

Manufacturing Dissent: Assessing the Methods and Impact of RT (Russia Today)

by

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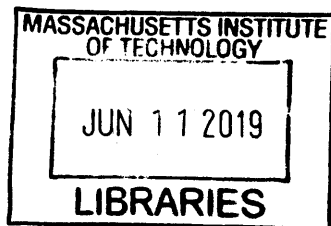
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ABSTRACT

The state-sponsored news network RT (formerly Russia Today) was launched in 2005 as a platform for improving Russia's global image. Fourteen years later, RT has become a self-described tool for information warfare and is under increasing scrutiny from the United States government for allegedly fomenting unrest and undermining democracy. It has also grown far beyond its television roots, achieving a broad diffusion across a variety of digital platforms. This thesis seeks to unravel and assess RT's historical roots, its creation and evolution, its methods, and ultimately its impact on American politics and society. Drawing on a broad analysis of RT's television, web, and social media content, I argue that RT strategically reconfigures traditional concepts of soft power, propaganda, and disinformation to spread disruption and doubt throughout the media landscape in a hybrid model that can be termed "Disinformation 2.0." I go on to ask if established frameworks for measuring media engagement are able to accurately capture RT's impact, given both the network's multi-platform structure and its subversion of conventional communication models.

Thesis Supervisor: William Uricchio
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Introduction

The news network Russia Today launched in 2005 with the prosaic mission of showing the world that there is more to Russia than “communism, snow, and poverty.”¹ Early reports covered such topics as “Swedish truck makers set sights on Russia” and “Stars come out for Moscow film festival.” Fourteen years later, Russia Today – rebranded as RT – has become a very different organization. Headlines now read “From ‘Comrade Bernie’ to ‘Dildos Against Democracy’: The top 5 Democrat conspiracies ranked” and “New American Civil War? Some people think it’s already begun.” American intelligence officials accuse the network of being a “propaganda machine” bent on undermining the democratic process,² and it has been forced to register as a Foreign Agent in the United States under a law originally intended to counteract Nazi propaganda.

This thesis seeks to unravel RT’s path from just another news network on the far reaches of the cable dial to an internet-centric weapon for “information warfare” (in the words of both the intelligence community and RT Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan).³ Beyond this, it tells a larger story of how traditional concepts of soft power, propaganda, and warfare have been reshaped by the modern, decentralized media landscape, and the challenges of assessing how these new methods impact political systems and societies.

¹ Andrew Osborn, “Russia’s ‘CNN’ Wants to Tell It like It Is,” *The Age*, August 16, 2005, <https://www.theage.com.au/news/world/russias-cnn-wants-to-tell-it-like-it-is/2005/08/15/1123958007022.html>.

² “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections,” Intelligence Community Assessment (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 6, 2017), https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf.

³ Ben Nimmo, “Question That: RT’s Military Mission,” *DFRLab* (blog), January 8, 2018, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/question-that-rt-s-military-mission-4c4bd9f72c88>.

As a public-facing entity with an openly acknowledged connection to the Russian government, RT has come under considerable scrutiny in the United States following allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election. The aim of this thesis is to provide an objective evaluation of RT's structure, origins, methods, and impact beyond the heightened, frequently partisan rhetoric currently surrounding the network. Looking past the headlines, RT presents a number of paradoxes that defy easy categorization. How, for example, can a network that plays host to personalities from across the American political spectrum, from Green Party candidate Jill Stein, to media stalwart Larry King, to Libertarian former congressman Ron Paul, be labeled undemocratic?

While there has been extensive coverage and analysis of Russian influence activities in the lead up to and following the 2016 election, including social media manipulation through troll and bot accounts and the leaking of hacked political documents, comparatively less attention has been paid to RT on its own. The network has drawn the attention of a relatively small selection of media scholars and Russia specialists, most prominently through the ongoing University of Manchester and Open University project *Reframing Russia for the Global Mediasphere: From Cold War to "Information War?"* led by Stephen Hutchings.⁴ *Reframing Russia* broadly considers the reconfiguration of the "projection of national identities and interests on the global stage ... by the twin consequences of post-Cold War geopolitical dynamics and transformations in the global news media landscape."⁵ A second RT-focused project, the Columbia School of

⁴ *Reframing Russia for the Global Mediasphere: From Cold War to "Information War?"* accessed April 24, 2019, <https://reframingrussia.com/about/>.

⁵ Ibid.

Journalism's graduate student blog series *RT Watch* from 2015, also attempted to look beyond the rhetoric at RT's specific methods and editorial choices.⁶

My research follows a complementary thread with these projects in its evaluation of RT's Cold War-era political and methodological roots, focus on the evolution of the media landscape, and articulation of RT's specific methods and techniques. I agree with *Reframing Russia's* assertion that contemporary scholarship on RT has "failed to account for the complexities of current relationships between RT and its very diverse audiences"⁷ and attempt to develop a clearer picture of who watches RT and why. In addition to these projects centered on RT, my research draws from the broader field of propaganda studies, most notably the work of Edward Bernays, Jacques Ellul, and Lawrence Martin-Bittmann; media and communications scholars Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Philip Napoli, and Monroe Price; international relations scholars Joseph Nye and Kenneth Waltz; as well as a range of modern Russian media scholars and journalists including Vasily Gatov, Julia Ioffe, Arkady Ostrovsky, and Peter Pomerantsev.

Building on these studies, I attempt to formally define RT's (complex and sometimes contradictory) hybrid mixture of news production, soft power, and propaganda/disinformation – a mixture that I argue is specifically formulated for and thrives in the accelerated digital media landscape. Furthermore, I consider the question of RT's impact on American politics and society, an issue that has been central following the 2016 election but has not definitely been answered. While I have no hard answers to provide, I ask if the current methods for measuring media impact are actually suited for the task of evaluating a hybrid, multi-platform operation like RT.

⁶ *RT Watch* (blog), accessed April 24, 2019, <https://rtwatchcuj.tumblr.com/>.

⁷ "Reframing Russia".

In developing these arguments, I draw on RT's television, web (RT.com), and social media (primarily Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube) content from the network's formation in December 2005 to April 2019. In consideration of the fact that RT's editorial stance has changed and evolved in line with Russia-U.S. relations over time, the bulk of the content that I analyze comes from roughly 2014 and onward, a timeframe that is generally agreed to characterize the current era of relations (post-annexation of Crimea). I began regularly viewing and reading RT, on a weekly basis, across its platforms at the outset of this thesis in Spring 2018. While RT creates content in six languages for multiple audiences worldwide, I focus on English-language content chiefly intended for American audiences in the United States (while acknowledging that, given the borderless nature of the internet, content can become mixed online). I have chosen this U.S.-centric approach both to limit the scope of my research to meet the scale of the thesis and because of my specific questions related to the 2016 presidential election. To develop a clear initial picture of RT's structure, operations, and popularity, I rely on the network's public statements, independent web and social media analytics, and interviews with former staff of RT and its parent company RIA Novosti (both previously published and conducted in person).

RT's status as both a public-funded non-profit organization in Russia and a Foreign Agent in the United States was advantageous in that it necessitated the filing of publicly-accessible reports detailing financial information and corporate ownership. However, there are other aspects of the network that remain opaque, including internal hierarchies, departmental budgeting, and audience metrics. These presented challenges that I attempted to reconcile through interviews with insiders as well as leaked internal documents that had been previously published. Federal indictments of individuals associated with Russia-linked influence activities, including the Internet Research Agency, published in 2018 also provided valuable insights that

had not previously been available. As mentioned earlier, measuring RT's impact using traditional methods was an additional challenge given the network's diffusion across multiple platforms. I attempted to address this constraint by taking a more holistic view of RT's connections with other influence activities, as outlined in further detail in Chapter Four. It should also be noted that this research was undertaken as new revelations continue to be made public regarding Russian influence activities in the United States.

The thesis is comprised of four chapters, taking into consideration RT's structure, historical roots, methods, and impact. In order to provide an accurate sense of the network's scale before delving in greater detail into its origins and methods, Chapter One offers a brief overview of RT's corporate and editorial structures, staffing, budget, and audience. Beginning in the Cold War period (1947-1991), Chapter Two traces the shifting Russia-U.S. relations and domestic political developments paralleling the advancements in communication technology and changing information landscape that created the conditions for RT's establishment and evolution to its current form. Chapter Three compares RT's content and methods against conventional definitions of soft power, propaganda, and disinformation, laying out the network's hybrid, internet-driven approach that I term the "Disinformation 2.0" model. Finally, Chapter Four interrogates RT's claims about its television, web, and social media metrics, and attempts to determine if these figures are congruent with reality. I go on to ask if these figures, accurate or otherwise, are actually relevant in terms of the network's impact, a measurement that is complicated by RT's digital distribution model and the competing narratives created through disinformation. In addition, I attempt to address RT's role as a node within the broader "ecosystem of Russian influence" and subsequent degree of influence, if any, on the 2016 election.

Chapter One: Corporate and Editorial Structure

Before delving into RT's historical context, methods, and impact, it is useful to start with an overview of the network's scale and structure. This overview also serves to ground RT in reality amidst the competing, sometimes hyperbolic claims regarding issues such as its funding and size. The chapter begins with an outline of RT's corporate structure, staffing, and budget, then goes on to look at editorial oversight across its television, web, and social media platforms. Finally, RT's audience demographics are considered based on information shared by the network, its marketing techniques, and feedback from independent sources.

Corporate Structure and Funding

The RT network consists of eight television channels, including 24-hour news in English, Arabic, and Spanish, and the documentary channel RTDoc; digital platforms in English, Arabic, Spanish, French, German, and Russian; and a video news agency, RUPTLY.⁸ RT America airs from Washington, D.C., RT U.K. from London, and RT France from Paris, while broadcasts in other languages are produced at RT's headquarters in Moscow. RT claims to be available in more than 100 countries spanning five continents.⁹ In addition to the core RT brand, there are numerous other digital channels within the network's orbit. These include the news agency and website Sputnik as well as a suite of video channels – In the NOW, Soapbox, Waste-Ed, and Backthen – owned by the German company Maffick Media, which is in turn controlled by

⁸ "About RT," RT International, accessed February 8, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/about-us/>.

⁹ Ibid.

RUPTLY.¹⁰ In the NOW was originally a program on RT before becoming a separate spin-off video channel. These channels have come under scrutiny in recent years for their alleged failure to disclose their connections with RT and the Russian government.¹¹

RT does not publish exact staffing figures, but the number most commonly cited by both RT and external sources is 2,000 staff worldwide.^{12 13} A February 2019 search of the business networking site LinkedIn found 2,358 profiles indicating current or previous work with RT.¹⁴ For comparison, CNN employs 3,000 people worldwide¹⁵ and Voice of America employs 1,050 people.¹⁶

When Russian state news agency RIA Novosti launched RT in 2005, it placed the network under a new parent company called ANO TV-Novosti (Autonomous Non-Profit Organization TV-News).¹⁷ Despite initially sharing the same headquarters, RIA Novosti claimed to have no control over ANO TV-Novosti or RT. In 2012, the agency stated “RIA Novosti does not have any representatives on the RT Supervisory Council or any other RT management bodies, and hence does not influence the network’s editorial policy, or its financial and economic

¹⁰ Donie O’Sullivan et al., “Russia Is Backing a Viral Video Company Aimed at American Millennials,” CNN, February 18, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/15/tech/russia-facebook-viral-videos/index.html>.

¹¹ “Facebook Blocks RT’s Viral ‘In the Now’ Video Page,” *The Moscow Times*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/02/18/facebook-blocks-rt-s-viral-in-the-now-video-page-a64535>.

¹² “About RT”.

¹³ Oliver Bullough, “Inside Russia Today: Counterweight to the Mainstream Media, or Putin’s Mouthpiece?,” *The New Statesman*, May 10, 2013, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/world-affairs/2013/05/inside-russia-today-counterweight-mainstream-media-or-putins-mou>.

¹⁴ “RT: About,” LinkedIn, accessed February 15, 2019, <https://www.linkedin.com/company/rt/about/>.

¹⁵ “CNN Worldwide Fact Sheet,” CNN, accessed February 15, 2019, <http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/cnn-fact-sheet/>.

¹⁶ “Voice of America Factsheet,” 2016, <https://docs.voanews.eu/en-US-INSIDE/2016/12/05/5d1e6a53-3ed2-4c3e-b043-ecae12d9eed8.pdf>.

¹⁷ Elena Postnikova, “Agent of Influence: Should Russia’s RT Register as a Foreign Agent?” (The Atlantic Council, August 2017), http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/RT_Foreign_Agent_0831.pdf, 5.

operation, directly or indirectly.”¹⁸ In 2013, under the direction of President Putin, RIA Novosti was dissolved and a new “state unitary enterprise” called MIA Rossiya Sevodnya (International News Agency Russia Today) was created in its place.¹⁹ RT Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan was appointed head of MIA Rossiya Sevodnya, while continuing to serve as head of RT.²⁰ Despite sharing a name and a leader, however, RT has insisted that MIA Rossiya Sevodnya is not “in any way related to the RT television channel.”²¹ In the United States, RT operates under a Washington D.C.-registered company called T&R Production LLC.²² T&R Production, in its most recent Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) filing, indicated ANO TV-Novosti as its “foreign principal.”²³ A 2017 report from the Atlantic Council on RT’s FARA registration notes that RT can claim independence because ANO TV-Novosti is an autonomous nonprofit organization.²⁴ While corporate structures are often complex and opaque, it is reasonable to suspect that RT’s ownership and control structure are purposefully convoluted in order to obscure the network’s connections to the Russian state.

¹⁸ “RIA Novosti Does Not Control RT Television – Russian Media Experts,” RIA Novosti, February 6, 2012, https://web.archive.org/web/20120210025703/http://en.rian.ru/agency_news/20120206/171179459.html.

¹⁹ Postnikova, 6.

²⁰ “RT Editor Simonyan to Head Kremlin-Backed News Agency,” BBC News, December 31, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-25560434>.

²¹ “Putin Orders Overhaul of Top State News Agency,” RT International, December 9, 2013, <https://www.rt.com/news/ria-novosti-overhaul-putin-960/>.

²² Fatima Tlis, “RT’s FARA Examined. Part I,” POLYGRAPH.info, November 16, 2017, <https://www.polygraph.info/a/rt-fara-fact-check/28858396.html>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Postnikova, 6.

RT's annual budget is a source of considerable debate and contention. RT has stated that its 2017 budget was 18.7 billion rubles, or roughly \$323 million at the time.²⁵ ²⁶ Outside estimates of RT's budget often vary significantly from the network's own declarations. In 2015, when RT claimed a budget of 13.85 billion rubles (\$220 million),²⁷ the news website *The Daily Beast* asserted that the network had a budget totaling as much as "half a billion dollars."²⁸ Similarly, in 2016 when RT declared a budget of 17 billion rubles (\$240 million),²⁹ U.S. Senator Rob Portman (R-OH) claimed that RT "reportedly spends \$400 million annually just on its Washington Bureau alone."³⁰ Given the opaque sourcing of these competing figures, it is difficult to determine an exact number. RT frequently disputes claims about its budget on a website titled "Facts vs. Fiction: Setting the story straight about RT."³¹ It is unclear how RT's budget is divided between the network's television, web, and social media operations. For purposes of comparison, in fiscal year 2018, the Broadcasting Board of Governors – the U.S. government agency that supervises Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and

²⁵ Steven Erlanger, "What Is RT?," *The New York Times*, December 22, 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/world/europe/what-is-rt.html>.

²⁶ Note: RUB-USD exchange rates have been calculated using historical data on <https://www.xe.com/currencytables/>.

²⁷ "More Money, More Problems?" RT International, April 20, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/233147-media-rt-financing-myths-facts/>.

²⁸ Michael Weiss, "Russia's Propaganda Blitzkrieg," *The Daily Beast*, October 4, 2015, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/10/04/russia-s-propaganda-blitzkrieg>.

²⁹ "US Gears Up to Fight Russian 'Disinformation' with... Disinformation," RT International, March 17, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/op-ed/335983-disinformation-murphy-portman-propaganda/>.

³⁰ Rob Portman, "Portman Delivers Speech on Bipartisan Bill to Counter Foreign Government Propaganda," March 16, 2016, <https://www.portman.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/press-releases?ID=B764E2E9-EFB5-4E90-9F16-0428FE7D4CBB>.

³¹ "Fact vs Fiction," RT International, accessed February 8, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/facts-vs-fiction/>.

other American-funded international media entities – received a budget from Congress of \$685 million.³²

RT is somewhat unusual among television networks in that it pays to be carried by major U.S. operators, including Comcast, Dish Network, and Charter Communications.³³ This arrangement makes it difficult for RT to be dropped by operators, as independent programmers like RT can assert “must carry” rights under FCC leased access laws.³⁴ The 2017 Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) report alleges that “the Kremlin spends \$190 million per year alone on the distribution and dissemination of RT programming, focusing on hotels and satellite, terrestrial, and cable broadcasting,”³⁵ a claim that RT disputes.

Although its business model is largely dependent on subsidies from the Russian state, RT draws at least some income from advertising. Until 2017, RT was part of Google’s “preferred news” lineup on YouTube, which gave the network access to premium advertisers.³⁶ With RT’s average of 38 million views per month on YouTube in 2018, statistics site Social Blade estimates that the network could have earned between \$9,100 and 145,100 dollars per month in ad revenue, depending on the advertiser’s CPM (cost per one thousand views).³⁷

³² “FY 2019 Congressional Budget Justification” (Broadcasting Board of Governors, 2019), https://www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2018/02/BBGBudget_FY19_CBJ_2-7-18_Final.pdf.

³³ Shalini Ramachandran, “RT Channel’s Unique Carriage Deals Make It Difficult to Drop in U.S.,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 25, 2017, sec. Business, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/rt-channels-unique-carriage-deals-make-it-difficult-to-drop-in-u-s-1485361056>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections.”

³⁶ Daisuke Wakabayashi and Nicholas Confessore, “Russia’s Favored Outlet Is an Online News Giant. YouTube Helped.,” *The New York Times*, December 27, 2017, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/23/technology/youtube-russia-rt.html>.

³⁷ Calculated using the Social Blade “Estimated YouTube Money Calculator,” <https://socialblade.com/youtube/youtube-money-calculator>.

