

How RT (Russia Today) Navigates ‘Us’ and ‘Them’

Written by Precious N Chatterje-Doody

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PRECIOUS N CHATTERJE-DOODY, OCT 3 2018

What Is RT and Why Is It Relevant?

Founded in 2005 as Russia Today and rebranded as RT in 2009, Russia’s state-funded international broadcaster has recently become the subject of increased political and academic scrutiny amidst deteriorating relations between Russia and various states in North America and Western Europe. In the context of an apparent “information war” with this “rogue state”, numerous journalists, academics and policy institutes have argued that RT, and the “useful idiots” that appear on it work within “Russia’s state-run propaganda machine” to bring “Kremlin messaging to Russian and international audiences”. Following the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury, UK, the British broadcasting regulator Ofcom announced an investigation into RT’s reporting, to ascertain whether it fulfilled the ‘fit and proper’ requirements of its license. UK political parties discouraged their members from appearing on the network, and there were calls in parliament for a ban. Most recently, RT aired a fantastical interview with the two men named as suspects in the poisoning of the Skripals, which – as Rhys Crilley and I have argued elsewhere – completely backfired with audiences. UK politicians were similarly unimpressed, with Prime Minister Theresa May calling the interview “deeply offensive”.

Despite such alarm over RT’s operations and influence, the empirical evidence creates a more complex picture. RT’s viewing figures appear substantially lower than often claimed. In the UK at least, they make up a tiny proportion of broadcast audience share. Online, RT’s claim to be “the most watched news network on YouTube” is misleading, since the bulk of its views are from light interest ‘shorts’ rather than core programming. As Prof. Ellen Mickiewicz has argued, for RT to have a real ‘impact’, its viewers would have to change their opinions as a result of being exposed to its outputs. There is no evidence that this is the case. Even though RT’s cross-platform operations might seem intuitively likely to increase the resonance of its messages, there is again no evidence to support such a claim. On the contrary, findings due to be published in November 2018 by the Reframing Russia project suggest that audience members attracted by particular platform outputs or special projects are not inclined to migrate across to RT’s core news content.

The same report – part of a three-year investigation into RT by scholars at the University of Manchester and The Open University – demonstrates striking similarities between those who follow RT news online, and those who follow other news providers. Where audiences choose RT, they cite specific perceived merits such as digital innovation, or its inclusion of ‘non-mainstream’ stories and perspectives. Crucially, RT’s audiences tend to be aware of its backing from the Russian state, and approach its outputs critically. Yet, if the network’s outputs consisted solely of base propaganda, then it would struggle to maintain these audiences. So, to deal effectively with the challenges that RT represents in the global news environment, we need a better understanding of its appeal. In fact, RT’s operations shed light on a wider range of trends within the contemporary global media environment.

Populism and the Media: RT and the Wider Media Ecology

Since the 1990s, there has been a steady expansion in low-cost online publishing opportunities for news and current affairs commentary, accompanied in recent years by the rise of interactive web 2.0 technologies across social media platforms. Together, these developments have altered the process of news production and dissemination, with more online citizen-journalism, and increased openings to news and commentary within a ‘hybrid media system’. As citizen

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journalists and online 'influencers' have increasingly found ways to monetise their content, the previously-dominant 'legacy media' institutions have experienced decreasing circulation and advertising revenues.

The result has been a general shift towards media logics which prioritise specific news values and storytelling techniques, and blur the distinctions between news production and consumption. Boundaries between categories, genres and audiences similarly collapse. Respected broadsheets and international broadcasters alike have diversified their outputs towards more online-appropriate interactive and multimedia content. These formats can promote engagement from transnational online audiences. The content and form of news has also evolved to suit the specificities of online reading processes, including through recourse to online 'listicles' and other 'clickbait'-type content. Within this environment, origin is not necessarily a reliable indicator of quality, and individuals are obliged to exercise personal judgement about the media that they consume.

Such evolutions in news values and format influence how people come to think about, and respond to, world affairs. Visual images in particular can rapidly transcend national boundaries, forge mental and emotional associations, and be used to make supposedly objective knowledge claims. So, often, audiences are inclined to treat as (and act upon) basic 'facts' which in reality are media interpretations that are intimately bound up with audio-visual representations, and with audiences' emotional responses to what is being viewed. Such responses are similarly influenced by the extent to which they feel an affective investment in the identities and discourses represented within those media.

