

Contested stories of commercial security: self- and media narratives of private military and security companies

Andreas Kruck* and Alexander Spencer

Geschwister-Scholl-Institute for Political Science, Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Oettingenstr 67, 80538 Munich, Germany

The article illustrates the potential of narrative analysis as a transdisciplinary method for critical security studies by investigating self-legitimizing narratives of private military and security companies (PMSCs) and contrasts them to the narratives on PMSCs found in the news media. By employing narrative analysis and focusing on the websites of 55 PMSCs and four quality US and British newspapers, we reconstruct how PMSCs and the media establish four conflicting narratives characterizing PMSCs as *technical and military experts vs. incompetent cowboys*; *professional businessmen vs. exploiting war profiteers*; *noble humanitarians vs. uncontrolled abusers* and *proud patriots vs. dirty mercenaries*. Our analysis shows that the self-narratives of the PMSCs largely fail to arrive in the public media narratives although some self-characterizations such as *the expert* or *the businessman* resonate somewhat better than others, in particular the strongly romanticizing images of *the humanitarian* or *the patriot*. We propose the concept of ‘intertextual narratability’ to suggest that the media reception of PMSCs’ self-narratives is shaped by their (lack of) connectability to existing culturally embedded narratives on PMSCs.

Keywords: private military and security company, narrative, narrative analysis, media, image

Introduction

At least since the time of well-publicized fatal shootings in post-invasion Iraq, private military and security companies (PMSCs) have faced not only heightened public attention but also a massive image problem. As both commercial enterprises and political actors in international security, PMSCs are aware of, and care about, their (bad) image as they go to considerable lengths to improve their blemished reputation and to influence the broader public’s view of who they ‘really’ are and what they do. For that purpose, PMSCs have deployed substantial resources and acquired specialized expertise in the area of image management. PMSCs have hired large public relations (PR) firms such as Burson-Marsteller and high-level individual specialists such as Kenneth Starr. Industry representatives have given numerous media (TV and newspaper) interviews, among others to CBS, CNN, NBC, PBS and *The Washington Post*. Further PR activities include professional advertisements in industry magazines, the creation and support of charities, the sale of merchandising products such as t-shirts and coffee cups with the firm’s logo on them, and last, but not least, the establishment of a positive online persona on their websites.

* Corresponding author. Email: Andreas.Kruck@gsi.uni-muenchen.de

Thus, PMSCs tell particular legitimizing narratives and constitute certain images of themselves which they communicate to their audiences, including the broader public. The main aim of this article is to analyze which characterizations are most prominent in PMSCs' self-presentation, in how far these self-characterizations are adopted by the news media and which alternative characterizations of PMSCs also appear in the media. In doing so, we assess the extent that PMSCs are able to narratively project positive self-images. We thus shed light on the opportunities and constraints for the (self-)legitimation of security actors.

Research in International Relations (IR) has only begun to tackle questions pertaining to the identity construction, discursive influence and legitimacy of PMSCs. After earlier work in the private security literature had focused on descriptive overviews of PMSCs' activities (Singer 2003), causes and consequences of their use (Krahmann 2010; Kruck 2013; Peterson 2010; Avant 2005) as well as issues in their regulation (Chesterman and Lehnardt 2007), scholars have recently turned to investigate how PMSCs see themselves (Franke and von Boemcken 2011), which identities they constitute (Berndtsson 2012; Higate 2012; Joachim and Schneiker 2012), and which effects the (self-)constructions of PMSCs' multiple identities, such as 'military experts' or 'new humanitarians', may have on their perceived legitimacy as providers of security governance (Cutler 2010; Krahmann 2012). However, there is a lack of empirical research about the success of PMSCs' attempts to establish a positive image. As a result, we do not know whether PMSCs are really able to shape media and public perceptions of their business. Thus, it is unclear how much discursive power PMSCs actually possess. This uncertainty hampers our understanding of PMSCs' possibilities and limits for legitimizing and normalizing a highly contested business (Leander 2005).

The original contribution of this article lies not so much in the obvious observation that PMSCs are trying to present a more positive image of themselves, but in the narratological inquiry of *how* they try and tell particular stories about themselves and how this is received by the media. The article therefore fits well into the current debate on method and methodology within Critical Security Studies (Shepard 2013; Salter and Mutlu 2013). It brings new insights from literary studies and Narratology to the realm of Critical Security Studies by illustrating how narrative analysis can be used as a method for the analysis of security. It thereby promotes 'a growing transdisciplinary conversation about security' (Mutimer et al. 2013, 7). Demonstrating that only some of the self-narratives of PMSCs are picked up in the media, the article is significant as it investigates the possibilities and limits of strategically using narratives to further political interests (in our case: PMSCs' desire to be seen as legitimate actors of security governance). In other words, while the emphasis is on the empirical analysis of self- and media narratives on PMSCs, this article offers a first step towards a critique of assumptions about the unlimited power of political elites to manipulate (security) discourse at will. As the article indicates in the final section, the agency over discourse is limited by the level of intertextual narratability as narratives have to connect themselves to previously existing ones in order to have a chance of becoming widely accepted. This does not mean that agents cannot tell new stories, but that these stories have to relate to existing ones in order to be considered intersubjectively sensible.

In pursuit of these goals we analyze and compare self- and media narratives on PMSCs. While there are obviously numerous societal (sub-)discourses on PMSCs and the news media will hardly provide a perfect one-to-one representation of 'the' public's view on PMSCs, media narratives are indicative of how PMSCs are perceived by a societal opinion elite which in turn draws on and informs perceptions of a broader interested public. Thus, as the media, through their coverage,

both reflect and shape societal ideologies about legitimate security policy and its ‘appropriate’ actors, media reports constitute key venues to study the success or failure of PMSCs’ narrative struggle for more broad-based societal legitimacy. The focus on the media is helpful as it provides insights into the reception of PMSCs’ self-narratives and the narrative re-production of a hegemonic societal view of PMSCs. Contrasting PMSCs’ self-narratives with media narratives on PMSCs therefore allows us to assess how far PMSCs are able to project positive self-images and intersubjectively establish legitimizing narratives.

In order to investigate self- and media representations of PMSCs, we draw on the interdisciplinary theoretical-methodological framework of narrative analysis. We use narrative analysis for our empirical reconstruction of self- and media narratives as it provides us with insights into the cognitive and cultural belief systems of those writing or telling and those reading or listening to these stories (Patterson and Renwick Monroe 1998, 315). From a cognitive perspective, narratives are said to be a ‘fundamental instrument of thought [...] indispensable to human cognition generally’ (Turner 1996, 4-5). Narratives are considered to be part of human mental activity in the sense that the human brain ‘captures many complex relationships in the form of narrative structures’ (Fludernick 2009, 1). From a cultural perspective, narratives are considered to be culturally embedded phenomena that are a part of every society. Myths and stories of the past, including stories about political actors such as mercenaries, are an essential part of all forms of community-building where the constitution of a common identity is sought. Individuals, as well as communities, make sense of themselves and of the social world around them through narratives which constitute their identities as well as their understandings of other actors.

We argue that, PMSCs are (co-)authors and subjects of identity-constructing self-narratives as well as objects of media narratives that constitute a particular understanding of PMSCs. Thus, the analysis of narratives contributes to our understanding of identity construction, common conceptions of ‘political reality’ as well as widely held perceptions of, and attitudes towards, political actors such as PMSCs (Somers 1994, 606-607). Although social narratives are very rarely single authored, the analysis of narratives can nevertheless be considered as an investigation into social action and agency. The analysis of how some narratives of political actors succeed and others fail to have an impact ultimately helps to understand the distribution of discursive power between political actors (Patterson and Renwick Monroe 1998, 315-316).

Our comparative narrative analysis of self- and media narratives indicates that PMSCs have only limited discursive influence to construct themselves and project positive self-images. Their self-images mostly fail to arrive in public media narratives although characterizations as *technical and military experts* and *professional businessmen* resonate somewhat better than other, highly romanticized images of *noble humanitarians* and *proud patriots*.

In the following theoretical-methodological section we outline our understanding of narratives, our methodological approach and our selection of data material. In the empirical section, we draw on the websites of 55 British and North American PMSCs to reconstruct the narratives told by PMSCs about themselves and contrast them with the narratives on PMSCs found in 191 British and US newspaper articles. The paper shows that the four main self-images of PMSCs constituting them as *technical and military experts*, *professional businessmen*, *noble humanitarians* and *proud patriots* stand in stark contrast to the dominant media narratives which tend to present PMSCs as *incompetent cowboys*, *exploiting war profiteers*, *uncontrolled abusers* and/or *dirty mercenaries*. We go on to suggest that a narratological perspective may help to make sense of these findings. Intersubjective understandings of the audience about PMSCs that are embedded in widely

shared cultural narratives compromise the ‘intertextual narratability’ of new positive narratives on PMSCs. Thus, we call for more research into a conception of narrative success and failure according to which structural constraints rooted in intertextual narratives limit agentic attempts at strategically projecting certain self-narratives. The article concludes with a summary of our main findings and propositions.

