relatively analytically distinct, in practice the distinction is blurry. Whilst "great power" status is not self-conferred, it *can* be understood as performatively composed through state actions and discourses (DiCicco and Onea 2023). As status can change, English and Kenny (1999: 253) refer to 'narratives' of decline and it is the social meaning attributed to these subject positions that impacts how we understand them. Great power status has been a key concern for international relations scholars since approximately the 1970s and Stivachtis (2023) argues that we need to update this, with more accounts of great power status in the digital age. In theoretical terms, I argue that the rise in importance of internet news reporting offers a much wider audience for the constructions of "great power" status, which functions to reinforce dominant discourses within this domain.

Within the wider literature on great power status, while there is a growing recognition of China (Liping 2010), this mostly focuses upon the former Soviet Union and USA (Larson 2021). There is comparatively less focus on Britain, though social and political emphasis on Britain as a great power is commonplace domestically, and it has long represented itself as a key player on the world stage. Houghton and Sanders (2017) argue that the understanding of Britain as holding special responsibilities stretches back at least to empire. This is a clear example of the social

production of state identity, making it possible for powerful states to present themselves as moral actors even when committing serious harm. Drawing upon discourses of racial and national superiority, empire was represented not as a self-serving practice, but an act of kindness in bringing better ways of thinking to states incapable of handling their own affairs (Houghton and Sanders 2017). In military terms, especially during the broad period of empire, Britain also held considerable strength: 'At the end of the First World War Great Britain was the leader of the Allied nations in military terms' because a military with large numbers of personnel and good equipment was necessary to maintain its empire (Clayton, 1986: 1). 1950s budgetary allocations reflected this, with 20% of government spending going to defence (Thompson et al, 2012), a proportion unthinkable today.

As English and Kenny assert, 'The simplest definition of 'decline' suggests that the term refers to a traceable process whereby Britain diminished as a world power' (1999, 253). Wheeler and Dunne (1998: 850) explain that 'Prior to the Thatcher era, British foreign policy had become preoccupied with the question of decline, and how a former imperial power should adjust to the 'reality' of life outside the premier league of states.' The reason for this was a perceived weakening of military power, whereby defence spending had fallen dramatically (despite the fact that Britain still spends far more than most states) (Morris 2011).

Whilst Britain's military power is seen to be declining, the perception remains that it still has particular rights and duties, which speaks directly to great power discourses. The Blair-era imagining of ethical foreign policy (see Wickham-Jones, 2000) shows how state responsibilities were reconceptualised following this period of decline:

> There is no talk of sovereignty, of which we heard so much from the previous administration, no mention of 'threats' to national security, no elevation of the principle of non-intervention in Britain's domestic affairs; in their place, one finds 'internationalism', 'promoting democracy', 'promotion of our values and confidence in our identity', 'a people's diplomacy' and so on (Frost, quoted in Wheeler and Dunne, 1998: 252)

Similarly, Jokela (2010: 86) concludes that British foreign policy discourse 'promotes democracy, liberal capitalism and the rule of law.' This broad positioning – while resulting in fewer foreign interventions – has been consistent since the Labour Blair/Brown government left office (Gilmore, 2015). As Davies and True explain within analysis of former (Conservative) Foreign Secretary William Hague's efforts to prevent sexual violence in conflict abroad: 'Hague was not the first to imagine British state identity as connected to moral leadership and to promote

a foreign policy that should be tethered to humanitarian causes' (Davies and True, 2017: 708). That there is consistency between governments of different parties suggests that holding special rights and responsibilities is deeply important to Britain. Writing in 2011 then, Morris (2011: 326) asserts that 'within government the idea that Britain is a great power remains an influential factor in determining British foreign and defence policy.' The next section demonstrates how "great power status" could be constructed through discourses and practices relating to state identity.

The construction of state identity and online media

David Campbell's 1992 classic *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* argues that state identity is socially produced. It also contends that threats – ranging from war, to drugs, to migration – are themselves socially produced and central to the (re)production of state identity. States are constructed performatively: it is through their representation and interaction with other subjects that states come to be (Campbell, 1992). As identities are inherently unstable, these must be constantly rearticulated to gain a semblance of ontological security, the sense of security derived from having a stable sense of self (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2007). Despite a perception of declining military power, re-emphasis of special responsibilities therefore maintains a coherent narrative of great power status for Britain (Hagström 2021).

