

# Sputnik and the “Information War”: Projecting Russia in the Digital Age

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## Abstract

This thesis presents the first comprehensive analysis of Russia's radio-cum multimedia international broadcaster, Sputnik's English language radio and social media output and a selective scrutiny of social media audience responses, asking whether Sputnik has a distinctive function within Russia's external projection strategy.

How does Sputnik depict official discourse on Russian identity? (RQ1); how does Sputnik respond to disruptive media events? (RQ2); how does it present itself within the wider global media ecology? (RQ3); how do audiences engage with Sputnik? (RQ4).

Deploying theories of strategic narratives, the hybrid media system and disruptive media events, I examine Sputnik's coverage of the centenary of the Russian Revolution (1); the Salisbury poisonings (2); the arrest, detention and legal proceedings involving WikiLeaks's founder, Julian Assange (3); and the COVID-19 pandemic (4).

I argue that Sputnik complements the subtler manoeuvrings of RT by acting as "defending attacker" in Russia's outward projection strategy, combining incendiary critiques of Western actors with the direct projection of Russian foreign policy initiatives. Thus, unlike RT, which focuses on undermining Western establishments and "mainstream media", it serves as the unadulterated "Voice of Russia".

Russian state-aligned media actors have a keen awareness of the technological and structural dynamics of the global media ecology and Sputnik attempts to tailor media content to different audiences. But Sputnik's low audiences conflict with Western perceptions of its threat, which is consistent with Russia's communications strategy: to "perform" disruption, seemingly without achieving it, but thereby to provoke Western establishments into raising Sputnik's profile by reacting to its "defensive attack".

**Keywords:** Information War, public diplomacy, soft power, hybrid media system, Russian politics, identity discourse, Russia-West relations, interstate conflict, foreign policy, memory politics, disruptive media events, alternative media ecology, strategic narratives.

## Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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## **Dedication**

For Nina, Marianna, Lyudmila, Larissa, Elena, Tamara, Olga, Vera and Anna—all the women who have shaped my education.

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## **Note on Transliteration and Translation**

This thesis uses the scholarly transliteration convention to render Russian terms and names from primary sources. All Russian language citations were translated into English by the author.

## Introduction

The 2008 and 2013 Foreign Policy Concepts of the Russian Federation outlined the priority of strengthening its “public diplomacy” efforts and of projecting Russia for international audiences (Kremlin, 2008; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). “Public diplomacy”, according to Sharp, “is the process by which direct relations are pursued with a country’s people to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented” (Sharp, 2005, p. 7). Simply put, “public diplomacy” is concerned with the effort to engage and influence foreign publics and international broadcasting is one of its main instruments. Public diplomacy is thus a tool in the wider pursuit of “soft power”: “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion” (Nye, 2004, p. x). Points six and 41 of the 2008 and 2013 Concepts declared that: “in its public diplomacy, Russia will seek to ensure its objective position in the world, develop its own effective means of information influence on public opinion, strengthen the role of the Russian mass media in the international information environment” (Kremlin, 2008; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). In 2009, it was Russia’s foreign policy objective to expand its global informational footprint, coupled with the aftermath of the Georgian War in August 2008 that, in the view of the Kremlin, highlighted the “Anglo-Saxon monopoly on global information streams” (Putin, 2013). The perceived failure to present the Russian position convincingly prompted a revision of reporting strategy on the part of Russia’s international television broadcaster, Russia Today (first founded in 2005), including its rebranding as RT (Seddon, 2016). Deviating from its original function as a traditional purveyor of soft power that sought to promote Russian culture, in its new guise, RT encouraged its viewers to “question more” by covering Western political and socio-cultural developments in a newly critical light (Birge and Chatterje-Doody, 2020).

In 2014, which coincided with further deterioration in relations between Russia and “the West” (i.e., the transatlantic English-speaking West) following the Ukraine Crisis and subsequent annexation of Crimea in 2014 and Russia’s military backing of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, the task of projecting Russia abroad acquired new urgency. The strategic response to this fresh

imperative came in November 2014 when news agency Rossyia Segodnya—which acts as a bridge between Russia’s domestic and international broadcasting—established a new international radio broadcasting outlet, Sputnik, to replace Voice of Russia and RIA Novostii (formally disbanded in 2013). RT’s new auxiliary, Sputnik, purported to offer more to “enquiring” international audiences by “telling the untold”. Thus, as with Russia’s revamped television broadcaster, RT, the newly configured Sputnik sought to break the “hegemony” of Western media and present an “alternative” viewpoint (Hilburn, 2014). What role does Sputnik play in rendering Russia for external audiences? The purpose of this doctoral thesis is to examine how Sputnik projects Russia to foreign audiences in order to establish whether it plays a distinctive role in Russia’s external projection strategy

RT and Sputnik’s status as “troublesome” broadcasting outliers have placed them front and centre of the “Information War”. This term is often invoked in political, public and even academic discourse to describe the hostile turn in Russo-Western relations in the 2010s and is based on the idea that Russia is successfully waging a war of (dis)information against the West in order to weaken its democratic institutions (Pomerantsev and Weiss, 2014; Thomas, 2014; Pomerantsev, 2015a; Pomerantsev, 2015b; Snegovaya, 2015; Paul and Matthews, 2016; Lucas and Pomerantsev, 2016; Van Herpen, 2016; Hoskins and Schechlin, 2018; Stengel, 2019; Jankowicz, 2020). Strikingly though, an analogously fear-driven narrative prevails in Russian discourses that present the West as intent on enfeebling Russia via public diplomacy messaging (Fridman, 2018; 2020; Chernobrov and Briant, 2020).

How does Sputnik, which came into being amidst these increasingly intractable dynamics, portray Russian identity and foreign policy objectives vis-à-vis the West? How does it engage Information War tropes in its depiction of self (Russia) and other (the West)? While there have been some scholarly analyses of Sputnik’s content—Kragh and Åsberg, 2017; Wagnsson and Barzanj, 2019; Birge and Chatterje Doody, 2020—its output and reporting strategies are yet to

be analysed comprehensively. This doctoral thesis endeavours to address this gap by asking how Sputnik projects Russia for the global media ecology.

RT's makeover from its predecessor, Russia Today, was intended in part to obscure the television channel's Russia connection. Conversely, the Sputnik branding—which harks back nostalgically to *Sputnik 1*, the first artificially produced earth satellite, which precipitated the Space Race and recalls an epoch when Russia's great power status was not called into question—sought to make the radio-cum-multimedia broadcaster's link to the Russian state incontrovertible. Thus, based on branding, Sputnik is ostensibly more concerned with projecting an unashamedly Russian position on international developments than is its elder sibling, RT. It perhaps comes as little surprise, then, that Sputnik has garnered the reputation of being the more inflammatory of the two international broadcasters (Groll, 2014; Orenstein, 2019, p. 37; Birge and Chatterje-Doody, 2020, p. 175; Feinburg, 2017). Incendiary notoriety notwithstanding, is Sputnik more akin to a conventional public diplomacy tool than RT, insofar as it is more open than RT about being the “Voice of Russia”?

Sputnik describes itself in understated terms as a “modern news agency” and is a heterogeneous web-based broadcasting outlet featuring news analysis, opinion pieces and polls, multimedia content, live newswire, a social media presence, a digital radio station and even a traditional AM/FM radio frequency. Sputnik expands Russia's international broadcasting output to include more languages than RT. Its website is available in over 30 languages including Russian and English (and those of Russia's “near abroad” (*bližajšee zarubež'e*)) compared with RT's web presence in French, German, Spanish and Arabic. In addition to its Moscow headquarters, Sputnik has regional hubs in Paris, Berlin, Cairo, Beijing, Washington DC and (until April 2021) London and Edinburgh (Tétrault-Farber, 2021). Similarly, Sputnik's radio broadcasts match RT's broadcasting in English, Spanish, German, Arabic and French and enlarge it by adding Chinese (although RT has a Chinese YouTube Chanel, it only has 5000 subscribers),

Portuguese (Brazilian), Turkish, Serbian, Polish and Farsi. In other words, Sputnik widens the scope of Russian broadcasting strategies to non-Western key global players, particularly fellow BRIC member countries China and Brazil, and Turkey, an important global player that, despite having NATO membership, has not been fully integrated into the West.

The expansion of Russia's public diplomacy operation via Sputnik to areas beyond RT's sphere was also reflective of a wider strategy to endorse "multipolarity" or a "multipolar" world order. A multipolar, or polycentric, world order denotes one in which power is distributed among several states rather than two (bipolar, i.e., the Cold War period) or one (unipolar, i.e., the post-Cold War period). In official Russian political rhetoric, the terms multipolar and polycentric (*mnogopoljarnyj* and *policentričnyj*) are used interchangeably with the former being more frequent; but both terms foreground "the power hubs" (poles and centres) rather than communication between them (multilateralism) (Kortunov, 2019, p. 3). Departing from matters of lexicon, multipolarity, as Russian foreign policy commentator Fyodor Lukyanov (2010) points out, is traditionally associated with the need for a balance of power in the international order, and it is through this lens that the term is perceived in the Russian context. More precisely, multipolarity is most often linked to former Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, who served during Boris Yeltsin's second presidential term in office (1996-1998), whether in theoretical terms as the historically predetermined successor to unipolarity or in practical terms to a strategic alliance between Russia and China designed to offset American hegemony and thus the unipolar world order of the 1990s (Kortunov, 2019, p. 11). Though the term has evolved since the mid-1990s to include non-state actors among the power sharers, when applied to Russia it is most accurately conceptualised according to its conventional definition of redressing the balance within the international order, i.e., counteracting US hegemony. While multipolarity has been a key tenet of Russian foreign policy thinking for over two decades, the precise manner in which it will materialise, and Russia's exact place in it, remains highly ambiguous.

Returning to the question of Sputnik, the multipolarity trope was invoked at the outlet's official launch in Moscow in November 2014 by Russian state-aligned media news anchor Dmitry Kiselev (then head of Rossiya Seogodnja) when he declared that it was conceived for those international audiences that were "tired of aggressive propaganda promoting a unipolar world" (Ennis, 2014). Strikingly, the multipolarity motif also featured in Sputnik's original mission statement, which claimed that the international broadcaster "pointed to a multipolar world". Despite this phrase having since been removed from Sputnik's official mission statement, its initial presence points to one of Russia's strategic aims. How does Sputnik's media content endeavour to promote multipolarity in its projection of Russian identity and foreign policy objectives? And how is the rather opaque notion of multipolarity constructed in Sputnik's broadcasts and outputs?

To address the principal research aims of understanding how Sputnik projects Russia to external audiences and thus whether it has a specific function within Russia's larger external projection strategy, this doctoral thesis documents and analyses Sputnik's radio broadcasts and social media output; it also selectively scrutinises social media audience responses, deploying four case studies (the centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution; the Salisbury poisonings; the arrest of Julian Assange; and the COVID-19 pandemic) over a four-year period (February 2017-2021). This particular time span was selected as it begins with the first selected case study, 1917's centenary (February 2017); coincides with the second and third selected case studies, the Salisbury poisonings (March-September 2018) and the arrest, detention and trial of Assange (April 2019-February 2020) and ends with the final one, the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (February 2021). Examining Sputnik's broadcast content over a four-year period sufficiently enables us to assess the trajectory of Sputnik's media strategy and allows us to determine whether and how Sputnik's media operation shifted over time, which in turn is likely to tell us something about how Sputnik's producers and editors conceive of and evaluate its performance. The thesis's analysis foregrounds Sputnik's radio broadcasts rather than the web

articles available on its global English language URL, Sputnik International, since radio is Sputnik's distinctive medium of choice.<sup>1</sup>

The first two cases were chosen because they relate to a number of key Russian identity tropes in official discourse: Russia as a great power; the uniqueness of Russian history and culture; the West as Russia's "Significant Other"; and the state as the Russian people's greatest achievement. The centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution, arguably the most significant historical event in 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia, reveals much about how Russia projects its history and culture. As is the case with many other historical events, the Putin regime has no coherent official narrative on the Russian Revolution. (The Second World War is the only historical event on which the regime has developed a stable narrative.) Examining its coverage of the 1917 centenary sheds light on Sputnik's specific strategies in addressing foreign English-speaking audiences as well as domestic Russian speaking ones.

The poisoning of former double agent Sergej Skripal and his daughter Julija in the cathedral town of Salisbury in 2018, in which Russia's alleged involvement is one of the principal corollaries of hostile West-Russia relations, demonstrates how Sputnik portrays foreign policy matters of the upmost importance to its national security to external English-speaking audiences on the one hand and domestic Russian ones on the other.

A comparison of Sputnik's UK- and US-produced English language content with its Russian-produced output was required in order to show how Russia tailors its broadcasting strategies to international and domestic audiences and responds to the new global media ecology. Likewise, to ascertain the distinctiveness of Sputnik and its main medium of radio within Russia's international broadcasting projects, I also compared the results of the 1917 centenary and

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<sup>1</sup> Sputnik International's web articles are closely pegged to those of RT International and RIA Novosti; thus, they would be unlikely to yield enlightening empirical evidence regarding whether Sputnik has a specific function within Russia's external projection strategy.

Salisbury poisonings with those of the project “Reframing Russia for the Global Mediasphere” the first systematic analysis of RT.<sup>2</sup>

The remaining two case studies—the arrest and ongoing legal proceedings against WikiLeaks’s founder, Julian Assange, in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020/21—were selected in order to identify Sputnik’s place within the wider global media ecosystem and to gauge how audiences respond to it. The former explores the outlet’s self-identification and journalistic practice as an “alternative” media channel in its English language US/UK coverage. The latter reveals how global English-speaking audiences engaged Sputnik across a major social media platform during a time of protracted global crisis. Thus, the four case studies address key features of Russia’s national identity discourse in their foreign projection on the one hand and Sputnik’s function as a global news broadcaster in the era of web 2.0 on the other. What are the discursive dynamics of Information War and “disinformation” that underline perceptions of Russia’s international broadcasting operation amongst members of the Western political elites and wider civil society? The following section fleshes out the two discourses that are of critical importance for the thesis’s research on Sputnik.

### **The Discursive Dynamic of “Information War”**

Recent publications in the sphere of Political Communication refer to the term “Information War” to describe the specificity of the consecutive diplomatic spats between Russia and the West. Though the term “Information War” is one we may associate first and foremost with the new digital, “informational” dimension of inter-state conflict, in reality it is not new. The first attempt to establish Information War as a concept in its own right was put forward in a 1996

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<sup>2</sup> “Reframing Russia for the Global Mediasphere” was a three-year Arts and Humanities Research Council funded collaboration between the University of Manchester and the Open University (2017-2020). It was the first systematic study of RT’s media outputs and audience engagement. See <https://reframingrussia.com>.



report by the American military think tank, the Rand Corporation, entitled *Strategic Information Warfare: A New Face of War* (Molander, Riddle and Wilson, 1996). As the Rand report makes plain, Information Warfare was to a large extent simply a new way of referring to what were already well-established military practices: the deliberate use of deception and “disinformation” as well as informational technical operations such as jamming. In Russia, the Information War concept developed in military and security circles shortly after its inception in the US in the mid-1990s (Molander, Riddle and Wilson, p. 27). Information War was also new lexicon for the long-serving informational-technical and informational-psychological aspects of military conflict. Undoubtedly, such tactics pertaining to information would have been particularly pertinent during the Cold War, in which there was never any direct military confrontation. The 1996 Rand report forthrightly predicts that as military operations concerning information would gain greater currency in the coming years, so too would the term Information Warfare (Molander, Riddle and Wilson, p. 27). Indeed, following the advent of web 2.0, Information War has ostensibly acquired a different meaning. Or, perhaps more accurately, as the Rand report prophesied, the scope for potential information warfare has greatly expanded.

In its current guise, the term has been invoked by analysts, journalists and some scholars (Ramsay and Robertshaw, 2019; Stengel, 2019). Former Lieutenant Colonel in the US military Timothy Thomas (2014); journalists Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev (2015a; 2015b; 2016); American journalist Michael Weiss (2014); research analysts Nina Jankowicz (2020), Marcel Van Herpen (2016), Miriam Matthews and Christopher Paul (2016); and scholar Maria Snegovaya (2015) have appropriated the term, largely in the form of reports commissioned under the auspices of conservative Western think tanks. While these alarmist accounts all acknowledge the pliability of Information War and its interchangeability with other terms such as “hybrid war” and “non-kinetic war”, they use it loosely to describe a well-coordinated, centralised, top-down and allegedly effective Russian-led Information War that successfully exploits democratic Western media flows in order to capture the hearts and minds of foreign

publics—both in and beyond Russia’s traditional geopolitical and linguistic orbit.<sup>3</sup> Thus, these publications reflect the Information War discourse’s problematic: its politicisation and obscurity. The above characterisation of Information Warfare as centralised, well-coordinated and top-down has been refuted with convincing vigour by theoretical polemics scholars Ellen Mickiewicz (2017) and Mark Galeotti (2018), and empirically by Vera Tolz and Yuri Teper (2018) and Marlene Laurelle and Keven Limoner (2021).

In the Russian context, the Information War discourse is framed in terms of a Western information war against Russia. There are three distinct yet overlapping conceptualisations of Information War in Russian analytical and academic discourse: Evgenij Messner’s “subversion war”; Aleksandr Dugin’s “net-centric war”; and Igor’ Panarin’s “information warfare” have been used to characterise Information War as a “Western technique to subvert its adversaries” (Fridman, 2017; 2018; 2020).<sup>4</sup> The Russian conceptualisation clearly points to Russia’s Soviet past; as Ofer Fridman shows, citing Panarin, this strand of Russian academic discourse goes as far as to claim that the Western information warfare against Russia “‘allowed the West to destroy the Soviet Union’ which ‘puts the dissolution of Russian Federation on the Western agenda,’” a highly contentious proposition (Fridman, 2017, pp. 62-63). Thus, Russian politicisation of the term is for the most part a mirror image of its Western counterpart.

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<sup>3</sup> Despite often being used interchangeably with “Information War, “hybrid warfare” tends to denote the combined use of military and non-military methods in order to achieve political goals, such as “disinformation” (i.e., the deliberate use of false information to mislead and confuse audiences) and hacking, which swaps the frontline for the battlefield of cyberspace and the mediasphere. As per “hybrid warfare”, on occasion hacked material also might be leaked to muddy the reputation of the actor to whom it refers if they occupy a prominent post, thereby comprising their position, i.e., (*kompromat*) (Nemstova, 2019; Suroweic, 2017). “Hybrid warfare” further includes “cyberwarfare” in its remit, i.e., systematically orchestrated cyber-attacks on a nation’s critical infrastructure such as an energy grid, a health database or transport system. Thus, “hybrid warfare” refers to the combination of traditional military warfare and war fought in the political and cyber arenas. For a timely critique of the term and its application see Aruntyuan (2021) and DeBenedictis (2021).

<sup>4</sup> Messner, who died in 1974, was a soldier in the Imperial Russian Army turned military theorist. Despite being outlawed for much of the Soviet period, his works have since been rehabilitated. Dugin is a contemporary conservative Russian scholar and political strategist who is closely associated with Russian nationalist movements and the concept of “neo- Eurasianism”. Finally, Panarin is a Russian professor of Political Science and is the dean of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s school for future diplomats—a post he has held since 2009. Messner, Dugin and Panarin are strongly associated with a recent resurgence in anti-Western Russian discourse.

Returning to the Western context, scholars working at the intersection of Political Communication and International Relations, such as Andrew Hoskins, Ben O'Loughlin, Scott McIntosh and Pavel Shchelin, have conducted rigorous analyses of Russia's international broadcasting strategy (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015; McIntosh, 2015; Hoskins and Shchelin, 2018). Nevertheless, some of the Information War discourse's basic theses continue to reverberate in the scholarship on Russia's internal and external broadcasting operation and political communication strategy. The Information War tropes present in the literature are: the specific nature of Russia's media and communication flows as linear and unidirectional and thus the "monolithic" Russian state's ability to control them (Hoskins and Shchelin, 2018); the Kremlin's misappropriation of democratic media flows and global connectivity which it uses to its own ends (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015; Hoskins and Shchelin, 2018); and the Russian state's strategic aim to exert influence over audiences (McIntosh, 2015; Paul and Matthews, 2016).

In sum, scholars Hoskins, McIntosh, O'Loughlin and Shchelin project Russia's informational exercise as a sophisticated, collaborative top-down disinformation campaign with arsenals of trolls and bots, as well as international broadcasting outlets RT and Sputnik (Hoskins and Shchelin, 2018, p. 258). These publications offer valuable contributions in explaining Russia's ambitions on the international arena and, more tellingly, how it endeavours to capitalise on the hyper-networked global media environment to achieve these aims. That said, as eminent scholar of Russian politics Mark Galeotti convincingly argues, Russian information campaigns do not have a single controlling centre and involve multiple actors with their own agendas (Galeotti, 2018). What is more, systematic analyses of Russian domestic and foreign media content have undermined the proposition that Russian media systems are strictly hierarchical, homogenous and orderly (Tolz and Teper, 2018; Kazakov and Hutchings 2019; Chatterje-Doody and Tolz, 2019; Birge and Chatterje-Doody, 2020; Tolz *et al.*, 2020; Laurelle and Limonier, 2021). The assertion that Russia's media is actually capable of exerting direct influence on

Western democratic systems has also been undermined (Rid, 2020; Tolz, 2020). Furthermore, even Pomerantsev, once himself a vociferous proponent of the position that “disinformation” was an inherently Russian phenomenon, now admits that misuses of information are omnipresent and do not stem solely from Russia (Benkler *et al.*, 2018; Pomerantsev, 2019). This doctoral thesis endeavours to build on this portfolio by demonstrating the inadequacy of the Information War paradigm when analysing Russia’s external communication strategy. A related but distinct concept, that of “disinformation”, represents a critical theoretical underpinning of the thesis’s study of Sputnik.

### **The Discursive Dynamic of “Disinformation”**

“Disinformation” is traditionally defined as the deliberate attempt to falsify information or manipulate evidence in the pursuit of strategic and political goals, whereas “misinformation” is usually understood as the unintentional dissemination of false information that an unwitting user “believes to be true” (European Commission, 2021). But as scholars Anja Bechmann and O’Loughlin correctly point out, since intent, or lack thereof, is often difficult to substantiate, the distinction between disusing or misusing information has little use (Bechmann and O’Loughlin, 2020, p. 10). Therefore, this thesis uses both these terms to denote the dissemination of false information.

