RT UK’s Facebook audiences’ interpretation of Russia’s strategic narrative of the Syrian conflict

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Abstract

Study of participative war has tended to focus on digital content produced by civilians and combatants in the region, but foreign citizens also participate by interacting with international broadcast coverage via social media. Russia’s international broadcaster, RT, is accused of promoting Russian foreign policy goals and being a tool of ‘information war’ with the West. Its coverage has been shown to promote Russia’s strategic narrative of the Syrian conflict, legitimating Russia’s heavily criticised pro-Assad military interventions. However, how these narratives are interpreted by foreign audiences and thus their actual consequences are not well understood. Based on data from an interview study with 26 Facebook users who interacted with RT UK, this paper asks whether and how RT’s narrative of Syria resonated with them. RT’s narrative appealed to these individuals’ disaffection with domestic media and politics, and residual feelings of betrayal around Britain’s involvement in the Iraq war. These results reveal the localised mechanisms by which RT was able to disseminate its strategic narrative around the conflict, and how this simultaneously functioned as an effective tool in Russia’s ‘information war’ with the West.

Keywords

Information war · News trust · Participative war · RT · Strategic narratives · Syria

Introduction

RT (formerly Russia Today) is Russia’s international broadcaster, nominally created in 2005 to ‘acquaint… international audiences with a Russian viewpoint on major global events’ (RT, n.d.). Well-financed by the Kremlin (Elswhah and Howard, 2020), by December 2021 its flagship Facebook page was followed by over 7 million global users. Its flagship YouTube channel boasted 4.5 million subscribers, with 3.5 billion views since inception, among the highest for any television channel on YouTube (ibid). In the UK, RT launched a dedicated YouTube channel and Facebook page alongside a Freeview television channel and was once described as ‘the most-watched foreign news channel in the UK’ (Intelligence Community Assessment, 2017: 6).

However, RT’s coverage has been accused of promoting Russian foreign policy goals (Miazhevich, 2014; Tolz et al., 2020; Yablokov, 2015). The Kremlin is said to be involved in key editorial decisions including curating the narrative around the shooting down of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 and Russia’s annexation of Crimea (Elswhah and Howard, 2020). In the context of Russia’s ‘information war’ with the West, which aims to ‘sow doubt and disagreement’ through online platforms (Golovchenko et al, 2020: 360), RT’s line has been described by staff as ‘anything that causes chaos’ (Elswhah and Howard, 2020: 631). Russia’s use of media to push strategic narratives of post-Cold War conflicts, at times with little regard for factual accuracy, has come under intense scrutiny since the Russian occupation of Ukraine began in 2014 (Szostek, 2018). These strategic narratives emphasise Russia’s claimed ‘great power’ status partly by promoting negative portrayals of the West (Szostek, 2017). At the time of writing, RT’s role in promoting these narratives to Western audiences has once again come to the fore amidst Russia’s brutal renewed invasion of Ukraine. By mid-March 2022, all major social media platforms had banned RT in Europe in response to its misleading content about the ongoing conflict (Dwoskin et al, 2022). In the UK, after the Culture Secretary described RT as ‘demonstrably part of Russia’s global disinformation campaign’ (BBC News, 2022), the regulator Ofcom officially revoked RT’s broadcast licence (Ofcom, 2022).
Yet, little is known about the actual impact of RT’s content on overseas audiences and the implications of this for Russia’s ‘information war’ with the West. Studies have tended to focus on the content of these narratives rather than how they are received (Szostek, 2018). This paper specifically explores interpretations of RT’s narrative of the Syrian conflict by the outlet’s UK Facebook audience. Strong criticism by NATO of Russia’s pro-Assad interventions in Syria (Barnes and Lubold, 2015) arguably presented a prime opportunity for RT to employ its signature criticism of Western global hegemony (Miazhevic, 2018). Through interviews with this audience, this paper asks how they interpreted RT’s coverage of Syria and why it resonated with them. In so doing, it sheds light on the role of Russia’s strategic narratives about the Syrian conflict in its ongoing ‘information war’ with the West.

Much has been made of the Syrian conflict as the ‘first social media war’ (Doucet, 2018: 142), but literature on such ‘participative war’ has tended to focus on social media’s use by combatants and citizens in the directly affected region (Merrin, 2018). The hypermediation of conflict in the hybrid media era has made ‘every war zone a global battlefield’ (ibid: 214). This was particularly true of the Syrian conflict which became a proxy war between competing interpretations of Islam, the West and Salafist jihadism in the form of Islamic State (IS), and the West and Russia and its Cold War allies (Merrin, 2018: 205). Furthermore, since the optimism of the Arab Spring, social media have revealed themselves to be not democratised spaces of equal individual participation, but rather curated arenas of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017), where influential information production is concentrated in institutional actors with political and commercial interests. Thus, understanding digital participative war necessitates considering content produced by agenda-driven international broadcasters like RT, and the digitally mediated participation of citizens of external states who interact with this. This form of mediated participation has reverberating consequences not only for the conflict at hand but for the abovementioned ‘proxy’ battles, including the ‘information war’ between Russia and the West. This paper thus also contributes to understanding this important but under-researched aspect of Syria’s participative war and how this intersects with Russia’s ‘information war’.

