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Nation branding in the post-broadcast era: the case of RT

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Abstract

The paper examines Russia's international multinational broadcaster RT (formerly Russia Today), which was launched in 2005 with the direct support of the Russian government. RT promotes a distinct 'counter-hegemonic' brand of broadcasting. This paper goes beyond RT's branding to explore the broadcaster's nation branding of Russia. It considers the range of strategies employed by RT, placing these within RT's change of mission – from 'informing others about events and life in Russia' to comprising those 'who question more'. By analysing RT's coverage of the Republic of Crimea in 2016, and using a framing approach, the paper explores RT's branding of Russia and the online audience's engagement with this within the contemporary transnational, convergent media environment.

Introduction

Nation branding means presenting a country as a brand, a 'product' to an external audience through forms of strategic communication. It relies on a set of 'shared' values and experiences (Aronczyk, 2013), although the ongoing media convergence (Jenkins, 2006) adds a new twist to this relatively new phenomenon. Building on critical approaches to nation branding (Kaneva, 2011; Volcic and Andrejevic, 2016) this article questions the transformations of nation branding, using the case of an international broadcaster in the post-broadcast era (Turner and Tay, 2009) – RT (formerly Russia Today) – which is particularly adept at utilising multi-platform media (Hutchings et al., 2015).

Much of the literature tends to conflate various aspects of 'branding' Russia, predominantly discussing it in terms of public diplomacy (Simons, 2011; Feklyunina, 2008). This echoes Aronczyk's idea that nation branding is a form of 'soft power' and 'public or "popular" diplomacy' (2013:16). Emerging scholarship on RT reflects on its self-representation strategies (Strukov, 2016), the challenges linked to its soft power mission, and the shifting expectations of a globalising transnational audience (Hutchings et al., 2015). This paper strives to re-orient the discussion more towards Russia's nation branding strategies. However, it is important first to recognize that the notion of 'soft power' (Nye, 2004) is itself a contested term (e.g. Hall, 2010). It is generally understood as aiming to coopt or 'shape preferences of others' (ibid:5) by projecting an attractive image of a country. A country's favourable image is pragmatically believed to enhance its diplomatic efforts, economic advantages, cultural and symbolic capital. From this perspective, nation branding is one *aspect* of soft power. Further, Grix and Lee's (2013:526) definition of soft power as 'a discursive mechanism for increased agency in global affairs through the performative politics of attraction' brings soft power and nation branding closer together. A nation's brand is also created via discursive mechanisms, via the re-circulation of images, symbols and meanings.

Obviously, there may be differences between the actual, construed, projected and desired images of a nation (Stock, 2009). However, an exploration of these different components of nation branding is beyond the scope of this paper. What is more important here is the dynamic, processual nature of branding, which implies incompleteness (Lury, 2004), fluidity and ongoing re-construction. Meanings ascribed to a brand may become self-referential

and even disjointed from the originally envisaged ‘strategic vision of the country’ (Anholt, 2003:11). For instance, the more horizontal architecture of participatory digital media means that audiences (sub/consciously) engage in ‘hollowing out’ a nation’s image through their diverse and multiple readings of the brand, leaving it open to further alteration and experimentation.

This article explores RT’s branding of its founding nation, questioning which values and dimensions of the brand it promotes, using which strategies. It also describes current dilemmas for nation branding within the convergent media landscape. RT provides an exemplary case study because it represents a straightforward case of nation branding with clearly identified (corporate) actors and branding strategy. RT reflects the interests of the establishment – the state. Its remit, discussed below, aligns with a specific, recent and evolving nation branding strategy. Finally, RT was launched in English first, and then in other foreign languages. It is not available in Russian, revealing that it was created for an external, international, multilingual audience. Thus, it goes beyond the tension between nationhood and nation-branding, or ‘inward-’ versus ‘outward-directed branding’ (Stahlberg and Bolin, 2015:275).

Constructing a competitive, technologically-mediated narrative within an increasingly intensifying global cultural flow (Appadurai, 1996) and 24-hour news cycle is controlled by elites, supported by technologically-savvy and culturally-informed PR experts or branding teams (Stahlberg and Bolin, 2015). However, the marketing and production side of RT’s broadcasts (i.e. what happens behind the scenes) is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I focus on RT’s nation branding strategies as identified in its content.

The paper starts with an overview of RT’s broadcasting philosophy, then outlines the methodology and data analysis used in my research. Framing analysis (Entman, 1993) and Gitlin’s interpretation of ideological hegemony (2003) help to deconstruct RT’s media coverage and examine its specific components, in the context of the Ukraine-Russia conflict which was triggered by Euromaidan protests in Kiev in 2013 and concluded with Russia’s re-unification with/ annexation of Crimeaⁱⁱ in March 2014. The study examines one year’s coverage (2016) of issues related to Crimea, to demonstrate the framing strategies used in (i) a number of relevant RT reports in this period, and (ii) related multi-platform media providing commentary about these reports.

RT’s evolution and its broadcasting ‘philosophy’

This section traces the key moments that established RT – an international multi-language broadcaster founded with the direct support of the Russian government in 2005. RT is part of a larger media conglomerate, TV-Novosti, which is strategically important for Russia (Shepovalnikov, 2012). RT firstly began broadcasting in English, then launched channels in Arabic in 2007 and Spanish in 2009. Next, it offered locally-based content for the USA and UK and, in 2015, began providing ‘alternative-to-mainstream online news and comments, with a strong social media focus on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube’ in German and French (RT, 2015).

According to its editor-in-chief, M. Simonyan, RT combines the ‘professional format’ of the BBC, CNN and Euronews, reflects ‘Russia’s opinion of the world’, and presents a ‘more balanced picture’ of Russia (RIA Novosti, 2005). However, the station’s original approach proved rather rigid and lacked broader appeal. RT interwove global news with Russian-based ones to draw attention to the country’s affairs and its regional influence. As a result, the audience viewed it as a direct mouthpiece of Russian propaganda. After the Georgian war in 2008, its coverage gradually changed (Ioffe, 2010).