The concern attached to Sputnik and RT as curators, harbingers and disseminators of disinformation in the West is substantial. Both international broadcasters have been implicated in meddling in democratic elections in a number of countries. Most notably, during the 2016 US presidential election race, RT and Sputnik were suspected of being part of a larger Russian intrigue (i.e., Russiagate) to scupper Hillary Clinton’s campaign, including promoting the Democratic National Committee and John Podesta email leaks published by WikiLeaks in July

and October 2016, which Russia was accused of perpetrating.<sup>5</sup> In addition, they are alleged to have tarnished Emmanuel Macron's French presidential and Angela Merkel's German chancellor election campaigns in 2017. In the US, the anxiety surrounding Russia's international broadcasting outlets reached its apogee in 2017, with the US government ordering RT and Sputnik to register as foreign agents. Margarita Simonyan, RT and Rossiya Segodnja's editor-in-chief, described the American measure as "an attack on free speech" and Russia has responded to it with reciprocal measures placing analogous restrictions on American media outlets working in Russia (Talmazan and Simmons, 2017). Likewise, Twitter banned both Sputnik and RT from advertising and devoted the funds raised via their previous campaigns to the investigation of meddling in democratic elections. Simonyan responded to Twitter's ban with the claim that Twitter had approached RT and Sputnik first with the offer of a large advertising deal. Such measures, prompted by Western anxiety about Russian disinformation and reciprocated by Russia, produce further polarisation of Russia and the West.

What is more, following the poisoning of double agent Sergej Skripal and his daughter Julija in 2018, the fear of RT and Sputnik as transmitters of disinformation was once again reignited. RT was under official investigation by the UK government-approved regulatory body for broadcasting and telecommunications, OFCOM, between 17 March and 26 April 2018. The investigation concluded that the RT shows *CrossTalk*, *News* and *Sputnik* had breached due impartiality on seven occasions in their coverage of the story.<sup>6</sup> The authors of a report commissioned under the auspices of the Open Society Foundation entitled *Weaponising news: RT, Sputnik and targeted disinformation* claimed that the broadcasters were "vehicles of disinformation" and that they had promoted 138 contradictory accounts of events in Salisbury in early March 2018 (Ramsay and Robertshaw, 2019). Furthermore, Western concerns about

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<sup>5</sup> John Podesta served as Hillary Clinton's campaign chair in her 2016 US presidential election campaign.

<sup>6</sup> The full OFCOM report detailing RT's misconduct can be found here [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/131159/Issue-369-Broadcast-and-On-Demand-Bulletin.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0020/131159/Issue-369-Broadcast-and-On-Demand-Bulletin.pdf)

Russian disinformation failed to dissipate during the COVID-19 pandemic despite the crisis's global character. There has been considerable anxiety among some policy makers pertaining to Russian efforts to capitalise on the uncertainty wrought by the pandemic by undermining public health messaging, i.e., lockdown measures, and immunisation programmes, i.e., vaccination. EUvsDisinfo, an offshoot of a defence initiative of the European Commission set up to counter "Kremlin disinformation strategies", has published a number of reports summarising these strategies (EUvsDisinfo, 2020a, b, c, d, e). While there has been some questioning of EUvsDisinfo's methodological robustness, their reports have nonetheless shaped the preponderant discourse on Russia's communication strategy during the pandemic (Hutchings and Tolz, 2020). Thus, as with the analogously unserviceable Information War paradigm, the disinformation trope has continued to dominate Western perceptions of Russia's external communication strategy. But how does one even begin to approach assessing disinformation?

The effects of Russian disinformation and specifically RT and Sputnik's role in it are broadly contested by scholars of Russia. As Yablokov's study of RT highlighted, it is extremely problematic to make direct links between media strategies and their effect on audiences and therefore to "measure impact and if audiences 'buy' the message being presented" (Yablokov, 2015, p. 311). Since gauging Sputnik's direct influence on audiences is problematic, why study Sputnik? The study of representation and projection itself is important in the examination of national identity discourse. Furthermore, my analysis of Sputnik's media content will go on to demonstrate the distinctive role of Sputnik in Russia's outward projection strategy. It reveals much about Russian foreign policy goals against the current backdrop of hostile relations between Russia and the West. What is more, it exposes Russia's fears, anxieties and ultimate ambitions in the international arena, or its "strategic narratives" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013).

Having situated Sputnik within its discursive context, I can now proceed to conducting a review of the scholarly literature in the fields of Russian Studies, Communication Studies and Politics and International Relations in order to elucidate the exact contribution my thesis offers to each of these disciplines. The subsequent section reviews the key publications on the three key strands that inform my analysis: Russia's domestic media operations, Russia's soft power strategy and Russian identity discourse.

### **Review of the Literature on Russia's Domestic Media Operations**

Two publications on the significance of radio during the Soviet era, including the Cold War period, provide indispensable historical background for this thesis. First, Lovell's (2015) *Russia in the Microphone Age: A History of Soviet Radio 1919-1970* is the only scholarly publication dedicated entirely to the medium of radio and offers the most detailed account of radio's trajectory from innovative and unexplored technology to tightly censored compulsory receiver. Second, historian Kristin Roth-Ey's (2011) book on the history of the Soviet mass media empire and cultural consumption during the Cold War provides useful historical analysis of Radio Moscow, one of Sputnik's predecessors. Christine Evans's (2016) book on the history of Soviet Television also offers valuable historical insight.

Looking beyond radio, numerous publications have appeared over the last 15 years in the field of Russian Media Studies on the shifting architecture of the domestic post-Soviet media landscape: Natalia Rudakova's (2017) *Losing Pravda* and Schimpfossel and Yablokov's (2017) journal articles on the regression of post-Soviet mass media from relative freedom during Yeltsin's presidency to tight control under Putin; Beumers, Hutchings and Rulyova (2009); Zassoursky (2004); and Koltsova (2006). Ryazanova-Clarke's chapter in Beumers *et al.*'s (2009) book on radio and linguistic culture in the 1990s emphasises the editorial freedom once enjoyed by radio compared with other media. Her comparative analysis of programmes on *Èxo*

Moskvy and Radio Rossii's treatment of foreign language words shows how the conflicting projections of the Russian "national idea" were negotiated in radio and thus the specific function radio served as a free platform for the discussion of the Russian national idea. While Èxo Moskvy still possesses a degree of editorial freedom, other Russian radio stations do not.

There is a range of publications dedicated to the cultural and political power of television in Putin's Russia: White (2008); Hutchings and Rulyova (2009); Oates (2008); Burrett (2010); and Mickiewicz (2008). Publications on television's role in addressing questions of official discourse on Russian identity include Tolz and Teper (2018); on Islam and security, Hutchings and Tolz (2015); Hutchings and Miazhevich (2009); and Flood *et al.* (2012). These publications offer further historical and contextual information on the evolution of media in post-Soviet Russia and hence serve as useful handbooks for my research on Russia's internationally oriented broadcaster, Sputnik. Moreover, these works foreground the role of media in addressing issues related to Russian national identity, especially in relation to its internal (domestic) projection. Nonetheless, there is a substantial gap in assessing the role that post-millennial radio—particularly in its new "digitised" and hybrid guise in the field of global communication—plays in both Russia's domestic *and* foreign projection.

### **Review of the Literature on Russia's Soft Power Strategy**

Another area of scholarly inquiry for the thesis's analysis of Sputnik's media content is that of soft power. Soft power denotes the pursuit of foreign policy goals through attraction rather than compulsion or "hard power", i.e., military force (Nye, 2004). There is a large body of work on Russian soft power and its international projection strategy. On the Kremlin's international PR project, Feklyunina (2008) considers the interaction between Russia's perceived image, self-image and desired image in the international arena. The paradoxical nature of Russia's projected image, she postulates, results in a failure to improve Russia's image abroad. On



Russian interpretations of and reactions to soft power there are, for example, publications by Sherr (2013), Kiseleva (2015) and Wilson (2015). Russian state actors, Kiseleva (2015) posits, are attracted to Western notions of soft power because of the opportunities they offer for enhancing Russia's status and influence and thus bolstering the deeply embedded discourse of Russia as a great power. However, she argues, the Russian leadership's efforts to project Russia are not recognised in the West as manifestations of Russia's soft power owing to the simple fact that Russia does not meet the "hegemonic criteria" for soft power as it is not a liberal democracy (Kiseleva, 2015, p. 316). Consequently, she postulates, the Russian soft power discourse is defined in Russia's own terms as a counter-narrative to the Western neo-liberal definition and is aimed at projecting Russia's national interests. Sergunin and Karabeshkin (2015) have written on the rehashed Russian understanding of soft power, which, they argue, departs significantly from the Western conceptualisation. In other words, in Russian foreign policy philosophy, soft power is not just about increasing Russia's "attractiveness" but also aims to reassert Russia's status as a great power and secure Russia's national interest. Furthermore, they argue, the Russian soft power definition does not prohibit the simultaneous use of hard power tools. It ought to be added, however, that Nye's (2004) original conceptualisation of soft power does not clearly demarcate soft and hard power. Additionally, Van Herpen's (2016) book provides a detailed account of the Russian institutions created for the enhancement of soft power, such as Russia Beyond the Headlines, Russki Mir and the creation of RT. Although these works provide valuable insight into how Russian political actors engage theoretically with the concept of soft power and some of the institutions created to wield it, they lack detailed systematic analyses of the international broadcasting outlets created to improve Russia's foreign projection and thus to enhance its soft power. Equally, we ought to acknowledge that what Russia presents as its soft power efforts are not regarded as examples of soft power by its EU and US counterparts, but rather as crude propaganda and subversive operations. Sherr (2013) and Van Herpen (2016), in particular, reflect this interpretation. "Propaganda", a word of Latin origin dating back to the sixteenth century and initially associated with the Catholic

Church, is rooted in the verb “to propagate”, i.e., to spread or promote an idea. Over time the term has acquired a stigma, which it carries to this day. It now connotes the propagation of deceitful, distorted and misleading information in the advancement of a political agenda (Jowett and O’Donnell, 2005, p. 2). So pejorative is the notion of propaganda that to label something as such essentially means to disregard and discredit it entirely, rendering the term redundant for any systematic analysis of an international broadcasting outlet.

Thus, Sherr (2013) and Van Herpen’s (2016) approach, which presents Russia’s soft power and public diplomacy operations as pure propaganda, limits the scope for understanding how Russia wishes to project itself in the international arena and thus for ascertaining its fears, desires and ultimate ambitions or strategic narrative. This thesis’s study of Russia’s foreign projection via Sputnik offers a development in the study of Russian interpretations and uses of soft power.

Public diplomacy scholar Gary Rawnsley (2015) also frames Russia’s international broadcasting strategy in terms of public diplomacy versus propaganda, albeit with an acknowledgement of the often-blurred distinction between the two. According to Rawnsley’s thesis, a global international broadcaster can be said to be practising propaganda or public diplomacy depending on its credibility, or lack thereof. To this end, Rawnsley argues that RT’s preoccupation with critiquing the West rather than with projecting a favourable image of Russia makes it a propaganda tool rather than an instrument of public diplomacy (Rawnsley, 2015). Curiously though, Rawnsley asserts that both *Russia Beyond the Headlines* and Sputnik, unlike RT, *are* agents of public diplomacy rather than propaganda insofar as they are more concerned with promoting an affirmative Russian position (Rawnsley, 2015, p. 284). However, he provides little evidence to back up this claim. Nor are affirming Russia and critiquing the West mutually exclusive—far from it. Given the centrality of the West in Russia’s historical-facing great power strategic narrative, Russia’s external projection strategy is likely to involve some criticism of the

West and its political, socio-cultural edifices (O'Loughlin and Miskimmon, 2017). This thesis will attempt to scrutinise the robustness of Rawnsley's thesis.

The role of international broadcasting in the context of Russian soft power has attracted some recent scholarly attention. Studies include Hutchings *et al.*'s (2015) article on the Sochi Winter Olympics on Russia Today and BBC World News, a comparative case study of RT and BBC World News' interaction with their audiences on social media platforms during the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, which coincided with a geopolitical crisis precipitated by the annexation of Crimea (Hutchings *et al.*, 2015). Using another major sports event as a case study, the 2018 World Cup in Russia, Crilley *et al.* (2021) demonstrate that RT's coverage of the championship yielded "an unusually positive vision of Russia that appealed to international audiences" (p. 136). Their analysis thus belies the proposition that RT is not able to elicit a positive soft power response from audiences, even at a time when Russia's international image was at a new low following the Salisbury poisonings.

Addressing the projection of Russian culture and history, researchers from the "Reframing Russia" team published a special journal section entitled *The Cultural Politics of Commemoration: Media and Remembrance of the Russian Revolutions of 1917*. This special edition features several articles analysing RT's media strategy in commemorating the centenary of the Russian Revolution (2017), a major soft power opportunity to burnish Russia's tarnished image (Chatterje-Doody and Gillespie, 2019). The scholars' findings will be of comparative value for this doctoral thesis's examination of how Sputnik approached the commemoration of the very same historical event.

Beyond the projection of soft power, publications have addressed qualitative audience engagement with Russian international broadcasting channels across their social media plugins, namely YouTube. Crilley and Chatterje-Doody (2020) have explored audience reaction in

reference to emotions, conflict and the war in Syria as well as the use of humour in RT's legitimisation of foreign policy objectives in the case of the Syrian war and Salisbury poisonings. Similarly, scholars have analysed audiences' mocking responses to RT's "exclusive" interview with the Salisbury suspects (Tolz *et al.*, 2020).

Regarding another key dynamic of Russian international broadcasting, Yablokov (2015) has investigated how RT uses conspiracy theories and invokes critiques from both the left and right to help establish Russia as a challenger to American hegemony. He delves deeper into this topic in his book *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in Post-Soviet Russia*, which unpacks the origins and spread of conspiracy theories in the post-Soviet Russian political landscape (Yablokov, 2018) and in a co-authored publication that explores the use and dissemination of conspiracy theories in RT's media content (Chatterje-Doody and Yablokov, 2021).

These studies all demonstrate the value of studying Russia's international broadcasting in relationship to its external projection strategies. They reveal how Russia responds to and makes use of the globalised media environment in disseminating its narratives. In addition, they underpin RT's specificity in seeking to reveal the hypocrisy of Western political elites and to question the sincerity of the democratic Western media's claim of "objectivity". However, none address Sputnik's media content, which, as previously noted, is more concerned with projecting an outwardly "in-your-face" Russian stance than is RT. My research seeks to address this gap so that one can appreciate the full picture of Russian international broadcasting strategies. In so doing, I demonstrate the specific role Sputnik plays in Russia's soft power operation and establish whether Sputnik *can* be called an instrument of public diplomacy.

## **Review of the Literature on Russian Identity Discourse**

Another significant research context underlying my doctoral thesis on Sputnik is the field of International Relations and specifically the importance of national identity perceptions for Russian foreign policy towards the West. The literature on Russian identity is vast, so here I will limit my overview only to the key publications on the relationship between national identity and foreign policy.

Scholars Ilya Prizel (1998), Igor Zevelev (2016), Andrei Tsygankov (2012; 2016) and F. Feklyunina (2008; 2012) have examined the nexus of Russian domestic national discourse and foreign policy in relationship to the West (the US and Western Europe). Zevelev argues that in Putin's third presidency, the question of national identity became the chief foreign policy project with the aim of re-establishing Russia's position as a great power. Central to the crystallisation of Russian national identity is its stress on historical continuity from Tsarist Russia to the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation. Another feature of this strategy, Zevelev maintains, is Russia's understanding of the West as intimately linked with its self-perception; this connection directly informs foreign policymaking. Similarly, Tsygankov maps Russian-Western relations from Alexander to Putin, positing that Russia's perceived sense of "honour" has defined its relationship with its "significant other", the West. Russian "honour", he shows, has followed three distinct patterns: cooperation with; defensive reaction to; and assertiveness towards the West. As such, the current phase at play in Russian "honour" is assertiveness towards the West as signalled by the South Ossetian crisis (2008), the annexation of Crimea (2014) and military sponsorship of Basir al-Assad. However, neither scholar provides an analysis of Russia's negotiation of its identity vis-à-vis the West in its projection of itself outside Russia. This thesis aims to grasp the full extent of Russia's current representation of itself in relationship to the West.

Thus, following a literature review, it is evident that my study of Russia's foreign projection via Sputnik offers a contribution at the intersection of the fields of Russian Studies, Communication Studies and Politics and International Relations, i.e., Russian Political Communication, by interrogating for the very first time Sputnik's distinctive role in rendering Russia to the audiences of the global media ecology.

## **Research Questions**

Having signposted the gaps in research in the fields of relevance to the thesis, I can now fully outline the research questions that this dissertation addresses. In order to gauge how Sputnik negotiates identity tropes in the context of a global preoccupation with identity politics, I explore how Sputnik projects official discourse on Russian identity (1). To assess the level of coordination and effectiveness in Russia's media operation, I examine how Sputnik navigates "disruptive media events" (2). To understand Sputnik's self-perception as an international broadcaster and how attempts to establish its "journalistic authority", I assess its place within the wider global media ecology (3). Finally, to evaluate Sputnik's "success" as an international broadcaster, I analyse how audiences engage it (4).

## **Thesis Outline**

Chapter I lays out the thesis's methodological, theoretical and analytical frameworks.

Chapter II analyses Sputnik's English and Russian language radio broadcast coverage of the centennials of both the February and October revolutions. It asks how Sputnik seized upon sharpened interest in Russia afforded it by the centenary. How did Sputnik deploy ideational and identitarian narratives in the context of the global audience's increasing preoccupation with identity tropes? How did Sputnik's coverage differ from that of RT?

Chapter III examines Sputnik's media strategy in the aftermath of the Salisbury poisonings: its radio broadcasts, live phone-ins and social media comments across its English and Russian language outputs. How coordinated was Sputnik's coverage of the Salisbury poisonings? How did it compare with that of RT? To what extent and in what ways did deflection and humour come to the fore? What does the mediation of an event of such significance to Russia's national security indicate about Sputnik's position vis-à-vis the Russian state?

In chapter IV, I pursue a slightly more theoretical angle in considering whether and how Sputnik presents itself as an "alternative" media outlet. By foregrounding Sputnik's coverage of the arrest of WikiLeaks's founder and former editor-in-chief Julian Assange across its English language outputs, I show how the outlet endeavours to adopt a loosely libertarian editorial stance that will enable it to appeal to wide-ranging audiences.

In chapter V, I address the question of audience engagement by examining reactions to Sputnik's English language social media strategy at two critical junctures in the first and second waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. I unpack in detail which Facebook posts garnered the most responses and which received the least. I then consider the specific nature of these responses and attempt to conclude how successful Sputnik is in this endeavour.

Finally, in the epilogue, I reflect on the thesis's four research questions in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing war there.

## **Chapter I: Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

This thesis's research aims and questions are interdisciplinary since they are situated at the intersection of Russian Studies, Communication Studies and Politics and International Relations. I bring together these broad academic disciplines to explore how Sputnik projects Russia to non-domestic audiences and to ascertain whether it serves a specific function within Russia's external communication strategy. This theoretical and methodological chapter introduces the overarching analytical frameworks that are key for praxis: "global media ecology"; "hybrid media system"; "disruptive media event"; and "strategic narratives". It concludes with an overview of the methodological approach of "close text analysis" that underpins this doctoral thesis's four analytical chapters on Sputnik and includes a demonstration of how the various conceptual frameworks were applied to my data.

### **Global Media Ecology**

In the age of web and public diplomacy 2.0, the global media ecology is not only a new arena where governments can communicate directly with foreign publics but also a forum where international politics unfolds. According to its original biological definition, ecology is the study of how organisms interact with their physical environment and other living organisms. Thus, the "global media ecology", the larger domain which Sputnik inhabits and without which it would not exist, connotes the physical and virtual systems of media, communication, information and technology, their interrelationships and their relationships with their users and audiences. The theoretical underpinnings of the "global media ecology" were pioneered by Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan and are neatly encapsulated in his famous utterance: "the medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964). Couched differently, the means of communication is just as, if not more, significant than the message it conveys; it is the "medium" that shapes the substance of the "message" and how it is perceived by audiences. It was actually media theorist Neil Postman who first presented "media ecology" as a stand-alone



concept in 1968 during a speech he delivered to a meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English entitled 'Media Ecology as Scholarly Activity'. For Postman, "media ecology" entailed the study of how media, communication and technology and their evolutions govern human perception, interaction and behaviour:

Technological change is neither additive nor subtractive. It is ecological. I mean "ecological" in the same sense as the word is used by environmental scientists. One significant change generates total change. If you remove the caterpillars from a given habitat, you are not left with the same environment minus caterpillars: you have a new environment, and you have reconstituted the conditions of survival; the same is true if you add caterpillars to an environment that has had none. This is how the ecology of media works as well. A new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything. (Postman, 1992, p. 17)

As well as being about the interrelationships between the constituent parts of the media environment, media ecology theory underscores the tenuousness of their interconnection, since one minor technological advance has the capacity to alter the entire framework. Thus, we may conclude, the media landscape is in a state of constant flux (Chadwick, 2016). Although the theory of media ecology was first introduced over half a century ago, in today's transnational hyper-networked media environment—where information, communication and technology wield pervasive sway on how we interpret events, perceive others and even ourselves—it has acquired a newfound timeliness. Each of the thesis's four analytical chapters draw heavily on the media global ecology paradigm throughout by giving due consideration to how the radio broadcaster-cum-multimedia outlet packages its content and how this corresponds to wider technological trends; how particular modes and forms of communication shape Sputnik's content; how it communicates with its perceived audiences; and how its listenership, readership or usership perceives and engages it.

## **Radio and the Global Media Ecology**

While it is the oldest broadcasting medium, radio remains the most adaptable. As historian of the Soviet Union Stephen Lovell's (2015) work has shown, radio "matched the trajectory" of the rise and fall of the Soviet Union and is the most well-established medium in Russia. Despite

briefly losing the limelight to television, it has since been reinvented thanks to the internet, which has:

offered vast data resources and ease of use, while radio provided structure (through stations and rubrics) and impact (through the unadorned human voice, still hard to beat as a way of getting and holding an audience's attention). From newspaper without paper and without distances, radio had become website without screen and without search engine. (Lovell, 2015, p. 216)

Though Lovell's comments were made in connection to radio's evolution over the course of Soviet rule, they have a wider resonance.

In its new digitised guise, radio is available on all electronic devices, from digital set to computer to tablet to smartphone, rendering the medium universally mobile with the added advantage of using far less data than television. Additionally, the advent of podcasts and radio apps has allowed radio stations to reach a younger, more technology-literate demographic. Furthermore, the "rebirth" of radio has been facilitated by the fact that radio stations are able to thematise podcasts and programmes via radio apps, meaning that audiences have the capability to personalise their listening experiences. Yet radio is no longer confined to the medium of audio. Over the past ten years, as the internet has become radio's main consumption vehicle, radio broadcasters in the UK such as the BBC and LBC and radio broadcasters in Russia such as Russkyoe Radio, Vesti and Èxo Moskvyy commenced the practice of installing webcams in their studios, meaning that audiences can watch as well as listen in real time—whether on their own apps or via social media platforms. As such, radio's flexibility has been greatly enhanced, as has audience agency, since listeners are now able to choose whether to consume broadcast material in purely audio or audio-cumvisual form. What is more, podcasters have also incorporated the visual into their outputs, which are aired customarily on social media platforms, namely YouTube, Facebook and Twitter. The above-mentioned shift has effectively blurred the once clearly demarcated boundary between the audio and the visual. For talk radio, this change has had the most far-reaching implications, inasmuch as now a television news broadcast is most saliently distinguished from a radio one by the studio backdrop. Visual supplement

notwithstanding, as a medium radio retains its more traditional formats that make the medium more interactive, more intimate and less formal than its main competitor, television: live phone-ins, longer news programmes, lifestyle topics etc. Thus, the medium of radio, rather than television, has been the true beneficiary of these technological shifts.