**Strategic narratives and Syria**

Strategic narrative has become a prominent explanatory framework for the dynamics of contemporary international politics, particularly regarding war and conflict (de Graaf et al, 2015; Schmitt, 2018). The concept, as elaborated by Miskimmon et al (2013), highlights how communication is integral to these dynamics. Strategic narratives comprise an assemblage of mediated messages and are deliberate ‘representations of a sequence of events and identities’ used by political actors to ‘attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives’ (ibid: 4). Those objectives include influencing overseas publics, and Miskimmon and colleagues acknowledged the role of international broadcasters like RT in communicating such narratives and in providing social media arenas for overseas audiences to interact with these narratives and with each other (ibid). In modern digitally mediated conflicts, winning the ‘war of words and narratives’ has mattered more on the international stage than having ‘the most potent weaponry’ (Patrikarakos, 2017).

However, the success of strategic narratives is not a given. To be convincing, they ‘must contain informational content that captures an audience’s attention’ (Miskimmon et al, 2013: 110); they should resonate with the ‘values, interests and prejudices’ of their target audience (Khaladarova, 2016: 125). Szostek (2018) demonstrated this with regard to how Ukrainians made judgements about the credibility of the Russian news narratives they consumed around the first phase of the Russian-Ukrainian war, in 2014. This highlights the importance of investigating strategic narrative reception for understanding the mechanisms behind strategic narrative influence.

Strategic narratives were particularly important to the Syrian conflict. The complex nature of the foreign policy interests involved, and the withdrawal of many international journalists amid targeting by Assad’s regime (Salama, 2012), made Syria a uniquely contentious terrain of journalism (Nyirubugara, 2018). Broadcasters relied heavily on content generated by citizens and distributed via social media (Dajani et al, 2019), but accusations of faked video evidence on both sides of the conflict turned it into an arena of contested truth (Merrin, 2018: 208). Distinguishing the ‘heroes’ from the ‘villains’ of the conflict was made all the more salient in the UK by divisive domestic political debates over the welcoming of Syrians fleeing Assad’s regime, and IS-led terror attacks in London and Manchester (Abbas, 2019).

**RT and Russia’s strategic narrative of Syria**

Russia has been a major supporter of the Assad regime, Syria being a Cold War ally in which Russia also had business and infrastructure investments (Arsenault et al, 2017). Having supplied weapons and personnel from the outset, in September 2015 Russia’s involvement escalated with its launching of airstrikes against the regime’s opponents (Casula, 2015). Although Putin positioned this as an attack on IS, it is claimed that most of those targeted were non-IS opposition groups (ibid). Some alleged targets were hospitals
Against this backdrop, the Russian state media narrative countered the dominant Western pro-revolutionary one (Arsenault et al., 2017). It reflected and extended a historically consistent strategic narrative used to legitimate Russia’s actions on the global stage, one which represents US interference as causing instability and as stemming from an American desire to maintain unipolar dominance even while costing other nations their sovereignty (Schmitt, 2018). European states like the UK follow the USA, subordinate to its interests (ibid). Meanwhile, Russia, an equally ‘great power’, intervenes to legitimately counter the imbalance of American dominance (Szostek, 2017).

At the time, Russia’s intervention featured prominently in RT’s reporting (Crilley and Chatterje-Doody, 2020; Orttung and Nelson, 2019) which broadly conformed to Russia’s strategic narrative, legitimating its actions. A study of RT’s 2015 YouTube content on the conflict identified a narrative of Western military intervention exacerbating civil unrest and empowering IS before the Syrian government asked Russia to assist and resolve the chaos (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley, 2019). This was supported by a qualitative analysis of RT Arabic’s 2018 social media postings and website articles on Syria which revealed that, alongside presenting the Syrian opposition as illegitimate and Syrian civilians as passive victims, the outlet depicted Russia as a diplomatic actor, alone capable of governing and protecting Syria from ‘outside forces’ (Dajani et al., 2019: 448). RT’s narrative presented the conflict as a geopolitical struggle ‘where the various other players [had] questionable motives’ (ibid: 449).

However, the reception and interpretation of these narratives are not well investigated. Although the coverage in question attracted high numbers of views (Orttung and Nelson, 2019), quantifying so-called engagement metrics provides a limited understanding of what content actually means to audiences. Notwithstanding the potential deliberate inflation of these statistics by bots, exposure does not necessarily mean engagement with or endorsement of RT’s message (Crilley et al., 2020).

