


ORIGINAL ARTICLE

“Anything that Causes Chaos”: The Organizational Behavior of Russia Today (RT)

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RT (formerly, Russia Today) is one of the most important organizations in the global political economy of disinformation. It is the most richly funded, well-staffed, formal organization in the world producing, disseminating, and marketing news in the service of the Kremlin. It is an agency accused of many things, but little is known about all the creative work involved in financing, governing, training, and motivating RT’s activities. To understand more about the production of political news and information by RT, we investigate its organizational behavior through in-depth interviews of current and former staff. Our data show that RT is an opportunist channel that is used as an instrument of state defense policy to meddle in the politics of other states. The channel has been established in the shadows of the Soviet media system and its organizational behavior is characterized by Soviet-style controls.

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Although standing only a few feet from the Russian President Vladimir Putin during a press conference in 2017, the French President Emmanuel Macron described RT (formerly, Russia Today) and Sputnik as “organs of influence, of propaganda and of lying propaganda” (Rose & Dyomkin, 2017). Macron’s statement is not the only official criticism the channel has received. The channel has been sanctioned several times by the U.K.’s Office of Communication for breaching the broadcasting code and is currently registered as an “agent of a foreign government” in the United States (Jackson, 2015; Pisia, 2017; Stubbs & Gibson, 2017; Waterson, 2019). However, no one can deny this channel’s voice, especially online. RT has one of the highest YouTube viewership rates for a television channel, with almost 3

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billion views at the time of writing (compared with 1.8 billion views for Al Jazeera English).

RT is known for being the home for controversial voices; it has hosted WikiLeaks's Julian Assange, the Holocaust denier Ryan Dawson, InfoWars's Alex Jones, the leftist George Galloway, and the Brexit leader Nigel Farage (Pomerantsev, 2015; Yablokov, 2015). At the same time, RT hosts industry heavyweights like Larry King, Chris Hedges, and Ed Schultz, whose contributions serve to boost the channel's legitimacy (Richter, 2017). With such controversial speakers and prominent news personalities, RT has had an undeniable impact on the business of journalism and the profile of state-backed news outlets. Yet, we still know very little about how this organization works.

In RT's first year in 2005, the Kremlin assigned only U.S.\$30 million to run the channel, which made it difficult for RT to compete with international media giants like the Qatari-funded Al Jazeera (Ioffe, 2010). The channel started with only 500 employees, including 200 Russian and international journalists, at its headquarters in Moscow (Alpert, 2014). Things have changed since then, and by 2011 the Russian state had allocated a bigger budget of over U.S.\$300 million to operate RT and employed more than 1,000 people in 22 bureaus around the world (Alpert, 2014; Rutland & Kazantsev, 2016). In 2013, Putin signed a decree banning any budget cuts for state-run news media, including RT, and the Kremlin upped its 2015–2017 budget for the channel to U.S.\$400 million (Alpert, 2014). RT does not rely on ads to run, instead the channel spends money on its own promotion. In a recent investigation by the Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA), it was reported that the Kremlin spends U.S.\$190 million a year on the distribution of the channel in hotels and via satellite and cable broadcasting all over the world (ICA, 2017).

Despite this, RT remains undertheorized in academic scholarship. Prior research on RT has focused on how it is part of information warfare (Pomerantsev, 2015; Xie & Boyd-Barrett, 2015); how it peddles conspiracies (Yablokov, 2015); and how effective and how persuasive its strategies are (Borchers, 2011; Miazhevich, 2018). However, at the time of writing, the organizational behavior of RT has not yet been explored. Hutchings et al. (2015) argue that this scholarly absence reflects the fact that RT is perceived as a government mouthpiece and a maligned news outlet that is not worthy of study. To add to that, we believe that this absence is also influenced by various obstacles to gaining access to RT's backrooms.

Here, we focus on the organizational behavior of RT rather than the content it presents. Organizational behavior is an applied behavioral science that investigates the impact individuals, groups, and structure have on behavior within a certain organization (Robbins & Judge, 2014). In this article, we advance the theory about the organizational behavior within the newsroom and news production. We add to the existing literature that has productively helped explain why some sources of political news and information produce the content that they do (e.g., Boczkowski, 2005; Powers & Vera Zambrano, 2016; Usher, 2013). From the theoretical lens of organizational behavior, we wanted to explore RT's organizational structure that forms the

foundation of the process of content control, socialization of the journalists, and the adaptability of the channel and its journalists. To do so, we sought to interview former and current RT journalists. Based on a year and a half of interviews with RT journalists, we are able to provide empirical and analytical answers to show the activities practiced at RT which constitute the channel's organizational behavior through which journalists are recruited, socialized, and controlled.

As a case study, RT offers a theoretical basis for understanding an underexplored part of the information warfare between Russia and the West. By examining RT, this article seeks to answer the following questions. First, how are content production, dissemination, and marketing organized by RT? Second, what are the mechanisms of social, political, and organizational control exercised over its staff? Finally, what are the defining features of this type of media organization?

The findings of this article show that RT was an ambitious public diplomacy project that was initially established to present a positive image of Russia to the world. However, the dynamics of the channel's news production changed considerably during the Russia–Georgia conflict in 2008. Since then, RT has worked to encourage doubts about the West, its media, agenda, and values, epitomized in its slogan “Question More.” In order to succeed in this mission, the channel's organizational behavior adopted various controls to socialize journalists and to control the content while maintaining a space to adapt to sudden political events over the years. In this research, we provide a deeper analysis of the development of RT over the last decade. Although it could be argued that the current Russian media system is different from the Soviet model in important ways, RT has been established in the shadows of the Soviet media system and its organizational behavior is characterized by Soviet-style controls. RT promotes the Kremlin's anti-West ideology, professional journalistic skills are not prioritized, editors are appointed by the government, and the channel is not driven by revenues.