Narratives and their analysis

The use of narratives in IR is by no means a new enterprise and the concept of narrative has been employed readily in a large variety of different theoretical perspectives (Somers 1994; Patterson and Renwick Monroe 1998). Most commonly one comes across the concept in constructivist and post-structuralist work on identity constructions of self and other and the drawing of borders (Ringmar 1996; Campbell 1998; Hansen 2006; Browning 2008), the influence of (pop-)cultural narratives (Nexon and Neuman 2006; Lacassagne et al. 2011) or the use of Hayden White’s insights into historical narratives and explanations (Suganami 2008; Roberts 2006). Yet, despite the widespread use of the concept, very little attention has been paid to the field of Narratology. Overall in IR, the concept of narrative has frequently been used as a synonym for discourse or frame and has not focused on the specific characteristics of what constitutes a narrative. Narratology offers concrete categories for the empirical analysis of narratives through the established consensus of what elements are necessary for making something a narrative. This section of the article will draw on these insights from Narratology in order to outline our understanding of narratives and thereby indicate the method used in the analytical sections which follow.

Narratology stresses that narratives can be found in almost every realm of human life where someone tells us about something. Narratives involve a number of very different text types (written, oral and visual) ranging from literary texts such as novels and poems to films, TV reports, newspaper reports and commentary, school and university textbooks, websites and conversations in our daily life (Barthes 1975). While some simply understand a narrative as ‘someone telling someone else that something happened’ (Herrnstein Smith 1981, 228), others add the issues of time, setting and purpose of this telling: ‘Somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened’ (Phelan 2005, 18). Thus, a narrative can be conceived as the (re-)production of an event or a ‘sequence of non-randomly connected events’ (Genette 1982, 127). Moreover, a narrative centrally involves some sort of disruption or specialty that makes it meaningful and interesting for a certain audience and thus worth telling. Finally, and most importantly for our analysis, narratives contain actors, i.e. human or human-like agents such as PMSCs or their employees that are characterized in multiple ways (Herman 2009).

These conceptualizations, as well as the practice of narrative analysis in literary studies, offer a number of categories which may guide the investigation of political narratives. A narrative is made up of a number of features such as a *scene* or *setting* of a story, an *event* and *emplotment*, as well as an *agent* that is *characterized* in different ways (Bruner 1991). All of these elements are elaborated on in the narrative discourse in order to give them a more specific character and an evaluative implication. The dimensions of *setting*, *emplotment* and *characterization* can be empirically analyzed and are representative of an overall narrative. While not all of these dimensions are always of the same importance, they may all serve as focal points for more detailed analysis.

With regard to the *setting*, the idea is that similar to a stage play or a film, the background, or location in front of which the story unfolds, is of importance for the narrative as a whole. As Toolan argues: ‘The locations [or settings] where events occur are [...] given distinct characteristics and are thus transformed into specific places’ (Toolan 2001, 41). We all want to know where a story takes place. We consciously or unconsciously look for indicators of the surroundings as they give us a clue of the kind of story we are about to indulge in. For example, in the case of narratives on PMSCs, one frequently encounters a setting of a ‘dangerous and lawless Iraq’ in which PMSCs have to operate.

The event and the *emplotment* are essential for a narrative: in a narrative something has to happen (Ricoeur 1981, 167). Moreover, the event understood as an action has to lead to more action. So the events in a narrative do not stand on their own; they have to be placed in relation to each other (Genette 1990). Here we have to distinguish a temporal and a causal dimension in the ordering of events and action. While the temporal elements of a narrative are important, as they emphasize or foreground certain events, and limit or silence other happenings, the causal dimension, commonly termed ‘causal emplotment’, elaborates the causal relationship between the elements of a narrative. Emplotment weighs and explains events rather than just listing them (Bruner 1991). For example the case of the PMSCs setting mentioned above can be part of the causal emplotment as it gives an indication of why PMSCs have to use extensive force which results in collateral damage. Therefore, harm to civilians is not a fault of their own but due to the circumstance in which they are operating: a dangerous and lawless environment.

The focus during the empirical analysis which is to follow will be on the third essential part of a narrative: the human or human-like agent and its *characterization* (Hutto 2007). There are a number of ways in which the characterization of an actor can be influenced. The first, and the most simple, is giving the agent a name or label rather than simply referring to him, her or it by the occupation or role they play in the story. The giving of a name or a label informs the relationship between the reader and the agent in the story. For example calling a PMSC employee a former Marine or a cowboy can bring with it a number of associations such as elite training or trigger-happiness. Secondly, an agent is characterized by being placed in relation to others. For example this can involve hierarchical relationships such as in the family (mother and child), in society (protector and protected), or in military operations (military leadership and PMSCs as serving supporters); it may also point to more equal relations such as business partners (Fludernick 2009, 44-45). A third means of characterization involves the description of the agent’s physical attributes such as clothes or the amount of weaponry PMSCs carry or outer appearance including facial expression. As most of these features are considered to be a deliberate choice of the agents and under their control, they are thought to provide an insight into one’s character. A fourth possibility of characterizing an agent is through his or her thought process or direct speech. What the character thinks or says greatly influences our perception of what that agent is like and how he or she becomes a character. While the narrator of a story is fully responsible for suggesting the thought of characters, the direct speech in newspaper commentary or other media channels is not under the control of the narrator. As will be indicated later, many of the more positive characterizations of PMSC as heroes and patriots are reported in direct speech by PMSCs themselves, indicating that this characterization should be taken with caution as it is not the reporter him-/herself that characterizes the actor in a matter-of-fact way (Herman and Vervaeck 2007, 227). Apart from name giving, the relationship to others, the description of appearance and direct speech, a final very important aspect of characterization is the

way in which the agent acts. Ultimately, the behavior attributed to the actor has an important effect on how we perceive characters like PMSCs (e.g. well trained, patriotic, reckless, ruthless etc.).

In our following analysis of self- and media narratives on PMSCs, we clearly concentrate on characterization. Nonetheless, we also make explicit references to setting and provide clues to the causal emplotment of the narratives. For our purpose of reconstructing PMSCs' main self-characterizations, we looked at PMSCs' websites. First we examined the 'About Us' section, where we expected to find self-images that PMSCs seek to project both through their websites and other forms of PR work mentioned above. We inductively drew out dominant categories of self-characterization which frequently appeared on the websites and then continually revised and refined these categories as we went on to analyse all the websites from our sample.

As to the selection of our sample, it is estimated that overall around 300 to 500 PMSCs exist around the world, although this is extremely difficult to verify (for figures and lists see Avant 2005, 9-15; Singer 2003, 79, 243-244). Many of these are small and local sub-contractors of the bigger (mainly US and British) players or 'virtual companies' with very fluid corporate structures and hardly any permanent employees. We only selected British and North American PMSCs that have a consolidated corporate structure (excluding very small firms and 'freelancers'), operate transnationally in zones of violent conflict (excluding domestic security firms) and who have their own website. Thus, our analysis of PMSCs' self-narratives covers the websites of 55 British and American PMSCs which fit these criteria.¹ These 55 companies include all the major British and North American players in the industry. Thus, while our findings are representative for the group of bigger and leading Anglo-Saxon PMSCs, they may not apply to Non-Western PMSCs, small splinter firms, and local sub-contractors.²

In our media analysis we first screened the reception, i.e. the presence, absence and evaluation of PMSCs' self-characterizations in the media and then inductively drew out (and again continuously revised) alternative characterizations of PMSCs that could be found there. To assess the success or failure of PMSCs' narratives of self-legitimation, we indicate the numerical prevalence of the different characterizations of PMSCs in the media (by counting articles echoing a particular narrative, see Table 1). More importantly, we pit particularly frequent and telling media quotes, which contain defining 'anchoring categories' for the relevant narrative and its constitutive sub-narratives, against PMSCs' self-characterizations in order to show the qualitative differences and the extent of discrepancies between self- and media narration.

Table 1. Narrative characterizations of PMSCs in the media.