Crilley and Chatterje-Doody (2020) found that comments made in response to RT’s YouTube coverage reflected RT’s affective representation of the conflict, concluding that this demonstrated audiences’ affective investment in the identities and narratives in the coverage. However, the authors themselves acknowledge that such comments are ‘aspects of discourse whose publishers will have varied intentions and motivations, which cannot be studied through their comments alone’ (ibid: 717). RT moderates comments on its social media content, removing posts and likely skewing observable reactions there (Miazhevich, 2018). Importantly, behavioural traces like comments are constructed by the logic and affordances of social media platforms along with cultures and norms of interaction in these environments (e.g. cynicism, gamification) (van Dijck, 2013); they should not be treated as windows into users ‘real’ or ‘true’ sentiments. Close-up, qualitative methods, however, allow investigation of audiences’ interpretations, experiences and meaning-making in their own words (Geertz, 1977) without divorcing them from the context of individuals’ offline lives. The current study draws on data from audience interviews to investigate how RT’s coverage of Syria was interpreted. The findings reveal the localised mechanisms by which RT’s strategic narrative around the conflict functioned as an effective tool in Russia’s own ‘information war’ with the West.

**Research method**

This paper draws on data from a qualitative study with members of RT UK’s Facebook audience. The study sought not to create generalisable findings but rather, in the tradition of qualitative, inductive research, to examine in detail some of the complex ways RT’s coverage resonated with individuals. It focused on Facebook given its significance as a social media platform and salience to RT’s audiences. RT’s television audience has been described as ‘too small to measure’ (Orttung and Nelson, 2019: 80), making its online audience a more meaningful area for investigation. In the UK, Facebook is the most popular social networking site (O’Dea, 2018) and the most popular social media platform for news consumption (Pew Research Center, 2018). RT UK’s following on Facebook was more than 6 times that of Twitter (approx. 650,000 vs. 96,000) before its ban. While RT’s YouTube channels have significant viewership, Facebook is an important medium by which the outlet and its audiences disseminate its YouTube-based videos. Furthermore, incidental news exposure is more common on Facebook than YouTube, given the primacy of its algorithmically driven ‘Newsfeed’ content and the function of peer recommendations (Yamamoto and Morey, 2019), rendering the study of Facebook-based audiences important to understanding news consumption.

Data collection did not begin with a focus on Syria. Rather, the then dominant news issue of Brexit was the planned focus, and recruitment thus targeted users interacting with RT’s Brexit-related coverage. Russia has been accused of potential meddling in the 2016 EU referendum (Rosenberg, 2016), and RT of providing comparatively more airtime to the Leave campaign (Elswah and Howard, 2020)—perhaps unsurprising given Brexit’s divisive

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1. The UK Intelligence and Security Committee’s findings on these were inconclusive (Forrest, 2020), but the United Kingdom Independence Party (key proponents of Brexit) explicitly supported President Putin (Flaherty and Roselle, 2018).
potential. The semi-structured interviews, however, explored a variety of topics around RT’s coverage, as it became clear that interviewees were interested in a range of global political issues (including the unfolding Covid-19 pandemic, Scottish independence, and corruption). Within this, coverage of Syria emerged as a particularly salient issue and became the focus of the current analysis. A separate analysis of the broader appeal of RT to interviewees can be found in Hall (2022).

For recruitment, CrowdTangle was used to identify Brexit-related posts on the RT UK Facebook page, two weeks before to two weeks after the UK’s departure from the EU (17 January–14 February 2020, n = 122). ‘Top Fans’ who had commented on the content were identified (n = 435) and invited to an interview using Facebook Messenger between 9 March and 19 May 2020. Top Fans were those who had been recently interacting frequently with posts on the page (on any topic). At the time of the study, Facebook attributed this status dynamically and automatically (without user consent), reflected in the fact that many interviewees mentioned they were not aware of holding the status. Top Fans were targeted not because they necessarily considered themselves fans of RT; rather, within a saturated online attention economy, having been attributed this status made them more likely (than, for instance, individuals who had simply commented once on RT UK’s content) to be aware of RT as a source and be interacting with it consciously (regardless of whether they regarded it positively).

Twenty-six users agreed and were interviewed between March and May 2020 (see Table 1). Interviewees hailed from all four nations of the UK and their ages ranged from early twenties to mid-seventies. The interviewee group was male-dominated, which reflects existing observations on RT’s audiences (Crilley et al., 2020). Informed consent was obtained electronically, and data were stored on password-protected, encrypted media.

Interviews took place online, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Most were conducted using voice chat on Facebook.