Sputnik is responding to and making use of the above-mentioned advances. In addition to being able to listen live via their website and app, one can download podcasts from the entirety of Sputnik's shows. As of June 2017, Sputnik's radio content became available in Washington DC on FM bandwidth 105.5 FM and from November 2017, Sputnik expanded to radio's older AM format, at frequency 1390. Likewise, from February 2020, it also became available in AM/FM format in a more regional setting, i.e., the Kansas City metropolitan area, in the Midwestern US state of Missouri. Theoretically, its arrival on both FM and AM local radio increases its chances of being heard by a more conventional American media public. This thesis will attempt to ascertain whether or not this translates into practice. Equally, Sputnik has attempted to facilitate audience engagement by making use of the older logic of the radio phone-in format and as per the advent of the visual element described above, it has added live video streaming for some of its shows via social media (Facebook and YouTube). By analysing Sputnik's synthesis of social media, audio and visual media in chapters III, IV and V, I will attempt to gauge whether and how Sputnik's content differs from that of RT. As the analysis shall reveal, on the one hand, Sputnik is harnessing radio's traditional interactive and intimate logics, and on the other hand, it is using the newer ones for radio broadcasting made possible thanks to the internet.

### **The Hybrid Media System**

The implications of harnessing orthodox and more technologically advanced media logics have been explored by Andrew Chadwick (2016). In his analysis of UK and US political

communication strategies, Chadwick develops a framework for the interaction and convergence between newer and older media logics that he calls the “hybrid media system” (Chadwick, 2016). Recognising the interplay between innovative and more traditional logics, Chadwick suggests, allows one to explore the nexus of political communication and power. Chadwick (2016) writes:

The hybrid media system is built upon interactions among older and new media logics—where logics are defined as technologies, genres, norms, behaviours, and organisational forms—in the reflexively connected field of media and politics. Actors in this system are articulated by complex and ever-evolving relationships based upon adaptation and interdependence and simultaneous concentrations and diffusions of power. Actors create, tap or steer information flows in ways that suit their goals and in ways that modify, enable or disable the agency of others, across and between a range of older and newer media settings. (p. 4)

The logics that Chadwick lists—“technologies, genres, norms, behaviours and organisational forms”—will form the bedrock of my analysis of Sputnik’s projection of Russian identity and foreign policy objectives. Curiously, Chadwick’s account of the hybrid media system also alludes to the global media ecology in its emphasis on the constantly shifting interactions between logics and “ever-evolving relationships based upon ... interdependence”. To this end, radio will not be conceptualised according to old vs. new; rather, Sputnik’s broadcast content will be understood as reflective of Chadwick’s hybrid media system. Thus, Chadwick’s framework will be extended to a non-Western context, i.e., Russia.

Chadwick’s hybrid media system theoretical framework will be applied to chapters III and V in which I explore Sputnik’s synthesis of more traditional and innovative radio logics to enhance audience engagement. In chapter III, I do so by analysing Sputnik’s blending of live phone-ins with live webcam transmission of shows across the social media platforms Facebook and YouTube in its coverage of the 2018 Salisbury poisonings. Analogously, Chapter IV brings to bear the hybrid media system in its examination of how Sputnik’s radio broadcasts combine these audio and visual logics in its coverage of the arrest of WikiLeaks’s founder Julian Assange.

## **Disruptive Media Event**

Another central conceptual framework that this thesis draws on what is media scholars Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes (2007) term a “disruptive media event”. Katz and Liebes’s notion of a “disruptive media event” is in fact an appendage to Dayan and Katz’s (1992) earlier theory that dealt with media events of a pre-planned or ceremonial nature that serve an “integrative” function. Their supplementary category of the disruptive media event allows for the “rise in the live broadcasting of disruptive events such as Disaster, Terror and War”, events that are unforeseen and undesirable and events that disrupt (Katz and Liebes, 2007, p. 157). Not only do “disruptive” events interrupt news scheduling formats, but in today’s hyper-networked and increasingly pervasive global media environment where events have the capacity to unfold in real time—inhabited by a multitude of media actors—they also create seemingly insurmountable challenges for political establishments trying to direct information flows (Dayan, 2009; Katz and Liebes, 2007, p. 157; Ustad Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud, 2016). Using the Salisbury poisonings as a case study, Tolz *et al.* (2020) and Birge and Chatterje-Doody (2020) have explored how Russia’s international broadcasting strategy responds to these events. The thesis seeks to build on this body of work in chapters III and V by showing how Sputnik adapts its coverage to disruptive events. To this end, I select two disruptive events, one originating in Russia (Chapter III: Salisbury poisonings) and one beyond its borders (Chapter V: the COVID-19 pandemic). To understand whether and how Sputnik adapts its broadcasting strategies when faced with these unforeseen circumstances, I compare its practices and audience reactions before, during and after the period of disruption in question. Analysing Sputnik’s reaction to disruptive media events will yield enlightening empirical evidence about Sputnik’s relation to the Russian state as well as its distinctive place in Russia’s external projection strategy.

## **Strategic Narratives**

The final conceptual framework that is central to the thesis's analysis of Sputnik is that of strategic narratives. "Strategic narratives" denote state actors' efforts to project a shared meaning of international relations in the global mediasphere. They connote a purposive attempt to attribute a shared meaning to the past, present and future that shape the views and behaviours of political actors at home and abroad, with the aim of achieving either a short-term or long-term goal. While foreign policy information remains classified, in the new information era strategic narratives are omnipresent and reveal much about state actors' projected identities and attempts to shape a favourable international order. Thus, strategic narratives are concerned with accomplishing behavioural change but also with establishing identities of actors and the international system.

International Relations scholars Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Laura Roselle (2013) propose a pliable and multi-layered strategic narratives framework for understanding the interplay between communication and power. Central to the theorisation of strategic narratives is the role of communication and the transformation of the media landscape that has occurred in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and ultimately has altered the formation and projection of these narratives. In other words, the environment that they are voiced in is the new global media ecology, which by its very nature comprises many competing strategic narratives. Thanks to the global information age, state actors can communicate with citizens of other countries and thus project their strategic narratives to larger audiences than ever before. Sputnik embodies this new type of global media outlet. Hence, strategic narratives offer a particularly appropriate framework for examining how Sputnik projects Russian foreign policy objectives.

The concept of strategic narratives, whether in the form of international system, identity or issue narrative, is an overarching set of propositions that take on narrative and form and are then disseminated: "a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past,

present and future of international relations to shape the opinions and behaviours of actors at home and overseas” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, p. 176). Thus, one may observe there are three fundamental features of a strategic narrative: first, identity, i.e., “a shared sense of Selfhood” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle, 2013, p. 9); second, the concept of temporality and its sequence from “past to present to future—from A to B to C” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, p. 9); and third, the fact that a strategic narrative is projected both domestically and internationally. All three of these components have particular resonance for my research into Sputnik for identity—Russia’s selfing and othering vis-à-vis the West—and for temporality. The historical-facing framework of strategic narratives offered a particularly fitting structure for my comparative study of Russia’s international (Sputnik English language) and domestic (Russian language) projection because unlike soft power, which focuses on foreign projection, strategic narratives are directed at both domestic and foreign audiences, although not necessarily in the same form. While the strategic narrative framework has resonance for the entire thesis, it comes to the fore in Chapter II, where I explore Sputnik’s projection of official discourse on Russian identity in its coverage of the centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution for English-speaking international and Russian-speaking domestic audiences.

The theoretical framework of strategic narratives has been applied in the study of Russian political discourse (O’Loughlin and Miskimmon, 2017) as well as in media discourse (Hutchings and Szostek, 2015; Szostek, 2018; Wagnsson and Barzanje, 2019). In political discourse, O’Loughlin and Miskimmon explore Russia’s projected strategic narratives in its efforts to shape an international order favourable for the achievement of Russian foreign policy goals. The key tropes they identify in Russia’s identity, international system and issue narratives are: “demands for recognition of Russia’s standing in the world by the West, the stressing of pan-European cooperation under The Common European Home narrative, and a stress on the emergence of a new world order based on polycentrism” (O’Loughlin and Miskimmon, 2017, p. 113). The common thread in Russia’s strategic narrative, they argue, is underpinned by an

antiquated identity narrative of Russia as a great power. O’Loughlin and Miskimmon’s (2017) analysis provides a useful conceptual tool for understanding Russia and the West’s competing strategic narratives and enduring miscommunication. Nonetheless, the material they analyse—speeches of political actors and foreign policy documents—do not reflect how Russia projects its strategic narratives in the multi-platform, multi-actor digital media ecology, another arena in which such narratives are communicated. Equally, while Hutchings and Szostek (2015) analyse Russia’s internal strategic narratives as communicated via domestic Russian media, they exclude from their analysis Russia’s outward strategic narratives as communicated via its international broadcasting outlets. Charlotte Wagnsson and Costan Barzanje (2019) applied the strategic narratives framework to their exploration of Sputnik’s foreign policy goals. However, they limited their examination empirically to Sputnik’s online web articles and thematically to Russia’s foreign policy towards Sweden. To understand how exactly Sputnik projects Russia’s strategic narratives, we must widen the scope to include its radio broadcasts and social media plugins. Similarly, we must enlarge the thematic material to include the transatlantic West, which is inextricably linked to its international system, identity and issue narratives. This thesis endeavours to grasp the full scope of Russia’s strategic narratives and the interaction between its foreign and domestic projection via Sputnik. It seeks to transcend the narrow discursive prism of Russian disinformation and malign influence by scrutinising the substance of Sputnik’s media content to understand Russia’s self-perception, fears, anxieties and strategic goals (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2013). The subsequent section of this chapter describes the overarching methodological principles that underlie my analysis of Sputnik’s media strategies.

### **Close Textual Analysis**

I selected “close textual analysis” as my principal methodological framework for the thesis’s four-chapter analysis of Sputnik. Close textual analysis was a particularly appropriate choice



given that my main research aim was to examine the specific practices of a primary source, i.e., Sputnik. Couched another way, I sought to identify patterns, consistency and underlying discourses as articulated through its broadcasting outputs using language, tone and register. For Communication Studies scholar Clariza Ruiz de Castilla, close textual analysis:

investigates the relationship between the internal workings of discourse in order to discover what makes a particular text function persuasively ... Close reading attempts to reveal the detailed, often concealed, tools that give a particular text stylistic consistency and rhetorical effect. By conducting a close reading analysis, hidden themes may surface that have been overlooked or underestimated. (Ruiz de Castilla, 2017, p. 2)

While “close reading” may at first glance traditionally be associated with the arts and humanities, i.e., literature and culture, in actuality it can be used in any study that places a primary source—whether in textual, audio or visual form—front and centre of the analysis. Since the thesis’s research on Sputnik is multidisciplinary and deploys a variety of conceptual frameworks in its praxis, the fact that close reading “may contain theories with social scientific, interpretive, and critical approaches” (Ruiz de Castilla, 2017, p. 4) renders it a particularly fitting method for my four analytical chapters. Furthermore, close textual analysis afforded my examination unlimited flexibility in revealing the underlying layers of meaning in Sputnik’s broadcasting context. Had I opted for a more traditional social science Communication Studies research method such as framing analysis, content analysis or critical discourse analysis, then my findings would have been limited to identifying frames, the presence of certain words or themes, or discourses. The three social science research methods listed above can be appropriate for studies that conduct comparative analyses of media content across different platforms, political and linguistic contexts. However, unorthodox as it may appear, I contend that for the thesis’s principal aim of ascertaining whether Sputnik serves a distinctive function in Russia’s external projection strategy, close textual analysis offered the most expedient vehicle for identifying its distinctive features. What is more, as Ruiz de Castilla (2017) writes: “one advantage of a close reading is that it allows critics to compare and contrast structures of communication to recognize which elements have been eliminated” (p. 7). For the purposes of the thesis’s comprehensive analysis of Sputnik, patterns of omissions are almost as crucial to

understanding its distinctive place in Russia's political communication strategy as patterns of what *is* included in its media outputs. Yet again, more traditional social science communication research methods do not allow for this layer of analysis.

Though close textual analysis's chief strength lies in its pliability, therein lies its main potential limitation—the danger of being too subjective a methodological tool. Nevertheless, as Ruiz de Castilla (2017) postulates, the hazard of subjectivity can be mitigated so long as the researcher focuses on “critiquing” rather than “reacting” (p. 7). Moreover, the fact that each of my analytical chapters was able to identify predominant patterns and consistencies in Sputnik's media operations is testament to close textual analysis's methodological robustness. How exactly I conducted my close textual analysis of Sputnik's broadcasts, social media plugins and Facebook content, as well as the specific methodological steps undertaken for each of my analytical chapters, will be demonstrated in the next subsection.

Since close textual analysis involves analysing data, irrespective of its original medium, in textual form, all of my Sputnik audio data was turned into text. Having listened attentively to each of Sputnik's programmes in my selected timestamps in each chapter from February 2017 to February 2021, I then pinpointed key passages in each of Sputnik's broadcasts and transcribed them by hand, selecting illustrative quotations to include in my analysis. Below is an overview of which methodological and theoretical steps were undertaken for each of the thesis's analytical chapters.

In order to address the question of official discourse on Russian identity (RQ1) in chapter II, I conducted a close textual analysis using the strategic narratives close textual analysis framework. Below is an illustrative example of how my theoretical and methodological approaches converged in my comparative analysis of Sputnik's English and Russian language coverage of the 1917 Russian Revolution's centennial:

Today's **witch-hunt** against Russia, post-Soviet Russia with all the same sort of accusations that Russia is behind "all the social divisiveness" including support for the **Black Lives Matter** movement, which is just **absurd. But anyway** there is this **toxic tangling** of anti-communism and racism and scapegoating and it just hasn't stopped and it seems to be part of the **DNA of American political bourgeois psychology** (*Loud and Clear*, 2017)

The different socialist parties **don't wanna take power, like they're like oh** it's not our turn, it's supposed to be a bourgeois form of government right now, the bourgeoisie is supposed to lead it's not really up to us. **But o my god**, the bourgeois government is too weak and Kerensky's not able to do anything and society is collapsing around us. **So, in many ways it is like the social situation pushes the Bolsheviks so that they have to have an insurrection. It's not like they began by saying 'that's what we're going to do' it's like the situation compelled them because** of the incredible amount of instability in the country (*Loud and Clear*, 2017)

The yellow highlighted bits of text in the two citations above pertain to Sputnik's use of language, tone and register, i.e., a mixture of Soviet jargon and modern American colloquialisms. The pink highlights concern the historical and identity narratives about 1917 that Sputnik projects. Once I had examined the various rhetorical devices on display that helped me to assess how Sputnik conceives of itself and its potential audiences, I then turned to collecting patterns of repetitions and omissions of renderings of the 1917 February and October Revolutions. I then was able to turn to my conceptual framework of strategic narratives to see whether there was any consistency in the multitude of detectable narratives in Sputnik's coverage. I asked whether there were any predominant strategic narratives—identity, issue or international system—present in Sputnik's mediation of one of the most important twentieth historical events both for Russia and internationally. As chapter II shows, the strategic narrative framework was fruitful in identifying several major narratives concerning Russia's great power status and recognition from the West (Miskimmon and O'Loughlin, 2017).

In chapter II, my close textual reading methodological approach was combined with conceptual frameworks: Chadwick's (2016) hybrid media system and Katz and Liebes's (2007) disruptive media event. First, in order to gauge how Sputnik responds to disruptive media events (RQ2), I analysed Sputnik's coverage of the Salisbury poisonings across three temporal dimensions:

before, during and after its disruptive phase. Comparing both Sputnik's coverage and its audience engagement at these three junctures enabled me to make an assessment about whether and how Sputnik adapted or changed course in its coverage of a news item of key importance to Russia's security elites (*siloviki*) and thus to grasp Sputnik's position vis-à-vis the Russian state and the level of coordination in Russia's larger external media operation. In order to explore audience reception of Sputnik's coverage of a disruptive event initiated by Russia, I analysed audience comments in its Facebook livestreams, calculating the mathematical averages of views, likes, shares and comments from each of the UK-produced show *News in Brief* posts.

To comprehend the specific genres, conventions and techniques that Sputnik deploys as an international broadcaster of radio, I brought to bear Chadwick's (2016) hybrid media system by attempting to identify the presence of older and newer media logics in its broadcasting e.g., purely audio formats versus social media livestreams. This enabled me to pinpoint the convergence of traditional and innovative logics in Sputnik's outputs. As this conceptual tool showed, Sputnik's blending of older and newer logics was anchored upon efforts to engage its audiences directly.

Whilst deploying the close textual analysis methodological framework, chapter IV applied the conceptual framework of "alternative media" in order to establish Sputnik's place within the global media ecology (RQ3). Using an analytical framework proposed by media scholars Kristoffer Holt, Tine Ustad Figenschou and Lena Frischlich (2019) in my empirical analysis of Sputnik's coverage of the Assange arrest, I endeavoured to ascertain whether or not Sputnik is an "alternative" media outlet. As per the media scholars' framework, a news outlet's so-called alternativeness can be measured across several different categories: "micro-level" (content producers, style and format); "meso-level" (publishing routines, editorial values and funding models); and "macro-level" (alternative media's place in the larger media eco-system) (Holt,

Ustad Figenschou and Frischlich, 2019, pp. 863-864). I applied this framework to my textual data on Sputnik’s coverage of the arrest by considering the three groupings and whether or not they were “mainstream” or “alternative” practices. The table below provides an example of how Holt *et al.*’s conceptual framework was deployed in citing one of Sputnik’s Washington DC-produced broadcasts in the leadup to Assange’s detention:

**Table 1: Alternative versus Mainstream**

Show: <i>Fault Lines</i>	Alternative	Mainstream
Micro-level	<p><b>Content producers:</b> Sputnik presenters and “alt-right” contributors, e.g., Cassandra Fairbanks</p> <p><b>Subject matter:</b> Assange and WikiLeaks</p>	<p><b>Style and format:</b> live phone-in and blend of talk radio/ political commentary</p>
Meso-level	<p><b>Editorial values:</b> anti-Western/anti-statist stance</p>	<p><b>Publishing routines:</b> standard daily in three-hour slot</p> <p><b>Funding routine:</b> state broadcaster</p>
Macro-level	<p><b>Position in media ecology:</b> alt-media ecology</p>	

As well as applying the alt-media as an academic concept as above, I also used it as a term of self-practice that media outlets assign to themselves. Conceptualising alt-media along these two axes enabled me to determine which was more informative for situating Sputnik within the larger global media ecology.

Chapter V, which explored how audiences engaged with Sputnik during the COVID-19 pandemic (RQ4), required an entirely distinct methodological approach. I chose to analyse Sputnik’s Facebook interactions instead of conducting focus groups, since many now access news on social media, with this social media platform remaining the principal one for news consumption worldwide. In order to gauge which strategies were successful for Sputnik in eliciting audience responses as well as the form that these responses assumed, I used the online analytical social

media platform CrowdTangle. CrowdTangle allows one to gather quantitative data in the form of Excel spreadsheets from which one can also extract the requisite qualitative data of Facebook posts in pages and groups. I selected Facebook as the central social media channel for my analysis thanks to its status as the main provider of news across all social media platforms.

Deploying two of CrowdTangle's functions, "Live Displays" and "Intelligence", I amassed quantitative data sets that are presented below in the form of graphs and tables. First, I used CrowdTangle's "Intelligence" function in order to acquire a comprehensive overview of Sputnik's Facebook strategy over our given time frames in March-April 2020 and February 2021: the total number of posts, the provenance of these posts (link, Facebook livestream or video); the total number of interactions; the nature of these interactions (like, comment, share and other reactions); and the increase or decrease in Sputnik's page followers during this time period. Second, using CrowdTangle's "Live Displays" function, which allows one to enter a custom time period, I was able to acquire a spreadsheet file ranking Sputnik's Facebook posts in order of total audience interactions. I then analysed the content, form and style of the ten most and least interacted-with posts in order to compute what audiences reacted to as well as what they did not react to. In the instance that the posts were promotional material for Sputnik's other platforms, I only analysed the content of the Facebook posts themselves, as this is where interactions were recorded. These top and bottom ten most interacted with posts were listed in table format throughout my analysis.

Concurrent to my quantitative analysis, I also conducted a qualitative analysis of Facebook comments that accompany posts in our time frame in order to comprehend how audiences responded to Sputnik's social media output. Before presenting my findings and analysis sections, there are several potential limitations of my chosen methodology that require reflection. First, due to data and privacy considerations, it is often impossible to acquire a comprehensive understanding of who audiences are. In order to protect the privacy of the

human participants I studied, I did not use their names. Instead, I determined the country they were located in and referred to them as a “user” in X country. Second, the audiences analysed in our data set were not representative of the wider population, nor even necessarily of Sputnik’s audiences, but rather of a small sample. Third, on occasion it was difficult to distinguish between genuine and nongenuine (i.e., bots and trolls) comments. Nonetheless, the potential limitations listed above apply to the entire field of social media data analytics. What is more, the outlined methodology of quantitative and qualitative methods was useful in evaluating how Sputnik’s social media audience engaged the outlet during the first and second waves of the pandemic, or its “disruptive” and ongoing phases.

Having outlined the conceptual and methodological approaches that underpin my doctoral thesis on Sputnik, I can now proceed to my analysis. The following chapter addresses the question of how Sputnik addresses official discourse on Russian identity.

## Chapter II: Rewriting Revolution: History, Memory and Identity

### Introduction

2017 marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1917 Russian Revolution, arguably the most important event in the twentieth century in Russia and unquestionably one of the most significant episodes in modern world history.<sup>7</sup> In the West, 1917 has long featured in the political imagination of many with left-wing predilections. Moreover, in 2017, against the backdrop of increased populist political activism across the world (right-wing in particular, but also left) the questions associated with past revolutions perhaps acquired greater pertinence. In other words, the reactionary populist onslaught on the corruption of the current political establishment and social order, with its rejection of globalisation by asserting the primary importance of identity tropes in the formation of political alliances—as evidenced by the 2016 US presidential Election, the 2016 UK Referendum on EU Membership and the rise of right-wing populist movements across Europe, Asia and Latin America—brought tropes of revolution and regime change to the fore. Western interest in the revolutionary chapter in Russian history and its legacies was reflected in a proliferation of roundtables, conferences, and lectures as well as media coverage dedicated to discussion of the Russian Revolution's centennial. Yet in Russia, themes of past revolution reflected a very timely concern: the colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space and the threat they posed to Russia's world standing. How would Russia's communication strategy negotiate this apparent contradiction: to capitalise on a rare opportunity to enhance Russia's soft power in rendering the Russian Revolution to Western audiences and in playing down the significance of 1917 for its domestic ones?