The Soviet Union's legacy media ecosystem

In order to understand the present state of the Russian media, we must look back to the Soviet era. Lenin described the press as “not only collective propagandist and collective agitator, but collective organizer” (Gruliov, 1956). Media outlets in the Soviet thinking are mouthpieces and instruments to convey the Communist Party's messages and to make citizens follow the state directives. The Soviet Union had an unprecedented and distinguished media model that was labeled “the Soviet-Communist Model” by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956). Under this Soviet model, the news was produced to reflect a Sovietized version of reality (Oates, 2007). In Siebert et al.'s (1956) book *Four Theories of the Press*, the authors point out that the Soviet media was required to support the Marxist–Leninist–Stalinist ideology. Under the Soviet model, media was not profit-driven and the rewards were not identified in terms of revenues but by creating influential propaganda.

Moreover, the Soviet media was integrated into the Party's control systems. The Party exercised its control on media using three main measures. First, it hired loyalists in all key appointments so they can take orders and follow them precisely, like "soldiers." Editors lacked professional training and experience; they were trained in politics and Marxist theory more than journalism (Siebert et al., 1956). Second, the Party used to issue a large number of directives and instructions to editors. For news writing, the Party's Department of Propaganda and Agitation issued "handouts" to Soviet editors assigning which stories to be included in media outlets. Third, the Party reviewed and criticized all media outputs constantly. This form of review intended to retain media under constant scrutiny (Siebert et al., 1956).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia began to develop some features of a nascent democratic media system under the rule of former President Boris Yeltsin before Vladimir Putin came to power in March 2000 (Becker, 2004; Oates, 2007). Putin's policies suggested that the media should support his efforts to bring order back to Russia and to stand for Russian interests (Becker, 2004). One of his first moves was taking ownership of media outlets away from the oligarchs and bringing their channels under state control (Ioffe, 2010). From 1999 to 2011, Putin's deputy head of the presidential administration, Vladislav Surkov, held weekly meetings with the heads of Russian television channels to instruct them in what to report (Ioffe, 2010; Pomerantsev, 2015).

Researchers have debated extensively about how the current Russian media system stands in relation to the Soviet era. Although the modern Russian media model has adopted unique features, it shares some elements with the Soviet model. One of these elements is self-censorship. Self-censored journalists tend to adopt the regime's norms and change their reporting style in anticipation of pressures from the state (Cheung, 2000). During the Soviet era, direct censorship was rarely needed and journalists were aware of how to formulate the stories to fit the Communist Party line (Oates, 2007). After the fall of the Soviet Union, self-censorship remained embedded in the Russian media system (Becker, 2004; Oates, 2007). This post-Soviet self-censorship could be explained not only in terms of the fears of journalists losing their jobs but also their wish to avoid physical harm in a country that has always scored poorly in media freedom indexes and known for its atmosphere of violence against journalists (Freedom House, 2019; Oates, 2007; Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

Communication scholars, however, have emphasized that Putin's system is not a complete return to the Soviet model (Becker, 2004; Lipman, 2014). There are several typologies that researchers proposed over the years to describe the substantive changes in the post-Soviet media. Oates (2007) argues that because of Putin's onslaught on media outlets, the current media system in Russia should be called a "neo-Soviet model." Oates (2007) explains that this model relies on a range of defining mechanisms, from the introduction of commercial media to an increasing violence against journalists—features that were not as prevalent during the Soviet era. In a similar vein to Oates's model, Becker (2004) argues that the current Russian

media system is “neo-authoritarian,” in which media outlets have limited autonomy and where private ownership is, to some extent, tolerated.

Tolz and Teper (2018), by contrast, believe that labeling the current system in Russia “neo-authoritarian” or “neo-Soviet” does not adequately capture the major changes in the strategy Putin applied to media during his third presidential term. They suggest calling this system “agitation” to describe the increased control exercised over media while adopting global media formats. Other post-Soviet media typologies were inspired by the work of Hallin and Mancini (2004) in North America and Western Europe media systems. It was argued that Hallin and Mancini’s polarized pluralist model is the closest to describe the post-Soviet media for sharing similar features (Vartanova, 2011). These features include the strong ties between the political elites and journalists, and the existence of a state-private media market. Yet, Vartanova (2011) believes that the current Russian model is different from Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) models, proposing the “statist commercialized model” to describe the contemporary Russian media which rely on unique characteristics such as the strong relationship between the state and media in addition to the growing commercialization of media.

Although the aforementioned typologies have different names, they indicate that contemporary Russian media has adopted new strategies that were not common during the Soviet era. Although this study does not examine the local media system in Russia or the Soviet media, RT originates within and from this system. This study examines the current media system followed within RT and the ways in which its organizational behavior ensures that the content is in line with its foreign policies. In the next sections, we illustrate how we collected our data, then provide an insider look at the influence of various political crises on the evolution and expansion of the channel. Later we take a deep dive into RT’s organizational behavior in terms of content control and journalists’ socialization.

Methods

To understand the inner workings of news organizations, researchers make use of a combination of newsroom ethnography and in-depth interviews (e.g., Aşık, 2019; Boczkowski, 2005; Hassan & Elmasry, 2019; Maziad, 2018; Usher, 2013). However, methodological challenges in accessing newsrooms are common in societies under authoritarian rule (Figenschou, 2010). Also, conducting newsroom ethnography in closed regimes might bring some unwanted risks to the researchers and might identify the study participants. In similar cases, interviews are the main method researchers rely on to examine the newsroom practices (e.g., Umejei, 2018; Wright, Scott, & Bunce, 2020). In this study, we interviewed former and current RT journalists who had worked for at least 3 months at the channel.