| Name     | Interview date | Interview format | Gender | Age | Location                      |
|----------|----------------|------------------|--------|-----|--------------------------------|
| Alan     | 10/03/20       | Voice            | M      | 50s | Spain                          |
| Bert     | 11/03/20       | Messenger        | M      | 60s | undisclosed (rural UK)         |
| Chris    | 11/03/20       | Voice            | M      | 20s | Northern Ireland               |
| Derek    | 16/03/20       | Messenger        | M      | Undisclosed | Bristol                 |
| Evelyn   | 16/03/20       | Voice            | F      | 64  | Liverpool                      |
| Fiona    | 17/03/20       | Voice            | F      | 62  | rural Scotland                 |
| Gordon   | 18/03/20       | Voice            | M      | 70  | Lanark, Scotland               |
| Harriet  | 18/03/20       | Voice            | F      | 63  | France                         |
| Ian      | 19/03/20       | Voice            | M      | 20s | Grimsby                        |
| Joshua   | 22/03/20       | Voice            | M      | 20s | NW English seaside             |
| Kevin    | 24/03/20       | Voice            | M      | 40s | West Midlands                  |
| Lorraine | 24/03/20       | Voice            | F      | 65  | Southern England               |
| Martin   | 24/03/20       | Voice            | M      | 47  | undisclosed                    |
| Noelene  | 09/04/20       | Voice            | F      | 75  | South Wales                    |
| Oliver   | 13/04/20       | Voice            | M      | 52  | SW England                     |
| Paul     | 14/04/20       | Messenger        | M      | Undisclosed | undisclosed     |
| Quentin  | 15/04/20       | Voice            | M      | 50s | Hong Kong                      |
| Russel   | 21/04/20       | Voice            | M      | 38  | Belfast                        |
| Scott    | 22/04/20       | Voice            | M      | 39  | NW England                     |
| Tess     | 22/04/20       | Voice            | F      | 56  | Scotland                       |
| Thomas   | 28/04/20       | Voice            | M      | 40  | UK and Spain                   |
| Vincent  | 01/05/20       | Voice            | M      | 62  | Bournemouth                    |
| Wallace  | 07/05/20       | Voice            | M      | 30s | Scotland                       |
| Will     | 20/05/20       | Voice            | M      | 30  | Scotland                       |
| Arthur   | 20/05/20       | Voice            | M      | 70s | North Wales                    |
| Byron    | 22/05/20       | Voice            | M      | 32  | Australia                      |

NB: Names given are pseudonyms

2 Facebook has since moved to explicitly asking users whether they wish to display this.
Brexit

online disinformation campaign by Russia (Pacheco et al., 2020). They were the target of a coordinated search and rescue, medical evacuation and other humanitarian activities during the conflict. They were the target of a coordinated search and rescue, medical evacuation and other humanitarian activities during the conflict. They were the target of a coordinated search and rescue, medical evacuation and other humanitarian activities during the conflict. They were the target of a coordinated search and rescue, medical evacuation and other humanitarian activities during the conflict. They were the target of a coordinated search and rescue, medical evacuation and other humanitarian activities during the conflict. They were the target of a coordinated search and rescue, medical evacuation and other humanitarian activities during the conflict. They were the target of a coordinated search and rescue, medical evacuation and other humanitarian activities during the conflict. They were the target of a coordinated search and rescue, medical evacuation and other humanitarian activities during the conflict.

3 Officially ‘the Syria Civil Defence’, this volunteer organisation conducted search and rescue, medical evacuation and other humanitarian activities during the conflict. They were the target of a coordinated online disinformation campaign by Russia (Pacheco et al., 2020).

Findings

The Syrian conflict was a prominent issue discussed by interviewees. They recounted it as an issue on which RT had made a significant impression, despite half a decade having passed since the heightened period of coverage of the conflict. To many interviewees, RT’s coverage of Syria—with its invitation to question Western media narratives on the conflict—was an important part of what made RT appealing. In fact, more interviewees mentioned this coverage as their first memorable encounter with RT than any other topic (n = 5, versus: the Israel-Palestine conflict [n = 2], Brexit [n = 2], 9–11 [n = 1], UFOs [n = 1]; could not recall [n = 15]). Aspects interviewees found particularly interesting included the White Helmets group, Assad’s alleged use of chemical weapons, the celebration of Christmas, and the role of IS—all issues on which RT’s narrative challenged that of mainstream Western news.

In the following analysis, I demonstrate how the appeal of RT’s counter-narrative on the Syrian conflict was primarily based on two aspects of interviewees’ attitudes around domestic politics: their distrust of UK and broader Western media, and their residual feelings of betrayal around Britain’s involvement in the Iraq war. The analysis thus reveals how local disaffection was effectively exploited by RT to disseminate its strategic counter-narrative of this distant issue, and how the issue became a potential vehicle for Russia’s ‘information war’ with the West.

Distrust in domestic media

Interviewees tended to speak favourably of RT’s coverage of Syria, but did so overwhelmingly by contrasting it with that of Western outlets. RT’s coverage was seen as ‘debunking’ Western myths and opening one’s eyes to ‘truths’ untold by allegedly disingenuous, inaccurate or incomplete British (and sometimes American) news coverage. On Syria, RT ‘unfolded a part of the story that wasn’t told by the media’ (Alan).

Deviation from Western outlets was key to Quentin’s becoming interested in RT. When asked about his first encounter with the outlet, he recalled a story on the White Helmets, the presentation of which had ‘really made sense’. He contrasted this with coverage by outlets like the BBC which ‘you just knew (…) was propaganda’. Quentin recounted his impression of this story:

It said ‘Why are they not doing this? Why aren’t they here? (…) Why have they said this?’ (…) [RT] explained. They exposed the White Helmets as a CIA propaganda arm, and I think that was the first time I realised that RT is actually doing proper reporting and not just reporting what everyone, reporting the Western narrative.