Subject of narrative Contestation	Narrative characterizations	Articles echoing the narrative (total 191)
Qualification	<i>Technical & military experts</i>	21 (11%)
	<i>Incompetent cowboys</i>	56 (29%)
Business ethics	<i>Professional businessmen</i>	18 (9%)
	<i>Exploiting war profiteers</i>	60 (31%)
Legality	<i>Noble humanitarians</i>	5 (3%)
	<i>Uncontrolled abusers</i>	73 (38%)
Loyalty	<i>Proud patriots</i>	8 (4%)
	<i>Dirty mercenaries</i>	72 (38%)

For that purpose, we examined articles on PMSCs from two British and two US newspapers: *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. This selection of moderately conservative and center-left quality newspapers follows several rationales. First, it corresponds to our sample of globally active PMSCs that have their home base in the UK or North America and takes into account that there might be country-specific differences in coverage. It also allows us to spot potential differences along political affiliations of newspapers while their situation in the political mainstream excludes societally non-representative radical views. Moreover, the choice of quality newspapers would lead us to expect a differentiated, largely non-evaluative rather than sensational, cliché-ridden treatment of PMSCs, thus avoiding an *a priori* bias against PMSCs. Finally, these quality newspapers – unlike tabloids – offer relatively extensive coverage of PMSCs and are thus a key source for an above-average politically interested public.

In order to find the relevant articles we used the *Lexis Nexis* database and conducted searches for the period between 2004 (after the first major PMSC-related security incident in Iraq) and 2011 using the terms ‘private military (company)’, ‘private security (company)’ and ‘security contractors’. From the resulting matches we excluded those articles that dealt with the domestic operations of private security firms and those that were too short to allow for a meaningful qualitative narrative analysis. This left us with a sample of 191 articles.

Self- and media narratives of PMSCs: conflicting characterizations

From our empirical analysis of the websites we reconstruct four major self-characterizations constituting PMSCs as *technical and military experts*, *professional businessmen*, *noble humanitarians* and *proud patriots*. While a positive self-depiction of PMSCs is hardly surprising, the broad range of prosaic and highly romanticized self-narratives that are evoked is quite remarkable. However, these positive self-narratives stand in stark contrast to the predominant media narratives found in US and British quality newspapers which characterize PMSCs as *incompetent cowboys*, *exploiting war profiteers*, *uncontrolled abusers* and *dirty mercenaries*. While there are a number of interesting sub-narratives visible in the empirical data, which we seek to represent as fully as possible through our selection of quotes, the analysis is structured by four general subjects of narrative contestation we found to be dominant in the discourse: PMSCs’ qualifications (*technical and military experts* vs. *incompetent cowboys*), business ethics (*professional businessmen* vs. *exploiting war profiteers*), legality (*noble humanitarians* vs. *uncontrolled abusers*) and loyalty (*proud patriots* vs. *dirty mercenaries*). As indicated by our selection of article quotes in the following sub-sections, the media narratives on PMSCs are strikingly similar both across home countries and political orientations of the newspapers. Moreover, we found no notable change of media narratives on PMSCs over time and it is important to stress that the characterizations are not mutually exclusive. As will become evident, many of the self and media narratives involve a number of different characterizations within the same text.

Contested qualifications: technical and military experts vs. incompetent cowboys

One of the most dominant images frequently evoked by PMSCs’ self-characterization on their websites is the *technical and military expert*. On the technical side, the PMSC constructs itself as ‘an international technology-enabled intelligence and information

management company'³ which offers 'the most advanced security solutions technology available in the market today'⁴ and 'trusted intelligence and scalable technology solutions that help companies, investors and governments address business and legal risks'⁵. Such firms stress their 'ability to combine know-how and technology quickly and effectively to create the solutions our customers need'⁶ in the setting of a 'rapidly changing world of technology'⁷. 'Whatever the level of protection, you can be assured that your total safety rests in the skilled hands of the world's most experienced craftsmen and security technicians'⁸.

On the military side of this expert narrative, the companies and their employees are characterized as elite warriors. PMSCs are presented as 'veteran owned'⁹ companies, founded by 'retired [...] military officers'¹⁰ and staffed by 'former military personnel'¹¹ who have extensive 'military qualifications'¹², 'military experience'¹³ and 'military decorations'¹⁴. Accordingly, one frequently encounters references to extensive experience and global 'operational expertise'¹⁵ in the US special-forces such as 'Delta', 'SEALs', 'Force Recon'¹⁶ or the 'British SAS'¹⁷, the 'Royal Marine Commandos'¹⁸ or 'the world's most elite maritime regiment – the United Kingdom's Special Boat Service'¹⁹. Employees are characterized as 'hand-picked'²⁰, 'highly qualified, and highly skilled'²¹ former members of 'special forces'²² or 'security elite'²³.

Some of these self-characterizations as technical and military experts can also be found in the media narratives on PMSCs in US and British newspapers. 21 of the 191 analyzed articles (11%) contained elements of this expert narrative. Articles describe the PMSCs as 'modern and well-equipped'²⁴ companies operating in an expert setting such as 'a state of the art 2,400ha (6,000 acre) training facility in North Carolina, including the largest shooting range in America and a lake for naval training' and providing 'elite forces staffed by well-trained veterans of powerful militaries for use in sensitive actions or operations'²⁵. Several reports characterize the employees of PMSCs as former members of the military using images such as 'highly trained personnel'²⁶, 'experts'²⁷, 'veteran[s]'²⁸, 'special forces or elite regiments'²⁹ or '(elite) commandos'³⁰.

However, in far more articles PMSCs are characterized as incompetent 'cowboys'³¹ in a setting where they 'have struck gold in the lawless frontier of Iraq'³². 56 of the 191 analyzed articles (29%) associate PMSCs with features of *incompetent cowboys*. According to this narrative, PMSCs are not elite soldiers or heroes: '[I]f you're a private military contractor fighting on foreign soil, you might as well be a cowboy looking for payday, and you won't convince anyone you're a hero'³³. PMSCs' employees are considered to be 'arrogant and trigger-happy operatives'³⁴ or 'out-of-control contractors'³⁵ who use 'cowboy tactics'³⁶ and are 'reckless'³⁷, 'ruthless'³⁸ and 'careless of Iraqi lives'³⁹, doing jobs 'that are too dull or too messy for the military forces'⁴⁰ and leaving behind a 'bloody mess'⁴¹. They have established a 'cowboy culture'⁴² and flaunt 'an aggressive, quick draw image'⁴³. Their outer appearance is described in phrases such as 'bandana-wearing, muscular employees riding shotgun on the convoys they protected'⁴⁴ and 'grim-faced men in battle fatigues [who] are oiling their M4s and Glock'⁴⁵: 'None of the guns had the safety catch on'⁴⁶. Similarly, employees are characterized as a 'set of foreign adventurers'⁴⁷ or guys with a 'hankering for adventure'⁴⁸. Their 'recklessness' and readiness to use indiscriminate violence are indicative of their 'aggressive machismo', 'bullying' and 'muscle-bound showiness'⁴⁹.

PMSCs are considered 'putative warriors'⁵⁰ or 'military washouts, ex-cons, gunmen fired from other contractors and the utterly unqualified'⁵¹. Rather than employing well-trained professionals, PMSCs rely on questionable selection and recruitment procedures that lead to the hiring of unqualified and outright incompetent staff in an 'industry where

it's apparently easier to become an armed security guard abroad than a bouncer in London'⁵².

Contested business ethics: professional businessmen vs. exploiting war profiteers

A second prominent characterization on the websites of PMSCs constitutes them and their employees as *professional businessmen*. A large number of PMSCs strongly emphasize a 'demilitarized' image of themselves as highly professional business enterprises which avoid militaristic lingo, operate in challenging but essentially civilian business settings and claim to be a far cry from commonplace images of mercenary firms. They provide 'government services'⁵³, 'effective and efficient operations'⁵⁴, 'targeted services' and 'total solutions'⁵⁵ which 'enhance our customers' effectiveness – anytime, anywhere'⁵⁶.

PMSCs characterize themselves as competent, reliable, trustworthy and responsive partners which 'deliver solutions and services of superior value that meets or exceeds our customers' expectations'⁵⁷ because they truly care about and understand their clients' needs. They offer an 'exceptional customer service'⁵⁸ and emphasize flexibility and cost-efficiency as key assets: 'Our daily preoccupation is providing the most cost-effective, responsive and personalized possible customer care'⁵⁹. Moreover, they stress that they 'provide the best value products and services'⁶⁰ and 'develop innovative solutions and provide customer value'⁶¹. For that purpose, PMSCs claim to rely on 'world-class professionals led by some of the strongest leaders in the business'⁶² and 'highly qualified management staff'⁶³.

Some of these characterizations as service-minded professional businessmen that get the job done do reach the media narratives on PMSCs. References to the *professional businessmen* narrative could be found in 18 of the 191 articles (9%). In these articles, PMSCs are characterized as 'professional' 'cost-saving' 'businesses' which are 'an essential part of the American war'⁶⁴ which 'could not have been maintained without mercenaries'⁶⁵.