Representations of the self are always reliant upon constructions of other subject positions (Campbell, 1992). Identity is, therefore, relational at local, national and international levels. For example, the Cold War served as a mechanism to 'discipline the ambiguity of global life' because it cemented for decades the identities of involved states (Campbell, 1992: 18). Foreign policy is particularly central to formations of state identity, formally (written documents) and informally (whereby states interact with each other) (Campbell, 1992: 43). In the context of state identity, 'A relationship of causality cannot, therefore, be formulated between identity and foreign policy since the two are intertwined through discourse' (Aydin-Düzgit 2012: 3). Within discourse and practice of foreign policy, various subjects, objects and issues not considered 'traditional' (i.e. military) threats to security have been labelled so nonetheless. This is due to 'their proclivity for anarchy and disorder' (Campbell, 1992: 32), which destabilises state identity because uncertainty poses a challenge to existing modes of being. Beyond this, representations of more traditional "threats," e.g. civil war or conflict also, shape state identity through foreign policy discourses and practice. Threats demand a response of some kind and this response produces a temporary fixity of identity (Aydin-Düzgit, 2012).

The world has changed significantly since *Writing Security* was published. The Internet came into use in universities and government institutions in the late 1980s before the World Wide Web was made publicly available by Tim Berners-Lee in 1991. The nature of the internet in the 2020s is wholly different from the early 1990s, when it was mostly employed for academic purposes. There are now myriad public websites across entertainment, communication, education and more, across various formats, from memes to TikToks to more standard text-based pages, accessible on a range of devices (Baspehlivan, 2024). The sophistication and ubiquity of technology has increased significantly, pervading daily lives in varied formats (see: Crilley and Gillespie, 2019). *Statista*, (2023) estimates that 64% of the world's seven billion population has internet access. This leads Hansen (2006: 192) to '[point] further to the importance of new media, particularly the internet'.

Writing in 2003, Seib (2003) argues that the relationship between the internet, news, and international relations would be one that would require further attention. In Britain, 71% of people read the news online, compared with 32% who read only print news (Ofcom 2024). I argue that mainstream online news outlets are positioned as '*authorized to speak*' (Milliken, 1999: 229) on matters of state identity and threat, due to access to large (and growing) audiences. Whilst the consumption of paper news might be an "everyday" activity, the consumption of online news can be seen as an "all-day, everyday activity" because the embeddedness of online news platforms within daily life has been normalised. This is especially the case now that it is possible to read online news sites on your mobile phone as well as your laptop: you might check the news on your phone when you wake up, on your desktop over lunch, and again on your phone as you commute home. There are specificities to online news reporting, including the facility to embed videos, extra space to include significantly more images (Hansen, 2006), easy incorporation of citizen journalist materials, and hyperlinks to internal/external webpages.

The specific format of internet news impacts upon the construction of state identity. The immediacy of the online news format means that there is little space for discursive contestation, because dominant discourses quickly repeated. Rogers (2008: 182) makes the case that 'The widespread availability of broadband makes it possible to distribute detailed coverage of paramilitary actions within hours of the events' where previously it might have taken days or more for readers in other regions to read news stories about a particular event. Where previously there would have been space to pause and consider, this gap is filled immediately with additional constructions of subjects and objects. This is especially the case when events are still unfolding, with "as it happens" or "live" stories being constantly updated to include the latest information as

it is received by the newsroom, a format of coverage not possible within paper news reporting. This discursive reinforcement also occurs through hypertextuality, which is the linking of one webpage to another through an embedded URL. Chung et al. (2012) argue that hypertextuality is a key indicator of readers' perceptions of credibility. This means that hyperlinks are important even if readers do not click on them. News websites largely link internally to other works of their own (Harmer and Southern 2020), repeating the same perspective, and thus reinforce the same discourses.

Despite this, within the study of state identity, digital spaces have not received as much attention as deserved, especially given the speed at which technology is advancing: Hansen by her own admission omits it from *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*, for example, as does Hopf in *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities & Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 & 1999*. Within *International Relations and Security in the Digital Age*, the authors make the case that there is little examination of the interplay between identity, threat and digital media because, as the editors of this volume note, there are 'few constructivist accounts of digital-age security currently available' (Eriksson and Giacomello, 2007). Since 2007, there have been a comparatively small number of works that explore this area, including (Jackson et al., 2021; Dück, 2023; Bogain, 2020). These generally acknowledge that the digital dimension has a strong impact on the identity/threat relationship. Overall, however, the digital aspect still demands further exploration and this article contributes to this.

