

RT's appeal to British audiences on Facebook: Outsider in an untrustworthy media environment

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Abstract:

The expansion of Russian international broadcaster RT (formerly Russia Today) has been problematised in recent years, with the outlet accused of spreading propaganda, untruths and populism, and seeking to disrupt Western regimes. Most research has attempted to understand RT's appeal through top-down approaches that focus on its content, making assumptions about its actual reception. This paper interrogates such assumptions through interviews and online observations with 26 individuals who engaged with RT UK's content on Facebook (the UK's most popular social networking site and a significant source of RT.com's traffic) around Brexit and other issues. I find that the outlet's appeal rested on its perceived status as an outsider, predicated on the rejection of a perceived untrustworthy domestic news media environment. These findings confirm the effectiveness of RT's self-positioning as counter-hegemonic and pariah, while shedding new light on the importance of its Russian origins to audiences. The situated empirical insights also highlight the way its image is co-created with audiences' attitudes and with the broader media and political environment. This has significant implications for our understanding of how individuals navigate the online news media sphere in an age of hybridisation and mistrust, and the ability of international broadcasters to exploit disaffection at home.

Keywords: audiences, disinformation, Facebook, international broadcasting, news trust, online news, RT (formerly Russia Today), social media

Introduction

Russia's primarily state-funded international broadcaster RT (formerly Russia Today) (Borchers 2011, 92) has been described as 'the most-watched foreign news channel in the UK'

(Intelligence Community Assessment 2017, 6). It was nominally created in 2005 to combat ‘non-objective’ reporting on Russia (Simons 2014, 446) and ‘acquaint... international audiences with a Russian viewpoint on major global events’ (RT n.d.). RT has expanded to provide content in multiple languages (Hutchings 2020, 285) and invested considerable capital to see it make ‘serious progress towards being accepted as [a] legitimate news organisation’ (Rawnsley 2015, 275). As at December 2021, its flagship English language YouTube channel had 4.5 million global subscribers and 3.5 billion views, among the highest for a television channel (Elswah and Howard 2020). Combining all of its YouTube channels, RT claims to be the ‘most watched news network on YouTube’ (Source: [youtube.com/c/RT](https://www.youtube.com/c/RT), banner advertisement observed 22/12/21).

However, the network’s reporting of issues like Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the Salisbury poisonings, and the Syrian conflict have come under scrutiny for pro-Russian bias and potential mistruth, attracting warnings and fines from the UK’s Office of Communications for breaching impartiality rules (Ofcom 2019; Rawnsley 2015). RT has been accused of spreading ‘targeted disinformation’ on numerous issues globally (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2019), with suspicions heightening since allegations of Russia’s interference in the 2016 US Presidential election, and the use of ‘bots’ by the Russian ‘Internet Research Agency’ to influence political campaigns on social media (Howard et al. 2019).

RT was launched during the transition to a new digital news paradigm of ‘distributed discovery’ (Toff and Nielsen 2018), in which social media have become major platforms for the distribution of news, and dissemination now relies on co-creation and re-circulation by individual users. RT.com receives a significant proportion of its traffic from social media compared with major news sites like CNN.com and BBC.com (Orttung and Nelson 2019, 87). The outlet’s international English-language Facebook page shares its content to over 6,000,000 followers, and the specialised *RT UK* page over 650,000¹. Within the context of deteriorating UK-Russia diplomatic relations (The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the UK n.d.), and Russia’s so-called ‘information war’ (Clinton 2011; Thomas 2015), RT’s impact is receiving increasing scholarly attention. Recent research argues that while RT’s presence is derided by many, it is gradually being normalised (Crilley, Gillespie, and Willis 2020). Alternative media like RT ‘may be slowly changing the rules of engagement’ and researchers ‘ignore them at our peril’ (Hutchings et al. 2015, 653).

Prior research has concentrated on RT’s content, making assumptions about its actual reception. This paper aims to interrogate such assumptions through a qualitative, inductive study with users who engaged with RT UK’s news on Brexit and other issues on Facebook, asking why they did so and how this interacted with their political views. The findings confirm the effectiveness of RT’s self-positioning as non-mainstream and pariah, and the way in which its image is co-created in interaction with audiences’ positions on domestic politics and the

¹ It should be noted, however, that these numbers may be artificially inflated by ‘bot’ accounts; for example, one study classified 39% of RT’s Twitter followers as ‘bot’ accounts (Crilley et al. 2020).

broader political and media environment. For these users, RT's appeal was predicated on the rejection of what was perceived as an untrustworthy domestic news media environment, rendering the outlet's perceived 'outsider' status a significant draw. However, the findings also shed new light on the importance of the outlet's Russian origins to audiences. The findings have significant implications for understanding how individuals navigate the online news media sphere in an age of hybridisation and mistrust, and the ability of international broadcasters to exploit disaffection at home.

I first review the existing research into RT's reception and appeal, particularly online, demonstrating the significant research gap. I then outline the methodology of the current study before presenting the analysis through three pen portraits of the users interviewed. These reflect key political positions within the participant group and illustrate broader trends in how attitudes towards media and politics interacted with individuals' engagement with RT. I conclude the paper with discussion of the implications of these findings for understanding RT's role in the contemporary digital media ecology and audiences' engagement with alternative news outlets online.