In contrast, there are characterizations that do not accept PMSCs' self-characterization as normal professional businesses and strongly question their ethics. In 60 of the 191 articles (31%), PMSCs are associated with the attributes of 'war profiteers'⁶⁶ who have made tremendous profits and received 'munificent payments'⁶⁷ from 'lucrative war contracts'⁶⁸. In this *exploiting war profiteers* narrative, PMSCs are described as 'well-paid mercenaries'⁶⁹ 'driven by money'⁷⁰. According to this narrative, 'the hugely lucrative commercial security industry'⁷¹, whose 'annual revenue (...) soared'⁷² 'as Iraq was awash with billions of dollars from the US', has unscrupulously exploited 'the pot of gold'⁷³ and 'windfall'⁷⁴ of revenues that could be grabbed in the violent and insecure settings of Iraq and Afghanistan.

PMSCs and their 'lucrative trade'⁷⁵ are condemned for unmorally 'cash[ing] in on chaos'⁷⁶, 'driving up profits'⁷⁷, and 'profit[ing] from the hugely expanded demand for military training and security that followed the attacks on New York and Washington'⁷⁸. Fighting for the sake of money is denounced: 'The only reason any of them are there is money, on average pounds 400 a day'⁷⁹. The profit-making motive of PMSCs 'whose prime loyalty is to their shareholders'⁸⁰ and resulting 'inherent interest in ongoing conflict'⁸¹ are frequently underlined to the extent that PMSCs are becoming 'counterproductive'⁸² to the overall effort of the governments paying them.

While a few reports refer to the cost-savings rationale for hiring PMSCs⁸³, most are critical about PMSCs' cost-efficiency and stress 'inefficiency'⁸⁴, 'waste and fraud' or

‘shoddy’⁸⁵ work ‘funded by the British taxpayer’⁸⁶. PMSCs have ‘defrauded the U.S. government of tens of millions of dollars’⁸⁷ and they are ‘overbilling’⁸⁸ and ‘siphoning off’⁸⁹ substantial financial resources. Contractors are blamed for charging ‘far more than any soldier, often for similar work’⁹⁰ so that ‘the work could be done by the government or the military at a much lower cost’⁹¹. After all, ‘[r]ather than models of speed and efficiency, the contractors look more like overcharging, underperforming, lumbering beasts, barely able to move for fear of the hatred they have helped generate’⁹².

Contested legality: noble humanitarians vs. uncontrolled abusers

A third self-characterization of PMSCs presents them and their employees as *noble humanitarians* (see Joachim and Schneiker 2012) who ‘help individuals take charge of their future’ ‘whenever and wherever there’s a need’⁹³ in order to ‘make the world a better place’⁹⁴. PMSCs characterize themselves as ‘a force for good’⁹⁵ promising to ‘serve today for a better tomorrow’⁹⁶.

More specifically, this self-characterization as noble humanitarians takes the form of emphasizing ‘support’ of, or ‘respect for human rights’⁹⁷ as ‘a core principle’⁹⁸ and part of the PMSC’s ‘ethos’⁹⁹. PMSCs emphasize their support for human rights by participating in human rights schemes such as the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights¹⁰⁰ or the International Code of Conduct for Private Security Service Providers (ICoC)¹⁰¹. They stress that they will ‘never be complicit in human rights abuses’¹⁰² and claim that they are ‘fully compliant with government regulations, industry protocols and international law’¹⁰³.

Many companies also emphasize their ‘Code of Ethics’¹⁰⁴, ‘highest standards of moral, ethical and socially responsible behavior’¹⁰⁵ or, generally, an ‘ethical approach’¹⁰⁶. Mission Essential Personnel (MEP) publicly pleads to its employees that ‘each of us has a moral compass. Use that compass to seek the truth and stay on the right path; to choose the hard right over the easy wrong; and to set the example – even when nobody is watching’¹⁰⁷. Some PMSCs even point to the existence of ethical training programs for employees¹⁰⁸ or an ‘Ethics Hotline’¹⁰⁹ ‘to ensure our working practices and accountability are always beyond reproach’¹¹⁰.

Others illustrate their noble humanitarian image by highlighting that their clients include ‘human rights organisations’¹¹¹ as well as ‘humanitarian and non-governmental organisations’¹¹² such as Oxfam, MSF, Red Cross¹¹³, USAID or the United Nations¹¹⁴. The self-characterization as noble humanitarians is further strengthened through the support of ‘charitable organisations’¹¹⁵, notably in the area ‘of training, education and mentoring (...) in the developing world’¹¹⁶. Firms stress to support ‘building a new school’ in Sudan¹¹⁷ and show ‘an especially strong commitment to organizations that promote education, health care, and human services’ through ‘volunteer activities, financial donations, and ‘in-kind’ gifts’¹¹⁸.

Interestingly, this characterization is almost completely absent in the media narrative on PMSCs. Merely 5 (of 191 analyzed) articles (3%) included references to the *noble humanitarians* narrative. Rather, PMSCs’ attempts at presenting themselves as moral humanitarian actors are displayed in a rather negative way as a ‘major damage-limitation exercise’¹¹⁹ and a ‘bid to shed some of [their] bad image’¹²⁰.

In 73 of 191 articles (38%), the media characterized PMSCs as *uncontrolled abusers* operating in the setting of a ‘grey zone’¹²¹ and engaging in illicit or legally dubious activities without facing adequate regulation and control. Security contractors are thus portrayed as ‘outlaws’¹²², ‘desperados’¹²³ or ‘thugs’ doing ‘criminal’¹²⁴ things or ‘dirty

work¹²⁵ for their clients. PMSCs are said to display ‘lawless behavior’¹²⁶, including ‘bribery’¹²⁷, ‘weapons smuggling’¹²⁸ and ‘rogue operations’ which ‘pushed the boundaries of legality’¹²⁹. They are ‘misfits, thugs and outright psychotics who kill with impunity under corporate flags’¹³⁰. PMSCs commit ‘violent felonies’ and ‘murder’¹³¹ in a ‘murky legal space’¹³² and a ‘culture of lawlessness’¹³³.

Rather than portraying the alleged noble and respectable sides of PMSCs’ activities, reports frequently refer to ‘allegations of abuse’¹³⁴, ‘human rights abuse by employees of foreign companies in Iraq and Afghanistan’¹³⁵ and other kinds of ‘misdeeds’¹³⁶. The legitimacy of PMSCs’ activities is outright questioned as ‘this outsourcing may be fueling serious human rights abuses’¹³⁷. Consequently, a lot of reports deplore the ‘lack of accountability’¹³⁸ and ‘the loose’¹³⁹ or ‘lack of control’¹⁴⁰ of the ‘unregulated private military and security companies’¹⁴¹.

Contested loyalty: proud patriots vs. dirty mercenaries

The final self-characterization portrayed PMSCs as *proud patriots*. Some PMSCs explicitly stress their patriotic loyalty towards their home-country. They place themselves into a highly patriotic and heroic setting and emphasize their ‘sole purpose of improving the Nation’s awareness, readiness, response, and recovery from all hazards we face’¹⁴², their ‘support of our nation’s vital priorities’¹⁴³, ‘continued distinctive service to the Crown and country’¹⁴⁴ and commitment to deliver ‘superior performance to the U.S. government [and] our allies’¹⁴⁵. CACI proclaims that ‘America’s missions are our missions. For more than 45 years we have been driven by a company-wide commitment to support our nation’s vital national priorities and to serve as a trusted national asset’¹⁴⁶. Similarly, the firm name SOC is meant to signify ‘Securing our Country’¹⁴⁷.

PMSCs strongly identify with the public armed forces of their home-country, praise their heroism in the defense of national security and pledge to ‘support our troops’¹⁴⁸ and ‘sav[e] American Warfighters Lives’¹⁴⁹ through their services. Supporting charities for wounded veterans such as the ‘Wounded Warriors Project’, the ‘Silver Eagle Group’¹⁵⁰ or Northrop Grumman’s Operation IMPACT (Injured Military Pursuing Assisted Career Transition) is another related way to demonstrate patriotic sentiments.

In newspaper articles, the image of the proud patriot is hardly echoed; it could be found in only 8 articles (i.e. 4% of the analyzed articles). Where such references did occur, they almost exclusively appeared in the direct speech of PMSC employees such as in: ‘They are all American, working for Americans, protecting Americans’¹⁵¹. Far more dominant than the proud patriot image, the media characterizes the PMSCs as *dirty mercenaries* in 72 of the 191 articles (38%). PMSCs are described as ‘(modern) soldiers-of-fortune’¹⁵², ‘commercial soldiers’¹⁵³ or simply as ‘mercenaries’¹⁵⁴.

