

The strange success of RT on YouTube

Monica Richter and Free Speech Debate colleagues examine RT's coverage of the US protests in Ferguson and Baltimore – in four languages.



On 19 April 2015, twenty-five year old Freddie Gray of Baltimore, Maryland, [died](#) from spinal injuries sustained during a police arrest. The [riots](#) that followed triggered a state of emergency in the city of Baltimore, making national as well as international headlines. As these events unfolded, I turned to YouTube to explore the news coverage: a quick search for "Baltimore protests" yielded everything from live footage to reports to talk show segments detailing the crisis. But between first-page hits from familiar sources like CNN and ABC News, several news reports came from a channel inconspicuously named RT.

How many of the people watching these videos, I wondered, knew that RT is the international broadcasting agency of the Russian government? Originally christened "Russia Today", it was founded in 2005 by the Kremlin to improve cultural perceptions of Russia abroad. The 2008 war in Georgia saw Russia Today come into its own, spurred by vocal anti-Russian coverage in the West. Its [false reports of genocide](#) in Ossetia by the Georgians captured international attention, cementing the network's reputation as a mouthpiece of the Kremlin. An EU post-mortem ultimately [revealed](#) that responsibility for the conflict was split between Georgian initiative and a disproportionate Russian response; neither the Western nor Russian narrative had been factually

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accurate. However, Russia Today [remained unapologetic](#) about its bias, claiming it was an intentional gambit to counter the bias of Western outlets.

This is the mission that continues to inform RT's strategy. As [Peter Pomerantsev](#) writes in the [memoir](#) of his time in Russia, RT's objective is to counter Western hegemony and alleged media bias through "coverage of what it calls 'other', or 'unreported', news". Explicitly pro-Kremlin reports (such as allegations over Georgians committing genocide in Ossetia or, in the lead-up to the annexation of Crimea, over fascists overtaking Ukraine) constitute only a minority of RT's reportage, so that the average viewer will not immediately register them. These extreme stories are instead cushioned within a much broader, dynamic output – one that gives airtime to controversial "anti-establishment" figures typically sidelined by the Western press, including conspiracy theorists, anti-globalists, and members of both the European far right (like Nigel Farage) and the far left (like George Galloway).

In response to accusations (and in the case of Britain, [sanctions](#) from the media regulator Ofcom) that it does not adhere to standards of journalistic impartiality, RT maintains that such standards are arbitrary and a further means for the West to control dissenting voices. The underlying philosophy is simple: "truth" is just a matter of perspective; impartiality is impossible. Margarita Simonyan, RT's editor-in-chief, has been explicit about this [point](#), claiming that "there is no objectivity – only approximations of the truth by as many voices as possible."

With an annual budget of over US \$300 million (€275 million), broadcasting in five languages, and a strong online presence, RT is well-situated to dispense this philosophy. Since 2009, it has introduced six regional channels to supplement its flagship, RT International: RT Arabic, RT Spanish, RT America, RT UK, RT France, and RT German. RT is particularly active on YouTube, where its channels cumulatively boast over two billion views, making it the most watched news network on the platform. As of July 2015, the flagship RT International itself had over 1.5 million subscribers and 1.4 billion views, far outstripping competitors like Al Jazeera, the BBC World Service, and CNN.

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A [study](#) for The Washington Post argues that "RT is implementing a sophisticated YouTube program that targets specific messages at well-defined audiences." The authors analysed 2,695 videos uploaded across RT's regional channels during a one-month period in early 2015 and compared the percentage of uploads on specific topics with their viewing share, revealing both RT's broadcasting focus as well as the most popular coverage for each region. On RT America, for example, 75% of videos and 81% of views are US-centred programming, suggesting that "selling Americans on the Kremlin-sanctioned view of the conflict in Ukraine is too challenging." This does not seem to be the case on RT France and RT German, where European (namely anti-EU) and Ukraine coverage dominates both upload and viewing shares.

The authors also conclude that, given the relatively small number of weekly uploads on the America and UK channels, RT appears to have "given up on targeting the specific U.S. and British audiences, as opposed to the broad international English language audience of RT.com." The video and viewing share data for RT International is shown below. Ukraine, Europe, and the USA top broadcast focus. The viewing share for Ukraine corresponds closely to video share, but this is

neither the case for Europe nor the USA. Definitive conclusions about RT viewers' habits cannot be drawn from such a small study, but the relative popularity of the Ukraine coverage indicates that its audience is not negligible.