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<sup>7</sup> The 1917 Russian Revolution refers to two revolutions. The first revolution occurred in February and the second in October (in March and November respectively according to the Julian calendar). The February revolution resulted in the abdication of the Tsar, Nicholas II, the end of the 300-year Romanov dynasty and the ushering in of the Provisional Government to power. The subsequent October revolution removed the Provisional Government from power, replacing it with the Bolshevik Party led by Vladimir Lenin.



RT, for its part, invested most of its commemoration effort in the implementation of an ambitious and innovative social media historical reenactment project, #1917LIVE<sup>8</sup>, while allocating a modest amount of TV coverage to 1917's centenary drawing on the Russian Revolution's progressive legacies (Chatterje-Doody and Tolz, 2019). This was in sharp contrast to domestic television channels Pervyj Kanal and Rossiya-1's coverage, which represented the Russian Revolution in an unequivocally condemnatory light (Chatterje-Doody and Tolz, 2019). But what of RT's multiplatform sister outlet (primarily radio broadcaster) Sputnik? How did Sputnik cover 1917's centennial? How did it frame Russia's history in the context of a global preoccupation with identity tropes? How did Sputnik's coverage of the Revolution across its English language content compare to its Russian language one?

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how Sputnik projects official discourse on Russian identity (RQ1) by analysing how it deploys ideational/identitarian narratives. These narratives about identity—civic national, ethno-national, cultural-lingua or religious—are put forward in official discourse when a government promotes a particular nation-building agenda. The question is therefore to show how Russia's history is represented to Sputnik's Western (UK and US) audiences as well as domestic Russian speaking ones by analysing coverage of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the key events linked to the Russian Revolution. Examining how Sputnik uses history to serve the needs of the present enables one to address the thesis's larger concern about Sputnik's distinctive role in Russia's external projection strategy. The Russian Revolution was selected in lieu of other historical events given its magnitude, the lack of any coherent

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<sup>8</sup> #1917LIVE was an immersive and educational historical reenactment/digital storytelling project developed by RT Creative Lab and dedicated to the commemoration of the Russian Revolution's centenary. The project was launched via social media, primarily Twitter but also YouTube, and was active for the entire duration of 2017. Over the course of 2017, RT created over 90 Twitter accounts for the Revolution's protagonists including Lenin, Trotsky, members of the Romanov family and ordinary working folk as well as a fictional newspaper, *The Russian Telegraph*. Internet audiences were able to bear witness to the events of 1917 in real time via over 7000 tweets about the Russian Revolution. In addition to its Twitter campaign, the #1917LIVE project had its own webpage and uploaded virtual reality videos to YouTube. The project was extremely well received by the international cyber public and generated a total of 75 million impressions. The project also received several awards for educational excellence and innovation. See the project's URL: <https://1917live.red/2/>

official narrative integrating it into the foundational myth of the Russian Federation, and the division and apathy that it engenders among Russians.

In this chapter, I argue that Sputnik projects official discourse on Russian identity differently depending on the target audience in question. If for its foreign audiences Sputnik invokes progressive present-day identity politics in depicting ideational and identitarian narratives, then for its domestic ones it aims to accommodate a range of conflicting ones. Based on two axes of comparison—between Sputnik’s English and Russian language radio content and between Sputnik’s English language content and RT’s—the empirical evidence presented in the chapter reveals that the medium of radio offers the regime a particularly useful tool in projecting competing narratives on Russian identity.

The chapter begins with an overview of the politics that underlies the commemoration of 1917’s centenary as well as the projection of official discourse on Russian identity. Section two provides an overview of the intensity of Sputnik’s English and Russian language coverage of the Russian Revolution’s 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Section three identifies and analyses the dominant narratives at play in Sputnik’s English language coverage of the centennial across its programmes: *Hard Facts* (Edinburgh, UK), *Loud and Clear* (Washington DC, US) and *Weekend Special* (Moscow, Russia). Section four identifies and analyses the dominant narratives at play in Sputnik’s Russian language coverage of the centennial via broadcasts from its shows: *Vizavi s mirom* and *Teorija zabluženij*. These programmes have been selected because they designated coverage of 1917’s centenary as the central theme for their respective shows. Section five addresses the representation techniques and particularities that Sputnik deploys as a radio broadcaster: genre, format, conventions and linguistic register in its English language and Russian language coverage of 1917’s centennial. The chapter will conclude that although radio’s flexibility, adaptability, unparalleled intimacy and capacity to transmit a multitude of voices in quick succession offer considerable advantages over other media such as television in

constructing divergent narratives on identity, the crude partisanship of Sputnik's coverage stymies its potential benefits.

## **1917 and the Politics of Commemoration**

Unlike the Second World War, the Russian Revolution has not been the subject of any consistent official historical narrative during Putin's presidencies. Under Putin's tenure, the Second World War has been elevated into a triumphal source of national pride that enjoys wide public engagement (Torbakov, 2018, p. 25). What is more, the Second World War's cult status in popular Russian culture has lent it considerable traction as a domestic legitimization tool for Russia's increasingly assertive foreign policy behaviour (i.e., the annexation of Crimea) and as a foreign one for promoting official historical narratives that endeavour to rehabilitate Russia's great power status (McGlynn, 2018; 2021).

In contrast to the Great Patriotic War, public interest in the 1917 revolutions is relatively low. The Levada Centre, Russia's most credible and robust polling organisation, carried out a poll in March 2017 that asked respondents: "Which periods of Russian history do you find particularly interesting?" The response "the 1917 Revolution and formation of the Soviet Union" was ranked only 7<sup>th</sup> out of 11 possible events at 13%, down 2% from July 2008 (Levada Center, 2017). The decline in public interest in the Russian Revolution could be attributed to a generational schism. Simply put, the younger generations in post-Soviet Russia show less interest in Soviet history than their elders, who were born in the Soviet Union; as a result, they have limited knowledge of its key facts and figures.

Low public interest in 1917 aside, some of the higher political echelons in Russia were reluctant to mark the centenary in an official capacity lest they risk emboldening an analogous political event like the colour revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia in the first decade of the new

millennium or the more recent Euro-Maidan protests in Ukraine (Wijermars, 2018).<sup>9</sup> In fact, the historical and cultural memory associated with the Russian Revolution had been irksome for Russia's political elite well before 2017. The awkwardness associated with embedding the events of 1917 into the Russian Federation's national story is perhaps most aptly encapsulated by the 2005 abolition of the (by then) 88-year-old public holiday that commemorated the October Revolution on 7 November every year. Upon the October Revolution's cancellation, a new holiday was conceived under the banner of a National Unity Day (*Den' narodnogo edinstva*). The new public holiday was established to memorialise the events of 4 November 1612, when Polish-Lithuanian troops were disbanded from Moscow and the Time of Troubles (*Smutnoe vremja*) came to its official conclusion (Omelicheva, 2017, p. 430).<sup>10</sup> Thus, by Putin's second presidential term, archaic historical narratives that signalled Russia's return to the world stage under the leadership of an autocratic Tsarist regime were prioritised over its more recent revolutionary escapades. The irony here is of course that Russia's status as a great power was only officially recognised by its Western counterparts when it was under Soviet rule.

Supplantation of October with National Unity Day notwithstanding, the powers-that-be could not simply avoid marking 1917's hundredth anniversary given that the Russian Federation was the accidental heir to the Soviet Union, to which Russia owes its great power status and for which the October Revolution served as the foundation myth as well as its actual historical

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<sup>9</sup> The colour revolutions refer to the ousting of political regimes in former Soviet states with close political ties to the nascent Russian Federation and the ushering in of Western style democracy. The Rose Revolution occurred in Georgia in 2003; mass protests across the country led to the toppling of President Shevernazde (previously the Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Soviet Union), replacing him with pro-Western liberal democracy politician, Sakashvilli. The Orange Revolution occurred in Ukraine in 2005 against the backdrop of a bid for presidential office between Yanukovych and Yushchenko, in which the former was regarded as being rigged in favour as he was the Kremlin's preferred candidate. Yushchenko, the pro-Western democratic candidate, finally prevailed, winning the presidential race with a clear majority. However, by 2010, Yanukovych was voted into office.

<sup>10</sup> The Time of Troubles (*Smutnoe vremja*) refers to a tumultuous period in Russia's Tsarist epoch (1584-1612) that saw the end of the Rurikid dynasty and was followed by chaos and lawlessness that was exploited by Russia's enemies. This fraught chapter in Russia's history ended with the establishment of the Romanov dynasty. Ever since its conclusion, the Time of Troubles has been tirelessly invoked to justify the need for a strong and hierarchical state to prevent Russia from falling prey to hostile external forces.

source point. By the same token, if foregrounding 1917's centenary brought potential hazards on the domestic front, then internationally it presented Russia with an irresistible opportunity to augment Russia's soft power at a time (2017) when its world image was extremely negative (Fitzpatrick, 2017, p. 826). Therefore, the political elite, state-aligned media bosses and producers needed to accommodate two opposing strands when commemorating the centenary's legacy at home and abroad. So how might they approach negotiating this apparent contradiction in marking the Russian Revolution's centennial inside and outside of Russia?

Despite the perceived interest that 1917's centennial galvanised amongst certain Western audiences and thus the attractive proposition it presented for enhancing Russia's soft power, members of the incumbent political elite were concerned about the possible threat it posed to national security. That is to say, high-ranking political officials put forward the notion that narratives about the Russian Revolution should be managed amidst fears that the centennial's narrative could be distorted by outside forces (Torbakov, 2018, p. 25). The centennial's treatment as a matter of national security is evidenced by the Russian Security Council's discussion about how 1917 could be misrepresented by the West as yet another weapon in the larger Western "plot" to denigrate Russia, through an Information War allegedly waged against Russia (Malinova, 2018, p. 274). Consequently, senior politicians such as the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergei Lavrov, explicitly designated the commemoration of 1917 as "a matter of national security" (Lavrov, 2016). The centenary's designation as a matter of national security has particular resonance for the analysis of Sputnik's coverage of 1917, since Sputnik's principal aim is to parry what it perceives as unabashedly negative portrayals of Russia in the Western-dominated information environment.

Several scholarly analyses addressed Russian international broadcasting and soft power in direct relationship to the centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution (Chatterje-Doody and Gillespie, 2019; Chatterje-Doody and Tolz, 2019; Crilley, Gillespie and Willis, 2019; Hutchings,

2019a; O'Loughlin, 2019; Pshenychnykh, 2019) as part of a journal special issue entitled *The Cultural Politics of Commemoration: Media and Remembrance of the Russian Revolutions of 1917* (Chatterje-Doody and Gillespie, 2019). These analyses of RT's commemoration of 1917's centennial demonstrate the opportunities, challenges and potential pitfalls of the increasingly integrated and participatory media environment for a neo-authoritarian regime in negotiating memory politics and constructing narratives of nationhood for international and domestic audiences. Chatterje-Doody and Gillespie (2019); Chatterje-Doody and Tolz, (2019); Hutchings (2019a) and Crilley, Gillespie and Willis (2019) foregrounded RT's ambitious #1917LIVE project, an interactive historical re-enactment platform on Twitter where audiences could watch the events of 1917 unfold and interact with the heroes of the Russian Revolution in the cyberspace of 2017.

Hutchings's (2019a) paper argues that rather than viewing the #1917LIVE project as an anomalous exercise in conventional soft power that marks a contrast with RT's general media output, it is actually reflective of the late Soviet custom of *stiob* (ironic, sarcastic mocking) that "aligns it with RT's disruptive mainstream output" (Hutchings, 2019a, p. 2). This observation, Hutchings posits, shows how RT has internalised its reputation as a troublemaking broadcasting outlier, which is a crucial feature of the Information War dynamic. The chapter's analysis will explore how Sputnik, which is noted for being the more disruptive of the two broadcasting outliers, enacts and performs its assigned role in rendering this monumental episode in Russia's historical development, as well as the extent to which humour and even *stiob* come into play.

In their analysis of audience reception of #1917LIVE, Crilley, Gillespie and Willis (2019) demonstrate that in allowing audiences to interact with Russian history, the immersive commemoration project was successful in generating some positive feeling about RT and even Russia amongst audiences. Thus, they conclude, by facilitating short term audience engagement,

public diplomacy initiatives such as #1917LIVE have the capacity to enhance soft power in the longer term (Crilley, Gillespie and Willis, 2019). This chapter's analysis of Sputnik's coverage of 1917 will explore how Sputnik deployed the audio medium in order to boost Russia's soft power status.

Beyond the Russian media landscape, O'Loughlin (2019) explores how the 1917 centenary of the October Revolution was represented as a revolutionary "imaginary" in 114 English language news stories across outlets in 26 countries. O'Loughlin's paper demonstrates that the October Revolution was largely framed as a touchstone for wide-ranging assessments of more recent revolutions, of varied contemporary stances towards Russia and of conflicting visions of how social and political change are enacted (O'Loughlin, 2019). O'Loughlin (2019) argues that the centenary became a global media event "entangling all societies" (p. 374). O'Loughlin's article on global commemorations of the October Revolution has implications for the chapter's analysis of Sputnik's memorialisation of 1917's centennial. The analysis of Sputnik's coverage will show how Sputnik attempted to link Russian history with progressive global movements past and present.

Chatterje and Tolz's (2019) comparative analysis of Russian state-aligned domestic television broadcasts with those of RT contends that the prediction of seasoned observers of the Russian scene that the chosen formula to mark 1917's centennial would adopt themes of "reconciliation and accord" (an inclusive interpretation of 1917 that would be palatable for pro- and anti-communists alike) proved to be spectacularly wrong (Chatterje-Doody and Tolz, 2019). Their study shows that while RT invoked 1917's cultural capital and contemporary relevance for progressive political movements for its foreign (Western) audiences, Russian state television channels Pervyj Kanal and Rossiya-1 were wholly disparaging of the Revolution and indeed of the entire Bolshevik legacy. They attribute the disparate nature of the narratives—between those of the Russian political elite and domestic television broadcasts; and between the

contrasting domestic and international framings of the centennial—to the fact that history is not used chiefly to uphold formations of national identity. In fact, they argue, 1917’s media coverage revealed a strategic aim of the “neo-authoritarian”—a political regime that deploys a hybrid of autocratic and pseudo-democratic methods—to deploy ideational/identitarian narratives in order to bolster political legitimacy and eradicate potential political rivals (Petrov, Lipman and Hale, 2013). As such, the domestic coverage of the Russian Revolution adopted a pronouncedly negative tone, not necessarily because it is viewed as such by members of the political elite, but rather because it was politically expedient ahead of the 2018 March presidential election for the regime to discredit communist legacies in order to scupper the chances of Communist Party candidate Gennady Zyuganov, who was expected to gain more votes (Chatterje-Doody and Tolz, 2019).

Divorcing nation-building from a wider legitimation strategy, postulate Chatterje-Doody and Tolz (2019), enables one to account for sharp fluctuations in official historical narratives under the same political leadership packaged by state-aligned media for different audiences. Likewise, far from being run as an entirely state-controlled monolith, they conclude that certain “trusted” journalists are ultimately “co-producers” of official discourse on Russian identity insofar as they are afforded a certain degree of autonomy within allotted parameters (Chatterje-Doody and Tolz, 2019, p. 342). This means that “trusted” journalists are able to present inflammatory, even provocative, angles on aspects relating to national identity that may occasionally contravene the Kremlin’s pronouncements. My analysis of Sputnik’s coverage of 1917 will explore the different narratives present in its rendering of the Russian Revolution to foreign and domestic audiences. It will also examine whether and how Sputnik’s journalists and guests become, even if perhaps unwittingly, proponents of official discourse on Russian identity and ideational/identitarian narratives.



As previously stated, ideational/identitarian narratives denote state narratives pertaining to the construction of national identity, be it civil or ethnic. Indeed, ideational/identitarian narratives become particularly useful for politicians when they have to justify the erosion of certain freedoms or a decline in living standards (Teper, 2018; Teper and Tolz, 2018). As Yuri Teper's analysis of official discourse on Russian national identity from 2012 to 2016 reveals, from official speeches and documents and state-aligned media, the official ideational/identitarian narrative was constantly reformulated and rehashed as each version brought in train its own potential political jeopardies. Since nation-building in its most rudimentary form denotes the delineation of "us" from "them", a fundamental task for any ideational/identitarian narrative pertains to establishing a clearly defined "other" or enemy, and state-aligned media are a crucial channel in their articulation and dissemination.

The new fixation on identity issues from Putin's third presidential term (2012 onwards) was accompanied by a new media strategy. As shown by Tolz and Teper's (2018) analysis of state-aligned TV channels Pervyj Kanal and Rossiya-1 between 2012-2016, there was a pronounced growth in political coverage via the use of the global media format of "soft news", e.g., talk shows; in this enterprise, they posit, conspiracy theories were carefully designed to appeal to a less politically engaged audience. This new media strategy they term "agitainment"—i.e., ideological political messaging via entertainment. Teper and Tolz make an important point in highlighting the fact that the Kremlin's post-2012 official discourse on identity made use of global identity issues and "global risks"—the threat of terrorism, immigration, human rights violations and defence of religions (Teper and Tolz, 2018). Equally, as some scholars of Russia have demonstrated, identity politics also plays a salient role in the formation of narratives in the domestic Russian media, particularly television (Hutchings and Tolz, 2015). The chapter's next section will endeavour to address how Sputnik deployed ideational/identitarian narratives in its coverage of 1917 to international English-speaking audiences.

Over the following pages, I will explore the dominant narratives at play in Sputnik's English language coverage of the Russian Revolution's centennial broadcast from Edinburgh and Washington respectively, followed by those of Sputnik's Russian language coverage aired from Moscow. We shall see how Sputnik's journalists, contributors and "network friends" project official discourse on Russian identity in order to peddle their own political agendas (Birge, 2019).

### **Sputnik English Language versus Sputnik Russian Language: Coverage Intensity**

The overall intensity of Sputnik's English language coverage of 1917's centennial was low. Incidentally, the same was true of RT's English language coverage. In total, Sputnik dedicated a mere three broadcasts to the centennial, two of which were aired on its radio channel and one exclusively on its podcast channel via Soundcloud. The first of the radio shows on one of Sputnik's former programmes, *Hard Facts*, presented by the Scottish journalist John Wight, was aired on 4 April 2017 at 15:18 GMT (*Hard Facts*, 2017). The show's broadcast date implies it was timed to mark Lenin's return to Petrograd from exile in Switzerland as well as the publication of his *April Theses*. However, this is not stated explicitly. The second radio broadcast was relayed on Washington DC airwaves AM/FM live on the evening of 7 November 2017 in time for the October Revolution's centenary, on US-based show *Loud and Clear* hosted by Becker and Kiriakou (*Loud and Clear*, 2017). Sputnik's podcast-like spinoff on the 1917 centenary was uploaded onto Soundcloud shortly after the precise anniversary of the October Revolution on 10 November 2018 (*Weekend Special*, 2017). It is striking that nothing was timed to mark the February Revolution (March according to the current Gregorian calendar).

Sputnik's Russian language coverage of the centenary was of higher intensity, with a total of seven programmes with 1917's centenary as the central theme for discussion. By contrast with Sputnik's English language broadcast content, the Russian language outputs marked all the most

salient moments of 1917: the February Revolution; Lenin's return to Petrograd from Switzerland in April, which notably was not covered on domestic Russian television; the October Revolution; and curiously, if slightly anachronistically, the execution of Tsar Nicholas II and his family that occurred in July 1918. While they are not of direct relevance to the events of 1917, during the course of 2017 broadcasts about Tsar Nicholas II's general rule proliferated. Thus, Sputnik's domestic Russian language coverage attempts to appeal to a diverse public, clearly imagining its home audiences as heterogeneous: spanning those nostalgic for Soviet times and those disdainful of its legacies, including supporters of monarchy.

It is noteworthy that Sputnik UK/US devoted so little airtime to the centenary in comparison to Sputnik Russia and particularly that nothing was broadcast to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the February Revolution. Nonetheless, there is a likely explanation for the imbalance between Sputnik's Russian and English language coverage of the February Revolution. The February Revolution and the government it engendered had strong democratic potentials. To this end, the Russian political elites see particular parallels between the February event and recent colour revolutions. The February Revolution would not appeal to Sputnik's left-wing, anti-establishment presenters and guests, nor its envisaged audiences. Furthermore, there is a plausible explanation for Sputnik's Russian language thematic diversity versus Sputnik English language's relatively narrow topic range in their respective coverage of 1917's centenary. Presumably, Sputnik's producers and presenters expect their Western audiences of left-wing ideological bent to be interested in one particular dimension of 1917: the October Revolution and its heroes, particularly Lenin and Trotsky, who both have a cult following in radical leftist circles. Undeniably, many contemporary supporters of the hard left vehemently revere Lenin, often crediting him with an almost mystical potency akin to that of a deity. On the other hand, in broadcasting via RIA Novostii on Radio Sputnik to domestic Russian audiences, given divided public opinion about 1917's legacy, Sputnik's journalists have to accommodate simultaneously a number of possible interpretations of 1917: the rather negative position of the Orthodox

Church; nostalgia for the Soviet Union and its legacies; themes of reconciliation; as well as “securitisation” themes (i.e., the fear that a Western-dominated information media environment may use this historical event in its Information War against Russia), which are particularly pertinent in traditionally Soviet and Russian areas of geopolitical jurisdiction where Russia’s soft power strategy is particularly pressing. Phrased differently, producers and presenters have to allow for more diverse and conflicted attitudes towards the Soviet Union’s original foundation myth amongst their audiences.

*Loud and Clear* and *Hard Facts* both aired on Sputnik’s main radio channel, but while *Loud and Clear* was relayed on both analogue Washington DC AM/FM and on Sputnik’s digitised station, *Hard Facts* was transmitted solely on Sputnik’s digital radio station as Sputnik does not have access to AM/FM radio in the United Kingdom. While *Sputnik’s Weekend Special* was aired live, it was not uploaded to Sputnik’s URL, but rather exclusively to its Soundcloud podcast spinoff page. Accordingly, I shall discuss *Loud and Clear* and *Hard Facts* together over the following pages and a separate section later will foreground *Sputnik Weekend Special’s* dominant narratives and genre, format and conventions.