In 2009 Russia Today was rebranded as RT to make its logo more ‘universal’ (Shepovalnikov, 2012) and, possibly, to attract more viewers by downplaying any reference to Russia in its title – as Simonyan remarks: ‘who is interested in watching news from Russia all day long?’ (von Twickel, 2010). In 2010 RT’s slogan was changed to ‘Question More’, to ‘provide an alternative point of view’ (Shepovalnikov, 2012). Thus, its activity is similar to other broadcasters pursuing a ‘counter-flow’ remit, such as Al Jazeera and Press TV.

RT’s new tagline reflects its positioning, aiming to appeal to audiences who have a natural anti-establishment, anti-corporation and anti-western (anti-American) predisposition. ‘Question More’ describes both the approach to (i) modes of journalism, and (ii) the type of the viewer/audience they are targeting. RT legitimizes a more hybrid and flexible form of reporting which includes gossip, news as entertainment and deconstructing the mainstream narrative. This ‘counter-hegemonic struggle’ presupposes the absence of any ‘objectivity’ and sanctions an eclectic and opportunistic approach. As a result, ‘all means are acceptable’ (Hutchings et al., 2015:645) and there is an ‘excuse’ for RT’s inconsistent and, at times, unreliable reporting. It also enables RT to refute any criticism of its output, since it can be framed within the suppression of a ‘free speech’ argument. This tactic is similar to the ‘information war’, or what journalist Petr Pomerantzev calls the ‘weaponization’ of information (2014), whereby some Russian media (including RT) no longer produce straightforward propaganda but diverse, and occasionally contradictory, accounts which cannot easily be verified, in order to create confusion and doubt. This notion of RT’s information counter-flow is very broad and encompasses anti-western views, conspiracy theories and a particular type of journalistic practice. I will discuss each of these in turn.

RT’s anti-westernism is structured around the belief that, ‘while Russia is far from perfect, the West as a whole is just as bad, and the US a great deal worse’ (O’Sullivan, 2014). Reports focus on issues such as racial unrest or growing social inequality in the USA, the surge of migrants during the Syrian crisis, and problems with multiculturalism in Western Europe. In relation to conspiracy theories and journalistic practice, ‘RT thrives in a 24-hour news environment in which global crises become subject to rumours, counter-rumours and unverified accounts superseding one another in a cauldron of conflicting information and unanswered questions – fertile territory for RT’s conspiratorial ethos’ (Hutchings et al., 2015:631). This sometimes backfires, however, e.g. in 2015 Ofcom sanctioned RT over a ‘series of misleading and biased articles’ about the BBC’s coverage (Jackson, 2015).

RT also uses social media to promote itself (Strukov, 2016). The editor, Simonyan, gives numerous interviews to the media and academics (e.g. Dougherty, 2013) and mixes everyday trivial posts on her personal Twitter account with ‘political proselytising’ (Hutchings et al., 2015:650). In its post-broadcast reporting, RT actively explores what its editor calls ‘the future of television’ (von Twickel, 2010) – that is, making content available via multiple platforms, such as cable, satellite, YouTube and Facebook (RT Play). RT’s online content is free, and people are encouraged to reuse it (Shepovalnikov, 2012). RT estimated that it had 1.4 million subscribers to its English language programming in 2014 (O’Sullivan, 2014), but this figure should be treated with caution, since there is a lack of verifiable data on RT’s popularity (Sitdikov, 2015), and there have been accusations that RT is a state propaganda tool (Ioffe, 2010; O’Sullivan, 2014), part of an ‘information war’ (Snegovaya, 2015).

RT’s counter-flow remit is linked to the nation’s brand. RT signals its exceptionalism, echoing Russia’s ‘special’ stance as a bearer of the ‘conservative values’ that uphold purity and tradition, as well as links to the idea of Russia’s unique mission and ‘messianic’ vision (Feklyunina, 2008:622). By challenging the key broadcasters’ monopoly, it also alludes to Russia’s global ambitions. Its remit is to challenge the framework within which it operates (i.e. the broadcasting practice of well-established western news organisations like CNN and BBC) and demonstrate its difference from other providers. In a way, it is similar to the negative

identity model (Gudkov, 2004), which defines Russia's national identity as 'against' something or someone. Finally, RT's counter-hegemonic standpoint is partially grounded on the image of a (Soviet) dissident, someone who refuses to conform to hegemonic pressures and is, therefore, 'cool'. This 'cool-ness' (Valaskivi, 2016) might be appealing to a more rebellious audience that wants to be trendy. These initial insights into RT will be expanded on in the analysis section below, which explores RT's framing of Russia's brand and the audience's related prosumption (consumption and production online) practices.

Methodology

The study reviewed one year's coverage (01/01/2016–31/12/2016) of developments associated with Crimea's 're-unification' with Russia. Crimea is a significant part of Russia's 'sphere of privileged interests' in the near abroad (Medvedev, 2008). As the conflict in eastern Ukraine is ongoing and Crimea's new status has only partially been accepted by the world community, it is important for the country to maintain its momentum (e.g. the Sochi Olympic Games) in broadcasting a positive image. In addition, recent shifts in global rhetoric following Brexit, Trump's election as US president and NATO's increased presence in the EU may also affect Russia's branding efforts.

To ensure my sample's representativeness, I ran a number of word searches for 'Ukraine', 'Crimea', 'crisis', 'conflict' and 'annexation', and monitored key concepts in relevant media reports. As a result, I developed a list of relevant search terms, including 'Crimean Republic' (I), 'Crimea Minsk' (II) and 'Crimean Tatars' (III). These sets predominantly cover politico-economic, legal (compliance with Minsk agreementsⁱⁱⁱ), and socio-cultural aspects respectively (the controversial Ukrainian entry about Crimean Tatars won the 2016 Eurovision Song Contest).