RT's Appeal: Insights from Prior Research

Although recent years have seen increasing interest in RT, research is primarily concerned with the outlet's content rather than its audiences, making inferences about its intentions and impact (e.g. Borchers 2011; Burchell et al. 2015; Cruikshank 2010; Hsu 2010; Tolz et al. 2021). This is partly because research into international broadcasting has often equated it with state-sponsored international propaganda designed to influence foreign public opinion (Youmans and Powers 2012; Fisher 2020), and in RT's case an 'information war' paradigm has shaped the research agenda (e.g. Richter 2017; Fisher 2020). For instance, Yablokov (2015) found that RT utilised conspiracy theories in the US to undermine confidence in government and promote Russian domestic and foreign policies. Other studies have argued that RT propagates disinformation (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2019), employs a pro-Russian bias on certain issues (Miazhevich 2018; Nelson 2019) or promotes a positive image of Russia (Orttung and Nelson 2019) and critical stance towards the West, particularly the US (Hutchings 2020). Assumptions are then made about who RT's audiences are, e.g. 'anti-establishment, anti-corporation and anti-western (particularly anti-American)' individuals (Miazhevich 2018, 3), a niche group of activists who are particularly politically engaged (Orttung and Nelson 2019), or no more than disillusioned cynics (Cohen 2014) or fringe conspiracy theorists who are distrustful of 'mainstream media' (Richter 2017).

RT is also characterised as employing populist discourse to appeal to its audiences (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2020a, 7). In particular, Yablokov (2015) highlights the synergy between populism and conspiracy theories and their construction of the enemy 'Other' – in Russia's case, the West. He argues that RT America taps into conspiracy theories in US culture by 'challeng[ing] an elitist aspect of American politics through populist ideas' (ibid, p. 306-7).

Born into a 'populist moment' in Western politics (Mouffe 2019) that has coincided with the rise of social media said to have an 'affinity' with populism (Gerbaudo 2018), RT is seen as taking advantage of anti-elitism and appealing to polarisation and discontent in these societies. It does this by exploiting criticisms of Western authority to position itself as an underdog or pariah (Hutchings 2020) and by challenging journalistic norms of formality (e.g. through the use of humour, Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2020b) to adopt an affable and authentic image that appears to represent 'the people' (see Wodak 2015).

While these perspectives are important, the 'success' of these strategies with audiences remains unclear due to a dearth of studies into RT's actual reception. Audiences do not necessarily interpret messages in the intended way and exposure is not the same as agreement (Mickiewicz 2018, 3). A focus on whether or how much control the Kremlin has over RT, and the nefarious 'information war' aims it might harbour, ultimately obscures the role that RT legitimately plays in the British and global news media ecosystem. It also tells us little about RT's actual impact on attitudes towards information within a contemporary climate of mis/disinformation. This is compounded by a similar tendency in research into alternative news outlets to focus on media theory and content analysis and neglect reception and audiences (e.g. Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019; Holt 2019).

A small number of studies have responded to calls for more rigorous investigation into RT's audiences. A recent study by Crilley et al. (2020) examining the demographics and interests of RT's followers on Twitter found that they were highly heterogenous; for the majority, RT was not their primary news source but one of many. However, quantifying 'likes' or 'follows' provides only a superficial understanding of what content actually means to audiences (Toff and Nielsen 2018). This is reflected in Crilley and colleagues' finding that many users who follow (i.e. are *exposed* to) RT's content on Twitter do not necessarily *engage* with it.

Two studies have investigated audience responses through analysis of comments on RT's social media content. Hutchings et al. (2015), analysing Twitter interactions around RT's coverage of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, concluded that RT's conspiratorial ethos means it thrives on contentious global issues, 'appealing to audiences interested in conspiracy theories and counter-hegemonic political discourse' (ibid, 653). However, the authors note that these results are particular to the context of the 2014 Olympics and coinciding crisis around Russia's annexation of Crimea. Chatterje-Doody and Crilley (2019) analysed comments made in response to RT's YouTube content about the Syrian conflict, finding that those who commented tended to support RT's perspective on and Russia's position in the conflict, and expressed mistrust and anger towards 'the West'. However, we cannot understand audience reception or motivations based solely on the comments they leave online. Such comments are partly constructed by the logic of social media platforms and authors' imagined audiences there (van Dijck 2013), and thus should not be treated as windows into 'true' sentiments (Latzko-Toth et al. 2016). If we accept that social meaning cannot be understood through observation alone, but must be investigated with reference to

the meanings attributed by actors themselves (Geertz 1977), then understanding what engagement with alternative media outlets like RT means to users necessitates asking them. As yet, the only study to have done this comes from Crilley, Gillespie, and Willis (2020). They examined audience interactions with RT's 'live re-enactment' of the 1917 Russian revolution on Twitter, including conducting focus groups with British users who followed the re-enactment handle. These followers were motivated by a general interest in Russian history, support for communist, socialist, or broader left-wing politics, family connections to the area, a desire to 'hear different perspectives' or 'to find out what the Russians are thinking' (ibid, 365). Some said they were aware RT was biased 'like every other news source', but viewed it as having a 'counter-hegemonic, anti-Western, anti-American style' (ibid). However, as this sample was selected from those who followed the revolution 're-enactment', they were arguably more likely to have a particular interest in Russia or its history. This is characteristic of a tendency in studies into RT to focus on particular topics or events where pro-Russian bias is evident in its coverage. The question remains how and why individuals engage with RT's coverage of everyday, domestic politics. Despite obvious important implications for understanding the contemporary 'disinformation order' (Bennett and Livingston 2018), as yet no studies have spoken to RT's audiences to investigate this area.