Methods

This project aims to understand how Britain represents itself on the world stage and, thus, focuses on British reporting (see Al Nahed (2018) for an interesting comparison of a British outlet and Al Jazeera). I examine five outlets: BBC News, the Daily Mail, The Guardian, The Sun, and The Telegraph. These include the national broadcaster, two tabloids, two broadsheets, and a range across the left/right political spectrum. This allows us to understand the broadest possible range of representations, and is a method followed by others (Nickels et al., 2012). This is not without nuance however, and one limitation is that *The Daily Mail* is much more obviously right wing than *The Sun* is left. These outlets are also among the most read according to the Audit Bureau of Circulations (*The Guardian* 2012[2]):

- *The Sun*: 2,530,843

[2] Figures for BBC News and other online news outlets are not available, which is a limitation, but as above this readership is much larger than print only. Some outlets have subsequently decided not to provide these figures publicly.

- *The Daily Mail*: 1,994,908
- *The Telegraph*: 587,040
- *The Guardian*: 230,108

Google's site search function was used to search these outlets, allowing me to search all outlets in the same way (which was especially helpful as some websites are less user-friendly than others). The search term employed was site:[website URL] violence OR protest AND Libya with a timeframe of 13 January to 31 December 2011. The date range starts with the beginning of the Libyan civil war and includes a short period of time to allow news outlets to finish exploring the subject after the war (notionally) ended on 23 October. I read articles from each outlet in parallel in their listed order on Google. I used Milliken's (1999: 234) logic in order to decide how many articles to examine: 'when upon adding new texts and comparing their object spaces, the researcher finds consistently that the theoretical categories she has generated work for those texts.' The news articles cited within this work can be found under 'supplementary material.'

The approach taken within this article is a discourse-theoretic one (Shepherd 2006). There is often discussion within media reporting about the need to get to the truth. A discourse theoretic approach does not aim to get to the heart of what is true and what is false within the documents examined. As Howarth and Torfing (2004: 8) explain, 'Discourse no longer refers to a particular part of the overall social system, but is taken to be coterminous with the social.' This article also does not focus on the reception of what is contained within these news reports as securitization approaches (Taureck 2006) or audience studies might. Instead, I focus on how patterns of meaning are created by media representations and how these are related to practices of power. This is because 'in language, we do not simply name things but conceptualise things' (Fairclough et al., 2011: 358).

In the context of the Libyan civil war, discourses must acknowledge for example that Gaddafi is indeed not an elected leader. A discourse-theoretic approach does not aim to muddy this water, but instead asks: precisely how is it conveyed that Gaddafi is unelected? *What does it mean* that Gaddafi is presented using particular words? How does this create temporary fixity of meaning for British identity, by offering a contrast? All components of the articles create the discourse and meanings therein, which means that standard news-style articles were incorporated alongside quotations from relevant politicians (Howarth, 2000). Also playing a role are op-eds published within the chosen outlets (provided they meet the aforementioned selection criteria). This results

in a blurring of "voice" within analysis; I argue that this reinforces the dominant discourse because this results in repetition from multiple angles.

The articles generated by my search were investigated using a poststructuralist discourse analysis. As part of this, I included headlines, body text, images and videos. I make use of Doty's (1993) conceptual framework of presupposition, predication and subject positioning. This is widely recognised within International Relations to be a robust and above all clear method for conducting discursive analysis (Åhäll and Borg 2013). Presupposition asks us what we take for granted within a given text: what is it assumed the reader will know already? Predication refers to the ideas attached to subjects or objects. We might consider, for example, the United States, which often has ideas of freedom attached to it. The final concept – subject positioning – is woven into the design of the project because I have demonstrated throughout that the construction of discrete subjects is reliant upon the construction of others and the ways in which they relate to each other.