Given this research into how RT is using YouTube, we at Free Speech Debate became curious about how the same news story is covered by each regional channel: does RT change its representation of a given issue based on the target audience? We chose to examine RT's YouTube coverage of the Baltimore and Ferguson protests in the United States, focusing on four channels: RT International, RT Arabic, RT Spanish, and RT German. We discovered that RT's narrative about the protests is largely consistent across the four channels, with only minor occasional deviations that tailor the narrative to local sentiments. Two types of videos define RT's coverage of the protests: footage of the protests, police deployment and police violence with no text or voiceover, and clips involving reporter commentary. The former are ubiquitous across all four channels, especially regarding Baltimore; these are often presented with a short stand-first text and headlines that are sympathetic with the protesters. The footage videos on RT International are often edited to [ominous effect](#) with menacing music and lighting alterations; one newscaster explicitly likened the protests to war. The vast majority of interviewees furthermore expressed some version of the same opinion: that the oppression of blacks in the US has become so unbearable that the eruption of violence was inevitable. In one video from RT Arabic, a newscaster comments

that the USA is has revealed itself to its people and the world without cosmetics, "according to observers". In a talk show entitled "Discrimination in the US and Israel: Illusion of Values", racism against African-Americans in the US is equated to that against Arabs and Africans in Israel. RT German makes several comparisons with Ukraine's Euromaidan protests, and claims that the US media is hypocritical to celebrate one and condemn the other. RT Spanish links the riots to the exacerbation of long-simmering racial tensions instigated by Freddie Gray's death, using vivid headlines such as "Open Wounds" and "Cracks in the Foundation." The focus is on the suppression of protesters and detention of members of the press.

Ferguson is covered more thoroughly than Baltimore, with RT predictably taking a distinctly sympathetic position towards the protesters. Reports focus on police injuries as well as police violence, protesters burning the American flag, and the dissolution of the US judicial system. RT International even created a documentary, "[Ferguson: Life Matters](#)", that follows a local resident (credited as a student and musician) in addressing what he and others in the community perceive to be the problems of the inner-city area. The documentary relies entirely on the interviewees' opinions and makes no attempt at fact- or numbers-based analysis of these claims. The coverage attributes the protests to racial profiling and police brutality, and links Ferguson to growing unrest in other US cities, but cites no sources or evidence to this end. RT Arabic links the protests to the historical African-American struggle for civil rights and equality, repeatedly invoking Martin Luther King's "I Have A Dream" speech. One interview show discusses whether the US is seeing a colour revolution. Unsurprisingly, given Russia's critical view of the Arab uprisings, no comparison is made between these and Ferguson. RT German compares Ferguson to the protests in Hong Kong, while RT Spanish considers broader questions about the implications of police militarisation for human rights in the US. The implication across all four channels is that America does not have the moral high ground to discuss human rights issues in countries like Russia and China.

Our take is that RT's coverage of the protests amounts to "whataboutism", where the response to any criticism is reciprocal indictment of the opponent's failure to act consistently. Thus, confronting RT about its pro-Russian and anti-Western bias only brings accusations of the opposite bias against Western media. Likewise, RT makes no mention of the dire state of [minority rights](#) and [free speech](#) in Russia, and instead presents the situation as equally bad in the US, regardless if the facts support the conclusion. As Lukas Alpert [explains](#), RT does not usually lie outright in its reporting; rather, it presents "facts in a way that distorts the reality of the situation and leads viewers to certain conclusions. [...] Important bits of context and key facts are ignored if these would undermine the idea being presented." As Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss note in their [report](#) on the Kremlin's weaponisation of information, RT's strategy warps the normative language of the West and turns it against itself, claiming not that Russia is "good" but that the West is just as bad, Western values are meaningless and fact-based reality is just a matter of perspective. However, although objectivity may be an unattainable goal, it is a goal nonetheless. Often, the facts point to a truth that is not always "somewhere in the middle", as RT would have us believe.

It is true, of course, that no worldview is neutral; our interpretations of events are intrinsically and

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inexorably shaped by paradigms resulting from historical, cultural and social conditioning that, by definition, preclude complete objectivity. RT distorts this message through the skilful use of new media to curry favour with diverse international audiences. Its strong online presence, coupled with commitments to expand international television coverage, represents a novel breed of public diplomacy.

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