Furthermore, no studies have investigated RT's audience on Facebook. In contrast to YouTube, Facebook is a platform for connecting with individuals and organisations, rather than simply viewing or sharing content (Stoycheff et al. 2017). Thus, incidental news exposure is common on Facebook through peer recommendations and algorithmically-driven 'Newsfeed' content (Yamamoto and Morey 2019). In fact, Facebook is an important medium by which RT and its followers disseminate videos hosted on its YouTube channel. Compared with Twitter, Facebook is less skewed towards the young and highly-educated segments of the population (Mellon and Prosser 2017; Sloan 2017). It is a far more popular social networking site in Britain (O'Dea 2018), and the most popular social media platform for news consumption (Pew Research Center 2018). Indeed, *RT UK's* following on Facebook is more than six times that of its Twitter handle (650,000 vs 96,000). Thus, research on Facebook is crucial to elucidating the significance of social media to engagement with RT and other alternative outlets.

In summary, a dearth of close-up, interpretive research that speaks to audiences themselves means that very little is yet known about British social media users' engagement with RT's domestic news content and what this means to them. This is particularly true on the most significant platform, Facebook. Elucidating RT's appeal can also provide crucial insights into the broader phenomenon of international and alternative news consumption, its motivations and consequences. I now outline the method employed to address this research gap.

Research Method

Challenging the recent ‘computational turn’ in research on social media which privileges online behavioural data (Latzko-Toth et al. 2016), the primary data source for this study was semi-structured interviews, based on an interpretive approach to social meaning (see above, Geertz 1977). Observations of a selection of *RT UK*’s Facebook posts and users’ interactions with these were used to ‘thicken’ (ibid) interview data, akin to the use of field notes in ethnography.

The issue of Brexit was chosen as a starting point. This is because it was a dominant domestic news issue for several years, and a site of very divisive politics (Hobolt et al. 2020) in which issues like disinformation and ‘meddling’ by foreign and domestic interests through social media have been implicated (Risso 2018). While there has been no official Kremlin backing of Brexit, commentators have pointed out what Russia may have to gain from the UK leaving the EU (Rosenberg 2016). A UK Intelligence and Security Committee enquiry investigating the question of Russian interference in the 2016 EU referendum found the evidence inconclusive (Forrest 2020). Thus, while overshadowed and/or side-lined on the news agenda by the Covid-19 pandemic at the time of writing, Brexit offers valuable insights into UK Facebook users’ engagement with *RT*’s news content on domestic issues.

The study focused on Brexit-related posts on the *RT UK* Facebook page, and the users who interacted with these, two weeks before to two weeks after Britain’s departure from the EU (17 January – 14 February 2020), as this was the most recent period of intensified news reporting on the issue. *RT UK* was chosen because its content is more UK-focused than *RT*’s international English-language Facebook page, *RT*, and had published a much larger number of Brexit-related posts in the period. A total of 122 posts were identified using a search query on the Crowd Tangle analysis platform² (including terms like ‘Brexit’, ‘EU’, ‘European Union’, and the names of prominent EU figures). As Facebook does not allow automated scraping of comments, each post was accessed individually and public comments observed in their original context. These observations were used to inform the analysis and provide context to the interviews.

From the database of comments compiled, I identified ‘Top Fans’³ and invited each to an interview. Top Fans were targeted on the assumption that more frequent interaction with *RT*

² This tool is provided by Meta (the company formerly known as Facebook) and allows users to generate ‘insights’ data from social media platforms such as Facebook.

³ ‘Top Fan’ labels are ascribed by Facebook to those who have interacted, with a certain degree of frequency, with posts on a particular page. At the time of the study, this ‘badge’ was attributed automatically.

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UK's posts meant they were more likely to be *consciously* engaging with it as a source. A total of 435 users who commented on one or more posts and had the Top Fan status at the time (9 March to 19 May 2020) were identified. Each was contacted through Facebook Messenger, eliciting 85 responses. Twenty-six of these individuals went on to agree to participate in an interview between March and May 2020.

The majority of interviews were conducted via voice chat using Facebook Messenger, with the exception of three asynchronous text interviews on the platform at these participants' request. Participants' ages ranged from early twenties to mid-seventies, and they hailed from all four UK nations. No active gender-based recruitment was undertaken and the final interview group contained only six women, reflecting existing observations of RT's audiences as relatively male-dominated (Orttung and Nelson 2019; Crilley et al. 2020). Nine participants vocally supported Leave in the interview, fourteen supported Remain, and the remainder appeared ambivalent. Details of the final participant group can be found in Appendix A. Informed consent was obtained electronically, all participants were anonymised, and data was stored on password-protected encrypted media.