Following ethics approval, we started the interviewing process in January 2018 and conducted the last interview in March 2019. Depending largely on snowballing, we were able to interview 23 journalists who consented to participate in this study.

In order to cover all the various channels RT operates, we interviewed participants from different bureaus, primarily at RT International, based in Moscow, RT America, RT UK, and RT Arabic. In addition, we were able to include journalists who witnessed the establishment of the channel and the first year of its production, the Georgia and Ukraine conflicts, the Brexit, the Syrian war, the 2016 U.S. elections, and other international events such as the Salisbury poisoning in the United Kingdom. This variety has enabled us to gain an understanding of the transformation of the organizational practices at RT since it was launched in 2005 to the time of writing. The participants worked in both the news production and the website and social media sections of the channel.

When we started the interviewing process, we discovered that RT management had imposed nondisclosure agreements (NDAs) on their journalists to prohibit them from speaking to researchers and media. The NDAs, which were enforced in 2014, are legally binding internationally and could be used to prosecute and fine journalists if they were to violate their contracts, even after they had left the channel. In order to counter this restriction, we anonymized our interviews and eliminated any information that could refer to their gender, nationality, or job titles. We avoided using quotes and details that could lead to revealing their identities. In addition, we removed information about whether the participant is currently working or not working at RT. Although we interviewed journalists from different bureaus, we have removed links between interviewees and their specific bureaus in this article. The response rate of this study was almost 10%; we reached out to more than 240 journalists and were able to interview 23. Among these interviewees, 21 respondents had left the channel by the time of the interview and only 2 of our respondents were still working at RT at the time of writing. This could be explained by the fact that journalists who had left the channel were at less risk from speaking with us than journalists still working at the channel.

The interviews took place in London and Washington, DC. The majority of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, but we also conducted ten interviews using VoIP. The interviews lasted for an average of an hour and ranged from half an hour to almost 3 hours and were conducted in English. Our sample is gender-balanced and includes subjects who were of the United Kingdom, the United States, Russian, and various European Union citizenships. In our initial contact with the respondents, we provided them with information about the study and informed consent protocols. Nonetheless, in several instances, respondents canceled their interview with us a few hours before we were due to meet them because they were afraid that their identities would be exposed. In presenting the findings of interview-based research, it is a common practice to present some descriptive characteristics about the human subjects involved in the associated outputs, but to help protect the identities of respondents, we have avoided doing so on this occasion.

We started each interview by asking the respondents to describe their roles at the channel. Each respondent was asked a set of questions with certain variations, and demographic questions to finish. The questions were about their experience at

RT, the sources they relied on to gather news and to write their stories, the political crises that shaped their RT experience, and the gatekeeping process at the channel. The respondents were informed that they had the right to decline offering answers to questions that they were not comfortable with providing. We wrote detailed field notes that included conceptualization remarks during each interview. To inductively analyze the data, we developed detailed reflective memos following each interview. The memos allowed us to elaborate on the themes that emerged and to identify the analytical and theoretical dimensions that emerged during the interviews.

Results

From soft power projection to aggressive intervention

During the early years of Putin's presidency, the Kremlin's reputation received a steady flow of international criticism regarding Putin's policies. In this context, the Kremlin announced in 2005 that it was launching a nonprofit 24-hour English-language international channel that could explain Russia's policies (Ioffe, 2010). Our interviewees provided insights into the early days of the channel. In 2005, the Russian government secured funding for a major English-language television channel known as Russia Today, which would broadcast from Moscow. The channel occupied one of the floors of the RIA Novosti building, Russia's main news agency at that time. There was a need for native English speakers to help in establishing and launching the channel. The majority of our respondents confirmed that a team of British editors was selected at this point to join a team in Moscow to help run the channel. Another batch of young, British journalists only recently graduated from journalism schools were recruited to help write the programs and to keep the channel running. The then 25-year-old Margarita Simonyan was appointed as the editor-in-chief of the channel.

At this point, our participants suggested that the management of Russia Today was uncertain about the purpose of the channel, how long it would last, and where the channel was heading. However, the content was clearly focused on Russian culture and positive Russian news. Participant9 stated:

In the beginning, when RT was founded, it was founded to give a positive image of Russia. The broadcast was all about culture, and much more of what is great about Russia, not what is bad about you [the West]. That strategy happened later. (Participant9, 2018)

The goal of the channel shifted when the Russia–Georgia conflict took place in 2008. Our respondents who witnessed this shift said that this conflict led the Russian government to realize that it could weaponize the channel to serve its political interests. First, the channel rebranded and changed its name from Russia Today to RT, hoping that its audience would overlook its Russian origins. Second, this

conflict marked the first time that RT produced disinformation. One of our participants described the coverage around Georgia as:

[t]he one that showed its [RT] true colors to the world when it spread complete lies about genocide, and this is when it was clear to everyone watching that it is a propaganda vehicle. (Participant1, 2018)

Following that, RT has become less and less about Russia. When Participant9, who had extensive knowledge about Russian media before working for RT, was accepted for the job at one of RT's foreign bureaus, the bureau chief told them:

I want to make it clear; we are not doing anything about Russia. Your Russian experience is not really helpful. (Participant9, 2018)

Across our interviews, our respondents agreed that the goals of the channel since 2008 have been and still are as follows. First, to push the idea that Western countries have as many problems as Russia. Second, to encourage conspiracy theories about media institutions in the West in order to discredit and delegitimize them. This is clearly adherent to the channel's "Questions More" slogan. Third, to create controversy and to make people criticize the channel, because it suggests that the channel is important, an approach that would particularly help RT managers get more funding from the government.