Imagery is key to the representation of Gaddafi and the Libyan state as violent. Images have their own particularities and are often useful in the construction of identities (Williams, 2003). Videos and images must be read within the wider context of the online news article because the discursive construction of an artefact is dependent on every element (Howarth, 2000). There are a variety of ethical considerations in a project of this nature: there is a duty to avoid uncritically *reproducing* harmful discourses of Othering. Perhaps more vexed is the question of image reproduction. Whilst images can indeed aid in accountability (Maia, 2009), I have opted to describe my images rather than show them because many involve violence. In the context of teaching about the Abu Ghraib torture images, Adelman (2014) encourages us to ask what right we have to show photographs like this and what this really *adds* to our analysis. Some outlets I examine are tabloid newspapers, and these often lean towards sensationalism in war, presenting this almost as entertainment (Rusciano, 2010). As a white British woman – i.e. not Libyan, with no personal ties to the state beyond this project – I do not feel that it is justified for me to show these images and that words are sufficient to convey my points.[3]

Analysis

[3] Ethical approval was not required by my institution because there are no 'living human subjects' and the data is publicly available

Figure 1: conceptual mapping of the discourse using Doty's (1993) framework

	Muammar Gaddafi	***The Libyan people***	***Britain***
Predication	Dictator; violent; arbitrary	Aspiring; democrats; rebels; want human rights; Muslim; sometimes conservative	A Great Power; champion of democracy and human rights; has allies; helps other states
Presupposition	Gaddafi is synonymous with the Libyan state; due to his arbitrary nature, anyone could suffer violence at his hands	Their protests are about democracy; they are not capable of "doing" democracy correctly	Acceptable/normal for Britain to have views on other states' affairs
Subject positioning	An aggressor towards the Libyan people; a target for British condemnation	Suffering at the hands of Gaddafi's violence and dictatorship; in need of words of support from Britain	Supportive of ordinary Libyans' human rights and democratic aims; posing a moral challenge to Gaddafi and the Libyan state

'Tyrant', 'pariah', 'despot': Gaddafi and Libya as violent

Muammar Gaddafi once reportedly asserted that 'There is no state with a democracy except Libya on the whole planet' (Asser, 2011). Gaddafi gained power in a coup, which the press reminds of frequently within reporting on the civil war: *BBC News* states that 'The Libyan leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, is the Arab world's longest-serving leader, having ruled the oil-rich state since a coup in 1969' (*BBC News*, 2011g; *BBC News*, 2011h). The term 'coup' is also employed in other articles (Niland, 2011). Gaddafi is therefore positioned as a dictator through text: 'Former Libyan dictator reportedly killed as government forces overrun home town of Sirte' (Meikle, 2011); 'the Mad Dog dictator' (*The Sun*, 2011). Other terms in the same family are also employed: autocrat, despot and tyrant. This facilitates the representation of Britain as challenging dictatorship and supporting democracy.

'Dictators' have strong command over the state they govern, and the portrayal of Gaddafi as a dictator shapes representations of the Libyan state. The length of Gaddafi's rule is referenced repeatedly: 'Meanwhile, demonstrators have been protesting outside the Libyan Embassy in London's Knightsbridge to oppose Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's 42-year rule' (*BBC News*, 2011j); 'ruler of 41 years' (*Daily Mail*, 2011b). As Phelps (2012: 724) notes, 'For the past four

decades, Gaddafi's Libya has often been presented as synonymous with Libya's Gaddafi.' The subject positioning in 2011 events follows the same principle, equating Gaddafi and the Libyan state by attributing the violence to both subjects. For example: 'Gaddafi's forces have taken a pounding from allied air offensives' (*Daily Mail*, 2011g). The 'forces' in question in this example are portrayed as Gaddafi's as well as Libyan state forces. Gaddafi and the Libyan state are therefore seen as synonymous. Together, Gaddafi and the Libyan state are constructed as a violent subject. David Cameron (Weaver et al., 2011) is quoted in one outlet reminding that 'We should also remember the many, many Libyans who died at the hands of this brutal dictator and his regime,' whilst other outlets refer to 'the use of violence against civilians by Libyan government forces' (*BBC News*, 2011c; see also Black and Bowcott, 2011). In this passage there is no ambiguity as to what has happened, who is responsible for the violence and who is being victimised by it.

