

## Interview – Precious Chatterje-Doody

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview – Precious Chatterje-Doody

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Dr Precious Chatterje-Doody is a Senior Lecturer in Politics and International Studies at The Open University, a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, and a member of the UK Young Academy. Her research is focused on the interrelationship between communication, perception, identity, and security, with a particular focus on Russia, disinformation, and military aggression. Her new co-authored book, *Russia, Disinformation and the Liberal Order: RT as populist pariah* (Cornell University Press, 2024) is now available in Open Access.

### **Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?**

For me, the most exciting IR work is always happening at the intersection of IR with other disciplines. It is a remarkably adaptable and elastic discipline, and I think this is a good thing. One of the most crucial areas of enquiry in international relations at the moment relates to how human beings and other political actors function within a globally integrated real-time media environment. Our daily routines, perceptions, and understandings are increasingly shaped by relatively opaque algorithmic factors that can then go on to influence our feelings and behaviours. What impact does this new reality have on debates about structure and agency? How can we separate the decisions we make about how we use online platforms from the platform-based structures and the shaping we experience through them? How do our online engagements intersect with our offline behaviours and decisions? What is the political economy of these dynamics? These are just a few examples of the kind of questions we need multidisciplinary engagement to make sense of in contemporary international relations.

### **How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

I consider myself a bit of an intellectual magpie, and I am very lucky to have picked up some fantastic inspiration from the wide range of very interesting and knowledgeable co-authors I have worked with across various disciplines. For me, the robust back-and-forth of co-authorship is a particularly good way to incorporate ideas and perspectives that you might not find intuitive, but that can significantly enrich your scholarship. I believe that, in most cases, if IR scholarship is not speaking across disciplines, it is probably missing a big part of the picture.

### **How would you define ‘geopolitical culture jamming,’ and how does it differ from other satirical or culture-jamming approaches?**

Geopolitical culture jamming is a tactic used by non-Western state-funded international broadcasters to critique and subvert the culture of the state they are addressing, but using that state’s very own culture. It goes beyond pure satire because it involves deliberately blurring the line between news and comedy. It is also different from culture jamming, which emerged from art-based activism as a way to subvert dominant messaging and encourage critical thought. With geopolitical culture jamming, these broadcasters are using the culture of the state they are addressing to both subvert dominant foreign policy discourses and discourage any actual reasoned engagement with them. If anything, it promoted apathy rather than engagement.

### **How does ICYMI’s (an internet acronym for ‘in case you missed it’) use of geopolitical culture jamming speak to broader trends in how media outlets engage with global geopolitics, especially in an era of**

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### **increasing disinformation and media fragmentation?**

ICYMI was a series of satirical online video shorts produced in English by Russia's international broadcaster, Russia Today (RT). In it, an attractive female presenter with a British accent and an Anglicised Russian name delivered snarky monologues about topical international issues, accompanied by greenscreen graphics and snapshots of photos, videos, emojis, and the like.

The producers saw the series as a light-hearted way to poke fun at politics in general, which reflected their own political leanings. As a whole, though, the series echoed RT's favoured talking points about a hypocritical and declining West, whilst also softening and minimising big Russian provocations like the Salisbury poisonings. Importantly, all this was done with a nod and a wink. Humorous 'questions' were asked at the surface level, and the product looked slick but no real interrogation was going on.

ICYMI's geopolitical culture jamming was a perfect fit with a contemporary media ecosystem in which people rarely have the patience to stick with a particular programme but who will enjoy short, sharp, shareable media products that make them feel as if they are in on the joke. It never had a massive audience, but it was a very good example of how you can package accessible media to look like it is saying something profound when the substantive content is actually very minimal. Very much a sign of the times.

### **You argue that disinformation works not because it is factual, but because it feels believable to the audience. What role does the media environment (both traditional and new media) play in amplifying or diminishing the effectiveness of false narratives?**

One of the most distinctive features of today's media environment is that the deciding factor in how far and fast media content circulates is not its reliability, believability, or quality – simply that it is entertaining enough to hold our attention or stir up strong emotions. But these are also precisely the factors that make disinformation effective – when it draws us into a compelling story or when it stirs up a visceral reaction, so people do not want to check if it is really true. But then the second stage of this is that the more we see this kind of content – and the more people who seem to endorse it through their interactions with it, the more believable it seems to be.