These goals were not communicated to our participants directly, but they learned them through their experiences over the years using trial-and-error. For instance, Participant13 noted:

They [journalists] are told to redo the story. It is like the electric tens; you get shocked the first time because you are doing something and you are told to redo it because you have done it poorly, or it was not what you were asked to do. So, you redo it and formulate it. (Participant13, 2018)

In order to achieve the above goals, RT has occasionally manipulated its content. We certainly cannot say that everything that RT produces is a complete lie but there are many situations when this channel has produced misleading content intentionally, Participant14 explained:

Would they twist stories, or make facts, or reshape things, or twist a narrative? Absolutely. It's less than about changing the story, just omitting facts. You take out key things and it will change the perspective that people will gain from the story and therefore it is misinformation. Other times they would report these unverified. (Participant14, 2018)

Things soon took a turn toward a more politicized editorial policy when the Ukraine–Russia conflict began in 2014. The Russian government had weaponized RT at this point to defend the Russian position and to demonize Ukraine. According to Participant16, this was the point at which RT management canceled

all the nonpolitical shows. Participant13 referred to how RT portrayed the insurgency in Donetsk and Luhansk as:

[s]upport for what is referred to as the self-defense units, the self-declared regions of Donetsk and Luhansk against the fascist Ukraine. That was pretty standard. A lot of stories, portraying Ukrainians as fascists, in the true sense of the word. Of course, there are fascists and very far-right groups in Ukraine, but their presence was blown out of proportion to portray Ukraine in a certain light and to portray Donetsk and Luhansk, which were supported by Russia, as having to defend themselves against a right-wing Ukraine. (Participant13, 2018)

The situation deteriorated when the Malaysia Airlines MH17 plane crashed in July 2014. The plane was attacked by a missile fired at the plane, leading to the crash in Eastern Ukraine near the Russian border and killing all 298 passengers on board (Hoon, 2017). In the aftermath, no one claimed responsibility, but the international community argued that the missile was fired by Moscow-backed Ukrainian insurgents. Across the interviews, MH17 was described as a particular crisis for the channel and that RT was unprepared for it. Following the incident, RT produced multiple explanations for the shooting down of MH17.

One of the first stories that came out of RT emphasized that the Ukrainian side might be involved. One of our respondents said that they published a story claiming that Putin's plane was the main target rather than MH17. At this time several RT journalists quit their jobs on air, such as Liz Wahl and Sara Firth. The departure of the RT America correspondent Liz Wahl came as a particular surprise to the management when she rebuked the coverage of Ukraine and resigned live on television (Carroll, 2014). Following Wahl's steps, the London-based reporter Sara Firth resigned due to RT's coverage of the MH17 incident (Plunkett, 2014).

In 2016, reports were circulated in relation to the Russian meddling in the U.K. referendum and the U.S. presidential elections. Some of our participants saw that RT has strategically emphasized Brexit messages by enabling more exposure to members of the Leave campaign. Participant20 was confused about the channel's line towards the Brexit:

I asked my editor, what is RT's line for this [Brexit], and he said: Anything that causes chaos is RT's line. (Participant20, 2019)

In regard to the 2016 U.S. elections, our participants who worked during this period emphasized that they used to attack Hilary Clinton repeatedly. However, none of them talked about any specific instructions to support Trump, in particular, in the run-up to the elections. One of the participants explained that RT seemed pro-Trump only because it criticized Hilary Clinton but, in reality, the channel would have supported any candidate running against her, Participant15 said:

During the run-up to the election, I remember bashing Clinton, criticizing Clinton all the time because RT themselves did not believe that Trump would win. Everyone thought that Clinton would win so they just criticized her as much as possible. (Participant15, 2018)

RT-election meddling has been investigated by the U.S. Department of Justice and in an unprecedented move in 2017; the U.S. government registered RT as a “foreign entity” and classified its journalists as foreign agents. Our respondents said that this was a “politically driven act.” This act led more journalists to quit their jobs at RT America, fearing that they would be classified as agents of the Russian government. RT is currently not available through cable in most states in the United States.

In the next sections, we will discuss more closely the organizational behavior of RT and the practices of journalists’ socialization and content control.

The socialization of RT journalists

The socialization of journalists is the first mechanism used in news organizations to promote its policy (Breed, 1955). In general, socializing journalists into a specific news culture is an integral process that includes learning about boundaries, distinctions, ideological values, norms, insider communicative behavior, language use, and a variety of discursive skills (Cotter, 2010). RT’s organizational socialization process depends on several practices. These socialization practices of the channel have unified its organizational behavior across its various bureaus and languages worldwide.

Socialization at RT depends largely on earning the loyalty of their journalists. In any organization, the behavior of an employee could be influenced by either (a) integrating the attitudes, habits, and state of mind into the employees which should lead them to reach decisions in favor of the organization; or (b) forcibly imposing decisions on the employees (Simon, 1997). RT’s organizational behavior employed the former style than the latter. To do so, RT management tends to select journalists who have little to no experience in journalism. This pattern of nonprioritizing journalistic skills is very similar to the one followed in the Soviet era (Siebert et al., 1956). Our participants, who themselves had no journalistic experience before joining RT, argued that this strategy was adopted to avoid any pushbacks from the journalists in relation to the content or the agenda and to be able to mold the newly hired journalists and shape their minds. This strategy is employed in all RT offices, including RT America and RT UK. Participant8, who had no experience when they joined one of RT bureaus, stated:

I would say that in all, RT hire inexperienced producers who they can mold in producing what kind of news they want and those who are less likely to put up a fight against certain editorial decisions. (Participant8, 2018)

British journalists dominated RT in 2005. There was an agreement among the study participants who witnessed the early days of RT in Moscow that RT

management was keen on selecting British journalists. Participant21, who held a senior position at RT, explained that RT could not hire Americans then because of the Russia–United States relationship. The British journalists were chosen mainly for their English-language skills.