My analytical approach is informed by Gitlin's bottom-up process of ideological hegemony, which entails promoting "common sense" narratives (2003:10-11). The overall framework used to trace RT's nation branding strategies includes examining: (1) direct statements and assertions, (2) inferential assumptions, and (3) critical omissions or absences. The study looks at the most commonly-used frames, shifts in emphasis, tone and voices present. Framing is a process which makes selected aspects of a "perceived reality... more salient in a communicating text in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (Entman, 1993:52). I regard frames as heuristic devices employed to interpret the world, and these will be identified on the basis of contexts, definitions and factors drawn from the 95 selected news reports (Table 1). I then cross-referenced these with other relevant reports (beyond the monitoring period) to inform my analysis.

The online searches were conducted using the UK version of RT. I found 53 relevant stories in the 'Crimean Republic' (I) category: 21 about the EU (e.g. after-reintegration sanctions, including 2 on NATO and security), 11 on Ukraine and 21 on Crimea-related matters. The 'Crimea Minsk' search (II) returned 34 relevant stories: 23 about the 'west' (sanctions, EU, USA, 2 on security), 4 on Russia and 7 on Ukraine. The 'Crimean Tatars' search (III) found 17 relevant reports, some of which also featured in the I and II samples (e.g. security). The remaining 8 stories comprised 5 about the 2016 Eurovision Song Contest, 2 on Crimean Tatars from a historical perspective, and 1 covering the prevention of a Ukrainian terrorist plot in Crimea. The number of articles in each set show that politico-economic issues (I) are the priority, followed by legal and security issues (II) and then socio-cultural (III) matters.

Several stories from each set were selected for closer analysis on the basis of: (1) relevance, and (2) their online popularity ('trending'). In set I, these are celebrations marking

the second anniversary of Crimea's re-unification (18/03), and Europeans' changing opinions of Crimea (16/03). In set II: reports about Russian President Putin's stance on Ukraine after 'a foiled [Ukrainian] terrorist plot' in Crimea (19/08), and the German Chancellor Merkel's pronouncements about the EU and NATO (07/07). In set II: a report about Tatars being deported (19/05), an account of Eurovision (14/05), and an editorial piece (15/05). As well as the reports, audiences' comments about them were also analysed (see Tables 2-4 about the dynamic of commenting and re-tweeting).

Analysis

The analysis below is structured around RT's techniques and tactics for promoting a positive image of Russia (direct and indirect strategies, as well as omissions).

How is Russia framed in the reports?

Positive direct and indirect branding strategies

Events to mark the second anniversary of Crimea's 're-unification' (set I) provided an obvious occasion to boost Russia's profile via direct positive branding. Starting with a photo of the Russian flag and a man in Cossack clothing, the report highlights the extent – 'massive' – and nature of the celebrations – a 'gorgeous firework display' (18/03). RT used this occasion to reassert the democratic nature of Crimea's unification (via a referendum), quoting Putin, as the embodiment of Russia: '*this historical justice had been long awaited and dreamed of without exaggeration by millions of people*'. The fact that festivities in Sevastopol only attracted 5,000 people is not noted – instead the account attempts to demonstrate support from across the whole of Russia (a rally in Moscow, Chechnya, etc.). As a way to strengthen the assertion of growing mass support for Crimea's status, RT ran another report prior to the anniversary (16/03) which quoted an invited expert (academic R. Sakwa) and commented that politicians from several EU states had confirmed that support for the 'people's choice' among 'westerners' was growing, despite the western media's '*perverted picture of events in Crime[sic]*'. The article's title: '*1 in 3 Europeans say Crimea is Russia 2 years after historic referendum*' is somewhat misleading, as only a small part of it discusses the survey. Its representativeness can also be questioned, since the survey was '*ordered by Russia's Sputnik news agency*' and '*revealed that roughly a third of Europeans [] consider Crimea a part of Russia*'. However, foregrounding other aspects, such as the 'perverted' western media coverage, diverts attention from those considerations.

Other examples of explicit branding include reports (set II) depicting Putin as the embodiment of Russia (e.g. featuring his image or name under headlines such as '*Putin: Russia not going to cut off relations with Ukraine over Kiev's plot in Crimea*', 19/08), the country's role in Syria (implying Russia's leading role in restoring a multipolar world, 18/05), and the EU (where Russia presents itself as an equal player). Putin (and less frequently other official figures) are quoted regarding the main issues. A miscellaneous report (set III) about Russia providing gas supplies to a freezing Ukrainian border town (12/11) is a clear case of explicit positive branding.

A more indirect strategy includes mainstreaming a theme across time, use of imagery and shifts of emphasis. For instance, set II consistently shows that Russia is abiding to the Minsk agreements, (unlike Ukraine), and even the reports about EU's sanctions are used to reinforce this idea. Eleven out of 21 stories assert that Russia is fulfilling the agreements, so sanctions should therefore be lifted – or they declare that various EU states, like France, are

challenging the need to prolong the sanctions. Set I includes a large number of reports accompanied by picturesque and tranquil scenes of Crimea, incidentally promoting a positive image of Russia's attractive new asset, and reaffirming the peace and stability 'granted' via re-unification.

Set II shifts the emphasis from a negative perception to a more nuanced delineation of attitudes towards Russia. For instance: '*Putin: "EU is Russia's friend, NATO is the problem"*', 18/06, '*Friend of foe? State Dept, Pentagon split on whether Russia poses threat*', 26/02, and '*Deterrence and Dialogue: Merkel says Russia key to European security but defends NATO build up*', 07/07. This framing (07/07) includes positive statements such as Merkel's statement that '*long-lasting security can only be ensured in cooperation with, not in defiance of, Russia*'. Although the report continues by discussing NATO's military build-up in Eastern Europe, it provides further quotations ("*We are interested in positive relations with Russia,*" Merkel added'), recounts low levels of public support in Europe for NATO's activity, and links to articles with a positive focus on Russia (e.g. 18/06). Above all, the report indirectly asserts Russia's stance as an important and equal global player.