### **Sputnik’s English Language Coverage of 1917’s Centennial**

The predominant narrative in Sputnik’s English language coverage of 1917’s centennial, like RT, endeavours to evoke the global legacy of 1917 in terms of its lasting impact on and current relevance to progressive politics (Chatterje-Doody and Tolz, 2019; O’Loughlin, 2019). As the analysis below will demonstrate, despite the fact that Sputnik’s English language coverage of the 1917 centenary seeks to emphasise first and foremost Russia’s *present-day* pertinence in global politics, this is attempted by deploying archetypally bygone Soviet narratives. The somewhat crude and partisan Soviet narratives at play in Sputnik’s coverage of the Russian Revolution are certainly familiar to radical left audiences. The titles of the two shows were: *100 Years Later:*

*How the Russian Revolution Changed the World (Loud and Clear)* and *The Russian Revolution: 10 Days that Shook the World (Hard Facts*, borrowing the title of American journalist John Reed's famous book in an attempt to highlight 1917's global resonance). Thus, as is the case with RT, Sputnik attempts to make use of the Russian Revolution's cultural capital to bolster Russia's soft power status (Chatterje-Doody and Tolz, 2019, p. 6). Within this larger progressive narrative framework there is a set of sub-narratives.

One of the prominent sub-narratives is of Russia and the West as mutually incompatible and in dialectical opposition to one another. That is to say, Russia is portrayed as a kind of revolutionary underdog, an *unlikely* purveyor of radical and progressive ideas, while Europe is projected as never being able to realise its revolutionary potential. Russia's economic development in 1917 is described by host Becker of Sputnik US's *Loud and Clear* in a statement concerning the unlikely feat of Russia being the first nation to have a Marxist Revolution:

Russia emerging really from the throes of feudalism and the legacy of underdevelopment, the retardation of capitalist development and so as Lenin said I think at the time: we had the Revolution at the time not because we thought we were the best equipped but because and I quote 'we were the weakest link in the imperial chain,' i.e., not where socialism was best suited but where capitalism was in greatest crisis. (*Loud and Clear*, 2017)

In this instance, Becker is referring to Marx's historical materialism, more specifically the materialist conception of history.<sup>11</sup> In other words, he posits, its relative economic backwardness in comparison to Western nations in 1917 gave Russia its unique status as pioneer of actual socialist revolution rather than just as a peddler of radical ideas that never come to fruition.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, this narrative elicits the proposition that Russia's very economic backwardness facilitated it in surpassing Western liberal democracies in terms of

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<sup>11</sup> A key tenet of Marxist theory that traces human development according to four sequential economic stages: Primitive Socialism, Feudalism, Capitalism and Socialism.

<sup>12</sup> Conversely, the Russian domestic television coverage of 1917 on state-aligned channels Pervyj Kanal and Rossija-1 presented Tsarist Russia on the eve of revolution as a country as very much on the upwards trajectory, with the highest economic growth in the world. See: <https://www.1tv.ru/doc/pro-istoriyu/podlinnaya-istoriya-russkoy-revoljucii-1-ya-seriya-fevral-dokumentalnyy-film> and [https://russia.tv/video/show/brand\\_id/62282/episode\\_id/1953529/video\\_id/2016426/](https://russia.tv/video/show/brand_id/62282/episode_id/1953529/video_id/2016426/)

political liberation and thus was not a weakness at all. In other words, an archetypal Soviet narrative was reproduced, based on Lenin's interpretation of the origins of the Russian Revolution.

We see this narrative of free- and forward-thinking Russia vs. a conservative West unable to deliver on Europe's progressive ideals further developed in *Hard Facts*. John Wight, *Hard Facts* presenter, underscores the absence of an analogous political event such as the Russian Revolution in the Western world. In the second minute of his show, Wight dramatically declares: "the wonder given this context is not that Russian Revolution occurred. The wonder is that the Revolution *only* occurred or succeeded in Russia at that time. Elsewhere across Europe the chains of nationalism and patriotism proved strong enough to survive the socialist tempest that Lenin, the Bolsheviks and the Russian workers and peasantry gave birth to. But only just" (*Hard Facts*, 2017).

Wight borrows Marxist terminology as exemplified by the phrase "chains of nationalism and patriotism", connoting imprisonment and enslavement of Europe and reflecting Marx's and Lenin's perception of nationalism as a political ideology that is or can be used by exploiting classes to prevent revolutionary political mobilisation of working people. Lenin, the Bolsheviks and indeed the Russian people are assigned mystical and transcendental powers. Both Soviet jargon and the veneration of Lenin and the Russian people by Wight are common phenomena amongst some current radical left-wing movements. Strikingly, unlike Sputnik, RT's coverage the centenary did not engage with the intellectual rationale for the Russian Revolution.

The narrative of revolutionary Russia versus a reactionary and oppressed Europe is further developed in both *Hard Facts* and *Loud and Clear*. The lack of any successful revolution (particularly in Europe) is framed in terms of the incapacity of socialist and social democratic movements to foment their own revolutions and is presented as a great disadvantage. This is

yet another narrative of Soviet origin, i.e., criticisms of non-revolutionary socialists and social democrats by Lenin and, particularly in the 1930s, by Stalin. Jodi Dean, a left-leaning American political scientist, laments the failure of other European states to lead revolutions of their own as “upsetting and frustrating” (*Loud and Clear*, 2017). By contrast, John Callaghan, an academic who is Wight’s only guest on *Hard Facts*, attempts to take a more toned-down approach to the question of why socialist revolution only occurred in Russia, citing the general political weakness of Tsarist rule compared to the relative strength of British parliamentary democracy, Russia’s international status notwithstanding. The incorporation of this more balanced approach is significant as it suggests that Sputnik imagines its UK audiences as being *au fait* with 1917’s historical timeline and indeed its wider historical context.

Another significant narrative in Sputnik’s English coverage of 1917’s centennial that harks back to Soviet times is that of the West as a thwarter and saboteur of Russia’s revolutionary trajectory. The attempts of the US, the UK and Western European nations to thwart Russia’s revolutionary fate are highlighted by Dean on *Loud and Clear*: “the US along with Britain fails to recognise this as a people’s struggle and then pursue their own military aggression in the East and propaganda efforts in Petrograd and Moscow” (*Loud and Clear*, 2017). It is curious that Dean should foreground the US and the UK’s interventions in the Russian Civil War, as in actuality a multitude of states participated in it. Nonetheless, hosts Wight and Kiriakou remind listeners to their respective shows that a total of 14 foreign armies intervened in the Civil War<sup>13</sup> on behalf of the White Army that opposed the Bolsheviks’ Reds. Thus, as per this particular framing of the Russian Revolution, not only were Western nations incapable of emancipating their citizens from the shackles of capitalist oppression, but also they wished to foil the Russian revolutionary trajectory.

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<sup>13</sup> The Russian Civil War lasted from 1918-21 and was fought between the Red Army (Bolshevik supporters) and the White Army (those who opposed the Bolshevik seizure of power).

The Soviet great and superpower narrative is also clearly decipherable in Sputnik's coverage of 1917's centennial. The discussants in both *Loud and Clear* and *Hard Facts* frame all the significant historical events of the twentieth century involving the Soviet Union on the international stage in reference to 1917. For example, they emphasise the remarkable feat of the nascent Soviet state's transformation—after being ravaged by the destruction of both the First World War and the Civil War—into a global industrial and military superpower. On a separate but related note, Sputnik's coverage of 1917's centenary also promotes the narrative of the Soviet Union as the ultimate victor over Nazi Germany and indeed over fascism. In this manner, Eugene Puryear, former presenter of the US-based Sputnik show *By Any Means Necessary*, appearing on *Loud and Clear* in a guest capacity, attributes the Allies' victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War not just to the Soviet Army, but also to a metaphysical "revolutionary sprit of the Soviet people to say yes we made this great revolution, yes we now have created this entity that we believe can liberate us and we will fight to defend it no matter what" (*Loud and Clear*, 2017). The Soviet people are accorded a mystical, transcendental status once again. Conflating the Second World War with 1917 represents an extremely imprecise historical leap, as most of the old Bolsheviks and higher ranks of the Red Army either perished or were incarcerated in the Stalinist purges of 1936-1938. While the narrative of the Soviet Union as the world's saviour from fascism is certainly popular amongst Sputnik's imagined radical left-wing audience, one ought to remark that this narrative was also a key pillar of political legitimacy in Soviet discourse from 1945 until its collapse in 1991. Moreover, the cult surrounding the Russian victory in the battle for Stalingrad and the larger war has been re-invoked by the Putin administration (Torbakov, 2018, p. 24). However, despite the quintessentially Soviet war narrative and general historical inexactitude, as is the case with RT's coverage of 1917's centenary, there is some acknowledgement by left-wing academic Vijay Prashad and Puryear that the Soviet triumph over fascism came at a great price, with an estimated 28 million deaths (*Loud and Clear*, 2017).



Additionally, the narrative about the Cold War is also framed in reference to 1917 in a typically Soviet fashion. Dean depicts the Cold War in terms of “a period of capitalist reaction to the strength of the proletarian revolution and the Soviet Union” (*Loud and Clear*, 2017). Thus, the Bolshevik Russian Revolution and indeed the entire Soviet legacy is projected as a progressive, forward-thinking proponent of industrial and military might and as an opponent of fascism that prevails in spite of repeated attempts of by warmongering and oppressive Western nations to forestall it. Crucially, there is no discussion of where the collapse of the Soviet Union fits into this narrative. Dean’s rather extreme rendering of the Cold War is again thoroughly emblematic of a bygone Soviet narrative. Therefore, one can see that Sputnik’s English language coverage of 1917 represents a significant departure from not only the Russian domestic coverage by Pervyj Kanal and Rossiya-1, which focuses on Soviet terror, but also from that of RT, where Stalin’s repressions are also a motif.

The earmarking of 1917’s centenary as a matter of national security, in the event that its historical legacy might be disparaged by the West as part of a larger campaign to discredit Russia, is also clearly intelligible in Sputnik’s English language coverage. To cite one representative example of 1917 being regarded as a potential information weaponisation tool (which again recalls a Soviet narrative): Kiriakou asks Prashad to comment on an article in *The New York Times* written by a distinguished historian of Russia, Simon Sebag Montefiore, and clearly seen as inflammatory (Sebag Montefiore, 2017). In the article published on November 6, 2017, Sebag Montefiore claims there is a causal link between the Russian Revolution, Hitler’s ascent to power, the waging of the Second World War and Mao Zedong’s takeover in China (Sebag Montefiore, 2017). Prashad frames *The New York Times* article or, as he puts it, true to Soviet jargon, the “bourgeois press” take on 1917 thus: “it’s all very well for them to try and denigrate this history because they are afraid of its consequences. They don’t want the values of this history to assert themselves in the present” (*Loud and Clear*, 2017). Thus, Western interpretations of 1917 are not just part of a wider information campaign to discredit Russia,

but rather are presented as emblematic of a more profound fear on the part of the Western political elite and press of finding their legitimacy challenged by socialist ideology and Russia's historical experiences.

Similarly, Bolshevik pacifism and opposition to Russia's involvement in World War One is contrasted with Britain, the US and France's warmongering. In the words of *Hard Facts* host John Wight: "millions of predominantly working-class men were hurled across mud-soaked battlefields to their doom in service to autocratic ruling classes to whom the lives of the poor were worth nothing and imminently dispensable" (*Hard Facts*, 2017). The emotive and overblown linguistic register is characteristic of Wight's journalistic style. Nonetheless, this citation is also illustrative of how Sputnik's coverage frames Russia as a purveyor of progressive and pacifist politics and promotes a very radically left-wing representation of the "bourgeois" West which is fully in line with the dominant Soviet historical narrative. In addition, while none of the coverage is timed for February's centenary, a clear effort is made to distinguish the October, Bolshevik Revolution from the February one. Aleksandr Kerensky's provisional government that took power following the abdication of the Tsar (February Revolution) is projected as a merely "bourgeois" government, which is expecting a "more efficient prosecution of the war effort" from Russia (*Hard Facts*, 2017). Likewise, Wight's guest, academic Callaghan, informs listeners that Kerensky's provisional government "had no intention of pulling Russia out of the war. If they'd been allowed to, they would have conducted the war to its conclusion" (*Hard Facts*, 2017).

While Callaghan's account is historically accurate, the failure to acknowledge the democratising achievements of Kerensky's government is problematic. Thus, the February Revolution is not presented as a source of Russian cultural capital. In fact, the February Revolution and provisional government, echoing yet another Soviet narrative, are depicted as betraying the revolutionary cause and therefore not a source of historical pride for Russia. By contrast, the

October Revolution is represented as the ultimate benchmark of progressive politics. Dean goes even further in her estimation of Kerensky's leadership and reasons for the subsequent October Revolution's taking place:

The different socialist parties don't wanna take power, like they're like oh it's not our turn ... it's supposed to be a bourgeois form of government right now, the bourgeoisie is supposed to lead it's not really up to us. But o my god, the bourgeois government is too weak and Kerensky's not able to do anything and society is collapsing around us. So, in many ways it is like the social situation pushes the Bolsheviks so that they *have to* have an insurrection. It's not like they began by saying 'that's what we're going to do' it's like the situation compelled them because of the incredible amount of instability in the country. (*Loud and Clear*, 2017)

In this instance Dean is mixing Soviet-style jargon with colloquial Americanisms, producing a rather unusual combination of vernaculars. Indeed, it is rather unusual to see classic Leninist language translated into contemporary American English. Again, her presentation of the Russian Revolution reflects a radical and one-sided interpretation. Dean's argument that the Bolsheviks did not wish to stage an insurrection and were simply compelled to do so is symbolic of the crudest of Soviet political legitimization narratives. Therefore, Sputnik's coverage of the February revolution sets itself apart from that of RT and domestic Russian television insofar as it is fully in line with wider Soviet narratives.

Another central narrative dimension in Sputnik's English language coverage concerns the relevance of 1917 for the emancipation of women, decolonisation and national liberation movements in the twentieth century and, surprisingly, the manifestos of present-day identity struggles. All the discussants on both *Loud and Clear* and *Hard Facts* credit the Bolsheviks and ultimately the Soviet Union with inspiring communist movements in Asia (China and Vietnam), Africa (the creation of the South African Communist Party and participation in the movement to end Apartheid) and Latin America (Fidel Castro's victory in the Cuban Civil War). The anti-colonial waves of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s that draw heavily on Marxism are also framed in reference to 1917's centennial. This narrative was also propagated in RT's coverage of the centennial, featuring prominently in one episode of *CrossTalk*.

In addition, the Soviet Union's "internationalism" and anti-imperialism (tolerant attitude towards minority ethnic groups) is contrasted in particular with US racial segregation. This contrast between a tolerant Soviet Union and a prejudiced and segregated West amounts to yet another traditional Soviet narrative. Interestingly, this particular narrative perpetrates an implicit elision of Soviet with Russian, itself a form of imperialism. Thus, by associating Soviet progressivism and multicultural tolerance with contemporary Russia, Sputnik implicitly invalidates that very tolerance. Once again there is no room for complexities or nuance, nor do the discussants acknowledge that many historians now regard the Bolshevik creation of the state on the territory of the Tsarist empire following the Civil War and the position of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe after World War Two as a particular type of imperialism (Martin, 2001). Equally, there is also no discussion of repression of minority groups in the USSR, such as the deportations of Tartars from Crimea to Uzbekistan in 1944, the persecution of Soviet Jews or the Doctors' Plot from 1952-53 (see Uehling, 2004; Kostyrchenko, 1995).

One of the most idiosyncratic narratives in Sputnik's coverage of 1917's centennial is how it frames Russia's relevance to current identity politics. Puryear invokes the October Revolution as the touchstone for the birth and advancement of the radical black liberation movement in the US, namely the African Blood Brotherhood which began activity in 1919. Puryear states: "all around the world the Soviet Union became a beacon to those oppressed and exploited nations" (*Loud and Clear*, 2017). Puryear further asserts the relevance of 1917 for the black liberation movements, accurately quoting Lenin who did in fact say: "Black people in the US are a nation within a nation" (*Loud and Clear*, 2017). The classification of an ethnic group as a nationality is once more a typically Soviet trope. It is precisely this line of thought, Puryear posits, that will drive the Black Lives Matter movement forward. It is worth remarking upon the fact that RT has been scathingly critical and even mocking of Black Lives Matter and trends pertaining to identity that it deems to be "woke", presumably to endear itself to the Trump-supporting right in the US. Returning directly to Sputnik's coverage of 1917's centenary, it appears to link Russia

to the current equality struggles of marginalised groups in Western liberal democracies.

Moreover, Sputnik's coverage of 1917 in relationship to identity, specifically the black liberation struggle in the US, goes yet further still. Becker claims:

Today's witch-hunt against Russia, post-Soviet Russia with all the same sort of accusations that Russia is behind "all the social divisiveness" including support for the Black Lives Matter movement, which is just absurd. But anyway there is this toxic tangling of anti-communism and racism and scapegoating and it just hasn't stopped and it seems to be part of the DNA of American political bourgeois psychology. (*Loud and Clear*, 2017)

Becker's pronouncement is radically Soviet in its linguistic register (e.g., claims of a witch-hunt against communists). Conversely, "the DNA of American political ... psychology" is not Soviet, but rather emblematic of extreme anti-establishment jargon. The biochemical term DNA is invoked to stress the mutual dependence of anti-communism with American mainstream politics. Further still, the conflation of the Black Lives Matter movement with a "witch-hunt" against Russia is very significant as it asserts that Russians and African Americans are victims of the same enemy, i.e., the West, and united in their struggles to resist it. Thus, Russia and indeed Russians are depicted as a persecuted minority in their own right along with those that oppose the dominant social order in the same degree as the African American ethnic minority.

Another echo of RT and significant narrative dynamic of Sputnik's English language coverage of 1917's centennial concerns the central role assigned to Lenin. In fact, in *Loud and Clear's* broadcast, Lenin is depicted as the chief mastermind of the Bolshevik revolution and Trotsky is scarcely mentioned.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the tendency in some circles to regard Lenin as a hero and Stalin a villain is critiqued by *Hard Facts* host Wight: "too many people try to erect a halo over Lenin and Trotsky and horns over the head of Stalin, but it was Trotsky himself who said that Lenin created the apparatus and the apparatus created Stalin" (*Hard Facts*, 2017). Wight is claiming that Stalin was a more logical successor to Lenin than Trotsky. Even so, his conflation of Lenin and Stalin could potentially diminish the progressive enhancement of the cultural

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<sup>14</sup> Curiously, domestic Russian television channel Pervyj Kanal broadcast an eight-episode serial where Trotsky, not Lenin, was presented as the mastermind of the Russian Revolution.

capital associated with the Russian Revolution among Western audiences. Wight adds to this, asserting that compared to Lenin, who wanted to build socialism, Stalin, who settled for Bukharin's notion of Socialism in One Country,<sup>15</sup> "better understood the temper of the Russian people" (*Hard Facts*, 2017). Wight's comment could be interpreted in two different ways. Again, the abstract concept of a "Russian people" is essentialised. Wight's statement amounts to yet another age-old Soviet, even Stalinist narrative. Since Stalin's time, references to communist internationalism were balanced by evocation of specifically Russian patriotism. To this end, Stalin realised that the Bolsheviks should prioritise building a strong Soviet state, based on the Russian people as a leading force. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation, which portrays Stalin positively as a Russian patriot, currently promotes this narrative in Russia (March, 2002). However, in the meantime Stalin's terror is whitewashed as Prashad describes the pitfalls of the Soviet political machine: "Of course there were great distortions inside the Soviet Union; it is true that they made many errors in the way of democracy in the fusing of the party and the state not allowing the party to continue as an external body" (*Loud and Clear*, 2017). Thus, as per the Soviet narrative structure, there is no room for contradiction, complexity or nuance. The fact that Prashad merely hints at Stalin's terror without explicitly acknowledging its historical occurrence suggests that the perceived US audience may not be familiar with the Stalinist repressions.

### **Sputnik's Russian Language Coverage of 1917's Centennial**

The first of Sputnik Russian's broadcasts on 1917's centennial, recorded on its regular show, *Vizavi s mirom*, was timed to mark the February Revolution and aired on 22 February 2017—on the eve of Russian national holiday Defender of the Fatherland Day (*Vizavi s mirom*, 2017a). The February Revolution was covered again on *Teorija zabluženi* and aired on 24 March 2017

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<sup>15</sup> As opposed to Trotsky's Permanent Revolution, Socialism in One Country was the proposition that Russia could build its own socialist system and begin to advance internally. Thus, it injected state policy with a patriotic twist.

(*Teorija zabluženij*, 2017a). Strikingly, *Vizavi s mirom*'s next show, which covered the fate of Tsar Nicholas II as well as the October Revolution, broadcast on 25 July 2017, was timed to mark the execution of the Tsar and his family in July 1918 (*Vizavi s mirom*, 2017b). This signals a conspicuous anachronism as the Tsar's execution occurred in 1918 and demonstrates a concerted effort to link the events of 1917 with the Tsar's killing a year later. On 4 October 2017, *Vizavi s mirom* aired another show discussing the wider historical legacy of February and October: how they should be addressed in school education and the possible parallels between 1917 and 2017 (*Vizavi s mirom*, 2017c). On 1 November 2017, shortly before the October Revolution's official centenary, *Vizavi s mirom* dedicated yet another broadcast to the October and February Revolutions, assessing their wider influence on Russian history (*Vizavi s mirom*, 2017c). Similarly, while 1917's centenary was not the only topic on *Dnevnik čitatelja*'s 24 October 2017 edition, it occupied the central thematic position (*Dnevnik čitatelja*, 2017). *Dnevnik čitatelja*'s show features discussion of publications on how Moscow looked and felt in 1917 as well as how one should broach the Russian Revolution with today's children. Thus, by contrast to its English language coverage, Sputnik's Russian coverage of 1917's centennial is spread across the year of 2017. As we shall see from the analysis of Sputnik's Russian language coverage, the Russian Revolution was framed heterogeneously.

As previously highlighted, Russian domestic television coverage of the 1917 centennial abandoned themes of "reconciliation and accord" in favour of negative depictions (Chatterje-Doody and Tolz, 2019). However, on the Russian language airwaves, tropes of reconciliation and accord proliferated. Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinskij was the first to propose that official commemorations of 1917's centenary should adopt themes of reconciliation and accord. The basic premise of Medinskij's narrative was to establish the actual Revolution and subsequent Civil War as catastrophic events, yet ones that engendered the Russian nation's greatest accomplishments: uniting the Russian people; superpower status; and victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War. In essence, the narrative of reconciliation and accord

rails against the very concept of revolution; however, it injects the Russian Revolution's legacies with a patriotic twist.