Those young, British, inexperienced journalists were treated like stars. Our participants stated that they were pampered with money, makeup artists, and private cars when they joined RT at its early days. When Participant4 joined RT, they had no experience and had just finished their bachelor's degree in journalism. Participant4 said that they were given an extremely generous amount of screen time and a salary that was higher than the salary they get after working for years in other media outlets. The glamorous treatment of these journalists fostered loyalty and discouraged them from leaving the channel. However, the participants said that in most cases, journalists who work for RT do not agree with its messages. Participant13 said that RT journalists knew that they were not telling the truth. However, working at RT guarantees that they receive a high salary while living in Moscow. Participant15 elaborated:

I started working there because it was the easiest way to join journalism, not being a journalism graduate myself and not having any kind of training in journalism. It is the good place for new grads because it is very easy there because the main prerequisite for the job is the language. (Participant15, 2018)

In addition to monetary-based loyalty, it was argued in the interviews that RT management instilled in foreign journalists working at RT UK and RT America an image that Russia is a victim of Western politics. RT UK and RT America journalists are not specialists in Russian culture or politics and, in most cases, have never visited Moscow. This was another strategy that was followed to help socialize non-Russian journalists. Participant9 noticed that:

[p]eople, who they hired then, were mostly young graduates who did not know anything about Russia . . . They didn't know Russian at all – it was completely stupid. (Participant9, 2018)

They are repeatedly told that Russia is misrepresented in Western media and that *Russophobia* is on the rise. Participant23 believes that this is done in order to enforce loyalty among foreign journalists.

To better socialize the foreign journalists and to protect the channel from whistle-blowers, NDAs were added to the contracts of non-Russian journalists from 2014. Participants stated that in the early days of RT, there were clauses in the employment contract to prevent journalists from speaking out but that these were not legally binding outside Russia. NDAs were imposed in 2014 following the MH17 incident to prevent journalists from discussing their work experiences at RT. The NDA made this legally binding outside Russia and journalists could be sued if they were to violate the terms of the agreement. Participant23 noted:

They tried to make everyone sign [a] nondisclosure agreement. That was around Ukraine. It was for non-Russians. A lot of the foreign staff decided to leave at this point. They [RT] did not want anyone to say bad things about the company. After Liz Wahl and Sara Firth [left RT], they did not want any more people doing this. There was something in the contract before but that was not enforceable abroad. That's why they did that. They wanted something legally binding in the foreign journalists' home countries. (Participant23, 2019)

Socializing Russian journalists was not as necessary. Russian journalists at RT have a particularly strong sense of nationalism. They often suggest that they are serving their country by working for this channel. Participant6 stated that workers at RT would reaffirm the argument that Russia is mistreated and that they want to empower Russia through RT. They said:

[I]f you were Russian, this is a great message to be sending: Russia is a powerful country [but] there is also this disparity. This is what they believe in, and Margarita, and most of them. They see Russia as being beleaguered and mistreated and they want to empower Russia on the international stage. (Participant6, 2018)

Language socialization is also an important part of the journalistic identity (Cotter, 2010). In that sense, each news organization produces a style guide in order to maintain a house style and use standard news language (Cameron, 1996; Ebner, 2016). Becoming familiar with the roles of the style guide and enforcing them are part of the organizational socialization of journalists (Cameron, 1996). RT is no exception; it has a style guide to provide guidance to its journalists and to unify its output. Based on our interviews, the style guide only includes instructions on the terms journalists should use to refer to regimes, countries, and political groups. For example, Participant22 said that:

Obviously within RT, the style guide would speak about the Syrian government or Assad government as opposed to the Syrian regime. At the BBC, you would talk about the Syrian opposition or Syrian rebels while it is really common at RT to speak about terrorists or militants. (Participant22, 2019)

Although the style guide existed, our respondents indicated that they rarely used it for editorial checks. Two participants were not even aware of whether RT has a style guide, which might imply that although the style guide exists, it is not strictly enforced. During the research, we were able to obtain a copy of the guide that is being handed to newly hired journalists to help them understand the production process. This document does not provide any political editorial directives but, rather, provides a professional guide for journalists who are just starting their career at RT. Participant23, however, believes that journalists were being told about the editorial policies of the channel through informal talks with the editors, rather than through

a formal, written style guide. The journalistic socialization at RT is mostly pursued during casual day-to-day directives.

Adapting and adopting journalistic norms and values

RT is a “learning organization” that has revolutionized itself over the years. A learning organization continuously transforms itself in order to meet its strategic goals (Pedler, Boydell, & Burgoyne, 1989). One of these goals is to *Russianize* the channel. Our respondents who witnessed the launch of RT in Moscow argued that hiring British journalists was part of a long-term plan to replace them with Russian journalists later. Those young and inexperienced British journalists who joined RT in 2005 in Moscow were responsible for training young Russian journalists who would later replace them. Participant4 said:

They were getting us to train up their kind of up-and-coming Russians. They were learning journalism from us and the idea was to whittle down the number of foreigners and very largely to be run by Russians. (Participant4, 2018)

Participant21 told us that Russian journalists were being trained at RT to lose their Russian accent and to speak fluent English while presenting on camera. The Russianization plan has partially fulfilled its goals. When we interviewed Participant15 in 2018, they believed that non-Russians represented 30% of RT’s headquarters in Moscow.

RT is not only a learning organization in terms of its human resources but also in terms of its rapid adaptation to new narratives in response to political events. Our respondents reported several examples of when RT tailored new narratives to sudden changes in Russia’s foreign affairs. Participant16 and Participant17 cited changes in RT’s narratives about Turkey. RT has usually portrayed Turkey in a less critical way. In 2015, when Turkish warplanes hit a Russian military aircraft while flying over Syrian territory, RT changed its narrative and started to present Turkey as an enemy. At that time, RT started disseminating stories on how members of ISIS and jihadists were being smuggled across the Turkish border and how Turkey was causing an immigration crisis in Europe. Nine months after this incident, Erdogan and Putin reached an agreement, and therefore RT stopped portraying Turkey negatively.