To Quentin, the story was representative of RT’s coverage as a whole, which he saw as ‘show[ing] you everything (…) they know, even if it’s detrimental to Russia. (…) Whereas with the UK media (…) you always know that they’re not actually showing the full picture’. This idea that RT’s reporting was more thorough, responsible or truthful compared with domestic outlets is part of its deliberate self-presentation (Miazhevich, 2018) and was echoed by a large number of interviewees.

When asked whether he had followed RT’s coverage of Syria, another interviewee, Oliver, replied ‘absolutely’, but immediately turned to the way this had prompted him to think critically of the BBC’s coverage:

That was interesting, yeah, to see the obviously biased BBC viewpoint towards Russia. (…) BBC were reporting that (…) the Russians were bombing hospitals and this, that and the other, whereas (…) pretty much Russia (…) brought an end to ISIS. If it weren’t for the Russian involvement (…) ISIS would still be (…) running around Syria (…) beheading people.
Oliver’s comments clearly reproduce Russia’s strategic narrative, and RT’s editorial stance, on the conflict. They also allude to accusations of Russophobia that RT commonly directs at the West and its media, which are part of Russia’s strategic narrative of international victimisation. RT’s own self-construction as underdog or pariah builds on this to sow doubt while adding to its own appeal (Hutchings, 2020). Oliver told me ‘the British government want [RT] (…) shut down’ because ‘they point out the uncomfortable truth’ and ‘say “hang on (…) what’s going on over here?”’, and (…) the politicians don’t want you to look over there’. Meanwhile ‘the BBC will just (…) toe the government’s line’. While Oliver did not go so far as accusing the BBC of lying, he felt they omitted or ignored stories that may be inconvenient for the British government. For instance, ‘RT have covered the sale of British arms to Saudi Arabia, whereas, you know, the BBC will just completely ignore that. (…) [RT are] far more critical of the British government, but that’s what we need. We don’t need a news outlet that’s gunna toe the government line’. Here we see the interwoven nature of media and government distrust, both of which are capitalised upon by RT to disseminate its narratives.

The BBC was commonly cited as the worst offender, perhaps reflecting its status as a national broadcaster and therefore a close perceived relationship to state-driven messaging. However, other outlets were also mentioned, like Channel 4, which had ‘shocked’ Evelyn by ‘supporting ISIL terrorists [in Syria] and people like the White Helmets’. She contrasted it with Sputnik Radio, a YouTube channel she was aware was affiliated with RT, saying Channel 4’s ‘foreign news is awful and their reporting is extremely biased’, while on Sputnik ‘you get the most up to date information about what’s happening in the world and you get people on it that are specialist (…) calling in from all different parts of the world—Australia, America, Syria…’.

Another interviewee who appreciated the number of ‘not just British’ guests on RT and felt this imbued the outlet with trustworthiness, was Tess. When asked what she thought of RT’s coverage of Syria, she responded that she found it ‘more informative than the general news that I get to watch on my normal television’. Tess was ‘interested in all those global wars and what’s actually going on, and the fact that we’re funding it. You don’t get taught that on the BBC’. Again, RT’s contrast here with domestic news was what constituted its appeal: ‘that’s one of the reasons why I watch RT—because you actually get news’. She continued, ‘I think in Britain this whole class system and the constant verbal diarrhoea that we’re fed through our newspapers and our news, it’s like (…) covering people’s eyes’. According to Tess ‘you need to go now and research your news (…) or you’re not going to know it’s happening’. Although Tess acknowledged that RT sometimes produced a ‘wee bit of propaganda’, what was important to her was that ‘they’ll actually question [things]’. As a result, to Tess, ‘RT has a better view’.

Similarly, Thomas described RT’s coverage on Syria as ‘very good for another perspective, because obviously all the Western media perspective is very limited’. For him, RT ‘seem[ed] much more credible than the information that was coming out of the British media’ because it was ‘the only news source that had correspondents actually go in there’. Meanwhile, the Western media (and Western governments) relied on an organisation called ‘the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights’ as a source, which he said had been revealed to be ‘one bloke living above a noodle shop’ who was ‘basically just a mouthpiece for ISIS’.

He then linked this to ‘the pictures from Christmas’ in ‘Aleppo and other places’, which had been one of the stories on RT that had stuck in his mind.

Aleppo, obviously, after it had been liberated, they’ve had Christmas again (…) Christmas trees, Christmas lights, whole place is lit up. Obviously, our Western media shows nothing of that. (…) All you’re seeing is footage supposedly from the White Helmets of gas attacks and things like that, which is just complete rubbish.