Arbitrary government violence reinforces the construction of dictatorship by highlighting state control over citizens (Herreros 2006). Imagery is particularly effective at conveying this. One article states that 'witnesses spoke of snipers firing at protesters from rooftops' (*BBC News*, 2011g). The article features a camera, which appears to be handheld, juddering frequently, and featuring low-quality image resolution. The use of handheld camera enhances the sense of realism, chaos and fear (Kressbach 2022). Snipers are considered to be expert marksmen; here, however, they function as a mark of arbitrariness because they are utilised to kill randomly in a crowd. In visual terms, the viewer hears shots fired and then sees people fall to the ground, the rest of the crowd is then sent into a state of panic causing further chaos. The machine gun is rapid-fire and has the potential to cause large-scale loss of life and injury. The imagery works in tandem with the text in this case, for example, this quote from 'a Benghazi resident': 'They were, he said, machine-gunning cars and people indiscriminately. "A lot [of people] have fallen down today," he added.'

Warnings to viewers reinforce a sense of Gaddafi government violence, and further highlight the importance of imagery. For example, one article features an embedded video (*BBC News*, 2011g): it is a composite video, made up of three separate videos of violence, followed by commentary from Hisham Matar, a Libyan writer. Within this video, the voiceover from a journalist then tells the viewer that 'what follows is a fatal shot to the head, too disturbing to show.' Images have a specificity to them, and warnings like these remind us that images can impact us in ways that go beyond words (Williams, 2003). One shows people running and a man on the floor surrounded by blood. The next shows three people stood lined up at the front of a

crowd, while men wave guns at them. The third hints at violence by showing people running from a water-cannon, which drives at them at speed. It is suggested that the footage was captured by ordinary people, which adds a more personal, first-person dimension, reminding us of what is at stake (Ali and Fahmy 2013). In the next section, I explore representations of the Libyan people, which act as a democratic contrast for those of Gaddafi and the Libyan state.

'History is sweeping through your neighbourhood': the Libyan people, and aspirations of democracy and human rights

The concepts of human rights and democracy are central to representations of the Libyan people within the British press. As I show in the final section below, these are the areas that Britain claims special responsibility for in this case, offering a variety of supportive statements. Here, popular protests are explicitly positioned as an attempt to bring about democracy: 'Libya is one of several Arab countries to have experienced pro-democracy demonstrations since the fall of long-time Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January. Egypt's Hosni Mubarak was forced from power on 11 February' (*BBC News*, 2011i). Indeed, 'pro-democracy' is a phrase ascribed to the Libyan people throughout reporting (*The Guardian*, 2011), though this occurs much more frequently in the right-wing press (for example, in Daily Mail, 2011e; Daily Mail, 2011f; Drury, 2011b; Drury, 2011a; Peev and Kelly, 2011; Bingham and Roberts, 2011; Verkaik, 2011; Swaine, 2011). Interestingly, what Al Nahed (2018: 409) refers to as the (democratic) 'Revolution frame' is also present within Al Jazeera coverage of these events.

Moves towards democracy are termed 'aspirations' by the media, which suggests betterment: *BBC News*, 2011a quotes Cameron as saying that 'Violence is never an answer to people's legitimate aspirations.' The desire for democracy extends to Libyans living within Britain, who have learned that democracy is indeed the best form of governance. This is positioned as desirable through the use of words such as 'reform' (BBC News, 2011n) and 'aspirations' (Tran et al., 2011). The representation of the Libyan people as seeking democracy contributes directly to representations of progress, as they are constructed as moving away from dictatorship towards Western liberal democracy.

Despite the assumption that democracy is a positive, there is a cautious tone within British reporting. Cameron puts it grandly, whilst hinting at rebel violence: 'History is sweeping through your neighbourhood. Not as a result of force and violence, but by people seeking their rights, and in the vast majority of cases doing so peacefully and bravely' (Wells and Soodin, 2011). This alludes to the question often posed in cases like this: can Libya – a Muslim state in the Global

South – really "handle" democracy? For example, Ban Ki Moon is quoted in *The BBC* as saying that democracy within Libya will 'take time' (*BBC News*, 2011d) while *The Guardian* states that there are 'ambitious plans' for democracy in the country (Weaver and Owen, 2011). This suggests simultaneously that democracy is a natural state of being but that the Libyan people are not themselves inherently democratic.