In 2016, RT and the online advertising company Taboola announced a multi-year partnership to implement Taboola’s “Full Page Personalization” technology across all of RT’s desktop, tablet, and mobile properties.³⁸ According to a press release, the partnership offered RT “the ability to customize the on-site experience for each visitor to its Web site using Taboola’s technology, which segments the audience into actionable user segments,” and goes on to claim that “since using the technology over the last several months, [RT] experienced a 27% increase in engagement among visitors and a 23% lift in revenue.”³⁹ This advertising partnership appears to have ended in 2017 or 2018, possibly due to the negative attention surrounding RT in the aftermath of the 2016 election. In October 2017, the industry periodical Ad Age published an article criticizing the American companies Proctor & Gamble and Ford for continuing to advertise on RT’s website through Taboola.⁴⁰ A review of RT’s website as of March 2019 found no Taboola advertising. However, some versions of the site, including the English and Spanish editions, contain advertising links to content “from our partners.” In the case of the English site, these links were to a news aggregation website called Mixi.Media. There is little information available about Mixi.Media and its ownership – a search of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) WHOIS database for the domain only reveals that it is registered in Panama. It is unclear how much revenue RT earns from this partnership.

³⁸ “RT Launches Taboola’s ‘Full Page Personalization,’ Presenting Each User With a Customized On-Site Experience in Real-Time, Growing Engagement by 27% and Revenue by 23%,” GlobeNewswire News Room, April 21, 2016, <http://globenewswire.com/news-release/2016/04/21/831196/0/en/RT-Launches-Taboola-s-Full-Page-Personalization-Presenting-Each-User-With-a-Customized-On-Site-Experience-in-Real-Time-Growing-Engagement-by-27-and-Revenue-by-23.html>.

³⁹ Tobi Elkin, “Taboola’s Full Page Personalization Tool Offers Customized On-Site Experience,” MediaPost, April 21, 2016, <https://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/273932/taboolas-full-page-personalization-tool-offers-cu.html>.

⁴⁰ Garrett Sloane, “P&G, Ford and Other Top Brands Keep Ads Flowing to RT’s Site,” AdAge, October 5, 2017, <https://adage.com/article/digital/p-g-ford-plenty-brands-ads-flowing-rt-s-site/310768/>.

RT's advertising earnings from its television broadcasts in the U.S. are unclear. While the live online streams of its programming are presented ad-free, advertising may appear on satellite and cable broadcasts in different markets. For instance, RT runs a "Partners Program" with hotel owners to carry the channel and promote their hotel on RT.⁴¹ In the United Kingdom, RT television broadcasts include advertisements from companies including the major pharmaceutical distributor Pharmacy2U.⁴²

Editorial Structure

Publicly available information related to the internal editorial operations of RT is limited, but through interviews with current and former RT and RIA Novosti staff it is possible to develop a picture of how the network's news-related decisions are made. Former RIA Novosti executive Vasily Gatov describes RT as being largely organized into language-based silos, with editorial decisions coordinated across television, web, and social media platforms within a given language.^{43 44}

A review of RT content for American audiences from the morning of April 17, 2019 (starting at 3:30am EDT, RT's first televised newscast of the day, through approximately 12:00pm EDT) found significant crossover between platforms. The newscast, aired every hour, focused on four main stories for the morning: the arrest of Julian Assange, accusations of French arms being used in the Yemen conflict, a climate change protest in London, and the Notre Dame

⁴¹ See <https://partners.rt.com/>.

⁴² Marianna Hunt, "Britain's Largest Online Pharmacy Found Advertising on Russian State 'Propaganda' Channel," *The Telegraph*, December 9, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/12/09/britains-largest-online-pharmacy-found-advertising-russian-state/>.

⁴³ Vasily Gatov, Interview, April 9, 2019.

⁴⁴ RT America and RT UK operate as distinct language/editorial silos.

cathedral fire. All of these stories were repeated in varying forms on RT’s website and Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube pages. Some of the stories were repeated within the same timespan as the television broadcasts, while others appeared later in the day. For example, after airing on television at 3:09am,⁴⁵ the full France-Yemen report was shared on RT’s Twitter page at 4:10am,⁴⁶ along with a link to a related article on the RT website.⁴⁷ The same clip appeared on Facebook at 6:24am and YouTube at 7:09am.⁴⁸ Shorter excerpts from the other televised segments were also shared across RT’s Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube pages, such as musician Roger Waters’ comments on Julian Assange’s arrest.⁴⁹

In addition to the main news stories of the day, RT’s Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube pages featured a variety of video clips, images, and stories related to sports, viral-type content (e.g. “Man charged with ASSAULT after attacking bus driver with a CANE!”)⁵⁰ and promotion of older RT articles and broadcasts. In reviewing cross-platform content from other days, it appears that RT is largely consistent in carrying its television news stories across its online appendages, while supplementing these lead stories with viral content on social media. A more detailed analysis of this content will follow in Chapter Three.

⁴⁵ “French Connection,” *RT News* (RT, April 17, 2019), Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/RT_20190417_070000_News.

⁴⁶ “Is France Complicit in Saudi War Crimes in Yemen?,” Tweet, @RT_com, April 17, 2019, https://twitter.com/RT_com/status/1118471667486023680.

⁴⁷ “Leaked Document Reveals EXTENSIVE French & US Efforts to Aid ‘inefficient’ Saudi Military,” RT International, April 16, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/news/456600-french-document-saudi-failure-yemen/>.

⁴⁸ *Leaked Docs: France Plays Deeper Role in Saudi-Led War in Yemen than Acknowledged* (RT, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpwwZwUam-URkxB7g4USKpg>.

⁴⁹ *Roger Waters on Assange Arrest: ‘UK Has Become a Satellite of American Empire’ (PROMO)* (RT, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpwwZwUam-URkxB7g4USKpg>.

⁵⁰ “Man Charged with ASSAULT after Attacking Bus Driver with a CANE! Both Men Escaped with Minor Injuries. The Driver Was Later Fired for Going Back after the Fight,” Tweet, @RT_com, April 17, 2019, https://twitter.com/RT_com/status/1118589948129697793.

There are differing accounts from RT on the degree of editorial control asserted by the Russian state over RT's content. Anchor and correspondent Kate Partridge has said that she "never felt pressure to report something she was not comfortable with."⁵¹ Likewise, reporter and producer Anya Parampil claims "not once have I been told what to say or experienced any serious editorial disputes," but goes on to add, "having said that, it's absurd to assume that any news organization's editorial line is entirely independent from its funding source."⁵² Other RT staff have described a higher degree of Russian government influence and oversight. Former RT producer Sam Knight has said that certain news topics that went against the Russian government line were "out of bounds."⁵³ Anchor Liz Wahl, who quit RT during a live broadcast in protest over coverage of Ukraine in 2014, characterized government influence over RT as "subtle," but also recalled repeated censorship and management that would "[punish] those who stray from the narrative."⁵⁴ The ODNI report notes that "RT Editor in Chief Margarita Simonyan has close ties to top Russian Government officials, especially Presidential Administration Deputy Chief of Staff Aleksey Gromov, who reportedly manages political TV coverage in Russia and is one of the founders of RT."⁵⁵

⁵¹ Yulia Talmazan and Kier Simmons, "Don't Be Afraid of Russia, Head of 'Propaganda Outlet' RT Says," NBC News, December 30, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-needn-t-fear-russia-rt-editor-chief-margarita-n831736>.

⁵² Whitney Webb, "Choosing Journalism over Cheerleading War: An Interview with RT America's Anya Parampil," *MintPress News*, November 13, 2018, <https://www.mintpressnews.com/choosing-journalism-over-cheerleading-an-interview-with-rt-americas-anya-parampil/251748/>.

⁵³ Lucia Graves, "Confessions of a Former RT Employee," *The Atlantic*, March 5, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/03/confessions-of-a-former-rt-employee/439872/>.

⁵⁴ "Video: RT Anchor Quits On Air," *The Daily Beast*, March 5, 2014, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/cheats/2014/03/05/rt-anchor-quits-on-air>.

⁵⁵ "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections."

Audience

While RT regularly publishes viewership and ratings figures (claims that will be interrogated in Chapter Four), there is less data available on audience demographics. Nevertheless, from anecdotal online feedback and RT's own targeting, it is possible to construct a speculative profile of who watches RT and why. The most direct information from RT about their audience has come from surveys commissioned by the network from market research firms Nielsen and Ipsos in 2012 and 2017, respectively. According to RT, the Nielsen report notes that "the average RT viewer based in one of the 5 surveyed American cities is a male aged between 35 and 49. While most hold an undergraduate degree, over 20 percent of RT viewers have a Master's degree or a Ph.D. as well. In terms of occupation, most American RT viewers are either business owners, self-employed, or are employed in management roles."⁵⁶ The Ipsos report found that "respondents across several regions cited a desire for 'a different perspective on global events' among their top-three reasons for their increase in watching RT in the last two years."⁵⁷ While RT has extensively promoted select findings from the reports, it has not released either of them publicly.

In the absence of full access to an independent survey of viewers, posts about RT on online forums can help shed light on why audiences are attracted to the network. For example, in a 2014 post on the question-and-answer website Quora asking "Who watches RT (Russia Today) in the West?" a respondent named Casey wrote, "I watch/read RT and other international news outlets because I feel it is important to have the United States talked about in 3rd person ... The more diverse your information is and the more you search on your own (rather than being fed the

⁵⁶ "RT'S New York Audience Triples in One Year," RT International, May 30, 2012, <https://www.rt.com/about-us/press-releases/rts-new-york-audience-triples-in-one-year/>.

⁵⁷ "RT Weekly TV Audience Grows By More Than a Third Over 2 Years; Now 100mn – Ipsos," RT International, April 3, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/about-us/press-releases/ipsos-market-research-rt/>.

news), the more informed and critically thinking you'll become.” Respondent Michael Bertsch echoes this, writing, “I find it important to see things from as many perspectives as I can get my eyes on ... Different perspectives enrich my life.” A third respondent, Jennifer Curry, wrote, “[RT] is news reporting that U.S. channels dont [sic] do. And they offer good interviews and discussion about important issues.”⁵⁸ Similar sentiments can be found in a 2015 discussion about RT on the website Reddit, in which user “FireFoxG” states: “In my opinion... They are one of the best new [sic] organizations in the world. They are definitely partial to Russia interests (everyone is partial to some degree), but their investigative reporting is on par with VICE or the best focus sources. IMO, if you get your news exclusively from western sources... you are living in a bubble.”⁵⁹

Insights into the type of audience that RT is seeking to engage with can be gleaned from marketing materials. RT’s mantra of providing an “alternative voice” and “news with an edge” suggests that it is positioning itself toward younger, savvier viewers. This reflects the makeup of RT’s own staff, who are frequently described as young, well-educated, and cosmopolitan.^{60 61} The series *#ICYMI with Polly Boiko*, which covers current events in humorous short videos reminiscent of the American series *The Daily Show* or *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, is one example of the network’s content that caters specifically to a young, sophisticated

⁵⁸ “Who Watches RT (or Russia Today) in the West? Why? How Would You Promote Russian Culture Abroad?,” *Quora*, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://www.quora.com/Who-watches-RT-or-Russia-Today-in-the-West-Why-How-would-you-promote-Russian-culture-abroad>.

⁵⁹ “R/PoliticalDiscussion - Is RT, Russia Today a Credible News Source?,” *Reddit*, accessed March 21, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/PoliticalDiscussion/comments/2tile3/is_rt_russia_today_a_credible_news_source/.

⁶⁰ Vasily Gatov, “Research the Revenge: What We’re Getting Wrong about Russia Today,” *OpenDemocracy* (blog), August 14, 2018, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/vasily-gatov/what-we-are-getting-wrong-about-russia-today>.

⁶¹ Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2015), 48.

Chapter Two: Historical Context

In order to understand the motivations driving RT and the methods that it utilizes, it is vital to first look at its historical precursors and the complex mixture of political, societal, and technological trends leading up to and following its creation. The overview presented in this chapter begins in the Cold War period (1947-1991), moves through the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of independent Russia in 1992, and finally enters the ongoing era of Vladimir Putin, whose election in 1999 to the Russian presidency shortly preceded the launch of RT in 2005. Each of these periods saw the introduction of new communications technologies and new forms of achieving global influence, which in turn shaped the formation of RT. As this thesis focuses on RT's content for American audiences and impact within the United States, the evolution of Russia-U.S. relations also plays a significant role throughout this chapter.

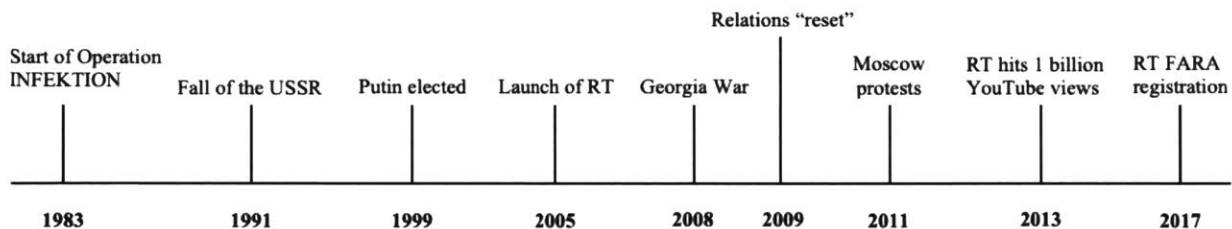


Fig 1. Timeline of key events

The Information Battlefield of the Cold War

Most scholars of the Cold War accept Kenneth Waltz's broad conceptualization of the period as one of bipolarity, in which the world was largely divided into two opposing camps – the United

demographic. Boiko, a British woman in her 30s who often wears jeans and a t-shirt instead more formal newscaster garb, criticizes mainstream media coverage of current events using jokes, props, and pun-filled headlines like “Trump's Syria pull-out method is going to be slow, messy and angry” and “Militant vegans are putting reputations at steak.”

There may be several reasons behind this push for younger viewers. First, from a business marketing standpoint, the 18-to-34 age group is traditionally the most profitable and subsequently the most targeted demographic by most media outlets.⁶² In addition, members of this demographic are considered important influencers and tastemakers.

Conclusion

This brief chapter presents RT as it exists in 2019, highlighting elements including the network's links with the Russian state, cross-platform spreading of content, and youth-centric orientation that will form important parts of the arguments presented later in this thesis. In considering RT's often opaque structure and operations, the layers of political rhetoric and obfuscation that must be peeled away in order to reach the core realities become apparent, a theme that is echoed throughout this study.

⁶² Ryan Kailath, “Is 18 to 34 Still the Most Coveted Demographic?,” Marketplace, December 8, 2017, <http://www.marketplace.org/2017/12/08/business/coveted-18-34-year-old-demographic>.

States and its allies and the Soviet Union and its allies.⁶³ This bipolar system remained more-or-less the status quo for nearly fifty years. Although the threat of global conflict and nuclear annihilation loomed ominously, and devastating proxy wars took place in contested nations, the bipolar world was generally considered to be a stable one, as the solid balance of power was seen as a limiting factor for direct confrontation. The United States was unable to directly attack the Soviet Union without the possibility of equal retaliation, and vice versa.

With hard power interventions largely off the table, the two adversaries focused significant attention on the information space, hoping to influence and persuade others toward their respective ideologies. Put simply, the Soviet Union's information aims were threefold: to maintain internal control; to promote the ideology of communism and a positive view of the Soviet Union; and to destabilize its enemies. Likewise, the United States sought to spread the ideologies of democracy and capitalism and to undermine communist governments. Earlier in the twentieth century, the conception of the "masses" as a "body to be molded" had become popular with politicians and advertisers on both sides of the divide, and theories of psychological manipulation and propaganda began to take root.⁶⁴ The United States and the Soviet Union sought to win "hearts and minds," both domestically and abroad.

The Soviet government eventually came to view propaganda as "an essential, progressive tool of socialist modernity."⁶⁵ While the bulk of Soviet propaganda was directed domestically, the nation's intelligence services also devoted significant energy toward promoting communism

⁶³ Waltz, Kenneth N. "The Stability of a Bipolar World." *Daedalus* 93, no. 3 (1964): 881-909. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20026863>.

⁶⁴ Jane Chapman, *Comparative Media History: An Introduction: 1789 to the Present* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2005), 143.

⁶⁵ Kristin Roth-Ey and Larissa Zakharova, "Foreword: Communications and Media in the USSR and Eastern Europe," *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 56, no. 2/3 (2015): 273.

and undermining capitalistic state powers. These activities often fell under the category of what were known as “active measures,” or ideological subversion. Active measures, as described in a U.S. State Department report from 1981, were covert actions that included “written or spoken disinformation; efforts to control media in foreign countries; use of Communist parties or front organizations; clandestine radio broadcasting; blackmail ... and political influence.”⁶⁶ The United States, too, invested heavily in its own global propaganda efforts, often euphemistically known as “psychological operations” or “information campaigns.”

For both sides, controlling the information environment necessitated mastery of the era’s communications technologies. Throughout much of the twentieth century, the primary mass communication mediums, on a global scale, were print and radio (film and television were also important during this period, but until the advent of home satellite broadcasting in the 1970s and 80s these technologies were largely relegated to the national sphere). The nature of these technologies – they operate in one direction, from the center to the periphery – made them ideal for the propagation and reinforcement of state narratives. To paraphrase Socrates, print (and radio) cannot debate with you. However, getting information into hostile territory using these technologies was difficult. The Soviet Union instituted a strict censorship regime and carefully monitored foreign information coming into the country. Powerful radio transmitters could be set up outside of borders to broadcast messaging, as was the case with the U.S.-backed Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty, but these required significant resources and could potentially be jammed.⁶⁷ Getting printed material inside the Soviet Union sometimes necessitated complex and

⁶⁶ “Soviet ‘Active Measures’: Forgery, Disinformation, Political Operations” (United States Department of State, October 1981), <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84B00049R001303150031-0.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Linda Risso, “Radio Wars: Broadcasting in the Cold War,” *Cold War History* 13, no. 2 (May 1, 2013): 145–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2012.757134>.

dangerous operations. In one example from the 1980s, CIA officers seeking to destabilize the Soviet Union by fomenting religious unrest arranged a mission to smuggle thousands of Uzbek-language copies of the Quran into the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic from Afghanistan, which required ferrying the books across a river under the cover of darkness.⁶⁸ This is not to imply that the Soviet Union was completely isolated – unapproved books, periodicals, and other media frequently circulated in the country, although the penalties for being caught with banned material could be severe.⁶⁹

The Soviet Union had an advantage in that the open, pluralistic nature of Western societies usually allowed their views to be promoted without censorship. As a case in point, the North American service of Radio Moscow was broadcast daily to the United States from high-powered transmitters based in Russia, Eastern Europe, and Cuba during the 1960s.⁷⁰ The United States did not jam these transmissions or outlaw their consumption, and Radio Moscow was said to have a sizeable audience.⁷¹ However, Russia expert Marcel H. Van Herpen believes that the impact of propaganda operations such as Radio Moscow was limited and that, in general, “Soviet propaganda had practically no access to the Western mass media.”⁷²

To get around this lack of direct influence, Soviet intelligence agencies employed clandestine active measures to inject their narratives into the Western media-scape. One of the

⁶⁸ Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2005), 104.