In the programmes broadcast on February and October's larger legacies, *Vizavi s mirom* presenter Armen Oganessian (a veteran Russian radio journalist and once the CEO of Sputnik's predecessor, Voice of Russia) opens the show with explicit reference to the notion of reconciliation:

As we mark the jubilee of the two revolutions, people often talk about "reconciliation" and the idea that we need to be "reconciled" ... there are different evaluations of what happened in 1917... what is meant by the phrase: "reconciliation is necessary" in today's context? How you understand this phrase? (*Vizavi s mirom*, 2017c)

To which his guest, Yuri Petrov, the director of the Institute of Russian History at the Russian National Academy of Sciences, replies:

The Russian historical community settled on a consensus that as only one revolution—the Great Russian Revolution, consisting of three phases: the February revolution, the October Revolution and the Civil War as a continuation of the first two in the form of open warfare ... now it is pointless to pit the different revolutions of 1917 against one another. As nowadays we don't need to distinguish the Reds, Whites and Scarlets. However, these oppositions remain entrenched in our minds. Removing this contradiction is a very important task on a general national scale. We perceive the Revolution completely differently to how we did 30 years ago because there is a realisation that revolution is a schism— a grave injury on a nation's body that takes a long time to heal. Helping the injury to heal is historians' task. How to do it? Through reconciliation as you mentioned ... It's not a matter of the Reds were good, and the Whites were bad or the reverse. Such thinking is not good for the unity of our country. Let's think together about how best to leave the schism behind. (*Vizavi s mirom*, 2017d)

Petrov's response aptly encapsulates the key components of what was expected to be the state's official position on 1917's centennial: the mantra of reconciliation and accord. Its notable features are: first, the fundamental tenet of the reconciliation narrative that revolution by its very nature is fragmentary and therefore produces only "schism" (Malinova, 2018); second, a core feature of Medinskij's reconciliation and accord, the notion of a "Great Russian Revolution", a collective term referring to the February and October Revolution as well as the Civil War (1917-1922); and third, a wider debate about the role of historians in present-day Russia, i.e., the proposition that they have a responsibility to unite the Russian people (Torbakov, 2018, p. 24).



Petrov's use of corporeal language and imagery is noteworthy. The metaphor of revolution as being a "wound on the nation's body" implies that the Russian people and the Russian nation are synonymous. Thus, the Russian people are identified as the Russian nation's nucleus as per the official discourse on Russian identity during the Annexation of Crimea (Teper, 2018). Also, we should mark the fact that in the citation's closing sentence, Petrov is inviting both his interviewer and the audiences to co-construct narratives about how best to achieve "reconciliation". Moreover, we should note, Petrov's senior position at the Russian Academy of Sciences may be pertinent, as being appointed to high positions in the Russian Academy of Sciences may require the observation of certain state protocols.

As with domestic Russian television coverage of the 1917 centenary, much of Sputnik's Russian language coverage disparages the Russian Revolution and indeed the entire Bolshevik and even Soviet legacies. Sputnik Russian's coverage, like the state-aligned television channels, deploys a wealth of conspiracy theories that endeavour to appeal to the emotional sensibilities of monarchists and Russian Orthodox Christians (Chatterje-Doody and Tolz, 2019). We witness the proliferation of these negative estimations of the 1917 centennial by way of conspiracy theories in *Vizavi s mirom's* broadcasts timed for the February Revolution and the 99<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tsar's execution. The former is clearly packaged with a devout Russian Orthodox Christian audience in mind, while the latter show saliently perceives its audience as possessing a wistful yearning for the return of Russia's monarchs.

Pyotr Mul'tatuli (PhD Candidate in History and a biographer of Nicholas II), Armen Oganessian's guest on *Vizavi s mirom*, invites audiences to muse on a number of inflammatory conspiracy theories concerning 1917. Initially, Mul'tatuli denies that the abdication of the Tsar ever occurred, saying "we can't ever know what happened on that wagon" (*Vizavi s mirom*, 2017a). Similarly, both Oganessian and Mul'tatuli agree that the release of Russian film *Matilda* timed for

late October 2017 was evidence of a plot to denigrate Nicholas II's image as a pious family man among Orthodox Christians.<sup>16</sup> However, the *pièce de résistance* among conspiracy theories comes with the following exchange between interviewer and interviewee:

Oganesjan: Now historical fact acknowledges that there really was a conspiracy in place against the Tsar that told hold among all of society's strata, chiefly among the elite—both civil and military. Let us talk about this. What was this conspiracy? When did it begin to ripen? How did it lead to/play a role in the tragic events of February 1917?

Mul'tatuli: A conspiracy certainly existed—no revolution happens without conspiracy—What is a revolution? This is a big question. A revolution is a change of formation, but for a riot to turn into a revolution we understand that a very good provision of money and ideological preparedness is required. So, every revolution is essentially a conspiracy. If this is not the case then it is simply a riot that is suppressed by the sovereign ... One can't say that it was a conspiracy of members or the elite, nobility or the church. I would say that it was a conspiracy of degenerates—a conspiracy of degenerates from all factions of society. (*Vizavi s mirom*, 2017a)

This exchange between *Vizavi s mirom's* presenter and historian guest is exemplary of how the two interact and indeed of how Oganesjan communicates with all his interlocutors on air.

Essentially, Oganesjan flexibly adopts the divergent positions of each of the different historians he interviews across 2017 on the Russian Revolution's centennial. In this case, he is framing the February Revolution as mere "conspiracy", as his guest biographer of Nicholas II conceptualises it. Indeed, the superstitious, even mystical theory that that the February Revolution took place as of conspiracy of "degenerates" that permeated Russian society is itself the ultimate whimsical conspiracy theory—a kind of "meta-conspiracy" if you will. Furthermore, the linguistic register, and use of the term "conspiracy of degenerates" (*zagovor vyrodkov*) suggests immorality and thus has religious connotations. Moreover, we observe the use of religious language elsewhere in this particular show by presenter Oganesjan. When discussing how the collective trauma produced by the "tragic" events of 1917 can be overcome, Oganesjan declares: "if the Russian people repent they shall be reborn" (*Vizavi s mirom*, 2017a). Oganesjan's statement uses

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<sup>16</sup> A state-funded feature film released in October 2017 foregrounding the youthful romantic relationship between Nicholas II and prima ballerina Matilda Kshesinskaya before his marriage and coronation. The film caused a scandal in Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church was its most vociferous critic, labeling it as blasphemy as the Tsar and his family were canonised in 2000.

quintessential biblical language and imagery: the fundamentally Christian idea that if one repents a sin, they will be forgiven and thus reborn.

We see the deployment of conspiracy theories used to frame the Russian Revolution disparagingly further developed in *Vizavi s mirom's* July 2017 broadcast. Strikingly, Mul'tatuli is Oganessian's guest once again. In this particular broadcast, the pair go as far as to claim that Kerensky and Trotsky were operatives in a larger US plot. As such, Kerensky was intended to become the head of the state while Trotsky was supposed to head the government (*Vizavi s mirom*, 2017b). Oganessian and Mul'tatuli also agree, perhaps paradoxically, that the initial reluctance of the US to join the First World War was due to its refusal to fight on the same side as Tsar Nicholas II. Thus, the implied logic is that the US plotting with Kerensky and Trotsky would present them with the opportunity to enter the war, a highly dubious proposition. Trotsky being depicted as the mastermind of the revolution reflects a similar narrative to that of domestic television. However, the domestic coverage does not allot Kerensky such malevolent agency. In addition to the US, Oganessian and Mul'tatuli also posit an age-old conspiracy theory that Germany provided the Bolsheviks with funds to bring about revolution with the aim of pulling Russia out of the war and increasing Germany's chances of victory. Added to this, Oganessian and Mul'tatuli also agree that Lenin received funds from the Japanese in 1905 during the Russo-Japanese war.

Adding to the extremity of the conspiracy theories put forward is the framing of Bolshevism as an illness, in the words of Mul'tatuli: "Bolshevism is a cholera (virus). Whoever opened this flask is ultimately responsible" (*Vizavi s mirom*, 2017b). However, their repudiation of Bolshevism extends to the entire Soviet period as Mul'tatuli adds inflammatorily that the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation are in no way synonymous, amounting to a wholesale rejection of the Soviet period. Thus, it is evident that Sputnik's producers and journalists perceive one particular constituent of their Russian-speaking audience as Russian Orthodox monarchists,

among whom emotional and crude conspiracy theories, that paradoxically are reminiscent of the crudest Stalinist type, will find traction.

Curiously, Sputnik's Russian coverage of the 1917 centennial also contains a positive assessment of both the Russian Revolution and indeed the entire Soviet period. Therefore, it bears far greater resemblance to the larger progressive narrative of Sputnik's English language coverage. Surprisingly, this positive coverage appears again on the programme *Vizavi s mirom*.

Oganesjan's guest, military historian Mikhail Mjagkov praises the Russian Revolution:

I would call the events of 1917—one the greatest events in the history of humanity. In October, an attempt was made to build on earth a classless society: where people were like siblings to one another; with social welfare; no private property; no wars; proletarian solidarity; and solidarity of all people on earth; no national differences.  
(*Vizavi s mirom*, 2017c)

Mjagkov's declaration recalls Sputnik US and UK coverage of 1917's centennial in narratives that display fervent left-wing support and sympathy for the Soviet experiment. Like Sputnik US and UK presenters and their interlocutors, Mjagkov and Oganesjan stress 1917's influence on colonised nations in Asia and Africa. However, in this Russian language context such positive narratives are not of left-wing origin, but rather of patriotic pride. The fact that yet another historical narrative dynamic of the revolution can appear on the same programme with the same journalist who has already put forward extremely negative and historically inaccurate conspiratorial renderings of 1917 alongside themes of reconciliation is noteworthy. Moreover, it seems to support Chatterje and Tolz's (2019) thesis about the pliability of historical narratives in official discourse. What is especially striking in the case of Sputnik Russian is the fact that phenomenally dissimilar narratives on 1917 can appear on the very same programme with the very same journalist just months and weeks apart. How do we explain this? The likely explanation seems to be that Sputnik imagines its audiences, who are presumably Russian speakers residing in former Soviet territories, as heterogeneous. In this sense, some are wholly disdainful of the Soviet experiment for religious and/or monarchist reasons; others embrace themes of reconciliation; and others are nostalgic for the Soviet Union.

The analysis of the dominant narratives at play in Sputnik's English language coverage of 1917's centenary has revealed one overarching trope. To put it another way, the analysis has disclosed the principal theme that stresses Russia's relevance to present-day global politics: the West's refusal to recognise Russia's importance and even purposive attempts to devalue Russia's world standing (O'Loughlin and Miskimmon, 2017, p. 115). To recap, the consistent tropes in this larger historical-facing great power narrative that the scholars identify are: demanding recognition of Russia's equal status from the US, UK and Western Europe; emphasising Russia's role in Common European Home negotiations at the end of the Cold War; and stressing the emergence of a new world order (polycentrism). However, the temporal dimension of past, present and future in Russia's great power strategic narrative as communicated via Sputnik is distinct from the one identified by O'Loughlin and Miskimmon (2017). In other words, it harks back anachronistically to an epoch in which the Soviet Union was not a great power. Thus, it is difficult to see how this particular strategic narrative could be persuasive.

Another important point made by O'Loughlin and Miskimmon (2017) in their identification of Russia's outward facing strategic narratives is that post-Soviet Russia draws on an outdated understanding of the international arena. The understanding of the international system invoked by the Russian Federation presents Russia as deserving prestige and recognition from the West for working in concert to bring an end to the Cold War. However, in the global media ecology—the arena in which strategic narratives truly come alive—we find in this particular case that Russia's strategic narrative that demands equal status with the West draws almost exclusively on bygone Soviet narratives. Hence, there is an inherent contradiction at play. On the one hand, Russia is responding to and engaging with the new multipolar nature of the international system. On the other hand, the Soviet language and imagery it invokes to assert its position are by definition at odds with multipolarity, as they hark back to a bipolar international order. We might deduce that while Russia is actively engaged in experimentation with public

diplomacy operations, it still does not possess the language required to articulate its position in the multipolar world. Or, alternatively, as esteemed expert on Russia foreign policy Kadri Liik (2021) argues, Russia does not yet itself understand its new role in the multipolar world. To this end, multipolarity is essentially conceptualised as opposition to Western hegemony.

## **Genres, Formats and Conventions**

As the analysis above of the dominant narratives at play in Sputnik's US and UK rather extreme coverage of the Russian Revolution has demonstrated, Sputnik clearly imagines its foreign audiences as radically left-wing with familiarity with some of the basic tenets of Marxist and even with Soviet jargon. Hosts on both *Loud and Clear* and *Hard Facts* address audiences directly in an instructive and informative manner, in this case about a key episode in Russian history. Significantly, *Loud and Clear's* hosts, who broadcast from Sputnik's US hub in Washington DC, take more time than the UK broadcast *Hard Facts* to pause and clarify points of information for audiences. Both Becker and Kiriakou spell out exactly what terms (e.g., Cold War) denote. To cite examples of how Sputnik's US presenters clarify terms: "Let's just remind the audience in case they don't know"; "maybe most Americans don't know that the US was in an alliance with the USSR before the Cold War"; and "Marx and Engels—those who wrote the Communist Manifesto" (*Loud and Clear*, 2017). By contrast, aside from making a clear distinction between the February and October revolutions, Wight in the UK does not pause to explain obscure terms those who have not studied Russian history may not know. Nor does he elucidate who the individual characters in Russian history he mentions are. One might deduce, then, that the contrast between *Loud and Clear's* efforts to explain terms and concepts and *Hard Facts's* lack thereof suggests that Sputnik assumes its audiences in the US to be less well-informed about Russian history than their British counterparts. As further evidence of this gap, it is worth noting the salient difference in linguistic register between Sputnik's US and UK coverage. While both Sputnik US and UK's coverage contain Soviet jargon, Sputnik US uses a

more colloquial register than Sputnik UK. The analysis of the dominant narratives at play in Sputnik's coverage revealed that the US coverage of 1917 is very one-sided in a quintessentially Soviet style, insofar as it conflates the Russian Revolution with the Soviet Union's entire 70-year history and hails it as the ultimate point of reference for both the Party for Socialism and Liberation and present-day oppressed minority groups. While the UK-based coverage of the centennial also frames the events of 1917 using Soviet narratives to promote a left-wing political agenda, its coverage is undoubtedly more historically accurate as well as more nuanced than that of Sputnik US. Therefore, it seems plausible that Sputnik's producers imagine their US audience to have more radical anti-establishment left-wing predilections. At first glance this may appear surprising, as radical left-wing politics is extremely marginal in the United States, far more than in, say, Western Europe or the United Kingdom. There are a number of possible explanations for this. First, in light of the allegations of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election, it may be that Sputnik's producers wish to distance the network from right-wing populism and Trump supporters, quite unlike RT. Indeed, at the time, Sputnik US only had one populist right-wing journalist, Lee Stranahan, a former employee of Breitbart News. Second, because of Sputnik and RT's increasingly precarious journalistic position as well as their generally low credibility rating in the United States, it may be that certain journalists at the other end of the political spectrum, i.e., Trump supporters, were wary of being associated with a state-funded Russian media outlet. Third, it is also possible that pending the FBI investigation into Sputnik and RT's journalistic activity (launched in September 2017), Sputnik US wishes yet again to distance itself from Trump supporters. Fourth, if we recall that several Sputnik journalists and contributors share certain affiliations to political and activist movements, it is conceivable that they represent a small coterie of radical socialists. In sum, the coverage clearly shows that Sputnik perceives its American audience as both more radically left-wing and less well informed about aspects of Russian history than their British counterparts. This marks a stark contrast to RT America, which flirts with alt-right narratives and is clearly fishing in the same waters as Fox and Breitbart News.

In assessing the difference in Sputnik's US and UK coverage of 1917's centennial it is important to recall that Sputnik US broadcasts live on AM and FM radio, whereas Sputnik UK is purely a digital radio station, as this will inevitably affect the radio content. Since Sputnik US broadcasts live on the airwaves on 105.5 FM in the Washington DC area, a diverse and multiethnic and metropolitan zone, it is presumably intended to reach demographics who are more likely to be well disposed to progressive politics—and perhaps to Russia—than most Americans. Equally, the structure and format of *Loud and Clear* (compared to *Hard Facts*) makes use of the immediacy of radio. In other words, both Dean and Prashad participate in the discussion via telephone, while Puryear joins the presenters in the studio, a common feature of conventional talk radio. Similarly, the discussion on *Loud and Clear* is structured around its three short breaks, and at the beginning of every new segment Becker and Kiriakou reintroduce the topic and all of their guests so that listeners who have just tuned in are *au fait* with the theme. By comparison, Sputnik UK only broadcasts digitally, giving it greater flexibility to pre-record its shows. As audiences of Sputnik UK will not be listening in real time, there are fewer conventions that have to be observed in comparison to traditional radio broadcasting, such as dividing up the programme according to breaks and reintroducing guests. In fact, Sputnik UK's *Hard Facts* resembles the newer type of digitised radio: half podcast (insofar as it is prerecorded and is not listened to in real time) and half radio (insofar as it is part of a larger network that broadcasts a range of programmes by a range of journalists round the clock). On the airwaves of AM/FM, Sputnik US is able to target ordinary citizens above 40 years old who are searching for background noise while in the workplace or indeed on the road. By contrast, via Sputnik's digitised platform, Sputnik UK is able to reach a younger, more technologically literate and politically informed audience who are aware of the global media ecology's infinite choices when it comes to selecting media sources. The question of whether practice mirrors theory and whether Sputnik does actually attract such audiences is another matter and will be dealt with elsewhere in the thesis.



In layman's terms, a podcast is an episodic audio series that can be downloaded directly onto an electronic device. Thus, by contrast with a digital radio station, which delivers broadcasts continuously, a podcast can be uploaded as seldom as once per month. The advent of podcasts has greatly altered the audio form, as now almost anyone can record a podcast and share it easily with potential listeners across digital space without need of an AM/FM radio. While podcasts have been around since 2004, they are becoming ever more popular in the UK (Smith, 2018). As a general rule, people listen to podcasts in order to inform or educate themselves about a topic much as one might read a book. The difference being, however, that one can learn about a topic of interest while in transit rather than embarking on the daunting task of opening a large historical volume. What is more, history is a particularly popular podcast genre. Thus, it seems that Sputnik's producers and editors are acutely aware of the advance of the historical podcast.

*Sputnik's Weekend Special* on 10 November 2017 on the centennial of the Russian Revolution with a guest appearance from Geoffrey Roberts broadcast exclusively on Sputnik's Soundcloud channel exemplifies how Sputnik interprets the historical podcast genre. I will discuss this broadcast separately from *Loud and Clear* and *Hard Facts* because it was not broadcast on the official Sputnik radio channel, but rather only on its podcast channel via Soundcloud. As previously mentioned, Roberts appeared on RT's *CrossTalk*, hosted by Peter Lavelle, on 13 November 2017. Hence, it seems conceivable that both his RT and Sputnik interviews were recorded in quick succession, presumably on the same visit to Moscow. While Sputnik in general tends to have more extreme and partisan coverage of 1917's global legacy, interestingly the *Sputnik Weekend Special* timed for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the October Revolution provides far more measured and historically balanced coverage than the remainder of Sputnik's other 1917 centennial coverage and even than RT's. First and foremost, unlike Sputnik's broadcasts on *Hard Facts* and *Loud and Clear*—which use evocative adjectives in their headlining such as “seismic” and “earthshaking” to emphasise the importance of the centenary and thereby attract

listeners—the title of the podcast is rather unassuming and neutral: *Geoffrey Roberts on the anniversary of the Russian Revolution*. As a matter of fact, the Soundcloud recording typifies a podcast insofar as Roberts describes the basic events of 1917, presents different schools of historical thought and considers the role of historical contingency in the Russian Revolution without injecting any of his own political inclinations. Furthermore, unlike Sputnik’s other two shows, Roberts and *Sputnik Weekend Special* host Graham Murray refrain from: using any Soviet-style jargon; venerating Lenin and the Russian people; anachronistically conflating the events of 1917 with the Soviet Union’s entire 70-year history; discussing Marxist theory; and crediting the Soviet Union with being the begetter of all national liberation and decolonisation or present-day identity struggles. Contrary to Sputnik’s other coverage of 1917, the recording frames the First World War as the overarching context of the Russian Revolution, which Roberts argues “shaped the nature of the Revolution—shaped it into a very violent revolution” (*Weekend Special*, 2017). Moreover, Roberts goes as far as to raise the question: “if it hadn’t been for World War One—would there have been a revolution at all?” (*Weekend Special*, 2017). Unlike *Hard Facts* and *Loud and Clear*, there is far less focus on the role of individuals, i.e., Lenin and Trotsky, in the revolution. Roberts does credit Lenin with being the singular mastermind behind the October Revolution. But in actuality, Lenin is mentioned on only four occasions, with Roberts opting for the term “the Bolsheviks”.

Another distinctive feature of *Sputnik’s Weekend Special* Soundcloud recording is its discussion of how the Russian Revolution’s centenary was being marked in Russia. The podcast’s Moscow-based host, Murray, puts the question to Roberts: “a recent Guardian article had the headline: ‘Revolution, what Revolution? Russians show little interest in the 1917 centenary.’ Why is this?” (*Weekend Special*, 2017). In this instance, Murray is engaging directly with the British newspaper *The Guardian*, an engagement which we also saw in *Loud and Clear* with Kiriakou’s citation of an article in *The New York Times*. Roberts’s claim that “Russian society is deeply

divided on the Revolution” in reality is a hyperbolic statement, as previously mentioned; the events of 1917 galvanise little interest or debate amongst the Russian population.

Even so, rather significantly, Roberts enunciates the dilemma that marking the Russian Revolution’s centennial presented for Putin’s administration:

Putin has a rather ambiguous attitude towards 1917—the revolution brought division, whereas for Putin stability and unity are the most important things. Putin is also concerned with foreign intervention in the affairs of Russia and there were many foreign interventions not in the Revolution itself but in the Civil War that followed. Therefore, there are sound reasons for Putin to be quiet about 1917... he needs to keep onside both the people who think the Revolution was a tragedy and those who are sympathetic to communist ideas and nostalgic for the Soviet Union. (*Weekend Special*, 2017)

Neither RT nor Sputnik’s main channels provide such an overt encapsulation of the ambivalence of the incumbent Russian political elite in marking the centennial. While there is a brief mention of the Russian people’s “ambivalence” towards 1917 on RT’s *CrossTalk*, the conversation quickly moves to Babich’s (curiously one of Sputnik’s very own journalists) utterances about the West’s inaccurate depictions of the Russian Revolution (*CrossTalk*, 2017). Moreover, Roberts’s fairly accurate claim about the difficult predicament the centennial posed for Russia’s political elite also explicitly addresses the securitisation narrative, i.e., the prospect that Western media may use the Russian Revolution in its larger Information War against Russia.

The fact that the same guest, Geoffrey Roberts, can appear on two different media outlets (one visual and one audio), run under the same auspices in very quick succession, and project two competing narratives on 1917’s centenary points to the occurrence of divergent narratives on the same topic under the same media outlet.