The interviews, lasting for between one and two hours, explored participants' news consumption and engagement with RT, including how they first became aware of RT and how they viewed its coverage. In line with the semi-structured interview format, the basic schedule of interview questions (see Appendix B) served as a rough guide, but conversations were also allowed to proceed organically such as to better capture the aspects of their engagement with RT that were most meaningful to participants. The semi-structured format also allowed exploration of participants' broader attitudes towards news and politics and how these related to their news engagement. Although narratives around media engagement may not accurately reflect practices, the aim was to generate insights into attitudes towards, and interpretations of, these practices, which were used to understand what engagement with RT meant to participants and the relationship between this engagement and their attitudes towards politics and information.

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Comments participants had made on the Brexit-related posts in question were sometimes used as discussion prompts. This strategy helped ground the interviews in concrete practices of social media use and contextualise participants' statements. While the Covid-19 pandemic meant that Brexit was often not at the forefront of participants' minds, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed discussions to explore their reflections on a range of social and political issues, resulting in the collection of rich inductive data. Key findings are discussed below.

Analysis: RT as Outsider in an Untrustworthy Media Environment

While participants expressed a range of different political inclinations that interacted with their motivations for engaging with RT, what the vast majority had in common was their rejection of 'mainstream' British (or broader Western) media outlets as biased, tribalist and thus untrustworthy. Based on their narratives about RT and media and politics in Britain, I argue that at the heart of these users' engagement with RT was its juxtaposition with domestic outlets. This outsider positioning was twofold, comprised of RT's status as objective observer and counter-hegemonic underdog.

Like the audiences examined in Crilley et al. (2020) and Crilley, Gillespie, and Willis (2020), these individuals did not necessarily consider RT their favourite news source, but rather described processes of information seeking that drew on a range of sources. Nonetheless, RT was an important and trustworthy source, and was viewed as *comparatively* objective, truthful and unbiased. This was the case even while participants did not agree with the totality of its content and many admitted that the broadcaster likely had its own agenda and links to the Russian state. RT's depiction as 'neutral' was in part a product of a general ambivalence towards Russia and resultant tendency to view it as outside the arena of relevance for 'Western' politics. In line with its motto 'Question More' and its self-positioning as an alternative news source (Miazhevich 2018), participants felt that RT, as an objective observer, provided information and perspectives that domestic media and other hegemonic or 'mainstream' (e.g. US) media outlets refused to.

RT's self-portrayed pariah status appeared to play an important role in participants' identification with the outlet. Partly affirming prior assumptions made about RT's audiences (see above), participants stressed their counter-hegemonic political positions (on Brexit, immigration, Scottish independence, or conflict in the Middle East), which they felt positioned them as outsiders who were not represented by the government or media. It was clear that RT provided an opportunity for participants to see their (perceived) marginalised positions taken seriously, and that the outlet's own marginalisation in the West was a significant factor in its appeal.

In the following analysis, I introduce three individuals who occupied distinct political positions while each illustrating the importance of disillusionment with domestic media on which RT's outsider status was predicated: Harriet (a socialist Remainer), Alan (a nativist Brexiteer), and

Wallace (a Scottish nationalist). These represent the three most common political positions among the participant group. Pen portraits are used here as a means of contextualising engagement with RT – and the dominant themes that emerged in this study – within lived experiences. Through them I highlight and discuss a number of striking commonalities among the broader participant group’s perception of RT and attitudes towards news and information, despite stark political differences. These qualitative findings are not intended to be generalisable to all of RT’s audience on Facebook, but rather to provide nuanced and situated exploration of experiences and meanings that inform a broader understanding of RT’s appeal (Barbour 2008).

Harriet: ‘I Don’t Want People Misinterpreting the Facts for Me’

Harriet was a sixty-three-year-old Brit who had moved to France twenty-five years ago. She was bilingual and worked as an English teacher to French speakers. Harriet was an advocate for refugee rights in France, attended anti-Islamophobia protests and taught French to Syrian refugee children. She was a Jeremy Corbyn supporter, and occasionally revealed socialist and pacifist concerns with comments like, ‘It is strange that there is never any money to help the working classes but plenty for killing people’. In this way, she expressed her socialist perspective on welfare and class-based deprivation in a register that also cohered with RT’s critical representation of Western interventions in the Middle East.

Harriet was a strong supporter of remaining in the EU, characterising the Leave campaign as ‘racist’ and even returning to the UK to vote in the referendum. She said she had watched Brexit in the news ‘avidly’, using many sources to garner a ‘global view’. This was linked to her description of herself as a ‘news fan’ who liked to educate herself by speaking to ‘clever people’, reading ‘scientific’ articles, and listening to intellectuals online, while trusting no one source in particular. She said she tended to leave her computer on most of the day at home with Twitter or Facebook open, and although she gathered most of her information online, like many participants was adamant she did not believe everything she read. Harriet keenly asserted that she was not basing her views on irrational bias, assuring me that she did not ‘agree with Europe’ on everything. Importantly, she felt that facts and figures should be allowed to speak for themselves, saying ‘I want to read facts. I don’t want to read bias... I don’t want people misinterpreting the facts for me’. This positivist view of social truth, and perhaps naïve view of the news, was shared by many participants and was closely linked to their construction of RT (and themselves) as objective, in contrast with the overly subjective ‘mainstream’ news.