The aspect of voice and agency is important. In most of the reports about Crimea agency is ascribed to – or at least linked to – Russia (set I). There are 2 Crimea-centric articles on the economy (e.g. foreign investment); 3 on human rights (its openness to external 'inspections', which implies democracy and transparency); 1 on human rights violations in Ukraine); and 1 on public support for Russia. Russia's agency is clear in 5 reports about security (NATO; terrorist threat from Ukraine; installing radars in Crimea (reinforcing Russia's military capabilities) and banning a Tatar extremists' organisation in Crimea), and 3 stories about celebrating the second anniversary of re-unification, with related opinion polls. There are also 2 miscellaneous reports and 5 political stories (e.g. internal – Crimea's new status within Russia and Putin's popularity; external – Russia's role in challenging a UN resolution 'sponsored' by Ukraine). So, although 'Crimea' is featured in the reports, it is generally 'spoken about on behalf of' Russia. The stories directly concerning Russia have the most urgency, importance and weight.

Indirect branding occurs by mixing news with entertainment, and involving social media. In this sample, RT used the story of a Crimean-born chess player winning an international competition (set I) to incidentally remind the audience about Crimea and boost Russia's international reputation. However, a sensitive issue like Crimea does not lend itself to extensive use in entertainment and tabloidisation. The logic of incorporating social media in the reports (e.g. tweets, YouTube clips, etc.) largely follows the idea of direct or indirect support of the framing. Thus, the *Deterrence and Dialogue* (07/07) report in set II uses RT's own tweet about a survey of German attitudes to NATO alongside previous RT footage of Kosovo, linking this to Crimea (18/03) and a report on the Tatars. Set III (19/05) criticizes 'so-called' experts on Ukraine, citing Twitter correspondence between two users. They seem to have been chosen at random and, interestingly, the popularity of online resources is not the main factor for their selection.

Thus, the framing here is mostly clustered around Russia as a global player advancing a multipolar world (Russia's involvement in Crimea, Syria, challenging EU sanctions and NATO), as a powerful protector of its region (speaking on behalf of Crimea), and Putin as the embodiment of Russia.

Constructing a brand by directly or indirectly attacking an opponent

RT's reporting within this stream echoes the Russian saying that defence is the best form of attack. Direct attacks (set I) include criticisms of the EU's sanctions on Russia; a claim that Russia is planning to respond with 'counter-measures' (16/12). Russia 'blasts' the EU due to

Crimeans' visa status (30/11); talks on behalf (or instead of) European actors (e.g. Medvedev on sanctions (13/02)). The recent report (set II) *The art of the deal: what Russia wants from Donald Trump* (18/01/2017) highlights Russia's assertiveness and global aspirations: *'Moscow's key demands shall likely include an end to US interference in the internal politics of countries in Russia's hinterland [] Putin will also seek a commitment to no further eastward expansion of NATO. While recognition of Russia's re-absorption of Crimea is important, so too the Kremlin will press for Washington to pressure Ukraine to fully implement the Minsk Agreement, which was supposed to resolve the Donbas conflict...'*

RT frequently employs a mirroring technique. For instance, at the start of the Russia-Ukraine conflict (2013-2014), RT often reversed perceptions by implying that pro-Maidan supporters belonged to a far-right movement and depicting Russian soldiers in eastern Ukraine as peace-minded forces (Miazhevich, 2015). Similarly, set II reports portray Ukraine in a negative light (e.g. radicals commemorating the anniversary of Euromaidan, or attacking Russian banks in Kiev), maintaining Russia's stance that the Ukrainian conflict was instigated by radicals and extremists.

This type of counter-attack is used in response to negative stereotypes and 'victimisation' of Russia by the west, stemming from a perception that 'the Western mass media often apply double standards in their coverage of Russia []' (Feklyunina, 2008:620). It culminates in N. Clark's (15/05) editorial (set III), stating that *'the Western elite [lead an] obsessional and relentless new Cold War against Russia... For daring to resist Western regime change plans in Syria and elsewhere, Russia should be sanctioned and isolated and not be hosting international events watched by millions of people around the world!'* Clark also perceives a bias in the Eurovision Song Contest's (Eurovision) running order and 'so-called' expert jury, concluding that the result *'shows to everyone the limits of democracy in the West'*. This obsession with winning is particularly peculiar, as Eurovision is viewed with some ambivalence in Russia, especially after a drag queen performer, Conchita, won the competition in 2014.

These kinds of direct attack are supplemented with other techniques, such as discrediting an opponent. Thus, depicting Ukraine negatively entails invoking a contrast – frequently alongside a positive branding of Russia. Set I includes 14 stories about diverse issues in Ukraine: 3 on politics, 4 on law, 3 on human rights issues, and 4 on energy. All of these paint Ukraine in an adverse light, for instance, its destabilising relationships, (pre-annexation) repression of its citizens, 'looting' resources after the fall of the USSR, and masterminding an energy blockade. The need for a referendum is explained as *'ousting of the democratically elected president of Ukraine and the installation of a nationalist-backed regime, which almost immediately declared war on the pro-Russian regions in the southeast'* (17/03). In this way, Russia's actions are framed positively as pro-democratic and legitimate.

Set III is mostly driven by the controversy around Eurovision 2016, when a change to the voting system resulted in Russia being beaten into third place, below the winner Ukraine's *'controversial piece about Stalin's deportation of Crimean Tatars'* (17/05). Five stories are constructed around *'the propaganda war against Russia'* (25/02), where *"it would have been disastrous if Russia had won the contest," a Eurovision source told the Mirror earlier, revealing that "feeling is that the European Broadcasting Union know how unpopular a Russia win would be and will do everything possible to help the other favourites to victory"* (14/05). RT also ran 2 stories on Crimean Tatars immediately after the contest – both to distance contemporary Russia from Stalin's actions towards Tatars (19/05), and to criticize Ukraine for 'neglecting' Tatars after the fall of the USSR (18/05).