A key aspect of liberal democracy – though not always observed in practice, e.g. in the USA – is the separation of religion and state. The issue of Libyan democracy is underpinned by conceptions of what Mishra (2008) calls 'political Islam.' One article says that world powers want to 'turn the country into the "beacon" of the Arab and Islamic worlds, but [it] faces a lengthy and dangerous bout of infighting between rival factions and is in no rush to stage elections' (Weaver and Owen, 2011). *The BBC* tells us that 'In another development, NTC [National Transitional Council] leader Mustafa Abdul Jalil has delivered his first public speech in Tripoli since the ousting of Col Gaddafi, urging a modern democratic state based on "moderate" Islam' (*BBC News*, 2011m). In the West, political Islam is conceptualised as antithetical to democracy[4]. As Sadowski (1993: 16) explains, 'In the words of the definitive Orientalist cliché, Islam was not just a religion but a total way of life. The totalistic character of the faith seemed to imply that only a totalitarian state could put its dogmas into practice.' As an example of this logic, Sadowski (1993: 14) quotes the oft-criticised work of Huntington: '"[A]mong Islamic countries, particularly those in the Middle East," wrote Samuel Huntington in a typical dismissal, "the prospects for democratic development seem low."'

Invocations of "conservativism" further represent Libyan proto democracy as unstable. Of particular relevance here is the Muslim Brotherhood (see Weaver and Owen, 2011), who are typically constructed within the Western press as evil (Leiken and Brooke, 2007), much like groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State:

> For not all the rebels are chaotic. One of their commanders, Abdel-Hakim Al-Hasidi, has been a member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) since the Nineties. This is a violent jihadist outfit that, for decades, had been waging a holy war against the Gaddafi regime with an aim of creating an Islamic state. It was banned worldwide after the 9/11 attacks, when Al-Hasidi fled to Afghanistan (Bradley, 2011).

[4] Mishra gives the example of Samuel Huntington and the 'clash of civilisations,' calling this position confrontationalist.

Rebels ‘are suspected of including elements sympathetic to al-Qaeda’ and ‘it is quite possible that a year from now some hardened Islamists will end up in a post-Gaddafi government’ (Gardner, 2011). The images in Bradley, 2011 and Gardner, 2011 are typical of this reporting: they are often blurred, do not show the rebels’ faces, and depict them in large groups, presenting them as a homogenous mass. This visually de-personalises and Others them, which locates them further from the “us” constructed around Britain. Other articles (such as Weaver and Owen, 2011) simply do not depict them at all, opting for images of leaders.[5]

The textual focus upon political Islam facilitates the presupposition that the Libyan people are unable to sustain “true” democratic governance. Mishra (2008) finds similar representations of other Muslim countries – such as Turkey, Iraq and Iran – which are also constructed within the Western press as struggling to perform democracy “correctly.” Representing peoples as not inherently democratic also evokes the idea that others *are* democratic by nature. Democracy and human rights are conceptualised within this reporting as inherently interlinked. Cameron states that ‘As recent events have confirmed, denying people their basic rights does not preserve stability, rather the reverse’ (*BBC News*, 2011a). In this example, the ‘pursuit of democracy and stability’ – two analytically distinct concepts – are presented as inseparable. Similarly, democracy is linked to freedom within the economy, as the same *BBC* article quotes Cameron explaining that the Libyan people are ‘hungry for political and economic freedom.’ Other work argues that ‘rebels’ in Libya are portrayed in a romanticised manner (Spencer, 2019) through appeals to democracy, human rights, stability, economic freedom, again highlighting the relationship between the concepts. That these are the concepts linked to democracy is not accidental, but rather draws upon wider discourses of Western liberal democracy: ‘A consistent theme of this "new thinking" was that the peoples of the developing countries must now acknowledge that liberal democracy is the only plausible form of governance in the modern world’ (Sadowski, 1993: 14).

In human rights terms, Libyan people are represented as desperate for help (‘They were screaming, saying “please help us, help us” because a lot of people are being killed in the bombings. It is a very terrible situation’ (Hutchison et al., 2011)). Beech and Munce (2019) argue that human rights especially were key to Cameron government narratives on taking a stand on Libya, and this is also reflected in the concerns of ordinary Libyans themselves (Creta, 2021). This demands that Britain respond to its duty to condemn government violence, and make itself heard.