Harriet intimated that she had previously loved the BBC and had considered it an example of British ‘greatness and intelligence’. However, she had stopped engaging with the outlet after becoming frustrated and disappointed with growing perceived bias. These sentiments exemplified a trend among participants to narrate a sense of decline in the news media, imagining news of the past as an unbiased information service and contrasting this with the

untrustworthiness of news today. Harriet expressed annoyance at the ‘smear campaign’ against Corbyn during the 2019 general election: ‘every time the Labour Party is popular with the people, the newspapers make mincemeat of them’. In particular, she lamented that the ‘mainstream media’ did not ‘criticise the government’, illustrating the link between her dissatisfaction with domestic news outlets and frustration with the perceived rightward direction of British politics.

Harriet had become aware of RT a couple of years prior; like a number of participants she had ‘chanced upon’ its content on Facebook. She did not characterise herself as a particularly avid fan of RT but told me she felt the outlet was independent and unbiased *compared with* domestic media. Some of the issues she spoke about reflected the flagship exposé campaigns of RT, including Julian Assange’s extradition case and the conflict in Syria. The latter was a recurring theme with participants, but Harriet’s views on this are particularly illuminating. She discussed coverage of the conflict in relation to feelings of bewilderment regarding the untrustworthy nature of contemporary news and information: ‘I’ve asked myself over and over again, do we *really* know what’s going on in Syria? ... It sounds too bad to be true’. However, she ultimately concluded that the Syrian people ‘were being bombed by the Syrian and Russian forces and that’s a fact’.

This acknowledgment of Russia’s involvement in the killing of civilians was in stark contrast to RT’s stance on this issue (Hutchings 2020). Intriguingly, Harriet’s engagement with and positive portrayal of RT seemed to emerge *despite* the outlet’s coverage of Syria, an issue which was clearly of importance to her. Apparently contradicting her portrayal of RT as objective, she defended RT’s coverage, saying ‘you can’t find reports that aren’t biased about what’s going on, really. It’s a warzone for the Russians and for the Americans. That’s all’. This raises questions about how audiences reconcile their perceptions of RT as an objective observer with blatant pro-Russian stances in some of its coverage, which will be returned to below.

In Harriet’s case, RT was portrayed as an arena for balanced debate, with its discussion programmes ‘giv[ing] people a chance to speak who don’t get the chance to speak on British television without being ... grilled and minced by interviewers’. In this sense, Harriet’s appraisal of RT stemmed from a contrast with domestic news media and her fatigue with a perceived politicisation of coverage on domestic issues. Along with the ‘facts’, she wanted to ‘hear [interviewees] speak and say what they’ve got to say’ to enable her to make up her own mind. In this way, Harriet was among the majority of participants who said they viewed RT as fair – a characteristic they considered lacking in ‘mainstream’ coverage. In Harriet’s case, this was clearly related to her sense that contemporary British media and the society that consumed its dog-whistle politics did not reflect her socialist and anti-racist views. RT’s talk shows are known for inviting guests from both ends of the political spectrum, from Jeremy Corbyn to Nigel Farage, and thus appeared to cater to a variety of felt marginalisations, as we will see in Alan’s portrait below.

Alan: 'RT is Filming What's Happening'

Alan was in his fifties and also happened to be a Brit living overseas. He had moved to Spain from his hometown in Northwest England thirty-one years ago and was running a fishing and tourism company there. He engaged with social media and online news throughout the day because 'it widens and broadens your mind'. Like Harriet, Alan was keen to construct himself as well-informed, unbiased, and a savvy information seeker. After many years, he had developed a 'good solid basis as to where to look' to verify information.

However, in contrast to Harriet, Alan was strongly in support of Brexit. He felt media coverage of the issue had been biased and had unfairly promoted Remain. He described the BBC as 'terrible' and liars:

... if Nigel Farage was going on one of their shows, they would try and demise [sic] him. Anybody from the middle to the right they would try and ... make 'em look small and try and pick up anything bad they'd done in their life which had nothing to do with Brexit ... that was their aim.

Thus, although from opposite ends of the political spectrum, Harriet and Alan shared a perception of domestic mainstream media, and the BBC in particular, as having a biased and divisive political agenda, and one which marginalised their views. Both constructed a narrative of decline in news quality and objectivity. For Alan, however, this was due to 'political correctness' or what he called 'the snowflake society', echoing an editorial stance of RT. According to Alan, in today's age it was necessary to 'try and find out who's telling the truth, who's telling the lies, and make your own mind up from there'. He maintained it was only the advent of the internet and alternative media like RT that had allowed audiences to do so – traditional media outlets could not be trusted.

Although insisting he was interested in 'everything [RT] cover', the primary concern Alan articulated was immigration. His views echoed a racialised, securitised and fearful discourse on immigration: migrants were arriving because of the opportunity to claim benefits, and were 'trying to fight to get into a country by way and means of aggression', constituting not immigration but 'an invasion'. He told me that the reason he liked RT was because they were exposing things like how many migrants were trying to enter Europe from Syria and Africa. RT were 'covering a story which should be covered' but was being 'cover[ed] up' by mainstream outlets; if it was not for RT we would not have 'insight as to what's really happening'.