⁶⁹ Jessica Loudis and Boyce Upholt, “The Art of Escaping Censorship,” *The New Republic*, December 13, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/146241/art-escaping-censorship>.

⁷⁰ William S. Howell, “The North American Service of Radio Moscow,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 46, no. 3 (October 1, 1960): 262–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335636009382420>.

⁷¹ Don D. Smith, “Some Effects of Radio Moscow’s North American Broadcasts,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, no. 34 (1970): 541.

⁷² Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putin’s Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 68.

best-known examples of this was Operation INFEKTION. In July 1983, an anonymous letter by a “well-known American scientist and anthropologist” in New York began circulating with the astonishing claim that “AIDS, the deadly mysterious disease which has caused havoc in the US, is believed to be the result of the Pentagon’s experiments to develop new and dangerous biological weapons.”⁷³ The letter was reprinted by a relatively obscure newspaper in India and largely went unnoticed at the time of its publication.⁷⁴ However, the claims made in the letter were later picked up by an East German biophysicist named Jakob Segal, who went on to publish pamphlets and give numerous interviews about the “experimental generation” of AIDS.⁷⁵ By late 1987, the story had circulated in 80 countries, appearing in over 200 publications in 25 languages.⁷⁶ Through declassified documents and interviews with former intelligence officers, we now know that the idea of AIDS as a biological weapon actually originated from Operation INFEKTION, a Soviet disinformation campaign.⁷⁷ Despite being repeatedly debunked, the claims persist to this day (on his 2005 song “Heard ‘Em Say,” rapper Kanye West delivers the line “I know the government administered AIDS.”)⁷⁸

While lingering belief in this conspiracy theory cannot be entirely attributed to the Soviet Union, the campaign clearly was successful in manipulating public perception. “Equipped with an intuitive understanding of the human psyche, Soviet and East German disinformation specialists applied the techniques that stimulate the growth and spread of rumors and conspiracy

⁷³ Anonymous, “AIDS May Invade India: Mystery Disease Caused by US Experiments,” *Patriot*, July 17, 1983.

⁷⁴ Thomas Boghardt, “Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign,” *Studies in Intelligence* 53, no. 4 (December 2009), 6.

⁷⁵ Boghardt, 13.

⁷⁶ Boghardt, 14.

⁷⁷ Boghardt, 8.

⁷⁸ Kanye West, *Heard ‘Em Say*, Late Registration (Def Jam, Roc-A-Fella, 2005).

theories – simplistic scapegoating, endless repetition, and the clever mixing of lies and half-truths with undeniable facts,” historian Thomas Boghardt writes. “Once the AIDS conspiracy theory was lodged in the global sub-conscience, it became a pandemic in its own right.”⁷⁹ These types of operations continued through the end of the Cold War, when both the global balance of power and the information environment were radically changed.

Independent Russia and the Rise of Globalization

In December 1991, the Soviet Union dissolved into fifteen independent republics. After having voted for their own independence, the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus issued a statement declaring that “the USSR as a subject of intentional law and geopolitical reality ceases to exist.”⁸⁰ The communist experiment ended, and with it seemingly went the global power struggle that had persisted for the past fifty years. The new Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, “jettisoned [ideology] completely ... ending the worldview of an inherent conflict between political systems.”⁸¹ With the Soviet Union out of the picture, the United States became the dominant global power, leading what was now a unipolar world.

At the same time that physical walls in Europe were falling, barriers were also coming down to enabling the free movement of money, culture, people, and information across borders. The end of the Cold War world, coupled with increased economic and political liberalization and advancements in communication and transportation technology, dramatically increased global interconnectedness in the 1990s. This movement toward a “single world society” is better known

⁷⁹ Boghardt, 19.

⁸⁰ Arkady Ostrovsky, *The Invention of Russia: The Rise of Putin and the Age of Fake News* (Penguin Books, 2017), 141.

⁸¹ Robert H. Donaldson, Joseph L. Noguee, and Vidya Nadkarni, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, Fifth Edition (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2014), 232.

as the phenomenon of globalization, as defined by sociologists Martin Albrow and Elizabeth King among many others.⁸² Globalization's proponents see it as ushering in a new era of peace and stability; what Marx had called a "universal interdependence" among nations.⁸³ To its opponents, such as political philosopher John Gray, however, globalization is a flawed and hegemonic effort to project American ideals and values onto other countries.⁸⁴ Economist Joseph Stiglitz argues that this is especially true in Russia, where "globalization and the introduction of a market economy [did] not produced the promised results in Russia and most of the other economies making the transition from communism to the market."⁸⁵

One of the key driving factors behind globalization was the introduction of new communications technologies. Satellites and the internet altered the global telecommunications landscape, liberating information from terrestrial borders. Information and communication could move freely through the internet from user to user with no intermediation, a striking contrast with the consolidated, center-to-periphery model of technologies like radio and television. With the advent of the internet, it seemed that the "global village" predicted by Marshall McLuhan – a "brand new world of allatonce" where "'time' has ceased and 'space' has vanished" – had finally been achieved.⁸⁶ Many hoped these advancements would bring about freer, more equitable societies. "Freedom is fostered when the means of communication are dispersed,

⁸² Martin Albrow and Elizabeth King, eds., *Globalization, Knowledge, and Society: Readings from International Sociology* (London; Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1990).

⁸³ Jacob Heilbrunn, "A Foreign Policy Realist Challenges America's Zeal for Intervention," *The New York Times*, November 24, 2018, sec. Books, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/20/books/review/stephen-m-walt-hell-good-intentions.html>.

⁸⁴ John Gray, "The Era of Globalisation Is Over," *The New Statesman*, September 24, 2001, <https://www.newstatesman.com/node/194169>.

⁸⁵ Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), 6.

⁸⁶ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (Bantam Books, 1967), 63.

decentralized, and easily available,” technologist Ithiel de Sola Pool optimistically predicted in 1983.⁸⁷

Further driving the spread of information was the deregulation and privatization of media. In the United States, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 (the first major overhaul of telecommunications law in almost 62 years)⁸⁸ sought to bring free market principles to the media sector by enacting “a pro-competitive, de-regulatory national policy framework designed to accelerate rapidly private sector deployment of advanced information technologies and services to all Americans by opening all telecommunications markets to competition.”⁸⁹ Russia’s media landscape also opened up dramatically in the 1990s. Oligarchs, flush with cash from the privatization of state resources, began purchasing and launching television channels and newspapers.⁹⁰ “As the state was now poor and pitiful,” journalist Arkady Ostrovsky writes, “oligarchs created their own parallel infrastructure.”⁹¹ Although controlled by a small group of wealthy men, many of the outlets provided greater objectivity and diversity of opinion than had ever been possible under the Soviet regime.

The United States warmly welcomed the newly-independent states into the global fold, but the period of rapprochement between the U.S. and Russia was ultimately short-lived. It soon became clear that the Americans viewed themselves as the unquestioned victors of the Cold War and planned to behave accordingly. The U.S. pushed forward with a neoliberal agenda,

⁸⁷ Ithiel de Sola Pool, *Technologies of Freedom: On Free Speech in an Electronic Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1983), 5.

⁸⁸ “Telecommunications Act of 1996,” Federal Communications Commission, June 20, 2013, <https://www.fcc.gov/general/telecommunications-act-1996>.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ostrovsky, 176.

⁹¹ Ostrovsky, 176.

expanding NATO eastward despite what Russia had perceived as promises to the contrary and intervening militarily against former Soviet allies in the Balkans and the Middle East.⁹² Russia, weakened by internal economic and social turmoil, was unable to prevent these unilateral actions and felt a sense of betrayal.⁹³ Furthermore, many Russians saw a deep hypocrisy in the failure of the United States to condemn Yeltsin for his use of military force against parliament during the 1993 constitutional crisis⁹⁴ and fraud during his 1996 re-election campaign.⁹⁵

In 1996, Yeltsin appointed a new foreign minister, Yevgeny Primakov. Primakov held a colder view of the West than his young predecessor Andrei Kozyrev. He called for a rebalancing of global power, advocating a multipolar world order that could “‘counterbalance’ the otherwise overweening influence of the sole superpower, the United States.”⁹⁶ Russia, Primakov felt, should be considered a “sovereign democracy,” with privileged interests within its spheres of influence, particularly the former Soviet republics.⁹⁷ These views had a strong influence on Yeltsin’s presidential successor, Vladimir Putin.

⁹² Donaldson et al, 237.

⁹³ Angus Roxburgh, “Why the West’s Betrayal of Democratic Russia Brought Us Putin,” *The Moscow Times*, December 27, 2016, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/12/27/why-the-wests-betrayal-of-democratic-russia-brought-us-putin-a56658>.

⁹⁴ Jonathan Steele and David Hearst, “Yeltsin Crushes Revolt,” *The Guardian*, October 5, 1993, sec. World News, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1993/oct/05/russia.davidhearst>.

⁹⁵ Peter Beinart, “The U.S. Needs to Face Up to Its Long History of Election Meddling,” *The Atlantic*, July 22, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/07/the-us-has-a-long-history-of-election-meddling/565538/>.

⁹⁶ Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (London; Washington, D.C: Chatham House; Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 43.

⁹⁷ Lo, 44.

The New Cold War and the Launch of RT

Upon taking office in 2000, Putin began reigning in the “era of experimentation” – economic, cultural, and political – that had defined the tumultuous 1990s.⁹⁸ He sought to reestablish Russia’s standing as a great power, one which naturally commanded respect and recognition on the global stage. “Russia was and will remain a great power. It is preconditioned by the inseparable characteristics of its geopolitical, economic and cultural existence,” Putin wrote in a 1999 essay.⁹⁹ Asserting Russia’s great power-ness (*derzhavnost*), in the view of Russia scholar Bobo Lo, compelled Putin to act with “a new militancy and ... aggressive self-confidence.”¹⁰⁰ Putin also sought to give a searching Russian people a sense of unity and cohesion to replace the void left by the collapse of communism. In its place, he offered the state. “For Russians a strong state is not an anomaly which should be got rid of” he wrote. “Quite the contrary, they see it as a source and guarantor of order and the initiator and main driving force of any change.” In essence, according to Arkady Ostrovsky, “Russia did not need state ideology, [Putin] argued. Its ideology, its national identity, was the state.”¹⁰¹

A former KGB officer, Putin came into office with an innate understanding of the power of the media to shape his political agenda. “Intelligence people are very close in their duties to the staff in the mass media,” he told a group of journalists early in his presidency.¹⁰² Journalist Julia Ioffe characterizes Putin as “obsessed with television.”¹⁰³ A popular anecdote describes

⁹⁸ Ostrovsky, 268.

⁹⁹ Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin et al., *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia’s President* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2000), 209.

¹⁰⁰ Lo, xvi.

¹⁰¹ Ostrovsky, 264.

¹⁰² Ostrovsky, 280.

¹⁰³ Julia Ioffe, “What Is Russia Today? A Kremlin Propaganda Outlet Has an Identity Crisis,” *Columbia Journalism Review* 49, no. 3 (October 2010): 44–49.

Putin's office as looking much as it did during his predecessor's time, with one key difference – the addition of a remote control on the presidential desk.¹⁰⁴ Putin viewed the diverse media landscape that had taken root under Yeltsin as a threat and quickly moved to consolidate ownership of the major outlets under regime-friendly oligarchs using incentives, coercion, and, if necessary, force.¹⁰⁵ Television, newspapers, and the nascent Russian internet were put under state surveillance and control.¹⁰⁶ In one prominent incident, Putin, allegedly angered by his portrayal on the satirical puppet show *Kukly*, had the offices of the show's parent company, Media Most, raided and its billionaire owner Vladimir Gusinsky arrested. Gusinsky was eventually compelled to sell the company to the state.¹⁰⁷ While Russia scholars Stephen Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova emphasize that “post-Soviet Russian television has not followed an unbending linear trajectory from freedom to subservience,”¹⁰⁸ by the end of Putin's first term in 2004 the Kremlin controlled many of the country's major print, television, and online media outlets. In the view of Russian political scientist Gleb Pavlovsky, the media eventually became “a branch of state power.”¹⁰⁹

Following his consolidation of the domestic media sphere, Putin turned his attention outward. He had long been cognizant of the shifting global information environment. “The beginning of the new millennium coincided with a dramatic turn in world developments in the

¹⁰⁴ Ostrovsky, 271.

¹⁰⁵ Jill Dougherty, “How the Media Became One of Putin's Most Powerful Weapons,” *The Atlantic*, April 21, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/how-the-media-became-putins-most-powerful-weapon/391062/>.

¹⁰⁶ Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, *The Red Web: The Struggle Between Russia's Digital Dictators and the New Online Revolutionaries*, First Trade Paperback Edition (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2017): 68.

¹⁰⁷ Giles Tremlett, “Putin Is Out To Get Me, Says Media Tycoon,” *The Guardian*, April 24, 2001, sec. World News, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/apr/24/russia.gilestremlett>.

¹⁰⁸ Stephen C Hutchings and Natalia Rulyova, *Television and Culture in Putin's Russia: Remote Control* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 10.

¹⁰⁹ Ostrovsky, 242.

past 20-30 years ... [including] the landslide development of the information science and telecommunications,” he wrote in 2000.¹¹⁰ The same year, Putin’s office published the “Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation,” which notes “the striving of a number of countries toward dominance and the infringement of Russia’s interests in the world information space and to oust it from external and domestic information markets,” and the need for “bolstering the state mass media, expanding their capabilities to promptly convey reliable information to Russian and foreign citizens.”¹¹¹

As part of a public relations campaign to improve Russia’s global image, the state news agency RIA Novosti launched “Russia Today,” a 24-hour international news network, in 2005. A 25-year-old former Kremlin pool journalist, Margarita Simonyan, was hired as chief editor. “Unfortunately, at the level of mass consciousness in the West, Russia is associated with three words: communism, snow and poverty,” RIA Novosti Director-General Svetlana Mironyuk said at the time of Russia Today’s launch. “We would like to present a more complete picture of life in our country.”¹¹² Mironyuk claimed that the channel would be balanced and reflect a broad range of Russian opinions, arguing that “it is very difficult to imagine that the channel could earn itself a good name, good ratings and an audience if it was a tool of blatant propaganda.”¹¹³ The channel sought to emulate the style and professionalism of the Western 24-hour news networks – of the networks’ initial 300 staff, 70 were foreigners.¹¹⁴ “We do not want to change the

¹¹⁰ Putin et al., *First Person*.

¹¹¹ “Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation” (Presidential Executive Office of the Russian Federation, September 9, 2000), https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Cybersecurity/Documents/National_Strategies_Repository/Russia_2000.pdf.

¹¹² Osborn, “Russia’s ‘CNN’ Wants to Tell It like It Is”.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ Julian Evans, “Spinning Russia,” *Foreign Policy*, December 1, 2005, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2005/12/01/spinning-russia/>.

professional format developed by such TV channels as the BBC, CNN, and Euronews,” Simonyan said in 2005. “We want to reflect Russia's opinion of the world and to make Russia clearer for understanding.”¹¹⁵ Early Russia Today broadcasts focused on Russia’s positive points: its unique culture, ethnic diversity, role in the Second World War, and process of modernization.¹¹⁶ While there was a notable lack of criticality on Russia-related issues, the network did not exhibit the aggressive editorial stance that would later come to define it.¹¹⁷

Although the domestic media sphere was now largely under state control, the 2008 Georgia War laid bare Russia’s limitations in shaping global narratives. In August 2008, a dispute over the status of separatist enclaves in Georgia, a former Soviet republic, led to an armed conflict between Russia, backing the separatists, and the Georgian military. Though the conflict only lasted for five days, it exposed the dilapidated state of Russia’s armed forces¹¹⁸ as well as its failure to control the information environment. Russian military and intelligence services attempted to spread propaganda inside Georgia, but Georgia countered by jamming Russian communications channels and presenting counter-narratives through Western news outlets.¹¹⁹ Ultimately, despite an eventual UN International Court of Justice ruling that both sides were responsible for the conflict, international sentiment tended toward labeling Russia as the aggressor.¹²⁰ Margarita Simonyan recalled this strategic defeat in a 2012 interview, saying, “a

¹¹⁵ “RIA Novosti Launches a TV Channel, Russia Today,” RIA Novosti, June 7, 2005, <https://sputniknews.com/russia/2005060740484511/>.

¹¹⁶ Van Herpen, 72.

¹¹⁷ Van Herpen, 72.

¹¹⁸ Nikita Petrov, “Russian Army’s Weaknesses Exposed during War in Georgia,” RIA Novosti, September 9, 2008, <https://sputniknews.com/analysis/20080909116657490/>.

¹¹⁹ Chad W. Fitzgerald and Aaron F. Brantly, “Subverting Reality: The Role of Propaganda in 21st Century Intelligence,” *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 30, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 215–40.