Thomas asserted that claims of the use of chemical weapons by Assad ‘were unlikely and made no sense at all. (…) Why would they use chemical weapons when they’d already surrendered them all?’ In this way, RT’s narrative appealed to common sense. Indeed, a number of interviewees used this frame to ‘debunk’ the mainstream narrative on Syria, branding RT’s account more plausible. Russel asserted that RT’s coverage of the chemical weapons attacks made sense because ‘[Assad] had no need to gas his people, to bring that kind of attention on himself. (…) He’d already won. (…) He just wouldn’t do that’. As Thomas described, ‘you see RT and you think “oh yeah that kind of makes sense”, and then you go on other newspaper sites and you scroll down far enough and you see the confirmation that something else has also published a story saying “yes” (…) but in a way that’s hidden so no one else notices it’. To Thomas, the fact that RT’s stories not only ‘made sense’ but were verifiable was important. The contrast in weighting given by domestic outlets to the stories that RT had portrayed as significant meant these outlets lacked ‘balance’. ‘Mainstream media’ ‘all feels like it’s being led by the same sort of people and it follows the same line. (…) There’s always a strong feeling of an agenda’. He contrasted this with RT, which he said had first appealed to him because ‘it was much more balanced’ giving ‘a wider, broader perspective’. Furthermore, he felt that in domestic media ‘there’s a distinct lack of any form of facts going around’. In short, ‘the newspapers all give you an opinion on things that happened, whereas RT (…) just reports the facts as they are. (…) [RT is] what journalism is,
rather than what the UK has, which is just a load of people making stuff up’. Here, RT’s discrediting of domestic media sources on Syria had made a significant impact on Thomas’ evaluation of these outlets, and RT had successfully positioned itself as objective, factual and for a ‘slightly more intellectual’ audience.

Meanwhile, interviewees were often quick to assure me that they did not uncritically accept RT’s narrative of Syria, and even occasionally criticised Russia’s intervention. Harriet expressed her bewilderment at conflicting narratives: ‘I’ve asked myself over and over again: Do we really know what’s going on in Syria? (…) It sounds too bad to be true’. Although she ultimately concluded that the Syrian people were ‘being bombed by the Syrian and Russian forces and that’s a fact’, this did not deter her from engaging with RT as one of many sources, for a ‘global view’ which she felt could not be provided by ‘mainstream’ outlets marred by pro-government bias. Whether or not interviewees agreed with RT’s version of events, it was an important source for them because it offered ‘a different perspective’ (Kevin) or was one of many outlets one must watch to ‘try and work out where the truth may lie’ (Evelyn). That is, an ‘unreliable’ mainstream Western media offering was nonetheless these interviewees’ motivation for interacting with outlets like RT and its narrative on Syria.

For Chris, although RT’s coverage of Syria had prompted him to ‘actually look into that situation a lot more’, when it came to who to believe between the ‘conflicting’ narratives, he felt ‘it’s very hard to say’. He conceded that the reason RT might be ‘painting Assad in a good light’ was because ‘Assad would be propped up by the Russians’. However, he ultimately emphasised the idea that the ‘rebel groups’ being backed by the West ‘could just be looked at as terrorists’. He elaborated, drawing on his own nation’s (Northern Ireland) experience of conflict:

…the West [are] calling Assad (…) a tyrant, dictator, all the rest of it, but the groups that are fighting against him (…) could be considered terrorists. It’s similar to, like, the conflict that was here. (…) That’s why I can sort of look at it a little differently. Because Americans, they were funding the IRA for, like, years. They basically called them ‘freedom fighters’, but they were terrorists.

Thus, Chris had an additional local experience that acted as a reference point for interpreting RT’s narrative. The comment highlights the impact of not only dissatisfaction with single-perspective domestic news coverage of a complex issue, but also distrust of US-led interventions in international conflicts. This important aspect will be turned to now.

### The Iraq war

Western military involvement in the Middle East was an important factor in the distrust of some interviewees towards domestic—and broader ‘Western’—government and media, and to their interaction with RT. This was both explicitly and implicitly linked to their scepticism around the Syrian conflict, which they sometimes represented as merely the latest in a history of morally reprehensible interventions that began with the Iraq war. The UK’s decision to participate in the invasion of Iraq in 2003, led by then Prime Minister Tony Blair, caused ‘unprecedented controversy and domestic dissent’, sparking the country’s largest ever street demonstration (Murray et al, 2008: 8). While public opinion swung to support for British troops after the war began (ibid), more recent surveys reveal largely negative public opinion (Gribble et al, 2015). In particular, there is a high level of cynicism about Britain’s motivations for participating in the invasion; contrary to the official narrative, the most commonly cited perceived motive is access to oil supplies, echoing a ‘war-for-oil’ narrative that emerged in parts of the mainstream media (ibid). A number of public inquiries produced damning results, including that war had been unnecessary, ill-prepared, and did not achieve its stated objectives (Chilcot, 2016). This cast a ‘long shadow’ on British foreign policy (Alexander, 2011; in Clements, 2013: 121). As Gaskarth (2016: 729) notes, the ‘fiasco of Iraq and the false intelligence used to justify action to the public’ has meant that ‘UK governments now (…) face a crisis of authority when it comes to presenting their case for war’.