In fact, RT had first caught Alan's eye with content about Syria that 'unfolded a part of the story that wasn't told by the media'. This echoes RT's pitch 'that it offers insights into "inconvenient" stories that the "mainstream media" overlook' (Hutchings 2020, 287). Although Alan, unlike Harriet, did not problematise RT's coverage of the Syrian conflict or Russia's role, both participants' comments illustrate RT's effective prompt to 'Question More'

(as its motto goes) dominant hegemonic (Western) narratives on the issue. The importance of coverage of the Syrian conflict to engagement with RT among participants is explored further in Hall (forthcoming). However, it is notable that RT's pro-Russian, anti-Western stance was reflected in Alan and a number of other participants' narratives about Syria in interviews.

To Alan, in contrast with 'mainstream' outlets, RT's coverage was 'truth and factual. Not fictional'. In particular, he found attractive RT's high proportion of video coverage, and appreciated videos without commentary by reporters. Echoing Harriet's positivist understanding of social truth, Alan said 'RT is filming what's happening ... It doesn't influence you in one way or another. It just gives you a perspective and truthful vision of what's going on'. This was accompanied by a sense of timeliness attached to RT's rapidly produced footage; according to Alan, RT was even filming 'right now' in Greece. This appeal was also highlighted by participants like Lorraine (65, Southern England), who said for instance that RT 'move[s] at a faster pace' than outlets like BBC and Sky.

Alan also liked the way RT encouraged open debate, and enjoyed participating in the comments on RT's Facebook posts. Unlike other outlets, regarding Brexit, he felt 'RT covered both sides of the argument'. Alan valued this balance, saying 'I think RT should cover everything that people like and don't like, and leave it open, honest and trustworthy'. Thus, part of RT's appeal for Alan, and the reason he trusted it over other outlets, lay in its perceived neutrality. The notion that RT was a neutral outside observer on domestic political issues like Brexit was a dominant theme in interviews. Its status as a foreign news outlet meant that on domestic issues like Brexit or Scottish independence, RT was seen as 'outsiders looking in' (Fiona, 62, Scotland) that had no reason to be untruthful. However, US news outlets (such as Fox, NBC and CNN) were generally not characterised in this way, but were derided in the same way as British outlets for their biased and untrustworthy content. This reflected parallels participants drew between the UK and US in terms of divisive politics and media, but also indicated that they essentially saw Russia as 'outside' the realm of geopolitical relevance for Britain, an issue I will continue to explore below.

Wallace: 'They're Not Talking About Scotland, They're Talking About England'

Wallace was a single father in his 30s living near Stirling in Scotland. He had a background in aircraft engineering and had also worked as a truck driver but had been unable to work for many years after an accident left him injured. A struggle with claiming welfare and constant fear of being wrongly classified 'fit for work' had made him passionate about dehumanising practices in Britain's welfare system. He had grown up in a 'Labour family' but since the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence ('Indyref') had become a Scottish National Party (SNP) supporter. This was one of the reasons he had started watching RT; when it came to the issue of Scottish independence, RT was the only outlet being 'honest'.

Wallace was one of five Scottish users interviewed who wanted to remain in the European Union and felt that Scots had been deceived by Westminster in the Indyref campaign: ‘they told us that to stay in Europe we have to stay in the UK. The morning of the result they then announced we’re gonna have this Brexit referendum’. For this reason, he asserted, ‘very few would say that they would still vote the same’ in a second Indyref. He felt Scotland was being exploited by England for their oil revenue, all while the narrative coming out of Westminster and the British media was that Scotland was the burden to England. ‘They’ve been treating us like subordinates, like we’re dogs ... they actually rub [the Indyref result] in our faces’ he said. This sense of injustice was what prompted Wallace to start to take an interest in politics. Similar to Harriet, Wallace assured me he did not take news ‘as gospel’ but liked to verify things and ‘educate’ himself on ‘the facts’. During the interview he demonstrated his knowledge by relaying many facts and figures about the benefits of Scottish independence. Wallace felt that British media had ‘become untrustworthy, unreliable’, particularly the BBC. In his view, the British media focused on stories like Brexit, the General Election or the pandemic to divert attention from other things, like parliament passing legislation ‘behind our back’. Wallace contrasted this perceived poor quality of domestic news with RT, which he said covered a variety of topics and points of view. In Wallace’s case, disdain for the BBC was primarily a manifestation of his feelings towards the British government, which he depicted as corrupt and self-serving. Alongside other Scottish nationalist participants, Wallace criticised the BBC and depicted it as England-centric; when it came to Scotland, the BBC ‘[don’t] even put any effort’. Importantly, British media were perceived as biased against Scottish independence and the SNP. Wallace spoke of a BBC interview with previous party leader Alex Salmond in the leadup to Indyref, which he felt had been unfairly cut to appear Salmond could not sufficiently articulate Scotland’s vision for independence.