Thus, RT portrays Russia as a leading player. News is predominantly presented from the Russian perspective (despite its remit to 'Question More'). Recurring themes include tackling unflattering stereotypes towards Russia and holding the west 'responsible for the

negative image' (Feklyunina, 200:626); showing that Russia adheres to international norms (especially in set II); providing an alternative view of world affairs with Russia as a central actor; and protecting its 'hinterlands'.

Omissions and silences

The final strategy involves other indirect ways of framing, for instance, omitting certain issues or facts. O'Sullivan (2014) states that RT's overall trend for silence involves either downplaying or omitting stories that are unfavourable for the country, such as economic recession, budget cuts and sanctions – there are no reports of the economic impact of the sanctions on Russia, for example. Other forms of framing (which are prevalent in Russian-language media) like protecting Russian speakers in neighbouring countries, or the notion that Russians and Ukrainians are 'one people' with a common past and shared culture, as Putin stated in 2013, are left out. However, RT uses more sophisticated tactics than mere omissions. The Crimean Tatars example reveals that RT chose to factually report the issue (Stalin's deportation of Tatars) instead of ignoring it. This aimed to demonstrate a certain objectivity and unbiased coverage and show that RT/Russia was not afraid of controversial issues.

In doing so, RT employs an incoherent, ambivalent and contradictory framing. While the article '*Crimea River: Decades after Tatar deportation, the situation is far from black and white*' in set III mentions the Tatars' deportation in 1944 (19/05), it constructs a historical narrative which highlights certain aspects, such as Stalinism and the deportation of other ethnic groups, whilst downplaying other significant facts, e.g. the Tatars' involvement with Nazi Germany. It also criticizes other media coverage '*of the situation*' as '*still wildly inaccurate, selective and misinformed*' (counter-attack and mirroring). This article depicts Crimean Tatars positively, in complete contrast to a report less than a month apart (26/04), which accused their top legislative body, the Mejlis, of extremism and banned it. This kind of inconsistency and ambiguity remains unchallenged, as RT's 'counter-hegemonic' remit means that it has no obligation to develop the topic further or follow it up.

Proactively tackling controversies instead of ignoring them

Another example shows how RT uses dilemmas for its own advantage. A recent high-profile scandal was the on-air resignation of two journalists – newsreader Liz Wahl and reporter Sara Firth – in the wake of the 2014 Russia-Ukraine conflict amplified by the annexation of Crimea. They allegedly resigned in protest against participating in the broadcaster's 'propaganda'. In response, RT released a statement that: '[...] when someone makes a big public show of a personal decision, it is nothing more than a self-promotional stunt. We wish Liz the best of luck on her chosen path' (06/03/2014)¹.

Although this episode was unexpected and potentially damaging for RT, it was skilfully managed on both its broadcasting and social media platforms (e.g. Simonyan's blog alleged that Firth had received another job offer a fortnight before her 'spontaneous' resignation²). In a way, in fact, it actually boosted RT's popularity (Halliday, 2014), and could even have been a deliberate strategy either for the reporters to secure employment elsewhere and/or the TV station, which turned it into a PR event to attract a wider audience.

This case resurfaced in January 2017 when another prominent journalist, Abby Martin, 'addressed accusations that her work for RT was part of a Kremlin propaganda effort and

¹ <https://www.rt.com/usa/rt-reacts-liz-wahl-042/>

² <http://m-simonyan.livejournal.com/82734.html>

explained that the NYT [New York Times] had falsely reported on her resignation' (10/01/2017). The NYT had mistakenly linked her resignation to the previous two, although Martin resigned a year after deciding to 'voice her opinion' on RT *'over Russia's involvement in Crimea'*. A very detailed report centres on Martin's Twitter demands that NYT retract the article and her Skype interview for RT. The report (as well as numerous comments after it) reiterates Martin's line: *"If this [RT] is a Kremlin mouthpiece, why was I able to have my opinion shown on primetime television on RT for an entire year after that happened?"* This inference of RT's high standards of journalistic practice via Martin's 'performative authentication' (Hutchings et al., 2015:642) results in positive PR for Russia

The article also attacks the western establishment and media, stressing that it bullies RT – and, by association, Russia – unjustifiably: e.g. Martin criticizes a recent [ODNI] report that *'reeks of desperation and it's lashing out on behalf of the establishment... A third of it is full of bashing RT. It is absolutely insane, ridiculous and embarrassing to say the least'*. Apart from attracting attention (*'what a publicity bonanza for RT'*), this report enhances RT's reporting authority: *'many turn to RT for its unbiased views'* and extends this credibility to Russia by implication: *'if RT is not afraid of criticism, then Putin is not afraid of criticism either'* (online comments). It strengthens the frame of 'raising the standards of reporting', 'uncovering truth' and challenging the western establishment, as well as reasserting Russia's confidence.

Before analysing how RT's online audience perceive the projected image of Russia, I will situate RT's coverage of Crimea within global information flows. While this reporting caters for the Russian-speaking diaspora, it also fulfils other goals – moving such incidents from the periphery to a core narrative of information flows. By positioning them on a par with other global events and linking them to a wider EU/NATO agenda, Russia subtly attempts to shape perceptions of its sphere of influence, in both the 'near' and more distant abroad. This is especially evident in set II, where the Minsk agreements are used as a tool to reiterate Russia's position as a powerful, modern state, criticising sanctions and highlighting western bias towards Russia. However, in reality, post-annexed Crimea is generally ignored by mainstream broadcasters, who are preoccupied with world affairs such as Trump's election and post-Brexit Europe. Thus, it remains in the margins of the global media environment.

Russia's framing and online audience

This section examines how participants in networked cross-media practices engage with RT's framing.