[5] This may be an editorial choice, to protect protestors. This article is not concerned with intent but impact, and the result is homogenisation nonetheless.

‘The world should not hesitate to condemn those actions’: Britain’s special responsibilities on the world stage

British reporting on the Libyan civil war begins with a presupposition: that it is acceptable and indeed *normal* for Britain to comment upon democracy and violence elsewhere. I argue that this is because Britain represents itself as holding special responsibilities as a state. This is linked with the number of public statements made by politicians and the subsequent attention from the British press; of the outlets examined in this article, most except *The Sun* (which publishes less on foreign affairs), have written about this at length. Britain is positioned as bearing special responsibility for democracy and human rights through suggestions that the state is evaluating the events in Libya: ‘The prime minister told MPs that [International Development Secretary] Mr Mitchell would be visiting the region later this week "to assess the situation on the ground for himself"’ (*BBC News*, 2011l). This is reinforced through frequent repetition of words and phrases such as ‘keep an eye,’ ‘trying’ (*BBC News*, 2011k), ‘planning’ (*BBC News*, 2011e), ‘prepared,’ ‘possibility’ (*BBC News*, 2011l), ‘discussing with allies’ (Peake and Wheeler, 2011) and ‘assessing’ (*The Guardian*, 2011).

The word ‘unacceptable’ is employed frequently within this reporting (Adetunji et al., 2011; Beaumont and Clark, 2011; Bingham, 2011; Hutchison et al., 2011); the responsibility for Britain to pay attention to global affairs then demands a response. British politicians were quoted at length about events in Libya. Senior members of the British government – such as Prime Minister David Cameron, Foreign Secretary William Hague and Defence Secretary Liam Fox – are quoted regularly. For example, ‘British Prime Minister David Cameron described the violence in Libya as "appalling and unacceptable", adding: "People working for this regime... should remember that international justice has a long reach and a long memory"’ (*BBC News*, 2011f; *BBC News*, 2011b). During the protests and the related government violence in Libya, Gaddafi made several televised addresses, and the reader is told that ‘Foreign Secretary William Hague gave an immediate response to the start of Gaddafi’s speech’ (Wells and Soodin, 2011). Hague is quoted elsewhere as calling the events in Libya a ‘very serious crisis’ (*Daily Mail*, 2011d)).

One action discussed repeatedly was condemnation. This includes Prime Minister David Cameron, who says ‘I call on them [the Libyan regime] even at this late stage to stop. People's aspirations for greater democracy, for greater freedom, for greater rights should be met with reform, not repression’ (*BBC News*, 2011n). ‘Libya unrest: David Cameron condemns violence’ is a *BBC* headline, giving the British position on this subject – and, crucially, not the violence

itself – prominence. Comments from other politicians reinforce this: 'Hague: "The world should not hesitate to condemn those actions"' (Bingham, 2011). As Shepherd (2006: 23) explains within analysis of the United States post-9/11, state leaders in the West are constructed as figures of authority through repetitions of 'claims to responsibility and protection of "western" values.' While less common than images of Gaddafi or the Libyan people, images and videos of British leaders giving speeches or at meetings also lend a sense of authority. This is especially the case when they include important locations like the House of Commons (*BBC News*, 2011a; Shipman, 2011).

Building on this, other coverage explores actions that the British government demands that Gaddafi and the Libyan state take. For example: 'Mr Hague, who spoke to the Libyan leader Col Muammar Gaddafi's son Saif al-Islam on Sunday, said international monitors should be allowed into the north African country as soon as possible' (*BBC News*, 2011n). Hague has also been quoted as saying that 'Governments must respond to the legitimate aspirations of their people, rather than resort to the use of force, and must respect the right to peaceful protest' (Adetunji et al., 2011). The focus is upon the British reaction, rather than the violence itself. More broadly, this extends to veiled threats offered by Britain: 'The UK prime minister said Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Gaddafi would face "consequences" for his actions' (*BBC News*, 2011a).