The companies are referred to as ‘the mercenary industry’¹⁵⁵, ‘mercenary forces’¹⁵⁶, ‘mercenary armies’¹⁵⁷, ‘mercenaries who risk their lives to earn pounds 400 a day’¹⁵⁸ or ‘mercenary private contractors’¹⁵⁹. More specifically, PMSCs are characterized as ‘trigger-happy’¹⁶⁰, ‘gun-toting’¹⁶¹ or ‘reckless mercenaries with little regard for Iraqi life’¹⁶² that are operating in an essentially immoral and dirty business setting. The association of PMSCs, the International Peace Operations Association, is referred to as ‘Orwellian-named mercenary trade group’¹⁶³.

The media are fully aware that the PMSCs ‘don’t like to be called mercenaries’¹⁶⁴ but nonetheless PMSCs remain ‘mercenaries, to you and me’¹⁶⁵: ‘[T]hey object to that label, but it fits’¹⁶⁶. The term ‘private security contractors’ is denounced as ‘our contemporary

euphemism for mercenaries'¹⁶⁷. What is more, a number of articles clearly criticize PMSCs' attempts 'at a major rebranding campaign aimed at shaking their mercenary image'¹⁶⁸ as well as governments' alleged assistance in this 'campaign' which aims at 'a legitimisation of one of the world's dirtiest professions'¹⁶⁹.

Intertextual narratability and the limits of strategic image construction

The stark contrast between dominant self- and media narratives indicates that PMSCs' self-narratives largely fail to have a significant effect on public media perception. Nonetheless, we should note that the *technical and military experts* and the *professional businessmen* narratives resonate somewhat better than the self-characterizations as *noble humanitarians* or *proud patriots* (see Table 1).

But what makes it so difficult for PMSCs to project positive legitimizing narratives about themselves, and how is it possible that some self-characterizations find at least some acceptance in the media while others are rejected? We argue that, in Herman's and Chomsky's (1988) terminology, it is mainly ideological (rather than structural economic¹⁷⁰) 'filters' that shape media coverage of PMSCs. Moreover, these ideological 'media filters' can be conceptualized as being rooted in broader narratives about PMSCs that serve as cognitive and cultural bases that 'narratively embedded' journalists (mostly unconsciously) draw upon in their rendering of events and protagonists. Thus, we suggest that Narratology provides a fruitful perspective for understanding the narrative success or failure of particular characterizations of PMSCs.

In a narratological view, PMSCs' self-narratives find themselves in a situation of narrative interdependence which can be best understood with reference to intertextuality (Bakhtin 1986; Kristeva 1980). This means that the success or failure of narratives depends on what may be called *intertextual narratability*. Narratives do not exist in isolation but always relate to, or are even part of other already existing narratives. As Lene Hansen notes with regard to intertextuality, 'the inimitability of every individual text is always located within a shared textual space, all texts make reference, explicitly or implicitly, to previous ones, and in doing so they both establish their own reading and become mediations on the meaning and status of others' (Hansen 2006, 55). (Re-)adopting this idea into the realm of narrative analysis, this implies that narratives cannot be freely changed or manipulated by agents such as PMSCs. Instead, (new) narratives have to conform, or at least connect to, previously existing ones. While there is room for new narratives, and actors can tell new stories, their intersubjective success in front of the audience depends very much on narratives the audience has previously heard. Thus, the acceptance of narratives is contingent on the intertextuality of the narratives being told and those embedded in the audience. In order to be accepted, new narratives have to refer and link themselves to established narratives to some extent (Spencer forthcoming).

As will be argued below in more detail, in the case of PMSCs, the public audience (including the media) shares very few positive narratively embedded connotations to which PMSCs' self-narratives can connect. There is a lack of readily available positive images in society on which PMSCs' self-narratives could build on. They cannot link themselves to cultural narratives on, for example, the heroic mercenary fighting for the honour of the poor and downtrodden. The positive (and especially romantic) self-characterizations of PMSCs are too far removed from dominant understandings of the audience about PMSCs that are embedded in widely shared and accepted cultural narratives—please see the discussion that follows. The distance between idealized stories

and negative narratively grounded prejudice of the readership is too large to be bridged. This applies to all the four self-characterizations of PMSCs, but in particular to the romanticizing *noble humanitarians* and *proud patriots* narratives.

Our argument about intertextual narratability provides plausible answers not only to why PMSCs' self-narratives fail to have a significant effect on public media perception but also to why the media seems somewhat more supportive of the *technical and military experts* and the *professional businessmen* narratives. First of all, the narratives about experts and professional businessmen are less romanticized and less idealized. Thus, the 'plausibility gap' between narrative (self-)idealization of PMSCs and culturally embedded negative preconceptions of PMSC is smaller here than with the stories about *noble humanitarians* and *proud patriots*. This makes the more prosaic and seemingly 'less improbable' narratives about experts, technology and professionals more palatable for media producers and consumers. Secondly, narrative notions of (security) experts, technological supremacy, and efficient professionalism can, at least to some degree, be linked to wide-spread neoliberal narratives and ideologies in Western societies and editorial offices. Conceptions of PMSCs as efficient, technologically skilled security experts might fit much better with contemporary neoliberal discourses of post-heroic, but technologically and economically efficient warfare than idealizations of PMSCs as humanitarians or patriotic fighters do; while heroic justifications are less accepted, efficient technological 'solutions' to security 'problems' become more appealing in neoliberal post-heroic societies (Dillon and Reid 2009).

The concept of intertextual narratability is certainly in need of further more detailed research. In the following we want to only briefly reflect on some of the avenues this research may take in order to show similar characterizations of PMSCs in other realms (beyond the news media) with a view to strengthening the argument of their cultural embeddedness and thereby their limiting effect on the success of PMSCs' self-narratives. Although, due to space considerations, this can only to a certain extent be done here, we can nevertheless point to examples from dictionary style definitions, common language use and popular culture which display very similar images of PMSCs as those in the news media and are thus indicative of broader narratively embedded beliefs about PMSCs.

A first set of indicators for the embeddedness of a predominantly negative image of mercenaries and their linkage to PMSCs amongst the audience can be found in dictionary style definitions and the development of common language usage as well as new slang. One realm which is indicative of a common use of language and thus an intersubjectively accepted understanding of actors or events is Wikipedia. User-generated encyclopaedias give an insight into the general understanding of a particular issue as they can be written or altered by anyone on the internet. While there is a lot of discussion about the truthfulness of Wikipedia articles, editing functions mean that the articles will over time converge to a consensus understanding shared by a majority of the users (Pentzold 2007). Through this organic growth and merging of subjective understandings of the individual users, one can gain insights into an intersubjective understanding of a diverse audience.

Wikipedia refers to a 'private military company' as follows:

'A private military company (PMC), or private military or security company, provides military and armed security services. These combatants are commonly known as mercenaries, though modern-day PMCs euphemistically prefer to refer to their staff as security contractors, private military contractors or private security contractors, rather than as mercenaries, and refer to themselves as private military corporations, private military firms, private security providers or military service providers.'¹⁷¹

And if one enters ‘private military contractors’ one is redirected to ‘mercenary’. Wikipedia or rather the user-generated intersubjective understanding here states that:

‘The private military company (PMC) is the contemporary strand of the mercenary trade, providing logistics, soldiers, military training, and other services [...] Private paramilitary forces are functionally mercenary armies, not security guards or advisors; however, national governments reserve the right to control the number, nature, and armaments of such private armies, arguing that, provided they are not pro-actively employed in front-line combat, they are not mercenaries.’¹⁷²

In other user-generated webs of knowledge similar characterizations can be found. For example the Urban Dictionary provides the same cross-reference to ‘mercenary’ when the term ‘private security contractor’ is entered. There are even new uses of language or slang expressions which further indicate this negative embedded understanding of PMSCs. When entering ‘Blackwater’ one finds a verb ‘to blackwater’, meaning ‘the act of firing at anything that moves with high-powered firearms, even if the target happens to be a slow-moving vehicle full of innocent civilians; to be utterly unconcerned about the loss of human life while engaging in highly questionable behavior’. As an example sentence the Urban Dictionary lists: ‘Damn, that street gang just blackwatered that poor family’¹⁷³.