¹²⁰ Donaldson et al, 199.

week before the war, Western PR specialists had already entrenched themselves in Tbilisi. And they worked closely with all journalists, did SMS mailshots, briefings, constantly created news ... And in our country on the eve of this war, there was no special PR office that would deal with the war, no one was hired. We were not going to fight. Russia just realized what it was about too late. It's as if we suddenly realized that there are nuclear weapons in the world and rushed to develop them. This was the main mistake.”¹²¹ To Simonyan and others in the government, Russia had failed to fully appreciate and adapt to the changing information battlefield of the digital age.

The Georgia War was a turning point for Russia Today. Instead of its original, relatively benign mission of offering a more complete picture of Russian life, Russia Today would become a harder-edged tool to counter the perceived anti-Russian narrative and information hegemony of Western media.¹²² “Before [the war], Russia Today had been quite boring and conservative, and not particularly scandalous, and suddenly with the war in Georgia they seem to suddenly understand what they were created for. I think that's the first time people actually sat up and noticed them,” British journalist Peter Pomerantsev said in 2015.¹²³ In the view of Marcel H. Van Herpen, “from a *defensive* soft-power weapon, RT began to develop into an *offensive* weapon.”¹²⁴ Reflecting this shift, Russia Today rebranded as “RT” in 2009, in a move some critics claim was intended to hide the channel's roots.¹²⁵ The following year, the network worked

¹²¹ Nimmo, “Question That: RT's Military Mission”.

¹²² Ilya Yablokov, “Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool: The Case of Russia Today (RT),” *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (November 1, 2015): 301–15, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9256.12097>.

¹²³ “The World According to RT” (VPRO, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZdL8oTBKHI&t=574s>.

¹²⁴ Van Herpen, 72.

¹²⁵ Nikolaus von Twickel, “Russia Today Courts Viewers with Controversy,” *The Moscow Times*, March 23, 2010, https://www.rbth.com/articles/2010/03/23/230310_rt.html.

with a British agency to launch a provocative ad campaign in the United Kingdom and the United States. The campaign featured overlapping images, such as headshots of U.S. President Obama and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, together with provocative captions like “Who Poses the Greater Nuclear Threat?” and RT’s slogan “Question More.” Despite being forced to run in a censored format in some venues, the campaign was named “Ad of the Month” by the Awards for National Newspaper Advertising in the United Kingdom.¹²⁶

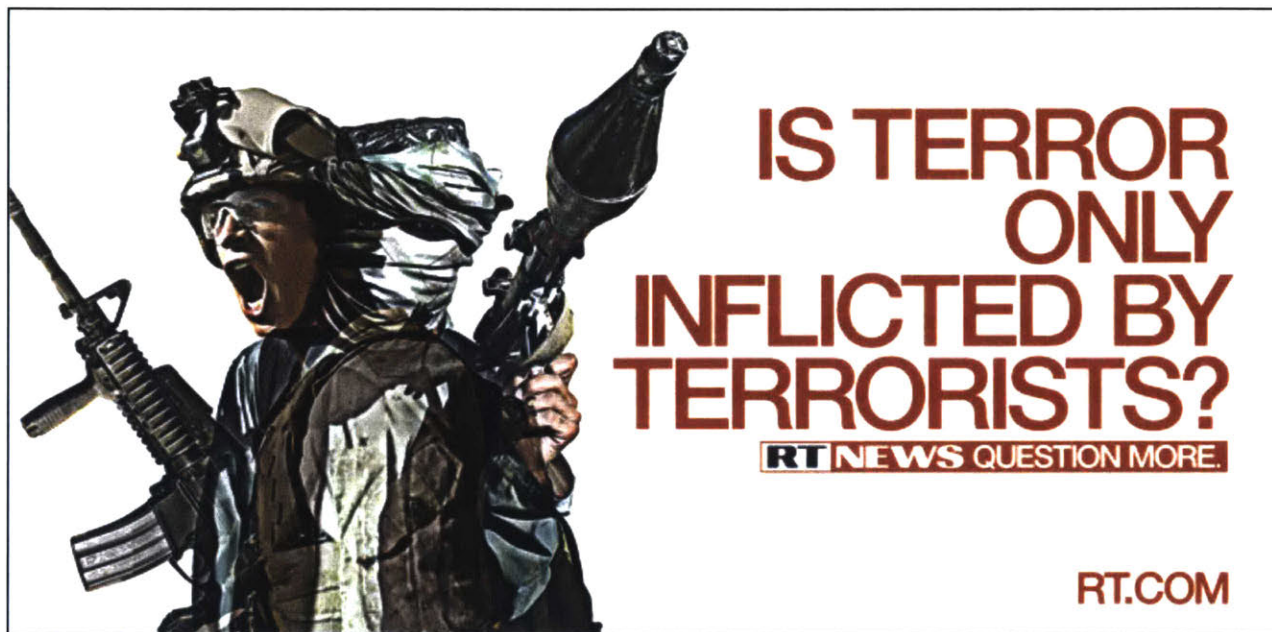


Fig 2. A poster from RT's 2010 "Question More" ad campaign.¹²⁷

The evolution of RT did not occur in a straight line, however. In 2009, the administration of newly-elected president Barack Obama reached out to Russia with an invitation to “reset” relations. Russia, hampered economically and politically by international fallout from the Georgia War as well as the global financial crisis, accepted the diplomatic overture. Journalist

¹²⁶ “RT’S Controversial Advertising Is Ad of Month in UK,” RT International, March 3, 2010, <https://www.rt.com/news/rt-controversial-advertising-award/>.

¹²⁷ “Advertising Campaign for TV Channel Russia Today,” *The Guardian*, December 18, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2009/dec/18/russia-today-advertising-television>.

Julia Ioffe notes that “Russia Today’s coverage ... closely mirrored this shift ... [becoming] more international and less anti-American.”¹²⁸ The network continued to grow during this period, but Ioffe argues that without a “common enemy” and lacking a particular ideology to propagate, the network became unfocused and “slightly schizophrenic.”¹²⁹ This period of improved, albeit still cautious, relations between the United States and Russia continued for several years.

Fundamental differences still existed between the American and Russian world views, however, and events such as the upheavals of the Arab Spring beginning in late 2010 brought these cracks to the fore. The United States, espousing the principles of democracy and freedom, supported protestors as they turned against regimes in Tunisia and Egypt that had previously been firm American allies. The Russian political and military establishment was suspicious of these “people-powered” revolutions, seeing Western hands and imperialism behind them.¹³⁰ These suspicions were reinforced by NATO’s intervention in the Libyan Civil War in 2011, which Putin denounced as a “crusade.”¹³¹ The breaking point came in late 2011, following controversial parliamentary elections in Russia that were won by Putin’s United Russia party. In the months following the elections and leading up to the inauguration of Putin to his third term as president, thousands of protestors took to the streets of Moscow, criticizing alleged corruption and electoral fraud.¹³² The Obama administration, while praising Russian government restraint, called the demonstrations “a very positive sign to all those who support the democratic

¹²⁸ Ioffe, “What Is Russia Today? A Kremlin Propaganda Outlet Has an Identity Crisis,” 49.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Anthony Cordesman, “Russia and the ‘Color Revolution’” (Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 28, 2014), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-and-%E2%80%9Ccolor-revolution%E2%80%9D>.

¹³¹ “Russia and the Arab Spring,” Middle East Institute, April 3, 2012, <http://www.mei.edu/publications/russia-and-arab-spring>.

¹³² Ellen Barry and Michael Schwartz, “At Moscow Rally, Arrests and Violence,” *The New York Times*, May 6, 2012, sec. Europe, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/07/world/europe/at-moscow-rally-arrests-and-violence.html>.

process.”¹³³ In response to this existential threat to his leadership, Putin turned on the offensive, seeking to aggressively counter Western narratives and inflict on Western political systems the same interference he felt had been perpetrated against him.¹³⁴

RT’s coverage of the United States subsequently grew more critical, focusing on issues such as social inequality, the homeless population, human rights violations and the banking crisis.¹³⁵ The network also began playing host to assorted fringe and conspiracy-oriented commenters including InfoWars’ Alex Jones, Holocaust denier Ryan Dawson, and proponents of the “truther” and “birther” movements.¹³⁶ In a move clearly calculated to provoke the United States, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who had orchestrated the release of thousands of classified U.S. diplomatic cables in 2010, was given his own talk show, “The World Tomorrow,” on RT in April 2012. The first guest featured on the show was Hassan Nasrallah, leader of the Lebanese group Hezbollah, which the U.S. classifies as a terrorist organization.¹³⁷ In an echo of Operation INFEKTION, RT’s show “Crosstalk” hosted a debate in 2010 on the business of HIV/AIDS, with one guest arguing that “AIDS treatments are killing people infected with ‘the so-called AIDS virus, which doesn’t do anything.’”¹³⁸

In 2014, Russia annexed the Crimea region of Ukraine and began providing covert military support to separatists in eastern Ukraine, sparking an ongoing armed conflict. These

¹³³ Alister Bull and Caren Bohan, “Russian Demonstrations ‘Positive Sign’: White House,” *Reuters*, December 12, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-russia-demonstrations-idUSTRE7BB14S20111212>.

¹³⁴ Ostrovsky, 312.

¹³⁵ Van Herpen, 72.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Alessandra Stanley, “Julian Assange Starts Talk Show on Russian TV,” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2012, sec. Television, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/18/arts/television/julian-assange-starts-talk-show-on-russian-tv.html>.

¹³⁸ Katie Sanders, “RT’s Peter Lavelle Says He Doesn’t Allow Conspiracy Theories on His Show, Then Utters One,” *Politifact*, July 30, 2014, <https://www.politifact.com/punditfact/statements/2014/jul/30/peter-lavelle/rts-peter-lavelle-says-he-doesnt-allow-conspiracy-/>.

moves drew widespread condemnation from the West, plummeting relations with Russia to a low not seen since the 2008 Georgia War. Some analysts have referred to the current era as “Cold War 2.0.”¹³⁹ These soured relations were compounded in 2016 by allegations of Russian interference in Western politics, including the U.S. presidential election and the “Brexit” vote in the United Kingdom. The U.S. levied extensive sanctions against Russia in response to these perceived aggressions. Barring a substantial reversal in Russian foreign policy, U.S.-Russia relations are likely to remain stagnant, a state of affairs that continues to be reflected in RT’s programming.

RT in the New Media Landscape

In addition to satellite and cable television, RT has focused considerable attention on expanding the online reach of its messaging using the internet as well as social media platforms, which had only recently been introduced.¹⁴⁰ RT’s launch in 2005 corresponded closely with the founding of Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006). The introduction of social media built on the changes of the internet era, bringing a “decentralized, disintermediated revolution in patterns of discourse,” as defined by media scholar Monroe Price.¹⁴¹ Social media and the internet also created asymmetric contexts of communication, in which vastly less powerful actors could challenge established powers.¹⁴² This balance was well-suited to Russia, allowing it to reach and

¹³⁹ Patrick Wintour, Luke Harding, and Julian Borger, “Cold War 2.0: How Russia and the West Reheated a Historic Struggle,” *The Guardian*, October 24, 2016, sec. World News, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/24/cold-war-20-how-russia-and-the-west-reheated-a-historic-struggle>.

¹⁴⁰ Jack Nicas, “Russia State News Outlet RT Thrives on YouTube, Facebook,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 24, 2017, sec. Tech.

¹⁴¹ Monroe E. Price, *Free Expression, Globalism and the New Strategic Communication* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 7.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

confront the West with minimal effort and cost. “The days of [intelligence services] sending a few thousand videos and books across the border ... have been overtaken by an information environment in which information boundaries have been, if not lost, substantially minimized,” security analysts Chad W. Fitzgerald and Aaron F. Brantly wrote in 2017, a reality that was equally applicable to Russian and the United States.¹⁴³

RT’s aggressive campaign in the United States coincided with cultural and societal trends that made American audiences potentially more receptive to divisive messaging. Between 2007 and 2017, the number of respondents to a Gallup poll expressing that they had “no trust and confidence at all” in the mass media to report the news “fully, accurately, and fairly” increased from 17% to 29%.¹⁴⁴ A 2018 report from the communications firm Edelman found that only one-third of Americans “trust their government ‘to do what is right’—a decline of 14 percentage points from [2017].”¹⁴⁵ In addition, only “forty-two percent [of those surveyed] trust the media, relative to 47 percent a year ago.”¹⁴⁶ Polls conducted by the Pew Research Center have also noted a significant decline in faith in the American government, finding that “no more than about 30% [of respondents] have expressed trust in the government in Washington to do the right thing at any point over the last decade. This marks the longest period of low trust in government since the question was first asked in 1958.”¹⁴⁷ Coupled with the lack of faith in government is deep partisan divide. A 2014 Pew survey found that “Republicans and Democrats are more divided

¹⁴³ Fitzgerald and Brantly, 216.

¹⁴⁴ “Media Use and Evaluation” (Gallup), accessed November 29, 2018, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1663/Media-Use-Evaluation.aspx>.

¹⁴⁵ Uri Friedman, “Trust Is Collapsing in America,” *The Atlantic*, January 21, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/01/trust-trump-america-world/550964/>.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ “Public Trust in Government Remains Near Historic Lows as Partisan Attitudes Shift” (Pew Research Center, May 3, 2017), <http://www.people-press.org/2017/05/03/public-trust-in-government-remains-near-historic-lows-as-partisan-attitudes-shift/>.

along ideological lines – and partisan antipathy is deeper and more extensive – than at any point in the last two decades.”¹⁴⁸ Highly negative views of the opposing party have more than doubled between 1994 and 2014, with 43% of Republicans and 38% of Democrats viewing the opposite party in strongly negative terms at the time of the survey.¹⁴⁹ Partisan media outlets, such as Fox News and MSNBC, have acted both as both symptoms and causes of this growing polarization. Not surprisingly, RT fits well within this hyper-partisan, mistrustful environment.

Conclusion

In this concise history of modern Russia, we see the simmering grievances and the vision for restored power and global influence underlying RT’s creation. While the network did not begin life as a tool for confrontation, it evolved quickly into one following Russia’s strategic shortcomings in the 2008 Georgia War. In doing so, it became part of a lineage of operations, rooted in the Cold War, designed to manipulate and control the information environment.

These operations and their subsequent impact have been shaped in large part by the communications technologies of their eras. The center-to-periphery distribution model of Cold War-era technologies like print, radio, and television formed the basis for activities designed to influence the global information environment for much of the 20th century. The introduction of satellite technology and the internet dramatically altered this landscape. Information became decentralized, borderless, and instantaneous, upending traditional models for communications and influence. In addition, RT was born at the crux of another revolution within the internet era: the rise of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. These platforms became

¹⁴⁸ “Political Polarization in the American Public” (Pew Research Center, June 12, 2014), <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

an integral part of RT's operational structure and have shaped its content in ways that will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter Three: Strategy and Operationalization

With an understanding of the historical and political motivations guiding RT in place, this chapter examines the underlying methods used by the network to influence its audience. I start by evaluating RT's content against the concepts of soft power, propaganda, and disinformation as they traditionally have been defined. In doing so, I find that RT is a unique hybrid of these concepts, one that has been adapted specifically to thrive in the decentralized information environment of the digital age. This is demonstrated through a series of examples that highlight the specific internet-centric trends and techniques frequently used by RT in its television, web, and social media content in support of what I call the "Disinformation 2.0" model.

Influence Strategies

States strive to attain global influence in many ways. Political scientist Joseph Nye describes these influence strategies as ranging on a spectrum from coercion to co-option.¹⁵⁰ State-sponsored media operations like RT traditionally have fallen on the co-option end of this spectrum, under the umbrella of what Nye calls "soft power." Soft power is an international relations strategy defined by Nye as "the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion."¹⁵¹ Soft power relies on appeal and attraction, as opposed to military force or "hard power." Nye views the soft power of a country as drawing primarily from

¹⁵⁰ Joseph S. Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (2008): 95. <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.mit.edu/stable/25097996>.

¹⁵¹ G. John Ikenberry, review of *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, by Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2004, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2004-05-01/soft-power-means-success-world-politics>.

three resources: culture, political values, and foreign policy.¹⁵² The U.S.-funded news networks Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, for example, promote American political and cultural values – chief among them the value of a free press – with the underlying intention of making America more appealing in the eyes of foreign audiences. Other state-sponsored news networks, such as France 24 and China Central Television (CCTV), serve similar appeal-centric functions.

Further to the left on the coercion-co-optation spectrum lies propaganda. Propaganda is similarly employed as a means of persuasion but does so in a way that relies less on attraction and more on manipulation. By its nature, propaganda is challenging to define – public relations pioneer Edward Bernays wrote in 1928 that “there is no word in the English language ... whose meaning has been so sadly distorted as the word ‘propaganda.’”¹⁵³ Bernays describes propaganda as “the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses.”¹⁵⁴ Media historian Philip M. Taylor calls propaganda “the *deliberate* attempt to persuade people to think and behave *in a desired way*.”¹⁵⁵ Former Soviet journalist and KGB agent Yuri Bezmenov describes propaganda simply as the act of trying to “convince us to believe something.”¹⁵⁶ Finally, French scholar Jacques Ellul views propaganda as a sociological

¹⁵² Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” 96.

¹⁵³ Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda* (Brooklyn, N.Y: Ig Publishing, 2005), 49.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 37.

¹⁵⁵ Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Era*, 3rd ed (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press; Palgrave, 2003), 6.

¹⁵⁶ Adam B. Ellick and Adam Westbrook, *Episode 1: Meet the KGB Spies Who Invented Fake News*, Operation Infektion: A Three-Part Video Series on Russian Disinformation (The New York Times, 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/12/opinion/russia-meddling-disinformation-fake-news-elections.html>.

phenomenon that not only serves to change opinions but “aims to intensify existing trends, to sharpen and focus them and, above all, to lead men to action.”¹⁵⁷

The line between soft power and propaganda is thin and often blurred. Both represent forms of non-military intervention and share the purpose (when employed externally) of influencing foreign “hearts and minds” to achieve foreign policy objectives. However, in Nye’s view, there is a fundamental distinction between the two concepts, namely that the soft power of attraction depends on credibility, a quality that propaganda lacks.¹⁵⁸ The following section considers how RT compares with soft power and propaganda as they are traditionally defined, and introduces the related influence strategy of disinformation.