RT's reports and online comments

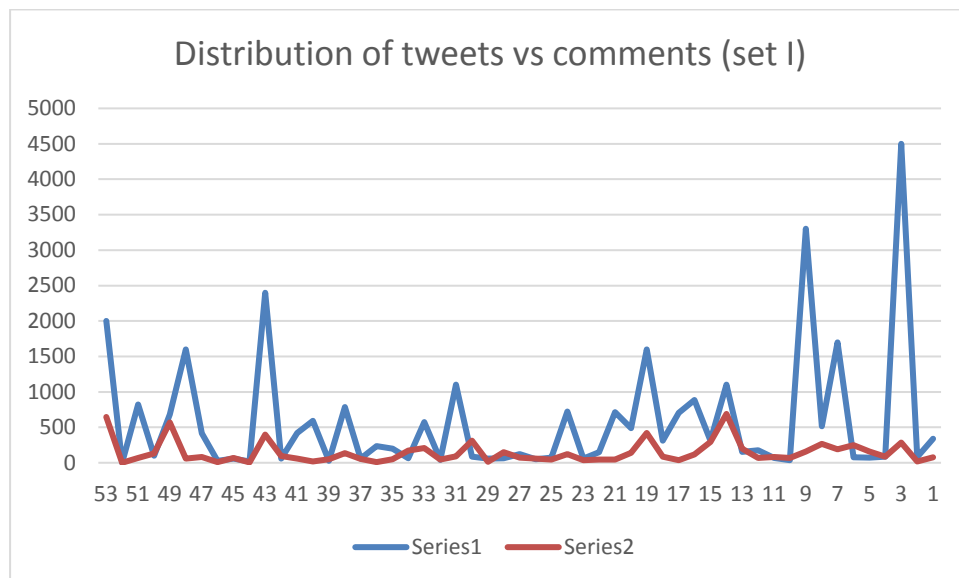
I analysed users' comments on the reports selected for in-depth analysis. RT moderates the comments (e.g. an article on the re-unification of Crimea (18/05) had 134 conversations and 43 postings removed). However, one comment which included Russian swearwords and asserted the irreversible nature of re-unifying Crimea remained (*'Xui tebe v rot a ne Krim'*), calling into question the level of scrutiny the posts are subjected to, and the moderation rules. Because the comments are anonymous (submitted under arbitrary usernames), some of them are probably online trolls, so the findings should be treated with caution. Social media involvement varied between the three thematic sets (Table 1) and, because of the high popularity of reports in the smallest sample (set III), the findings are slightly skewed (especially regarding Twitter). Excluding set III, the average number of re-tweets and comments were 715 and 140 respectively.

Table 1. Tweets and comments related to the articles in sets I-III

Set	Title/Sample	Average Tweets	Average Comments	Max Tweet	Max Comments	Min Tweets	Min comments
I	Crimean Republic (53)	848.7	137.8	5,200	846	0	0
II	Crimea Minsk (34)	582.6	143.4	4,500	689	0	0
III	Crimean Tatars (8)	1,839.6	493.5	4,500	1,063	162	40
	I and II	715	140				
	I-III	1,090.3	258.2				

The social media figures were checked on 01/02/2017 and there was no obvious correlation between the number of tweets and comments under an article. Some articles were retweeted over 2,000 times, but hardly any comments were posted, while others (in sets I and II) did not trend on social media at all. The social media dynamic (Tables 2-4) reflects the chronological order of reporting (with the most recent report ascribed number 1).

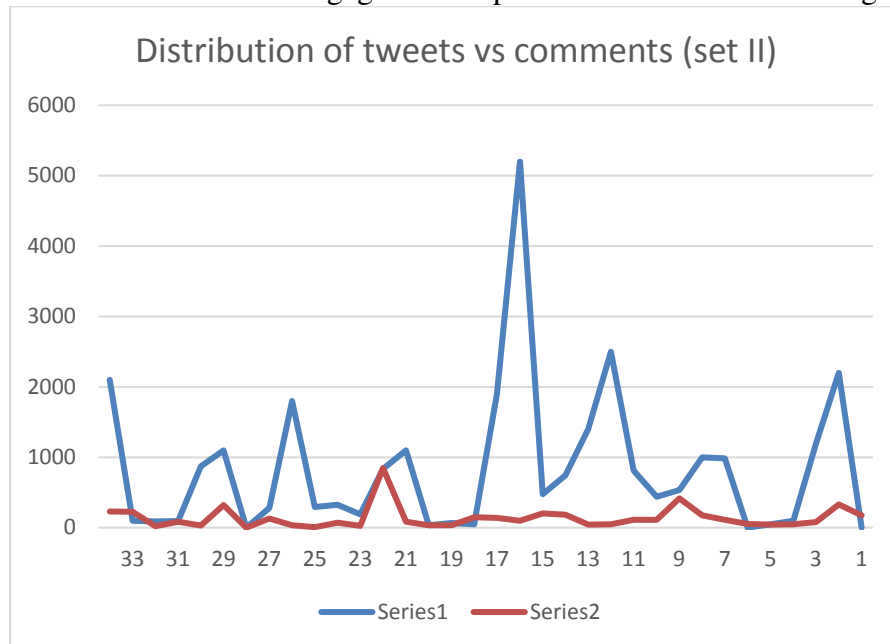
Table 2. Social media engagement: reports on the Crimean Republic



Several reports in set I, on a diverse range of subjects, were picked up on Twitter (Table 2). One, titled ‘5-yr Ukraine ban proposed for Le Pen after her ‘no illegal annexation’ comment on Crimea’ (04/01) had 4,500 tweets and 284 comments; the article suggesting that the US should sanction Soros and Poroshenko for destabilising Ukraine (15/11) had 3,300 tweets and 157 comments; the piece on European public support for Crimea in Russia 16/03 had 2,400 and 397 respectively; and the report called ‘Crimeans vote to give up electricity contract with Ukraine even if it means more power cut-offs’ according to the survey ordered by Putin (01/01) gained 2,000 tweets and 648 comments. The first two reports use indirect nation branding (by attacking Ukraine and US), while the second two use a direct approach (European and Crimean support for Russia). Several other stories retweeted more than 1,000 times were on security (NATO, Russia’s radar station in Crimea, the Ukrainian terror plot in Crimea), on Putin’s