The interaction between Murray and Roberts differs greatly from the exchanges between presenters and guests on both *Loud and Clear* and *Hard Facts*. As already shown, the presenters on *Loud and Clear* and *Hard Facts* for the most part purport to know as much about 1917 as their guests. Additionally, when Becker, Kiriakou and Wight question their guests about the

Russian Revolution, these questions are almost always tacked onto the end of rather lengthy statements and therefore often have the effect of framing and preempting the guests' answers. However, the interaction between Murray and Roberts is much more typical of a conventional interviewer and interviewee exchange. To put it another way, Murray asks pertinent and concise questions such as:

the Russian economy had been growing at a rate of 10% per year. So, what led to the tumultuous events of 1917? What did these movements in February and October actually want? What were their plans for imperial Russia? How did they actually differ from one another? Why did the February and October Revolutions happen? Was there any significance in their timing?" (*Weekend Special*, 2017)

Thus, Murray asks open-ended and straightforward questions that do not seek a particular answer. Indeed, Roberts is the main voice in the podcast and such a style of questioning is deployed specifically for that purpose. We can see that the general format of *Sputnik's Weekend Special* resembles far more closely the informative and educational historical podcast genre than it does *Sputnik's Hard Facts* and *Loud and Clear*. Similarly, there is a marked difference in the tone and linguistic register of the *Weekend Special's* recording. Neither Murray nor Roberts use the hyperbolic and verbose linguistic styles or the extreme colloquialisms that characterise both *Hard Facts* and *Loud and Clear's* broadcasts. Furthermore, this very difference of genre, format as well as linguistic register and tone strongly suggests that this particular recording is aimed at a very different audience than *Sputnik's* other shows that cover 1917's centenary, i.e., a very specific audience which is better informed, more educated and more actively interested in Russian history. However, it is worth noting that there is one common feature in *Hard Facts*, *Loud and Clear* and the *Sputnik Weekend Special's* coverage of 1917. The common feature in the entirety of *Sputnik's* coverage of the Russian Revolution is the direct engagement with and critique of Western media publications on the topic of 1917's centenary, i.e., *The New York Times* and *The Guardian*—or “reflexive media centrality—when the media representation of news stories is given more coverage than the actual events that underpin them” (Hutchings and Miazhevich, 2015). Firsthand reactions to the musings of Western press on 1917's centennial are significant as they give us a sense of how *Sputnik's* editorial team perceive the outlet's

purpose as well as its place in the wider global media ecology. In other words, this demonstrates that one of Sputnik's chief intentions is to parry directly negative projections of Russia in order to project a more favourable image.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter's analysis of Sputnik's media commemoration of one of most pivotal events in Russia's historical trajectory has revealed several of Sputnik's distinctive features. First, unlike RT, Sputnik's journalists and contributors exhibited an ideological affinity with the Russian Revolution, with its intellectual underpinnings as well as its larger progressive legacies. Second, the chapter uncovers a strong indication that Sputnik, in sharp contrast to RT, projects itself into the left-wing media ecology, with its voices seeming to reflect a fringe socialist coterie. Third, Sputnik projected more heterogenous narratives of the Russian Revolution than either RT or Russian state-aligned television channel, Pervyj Kanal and Rossija-1.

When it comes to projecting official discourse on Russian identity, the chapter showed that far from having consistent narratives on it, Sputnik deploys ideational and indentitarian narratives for pragmatic purposes in order to fit certain political agendas. In this sense, for Sputnik's global English-speaking audiences, the Revolution was framed as the ultimate touchstone for progressive movements pertaining to contemporary identity tropes such as decolonisation, feminism and anti-racism, while for its Russian speaking listeners, it used a "something for everyone approach", representing it according to a diverse range of historical interpretations that accommodate nostalgia for the Soviet Union, narratives of "reconciliation and accord" and anti-communist sentiment or Russian Orthodox beliefs.

The analysis also revealed that the audio medium is a particularly useful vehicle for the regime and state-aligned media executives through which to project divergent and conflicting narratives on Russia's identity discourse and thus to serve its varying political objectives and

strategic narratives. Thus, in theory Sputnik has the potential to be a more obliging soft power tool than its elder sibling, RT. Be that as it may, while this episode in Russian history has considerable cultural capital, the customarily partisan nature of Sputnik's journalistic content and style mean that the potential offered by radio's comparative adaptability, pliancy and intimacy is not realised. In sum, the means frustrate the ends. The thesis's next chapter will seek to address Sputnik's specific place in Russia's media operation by analysing how it negotiates a "disruptive media event".

## Chapter III: Sounding Salisbury: Hybrid Audio Media and Interstate Conflict

### Introduction

On 5 March 2018, BBC News Wiltshire reported that two individuals were in “critical condition” resulting from exposure to an unspecified “substance” in the cathedral town of Salisbury (BBC News, 2018). The next day, the identities of the critically ill man and young woman were revealed as being Sergej Skripal, the former Russian military intelligence officer turned M16-recruited double agent, and his daughter, Julija Skripal, who was visiting him from Moscow.<sup>17</sup> From the moment that the former GRU colonel’s identity was disclosed, the news item went from local news story to seismic international headline (Bannock, Harding and Morris, 2018; Castel, 2018). Concurrently, mainstream Western media outlets—BBC News UK, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*—began to invoke the case of the Russian defector Aleksandr Litvinenko who was assassinated in London in 2006.<sup>18</sup> Subsequently, Western mainstream news outlets posed the question: had the Russian state carried out yet another brazen poisoning of one of its former secret intelligence operatives turned British citizen on British soil?

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<sup>17</sup> Sergej Skripal, born in Kaliningrad in 1951, was a paratrooper in the Soviet Airborne Troops before being co-opted into military intelligence at the Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces GRU (Главное Разведывательное Управление). Skripal served overseas in Malta and then in Madrid, where he was recruited as a British double-agent in 1995. Due to poor health, Skripal returned to Moscow and was given the military rank of colonel. He was arrested in 2004 and sentenced in 2006 to 13 years in prison for high treason in the form of espionage. In July 2010, Skripal was released within the framework of a spy swap following the arrest of ten Russian intelligence officers in the United States. Shortly thereafter he moved to Salisbury, Wiltshire, and continued to provide intelligence services for the British government. For an in-depth, biographical account of Skripal’s Soviet spying career and his eventual defection to the British camp, see Urban, M. (2018) *The Skripal Files: The Life and Near Death of a Russian Spy*, Macmillan: London.

<sup>18</sup> Aleksandr Litvinenko was a former KGB and FSB intelligence offer. He accused the Russian security apparatus of staging the 1999 Apartment Bombings in Moscow, Buynaksk, and Volgodonsk, ordering the assassinations of former media mogul and oligarch Boris Berezovsky and journalist Anna Politkovskaya. Litvinenko was poisoned with radioactive polonium in London in November 2006. Litvinenko died as a result. A public inquiry on Litvinenko, commissioned in 2015 and published in early 2016, concluded that the murder was “probably approved” by President Putin and thus a state-sponsored act. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/493860/The-Litvinenko-Inquiry-H-C-695-web.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/493860/The-Litvinenko-Inquiry-H-C-695-web.pdf)

How did Russia's international broadcasting operation set about covering a story of profound significance to the Kremlin and the Russian Government? In the first months after the Skripal story broke, RT and Sputnik's web news coverage was convergent insofar as it was closely aligned with the official statements of Russian politicians that attempted to capitalise on the inherent ambiguity, commonplace for stories pertaining to state security, by encouraging speculation and contradictory narratives (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2015; Birge and Chatterje-Doody, 2020). In addition, RT and Sputnik sought to mobilise the prevailing political environment of uncertainty that challenges the authority of traditional channels of information (Birge and Chatterje-Doody, 2020; Tolz *et al.*, 2020). Nonetheless, in the aftermath of RT's much ridiculed "exclusive interview" on 13 September 2018 with the alleged suspects who used the names Ruslan Boshirov and Alexander Bashirov, led by its editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan, the two international broadcasters deployed drastically divergent editorial approaches (Birge and Chatterje-Doody, 2020). Scholarly analyses of Russian international broadcasting's mediation of the Skripal affair have analysed RT and Sputnik's web articles (Ramsay and Robertshaw, 2019); RT's broadcasts (Tolz *et al.*, 2020); as well as RT and Sputnik's web articles and selected broadcasts (Birge and Chatterje-Doody, 2020). But what of the totality of Sputnik's broadcasts and audience reaction to them? What specific techniques did Sputnik bring to bear as a radio broadcaster in its narration and framing of the Skripal affair over the story's trajectory? And how was Sputnik's radio broadcast coverage received by its audiences?

The purpose of this chapter is to establish how Sputnik negotiates a "disruptive media event" in order to assess the level of coordination and effectiveness of Russia's international broadcasting strategy (RQ2). To do this, I examine Sputnik's coverage of the Skripal poisonings vis-à-vis RT's in representing a matter of tremendous importance—not only to Russia's national security, but also its soft power status—and by evaluating audience responses to these broadcasts. In this chapter, I ask: how do authoritarian media actors attempt to control and shape the narrative during a global "disruptive media event" (originating in Russia) when the dominant global



Western mainstream media challenge the official position of the authoritarian state that sponsors these authoritarian media actors?

The Salisbury poisonings offer a particularly illustrative case study through which to gauge the coherence of Russia's international broadcasting strategy, as the incident is an example of what Katz and Liebes (2007) term a "disruptive media event", i.e., unforeseen and undesirable, an event that "disrupts" information flows and is impossible for political establishments to direct (Katz and Liebes, 2007, p. 157; Dayan, 2009; Ustad Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud, 2016). Unfolding against the backdrop of a global, live and interconnected media ecology, these disruptive events present more challenges still to the authority of established channels of information (Hepp and Couldry, 2010; Knüpfer and Entman, 2018). Controlling a disruptive media event in today's global media ecology, then, is a seemingly fruitless endeavour for any political establishment, even one of illiberal design that has a tight grip on information flows (Birge and Chatterje-Doody, 2020; Tolz *et al.*, 2020). With the disruptive media event in mind, Sputnik's coverage of an episode such as the Skripal affair is likely to yield informative empirical evidence about Sputnik's position in relation to the Russian state, as against other factors that any current media outlet must consider, namely, market imperatives. Examining Sputnik's coverage of the Skripal affair along with audience reception of it, and positioning it in relation to RT's, will contribute to the thesis's larger concern of deciphering Sputnik's distinctive role in Russia's outward projection strategy.

The chapter will argue that Sputnik uses a particularly distinctive tactic in attempting to negotiate a disruptive media event by ceding the floor to sympathetic audiences and inviting them to become co-producers. While Sputnik's blending of traditional audio broadcasting techniques such as live phone-ins with social media livestreams was clearly intended to buttress this strategy by enhancing the scope for audience engagement, the amateurism of

Sputnik's journalistic output meant that the outlet's attempts to invite audiences to speculate as to what had transpired in the cathedral town in early March 2020 were largely in vain.

Over the following pages I will analyse the specific techniques that Sputnik deployed in its English and Russian language radio broadcasts in covering the Skripal affair from the moment the story broke in March 2018 through all its key developments up to October 2018. Sputnik's radio coverage of the Skripal affair and its associated social media plugins form the bedrock of my analysis as it is only via its hybrid audio media content that Sputnik's status as a media convergent news outlet becomes fully apparent (Chadwick, 2016).

The chapter will begin with an overview of the empirical studies on the Salisbury poisonings. Section two will foreground Sputnik's *Hard Facts* and *Loud and Clear* engagement with the hybrid format of digital radio and podcast with news-making in covering the Skripal affair. Section three will compare Sputnik's English language and Russian language services' divergent editorial approaches to RT's botched interview with the suspects Petrov and Boshirov. Section four will conclude that while Sputnik deployed an idiosyncratic tactic in attempting to control the narrative about the Salisbury poisonings, its pitiful audience engagement clearly reflects the inadequacy of the Information War discourse in assessing Russia's international broadcasting strategy and as well as its struggles to steer information flows in today's hyper-networked global media environment.

### **Case Study Selection**

Recent studies of Russian international broadcasting have used the Salisbury poisonings as a case study (Ramsay and Robertshaw, 2019; Birge and Chatterje-Dooy, 2020; Tolz *et al.*, 2020). The very first academic report to be published on the Skripal affair, by Gary Ramsay and Sam Robertshaw (2019), which analyses Sputnik and RT's web articles on the Salisbury poisonings,

the projection of Russian military strength and depiction of the West, was entitled ‘Weaponising News: RT, Sputnik and targeted disinformation’. Thus, from the title alone it is clear that the report is situated in the politicised discourse of an Information War. Their main finding on RT and Sputnik’s coverage of the Skripal case pertains to the sheer volume of narratives, or as they term it, “flooding the zone” (Ramsay and Robertshaw, 2019, p. 21). Nonetheless, the scholars dedicate their analysis exclusively to RT and Sputnik’s online articles on the Skripal case, which prevents them from ascertaining how RT, a television broadcaster and Sputnik, a radio outlet, represented the story to their audiences. Therefore, the researchers are unable to gauge the specific roles of various media in depicting a subject of high importance to Russia’s national security and soft power status. My analysis of Sputnik’s broadcast content and audience responses on the Salisbury poisonings will attempt to compensate for at least some of these omissions.

By contrast, in their examination of RT’s coverage of the Skripal affair, Tolz *et al.* (2020) argue that the increasingly transnational, disparate and multifaceted nature of “mediatisation”—the process whereby media becomes intrinsic to the practices of everyday life—reduced state actors’ scope to assert narrative control as they were forced to delegate to journalists the ability to respond to challenging developments in the story. Thus, Tolz *et al.* postulate, “mediatisation” along with market imperatives “enhanced” Russian journalists’ “journalistic agency”—a reporter’s capacity to cover a topic of key importance in a manner that contradicts the official position adopted by the organisation that funds the outlet—in their reporting of the story despite it being a matter of high importance to state security apparatus (Tolz *et al.*, 2020). By the same token, in their comparative analysis of RT and Sputnik’s web and broadcast coverage at three critical stages in the story’s development: “breaking the news”; “interviewing the suspects”; and the “epilogue”, Lucy Birge and Precious Chatterje-Doody (2020) demonstrate that although security cases give the Russian public diplomacy outlets scope to mobilise

uncertainty, successfully managing it is another matter altogether and incidentally one that both RT and Sputnik struggle with (p. 187).

The empirical evidence presented in this chapter on Sputnik's radio coverage of and audience reception to the Skripal affair seeks to add to this latest body of work by demonstrating the inadequacy of the Information War discourse in evaluating and assessing Russia's international broadcasting strategy.

### **Hybrid Audio Formats: Live Radio and Podcast**

As the previous chapter on 1917's centenary demonstrated, Sputnik actively engages with the recent advent of the podcast. In a nutshell, a podcast is an episodic audio file that can be downloaded onto any device for ease of listening. Thus, podcasts are not designed for "live listening", but rather are produced for retrospective consumption. If in the case of the Russian Revolution's centennial, the podcast assumed a more educational format, then in the case of the Salisbury story, it took the hybrid form of news-making/political podcast insofar as it took a widely reported news story and adapted it to a podcast format. However, history also took a central role in framing the Salisbury poisonings in Sputnik's digital podcast/news-making genre, as twentieth century history, and in particular war, were often evoked.

The hybrid audio format of podcasts and news-making has the double function of setting the agenda and providing a prolonged analysis of one particular topic or offering a specific take on a story. It is podcasts' attention to detail as well as their positioning away from the immediacy of the live news cycle that make history and politics popular topics for this new digital audio medium genre. Sputnik's now discontinued show *Hard Facts* (UK) and *Loud and Clear* (US) reflect the network's experimentation with digital radio forms in rendering the Skripal

poisoning to English-speaking audiences and in attempting to draw wider political and historical conclusions from it.

*Hard Facts* broadcasts on the Skripal affair adopted the archetypal podcast format of one interviewer to one interviewee. Another salient feature of the podcast genre is the guest's credentials. As such, the presenter's discussant is usually an academic or political activist who appears to possess the requisite knowledge to speak authoritatively on the subject in hand. Logically, the guest's political background and expertise dictate the frame of the discussion. In Sputnik's very first radio show dedicated entirely to the Skripal story on 14 March 2018, which aired after both RT and Channel One began detailed coverage on 7 and 12 March respectively, presenter John Wight is joined by outspoken academic and conspiracy theory proponent Piers Robinson, then chair of Politics, Society and Political Journalism at the University of Sheffield and co-director of the controversial initiative called the Organisation for Propaganda Studies.

It is significant that Sputnik's very first detailed coverage of the story occurred a considerable time after both RT and Channel One's. Indeed, we may infer two propositions from Sputnik's dilatory approach to broadcasting about the Skripal poisonings. First, as the Skripal story was mediated and remediated and the pivotal role of media in shaping the diplomatic spat became clear, Sputnik's producers and journalists saw it as having a significant role to play in critiquing and directly engaging with Western media framings of the poisonings—i.e., mirroring by intimating inversions of the Western narratives—along with its central function as *agent provocateur* (Hutchings and Miasevich, 2009). Second, the delay might suggest that Sputnik also imagines its target audiences to be more interested in the story's mediation than the initial incident itself.

Switching our attention back to *Hard Facts*'s first broadcast, we note that Wight's guest, Robinson, also appeared frequently on RT to discuss the Skripal poisonings. It is plausible that

Robinson was a particularly valuable commentator for both RT and Sputnik given that he occupied a senior post at a well-regarded British university and therefore somewhat countered the image of their maverick commentators with either no credentials or dubious credentials. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given Robinson's academic interest in media, conflict and propaganda as well as his bent for conspiratorial speculation, his presence proliferated across Sputnik's shows during the Salisbury affair's peak coverage; he also appeared on *Fault Lines* and *Loud and Clear*.

As is characteristic of Wight's Sputnik broadcasts, he provides an extended introductory statement, in this case six minutes out of 29, against the backdrop of dramatic radio jingle, which acts as a small slice of entertainment designed to set the scene for the programme's discussion. As Wight's protracted introduction signals, history, in particular war, was a particularly dominant frame for the discussion of the Salisbury poisonings:

So why try to assassinate him and why now? If it was Russia, i.e., if the Russian state were responsible for this crime, I condemn it unreservedly but lest anyone make the mistake of believing that British intelligence are the eternal goodies and their Russian counterparts the eternal baddies in the mannequin world depicted by what is a vocal coterie of British jingoists. Unfortunately for them, some of us know better ... This deranged anti-Russia hysteria bears all the hallmarks of the hysteria that was whipped up in Britain and throughout Europe in advance of the First World War in 1914 ... People may say well what are you waffling about? No one is talking about going to war with Russia. Well, no one? was talking about going to war with Germany or Austria- Hungary in 1914 either when Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated ... history is a signpost, as of now, I must tell you, it is pointing us in the direction of catastrophe. (*Hard Facts*, 2018a)

Wight frames the Skripal affair in terms of supposed historical parallels: past "heinous" crimes of British intelligence and government during the rule of the British Empire; and propaganda efforts unleashed by British and European states on the eve of World War One. We witness the mirroring technique in full force here. On the very same day of the *Hard Facts* broadcast on the Salisbury poisonings, then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson declared in an article written for the *Washington Post*, "A tranquil medieval city has witnessed the first offensive use of a nerve agent in Europe since World War II" (Johnson, 2018).

Thus, both Russian and British populist-minded actors such as Johnson and Wight immediately evoke war to frame the attempted assassination of the Skripals. Indeed, war became a particularly prominent frame for the Salisbury affair in both Russian and British official discourse. What is more, in his latest publication: *This is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality*, Pomerantsev (2019) now concedes that disinformation is far from exclusive to Russia. What he terms “soft facts”, “pop-up populists” and “censorship through noise” are now ubiquitous, from Putin’s Russia to Duterte’s Philippines to the mediation of Brexit in the UK and Trump’s media techniques (p. 7). This leads Pomerantsev to conclude that there is now notable convergence between mainstream information strategies in Russia and the West.

Pomerantsev’s newly revised thesis is significant as it breaks with his former argument that misinformation strategies were inherently Russian in origin and character. Conversely, under the new Pomerantsev view, current Western and Russian media campaigns are reflective of a wider global trend in which long-established notions of truth, reality and perception are being challenged. Wight and Johnson’s media-driven anachronistic evocations of history seem to substantiate Pomerantsev’s arguments.

Despite the seemingly logical connection between Sputnik’s mediation of the Skripal affair and Pomerantsev’s thesis, political economist William Davies (2018; 2019) and media researcher Reece Peck (2019) have recently challenged the notion that the world has been only recently swamped by populist misinformation, fake news and post-truth realities. In his books *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World* and *Nervous State: Democracy and the Decline of Reason*, Davies posits that reason and logic have lost their potency in liberal democracies and have been usurped by emotions: fear and anxiety (2018; 2019). Mapping four centuries of intellectual history, Davies argues that inequality amongst other factors has steadily led to the displacement of fact by emotions. This gradual shift, he contends, has paved the way for a new fractious and divisive politics, or what many now call populism, and created “nervous states”. By contrast, in his extensive study of American television channel Fox News, Peck (2019)

postulates that the lure of right-wing populism in the US has little to do with misinformation. In actuality, stresses Peck, the success of the American alt-right and Trumpian populism can be attributed to Fox News' credible projection of niche conservative political demands as being popular and universal (2019).

Furthermore, without making it explicit, in his opening statement Wight is alluding to the conspiratorial proposition that Britain could well have carried out the Salisbury poisoning in order to advance its own interests, i.e., to foster an environment of anti-Russian sentiment amongst Western publics. Wight's anachronistic conflation of the historical context of World War One and indeed the entire period of Britain's colonial past with the attempted murders of the Skripals is evidence of Russia's international broadcasting outlets' riding of the current populist wave. To this end, Wight's political evocations of history are called upon to present the adversary as culpable. In the unequivocally populist anti-establishment rhetoric of the present day, Wight pits the people, "some of us who know better", against the corrupt British political classes. Yet again, Wight uses extremely emotive, overblown and hyperbolic vocabulary. Consequently, we might infer that the show's imagined audience is well-informed and familiar with certain episodes in European and global history. In addition to World War One, Wight also frames the core of the podcast's discussion on Salisbury around a more recent political and historical episode involving war, undoubtedly fresher in the minds of audiences: the 2003 invasion of Iraq by American and British forces and the subsequent toppling of Saddam Hussein. These particular historical references were invoked as they both pertain to government attempts to manage and exploit information flows. The first of these refers to a specific practice that was pioneered by the US during the First World War: the creation of government departments with the explicit purpose of manipulating information, which would subsequently be used as a weapon against a political adversary (Tworek, 2019). The second of these, the 2003 Iraq War, aroused suspicion and engendered widespread accusations that then UK Prime



Minister Tony Blair and US President George W. Bush had lied to their respective domestic publics about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.