RT and Soft Power

On the surface, RT appears to share the characteristics of a soft power initiative in the vein of Voice of America. Indeed, this was the originally stated purpose of the network – improving Russia’s image internationally – when it was launched in 2005. RT continues to produce content that meets this definition: on the “Russia” news section of the RT website, for example, recent headlines include “WATCH Putin’s ‘beautiful’ Russian-made Aurus limo turn heads of German automakers at Mercedes plant”¹⁵⁹ and “This mosquito stings like hell: Watch Russian sailors hone SUPERSONIC missile-firing skills.”¹⁶⁰ These stories tout Russia’s innovation and military

¹⁵⁷ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

¹⁵⁸ Joseph S. Nye Jr, “Soft Power: Propaganda Isn’t the Way,” *The New York Times*, January 10, 2003, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/10/opinion/IHT-soft-power-propaganda-isnt-the-way.html>.

¹⁵⁹ “WATCH Putin’s ‘Beautiful’ Russian-Made Aurus Limo Turn Heads of German Automakers at Mercedes Plant,” RT International, April 5, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/russia/455554-putin-aurus-mercedes-plant/>.

¹⁶⁰ “This Mosquito Stings like Hell: Watch Russian Sailors Hone SUPERSONIC Missile-Firing Skills,” RT International, April 5, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/russia/455632-russian-navy-moskit-missile/>.

prowess, both conventional soft power goals. Another example would be RT's "Russiapedia" project, a web encyclopedia of prominent Russian people, traditions, and history.¹⁶¹

These examples aside, however, scholars including Marcel H. Van Herpen have argued that modern Russia has little to offer socially, culturally, politically, or economically that is attractive to foreigners.¹⁶² This is evident in RT's overall content, where stories about Russia are significantly less frequent than stories on international issues. In a further reflection of this, the Russia news section of RT's English-language website is located toward the bottom of the homepage, after the categories "Sport," "USA" and even "Business." Journalist Tim Dowling also notes this trend, writing that "Russia barely tends to figure in RT's coverage."¹⁶³

Instead of making Russia appear more attractive, RT much more frequently *detracts* from Russia's adversaries, in a subversion of the conventional soft power model. Nye has adapted his definition of soft power in recent years specifically in response to this model of detraction, creating a new category that he calls "negative soft power." "By attacking the values of others," Nye writes, "one can reduce their attractiveness and thus their relative soft power."¹⁶⁴ This is more in line with Putin's vaguer and broader definition of soft power, which he views as "a complex of tools and methods to achieve foreign policy goals without the use of force, through information and other means of influence."¹⁶⁵ To Putin, soft power is essentially war conducted through non-military means, a view that differs markedly from Nye's original conception. RT,

¹⁶¹ "Get Russianized – Russiapedia," accessed April 24, 2019, <https://russiapeda.rtl.com/>.

¹⁶² Van Herpen, 22.

¹⁶³ Tim Dowling, "24-Hour Putin People: My Week Watching Kremlin 'Propaganda Channel' RT," *The Guardian*, November 29, 2017, sec. Media, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/nov/29/24-hour-putin-people-my-week-watching-kremlin-propaganda-channel-rt-russia-today>.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Joseph S. Nye, "Information Warfare Versus Soft Power," Project Syndicate, May 9, 2017, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/cyber-warfare-weakens-russia-soft-power-by-joseph-s--nye-2017-05>.

although clothed in a conventional soft power guise and occasionally producing content aimed at attraction and co-option, uses the concept in a negative, subversive way.

RT and Propaganda

RT's critics are often quick to label the network as propaganda. As previously mentioned, the U.S. intelligence community has bluntly described RT as "the Kremlin's principal international propaganda outlet,"¹⁶⁶ a sentiment that is often repeated in the Western media under headlines like "The Battle Against Kremlin Propaganda Network RT"¹⁶⁷ and "Russia's anti-Western propaganda campaign is a declaration of war."¹⁶⁸ As with soft power, however, RT does not fit neatly into conventional propaganda models.

Returning to the various definitions of propaganda outlined above, there appear to be two consistent threads at work: first, promoting particular opinions or beliefs, and second, inspiring some kind of behavior change or action. Looking at the first thread, RT does promote a consistent set of opinions related to certain issues, hewing close to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs line on topics such as Syria, Ukraine, and Venezuela. Negative allegations against Russia are consistently refuted, as seen in RT's coverage of the Malaysian Air Flight 17 crash and the murder of former Russian intelligence officer Sergei Skripal, both of which Russia denies responsibility for. RT also actively acknowledges that it promotes a particular perspective.

¹⁶⁶ "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections"

¹⁶⁷ Jamie Ross, "The Battle Against Kremlin Propaganda Network RT," *The Daily Beast*, May 22, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-battle-against-kremlin-propaganda-network-rt>.

¹⁶⁸ Henry Miller, "Russia's Anti-Western Propaganda Campaign Is a Declaration of War," *Washington Examiner*, January 2, 2019, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/op-eds/russias-anti-western-propaganda-campaign-is-a-declaration-of-war>.

As Margarita Simonyan has frequently reiterated, “from the beginning, we have always clearly expressed our intention to present the Russian point of view of the world.”¹⁶⁹

However, it is more frequently the case that RT is critical of *all* parties and viewpoints related to a particular issue. It is here that RT deviates most significantly from the traditional definitions of propaganda. Ellul conceives of propaganda as sharpening and focusing existing trends and “[leading] men to action.” Far from sharpening and focusing, RT attempts to soften and diffuse, creating more questions than answers. This is reflected in the network’s slogan: “Question More.” Watching RT has been described as a “dizzying experience”¹⁷⁰ that leaves the viewer “baffled and disoriented.”¹⁷¹ Unlike with Fox News or MSNBC, it is difficult to discern the “good guys” from the “bad guys.” Journalism scholar Michael Schudson argues that “news tends to emphasize conflict, dissension, and battle; out of a journalistic convention that there are two sides to any story, news heightens the appearance of conflict even in instances of relative consensus.”¹⁷² RT appears to take this tendency to its extreme, emphasizing conflict and dissent until the story itself becomes overwhelmed. This is a significant departure from propaganda as it has been traditionally defined. It is, however, more in line with the related model of disinformation.

¹⁶⁹ Vasily Klimentov, “RT, Russian Soft Power in Images,” InaGlobal, September 7, 2013, <https://www.inaglobal.fr/en/television/article/rt-russian-soft-power-images>.

¹⁷⁰ Steven Erlanger, “Russia’s RT Network: Is It More BBC or K.G.B.?” *The New York Times*, December 22, 2017, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/world/europe/russias-rt-network-is-it-more-bbc-or-kgb.html>.

¹⁷¹ Dowling, “24-Hour Putin People.”

¹⁷² Michael Schudson, *The Power of News* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), 9.

The Disinformation Model

While there are competing definitions of disinformation and debate as to whether or not it constitutes a separate concept from propaganda, it can be generally defined as “false information deliberately and often covertly spread ... in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.”¹⁷³ Disinformation as a practice has deep historical roots in warfare, but the term itself comes directly from the Russian *dezinformatsiya* and refers to techniques of creating and spreading false and misleading information developed by Soviet intelligence agencies.¹⁷⁴ The key distinction between disinformation and propaganda lies in the outcomes. Instead of leading populations to action, disinformation is “designed explicitly to engender public cynicism, uncertainty, apathy, distrust, and paranoia, all of which disincentivize citizen engagement and mobilization for social or political change.”¹⁷⁵ Journalist Peter Pomerantsev emphasizes that disinformation’s purpose “is to confuse rather than convince, to trash the information space so the audience gives up looking for any truth amid the chaos.”¹⁷⁶ Likewise, journalist Rafael Behr argues that “the job of disinformation is not to promote one set of facts over another, but to disorient and inculcate a nihilistic suspicion of all news, undermining confidence that the truth is available at all.”¹⁷⁷ Research by social psychologist Sander van der Linden supports the

¹⁷³ “Disinformation,” *Merriam-Webster*, accessed March 12, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disinformation>.

¹⁷⁴ Adam Taylor. “Before ‘Fake News,’ There Was Soviet ‘Disinformation.’” *Washington Post*, November 26, 2016, sec. WorldViews. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/26/before-fake-news-there-was-soviet-disinformation/>.

¹⁷⁵ “Issue Brief: Distinguishing Disinformation from Propaganda, Misinformation, and ‘Fake News,’” National Endowment for Democracy, October 17, 2017, <https://www.ned.org/issue-brief-distinguishing-disinformation-from-propaganda-misinformation-and-fake-news/>.

¹⁷⁶ Christian Caryl, “If You Want to See Russian Information Warfare at Its Worst, Visit These Countries,” *Washington Post*, April 5, 2017, sec. Opinion, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/04/05/if-you-want-to-see-russian-information-warfare-at-its-worst-visit-these-countries/>.

¹⁷⁷ Rafael Behr, “Russian Trolls Prey on the Toxic Way We Do Our Politics,” *The Guardian*, November 13, 2018, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/13/russian-trolls-toxic-politics-kremlin-brexit>.

effectiveness of disinformation, finding that when both are presented, factually correct information and false information “effectively [cancel] each other out, putting people back to a state of indecision.”¹⁷⁸

The disinformation model, in seeking to disrupt rather than replace, can be effective even without an underlying ideology. As discussed in the previous chapter, whereas during the Cold War the Soviet Union sought to promote a specific ideological agenda – socialism – the purpose of the modern Russian state is much less clearly defined. Russia analyst Sinikukka Saari supports this assertion, writing that “the key difference [in the post-Soviet Russian approach] is the lack of any ideological component, values or responsibilities to help achieve short-term goals.”¹⁷⁹

It is important to note that while disinformation is often defined as being based on falsehoods – for example, the planting of the fabricated claim regarding AIDS that was the basis for the Soviet-era Operation INFEKTION – RT rarely traffics in outright lies. This distinction is illustrated by looking at the network’s coverage of the 2014 Malaysia Air Flight 17 (MH17) crash. A multinational Joint Investigation Team tasked with investigating the crash concluded in 2018 that Russia was responsible for the deployment of the surface-to-air missile installation that brought down the flight, findings that have largely been accepted by the international community.^{180 181} Russia, however, has adamantly denied any responsibility for the downing of MH17 and has used RT as a primary conduit for spreading doubt about the crash and the

¹⁷⁸ Sander van der Linden et al., “Inoculating the Public against Misinformation about Climate Change,” *Global Challenges* 1, no. 2 (2017): 1600008, <https://doi.org/10.1002/gch2.201600008>.

¹⁷⁹ Sinikukka Saari, “Russia’s Post-Orange Revolution Strategies to Increase Its Influence in Former Soviet Republics: Public Diplomacy Po Russki,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 1 (2014): 63.

¹⁸⁰ “MH17: The Netherlands and Australia hold Russia responsible,” Nieuwsbericht, Government of the Netherlands, May 25, 2018, <https://www.government.nl/latest/news/2018/05/25/mh17-the-netherlands-and-australia-hold-russia-responsible>.

¹⁸¹ “Joint Statement From G7 Foreign Ministers on MH17,” U.S. Department of State, July 18, 2018, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/07/284171.htm>.

investigation process. What makes this coverage notable is that RT rarely, if ever, as far as my research has shown, makes the direct claim that Russia was not responsible for the crash. Instead, it continually picks holes in the evidence presented by investigators and presents innumerable alternative theories for what may have happened. A television news piece from July 2014 titled “The Plane Truth” features an engineer who claims that audio evidence of Russian involvement in the crash was faked,¹⁸² while a headline from July 2015 asks “‘Was there a 2nd plane?’ New footage shows MH17 crash site minutes after Boeing downing.”¹⁸³ The notion that finding the truth is possible at all is also thrown into question: an article on MH17 from December 2017 leads with a quote from a Russian military official that “anything can be fabricated.”¹⁸⁴ These are in keeping with the outcomes of the disinformation model, namely polluting the information space with competing narratives/realities. Unlike the fabrications of Operation INFEKTION, however, RT does not directly create falsehoods. As such, RT again appears to set a unique path for itself, one that I will attempt to define below.

Disinformation 2.0

In weighing RT against the concepts of soft power, propaganda, and disinformation, we see that it is a distinctly hybrid model, sharing similarities with each concept but also deviating from them. This hybridization corresponds with broader trends that the Russian establishment sees as driving international relations and warfare. In 2013, head of the Russian armed forces General

¹⁸² *Timeframe: Expert Dissects Ukraine’s MH17 “Smoking Gun”* (RT, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=URnpj14eIus>.

¹⁸³ “‘Was There a 2nd Plane?’ New Footage Shows MH17 Crash Site Minutes after Boeing Downed,” RT International, July 20, 2015, <https://www.rt.com/news/310082-mh17-video-another-aircraft/>.

¹⁸⁴ “‘Anything Can Be Fabricated’: Retired Russian General on Accusations of Involvement in MH17 Crash,” RT International, December 13, 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/412913-mh17-bellingcat-russian-general/>.

Valery Gerasimov published an article titled “The Value of Science is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations,” outlining a new approach to war. Gerasimov argued that “the very ‘rules of war’ have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.”¹⁸⁵ He goes on to note that “the information space opens wide asymmetrical possibilities for reducing the fighting potential of the enemy.”¹⁸⁶ This article subsequently became known in Western political and military circles as the “Gerasimov Doctrine” and has been the source of considerable debate over whether it represents a bold new Russian vision for war or simply an articulation of what the future may hold.¹⁸⁷ Regardless, it suggests that Russia is cognizant of how the world has changed, driven by the dramatic growth in access to information and global connectedness made possible by the internet and related technologies.

RT’s hybrid format reflects this changed landscape. It has jettisoned the facets of soft power, propaganda, and disinformation that are no longer applicable in the digital age and embraced those that work within the chaotic “allatonceness” of the internet and social media, shaping these forces to its advantage. Journalist Jim Rutenberg describes RT as “the hub of a new kind of state media operation: one that travels through the same diffuse online channels, chasing the same viral hits and memes, as the rest of the Twitter-and-Facebook-age media”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ Valery Gerasimov, “The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations,” trans. Robert Coalson, *Military-Industrial Kurier*, 27 February 2013.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Damien Van Puyvelde, “Hybrid War – Does It Even Exist?,” *NATO Review Magazine*, 2015, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2015/Also-in-2015/hybrid-modern-future-warfare-russia-ukraine/EN/index.htm>.

¹⁸⁸ Jim Rutenberg, “RT, Sputnik and Russia’s New Theory of War,” *The New York Times*, September 13, 2017, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/13/magazine/rt-sputnik-and-russias-new-theory-of-war.html>.

This new approach pioneered by RT is nebulous and frequently shifting, but it might be called “Disinformation 2.0.”

The internet has made traditional disinformation and propaganda campaigns significantly more difficult to carry out. Outright lies and manipulation are less likely to be effective when false claims can be quickly disputed with a Google search, and specific messaging can become lost in the torrent of competing information available online. Instead of fighting these trends, RT embraces them through the disinformation model, which emphasizes numerous competing realities over the specific counter-reality of conventional propaganda. The availability of competing realities is amplified exponentially by the internet; on social media, in particular, it is always possible to find “alternative” opinions and facts. Furthermore, once introduced into the internet’s bloodstream, information often takes on a life of its own, a tendency that could be detrimental for conventional propaganda but is actually beneficial when the goal is to create an excess of narratives. Ironically, this strategy also, as Vasily Gatov points out, exploits the “weaknesses of the liberal order,” which celebrates freedom of speech and diversity of opinion.¹⁸⁹

The internet and social media offer RT distinct advantages compared with television. While television, a center-to-periphery communications technology, generally compels viewers to accept all of the information and viewpoints presented in the course of a given program, information presented online is much easier to pick and choose (and share) piecemeal. When propagated through social media, this information can subsequently become siloed in echo chambers of likeminded individuals, amplifying its effect. As scholars Cailin O’Connor and James Owen Weatherall note, “social media also allows us to construct and prune our social

¹⁸⁹ Gatov, “Research the Revenge.”

networks, to surround ourselves with others who share our views and biases, and to refuse to interact with those who do not. This, in turn, filters the ways in which the world can push back, by limiting the facts to which we are exposed. Propagandistic tools are especially effective in this environment.”¹⁹⁰

Across its multiple platforms – web, social media, and television – RT can take on different guises to suit different ends. To television audiences watching *Politicking with Larry King*, RT can be a professional, non-partisan news source; to online users, individual RT articles and social media posts can be found that support nearly any ideology or cause. This strategic ambiguity also provides RT with a degree of deniability – how can the network possibly traffic in fringe propaganda and conspiracy theories when it hosts a respected media personality like Larry King? Whether RT’s defiance of categorization is by design or partially the result of managerial indecisiveness is open for debate. It is possible that, at times, RT puts the cart before the horse in terms of online popularity and virality. Former RT journalists have described a strong editorial push for viral traffic, with one staffer saying that her work “was very much driven by clicks, in terms of how much online traffic an article would generate. There wasn’t really a lot of regard for what was being published so long as it got in the shares and likes and did well on social media.”¹⁹¹ In any case, it is clear that RT demonstrates a canny understanding of the workings and language of the internet, and creates content designed to thrive in this new environment. The following section looks at RT’s multi-platform content in more detail and

¹⁹⁰ Cailin O’Connor and James Owen Weatherall, *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 16.

¹⁹¹ Jim Waterson, “Clickbait and Skripal Jokes: Russia’s RT Thrives Online,” *The Guardian*, May 3, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/may/03/clickbait-and-skripal-jokes-how-russias-rt-is-growing-online>.

considers how particular trends and techniques fit within the Disinformation 2.0 framework described above.

Content Analysis: Trends and Techniques

As a 24-hour news network operating across multiple platforms, RT produces a vast amount of content, much of which defies neat definition and categorization. However, from a broad review of RT’s television, web, and social media content, clear recurring themes and techniques that correspond with the “Disinformation 2.0” model become apparent.