RT, in contrast, was ‘more truthful’ and would ‘give you the full interview’. In fact, RT was Wallace’s go-to source for anything to do with domestic news and politics, including the unfolding pandemic and the issue of Brexit. This was because, as a Russian-based outlet, ‘what have they got to benefit from lying?’ Thus, RT’s trustworthiness and reliability were predicated on its status as an actor entirely outside the realm of British politics. Such a depiction is puzzling, not least because of the UK’s difficult diplomatic relations with Russia and contemporary accusations of an anti-Western disinformation agenda. However, Wallace dismissed this villainous depiction of Russia. The British media were disingenuously ‘trying to brainwash the public into believing that [the Russians were our] enemies’ and that they were ‘communist’. This was a dominant view amongst participants, with some also lamenting the West’s tendency to gloss over Russia’s substantial contribution to defeating Germany in WWII. Conceding that Putin was not perfect, Wallace nonetheless felt he was a ‘straight talker’ and good leader, and blamed Britain for difficult UK-Russia relations. Wallace attributed Britain’s demonisation of Russia to its desire to appease the US, drawing parallels with involvement in the Iraq war. He recited anti-Western narratives promoted by RT, saying

that unwelcome military intervention by Britain in the Middle East had made them ‘no better than the Nazis’.

Importantly here we see not only agreement from participants with RT’s anti-Western messaging, but also significant buy-in regarding the outlet’s self-assumed image as underdog or pariah and the idea that its marginalisation by the West is the result of unfair Russophobia. We cannot be sure to what extent anti-Western perspectives subscribed to by participants were shaped by the content they consumed on RT versus the outlet simply having appealed to pre-held views. What is interesting here, however, is the clear synergy between this form of pro-Russian messaging and participants’ own feelings of political marginalisation – RT was the ‘neutral’ outsider with whom they could identify.

Discussion

The above three portraits are of followers of *RT UK* on Facebook who hailed from very different political camps. They exemplify the way in which, for the users spoken to, engagement with RT was predicated on the rejection of an untrustworthy domestic news media environment. Against this backdrop, RT’s primary appeal was in its perceived status as an outsider: as an Eastern and thus ‘neutral’ observer, and as a counter-hegemonic underdog. All three accounts point to the ability of RT to appeal to a sense of political disenfranchisement or injustice, independent of an individual’s political leanings on even the most contentious issues. Whether socialist Remainer, nativist Brexiteer, or Scottish nationalist, participants could find in RT a ‘fairer’ voice for their marginalised views and an escape from the perceived politicised and biased reporting of the British (or at times more broadly ‘Western’) media. This cross-spectrum political appeal is particularly interesting given a tendency in studies of alternative online news to focus on the significance of right-wing outlets (Bennett and Livingston 2018).

In this sense, RT appeared to successfully capitalise upon the volatile political situation in Britain around Brexit and populist politics and the way in which this situation, coupled with the contemporary hybrid digital news environment, has given rise to declining trust in and disengagement with institutions of informational authority (ibid). For some, RT also spoke to residual feelings of betrayal and disgust around the Iraq invasion through narratives about the Syrian conflict that promoted the idea that once again Brits were being deceived about the reality of conflict in the Middle East and who the victims were. Participants’ narratives around RT appeared to cohere with its self-image, epitomised by its motto ‘Question More’ that simultaneously casts doubt on ‘mainstream’ narratives and implies a failure by Western outlets to provide critical coverage. Thus, RT effectively appeals to existing discontents while achieving its goal of further undermining confidence in Western regimes and agendas (Hutchings 2020).

Hutchings (ibid, 286) has described RT’s image as co-created through an ‘interactive dynamic’ between RT and the Western actors that deride it. In the current study, the failings of

domestic media in participants' eyes contributed significantly to RT's appeal. However, audiences also formed part of this dynamic as they saw their own political marginalisation reflected in RT's image. This affinity contributed to their trust in RT, and their engagement with RT's coverage in turn likely helped further legitimise these concerns and senses of victimhood. Furthermore, as a digitally-focused outlet (ibid, 287), RT was able to use social media to tap into the very individuals whose trust in traditional media the hybrid digital news environment had undermined. The outlet offered this self-proclaimed savvy information-seeking audience, who intensely valued social media as a news source, the alternative narratives that confirmed their suspicions.

Identification with RT's pariah image also led a number of participants to buy into RT's narratives about the victimisation of Russia. A dominant narrative reproduced by participants was that negative representations of Russia and RT in the West were a product of Russophobia and adopted positive stances towards Russia, whether that be around culture, geopolitics, or Putin's character. Thus, while RT's mission has commonly been depicted as disruptor or underminer of Western politics, participants' accounts demonstrated its potential effectiveness as a tool of soft power for Russia.