Thomas explicitly linked his scepticism of Western narratives of the Syrian conflict to a perceived deception by the British media around the Iraq invasion:

Some stuff we’re being fed is nothing more than propaganda intended to justify attacks against Syria in an attempt to seize control of the country. (…) You look at that and also you can look back (…) at what propaganda was in place before the invasion of Iraq (…) and you can see that (…) the British government are basically running the media as a propaganda arm to justify attacks on other countries at the moment.

Thomas told me that like ‘most people in the UK’ he believed ‘Tony Blair should be sent to the Hague’ for having ‘lied to parliament (…) to trigger a war that caused a million people to die’, ‘a war crime comparable to what happened in Germany in World War II’. Drawing parallels with the subsequent Western military intervention in Libya, Thomas graphically depicted its devastating consequences:

[The Iraq war] was the systematic invasion and destruction of a country. (…) They did exactly the same thing in Libya. They basically went in and sys-
tematically destroyed a country that was the most developed country in the whole of Africa. (...)

They turned it into a third-world hell hole for absolutely no reason.

In Thomas’ view, the first Iraq war had come to an end because of public reaction to scathing footage of ‘US helicopter pilots using fleeing Iraqi soldiers in cars for target practice’. ‘After that, when the second Iraq war came around, there was much more control over the media, and then when it came to Libya, the media basically did a complete blackout on it’ because ‘the government basically told them not to cover it’. This set a precedent for Syria. In Thomas’ account, the media and government were simultaneously implicated.

Thomas was not the only interviewee who used comparisons to WWII to emphasise the severity of the atrocities being overlooked and accuse the West of hypocrisy. As Wallace told me, in the Iraq war: ‘they make out we were heroes, but (...) we were no better than the Nazis. [Iraqis] didn’t ask us to come into their country and help them out’. To Wallace, the Western narrative was a disingenuous inversion of reality; the real motivation was ‘because they wanna tie with America’.

In this way, many interviewees echoed Russia’s strategic narrative that Britain was at the behest of the USA and spoke of the UK’s motivations in the Middle East as a proxy for those of America. The American ‘war-for-oil’ narrative ran through most interviewees’ interpretations. According to Oliver, the US agenda in Iraq and Afghanistan had been ‘nothing to do with’ ‘securing people’s freedom’ but ‘all about securing oil (...) basically to stop China getting their hands on [it]’. Syria was merely a continuation of this. To Oliver, the Syrian conflict was ‘all about land grab, seizing power in the Middle East, securing pipelines, and America and the West want to keep Russia and China out of that area’. In interviewees’ eyes, the USA, and the UK following suit, were quick to sacrifice stability and lives in the Middle East for the sake of oil and power.

When asked whether Russia’s agenda in the Middle East differed from this, Oliver maintained that Russia was not the ‘war monger’ it was constantly made out to be by the BBC, who ‘seem to want to blame Russia for everything’. However, he conceded that ‘it wasn’t a humanitarian thing at all. (...) Russia wanted to secure their influence in that part of the world as well’. Nonetheless, he insisted ‘you can’t blame them’ because ‘they’re only doing what America’s doing anyway’. Evelyn expressed a similar view, telling me that the Russians were ‘not a war-like people. (...) If you look at over the last 30 years, who’s invaded who? (...) The countries that have invaded other countries are the USA, the UK, France and Israel’. Russia’s own agenda in the Middle East (and history of aggression towards its neighbours) was ignored. What was important to interviewees was siding against ‘the West’, whose insidious agenda RT was exposing. Trust had been lost in one’s own government, and now the availability of alternative news sources online meant to Oliver ‘if the government tells you one thing, you don’t blindly believe it anymore’.

Discussion and conclusion

Russia’s strategic narrative of the Syrian conflict resonated strongly with the interviewees of the current study. Their interpretations of that narrative, consumed through RT and interacted with via social media, provide new insights into why this was the case, which have consequences for Russia’s own ‘information war’ with the West. It was their disaffection with media and politics at home, and the context of the Iraq war legacy in particular, that made RT’s coverage of Syria meaningful to them. This finding builds on that of Schmitt (2018) that external strategic narratives must resonate with local political myths—in fact, domestic sociopolitical conditions in the form of grievances and historical scars can also play this vital role.

Interviewees overwhelmingly related their positive reception of RT’s alternative narrative on Syria to their negative attitudes towards domestic media, which were viewed as untrustworthy, one-sided, and pro-government. Disaffection with domestic media was identified in the broader findings of this project as the driving force behind these individuals’ engagement with RT (see Hall, 2022). The current paper demonstrates how this distrust in media was highly relevant to their positive reception of RT’s narrative of Syria, highlighting the benefit of such distrust to the dissemination of this narrative. Even when interviewees criticised RT’s perspective on, or Russia’s role in, the conflict, they valued RT for its ability to provide a ‘different’ view, and to interrogate UK and US involvement, where domestic media would not. RT’s self-positioning as factual, analytical, and as a pariah bravely covering ‘inconvenient’ stories appears to have been effective here (Hutchings, 2020: 287).