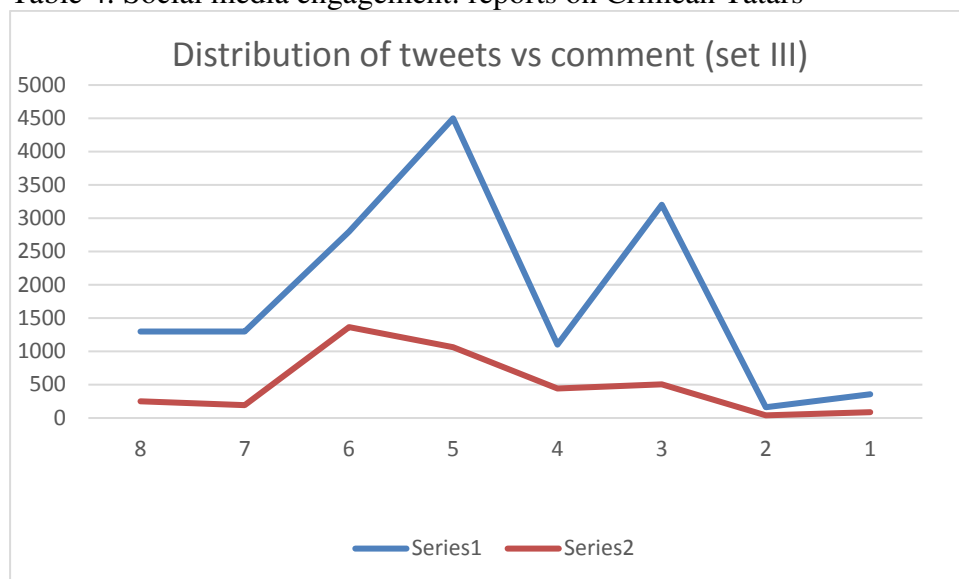
support in Russia, and the Czech president asserting that Crimea should ‘never be returned to Ukraine’. So, the public picked up the reports dealing the various dimensions of Russian brand.

Table 3. Social media engagement: reports on the Crimea-Minsk agreements



There was one anomaly in set II (Table 3) – an extremely popular report called ‘*Putin: EU is Russia’s friend, NATO is the problem*’ (18/06), which gained 5,200 tweets but only 97 comments. It is difficult to ascertain why the frame of ‘Putin as embodiment of Russia’ became so popular on Twitter. It might be because set II had a narrower set of frames (Minsk agreements) and more formulaic reporting (dominated by authority voices), and was therefore less suited to extensive online discussions.

Table 4. Social media engagement: reports on Crimean Tatars



The most popular reports in set III (Table 4) were on Eurovision and the ‘secret’ Ukrainian terror plot; the two least popular were about Crimean Tatars. Patterns of tweets and comments largely overlap, reflecting more genuine public support of the topic, and a rapid increase of interest immediately after the Eurovision media event.

There were instances of flaming (e.g. 19/05 from set III), trolling behaviour (a user posting one-liners e.g. *'Americans are surprised that in Russia people have their own children', 'USA are crazy about Crimea. Russia rubbed the USA's nose in it when the US thought they had it ...LOL', 'Russia made peace in Crimea, USA made Abu Ghraib in Iraq'* (16/03), and suspicions about the presence of trolls: *'I don't care about Crimea or Ukraine, it's a Slavic business, I want Moldova united with motherland Romania, now I'm waiting for Russian trolls!'*). The users often stated where they were from (possibly to add credibility to their comments), for instance, *'I'm in Australia and believe Crimea is part of Russia'* (18/03), which again raises questions about who is behind this and what their agenda is. Comments like, *'RT is no longer what it used to be'* (10/01), or *'people do not come to RT'* articulate doubts about the level and genuine nature of public support for RT.

Typically, the comments repeat an article's main points and seem to fall into a clear-cut dichotomy in line with RT's remit (Russia is great – the west is hypocritical, etc.). The most common RT frames are followed up in the commentaries. Namely, the 18/03 report (set 1) triggered negative attitudes towards Ukraine and America/EU, alongside positive statements about Russia: *'need to continue unite the Slavic countries', 'congratulations [] for your democracy policies', 'Crimea returned to where it always belonged', 'a very moderate intervention', [Putin] is too decent to cut gas [to Ukraine], 'Russia-jack-in-the-box' [will outwit everyone], 'western media has no shame'*. Other posts repeat RT's frame that *'Sanctions will never work against Russia, the people are the worlds greatest stoics'* (16/03), talk about stability and peace in Crimea as opposed to conflict-torn Ukraine, compare Kosovo and Crimea (18/03), reiterate Abby Martin's contention of bias in the Western media, and argue that RT is not a propaganda outlet (10/01). Here the audience reproduces and reinforces RT's 'philosophy'.

At the same time, 'supporters' of the Russian brand can interpret the framing in their own ways. For instance, there are multiple readings of anti-westernism, as users conflate various groups and post xenophobic outpourings on RT's online platform. The report (18/03) from set I contains claims like: *'Crimea is Russia and Russia is Crimea. Nothing the US and West can do about that is going to change the reality!'*, *'Crimea is part of Russia. Nazis/Westerners hate this fact'*, *'Lucky the Russians got Crimea back, Ukrops are selling everything off, they would have sold off Crimea too, to the Turks or some other filthy Nation.'* Some users also try to amend ambiguous reporting – one 'corrects' the shift in emphasis about Merkel's stance on Russia (07/07): *'In simpler terms, this is what Merkel is saying: We are friends (when it suits us), but we retain the right to treat you as an enemy'*.

RT's framing of Russia undergoes certain permutations once exposed to an even more diverse online audience. Comments (07/07) attacking the west, e.g. *'The only threat to Germany is being an American pawn'* are rebuffed by responses such as *'Russia should drop cold war mentality and forget, that they will have some spheres of influence in Europe'*. At the same time, RT's framing of Russia as 'not afraid of criticism' reduces the weight of opposing comments. By allowing critical comments to remain online, RT enhances the framing of Russia as 'in favour of a more democratic world order', ensuring 'a plurality of positions' (Feklyunina, 2008:615).