(Popular) cultural narratives in films, novels but also computer games and blogs offer further insights into the kind of dominant narratives on PMSCs. There are few popular cultural narratives that portray PMSCs the way they portray themselves, especially if we consider the *noble humanitarian* and the *proud patriot* images. In blockbuster movies, PMSCs are most often not considered the heroes. Even the most famous ‘mercenary’ outfits on TV, ‘The A-Team’, are in their position due to the deceit and treason of a PMSC called ‘Black Forest’, which is characterized in the same manner as in the media narratives analysed above.¹⁷⁴ Video games are also illuminating. There is an Xbox 360 game called *Blackwater*, which the founder of the PMSC Erik Prince hopes will become a franchise.¹⁷⁵ In the game the player takes the role of one of four Blackwater employees in a mission in which they have to protect aid workers and members of the UN, mirroring many of the self-characterizations found on the PMSC websites. While it is usually difficult to grasp direct audience reaction to PMSCs, let alone their attempts at self-narration, this video game as a PR tool and attempt at self-characterization produced explicit reactions in the form of internet reviews, blogs and comments. Most of the comments were highly negative and mirror many of the characterizations found in the media narratives:

‘a game made about legal murderers...wouldn't play it even if it's free.’¹⁷⁶

‘The existence of this game is disgusting. I know, let's make a concentration camp simulator! Surely that will be better.’¹⁷⁷

‘A game about a company that killed countless number of innocent Iraqi people. Shocking this!’¹⁷⁸

‘Ah, yes! Give glory to men who are hired to kill for money.’¹⁷⁹

‘blackwater those guys need to be tried for war crimes.’¹⁸⁰

Similarly, the review reflects the same narrative characterizations as the media narratives on PMSCs:

‘I pity the writer who had the unenviable task of trying to make these killers-for-hire likable. It’s an impossible job and to be completely honest, the overly nice, heroic tone of the characters is unconvincing and utterly forced. [...] If the aim of the game was to make Blackwater more appealing to the general public, then as a piece of digital propaganda it has failed miserably. What it has done instead is paint Blackwater to be simple, inaccurate, uncoordinated idiots. Ohhh ... so maybe the game has got it spot on after all.’¹⁸¹

Conclusion

This article has shown the conflicting characterizations of PMSCs in PMSC’s self-narration and in the narratives found in US and British media. While the companies characterize themselves as *technical and military experts, professional businessmen, noble humanitarians* and/or *proud patriots*, the media, in contrast, tend to see them as *incompetent cowboys, exploiting war profiteers, uncontrolled abusers* and/or *dirty mercenaries* even though the *technical and military experts* and the *professional businessmen* narratives found some limited resonance. In the final section we have suggested that the reception of legitimizing (self-)narratives is contingent on the intertextual connectability of the narratives being told to existing culturally embedded narratives. The positive (and especially the romanticizing) self-characterizations of PMSCs are too far removed from dominant narratively grounded understandings of the audience about PMSCs. As the new positive self-narratives can hardly link themselves to existing positive narratives on PMSCs, PMSCs’ attempts at strategic image (re-)construction largely fail. Overall the article opens up space for further research on questions of intertextuality and narratability along two lines. First, it draws attention to the importance of other widely shared understandings and ideologies such as neo-liberalism, militarism and the fetishisation of military technology as well as their interplay with a dominant cultural interest in ‘how’ warfare is conducted rather than ‘why’ it is conducted; secondly, it demonstrates the need for a more detailed theoretical (re-)treatment of the role of agency in the shaping of narratives which appears more limited on a societal intersubjective level than on a subjective individual or group level (Spencer forthcoming). While we stress that further research on narratively embedded understandings of PMSCs is clearly needed, we believe that our argument about intertextual narratability provides a promising avenue for further theorizing the narrative success and discursive power of private governance actors (in security policy but also in other policy fields) seeking to discursively legitimate themselves.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Tine Hanrieder, Stefanie von Hlatky, Elke Krahmman, Xenia Lanzendörfer, Tobias Müller, Judith Renner, Frank Sauer, Bernhard Zangl, the participants’ of research workshops in Bonn and Munich, the anonymous reviewers and Kyle Grayson from *Critical Studies on Security* for very helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

Notes

¹ The list of analyzed PMSCs includes the British firms Aegis Defence Services, AKE Group, Armor Group, Assured Risks, Ayr Group, Centurion Risk Assessment Services Ltd., Control Risk Group, Edinburgh International, Erinys International, Global Strategies Group, Gurkha Security Guards, Hart Security Limited, MineTech International, Olive Group, Pilgrim Elite, Saladin Group, Sandline International, TOR International and Track24. The following North American PMSCs were analyzed: 3D Global Solutions, Academi (formerly Blackwater/XE), Aecom, Airscan Inc., AlliedBarton Security Services, American Security Group, Blue Hackle, CACI International Inc., Cubic Defense Applications, DynCorp, EOD Technology, GardaWorld, General Dynamics Information Technology,

GlobalEnforce Inc., Global Security Services, Golan Group, Gryphon Group, H3 LLC, HSS-International, ICI of Oregon, KBR, Kroll Inc., L-3 Communications, Military Professional Resources (MPRI), Mission Essential Personnel, MVM Inc., Northrop Grumman, Overseas Security & Strategies, Inc. (OSSI), Pax Mondial, Reed, Ronco, SCG International Risk, Spartan Consulting Group, Special Operations Consulting Security Management Group (SOC-SMG), Steele Foundation and Triple Canopy.

² In a further caveat, we should note that our interest in saying something general about (British and American) PMSCs' self-narratives and their success implies that we cannot focus on the intricate details of specific narratives on/by individual firms. In other words, we deliberately neglect some firm-level specificities and variation to draw a broader aggregate picture of the self-depiction of the industry.

³ Kroll, <http://www.kroll.com/about/history/>

⁴ Golan Group, <http://www.golangroup.com/company.shtml>.

⁵ Kroll, <http://www.kroll.com/about/>.

⁶ L-3 Communications, <http://www.l-3com.com/about-l-3/message-from-the-ceo.html>.

⁷ Cubic Corporation, <http://www.cubic.com/Solutions>.

⁸ Both from Golan Group, <http://www.golangroup.com/company.shtml>.

⁹ OSSI, <http://ossiinc.com/about/>.

¹⁰ Airscan, <http://www.airscan.com/about.php>.

¹¹ AEGIS Defence Services, <http://www.aegisworld.com/index.php/about-us-2>.

¹² Centurion Risk Assessment Services, <http://www.centurionsafety.net/About.html>.

¹³ 3D Global Solutions Inc., <http://3dglobalsolutions.net.p2.hostingprod.com/>.

¹⁴ Control Risks Group, <http://www.controlrisks.com/aboutUs/SitePages/Our%20People.aspx>.

¹⁵ Gryphon, http://www.gryphonsecurity.com/index_2.htm.

¹⁶ All quotes from HSS-International, <http://www.hssinternational.com/company.php>.

¹⁷ TOR International, <http://torinternational.com/about/>.

¹⁸ Assured Risks, http://www.assuredrisks.com/about_assured_risks.html.

¹⁹ Neptune Maritime Security,

<http://www.neptunemaritimesecurity.com/Neptune%20Maritime%20Security%20In%20Summary.pdf>.

²⁰ Pilgrims Group, <http://www.pilgrimgroup.com/about.php>.

²¹ Reed, <http://www.reedinc.com/web/page/587/interior.html>.

²² Olive Group, <http://www.olivegroup.com/about.htm>.

²³ Pilgrims Group, <http://www.pilgrimgroup.com/about.php>.

²⁴ *New York Times*, April 2, 2004.

²⁵ *Guardian*, August 1, 2007.

²⁶ *Washington Post*, December 11, 2009.

²⁷ *Washington Post*, August 24, 2007.

²⁸ *Washington Post*, June 16, 2004.

²⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, May 4, 2007.

³⁰ *Washington Post*, April 8, 2004.

³¹ *Washington Post*, May 28, 2008.

³² *New York Times*, April 4, 2004.

³³ *Washington Post*, May 23, 2010.

³⁴ *Washington Post*, September 20, 2007.

³⁵ *New York Times*, October 3, 2007.

³⁶ *New York Times*, August 18, 2010.

³⁷ *New York Times*, January 19, 2008.

³⁸ *Guardian*, August 21, 2009.

³⁹ *Washington Post*, July 27, 2008.

⁴⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, May 4, 2007.

⁴¹ *Washington Post*, October 7, 2007.

⁴² *New York Times*, November 11, 2009.

⁴³ *New York Times*, September 27, 2007.

⁴⁴ *Guardian*, August 21, 2009.

⁴⁵ *Guardian*, May 15, 2004.

⁴⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, May 4, 2007.

⁴⁷ *Guardian*, January 25, 2005.

⁴⁸ *Guardian*, May 17, 2004.

⁴⁹ All quotes from *New York Times*, September 23, 2007.

⁵⁰ *New York Times*, March 22, 2006.

⁵¹ *Washington Post*, December 21, 2008.

⁵² *Daily Telegraph*, December 10, 2004.