Participants had perhaps unrealistic expectations of news 'objectivity' – in their view, the news should be nothing but 'factual'. Their self-construction as objective fact-seekers who engaged with a variety of alternative and counter-hegemonic news sources to make up their own mind reinforced their disappointment with 'biased' mainstream media. This preoccupation with objectivity could partly be a response to popular characterisations (by domestic media and politicians) of issues like Brexit and Scottish independence as affective, subjective or 'post-truth' politics (Moss et al. 2020). In this sense, although RT's anti-establishment populist messaging was a key aspect of its appeal, and negative portrayals of 'mainstream media' are a key tenant of populist media more broadly (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019), these particular participants were not necessarily attracted to the outlet's 'low' populist communication styles (cf. Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2020b). While videos depicting humorous or bizarre human interest stories have been shown to be the most popular social media content produced by RT (Crilley et al. 2020), the participants of the current study said they were drawn to RT's respectable, factual content. This is partly a product of the current study's focus on domestic politics, which led to recruiting users engaged with RT around Brexit. However, this novel close-up look at politically engaged audiences demonstrates the way RT simultaneously maintains its self-representation as subversive and irreverent news alternative (see Hutchings 2020, 287; Crilley and Chatterje-Doody 2020b) and respectable international broadcaster. It also highlights the importance of conducting research with different types of audiences, given the contrast with quantitative findings of a correlation between perceived media bias and reduced overall news consumption (e.g. Ardèvol-Abreu and Gil de Zúñiga 2017).

Participants described RT as more 'truthful' or 'objective' than British (or American) news outlets, but this was inconsistent with their concessions (perhaps born of their eagerness to

construct themselves as rational and objective) that RT likely included pro-Russian bias. Indeed, one participant (Russel, 38, Belfast) who said ‘all media is propaganda’ did not hold this against RT; being a foreign outlet, he *expected* RT to have an agenda, in contrast with British outlets who were traitors sabotaging their own people’s interests. This again reflected the way in which the appeal of RT to participants was as much shaped by their disaffection with domestic outlets as with RT’s own image and content. The way in which RT was seen as a neutral outsider reporting on domestic political affairs – despite such admissions of probable pro-Russian bias – also revealed a view that Russia was not likely to have a significant position or agenda on political issues in Britain. This reflected participants’ ambivalence toward Russia and the way they saw it as outside the realm of domestic political relevance (in stark contrast with their perspectives on the US). In other words, RT may be biased, but not in a way that *mattered* to participants, who were concerned with issues they saw as Western problems. This was reflected in Russel’s comment that ‘If I was Putin I would sit back and let the West destroy itself, cos that’s where it’s going’.

These findings challenge characterisations of RT’s audiences as mere conspiracy theorists, passive dupes, or extremist fanatics. A small number of participants took an interest in conspiracy, while others uncritically accepted RT’s pro-Russian messages. However, RT’s appeal was more complex and nuanced than such characterisations acknowledge, and emerged as a product of Britain’s domestic political situation and news media environment. This interactional dynamic also challenges the linear ‘information war’ paradigm that is so often used to understand RT and Russia’s geopolitical position more broadly.

Conclusion: Implications for the Contemporary News Media Ecology

By elucidating the significance of domestic socio-political and media context to what engagement with an international (and in particular, non-Western) broadcaster like RT meant to a range of individuals, these findings contribute not only to understandings of international broadcasting and propaganda, but also of news and information consumption in the hybrid media era. Theories like the ‘disinformation order’ (Bennett and Livingston 2018) – which aptly identified the systemic nature of digitally-mediated democratic disruption fuelled by declining confidence in institutions – while noting the role of foreign agents, conceptualise these mostly in terms of bots, hackers and ‘troll farms’. RT, editorially influenced by its state sponsor (Elsawah and Howard 2020) but conducting its day-to-day operations independently as a legitimate news outlet (Hutchings 2020), does not fit neatly into our existing understandings of this order. In particular, its appeal to self-identified marginal individuals from a variety of political camps complicates dominant conceptualisations based on left-right polarisation and (radical) right nationalistic appeal. The extent of RT’s actual influence on political attitudes in the West are as yet unclear, but Kremlin spending on the outlet has continually increased and was recently estimated at US \$190 million a year (Elsawah and Howard 2020), making it a potential force that would be dangerous to ignore.

The way in which mistrust – whether of media or government – was the dominant register through which participants articulated their relative trust in or affinity with RT’s coverage supports prior claims of the impact of mistrust and political disaffection on alternative digital information seeking. Divisions and discontents, although effectively crystallised by debates around Brexit, have existed in Britain for many decades, and will continue for many more. Neither alternative digital news sources nor the anger and doubt they stoke are likely to lose prominence anytime soon, in Britain nor abroad. According to the Reuters Institute, although trust in news media rose slightly in 2021 amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, at 36% it is still 14 points lower than prior to the 2016 EU Referendum (Newman 2021). If, as suggested by the current findings, this disaffection alone is enough to drive some individuals to alternative news consumption, then a concerning opportunity may be open to foreign and other alternative outlets holding evident (geo-)political agendas. RT is likely to be able to continue to successfully appeal to disaffected groups using its self-styled outsider status and contrast with Western outlets, as are any outlets who may seek to emulate its relative success. Future studies should continue to investigate the appeal of such alternative news outlets in the context of different domestic political issues, including the less divisive but equally grievous issue of the ongoing pandemic and governments’ handling of it (particularly given RT’s clear anti-lockdown editorial stance, see Hall 2020). The findings of the current study reinforce the importance of doing close-up research with audiences; without speaking to individuals we cannot understand what online news engagement really means to them, particularly the complex intersections between their political attitudes and that engagement.

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