

Did RT Influence the 2016 US Elections?

Written by Rhys Crilley

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RHYS CRILLEY, NOV 21 2017

On Thursday 8th November, the US Department of Justice wrote to the Russian state-sponsored international broadcaster RT, and ordered them to register as a foreign agent in line with the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938 (FARA). This act was created by the US government to address Nazi propaganda activities in the United States, and requires 'agents of foreign principles' to register and disclose the nature of their activities. The act includes various exemptions, including diplomats, commercial companies, academics, lawyers, lobbyists, and any news organisation involved in 'bona fide news or journalistic activities.' Despite this, RT has been ordered to register due to US intelligence community suspicions that RT was a fundamental aspect of Russian attempts to influence the outcome of the 2016 Election.

RT has agreed to register as a foreign agent, however they will challenge the decision in court. In addition, Russia is poised to take 'retaliatory measures' against the US, and this is expected to include amendments to Russian laws that will force mass media organisations and social media companies to register as foreign agents in Russia. Tensions between Russia and the US, in the context of what some call the 'New Cold War' or the global information war, seem to be heating up. So, did RT influence the 2016 US Elections?

The topic of Russian meddling in the US elections has dominated the media for the past year, and a senior intelligence official in the Obama administration stated that 'this attack is really the political equivalent of 9/11 — it is deadly, deadly serious'. According to the US intelligence community, this attack 'followed a Russian messaging strategy that blends covert intelligence operations—such as cyber activity—with overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or "trolls"'. Here, according to the intelligence report, RT 'contributed to the influence campaign by serving as a platform for Kremlin messaging to Russian and international audiences.'

Perhaps this is so. The intelligence report argues that RT's coverage throughout the election cycle was decisively pro-Trump, casting him as the victim of unfair media coverage, and focusing on Hillary Clinton's leaked emails, ill health, and accusing her of corruption. Exactly the type of coverage you would find on Fox News. Of course, Fox News is not funded by the Russian government, however it seems rather problematic to force RT to register as a foreign agent simply because of their funding source (government funding is not unusual for an international broadcaster) and pro-Trump narratives (and I say this as someone who despises the man). Moreover, there is evidence that RT was not as pro-Trump as the intelligence community claims, and further studies show that mainstream US media outlets such as CNN published more negative stories about Clinton than Trump.

And this is the thing: the US intelligence report equates content with influence, and at no point demonstrates how the content RT broadcast and shared on social media actually influenced the election. Indeed, as Ellen Mickiewicz has recently pointed out 'analyzing content may tell you what government wants to put out. But it doesn't tell you anything about what the impact is.'

The intelligence community report also fails to note that whilst some estimates place RT's audience in the United States at 8 million people watching a week, it is also the case that RT does not pay to be rated by the US industry standard, presumably because of low viewing figures. Some estimates even place RT's nightly viewership below 30,000 people. Whatever the actual figure may be, it seems that these are shaky foundations on which to build a

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case for RT having influenced the US elections.

Beyond the intelligence community's assessment, Elena Postnikova from the Atlantic Council has laid out a clear case for making RT register as a foreign agent. Postnikova argues that 'having RT register as a foreign agent is necessary to ensure that the American public is not misled that RT is a disinterested source' and she points towards RT's opaque governing and editorial structure being a major problem. Here, perhaps, Postnikova has a point, and it would be good if RT did disclose 'its beneficial ownership structure, identify its supervisory board members or other persons with control, provide detailed financial reports, and produce evidence demonstrating its editorial independence.' However, getting RT to do this does not require its registration under FARA.

Forcing RT to register as a foreign agent in the US runs the risk of escalating tensions between Russia and the US. Such an action contributes to what Ben O'Loughlin and Alistair Miskimmon have identified as 'a cycle of miscommunication, generating frustration on all sides and restricting the scope for cooperation.' This is especially so when claims about RT's influence in the election are based on such limited evidence of its actual effects and impact. The hysteria over RT detracts from the more pressing issues of probable Russian covert cyber activities and the alleged Trump campaign's collusion with the Russian government, both of which probably had more impact on the election than RT's broadcasts and YouTube videos. It also serves to overshadow the role that structures of inequality, racism, sexism, and alienation inside of the United States played in the election of Trump.

By making RT register as a foreign agent, the US government is playing to RT's narrative that Western democracy is in crisis and that Western media only reports on what 'the establishment' want them to. Whilst Russia has applied its own 'foreign agent' status to Western funded NGO's operating within its borders, it is imperative that the US and other states rise above this form of tit-for-tat punishment. Making RT register as a foreign agent only serves to further arguments about Western hypocrisy, and ultimately makes Western calls for progress on freedom of expression ring hollow in Russia.

Rather than forcing RT to register as a foreign agent, efforts should be spent on making RT clarify any opaque business and editorial structures, whilst also encouraging RT to be more consistent in adhering to high journalistic standards. Furthermore, states, scholars, and people concerned about RT's influence would be wise to attempt to understand what exactly makes RT's output appealing to the people who view it.

About the author:

Rhys Crilley is a Research Associate at the Open University, UK. He is currently working on an AHRC funded project 'Reframing Russia for the Global Mediasphere: From Cold War to "Information War"?''. His research explores social media, visual politics, and narratives in global politics. He tweets at @rhyscrilley.