- ⁵³ KBR, <http://www.kbr.com/About/Company-Profile/>.
- ⁵⁴ Reed, <http://www.reedinc.com/web/page/554/interior.html>.
- ⁵⁵ GardaWorld, <http://www.garda-world.com/whatwedo/services/>.
- ⁵⁶ EOD Technology, <http://www.eodt.com/AboutUs/>.
- ⁵⁷ General Dynamics Information Technology, <http://www.gdit.com/about/aboutus.aspx?id=3458>.
- ⁵⁸ Global Security Services, http://globalsecurityservices.com/component/option,com_frontpage/Itemid,1/.
- ⁵⁹ Steele Foundation,
http://www.steelefoundation.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=12&Itemid=276.
- ⁶⁰ General Dynamics Information Technology, http://www.gdit.com/contact_us/contactus.aspx?ekfrm=3460.
- ⁶¹ GardaWorld, <http://www.garda-world.com/whoweare/about/>.
- ⁶² General Dynamics Information Technology, <http://www.gdit.com/about/aboutus.aspx?id=2746>.
- ⁶³ Reed, <http://www.reedinc.com/web/page/554/interior.html>.
- ⁶⁴ All quotes from *New York Times*, April 2, 2004.
- ⁶⁵ *Washington Post*, December 1, 2008.
- ⁶⁶ *Washington Post*, October 13, 2007.
- ⁶⁷ *New York Times*, October 3, 2007.
- ⁶⁸ *Guardian*, August 1, 2007.
- ⁶⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, April 8, 2011.
- ⁷⁰ *Washington Post*, April 23, 2005.
- ⁷¹ *Guardian*, May 8, 2011.
- ⁷² *Guardian*, October 30, 2006.
- ⁷³ Both from *Guardian*, September 22, 2007.
- ⁷⁴ *Washington Post*, July 1, 2004.
- ⁷⁵ *New York Times*, November 17, 2006.
- ⁷⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, May 31, 2007.
- ⁷⁷ *Washington Post*, November 4, 2006.
- ⁷⁸ *Guardian*, January 2, 2010.
- ⁷⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, May 4, 2007.
- ⁸⁰ *Guardian*, August 1, 2007.
- ⁸¹ *Guardian*, October 30, 2006.
- ⁸² *New York Times*, September 27, 2007.
- ⁸³ *Guardian*, August 10, 2010.
- ⁸⁴ *New York Times*, June 15, 2004.
- ⁸⁵ Both from *Washington Post*, November 4, 2006.
- ⁸⁶ *Guardian*, June 21, 2009.
- ⁸⁷ *Washington Post*, April 23, 2005.
- ⁸⁸ *New York Times*, June 15, 2004.
- ⁸⁹ *Daily Telegraph*, June 4, 2007.
- ⁹⁰ *Guardian*, April 17, 2004.
- ⁹¹ *Washington Post*, October 3, 2007.
- ⁹² *Guardian*, June 26, 2004.
- ⁹³ Both from MPRI, <http://www.mpri.com/web/>.
- ⁹⁴ DynCorp, <http://www.dyn-intl.com/index.aspx>.
- ⁹⁵ Edinburgh International, <http://www.edinburghhint.com/about-us/csr/>.
- ⁹⁶ DynCorp, <http://www.dyn-intl.com/>.
- ⁹⁷ AEGIS Defence Services, <http://www.aegisworld.com/index.php/our-approach-ethos-2>.
- ⁹⁸ Edinburgh International, <http://www.edinburghhint.com/about-us/csr/>.
- ⁹⁹ AEGIS Defence Services, <http://www.aegisworld.com/index.php/our-approach-ethos-2>.
- ¹⁰⁰ Hart Security Limited, <http://www.hartsecurity.com>.
- ¹⁰¹ Saladin Security Ltd, <http://www.saladin-security.com/corporate-social-responsibility.php>.
- ¹⁰² Hart Security Limited, http://www.hartsecurity.com/aboutus_codeofconduct.asp.
- ¹⁰³ Triple Canopy, <http://www.triplecanopy.com/company>.
- ¹⁰⁴ DynCorp, <http://www.dyn-intl.com/about-us/values-code-of-conduct.aspx>.
- ¹⁰⁵ Pax Mondial, <http://www.paxmondial.com/how-we-operate/>.
- ¹⁰⁶ Control Risks Group, <http://www.controlrisks.com/aboutUs/SitePages/Ethical%20And%20Independent.aspx>.
- ¹⁰⁷ MEP, <http://www.missionep.com/company/vision>.
- ¹⁰⁸ Pax Mondial, <http://www.paxmondial.com/how-we-operate/>.
- ¹⁰⁹ DynCorp, <http://www.dyn-intl.com/about-us/values-code-of-conduct.aspx>.
- ¹¹⁰ Both from Control Risks Group, <http://www.controlrisks.com/aboutUs/SitePages/Our%20Reputation.aspx>.
- ¹¹¹ Centurion Risk Assessment Services, <http://www.centurionsafety.net/About.html>.

- ¹¹² Hart Security Limited, <http://www.hartsecurity.com>.
- ¹¹³ AYR Group, <http://www.ayrgroup.co.uk/>.
- ¹¹⁴ TOR International, <http://torinternational.com/about/>.
- ¹¹⁵ Olive Group, <http://www.olivegroup.com/about.htm>.
- ¹¹⁶ Edinburgh International, <http://www.edinburghint.com/about-us/csr/>.
- ¹¹⁷ Saladin Security Ltd, <http://www.saladin-security.com/corporate-social-responsibility.php>.
- ¹¹⁸ Cubic Corporation, <http://www.cubic.com/About-Us/Corporate-Responsibility>.
- ¹¹⁹ *Guardian*, January 2, 2010.
- ¹²⁰ *Guardian*, January, 2, 2010.
- ¹²¹ *Guardian*, April 17, 2004.
- ¹²² *Washington Post*, December 21, 2008.
- ¹²³ *New York Times*, October 3, 2007.
- ¹²⁴ *New York Times*, January 19, 2008.
- ¹²⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, April 8, 2011.
- ¹²⁶ *Washington Post*, December 11, 2009.
- ¹²⁷ *Washington Post*, November 4, 2006.
- ¹²⁸ *New York Times*, November 11, 2009.
- ¹²⁹ Both from *New York Times*, November 11, 2009.
- ¹³⁰ *Washington Post*, December 12, 2008.
- ¹³¹ Both from *New York Times*, November 17, 2006.
- ¹³² *Washington Post*, September 18, 2007.
- ¹³³ *Washington Post*, October 12, 2007.
- ¹³⁴ *Guardian*, May 15, 2004.
- ¹³⁵ *Guardian*, February 18, 2008.
- ¹³⁶ *Washington Post*, November 4, 2006.
- ¹³⁷ *New York Times*, May 28, 2006.
- ¹³⁸ *Washington Post*, October 12, 2007.
- ¹³⁹ *Guardian*, May 15, 2004.
- ¹⁴⁰ *Washington Post*, December 24, 2007.
- ¹⁴¹ *Guardian*, October 31, 2006.
- ¹⁴² Spartan Consulting Group, <http://www.spartanconsultinggroup.org/>.
- ¹⁴³ CACI International Inc, http://www.caci.com/about/mission_lv.shtml.
- ¹⁴⁴ Gurkha Security Services,
http://www.gurkhasecurityservices.co.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1&Itemid=2.
- ¹⁴⁵ L-3 Communications, <http://www.l-3com.com/about-l-3>.
- ¹⁴⁶ CACI International Inc, http://www.caci.com/about/mission_lv.shtml.
- ¹⁴⁷ SOC, <http://soc-smg.com/page/home>.
- ¹⁴⁸ H3 High Security Solutions LLC, <http://www.grouph3.com/>.
- ¹⁴⁹ Gryphon, http://www.gryphonsecurity.com/index_2.htm.
- ¹⁵⁰ Both from MVM Inc, <http://www.mvminc.com/in-the-community/>.
- ¹⁵¹ Erik Prince, founder and (former) owner of Blackwater, cited in *Washington Post*, July 3, 2007.
- ¹⁵² *New York Times*, April 4, 2004.
- ¹⁵³ *Daily Telegraph*, May 4, 2007.
- ¹⁵⁴ *New York Times*, September 28, 2007.
- ¹⁵⁵ *Guardian*, August 1, 2007.
- ¹⁵⁶ *Washington Post*, October 7, 2007.
- ¹⁵⁷ *New York Times*, May 22, 2006.
- ¹⁵⁸ *Daily Telegraph*, May 4, 2007.
- ¹⁵⁹ *New York Times*, June 12, 2008.
- ¹⁶⁰ *Washington Post*, August 17, 2010.
- ¹⁶¹ *New York Times*, November 5, 2007.
- ¹⁶² *Washington Post*, October 10, 2007.
- ¹⁶³ *Guardian*, August 1, 2007.
- ¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, April 8, 2011.
- ¹⁶⁶ *Washington Post*, December 9, 2008.
- ¹⁶⁷ *Washington Post*, December 21, 2008.
- ¹⁶⁸ *New York Times*, March 28, 2006.
- ¹⁶⁹ *Guardian*, August 1, 2007.