In order to both create a chaotic information space and appeal to audiences across the political spectrum, RT often amplifies both left- and right-wing narratives on American political and social issues. Take, for example, RT’s coverage of U.S. Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who is popular on the left and vilified on the right. Unlike the consistency audiences have come to expect from partisan media outlets, RT’s news pieces about Ocasio-Cortez have taken on strikingly different tones. During Ocasio-Cortez’s campaign and her first days in office, RT ran several positive articles on the candidate and her policies. These included a web article from August 10, 2018 headlined “US can afford ‘unlimited war’ but not Medicare for all, says Ocasio-Cortez,” which criticized President Trump’s defense spending and highlighted statistics in favor of Ocasio-Cortez’s support for single-payer health care.¹⁹² In January 2019, RT ran another piece ridiculing critics of a “leaked” video of Ocasio-Cortez dancing in college, noting that “the hit job backfired completely,” and that “constantly ripping on Ocasio-Cortez over

¹⁹² “US Can Afford ‘Unlimited War’ but Not Medicare for All, Says Ocasio-Cortez,” RT International, August 10, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/usa/435566-ocasio-cortez-healthcare-war/>.

inconsequential matters was only helping her.”¹⁹³ At roughly the same time, however, RT was also running critical stories on Ocasio-Cortez. On a February 13, 2019 episode of the debate program *CrossTalk*, host Peter Lavelle and several of the segment’s guests criticized Ocasio-Cortez’s proposed environmental legislation, calling it “sheer lunacy” and referring to the congresswoman as “the village idiot.”¹⁹⁴ ¹⁹⁵ Similarly, a March 4, 2019 article headlined “‘Pompous twit will get us all killed’: AOC tweet-tacked over Green New Deal by ex-Greenpeace founder” characterizes Ocasio-Cortez’s proposed legislation as having been “ridiculed from all sides” and devotes most of its length to reprinting Twitter posts from a climate skeptic who accuses Ocasio-Cortez of being “a garden-variety hypocrite” with “ZERO expertise.”¹⁹⁶

Conflicting sentiments can even be seen in articles published within hours of one another. One example comes from President Trump’s March 2019 visit to tornado-affected communities in Alabama. An article published at 12:01pm on March 9, 2019 mocks Trump for autographing Bibles handed to him by tornado victims, calling the act “uncouth” and quoting numerous jokes and criticisms from left-leaning Twitter users.¹⁹⁷ An article from 4:46pm the same day, however, criticized Democratic congressman Ted Lieu for mocking Trump’s visit to Alabama, chiding Lieu’s “obliviousness to the devastation” and quoting conservative Twitter users who call the

¹⁹³ “‘Leaked’ College Clip of Dancing Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez Backfires (VIDEO),” RT International, January 4, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/usa/448041-ocasio-cortez-dance-viral/>.

¹⁹⁴ “Green New Deal,” *CrossTalk* (RT, February 13, 2019), <https://www.rt.com/shows/crosstalk/451334-green-new-deal-plan/>.

¹⁹⁵ While it should be noted that *CrossTalk* is an opinion show rather than news, the program was distinctly weighted against Ocasio-Cortez, with the host and two out of three guests expressing negative sentiments toward her.

¹⁹⁶ “‘Pompous Twit Will Get Us All Killed’: AOC Tweet-Tacked over Green New Deal by Ex-Greenpeace Founder,” RT International, March 4, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/usa/452931-ocasio-cortez-greenpeace-climate/>.

¹⁹⁷ “Donald Trump Gets Lampooned on Twitter for Autographing Bibles,” RT International, March 9, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/usa/453408-trump-signs-bible-twitter/>.

congressman a “moron,” “disgusting,” and “callous.”¹⁹⁸ The overall effect is twofold – on one hand, it allows audiences to cherry-pick the stance that best suits their own politics, and on the other, it creates noise and confusion that has the effect of leaving audiences disillusioned with the American political system as a whole.

To bolster the viewpoints co-opted from both sides of the American political spectrum, RT also selectively uses quotes from partisan social media users in a technique that could be labeled “editorial outsourcing.” The users quoted are sometimes prominent voices on the left or right (generally tending toward the fringes rather than the mainstream), but just as often can be users with little to no following. Examples of this can be found in a March 18, 2019 article on the Australian prime minister’s decision to provide grants to places of worship for security measures following the Christchurch terror attacks.¹⁹⁹ While the article presents itself as a factual account of the decision, it is peppered with numerous quotes from Twitter and Facebook users critiquing the Australian government. Some of the quotes are embedded directly from Twitter, while others are summarized without attribution. For example, Twitter user @mikeaubrey2 is quoted as saying “WTF....is he on about, just wild spending taxpayers money.” User @AngryManAust’s tweet “What an outrageous grandstanding waste of taxpayers money. How dare you” is also embedded. The Twitter users quoted in the article are not well-known or popular online personalities; in fact, @AngryManAust had no followers at the time that the article was published. This is not an isolated example; another article from the same week quotes prominent journalists and political commentators but also Twitter user @Amastan9, who had

¹⁹⁸ “Democrat Congressman Eats Humble Pie after Mocking Trump... for Visiting Tornado Victims,” RT International, March 9, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/usa/453424-ted-lieu-alabama-trump/>.

¹⁹⁹ “‘Did Anyone Bring an Egg for This Guy?’ Australian PM Gives Places of Worship \$55mn for Fence & CCTV,” RT International, March 18, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/news/454095-australia-religious-grants-pm/>.

seven followers at the time of publication.²⁰⁰ Through this selective employment of quotes from social media, RT is able to editorialize and foment discord without showing its own hand. Used indiscriminately, social media provides a nearly endless well of opinions to employ in order to create alternative narratives and overall discord.

RT's internet-centric orientation is further reflected in its use of "clickbait"-style sensationalism. Stories featured on RT frequently seek to grab attention with provocative headlines and content. Consider these phrases from a brief survey of one week's headlines: "shocking VIDEO," "scary," "liar, liar," "obscene and ridiculous," "Wacky Nut Job," "vicious attacks," and "provocative." Three categories in particular – sex, violence, and unusual natural phenomena – are common. A brief survey of the RT website's featured stories sidebar finds such examples as "Horrific 'hairy' creature washes up on Philippine beach (PHOTOS),"²⁰¹ "Marilyn Monroe's lost nude scene locked away for decades re-discovered,"²⁰² "Hardcore porn at school? Calls for sex education to get more graphic,"²⁰³ and "Bar guests in Russia narrowly escape CHAINSAW MASSACRE as man tries to cut them into pieces (VIDEO)."²⁰⁴ This tendency crosses platforms and can be seen in RT's televised content, where headlines have included

²⁰⁰ "But Where Are All the Wars? Dick Cheney Tears into 'Isolationist' Pence at Neocon Conclave," RT International, March 12, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/usa/453583-dick-cheney-attacks-pence-isolationism/>.

²⁰¹ "Horrific 'Hairy' Creature Washes up on Philippine Beach (PHOTOS)," RT International, May 14, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/426558-philippine-beach-hairy-sea-creature/>.

²⁰² "Marilyn Monroe's Lost Nude Scene Locked Away for Decades Re-Discovered," RT International, August 14, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/news/435814-marilyn-monroe-nude-scene/>.

²⁰³ "Hardcore Porn at School? Calls for Sex Education to Get More Graphic," RT International, November 21, 2017, <https://www.rt.com/uk/410365-porn-sex-school-teenagers/>.

²⁰⁴ "Bar Guests in Russia Narrowly Escape CHAINSAW MASSACRE as Man Tries to Cut Them into Pieces (VIDEO)," RT International, March 25, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/russia/454661-chainsaw-massacre-russia-bar/>.

“Political blow? Italian oral sex star blocked from Instagram for ‘influencing public opinion’”²⁰⁵ and “Animal Urges: Bestiality banned by Bundestag amid zoophilia rise.”²⁰⁶

RT’s content also can take on an informal, irreverent tone, incorporating memes and other aspects of internet culture. A January 2019 article mocking Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s use of the phrase “run train,” which according to some conservative pundits has a sexual connotation, included an animated .gif from the television series *Archer* with the main character’s catchphrase “phrasing!”²⁰⁷ Similarly, an article from October 2017 on flat earth conspiracy theories uses an animated .gif from the film *The Planet of the Apes* portraying a character giving a skeptical look.²⁰⁸ This informality is also frequently on display in idiomatic, pun-filled headlines and video titles like “No Fuchs Given!: Premier League winner Christian Fuchs primed to take over eSports world,”²⁰⁹ and “Kim be like: I’m going to have my own elections, with 99.9% turnover and pre-approved candidates.”²¹⁰

²⁰⁵ “Political Blow? Italian Oral Sex Star Blocked from Instagram for ‘Influencing Public Opinion’” (RT, March 2, 2018), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEd1sxUb6zA>.

²⁰⁶ “Animal Urges: Bestiality Banned by Bundestag amid Zoophilia Rise” (RT, December 16, 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpwwZwUam-URkxB7g4USKpg>.

²⁰⁷ “Phrasing! Ocasio-Cortez Says She Wants to ‘Run Train’ on Progressive Agenda,” RT International, January 17, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/usa/448989-ocasio-cortez-run-train-phrasing/>.

²⁰⁸ “Nice Try, Earth Is Flat’: Conspiracy Theorists Can’t Handle First Ever 360 Space Video,” RT International, October 5, 2017, <https://www.rt.com/news/405678-flat-earth-theory-space-video/>.

²⁰⁹ “No Fuchs Given’: Premier League Winner Christian Fuchs Primed to Take over ESports World,” RT International, March 17, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/sport/454072-no-fuchs-given-e-sports/>.

²¹⁰ “Kim Be like: I’m Going to Have My Own Elections, with 99.9% Turnover and Pre-Approved Candidates.,” RT, March 18, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpwwZwUam-URkxB7g4USKpg>.

"What have you got left? I'm six days into the term, and you already used all your ammo. So enjoy being exhausted for the next two years while we run train on the progressive agenda," she added.



via GIPHY

Fig 3. A screenshot from the article "Phrasing! Ocasio-Cortez says she wants to 'run train' on progressive agenda"

These memes and jokes serve as a self-aware "wink" to audiences, letting them know that RT is different from the mainstream media. Indeed, criticism of the mainstream media is a common refrain across much of RT's content. By mainstream media, RT is not necessarily referring to reach and audience size; this would complicate its frequent claims to being one of the "most-watched news networks." Instead, the mainstream label broadly refers to "Anglo-Saxon TV news network[s]" as a whole.²¹¹ The term is used in roughly the same pejorative sense that has become popular with American conservatives, but without taking partisan sides. Critique of the mainstream media can even be the story itself. A February 2019 news article ostensibly about a concert to aid Venezuela, for example, focuses more on the media coverage than the event,

²¹¹ "About RT."

arguing that “the entire mainstream Western media dutifully covered the event as a success, even before it happened, unquestioningly repeating claims of 250,000 people attending and \$100 million being raised in 60 days.”²¹²

This theme is repeated in RT’s occasional rejection/neglect of traditional journalistic standards and conventions. This includes the informality and irreverence discussed previously as well as a disregard for basic conventions like the proper attribution of sources and consistent delineation between news and op-ed pieces. In addition to editorial outsourcing, RT will, at times, use entirely unattributed quotes. The article on the Australian prime minister mentioned above includes the claims, “one person suggested that Morrison was simply *‘point scoring’* [italics included in original] in the wake of the Christchurch tragedy, while another called the prime minister *‘a puppet’* who is unable to make *‘Australia strong’*” without identifying the commenter or the social media platform. In other instances, RT forgoes quotes altogether and simply adds its own commentary to the body of news articles. For example, an article on the March 2019 arrest of activist Chelsea Manning is labeled as “news” (the RT website distinguishes between news and op-ed pieces) but opens with the highly opinionated statement: “Does the American media care that a whistleblower was hauled off to jail for refusing to testify to a secret grand jury? Not really. After all, there’s ‘Russian collusion’ to chase.”²¹³ The article augments this argument with Twitter quotes from prominent figures on the left but is distinct in its inclusion of direct commentary and criticism within the headline and body. A similar article from February 2019, ostensibly about the diversion of American

²¹² “200,000 or 10,000? WaPo Deletes Inflated Venezuela Aid Live Attendance Figure from Its Website,” RT International, February 26, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/news/452358-venezuela-aid-concert-branson-numbers/>.

²¹³ “Chelsea Manning off to Jail: Mainstream Media Would Care If This Was Russia,” RT International, March 9, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/usa/453426-chelsea-manning-prison-media-manafort/>.

weaponry in Syria, is headlined “Weapons Ending up with Terrorists Is OK, as Long as Obama Did It: The World According to CNN” and opens with this critique: “A ‘bombshell’ CNN report has revealed that US-made weapons found their way to Al-Qaeda-linked fighters in Yemen. But is anyone surprised? And where was CNN when the Obama administration armed hardcore jihadists in Syria?”²¹⁴ While these blurred journalistic lines are unusual in the context of mainstream news reporting, they are more at home in the context of internet forums and blogs, where fact and opinion blend much more readily and there are few, if any, agreed-upon standards and conventions.

These examples aside, it is important to note that the majority of RT’s content meets what are generally acknowledged as the basic standards for conventional journalism – i.e. content that is factual, verifiable, and properly attributed.²¹⁵ This can be seen in RT’s coverage of the November 2018 California wildfires, for example. In both its televised and online content related to the fires, a leading international news story at the time, the network reported basic facts (scale, impact, quotes from officials and the affected community) about the situation in conjunction with verified photos, videos, and Tweets from the scene.²¹⁶ Of course, journalistic conventions are largely cultural constructs that can shift and evolve (as they are in the process of doing now amidst frequent partisan accusations of “fake news”). Walter Lippmann emphasizes the distinction between objective standards and conventions, noting that “every newspaper when it reaches the reader is the result of a whole series of selections as to what items shall be printed, in

²¹⁴ “Weapons Ending up with Terrorists Is OK, as Long as Obama Did It: The World According to CNN,” RT International, February 6, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/usa/450727-cnn-trump-weapons-obama-syria/>.

²¹⁵ For one example of such standards, see “SPJ Code of Ethics,” Society of Professional Journalists, September 6, 2014, <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>.

²¹⁶ “California Wildfires Force Hundreds of Thousands to Evacuate, Claim Five Lives,” RT International, November 12, 2018, <https://www.rt.com/usa/443575-fire-california-evacuation-death-zoo/>.

what position they shall be printed, how much space each shall occupy, what emphasis each shall have.”²¹⁷ That being said, it is important to distinguish between RT’s conventional and unconventional content in order to illustrate how the network shifts between conventional journalism and the looser standards of the internet.

Conclusion

The inconsistencies found within RT’s content – conflicting ideological rhetoric, erratic style and standards – suggest, at the surface level, a lack of vision and managerial cohesiveness within the organization. This may to some extent be true. However, this quality of being “everything at once” is also a large part of RT’s underlying strategy. By producing content that appeals to both right- and left-wing audiences (even though it may be contradictory), mimicking the professionalism of the BBC in some cases and the lurid tabloid style of *The Daily Mail* in others, along with a similar flexibility when it comes to adhering to journalistic standards, RT maintains a chameleon-like quality that extends its reach. In addition, this approach further crowds the information space with competing narratives and opinions, fostering the kind of chaotic, apathy-encouraging environment intended by the Disinformation 2.0 model.

These aspects of RT’s strategy and content are complimented and amplified by the affordances of the internet and social media. RT utilizes its different guises to push as much counter-mainstream content out as possible, knowing that these narratives will get picked up in online currents and co-opted and adapted to suit different ends. As long as those ends are broadly anti-establishment, it does not matter to RT what they are. This is both an astute adaption and a pragmatic one. Individual counter-realities have become increasingly difficult to convincingly

²¹⁷ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2004), 149.

propagate amidst the noise and competition online. The Disinformation 2.0 model – a hybrid combination of elements of soft power, propaganda, and disinformation – acknowledges this, and aims instead at unsettling the acceptance of reality as a whole, using the internet as its underlying engine. Social media creates a wellspring of content and opinion for RT to draw from to create its counter-narratives and in addition provides a degree of removal to distance itself from criticism and accusations of bias.

While these insights deepen our understanding of RT, questions remain regarding the efficacy of the methods described in this chapter. As political scientist Ellen Mickiewicz points out regarding RT, “analyzing content may tell you what the government wants to put out ... [but] it doesn’t tell you anything about what the impact is.”²¹⁸ The following chapter considers RT’s actual impact on American politics and society, and how that impact corresponds with the methods and strategy described above.

²¹⁸ Amanda Erickson, “If Russia Today Is Moscow’s Propaganda Arm, It’s Not Very Good at Its Job,” *Washington Post*, January 12, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/01/12/if-russia-today-is-moscows-propaganda-arm-its-not-very-good-at-its-job/>.

Chapter Four: Measuring the Impact

Having examined RT's motivations and methods in the previous chapters, this chapter asks if RT has been successful in effecting political and social change in the United States. It begins with an interrogation of RT's viewership and popularity, examining its claims against the available statistics for each of its platforms (television, web, and social media). RT's role as a node in the wider ecosystem of Russian influence operations is also taken into consideration. Beyond the question of these particular metrics and connections, however, is the broader issue of how to measure the impact of a hybrid media operation like RT, particularly when its intentions are to disrupt and deconstruct as opposed to constructing a specific reality.

Quantitative Assessment: Claims and Reality

Television

In an industry where networks seemingly live and die on audience metrics, it is surprisingly difficult to get a clear picture of how many people actually watch RT on television. In an April 2018 press release, RT claimed to have "100 million weekly viewers in 47 of the 100+ countries where RT broadcasts are available," according to a survey commissioned from the market research firm Ipsos.²¹⁹ This figure included 11 million weekly viewers in the United States, a 30 percent increase from 2015.²²⁰ The press release goes on to cite overall global audience growth

²¹⁹ "RT Weekly TV Audience Grows By More Than a Third Over 2 Years; Now 100mn – Ipsos."

²²⁰ In typical fashion, RT Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan included a statement in the press release that acknowledged the uptick in American viewers by saying "Many thanks to our most devoted viewers: the US Department of Justice, the UK government, and, in fact, the entire Western establishment. It is because of their efforts that an increasing number of people are eager to hear RT's alternative voice."

of 36 percent between 2015 and 2017. These figures, along with previous viewership figures released by RT, have frequently been called into question by critics, however.