The editorial on Eurovision (15/05) with 11,400 tweets and 517 comments illustrates the diversity of demographic and subcultural groups and how their backgrounds manifest in different 'readings' of the report. Some of them uphold RT's position (*'another stab at Russia', 'bullying'*, not letting Russia host the event); some criticize Russia (homophobic attitudes, Russian expats voting, fair running order); others use irony to argue against accusations of vote rigging: *'Russian phone-hacking is not what it used to be'*; while some users highlight the politicized nature of previous entries (*'Waterloo'*) and the historic (rather than political) nature of Ukraine's entry; whilst others focus on Tatars (Stalin was right because Tatars *'fought*

shoulder to shoulder with Nazis’).

Thus, RT’s reliance on the logic and shared practices of digital participatory media cultures (Jenkins, 2006) is problematic. The online presumption of RT’s audience follows the logic of connective rather than collective action (Bennet and Segerberg, 2012). Those users who share a similar viewpoint (either pro- or anti-Russian) do not necessarily feel affiliated to other users (or RT itself), so RT’s main framings of Russia might not be supported, could be misunderstood, and even challenged (ironically, ‘questioned more’ by users who cannot be held accountable for their ridicule or subversion). This is especially true at a time when the new mediascape lacks clarity on self-governance, mutual-governance and regulation.

Users’ motivations for participating in social media are also extremely varied, ranging from affirmations of national identity (for instance, by a member of the Russian transnational diaspora), to others who depend on a technologically-conditioned and mediated selfhood. While some of the groups are attracted to RT by its remit, others are driven by a ‘consumer culture’, their identities shaped by online presumption and self-commodification. Some individuals strive to achieve some sort of narrative closure from RT’s deliberately contradictory coverage; while others are attracted by the ‘gamification’ principle, in which they compete to score the highest number of re-tweets, followers, popularity based on ironic observations on RT’s coverage, etc. RT’s favouring of conspiracy theories adds another stimulus to encourage audiences to engage in this ‘game’ and assemble various pieces of the puzzle into a different, coherent narrative.

Conclusion

This study reviewed RT’s ‘counter-hegemonic’ remit, which accommodates a greater flexibility in news reporting, changing consumer prerogatives (e.g. entertainment and provocation), and growing individualistic sentiment (a logic of self-empowerment via digital participatory culture, the need for personalisation, etc.). RT’s current framing of Russia follows a set of well-established ideas including ‘Russia as a great power’ and ‘an equal partner of western countries’ (Feklyunina, 2008:612-613), a key player on the international stage ‘at ease with itself and the world’ (Hutchings et al., 2015:631). However, the strategies for promoting Russia’s image have become more complex and sophisticated.

The research showed that RT’s nation branding efforts involve positive direct and indirect strategies, as well as omissions and silences. Some of these strategies result in incongruencies and contradictions in framing, such as Russia being depicted as both an assertive global player and a victim of western bullying.

Despite a perceived lack of coherent framing, RT’s counter-hegemonic agenda ensures sustainability of the key narratives. It also forms part of the strategic principle driving its nation branding communication. By continuously challenging a ‘corrupt and hypocritical western establishment’, RT implies the existence of an alternative power centre – Russia – ‘holding it to account’, acting as a guardian of conservative values and an equal actor in global affairs, thereby promoting a positive image of Russia. Thus, the politics of attraction are based on a counterintuitive principle, with nation branding being predominantly based on a counter-hegemonic position and negation implying positive attributes through the ‘deconstruction’ of an opponent.

This analysis also revealed that RT’s nation branding strategies range from subtle branding methods to more propaganda-like approaches, treading a fine line between freedom of expression and subversive manipulation of information. This dimension of study warrants a separate inquiry. Another question which should be investigated further is how far the projected image of Russia is shared or ‘accepted’ by its audience (especially if the country’s performance

diverges from the values and frames articulated by RT). As this research shows, there is a certain level of support for RT's strategies, whilst audience comments display a low level of internalisation, with users crudely repeating key messages and frames within their own competing agendas. A further longitudinal inquiry into digital re-imagining of Russia's nation brand from 'bellow' via, for instance, users' news-driven digital storytelling on other social platforms such as Facebook is needed.

Furthermore, the study showed that the audience values RT's counter-hegemonic approach, moving from impersonal bureaucratic broadcasts to a more personalized approach (Volcic and Andrejevic, 2016) which is unstable and inherently problematic. Indeed, issues around controlling the message and the logic of co-producing a shared narrative via new media-enabled platforms remain open to negotiation and exploitation. Audiences' virtual engagement via social media platforms entails an integral tension between consuming, subverting and appropriating broadcasters' narratives for their own ends. The question is: at what point does public involvement turn into an 'invasion' and gain control over the framing? RT currently utilizes the tactic of somewhat distancing itself from the audience's co-produced meanings and over-relying on experts' opinions instead (Hutchings et al., 2015). It remains to be seen how RT's move to repackage its content for contemporary networked cross-media practices will play out.

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ⁱⁱ The Crimean Peninsula was part of Russian empire since 1783 and then formed part of the Russian Soviet Federalist Soviet Republic until 1954, when N. Khrushchev passed it as a 'gift' to the Ukrainian SSR. Current conflict over Crimea is framed differently in western and Russian mediascape (as 'annexation' versus 're-unification' respectively). This paper uses these two notions interchangeably.

ⁱⁱⁱ Minsk agreements involved two summits in Minsk (first in September 2014 and then January 2015, also known as Minsk II) between the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France to develop measures to alleviate the conflict in eastern parts of Ukraine. Minsk II outlines a plan for 'a full ceasefire before moving forward with the political elements of the deal' (Economist, 2016).