The refugee crisis is another example of RT altering the angles of stories due to political changes. Participant22 recalled that RT was open to and supportive of the refugees seeking asylum in the West. However, with the Syrian crisis taking over, RT managers thought that stigmatizing the refugees would be a good opportunity to destabilize Western politics. According to Participant22, some of these stories were false but remained popular:

Some of the stories were proven to be false at RT but RT would give them a lot of airtime. I think there were stories about rapes and stuff like that in

Germany that is caused by refugees . . . So, you see this shift from “freedom and balance” to “migrant crisis” that is destabilizing Europe. (Participant22, 2019)

Similar alterations took place during the coverage of the 2011 Arab Spring. Participant10 gave an example of how RT needed to change its editorial policy frequently to stay in step with the Kremlin’s line. RT was supportive of the Arab Spring in 2011; however, after the Russian Foreign Ministry evaluated the situation and decided that the Arab Spring was harmful to their foreign policy, RT changed its coverage to be anti-Arab Spring. Although it is not uncommon for narratives to change on other channels, it is particularly common practice at RT and part of its organizational behavior.

Politically, it is difficult to state whether RT is a left-leaning or right-leaning news organization. The majority of the respondents insisted that RT does not have a political identity but rather that it changes its stance to be in line with its broader goals. One of the respondents mentioned that RT was far left when it was established, promoting “unreported” groups, environment-related issues like anti-fracking, and interviewing the leaders of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Later, it started to support far-right ideas and highlight right-wing leaders. As such it is far more likely that RT is an opportunist organization that adopts ideas that are intended to weaken the power of the West. This supports Yablokov’s (2015) argument that RT has simultaneously adopted left- and right-wing ideas in order to attract different audiences and to expand its influence.

Gatekeeping and self-censorship in authoritarian news

Kurt Lewin (1947) proposed the term “Gatekeeper” to describe a person who makes the decisions between “in” and “out” in an organization. Later, the term was picked up by White (1950) who applied it to news organizations to conclude that news is determined by the gatekeeper’s own set of experiences, attitudes, and goals. Shoemaker and Vos in their well-cited book *Gatekeeping Theory* (2009) argue that media messages pass through a series of gates that influences and changes the messages. Within the context of the organizational structure of RT, there are several “gates” to reframe news. The most important gatekeeper is the Russian government.

The Russian government is involved in RT in different ways. Participant12 described RT as “a wing of the government information team” whereas Participant13 said that RT is a PR organization for the Russian government. The government control on RT includes hiring managers, imposing story angles, and, in some instances, disapproving of stories. Participant3 said that RT has close ties with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and confirms some news stories with the Ministry. Participant16 pointed out that RT journalists were trained to adopt the Russian government’s position toward events.

During the Soviet era, the appointment of editors was on the basis of their political reliability and knowledge of Marxism rather than their professional competence, in a process which was supervised by the Communist Party (Siebert et al., 1956). Similar to this, one of our participants said that the government appoints an advisory team to supervise the hiring of journalists at RT in Moscow. In addition, all of our respondents have confirmed that the top managers and senior editors at all RT bureaus are Russians. Participants from RT UK and RT America confirmed that their offices were run by Russian managers and senior editors. Participant18 noticed that:

The higher up the ranks, the more Russians it goes. So, senior producers were Russian and all the bosses. Down the line, they will be less Russian and more British, or Australians. (Participant18, 2019)

Participant2 stated that “nothing we did was our own idea.” The gatekeeping process at RT is similar to the one that was followed during the Soviet era during which the Communist Party used to select which stories to cover on a daily basis (Siebert et al., 1956). At RT, all the stories are either assigned by the channel’s editors or approved by Russian seniors. At the RT newsroom in Moscow, there are several news teams and each team is supervised by two editors: a Russian editor who is responsible for the political editing of the stories and a foreign editor who ensures that the writing is at a professional level. The story selection process at RT starts with what our respondents referred to as “the morning meeting” where senior editors, in most cases Russians, meet in order to select the stories RT will cover for the day (Figure 1).

Following the morning meeting, news is assigned by the editors to the journalists. The assignments vary according to the topic. When it came to assigning politically sensitive stories, foreign journalists are usually avoided for such tasks. Participant13 stated:

I am a foreigner, so they would not give me the sensitive stories. The sensitive stories were done by people who understand the line that needs to be taken. (Participant13, 2018)

For instance, during the Georgia conflict in 2008, Participant1 said that they sent Russian journalists rather than British journalists to cover this conflict.

This aforementioned assignment strategy is followed at RT International in Moscow. Participants who worked in foreign bureaus did not have an agreement on whether the stories are directly assigned to them or that they were able to pitch their own stories. Participant8 who worked at one of RT’s foreign bureaus said that the stories are sent from the Moscow headquarters on a daily basis to the bureau where they work, stating:

What we get was a short word document that has a list of the stories that a senior Russian manager felt that we should cover. This is what we used to