It is in this context that *transnational populist communication logics* have come to the fore across the global media. Taken as the "distinct set of formal discursive qualities" that govern populist communication, these logics encompass the substantive assertions made in a given instance; the actors involved in producing them; the reasons for their involvement; and the ways in which the assertions are produced – all of which are influential in today's increasingly networked global media ecology. To date, populism in the media has predominantly been seen as the reproduction of 'populist' politicians' messages by media outlets – whether as a result of audience demand or as part of a mutually-reinforcing relationship. However, this contingent understanding of media populism is no longer appropriate within the fundamentally interactive contemporary global media environment and some more recent scholarly accounts have attempted to decouple media populism from populist movements.

Nowadays, a range of media actors (including legacy outlets, web 2.0 platforms and their users) are all involved in co-constructing key messages through transnational processes of discussion and interaction. This is partly because the rise of social networks and web 2.0 technologies has decreased the impact of journalistic gatekeeping and news production cycles; helped close the gap between political actors and their audiences; and promoted personalised leadership and 'media-centred' communication. With new patterns of circulation arising between social and other online media, a range of audiences and platforms (both directly and via their inherent circulation logics) become directly involved as co-producers of the emotional and affective appeals and normatively-driven identities that populate our media space. Within this environment, there is a recurrence of specific populist communication logics, which feed into the particularities of the contemporary media circulation processes. These logics include the implication of an opposing, dichotomous relationship between the 'people' and the 'elite'; the incorporation of stylistic informality/'bad manners'; attempts to stimulate affective responses using crisis or immediacy; and the use of emotive signifiers to promote audience engagement and interaction (see also here).

'Us' and 'them': Positioning RT and Its Audiences

More so than many other international broadcasters, RT operates at ease within this environment. It is true that, as some observers have already pointed out, RT's programmes tend to include overwhelmingly negative reporting on the 'West' and its institutions, with a particular focus on the USA. But given that these critiques are of its audiences' home societies, how can a foreign-owned news network articulate them without intended audiences feeling alienated?

One answer lies in RT's active adoption of populist communication logics within both its outputs and brand identity. This means that RT's programming does not present as an outsider's critique of Western societies. Rather, the

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network's outputs set up communities of 'us' and 'them' in which the critiques it airs come from within segments of the societies in question: RT appears as a neutral witness to this conflict. Though the representations of opposing 'us' and 'them' groups is a consistent feature of the network's output, their supposed members are subject to variation. The result is ideologically-ambiguous programming, which nevertheless reaffirms populist tropes.

People versus Elite

RT constantly elides mainstream media, politicians and 'deep state', and builds antagonism between 'people' and such 'elites' into the design of its shows. These are expressly intended to "[break] through the mainstream headlines" (*BoomBust*) and give "a new perspective, a different view" of current affairs (George Galloway's *Sputnik*), to discuss "the stories that aren't being covered by the UK mainstream media" (RT UK's *Going Underground*), or more explicitly to uncover "government hypocrisy and corporate deception" (*The World According to Jesse*). Guests are "dissident voices" (*On Contact*) who "question the conventional wisdom of modern life" (*Renegade Inc.*) and provide "uncommon opinions" (*SophieCo*) about "the hard questions that others avoid" (*Worlds Apart*).

However, RT's outputs are inconsistent about precisely who these corrupt elites are. For example, RT's documentary *Soft Occupation* (2017) alleges that Germany has been under *de facto* occupation by the USA since World War Two, and that the US and its transnational delegates constitute a threat to the unity of the EU. In *The Greek Depression: Hostage to Austerity* (2016), however, the EU and its austerity programmes threaten the lives and democratic freedoms of ordinary Greek people. This opposition between 'people' and 'elite' can become overtly conspiratorial, such when the death of a US-critical journalist in *Soft Occupation* is reported as being "Officially... of a heart attack, but what caused it has yet to be specified" (24:41).

RT's disproportionate airtime dedicated to social ills in and of the 'West' further reinforces the people-elite dichotomy. This is compounded by RT's choice of experts. Various contributors come from the far-right or far-left of the political spectrum, are clearly situated on one side of a specific contemporary debate, or have direct links to Russia or RT itself. Others are noted conspiracy theorists. Yet the network also extensively platforms oppositional politicians, former members of establishment institutions, and representatives of NGOs critical of particular state policies. The critiques they air are therefore not external, but from the internal margins – and they appear not as criticisms from a foreign power, but as personal appeals from an 'us' group of which the audience feels part – directed upwards at the holders of power.