A 2015 report in *The Daily Beast* accuses RT of “hugely exaggerating” its viewership, a claim based in part on internal documents obtained from RT’s former parent company RIA Novosti.²²¹ The documents, which argue for increased funding of RIA Novosti over RT, assert that RT often uses potential impressions – the number of viewers that the channel *could* reach in a given market – as a metric, instead of actual viewership. For example, RT claimed in 2013 to have a reach of 630 million people worldwide for its English, Spanish, and Arabic-language broadcasts, a number that merely represents “the theoretical geographical scope of the audience.”²²² This criticism may have been noted by RT’s management, as the network has shifted in recent years from using these potential figures in favor of actual viewership numbers, such as the 11 million weekly viewers in the United States cited above. However, these figures are also problematic.

RT’s claimed viewership in the US is complicated by the network’s failure to appear in the Nielsen ratings (audience size and composition ratings conducted by Nielsen Media Research, which have been the industry standard since the 1950s). Despite its audience claims, RT does not pay to be rated by Nielsen, which raises doubts that the network meets the 30,000 daily viewer threshold needed for qualification. Less than 30,000 viewers per day is clearly a far cry from RT’s claim of 11 million weekly viewers. RT has also failed to break onto the Nielsen list of top cable channels. As of Q1 2019, that list included 109 channels, the least-watched of

²²¹ Katie Zavadski, “Putin’s Propaganda TV Lies About Its Popularity,” *The Daily Beast*, September 17, 2015, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/09/17/putin-s-propaganda-tv-lies-about-ratings>.

²²² *Ibid.*

which (the channel “ESN Lifestyles”) averaged 1,000 viewers per day.²²³ RT has not released either the Ipsos study or a 2014 study commissioned from Nielsen that the network claims found “2.8 million people in seven major U.S. urban areas (Washington, New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, and San Diego) watch RT weekly.”²²⁴ Even if these claims are factual, without the original studies there is no way to know how the standard for “weekly viewing” was defined. The 2012 documents from RIA Novosti received by *The Daily Beast* note that “In 7 years of work, RT has never divulged a single, absolute figure confirmed by measurements of its audience. All the press releases put out by the channel about its viewing abroad are based on playing with relative numbers: the audience doubled, the coverage is 60% greater than its competitors, and so on.”²²⁵

Website

It could be argued that RT’s influence should not be measured by television viewing figures, but instead by online engagement, in line with broader trends for all news outlets. A 2018 study by the Pew Research Center found that in the United States, roughly nine-in-ten adults (93%) get at least some news online.²²⁶ It is also easier for external researchers to measure web and social media metrics, as they are more publicly accessible than television viewership figures. This section will start with an analysis of traffic to RT’s main English-language web domain (rt.com) and go on to look at performance metrics for RT’s YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter pages. In

²²³ “Basic Cable Ranker: Q1 2019 (Total Viewers),” Live+SD data (Nielsen, March 31, 2019), <https://www.scribd.com/document/404307593/Basic-Cable-Ranker-Q1-2019-Total-Viewers>.

²²⁴ Zavadski, “Putin’s Propaganda TV Lies About Its Popularity.”

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ “Digital News Fact Sheet,” State of the News Media (Pew Research Center, June 6, 2018), <http://www.journalism.org/fact-sheet/digital-news/>.

order to assess RT's relative popularity, these figures will be compared with the private news outlets CNN and Fox News as well as the state-sponsored networks Al Jazeera and Voice of America.

In 2017, an RT spokesperson announced that the network's six websites (English, Spanish, Arabic, French, German, and Russian) received 120 million combined monthly visits.²²⁷ While historical figures are not readily available, a September-November 2018 analysis of RT's web traffic for all of its domains shows an average of 173 million visitors per month, which seems to verify the press figure.²²⁸ Web analytics from the same period also show an average of 47 million unique visitors per month, a figure that corresponds with a February 2016 press release from RT touting 49 million unique monthly visitors.²²⁹ For comparison, the cable news network CNN received an average of 507 million visitors per month during the same period, including 127 million unique visitors,²³⁰ while Fox News received 341 million visitors (68 million unique).²³¹ State-sponsored news network Al Jazeera received 19 million visitors (8 million unique)²³² and Voice of America received 18 million visitors (6 million unique).²³³ The web analytics company SimilarWeb ranked RT's website as the 58th most popular in the news and media category as of December 2018. Interestingly, the significant majority (34%) of the

²²⁷ Erlanger, "What Is RT?"

²²⁸ "Website Performance: rt.com," SimilarWeb, accessed December 8, 2018, https://pro.similarweb.com/#/website/worldwide-overview/rt.com/*/999/3m?webSource=Total.

²²⁹ "RT's Online Audience Approaches 50 Million Unique Users Monthly," RT International, February 29, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/about-us/press-releases/rt-audience-digital-web/>.

²³⁰ "Website Performance: cnn.com," SimilarWeb, accessed December 14, 2018, https://pro.similarweb.com/#/website/worldwide-overview/cnn.com/*/999/3m?webSource=Total.

²³¹ "Website Performance: foxnews.com," SimilarWeb, accessed December 14, 2018, https://pro.similarweb.com/#/website/worldwide-overview/foxnews.com/*/999/3m?webSource=Total.

²³² "Website Performance: Aljazeera.Com," SimilarWeb, accessed December 14, 2018, https://pro.similarweb.com/#/website/worldwide-overview/aljazeera.com/*/999/3m?webSource=Total.

²³³ "Website Performance: Voanews.Com," SimilarWeb, accessed December 14, 2018, https://pro.similarweb.com/#/website/worldwide-overview/voanews.com/*/999/3m?webSource=Total.

website’s traffic comes from within Russia, while the United States follows with roughly 11%. Critics have cited this fact to suggest that Russian actors could be artificially inflating RT’s web traffic.²³⁴

YouTube

RT was an early and vigorous adopter of YouTube, joining the platform in 2007.²³⁵ Former RT correspondent Liz Wahl explains that “RT management [viewed] YouTube as hugely important to spreading content. Traditional television ratings weren’t important because the aim was to get the messaging out through various digital and social platforms.”²³⁶ RT’s video content embedded in its various other online platforms is frequently hosted on YouTube. In 2013, RT became the first news organization to surpass one billion views on YouTube.^{237 238} It has held onto its throne as the “most-watched news network,” boasting over seven billion views across its YouTube network (comprised of at least 18 channels, including some not branded as part of RT) from May 2007 to December 2018. It is not clear exactly how the seven billion figure was calculated across these multiple channels.

²³⁴ Alexey Kovalev and Aric Toler, “RT, Information War, and Billions of Views: Where Do the Numbers Come From?,” *StopFake.Org* (blog), January 11, 2017, <https://www.stopfake.org/en/rt-information-war-and-billions-of-views-where-do-the-numbers-come-from/>.

²³⁵ Wakabayashi and Confessore, “Russia’s Favored Outlet Is an Online News Giant. YouTube Helped.”

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ YouTube uses an algorithm to determine views and has not specified exactly how long a video must be played to be counted as “viewed,” but it is believed by industry sources to be approximately 30 seconds. See: Alexandra MacRae, “What Counts as a Video View on Social Media?” *Adweek*, August 6, 2018, <https://www.adweek.com/tv-video/what-counts-as-a-video-view-on-social-media/>.

²³⁸ Wakabayashi and Confessore, “Russia’s Favored Outlet Is an Online News Giant. YouTube Helped.”

In 2017, RT was a finalist in the 9th Annual Shorty Awards (referred to by some as the “Oscars for YouTube”),²³⁹ which showcase short-form content production. The nomination proclaimed that “RT’s strategy on YouTube has totally paid off: RT is the most watched news network on YouTube ... Overall watch time exceeds 4,500 years. On an average day RT network records over 2 million views across its channels. The average watch time is around 3 minutes.”²⁴⁰ In comparison with RT’s cumulative seven billion views, as of December 2018, CNN had approximately four billion views across its various YouTube channels; Fox News had 1.7 billion views; Al Jazeera had 1.2 billion views; and Voice of America had 126 million views. A study of RT’s YouTube page using the analytics website Social Blade for the period November 26 to December 9, 2018 found that the network achieved an average of approximately one million views per day.²⁴¹ CNN averaged 3.9 million views during the same period;²⁴² Fox News averaged 2.2 million views;²⁴³ Al Jazeera English averaged 600,000 views;²⁴⁴ and Voice of America averaged 101,000 views.²⁴⁵

A second metric for YouTube engagement is a channel’s number of subscribers – the users who have signed up to “follow” a channel and be notified when new content is posted. A

²³⁹ “Shorty Awards Are the Oscars for YouTube!,” *Blogilates* (blog), January 7, 2012, <https://www.blogilates.com/shorty-awards-are-the-oscars-for-youtube/>.

²⁴⁰ “RT YOUTUBE NETWORK - The Shorty Awards,” The Shorty Awards, accessed December 8, 2018, <http://shortyawards.com/9th/rt-youtube-network>.

²⁴¹ “russiatoday YouTube Stats, Channel Statistics,” Social Blade, accessed December 9, 2018, <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/russiatoday>.

²⁴² “cnn YouTube Stats, Channel Statistics,” Social Blade, accessed December 14, 2018, <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/cnn>.

²⁴³ “FoxNewsChannel YouTube Stats, Channel Statistics,” Social Blade, accessed December 9, 2018, <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/foxnewschannel>.

²⁴⁴ “AlJazeeraEnglish YouTube Stats, Channel Statistics,” Social Blade, accessed December 14, 2018, <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/aljazeeraenglish>.

²⁴⁵ “VOAvideo YouTube Stats, Channel Statistics,” Social Blade, accessed December 14, 2018, <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/voavideo>.

YouTube tutorial aimed at content creators explains that subscribers are “critical to your success on YouTube because they tend to spend more time watching your channel than viewers who aren’t subscribed.”²⁴⁶ As of December 2018, RT had 3.2 million subscribers, outpacing Al Jazeera (2.7 million), Fox News (2.1 million), and Voice of America (240,000). However, CNN significantly eclipses RT’s total with 5.4 million subscribers. Given these statistics, RT’s claim of being the “most watched news network on YouTube,” while accurate in terms of views, does not reflect other important metrics like number of subscribers or average daily views.

The record-breaking seven billion views figure has also been subject to debate.²⁴⁷ A December 2018 analysis of RT’s most popular content on YouTube shows that it is markedly different from its television programming. The most-viewed videos on RT’s main English-language channel are an assortment of natural disaster footage, including several dramatic views of the 2011 Japan earthquake and tsunami, and “feel-good” news pieces, such as the story of a homeless man whose “golden voice” lands him a job as a radio newscaster (RT’s most popular video at the time, with 43 million views).²⁴⁸ All of these most-viewed videos are presented without commentary and are distinguished as products of RT only by the presence of the network’s logo and a short “RT presents” graphic at the beginning of the clip. The videos are licensed from other outlets, not produced by RT; in several instances the original producers are credited or have their logos visible. Of the 25 most popular videos on RT’s channel as of December 2018, accounting for a total of approximately 415 million views, only two could be

²⁴⁶ “Subscribers - YouTube Creator Academy,” YouTube, accessed December 9, 2018, <https://creatoracademy.youtube.com/page/lesson/subscriber-advantage>.

²⁴⁷ Erickson, “If Russia Today Is Moscow’s Propaganda Arm, It’s Not Very Good at Its Job.”

²⁴⁸ “Golden Voice” Homeless Man Finds Job, Home after Viral Video Success (RT, 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpwwZwUam-URkxB7g4USKpg>.

considered even remotely political: action-packed footage of missiles being test-launched during Russian military drills and a video of Vladimir Putin singing at a public event.

Overall, many of RT's most-popular videos could be classified as clickbait; i.e. material that is intentionally designed to grab attention. The first overtly political video on the list, a 2011 news clip titled "Putin: Who gave NATO right to kill Gaddafi?" was ranked as the channel's 54th most-popular with 4.2 million views as of December 2018.²⁴⁹ This is less than one-tenth of the viewers for the channel's highest-viewed video. Other videos in the top 100 most popular, such as the 2014 clip "Violent video: Ukraine rioters brutally beat police, storm local admin building," could be considered politically relevant, given Russia's conflict with Ukraine, but the video is also likely attracting viewers through the inherent gruesome thrill of watching a public brawl in any context.²⁵⁰ Many of RT's popular videos share this ambiguous duality: footage of topless protestors from the Ukrainian activist group Femen being attacked at a Muslim conference in France may fulfill Russia's objective of portraying Europe (and again, Ukraine) as decadent and immoral, while at the same time needling France for its tolerance of "violent" Muslims, but it likely that the majority of the video's 2.9 million viewers simply watched the one minute clip because of its provocative headline, uncensored nudity, and violence.²⁵¹ Researcher Ellen Mickiewicz speculates that "RT hopes that the authenticity of such raw content will draw viewers to its political stories too."²⁵² While this strategy appears to have paid some dividends in

²⁴⁹ *Putin: Who Gave NATO Right to Kill Gaddafi?* (RT, 2011), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iw5Ij_RFJ1Q&t=3s.

²⁵⁰ *Violent Video: Ukraine Rioters Brutally Beat Police, Storm Local Admin Building* (RT, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpwwZwUam-URkxB7g4USKpg>.

²⁵¹ *Topless FEMEN Disrupt Muslim Conference in France, Get Kicked* (RT, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpwwZwUam-URkxB7g4USKpg>.

²⁵² "RT's Propaganda Is Far Less Influential than Westerners Fear," *The Economist*, January 19, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2017/01/19/rts-propaganda-is-far-less-influential-than-westerners-fear>.

terms of raw views, the relative unpopularity of RT's more politicized newscasts and programming suggests that audiences may not be crossing over.

While details and additional evidence remain scant, there may be additional, more fraudulent explanations for RT's YouTube popularity. In August 2018, *The New York Times* profiled several companies that sell fake views on YouTube.²⁵³ Through sales records, journalists were able to identify RT correspondent James Brown as having been a customer of a fake views company called Devumi.com. Brown admitted to purchasing "30,000 views and 300 likes across three [RT] videos that focused on problems involving homelessness and immigration in Europe," explaining that "he took Devumi at its word that the views would be real people." In response to the article, an RT spokesperson claimed to be unaware of the purchases.

Facebook and Twitter²⁵⁴

While RT has seemingly excelled on YouTube, its Facebook and Twitter pages lag behind most of their counterparts. As of December 2018, RT's main English-language pages had approximately 5.4 million likes on Facebook and 2.7 million followers on Twitter. This is considerably less than CNN, which had 30.9 million Facebook likes and 40.9 million Twitter followers. Fox News had 17 million Facebook likes and 18 million Twitter followers; Al Jazeera English had 11.6 million Facebook likes and 4.9 million Twitter followers; and Voice of America had 10.9 million Facebook likes and 1.6 million Twitter followers. A 2017 survey by *The Economist* found that RT averaged 109.7 retweets per tweet on Twitter, which put the

²⁵³ Michael H. Keller, "The Flourishing Business of Fake YouTube Views," *The New York Times*, August 11, 2018, sec. Technology, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/08/11/technology/youtube-fake-view-sellers.html>.

²⁵⁴ One complication that emerged during the course of evaluating RT's social media influence was the presence of channels including "#ICYMI," "Ruptly," and "In the Now," which are controlled by RT but sometimes disguise their connection. "In the Now," which features a quirky mixture of viral video material has been particularly popular, garnering a following of 3.3 million on Facebook.

network close to Al Jazeera English (135.1 retweets per tweet) but substantially behind CNN (400.3 retweets per tweet).²⁵⁵

Network	Facebook Likes	Twitter Followers	YouTube Subscribers
Al Jazeera	11.6 million	4.9 million	2.7 million
CNN	30.9 million	40.9 million	5.4 million
Fox News	17 million	18 million	2.1 million
RT	5.4 million	2.7 million	3.2 million
Voice of America	10.9 million	1.6 million	240,000

Fig 4. Social media reach as of December 5, 2018

Impact

RT’s impact in the United States has been the subject of considerable debate. A 2017 article in *The New York Times* describes researchers as being “sharply divided about the influence of RT.”²⁵⁶ The American intelligence community clearly views RT as a threat; the ODNI’s 2017 report devotes seven of its thirteen pages to RT, claiming that the network promotes “radical discontent” in the United States.²⁵⁷ As a consequence of its perceived negative influence, RT was forced to register under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA) and had its advertising banned from Twitter.²⁵⁸ Voices claiming that RT does not represent a serious threat are also

²⁵⁵ “RT’s Propaganda Is Far Less Influential than Westerners Fear.”

²⁵⁶ Erlanger, “Russia’s RT Network.”

²⁵⁷ “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections.”

²⁵⁸ Jon Russell, “Twitter Bans Russia Today and Sputnik from Advertising on Its Service.” TechCrunch (blog), October 26, 2017. <http://social.techcrunch.com/2017/10/26/twitter-bans-russia-today-and-sputnik-from-advertising-on-its-service/>.

prominent, however. A 2017 article in the *Washington Post* asserts “If Russia Today is Moscow’s propaganda arm, it’s not very good at its job,” citing the misleading television and YouTube viewing figures described earlier in this chapter.²⁵⁹ Carnegie Europe fellow Thomas de Waal also cites RT’s low television viewing figures in his contention that “U.S. intelligence agencies grossly inflated [RT’s] importance.”²⁶⁰

Media scholar William Uricchio argues that “the narrative of media’s potential to change the world is an ancient one.”²⁶¹ The impact of the news media, in particular, has been a longstanding focus of the media effects field. Communication scholars Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw claimed in their 1972 article “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media” that “in choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality.”²⁶² The direct political impact of the news media is further emphasized in a 2017 study by researchers Gregory Martin and Ali Yurukoglu, who found that watching Fox News led to “a substantial rightward shift in viewers’ attitudes, which translates into a significantly greater willingness to vote for Republican candidates.”²⁶³ Martin and Yurukoglu contend that if Fox News had not existed, Democratic candidate John Kerry would have won the 2004 presidential election over Republican George W. Bush.²⁶⁴

²⁵⁹ Erickson, “If Russia Today Is Moscow’s Propaganda Arm, It’s Not Very Good at Its Job.”

²⁶⁰ Judy Dempsey, “Judy Asks: Can Europe Defeat Russian Disinformation?,” Carnegie Europe, January 11, 2017, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=67646>.