Britain is represented as standing alongside other countries (such as the US) or organisations (like the EU) as fellow democratic Western powers in adopting a strong position on anti-democracy and violence within Libya. For example, US 'Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called the violence there "completely unacceptable"' (*Daily Mail*, 2011a). Similarly, 'The U.S. president phoned David Cameron, Nicolas Sarkozy and Silvio Berlusconi to express his "deep concern" over Colonel Gaddafi's use of violence which he said "violates every standard of human decency"' (*Daily Mail*, 2011c). References to multiple world leaders or states adopting the same critical position as the UK are common within this reporting. For example, in *The Telegraph* (Hutchison et al., 2011), in a single article, Spain, Malta, Italy, France, the US, Canada, the EU, the Arab League and NATO are all quoted as condemning Gaddafi as the UK has done. The subject positions are further linked through the use of the same words or phrases – or synonyms – for example, Clinton above calls Libyan government violence 'unacceptable' as does David Cameron (*BBC News*, 2011f). This is shown to be a direct concern for Britain and the global organisations of which it is a member[6]. For example: '[Hague] added that the pursuit of

[6] Britain has now left the European Union.

democracy and stability in North Africa and the wider Middle East was a "major test" for the European Union' (BBC News, 2011n).

Calls to follow due process and take decisions collectively show that Britain abides by democratic norms. Politicians are quoted making clear their desire for UN involvement as a means of legitimation: 'Foreign Secretary William Hague has said the UN Security Council "must bring its influence to bear" in Libya' (*BBC News*, 2011a); 'David Cameron says UN should adopt a resolution on Libya' (Hutchison et al., n.d.); William Hague 'called on other countries to join Britain in backing a resolution being debated by the UN general assembly' (*The Guardian*, 2011); 'David Cameron and other European leaders have agreed that the UN and the European Union should take urgent action against Gaddafi's regime' (*The Guardian*, 2011). Thus, as it is taken collectively, any action taken is already in advance positioned as legitimate.

A variety of options were discussed by the press, including 'humanitarian aid effort,' 'a military no-fly zone over the country' (*BBC News*, 2011l), sanctions (Mulholland, 2011), and a 'referral of the situation in Libya to the International Criminal Court' (*BBC News* 2011b). Largely absent are suggestions for a military response beyond a no-fly-zone. This is talked up somewhat within The Daily Mail, for instance one article (Shipman, 2011) has as its headline 'We'll use military force to free Libya vows PM: Cameron plans no-fly zone over country and even threatens to send British troops'. Sending British troops is labelled a 'threat', reinforced through the suggestion that Cameron 'even' threatened to send troops, connoting an extreme idea. Whilst Britain did send troops to enforce the no-fly zone and offer training, there was no large-scale deployment of forces as there has been in Iraq, for example.

Conclusion

What does British media reporting on foreign conflict tell us about how Britain understands itself? In this article, I have argued that state identity is relationally constructed and the representation of Gaddafi and the Libyan people makes possible the construction of Britain. While the former are violent, in need of support, or unable to "do" democracy correctly, Britain is depicted as a state with special rights and responsibilities on the world stage. Further research in this area might broaden the scope to examine contestations within this space. As outlined above, representations of Britain as holding special rights and responsibilities stretches back at least to the age of Empire. Mainstream online news outlets do not themselves situate the British relationship with Libya within a postcolonial perspective. It is likely that alternative online news

outlets (e.g. Byline Times, Open Democracy) would construct relationships like this one rather differently, in ways that challenge mainstream representations, and do not homogenise the Libyan people. Further research could therefore focus on these spaces, asking how they represent Britain and how they contest or confirm mainstream narratives of "great power" status. Social media representations add another dimension also, granting a measure of discursive power to a wider range of ordinary people[7].

The first contribution of this article is to make clearer the relevance of the media – especially online news – to the international relations literature. The world is in a significant state of flux. Since 2011, Britain has exited the European Union, troops have been withdrawn from Afghanistan (where Britain had contributed), and defence spending is hotly debated. Indeed, there are frequent assertions that Britain does not have "enough" troops or equipment for the circumstances it might face in the near future. The second contribution therefore is to highlight how Britain is represented as holding great power status, *despite* perceived declining military power. At a time when growing numbers of people are reading their news online, this status is (re)confirmed through the positioning of Britain as holding special responsibilities on the world stage. The discourse of special rights and responsibilities is highly flexible, making it possible to construct Britain as holding "great power" status in any situation.

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[7] Mainstream media, states, intergovernmental organisations, and corporations also have social media accounts, so power can flow in multiple directions.

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