¹⁷⁰ In particular, one may argue that even quality media generally tend to focus on bad news and scandals in their reporting, as “bad news is good news”. However, it is very doubtful that an over-riding preference for bad news and negative characterization of protagonists in political news stories really exists. Not all reporting on political actors is uniformly negative; rather some political actors (e.g. the UN) are usually portrayed and evaluated more positively than others (such as PMSCs). Even seemingly similar scandals, e.g. corruption and siphoning off reconstruction money by multilateral agencies and PMSCs, are treated quite differently.

¹⁷¹ See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Private_military_company.

¹⁷² See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Private_military_contractors.

¹⁷³ See: <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=blackwater>.

¹⁷⁴ See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0429493/>.

¹⁷⁵ ‘Stand, duck and cover in new ‘Blackwater’ video game,’ *USA Today*, June 9, 2011.

¹⁷⁶ Comment by spitfirez89 on ‘Blackwater – official trailer (Xbox),’ *You Tube*, http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=fqIjEdCtvsk&page=1.

¹⁷⁷ Comment by Jordy216 on ‘Official Blackwater Video Game Trailer,’ *You Tube*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DyaKfisoMy4>.

¹⁷⁸ Comment by LOLMAN22 on ‘Blackwater – official trailer (Xbox),’ *You Tube*, http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=fqIjEdCtvsk&page=1.

¹⁷⁹ Comment by ValkyrieOneNiner on ‘Blackwater – official trailer (Xbox),’ *You Tube*, http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=fqIjEdCtvsk&page=1.

¹⁸⁰ Comment by IamSoulSurvivor on ‘Blackwater – official trailer (Xbox),’ *You Tube*, http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=fqIjEdCtvsk&page=1.

¹⁸¹ Review of ‘Blackwater’ by *Platform32*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U4iZHUaMn1Q&feature=related>.

Notes on contributors

Andreas Kruck is lecturer and research fellow at the Geschwister-Scholl-Institute for Political Science, Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich. Among his publications are *Private Ratings, Public Regulations: Credit Rating Agencies and Global Financial Governance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) and *International Organization* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, co-authored with Volker Rittberger and Bernhard Zangl). He has also recently published an article on private military and security companies in *Journal of International Relations and Development*.

Alexander Spencer is assistant professor at the Geschwister-Scholl-Institute for Political Science, Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich. He is the author of *Romantic Narratives in International Politics. Rebels, Pirates and Heroes* (Manchester University Press, forthcoming) and he has published articles in *Foreign Policy Analysis, Global Society, International Studies Perspectives* and *Security Dialogue*.

References

- Avant, Deborah. *The Market for Force: The Consequences of Privatizing Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986.
- Barthes, Roland. "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative." *New Literary History* 6, no. 2 (1975): 237-72. doi: 10.2307/468419.
- Berndtsson, Joakim. "Security Professionals for Hire: Exploring the Many Faces of Private Security Expertise." *Millennium* 40, no. 2 (2012): 303-20. doi: 10.1177/0305829811425635.
- Browning, Christopher S. *Constructivism, Narrative and Foreign Policy Analysis: A Case Study of Finland*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2008.
- Bruner, Jerome. "The Narrative Construction of Reality." *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 1 (1991): 1-21. doi: 10.2307/1343711.
- Campbell, David. *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity, and Justice in Bosnia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- Chesterman, Simon, and Chia Lehnardt, eds. *From Mercenaries to Market: The Rise and Regulation of Private Military Companies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Cutler, A. Clair. "The Legitimacy of Private Transnational Governance: Experts and the Transnational Market for Force." *Socio-Economic Review* 8, no. 1 (2010): 157-85. doi: 10.1093/ser/mwp027.
- Dillon, Michael, and Julian Reid. *The Liberal Way of War. Killing to Make Life Live*. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Fludernick, Monika. *An Introduction to Narratology*. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Franke, Volker, and Marc von Boemcken. "Guns for Hire: Motivations and Attitudes of Private Security Contractors." *Armed Forces & Society* 37, no. 4 (2011): 725-42. doi: 10.1177/0095327X11412913.
- Genette, Gerard. *Figures of Literary Discourse*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Genette, Gerard. "Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative." *Poetics Today* 11, no. 4 (1990): 755-74. doi: 10.2307/1773076.
- Hansen, Lene. *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Herman, David. "Narrative Ways of Worldmaking." In *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research*, edited by Sandra Heinen and Roy Sommer, 71-87. Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009.
- Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1988.
- Herman Luc, and Bart Vervaeck. "Ideology." In *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, edited by David Herman, 217-230. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Herrnstein Smith, Barbara. "Narrative Version, and Narrative Theories." *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1981): 213-236. doi: 10.2307/1343185.
- Higate, Paul. "Cowboys and Professionals: The Politics of Identity Work in the Private and Military Security Company." *Millennium* 40, no. 2 (2012): 321-41. doi: 10.1177/0305829811425752.
- Hutto, Daniel D. "Narrative and Understanding Persons." In *Narrative and Understanding Persons*, edited by Daniel D. Hutto, 1-15. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Joachim Jutta, and Andrea Schneiker. "New Humanitarians? Frame Appropriation Through Private Military and Security Companies." *Millennium* 40, no. 2 (2012): 365-88. doi: 10.1177/0305829811425890.

- Krahmann, Elke. *States, Citizens and the Privatization of Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Krahmann, Elke. "From 'Mercenaries' to 'Private Security Contractors': The (Re)Construction of Armed Security Providers in International Legal Discourses." *Millennium* 40, no. 2 (2012): 343-63. doi: 10.1177/0305829811426673.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- Kruck, Andreas. "Theorising the Use of Private Military and Security Companies: A Synthetic Perspective." *Journal of International Relations and Development*, advance online publication 1 March 2013. doi: 10.1057/jird.2013.4.
- Lacassagne, Aurélie, Tim Nieguth, and Francois Dépelteau, eds. *Investigating Shrek: Power, Identity, and Ideology*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011.
- Leander, Anna. "The Power to Construct International Security: On the Significance of Private Military Companies." *Millennium* 33, no. 3 (2005): 803-26. doi: 10.1177/03058298050330030601.
- Mutimer, David, Kyle Grayson, and J. Marshall Beier. "Critical Studies on Security: An Introduction." *Critical Studies on Security* 1, no. 1 (2013): 1-12. doi: 10.1080/21624887.2013.801126.
- Nexon, Daniel H., and Iver B. Neumann, eds. *Harry Potter and International Relations*. Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.
- Patterson Molly, and Kristen Renwick Monroe. "Narrative in Political Science." *Annual Review of Political Science* 1, 1998: 315-331. doi: 10.1146/annurev.polisci.1.1.315.
- Pentzold, Christian. *Wikipedia: Diskussionsraum und Informationsspeicher im neuen Netz*. München: Fischer, 2007.
- Petersohn, Ulrich. "Sovereignty and Privatizing the Military: An Institutional Explanation." *Contemporary Security Policy* 31, no. 3 (2010): 531-552. doi: 10.1080/13523260.2010.521706.
- Phelan, James. *Living to Tell about it: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005.
- Ricoeur, Paul. "Narrative Time." In *On Narrative*, edited by William J. T. Mitchell, 165-186. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1981.
- Ringmar, Erik. *Identity, Interest and Action: A Cultural Explanation of Sweden's Intervention in the Thirty Year War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Roberts, Geoffrey. "History, Theory and the Narrative Turn in IR." *Review of International Studies* 32, no. 4 (2006): 703-714. doi: 10.1017/S0260210506007248.
- Salter, Mark B., and Can E. Mutlu, eds. *Research Methods in Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Shepherd, Laura J. ed. *Critical Approaches to Security: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Somers, Margaret R. "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach." *Theory and Society* 23, no. 5 (1994): 605-49. doi: 10.1007/BF00992905.
- Spencer, Alexander. *Romantic Narratives in International Politics. Rebels, Pirates and Heroes*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming.
- Suganami, Hidemi. "Narrative Explanation and International Relations: Back to Basics." *Millennium* 37, no. 2 (2008): 327-56. doi: 10.1177/0305829808097643.
- Toolan, Michael J. *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Turner Mark. *The Literary Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.