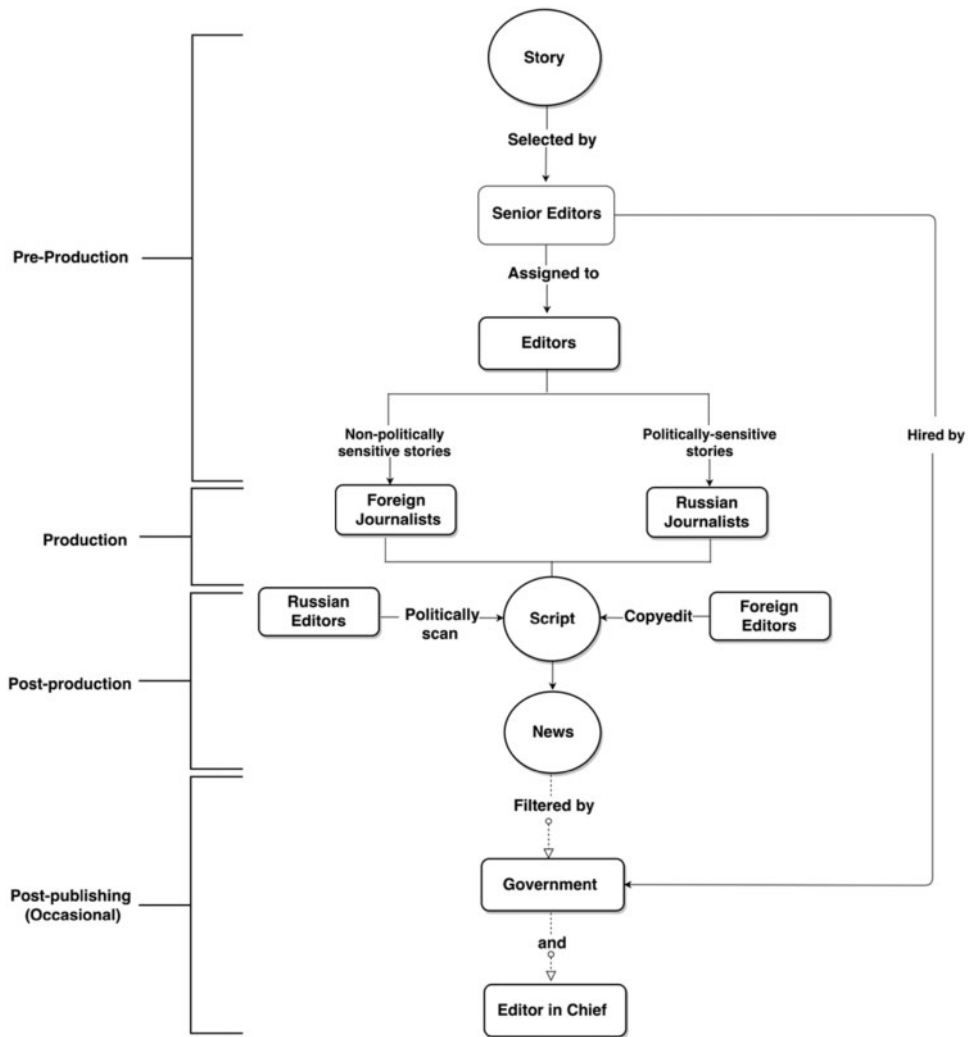


Figure 1 News Production Workflow within RT

Source: Based on our interviews with RT journalists collected from January 2018 to March 2019.

Note: A circle represents story development, boxes represent the decision-makers and the gatekeepers at the channel, and thin arrows represent the sequence in which the story follows. Dotted lines refer to a possible intervention from the government or the editor-in-chief to take a story off-air.

dictate our news agenda . . . this list was only sent to the news editor and it was not sent to producers. I don't think they wanted it to be widely shared. (Participant8, 2018)

However, a few other respondents, who worked for the foreign bureaus, said that they used to propose stories that are then approved only if they fitted the anti-West narrative of RT. Participant17 said:

The individual journalists who work for RT . . . they pitch the story. Whoever is in charge is more than happy to confirm if that story makes the US and the UK look bad. (Participant17, 2018)

After journalists write a script, they need to get it approved by their editor. Most of our respondents who were based in the Moscow office said that the Russian editor would approve the script and the British editor would check the script to ensure it was professionally styled:

You have the UK editor who is usually a senior person who worked for Sky or BBC, to make sure that the quality is as good as BBC or CNN, then you had the Russian editor by his side to make sure it ticks all the boxes. The UK [editor] would look at my script and may amend it or something, and then it goes to the Russian editor and this is where it got screened. (Participant2, 2018)

One of the respondents said that in the foreign bureaus, scripts are sent to the Moscow office for approval. However, they believe that this process is necessary to ensure the reliability of scripts and to avoid unintended mistakes. However, Participant6 said that none of the reports produced for RT UK, for example, needed to be approved by the headquarters. They argued that the Moscow office's approval was not needed because the head of the news program is Russian and that this person had worked for RT in Moscow for a long time. However, they added that reports made for RT international must be approved by the Moscow office.

After a script is approved, the story is produced and broadcasted. However, there were a few incidents when the government and the Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan played a last-minute top-down gatekeeping role by taking down stories after they had been broadcasted. For example, Participant3 said that when RT Arabic managed to interview the Libyan president Muammar Al Gaddafi when he was hiding from the opposition in 2011, RT broadcasted the interview and then officials ordered that no further broadcasts should be aired until the political position of Russia was confirmed.