This multifaceted problem goes beyond pure disinformation and is related to the nature of the type of content that is algorithmically pushed to us as media consumers. It may differ substantially by platform, but nonetheless, when content makes enough of a splash, it migrates in some form across platforms, spawning its own forms of derivative product that take us further away from the substantive content that can be proven true or false. Instead, we get a wide range of vaguely familiar content that we develop indicative feelings about rather than informed opinions on.

### **You argue that Russia Today's (RT) comedic content is not merely about advancing Russian foreign policy but about drawing attention to global political imbalances. What is the broader impact of this type of media on international perceptions of Russia?**

There is a rapidly expanding body of scholarship across IR and political communication that looks at the power of humour and satire to influence international affairs. Since people's feelings about the information they often encounter last longer than their memories of the actual information they have encountered, humour has the potential to shape people's impression of international actors in the longer term. So, whilst an individual humorous narrative might not necessarily sway somebody's opinion on a specific topic, together they can strengthen people's pre-existing sentiments about inequalities within liberal democracies and also make them feel apathetic about their ability to change this. That sets the groundwork for thinking "Well, maybe Russia has a point" about certain features of international politics, reducing people's instinctive resistance to some of the gratuitously false narratives we have seen the Russian state propagate in recent years.

### **Do you see RT's promotion of conspiracy theories as a deliberate strategy, or is it a byproduct of its broader media and communication tactics?**

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RT's promotion of conspiracy theories is certainly a deliberate strategy, but it does not stand alone—it fits with a lot of RT's broader approach to the international media environment, which it has learned in part from the approach of the populist right-wing media. It is important not to forget that conspiracy theories are a particular way of looking at the world that have often proven popular throughout history. This worldview is focused on the disparities of power between the elite and the ordinary people, so it is easy to superimpose onto the salient issues of the day in whichever geographical context. In the case of RT, there is generally no need to invent conspiracy theories since there is such a large supply of them already circulating across the global media. RT is just particularly adept at appropriating them for its own objectives – tapping into currents of public opinion, fears and concerns in ways that suit the Kremlin's own preferred narratives of the international system.

**Given the success of Russia's media operations outside the West, what recommendations would you make for counteracting Russia's influence in these regions?**

One of the biggest difficulties with countering Russian influence outside the West is how it is built on the Soviet legacy to present itself as a counterbalance to Western (neo-)imperial hegemony. In fact, Russia's approach to international relations is very much imperial in nature, and it would be wise to make more of this. In the case of war in Ukraine, for example, Russia likes to pretend that it is a proxy conflict in which Russia is defending its interests against a NATO-backed Western shill. But, Ukraine is a sovereign country with its own proud history of fighting Russia's imperial advances – post-colonial states have far more in common with it than with Russia. These are important parallels that should be emphasised.

**How do you see the role of public service broadcasters evolving in the next decade, especially given increasing media fragmentation, digital influencers, and growing distrust in traditional news sources?**

For me, public service broadcasters have never been so important, even though their position is coming under attack now more than ever. Once, they could rely on their reputations to cultivate a baseline of public trust, and to some extent that remains true about the significant issues that matter – for example, when it came to COVID-19, many people turned to the BBC as a reliable source of information when there was a lot of speculation and false reporting going around. But at the same time, trust in the so-called 'legacy media' has been in a long-term decline, and some people lump public service broadcasters into that category. Reaching these people is not just about providing reliable information. It is about providing reliable information about the things that actually matter to them. People switch their attention elsewhere when they do not feel seen or heard. So, over the next decade, it will be essential for public service broadcasters to cover the topics that concern their audiences, on their own terms – not having the terms of the debate dictated by partisan media. If they can do this, they will be in a stronger position to provide the wider educational content that is key to public service broadcasters' missions.

**What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?**

Set your horizons as wide as you can! Pretty much everything is international relations in one way or another, so you should never restrict the topics of your study based on what academic gatekeepers consider appropriate disciplinary topics. Go down those rabbit holes, and use the IR skills you have learned to navigate your way through them. I would say this is pretty good advice for life in general!