²⁶¹ William Uricchio, “From Media Effects to the Empathy Machine: The Nature of the Audience and the Persistence of Wishful Thinking” (unpublished manuscript, 2019).

²⁶² Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972), 176.

²⁶³ Gregory J. Martin and Ali Yurukoglu, “Bias in Cable News: Persuasion and Polarization,” *American Economic Review* 107, no. 9 (September 2017): 2565–99, <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20160812>.

²⁶⁴ Dylan Matthews, “A Stunning New Study Shows That Fox News Is More Powerful than We Ever Imagined,” Vox, September 8, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/9/8/16263710/fox-news-presidential-vote-study>.

While the arguments disputing RT's importance and impact tend to similarly draw on reach, ratings, and other quantifiable aspects of exposure, these are not necessarily the determining factors for impact. As discussed earlier, for example, the Soviet-era disinformation campaign Operation INFEKTION was first introduced in a small Indian newspaper but slowly spread throughout the world, eventually making its way to the CBS Evening News. A 2017 study by social scientist Gary King supports the argument that a large reader- or viewership is not essential to have an effect on public opinion, finding that "even small- to medium-size media outlets can have a dramatic impact on the content and partisan balance of the national conversation about major public-policy issues."²⁶⁵

In addition, there is the question of RT's proliferation beyond television to the internet and social media platforms. Media scholar Philip Napoli proposes that engagement is a more versatile metric for determining impact in the digital age, writing "the notion of engagement would seem to suggest dimensions of audience interaction with media that extend beyond frequency and duration of exposure."²⁶⁶ Engagement, according to Napoli, can be measured by looking at the number of audience members who participate in some form of measurable action after being exposed to content. Engagement comes in different forms, from passive (experience-expression) to active (sharing-participation-action). This metric is well suited to assessing impact via social media, where audience actions like sharing, liking, and re-tweeting can be easily measured. While Napoli stresses that engagement does not necessarily equate with impact, it is

²⁶⁵ Peter Reuell, "Small Media, Big Payback," *Harvard Gazette*, November 9, 2017, <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/11/small-media-can-have-broad-impact-on-the-national-conversation/>.

²⁶⁶ Philip Napoli, "Measuring Media Impact: An Overview of the Field," Media Impact Project (School of Communication and Information, Rutgers University, Winter 2014), <https://learcenter.org/pdf/measuringmedia.pdf>.

nonetheless an important precondition for impact (defined in this context as longer-term changes in individual behaviors and/or public policy).

By the standard described above, RT's high degree of engagement on social media could indicate a significant level of impact. However, it is important to return to the findings of Chapter Three and reiterate that RT's aims diverge from those of a traditional media outlet. Instead of promoting a particular message or construction of reality, RT utilizes the disinformation model to propagate competing messages and realities. This being the case, conventional frameworks for measuring impact may not be applicable to RT. Monika Richter of the Atlantic Council supports this argument, writing that "RT does not produce the 'hypodermic needle' effect postulated by traditional propaganda theory, in which the media is able to 'inject' specific cognitions directly into viewers' minds through exposure to persuasive messaging."²⁶⁷ The difficulty of measuring RT's direct impact is echoed by Russia scholar Ilya Yablokov, who writes "existing methodology (such as framing analysis and measuring interest by counting posts, readership, etc.) can indeed provide some data [about RT]; however, it is almost impossible to trace the causal links between policies and their effects ... Given these methodological obstacles and the lack of open data about the popularity of RT, it is virtually impossible to measure the channel's success and influence."²⁶⁸ In light of this, it may be more productive to step back from RT's impact as an individual entity and consider its wider relationships and role.

²⁶⁷ Monika L. Richter, "RT: A Low-Grade Platform for Useful Idiots," Atlantic Council, October 17, 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/rt-a-low-grade-platform-for-useful-idiots>.

²⁶⁸ Yablokov, "Conspiracy Theories as a Russian Public Diplomacy Tool."

RT within the Ecosystem of Influence

Instead of looking at RT's impact independently, another possible approach is to consider its role as part of a broader ecosystem (or matrix, as the structure is termed by journalists Joby Warrick and Anton Troianovski)²⁶⁹ of Russian influence operations. This ecosystem, as outlined in the ODNI report, is a blend of covert intelligence operations (e.g. hacking and other traditional forms of espionage) and "overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or 'trolls.'"²⁷⁰ RT is the most prominent example in the category of state-funded media.

Many Russia analysts, including Marlene Laruelle, surmise that there is no Kremlin "master plan" or clear overarching strategy for these influence operations, and that much of this activity is carried out on an opportunistic, ad hoc basis by a wide range of governmental and non-governmental actors, or "ideological entrepreneurs."²⁷¹ Laruelle argues that this lack of structure could in fact be part of the strategy itself, as it creates deniability and flexibility.

Direct connections between RT and other facets of ecosystem of influence are difficult to ascertain. This is, in part, because the workings of the covert elements within the ecosystem are largely opaque. The September 2018 indictment of Elena Khusyaynova, an alleged employee of the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a Russian company that carried out social media influencing activities, sheds some light on the internal workings of the covert operations. For example, on August 7, 2017, IRA staff were directed:

²⁶⁹ Joby Warrick and Anton Troianovski, "Agents of Doubt: How a Powerful Russian Propaganda Machine Chips Away at Western Notions of Truth," *The Washington Post*, December 10, 2018, sec. National Security, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/world/national-security/russian-propaganda-skripal-salisbury/?utm_term=.973ee13decb2.

²⁷⁰ "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections."

²⁷¹ Marlene Laruelle, "Russian Nationalism and the War in Ukraine" (February 5, 2018).

“Brand [Congressman] Paul Ryan a complete and absolute nobody incapable of any decisiveness. Emphasize that while serving as Speaker, this two-faced loudmouth has not accomplished anything good for American or for American citizens. State that the only way to get rid of Ryan from Congress, provided he wins in the 2018 primaries, is to vote in favor of Randy Brice, an American veteran and an iron worker and a Democrat.”²⁷²

A review of RT’s news coverage from the same week did not turn up any negative pieces about Congressman Ryan or positive pieces on Randy Brice. This was similarly true for other directives mentioned in the indictment. A 2019 *Washington Post* article cites the coincidental timing of interviews that Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders gave to RT and a directive given to IRA staff to “use any opportunity to criticize Hillary and the rest (except Sanders and Trump — we support them)” as evidence of potential alignment between the two entities, although this link is somewhat vague in that it does not refer to a specific narrative.²⁷³

There are instances where RT’s outputs and other influence activities seem to have overlapped. A 2018 study found that RT.com was one of the top-twenty domains linked to by IRA-run social media accounts, noting that “Russian trolls are quite effective in ‘pushing’ [RT’s] URLs on Twitter and other social networks.”²⁷⁴ In addition, a 2016 anti-racism protest in Georgia orchestrated by imposter IRA social media accounts received coverage on RT, with

²⁷² “Criminal Complaint: United States of American v. Elena Alekseevna Khusyaynova” (United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, September 28, 2018), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1102316/download>.

²⁷³ Michael Kranish, “Inside the Russian Effort to Target Sanders Supporters — and Help Elect Trump,” *Washington Post*, April 12, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/inside-the-russian-effort-to-target-sanders-supporters--and-help-elect-trump/2019/04/11/741d7308-5576-11e9-8ef3-fbd41a2ce4d5_story.html.

²⁷⁴ Savvas Zannettou et al., “Disinformation Warfare: Understanding State-Sponsored Trolls on Twitter and Their Influence on the Web,” *ArXiv:1801.09288 [Cs]*, January 28, 2018, <http://arxiv.org/abs/1801.09288>.

RUPTLY purchasing the rights to videos shot at the event.²⁷⁵ ²⁷⁶ Researcher Ben Nimmo also describes how RT's reporting on hacked information released by WikiLeaks helped bring particular themes and stories to the attention of the social media troll and bot networks, thereby "[creating] the fodder for thousands of fake news propagators and providing another outlet for hacked material that can serve Russian interests."²⁷⁷ While the question of direct coordination between RT and the IRA remains unclear, it is nonetheless likely that these disparate Russian influence activities had the effect of reinforcing and amplifying one another.

In addition to reinforcing and amplifying, it can be argued that RT has a legitimizing effect. From its inception, RT strived to adopt the outward characteristics of its mainstream news contemporaries. "We do not want to change the professional format developed by such TV channels as the BBC, CNN, and Euronews," RT chief editor Margarita Simonyan said at the time of the network's launch.²⁷⁸ This goal appears to have been achieved; a 2008 profile in *The New York Times* mentions RT's "slick studio and polished graphics," saying that the network "looks like most cable news channels."²⁷⁹ This sophisticated visual style extends to RT's online presence, although the medium of television itself is an important element of RT's perceived overall legitimacy. Despite the fact that Americans are increasingly turning away from television

²⁷⁵ Spencer Ackerman, Gideon Resnick, and Ben Collins, "Leaked: Secret Documents From Russia's Election Trolls," *The Daily Beast*, March 2, 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/exclusive-secret-documents-from-russias-election-trolls-leak>.

²⁷⁶ "Anti-Racism Protesters Clash with Police at Confederate Rally in Georgia (VIDEO)," RT International, April 24, 2016, <https://www.rt.com/usa/340771-confederate-rallies-kkk-georgia/>.

²⁷⁷ Erlanger, "Russia's RT Network: Is It More BBC or K.G.B.?"

²⁷⁸ "RIA Novosti Launches a TV Channel, Russia Today."

²⁷⁹ Stephen Heyman, "Russia Today, a Channel With an English Voice," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2008, sec. Television, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/18/arts/television/18heyman.html>.

to online news sources, trust levels in broadcast news remain higher.²⁸⁰ As such, RT creates and extends a veneer of trust and respectability to all of its content by virtue of having a professional televised newscast. This ultimately enhances the legitimacy and subsequent reach and impact of Russia-sourced narratives.



Fig 5. RT's studio in Moscow ²⁸¹

At the core of many contemporary inquiries into RT and other Russian influence activities is the question of whether or not these actions impacted outcome of the 2016 presidential election. In October 2018, communication scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson published

²⁸⁰ Indira A.R. Lakshmanan, "Finally Some Good News: Trust in News is Up, Especially for Local Media," Poynter, August 22, 2018, <https://www.poynter.org/ethics-trust/2018/finally-some-good-news-trust-in-news-is-up-especially-for-local-media/>.

²⁸¹ Nadezhda Azhgikhina, "The Abyss Between Russian and US Media Just Got Wider," *The Nation*, December 22, 2017, <https://www.thenation.com/article/azhgikhina-on-russiagate-and-all-that/>.

one of the first critical, academic analyses of the election, presenting the demonstrable outcomes that Russian influence operations were able to achieve.²⁸² In her book *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President, What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*, Jamieson argues that “the kinds of messaging that Russians used and generated are capable of producing sizeable-enough results to alter a close election,” and that the material stolen from Democratic National Committee “could have altered the [election] outcome by reweighting the message environment and altering the news and debate agendas in the final month of the campaign.”²⁸³ Jamieson’s findings are complex and nuanced, and she acknowledges that there are still unknowns, but broadly speaking she concludes that Russian messaging influenced voters’ perceptions of Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump in key electoral districts to an extent that the outcome of the election was affected against Clinton.²⁸⁴

In Jamieson’s view, RT, as an overt entity with a known (although sometimes veiled) connection with the Russian government, did not have a prominent role in influencing American voters.²⁸⁵ However, Jamieson concurs with the assertion that RT served to amplify themes and stories that fit within the Russian agenda, particularly those related to the hacked DNC emails.²⁸⁶ As such, RT can be considered to have played at least some part in shaping the outcome of the 2016 election as part of the broader ecosystem of influence, although its impact as an independent actor was minor at best.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President, What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 17.

²⁸⁴ Jane Mayer, “How Russia Helped Swing the Election for Trump,” *The New Yorker*, September 24, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/01/how-russia-helped-to-swing-the-election-for-trump>.

²⁸⁵ Jamieson, 68.

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 69.

Conclusion

While there are discrepancies, it is clear that RT has developed a significant audience online and, to a lesser extent, on television. How this audience receives RT's messaging and translates it into action (or inaction), if at all, is less apparent. RT's hybridization across multiple platforms, in conjunction with its dissemination of numerous competing narratives through the disinformation model, makes its impact substantially more difficult to measure compared with traditional propaganda or other forms of media, even when using frameworks for measuring impact and engagement in the digital age. New systems of measurement may ultimately need to be developed in order to accurately capture the scope and scale of RT's impact.

Placing RT within the ecosystem of Russian influence operations, where key actions like the hacking of the DNC can be more directly linked to changes in public opinion, allows for some degree of correlation between the network and demonstrable political outcomes to be established. It also shines light on RT's legitimizing role as one of the few public-facing nodes within this ecosystem. However, focusing on these connections does not provide significant insight into the independent impact of RT, standing on its own as a policy-shaping tool without the added influence of more aggressive activities like espionage and deception.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to explain RT's motivations, methods, and impact, a challenging task given the network's often intentional ambiguity and opaqueness as well as the charged political rhetoric currently surrounding Russia. Reflecting RT's slogan, "Question More," I find that my research raises more questions than answers. That said, there are several key points that can be taken away from this exploration of RT.

First, in reviewing how Russia and the United States have utilized the information space as a means for conducting both diplomacy and warfare from the Cold War through the present day, clear historical precedents for RT become apparent. RT did not appear out of nowhere; it draws from a rich history of soft power, propaganda, and disinformation campaigns that have evolved in step with changing communications technologies. RT's aggressive, undermining stance toward the U.S. is also not accidental. It is the product of several decades of deteriorating relations between Russia and the U.S., driven by perceived broken promises and a desire to rebalance the global power structure.

While RT is an extension of historical practices of soft power, propaganda, and disinformation, the network's format and methods differ considerably from conventional definitions of these models. RT's early content promoted Russia's attractive qualities in the soft power mold of a traditional state-sponsored news network, but its shift circa 2008 toward a model of detraction (what Joseph Nye dubbed "negative soft power") subverted this structure. Although RT is frequently accused of being a Kremlin propaganda outlet, there are significant inconsistencies between its methods and propaganda as it is traditionally defined. For one, the network lacks an overarching ideology and associated narratives to propagate, unlike its Soviet-

era predecessors. RT seems to have the closest fit with the disinformation model, which replaces the specific narratives/counter-narratives of propaganda with a surplus of competing narratives, aiming to overwhelm the information space and create general chaos and confusion. However, unlike pre-digital uses of disinformation, which relied on slow and incremental spread through newspapers, television, and word-of-mouth, RT applies the disinformation model in a far more interconnected and diffuse information landscape.

Dating back to the 19th century, propaganda maps have frequently depicted Russia as an octopus reaching its tentacles far and wide across the globe to interfere with the affairs of other nations.²⁸⁷ RT seeks to achieve the same octopus-like dispersion across the new media-scape. RT is uniquely tied with the internet and with social media networks in particular, having been launched within one year of the introduction of YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. The open, decentralized nature of these platforms allows for an abundance of competing narratives to be rapidly spread across borders without mediation. Leveraged in conjunction with its television broadcasts, which benefit from higher degrees of perceived trust and legitimacy, RT is able to strategically feed disruption and doubt into global information stream at a scale that would have been unthinkable during the time of the Soviet Union. This new, hybrid model – Disinformation 2.0 – is chillingly effective because of its immunity to counter-narratives and its canny exploitation, as Julia Ioffe notes, of tools invented in the free world to undermine democracy.²⁸⁸ The asymmetric rebalancing of power enabled by the increasingly interconnected world makes Disinformation 2.0 an accessible and attractive model for state and non-state actors beyond RT.

²⁸⁷ Allison Meier, “The Octopus, a Motif of Evil in Historical Propaganda Maps,” *Hyperallergic*, May 8, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/375900/the-map-octopus-a-propaganda-motif-of-spreading-evil/>.

²⁸⁸ Julia Ioffe, “Starr Forum: The Trump-Putin Phenomenon” (September 14, 2017), <https://cis.mit.edu/events/transcripts/starr-forum-trump-putin-phenomenon>.



Fig 6. "Serio-Comic War Map for The Year 1877," published by G. W. Bacon & Co. ²⁸⁹

The final key takeaway from this study is the challenge of measuring RT's impact using conventional media metrics. What RT seeks to achieve through its content in the United States and what it has actually achieved are two very different questions. The heightened rhetoric related to RT and Russia in general within the U.S. and the frequently hyperbolic claims made regarding the network present one layer of difficulty in assessing its impact. In addition, it is challenging to gauge how viewers' attitudes and habits have been affected, and the subsequent wider impact on politics and society, without forms of measurement that account for how

²⁸⁹ Meier, "The Octopus, a Motif of Evil in Historical Propaganda Maps."

information is spread and shared across online and offline platforms. It is clear that traditional metrics, such as television ratings or YouTube views, do not tell the whole story. Beyond both of these factors, however, is the greater challenge of measuring the noise and chaos created through the Disinformation 2.0 model, when traditional metrics are designed to capture the opposite. New frameworks need to be established that capture not just the effects of receiving specific messaging, as has been the status quo, but the impact of receiving a multitude of competing messages. Progress is beginning to be made in this field, such as the work of Sander Van Der Linden cited in Chapter Three, but more focus will be needed in the future as disinformation becomes an increasingly prominent part of public discourse.

Additional issues raised in this thesis that could benefit from future attention include an independent survey of RT's audience in the United States as well as a more systematic, long-term analysis of the network's content across its platforms. The 2020 U.S. presidential election will also offer an opportunity to watch in real time as narratives spread from RT through the ecosystem of influence, establishing clearer connections between the various nodes.

Ultimately, RT's impact might be most strongly felt in a more systemic sense, where its Disinformation 2.0-driven "everything for everyone" mentality may be indicative of the direction media as a whole is heading. Journalist Ben Judah has called RT possibly "the purest, crudest TV news channel in the world. A complete rejection of truth, a complete focus on viewing figures."²⁹⁰ If, as philosopher Lee McIntyre has argued, the world is moving ever closer to a "post-truth" era,²⁹¹ then RT may be the news network for it.

²⁹⁰ "The World According to RT."

²⁹¹ Lee C. McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

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