Stylistic Informality/'Bad Manners'

RT's outputs incorporate stylistic informality where it is least to be expected. Its daily news bulletins and web news coverage frequently incorporate sarcasm and satire. Linguistic informalities are also often used – for instance through the insertion of puns into the headlines and information bars of even the most serious kinds of news item (see 12:20). Similar informalities are present throughout various of RT's extended current affairs programmes. Participants in RT's 'flagship' discussion programme, *CrossTalk* are encouraged to interject and talk over one another – generally, a carefully-curated pool of guests offers similar perspectives on the issues under debate, all contradicting the 'mainstream'. Where contributors differ from this mould, they are talked over by the other commentators, or the host.

In shows in which stylistic informality is to be expected (satirical programming, for example) such techniques are used to tackle more weighty ideological matters. This includes by explicitly articulating a conflictual relationship between an 'us' group of citizens contrasted with a corrupt, corporatist elite 'them'.

Affective stimuli (foregrounding crisis or immediacy)

RT promotes immediacy by integrating web 2.0 technologies throughout its outputs and standard news broadcasts extensively sample and/or report upon social media activity. At times, these are used as the source of headlines; at times as a proxy for the consensus of 'the people'. RT also actively courts engagement from its online audiences. Shows routinely end with calls for the audience to get further involved in person or via RT's social media channels, and the network has produced several innovative interactive online special projects.

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Another way in which RT creates immediacy of coverage is through the use of personally-involved commentators. Narrative voice is frequently delegated to these close witnesses using *vox populi* segments in news and current affairs programming, mobile phone recordings from eyewitnesses, plus formal interviews and informal home-made video diaries in extended programming. Similar patterns of affective immediacy are present with the network’s professional presenters. Reporters and moderators often disclose their own opinions, whilst documentary presenters more often than not have a direct personal connection to the topic that they are reporting. Audio-visual techniques further reinforce the ideas of crisis and immediacy: anchors explicitly highlight the magnitude of particular news developments; and recordings taken on hand-held personal recording devices are used even by its professional presenters.

Emotive Messaging to Promote Audience Engagement or Interaction

RT cultivates emotive messaging by prioritising issues related to social justice, and reporting them primarily through the framework of personal narratives rather than rationalist argumentation. In this way, commentary on social issues is filtered through the struggles of particular individuals. Sometimes, such processes occur at one remove – as in the recent production of the high-profile ‘grassroots’ documentary, ‘Failed by the State: the Struggle in the Shadow of Grenfell’ by Redfish media – which is funded by RT.

Often, audio-visual editing techniques are used for emotive purposes (e.g. overlaying informational news packages with graphic visuals and dramatic soundtracks). Emotion is further built into RT’s outputs through the careful curation of featured voices and the way that even historical discussions are framed not around chronological developments, but personal stories or responses to events. This is reinforced by RT’s multiplatform experimentalism, encouraging audiences to co-produce narratives.

Making Sense of RT’s Treatment of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’

RT is often portrayed as a ‘fake news’ propaganda network. Yet, if the network’s outputs were restricted to blatant propaganda, it would struggle to maintain even the modest audiences it does – much less to resonate with their concerns.

Instead, the network skillfully incorporates populist communication logics within its outputs. Such logics are not the sole preserve of this state-funded international broadcaster; they reflect a range of commercial and technical trends in the wider global media ecology. Yet, in its stated remit to provide a counterbalance to hegemonic accounts of the news, RT’s institutional identity allows it to more effectively internalise transnational populist communication logics than networks whose identities are linked to public service and balance. Indeed, RT’s freedom from these constraints has enabled it to respond more rapidly to breaking news events. At the same time, RT situates its critiques of the ‘West’ as coming from ‘us’ groups within it – frequently through personal testimonies or expert commentary from within the boundaries of ‘legitimate’ discourse. RT’s own contribution to such criticism comes at one remove, as an apparent witness to moral conflict between an ‘us’ group neglected by a powerful ‘them’. The reliability of RT’s accounts becomes somewhat irrelevant, since they appear to reflect deeper truths that matter to its audiences. Any response to RT’s editorial line, then, can only be effective by engaging directly with the social divisions that fuel it.

About the author:

Precious N Chatterje-Doody is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the University of Manchester, investigating the RT (Russia Today) network as part of the AHRC-funded project “Reframing Russia for the Global Mediasphere: from Cold War to ‘information war’?” In addition to her work on RT, she has research interests in historical narrative; national identity projection and political legitimation; Russian foreign and security policy; global media and ‘post-truth’ politics; and global governance. Precious tweets @PreciousChatD.

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