Self-censorship is one of the main defining features of the Soviet media and the current Russian media system (Becker, 2004; Oates, 2007). As such, RT is no different; journalists at RT have turned into gatekeepers. Most of our participants stated that they self-censor while pitching stories or writing scripts. Participant6 provided a summary of this phenomenon by stating that:

Everyone is doing self-censorship. Even when you are pitching stories you will say to yourself, they are never going to go with that, so I am not going to bother to pitch it. (Participant6, 2018)

This self-censorship sometimes replaces the structured process of gatekeeping at RT. In some instances, the Moscow office does not interfere with the foreign bureaus' production process. Participant18, who worked in a foreign bureau, stated that:

I had a very little control from Moscow. I ran 10 stories a day with no direction and it was up to me. However, I knew what the Russians wanted so I was self-censoring. (Participant18, 2019)

Unlike the current Russian media system that relies on direct punishment in the sort of harassment or violence (Oates, 2007), firing journalists who do not abide by RT policies were found to be uncommon. Our participants discussed incidents when they refused to cover certain stories but their future at RT was not affected. In some situations, mild sanctions were employed, but not the termination of contracts. For example, when one of the participants refused to produce stories that they perceived as extreme and against their political opinions, the management took away the team they had been supervising as a warning. Alternatively, the emphasis is upon loyalty to the channel, such that it has a significant bearing on career progression. Journalists who are considered particularly loyal to RT occupy senior positions. In other words, self-censorship in RT is not driven by fear of punishment but rather fear of losing the incentives the channel offer to those who follow its line.

Conclusion

Although it might be tempting to compare RT's organizational behavior with other media outlets, this study focuses only on RT. Our case study exposes and explains the internal processes of an important instrument of Russia's information warfare infrastructure. RT's organizational behavior may share some practices with other news organizations. However, our findings reveal particular features to RT's organizational behavior: (a) the gatekeeping processes that begin with assigning the politically-sensitive topics to Russian journalists and ends with an occasional top-down intervention from the state; (b) the socialization process of journalists that depends on establishing loyalty in the newsroom through monetary incentives and job promotions; (c) not having a specific political leaning; our data show that RT was a far-left organization in the early days and later changed to adopt far-right ideas.; (d) focusing on non-Russia-related content instead of representing Russia positively.

To fulfill its mission, RT management has drawn heavily from the types of practices of Soviet media controls that Siebert et al. (1956) identified in their work on the Soviet era (Table 1). Journalists at RT continue to be subject to Soviet-style

Table 1 A Comparison Between the Soviet and RT Media Models

	Soviet Media Model	Modern RT Media Model
Purpose	To contribute to the success of the Soviet socialist system	To defend the Russian state by emphasizing the negative side of the West
Ideology	Soviet ideology	Anti-West ideology
Control	Hiring loyalists at key positions, assigning stories, and constant review and criticism of the press	Hiring loyalists at key positions, assigning stories, and offering monetary incentives to staff
Ownership	Public	State
Hiring Journalists	Supervised by the Party	Supervised by the Russian state
Profit	Non-profit driven	Non-profit driven
Redlines	Criticism of the Soviet ideology	Criticism of the Russian government
Journalistic Skills	Not prioritized	Not prioritized
Self-Censorship	High	High

Source: Based on the work of [Siebert et al. \(1956\)](#) and our analysis of interviews with RT journalists collected from January 2018 to March 2019.

socialization and self-censoring, through an awareness of the messages that Russian senior editors want to put forward for broadcast. RT's social controls do not focus upon coercion and fear, like the current media system in Russia, but rather on the benefits associated with working for RT. Non-Russian journalists often joined and stayed with RT for career progression, suggesting that other institutions would refuse to hire them if they were to leave the channel.

By contrast, Russian journalists are more likely to articulate a sense of pride in serving their country by working for RT. It, therefore, makes sense that interviewees would speak of RT's management intending to replace foreign journalists with Russian journalists. In addition to Russianizing the institution, other controls were also imposed. The news assignment strategy maintained an anti-West agenda in the channel and unified the critical representation of Western governments across all RT languages.

RT is a component of the Russian state's defense policy. Its critical representation of the West is regarded as a counterpunch to the West's anti-Russian narratives and political positions. The idea that Western media lies is one of the main elements of RT's agenda and significantly shapes the ideological foundation of the channel ([Kofman & Rojansky, 2015](#); [Yablokov, 2015](#)). This is what [Rawnsley \(2015\)](#) describes as "oppositional soft power," arguing that Russia uses RT to improve its image by undermining the narratives projected by the West. In that sense, if there is a story in the U.S. media criticizing the Russian government, RT will respond by

criticizing the United States. Whenever Russia is accused of a human rights violation, RT broadcasts stories that suggest that there are comparable cases in the United States.

There is a rising homegrown dissatisfaction with liberal Western democracies (Foa & Mounk, 2016, 2017). It is, however, methodologically and empirically difficult to assess RT's role in destabilizing consolidated Western democracies (Richter, 2017; Yablokov, 2015). What we know from examining RT's organizational behavior is that it indeed promotes an anti-West narrative through their daily news agendas. What we can ask is who actually do watch RT? Our participants stated that they were writing and broadcasting to audiences with pre-existing anti-Western and antiestablishment beliefs. The channel gives this type of audience a voice, news to amplify, and a source that reinforces their beliefs and political agendas. However, our participants doubted that RT has the power to change the public opinion in a broader sense.

Giving the perception that RT could possibly break democracies enables it more power and eventually makes it eligible for more state funding. RT alone cannot break Western democracies; it is a single apparatus among many others that are used to meddle in Western politics. The success of the Russian information warfare depends largely on the network of different sources, including media outlets, social media bots, trolls, and cyberattacks (Richter, 2017). RT, however, is more likely to be held accountable because, unlike other covert strategies, for being a public-facing broadcaster that must adhere to follow Communication Acts and media regulations where it operates.

This article advances the scholarship of news organizational behavior, information warfare, and international broadcasting. We provide a framework to examine state-backed media operations by understanding their historical and domestic contexts. RT's organizational behavior would not have been the same without the historical influence of the Soviet media system. By studying RT, we realized how important it is to contextualize state-backed media within the broader media ecosystem that shaped their evolution. Although some outlets—especially those backed by nondemocratic states—might share some elements and promote similar narratives, the controls they inherit are shaped by unique domestic sociopolitical factors that evolve and change their editorial structure.

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