Russia’s strategic narrative of nefarious US interference that draws a temporal line from Iraq and Afghanistan to Libya, Syria and Ukraine (Schmitt, 2018) also appears to have been successful with these individuals. Interviewees viewed the Syrian conflict in the broader context of post 9–11 Western interventions in the Middle East, which they criticised heavily. Their comments revealed the salience of enduring feelings of betrayal around Britain’s involvement in the Iraq war to the reception of RT’s counter-narrative of the Syrian conflict. This affirms conclusions drawn by Crilley and Chatterje-Doody (2020: 12) that support for RT’s narrative of the conflict ‘is not necessarily because [commenting users] felt positively about Russia, but rather because they felt so negative about other actors involved in
the Syrian conflict’. The current study, however, adds crucial insights on the nature of this antipathy and its relationship to interpretations of RT’s coverage. It demonstrates how RT successfully capitalised upon ‘a significant moment in the general decrease of public trust in government’ (Marshall and Drieschova, 2018: 97), in turn pointing to this moment’s far-reaching consequences. The revelation that the British public had been misled over intelligence used to justify the Iraq invasion, coupled with the response to the 2008 economic crisis, are said to have triggered a steady decline in trust in government which culminated in the 2016 EU referendum result (ibid). Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that interviewees selected for their engagement with RT’s coverage of Brexit also expressed deep disaffection and distrust of British government, cynicism about its agenda in the Middle East, and scepticism towards its official narrative of Syria. Although the recruitment parameters represent a limitation of this study, the overlap between these issues also provides intriguing insight into the sorts of disaffection RT appeals to, their interrelatedness and their reverberating consequences.

Interviewees did not speak specifically of coverage they had seen on RT around the Iraq war or military interventions in Afghanistan or Libya, and determining to what extent RT deploys explicit messaging on these topics is one task for further research. However, the salience of disaffection around this is likely not something that is lost on RT, as an ‘opportunist organisation’ with a subversive agenda (Elswah and Howard, 2020: 636). At the time of writing, amidst Russia’s renewed Ukraine invasion, RT’s website is publishing new op-eds asking whether ‘the West has learned any lessons’ from the Iraq invasion (Inlakesh, 2022). The calamitous withdrawal of British, USA, Australian, German and Italian troops from Afghanistan has created more opportunity for RT to stoke discontent on the subject that is not unique to the UK, but also exists, for example, in Australia and the USA (Barratt, 2014; Igielnik and Parker, 2019). Importantly, by exploiting such disaffection, RT is not only able to attract audiences and promote its narrative of the Syrian conflict, but also exacerbate distrust and suspicion of individuals’ own governments, Russia’s apparent aim in its own ‘information war’ with the West. These interviewees did not always go on to be particularly interested in the issue of Syria itself. However, they did go on to interact with RT and its other alternative narratives. Exposure to RT’s counter-narrative coverage on Syria planted seeds of doubt that created openings for RT’s other invitations to question Western narratives on important issues.

This study only investigated individuals who were consciously engaging with RT UK on Facebook and thus cannot draw conclusions on the resonance of Russia’s strategic narrative on other audiences or the broader UK citizenry. However, many interviewees said they were not particularly ‘fans’ of RT nor did they consider it their favourite source. Furthermore, that Syria represented the first memorable encounter with RT for a number of interviewees indicates that this coverage not only appealed to sympathetic or ideologically aligned audiences, but also acted as a powerful tool for attracting new audiences for its narratives. It is not possible to measure to what extent interviewees’ disaffected attitudes pre-existed their encounter with RT. However, the way interviewees related them to RT’s coverage of Syria provides crucial insights into the ability of RT to capitalise upon discontent in British—and potentially other Western—societies. In recent years, we have seen the dire consequences for democracy of the digitally mediated harnessing of such discontent, even among a small fringe group, including in the US Capitol Hill riots of 2021.

RT may have been banned on major social media platforms in Europe and removed from Freeview TV, but its website may still be accessible via technology such as Onion Router software and its content can still be disseminated through encrypted and/or unregulated social media apps and platforms. More importantly, the damage may already be done for its existing audiences, whose scepticism might only be deepened by this banning. As Khaldarova and Pantti (2016: 899) noted, Russian state media’s deliberate blurring of the boundary between reality and fiction aims to ‘form a context in which other messages can be communicated with greater ease’. It remains to be seen how RT’s strategically lain groundwork will affect the way its existing audiences—in the UK and abroad—interpret the ongoing Ukraine conflict. Moreover, lessons from RT’s strategy will be crucial in responding to the adoption of similar strategies by other international broadcasters who may mimic RT’s approach.

Finally, in today’s hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017), this paper has demonstrated how understanding participative war necessitates taking into account the participation of foreign audiences interacting with international broadcaster content on social media. Doing so has shed light on the crucial intersection between the complex participative Syrian conflict and Russia’s ‘information war’ with the West, which is both ongoing and a chilling prelude to its current military aggression.

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