A mere two days later, on 16 March 2018, Robinson appears on the Washington-produced show, *Loud and Clear* (*Loud and Clear*, 2018a). Like *Hard Facts*, *Loud and Clear* leans towards the podcast style of digital radio, but it also features more customary talk radio, news-reporting and live news cycle styles. As well as being available digitally, Sputnik has access to analogue AM/FM airwaves in the Washington DC area. Having access to the ethnically diverse American capital's airwaves enables Sputnik to target a more specific constituency of radio consumer: a comparatively more progressive demographic. To this end, instead of beginning with prolonged preambles, *Loud and Clear* shows begin with a rundown of the headlines before a subject is selected for more thorough discussion. Likewise, *Loud and Clear* has two presenters, which is more commonplace in traditional radio broadcasting news than with podcasts, which ordinarily only have one, as the focus is not just to enlighten audiences on a certain topic. *Loud and Clear's* hybrid of podcast and news-making varieties is significant as it ultimately determines the form in which topics of high political importance to Russia are presented to external audiences. It is against the backdrop of breaking news, for the most part, that *Loud and Clear* frames its reporting of the Skripal story in terms of a diplomatic conspiracy in which Russia finds itself on the receiving end.<sup>19</sup> That is to say, its coverage is structured around the news item's latest developments: the expulsion of diplomats; the ratcheting up of diplomatic pressure on Russia—or, as it terms it in prototypical Soviet language, “Out of Control Theresa May Calls for European-Wide Witch-Hunt vs Russia”; and further issuing of sanctions (*Loud and Clear*, 2018a).

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<sup>19</sup> For a detailed analysis of the role of conspiracy theories in post-Soviet Russia, see Yablokov, I. (2018). And for the specific character of conspiracy theories in RT's outputs including the Skripal affair see Chatterjee-Doody, P.N. and Yablokov, I. (2021).

Sputnik further appropriated the podcast genre with talk radio in its coverage of the Skripal story. Strikingly, both *Hard Facts* and *Loud and Clear* devote 30 minutes entirely to the positive effect of the Skripal affair on the 2018 Russian presidential election. *Loud and Clear's* broadcast was relayed just before the election, on 17 March 2018, and *Hard Facts's* immediately after, on 21 March 2018. Curiously, their guests for each of these programmes are none other than their RT colleagues George Galloway and Peter Lavelle respectively. It is noteworthy that RT's long-serving journalists Lavelle and Galloway appear on Sputnik to discuss the Skripal story in relationship to the Russian presidential election as this coincided with OFCOM's investigation into RT's possible breaching of due impartiality.<sup>20</sup> Unlike RT, Sputnik was not under official investigation, signifying that Sputnik was acting as Russian international broadcasting's editorial outpost during this period, thus enabling Russia to dodge regulator control of its output. In *Loud and Clear's* broadcast, Lavelle, a long-time resident of Russia who joins Kiriakou and Becker live from Moscow, is called upon to estimate Putin's combined presidencies and the scale of Putin's then-upcoming election victory, which he, similarly to domestic Russian broadcasters, terms "a referendum on the last eighteen years" (*Loud and Clear*, 2018b). Effectively, *Loud and Clear's* Russian election special turns into a blatant Russian state promotion exercise, with Lavelle declaring that the Skripal affair will only further rally the Russian people around Putin, who he claims, "has a lot to be proud of" (*Loud and Clear*, 2018b). As we saw in the previous chapter on Sputnik's coverage of the Russian Revolution's centenary, political abuses and traumatic elements of Soviet history were omitted. Congruently, in the case of the Russian presidential election, issues of democratic malpractices, falsifications and ballot-stuffing are avoided.

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<sup>20</sup> RT was under official investigation by UK government-approved regulatory for broadcasting and telecommunications, OFCOM, between 17 March and 26 April 2018. The investigation concluded that RT shows *CrossTalk*, *News* and *Sputnik* had breached due impartiality on seven occasions. See the full report here <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/media/media-releases/2019/ofcom-fines-rt>

*Hard Facts's* Russian presidential election broadcast is no less partisan than *Loud and Clear's* (*Hard Facts*, 2018b). Astoundingly, Wight frames the discussion of the recording that is available exclusively in digital format around the parallels between Franklin D Roosevelt and Putin, both of whom served four presidential terms in office. Wight's wildly inaccurate and anachronistic comparison between Putin and Roosevelt also signals further evidence of engagement with the historical/political podcast genre, that is to say, taking a news story such as the Skripal affair and extracting a wider discussion from it that spans history and considers larger contexts designed for historically and politically informed audiences, most likely with an interest in left-wing politics. It is apparent from the very first exchange between Galloway and Wight that the pair have a jovial relationship as well as congruent political leanings. Once a Labour Party MP, Galloway was expelled from the party in 2003 for his vociferous opposition to the Iraq War. Positioning himself left of centre and endorsing Jeremy Corbyn for leader, he has remained a thorn in the side of the "establishment" Labour Party. Thus, Galloway and Wight are very much politically aligned.

Following Wight's customary five-minute introduction in which he proclaims that following the Yeltsin years, Putin has "successfully restored Russia's standing as a strong and independent nation internationally, turning it into a country that refuses to accept Washington's right to rule the world," Galloway sycophantically responds, "that was one of the best broadcasting introductions I have ever heard" (*Hard Facts*, 2018b). In sum, the duo frame the Skripal affair in unadulterated Soviet jargon as a "neo-McCarthyistic" conspiratorial plot by the West designed to "whip up" Russophobia and offset the transition of the international order from a unipolar to a multipolar one, which is further centered around the discussion of various "witch-hunts" against dissenting voices on Syria, namely then Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn.

As this section has demonstrated, Sputnik's digital coverage of the Skripal affair was symptomatically bellicose. Sputnik deployed the hybrid forms of the audio medium—genres of

digital radio, podcast and talk radio—in order to frame the larger interstate conflict underlying the Salisbury poisonings. The interaction of talk radio’s older media logics with the newer ones of the digital radio/podcast format were clearly present in *Hard Facts* and *Loud and Clear* coverage of the Salisbury poisonings. This particular hybrid audio media form offered a particularly effective tool through which Sputnik’s journalists could conflate news of the attempted assassination of the Skripals (talk radio) with past historical episodes, namely war, however anachronistically (digital radio/podcast). The inclusion of “experts”, in these instances: resident of Russia (Lavelle); anti-war activist (Galloway); and academic (Robinson), despite their maverick views, is intended to lend greater credibility to the discussions. Furthermore, the language, content and styles of reportage in the recordings on Salisbury suggest that *Hard Facts* and *Loud and Clear* are striving to garner an intellectually curious, left-leaning social stratum with prior knowledge of international relations and history. In the subsequent section, I shall consider another of Sputnik radio’s hybrid audio medium forms, traditional talk radio combined with innovative social media webcam livestream, in representing the Skripal affair to external audiences.

A growing trend in radio broadcasting is that of the livestream webcam. In layman’s terms, this simply means the installation of a camera in a radio studio that captures radio production in action. For well-established radio broadcasters such as LBC and BBC, the placement of web-cameras *in situ* is already common practice. Anti-establishment figures such as Nigel Farage have successfully used the new webcam tool embraced by radio broadcasters to connect physically as well as aurally with audiences and hence advance their political interests and garner public support. The tangible outcome of adding a visual element to the hitherto audio-only medium is that the relationship between presenter and audience alters. To this end, the presenter becomes a face as well as a voice, which ultimately affects the content and journalistic practices. In short, the radio host’s entire demeanor acquires greater prominence. Likewise, many mainstream radio broadcasters also share live webcams of shows in action via social

media platforms, principally Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, as well as their own apps, in order to boost interactivity via comment, like and share. On the one hand the introduction of live webcams speaks to the older logic of radio as principally a live experience. On the other hand, as the webcam livestreams of radio broadcasts remain stored on social media pages after their initial upload, the live experience can be preserved for retrospective listeners/viewers. Despite the technological advances in audio medium logics, webcam and social media, the older logic of talk radio still forms the core structure of these broadcasts. The newer logics are not designed to displace the older form of traditional talk radio, but rather to enhance its capacity for interactivity.

Sputnik is responding to and engaging with these newer logics in radio broadcasting. Of its seven listed official shows, four deploy live webcam streams via social media. However, for the purposes of my analysis on the Skripal affair, I shall concentrate on the Washington DC-produced, thrice weekly *Fault Lines*. Additionally, while it is not listed as an official show, I will include in my analysis the daily roundup of headlines and social media trends, often referred to as *News in Brief*, aired live on Sputnik's digital radio, its US-based AM/FM and on Facebook from Sputnik's Edinburgh hub, presented by its in-house, amateur, mostly young journalists. Significantly, *News in Brief* has its own tagline: "we speak *your* language," connoting a populist tone of attempting to appeal to "ordinary people". *Fault Lines* and *News in Brief* have been selected for analysis as they covered the Skripal affair extensively, but also because of their hybridization of older and newer audio forms in their attempts to stimulate audience engagement. While both UK-produced *News in Brief* and US-produced *Fault Lines* foster the advent of webcam in their broadcasts, they also call upon traditional audio medium logics to increase interactivity: emails and phone-ins.

Strikingly, even as the story broke, *News in Brief* framed it as a top social media tag rather than a news item, indicating that news is depicted by Sputnik as "always already mediated" (Birge and

Chatterje-Doody, 2020, p. 180). This “always already mediated” approach, which Sputnik has in common with RT, serves to divert viewers’ and listeners’ attention away from the original events and incidents that underpin them to their secondary mediation. Typical duration of *News in Brief* shows is either seven or fifteen minutes. Following a super speedy reminder of the world’s top headlines, the first half is spent with a host and two discussants conversing on daily news topics of their choice, while the second half is spent discussing top social media hashtags as well as sharing audience opinions. Sputnik’s Edinburgh-based news team rotates the roles of host and presenter so that no one has a fixed position. The Skripal story did not feature frequently in the 20-second introductory headline, and it is seldom selected as a story for discussion in the show’s first section. *News in Brief*’s packaging of the Skripal story as a social media trend rather than a headline in and of itself has threefold significance. First, it reflects the synonymy of the Skripal story with the broadcast and social media that mediate it, once again underscoring the outlet’s preoccupation with the mediation of news rather than the incidents themselves—an approach it shares with RT. Second, it exemplifies Sputnik’s endeavours to invite global audiences to become co-producers on the Salisbury affair—an example of a disruptive media event—akin to a kind of citizen journalism (Katz and Liebes, 2007; Hepp and Couldry, 2010). Third, it demonstrates Sputnik’s strategic and instrumental use of selective audience members as co-producers on the Salisbury poisonings, which is clearly intended to help keep control of the narrative surrounding the events. Parenthetically, before Simonyan’s (2018) interview with the alleged suspects, many members of the British public were indeed skeptical of the British government’s line as it opted to release evidence in support of its narrative very slowly. Therefore, at this specific stage in the story’s development, Sputnik’s chosen strategy of attempting to use audiences to fill holes in the narrative may have been more fruitful.

For the most part, *News in Brief*’s team punctuates their discussion of the Salisbury affair with audience comments. Typically, the chosen audience comments are extremely conspiratorial. To

cite one illustrative example, on 12 March, one of Sputnik Edinburgh's "very own correspondents", Jordan Brookes, frames the Skripal story around "trending hashtag: #RussiaTeresaMay", which he emphasises "has had a lot of people talking on Twitter, we've had a lot of people get in touch about this one" (*News in Brief*, 2018a):

Jacqui: wow if only BBC news could dig out this much info on this thieving corrupt Tory government has been up to and get it on our screens and loop that promptly?

Hanas: are you the news still leading with this spy story? when a British spy was found folded inside a suitcase. the most our government said at that point was he must have got there himself

Kelly: the behaviour and language over this issue has been appalling, there's been no proof as to who did this

Maud Start (acting host): yeh it certainly is quite the scandal and it's posted all over the screens and the media ... I know that the UK government is guilty of a fair few coverups themselves ... it's a tricky one. (*News in Brief*, 2018a)

Brookes has selected three particularly inflammatory email comments from audiences.

However, we have no way of verifying their authenticity. The fact that the individuals behind the comments are introduced on a first name basis reflects a degree of informality as well as an attempt on the part of Sputnik's Edinburgh reporters to establish a verbal and as well as visual rapport with audiences. It is noteworthy that two out of three of his selections from Jacqui, Hanas and Kelly, refer explicitly to the Salisbury poisonings' media coverage amongst Western outlets, a further example of the reflexive "already always mediated" approach taken by Sputnik. Furthermore, while it is not spelt out explicitly, the host of that day's edition of *News in Brief*, Maud Start, makes comments that point to a possible British conspiracy. The fact that Sputnik's Edinburgh in-house news team structures their questions or statements almost exclusively around audience comments is populist news writ large. Adding to this, Sputnik's approach to audience comments marks a contrast to RT and Channel One's, where tweets by audience members are displayed across the screen in order to show that audiences support their narratives. Perhaps more pertinently, though, it shows how Sputnik is attempting to deploy the radio medium's immediacy and its traditional practice of giving the floor to audiences. Undoubtedly, the act of streaming the shows over social media is intended to further

enhance interactivity. Nonetheless, the data which was gathered by extracting the mean number of daily views, likes and shares from 8 March until 8 October for *News in Brief's* shows from March-July 2018 shows an average of around 1,000 viewers for each of its videos, 43 likes and 7 comments. As such, despite its efforts, Sputnik is not very successful in this enterprise. How do we explain such low levels of audience engagement? Do Sputnik's feeble attempts to promote interactivity point to its role as being purely performative? The discussion of *Fault Lines's* mediation of the Skripal affair below will attempt to shed light on this by considering its hybrid use of new live webcam on social media combined with the age-old practice of live phone-in.

*Fault Lines*, or as it is described by its presenters Lee Stranahan and Garland Nixon, "the most disruptive show in America", also cultivates radio broadcasting's older and newer logics: AM/FM airwaves access as well as the innovation of live webcam via social media sites Facebook and YouTube. *Fault Lines* broadcasts Monday to Friday for a duration of three hours per show, which is a customary scheduling format for the talk radio genre. Overall, *Fault Lines's* substantive coverage of the Salisbury poisonings was very much in line with that of RT in its framing of the story in *cui bono* terms and with Sputnik's in its crude invocation of conspiracy theories and its inclusion of contributors (Robinson, Galloway and Sleboda). Additionally, as with RT, Channel One and the British Tabloid Press, in *Fault Lines* the mirroring technique was in evidence for the entirety of its coverage of in the Salisbury poisonings. The innovation of webcam provided an important tool in reflexive media convergence of which *Fault Lines's* presenters took full advantage. Thanks to the introduction of the visual element in radio broadcasting, Nixon and Stranahan were able to project images of broadcasts and headlines from Western media outlets' reporting on the Skripal story. To cite but a few examples in the story's development, Nixon and Stranahan interlaced their reporting with images of Julija Skripal's official statement aired on BBC on 24 May 2018 (*Fault Lines*, 2018a) following her recovery; the front page of *The New York Times* with CCTV images of the suspects on 6



September 2018 (*Fault Lines*, 2018b); and video footage of the botched RT interview with Simonyan questioning Boshirov and Petrov on 13 September 2018 (*Fault Lines*, 2018c).

Thus, the innovative introduction of the webcam device was instrumental in the implementation of reflexive media centrality for *Fault Lines*'s broadcasting on the Salisbury poisonings. "Reflexive media centrality" (Hutchings and Miazhevich, 2009) connotes a reporting technique whereby a news item is framed in terms of its representation by other media outlets rather than the actual events that underpin it. Indeed, reflexive media centrality is a widely used reporting style for "alternative media" outlets. Going back to *Fault Lines* and its mediation of the Skripal affair, it is especially significant that the hybrid concurrence of older and newer media logics, or in this case, the introduction of a visual element in radio broadcasting, reflects a wider erosion of the once stark delineation between audio and visual.

Returning resolutely to the question of how rather than what, we see that *Fault Lines*'s journalists deployed a different combination of hybrid audio media logics than those of *News in Brief*. Rather than using an email-in format along with its webcam livestreaming over social media (Facebook, YouTube and Twitter), *Fault Lines* opted for an even more traditional talk radio tool in its coverage of the Skripal affair: the radio phone-in. Ostensibly, *Fault Lines*'s use of the phone-in format is designed to increase audience participation. Hence, once again we observe Sputnik's distinctive strategy of using audiences as co-producers to control the narrative during a disruptive media event that presents major challenges to the official Russian line.

That *Fault Lines* embraces the phone-in tool acquires greater resonance when we recall the fact that Sputnik's US-based shows have access to local audiences by AM/FM airwaves in the Washington DC area. Access to radio's older transmission networks would be likely to enable Sputnik's American-produced shows to reach a particularly important constituent of radio

listeners: drivers. AM/FM transmission notwithstanding, there is an additional layer to *Fault Lines's* use of the phone-in: it is also intended to promote citizen journalism. Incidentally, Stranahan, *Fault Lines's* presenter in “the right corner”, then a self-proclaimed Republican populist (he has since withdrawn his support for the Republican Party) and former protégé of far-right reporter, Andrew Breitbart, is not only a champion of citizen journalism, but also runs and sells courses to the general public on it via his Citizen Journalism School.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, *Fault Lines's* strong emphasis on citizen journalism implies that Stranahan has considerable editorial freedom over the show’s production process. Once again then, the Information War model that presents Russia’s international broadcasting operations as entirely top-down structures, seems to miss the complexity arising from the fact that Russian international broadcasters must respond to the specificities of the global media environment beyond their own and the Kremlin’s control.

Yet *Fault Lines's* endeavours to attract more conventional swathes of the American public via phone-ins and simultaneously promote citizen journalism seem to have little success. *Fault Lines's* phone-ins in its reportage of the Salisbury affair seem to engage very few Americans and to entice very few would-be citizen journalists. In fact, the very few telephone calls from audiences that Stranahan and Nixon receive during their shows that cover the Skripal poisonings are made in connection to other topics. One of these audience phone calls is made by supposedly “regular caller Louise” in connection to far-right reporter Alex Jones and Syria on 6 September 2019, shortly after the suspects’ portraits and names have been released (*Fault Lines*, 2018c). The second call, which is of greater significance for the purposes of our analysis, is made in connection to a health topic. On 24 May, which coincidentally is the day the day Juliya Skripal made her official statement on the BBC following her recovery, Nixon and Strahan are joined by Dr Annette Bosworth, an “internal medical physician” who they refer to affectionately

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<sup>21</sup> See <https://citizenjournalismschool.com> for Stranahan’s online courses in citizen journalism. (Accessed: 21 August 2019).

as “Dr Boz”. In reality this is neither Dr Bosworth’s first nor last appearance on *Fault Lines*; she appeared on numerous occasions throughout 2018 to discuss a wide range of health and lifestyle topics.

However, on this particular occasion—which coincides with a key development in the Skripal story—she appears rather bizarrely, to extol the virtues of taking vitamin D supplements. While this digression in *Fault Lines*’s reporting on the Skripals to health matters may seem extraneous, it is in actual fact of great significance for understanding Sputnik’s editorial and agenda-setting processes. If we return to Stranahan’s personal interests and pursuits, the rationale for Dr Bosworth’s multiple appearances on *Fault Lines* quickly becomes apparent. Strahan suffers from diabetes and is an ardent proponent of the keto diet (Twitter, 2017). Incidentally, Dr Bosworth is famous for having written a book detailing how her mother survived cancer thanks to this very diet (Bosworth, 2018). On the basis of this book, she made a guest appearance for *Fault Lines* in January 2018 (*Fault Lines*, 2018d). Strikingly, health and lifestyle topics are archetypal themes for conventional daytime talk radio, perhaps suggesting that *Fault Lines*’s journalists are attuned to market considerations and perceive their audiences as traditional daytime talk radio listeners: retirees, homemakers and, crucially, drivers.

Once more though, we see how *Fault Lines* journalists’ personal interests and agendas shape the production process of their radio broadcasts even when topics of such profound importance to Russia’s national security and soft power image—such as the attempted Skripal murders—are at stake. Therefore, it is reasonable to surmise that Sputnik’s journalists have sufficient agency over their editorial processes, further belying Information War accounts of Russia’s international broadcasting as uniform and coordinated.

In addition to receiving very few phone calls, *Fault Lines* audience participation via Twitter and Facebook is negligible. Its Facebook and Twitter webcam streams on Salisbury attracted a daily

average of 1,300 views, 12 comments and seven shares. As previously stated, radio production can now be streamed live over Facebook and Twitter and YouTube. However, Nixon and Stranahan use YouTube purely as a post-production sharing platform for their shows on Salisbury. The *Fault Lines* production team retrospectively uploads webcam recordings of its radio production in action and breaks them up into digestible clips from their lengthy programmes. Each YouTube clip lasts approximately 20 minutes and is uploaded onto the show's YouTube channel, Fault Lines Radio (*Fault Lines*, 2021).

Titles and headlines on the Salisbury coverage were typically provocative: on 10 April 2018, "Headlines + Skripal Story Skepticism" (*Fault Lines*, 2018e); on 19 April, "Headlines + Is Yulia Skripal a political prisoner? #FreeYuliaSkripal #FaultLines" (*Fault Lines*, 2018f); on 11 June, "A Rush to Blame #Russia: The #Skripal and #Babchenko Sagas | Guest: Mark Sleboda" (*Fault Lines*, 2018g); on 9 July, "Headlines + UK #Novichok Madness & Taking Your Calls NOW @ 202-521-1320!" (*Fault Lines*, 2018h); on 24 July, "Is the Jig Up with Russia-Related #FakeNews?" (*Fault Lines*, 2018i); and on 13 September 2018, "Headlines: Hurricane Update, California Gunman, Skripal Shocker" (*Fault Lines*, 2018j). However, *Fault Lines*'s efforts to attract audiences on YouTube yield even poorer results than their live webcam streams on Twitter and Facebook. Their YouTube page has a mere 4,300 subscribers and the average number of views per clip on the Skripal affair was 42, with two thumbs up and zero thumbs down. These are not the kind of figures that one would expect from one of the main programmes of a major international broadcaster.

Thus, as this section has shown, radio's flexibility, adaptability, immediacy and intimacy coupled with recent technological advantages present potential opportunities for Sputnik to invite audiences to become co-producers on the Salisbury poisonings. Once again, it has demonstrated that calling upon audiences to become co-producers was the main instrument in Sputnik's toolkit in attempting to control the narrative during a disruptive media event. However, as we

have seen, Sputnik's audience engagement efforts are largely in vain, whether in the hybrid form of *News in Brief's* amateur internet radio station for the young or *Fault Lines's* fusing of webcam livestream with phone-in formats. So, what does Sputnik's meagre capacity for audience engagement tell us about the outlet's place in Russia's wider international broadcasting strategy? In part, one can put Sputnik's low audience engagement down to its belligerent and crude journalistic practices. Therefore, this begs the question of why the Russian government should continue to sponsor Sputnik given its feeble attempts to attract audiences? There appears to be a threefold answer to this question. First, radio production is not costly, especially when compared with television. Second, in the hyper-networked global media environment, Russian political and media elites see the presence of a larger international broadcasting network, particularly when broadcast in the English language, as a prerequisite of great power status. Third and foremost, Sputnik's desired function seems to point to that of *agent provocateur*, which is designed to spark statements of outrage and thus keep Russia at the centre of the international public agenda.

Despite *Fault Lines's* ineffectual effort to motivate and galvanise audiences in its Salisbury coverage, Nixon and Stranahan did manage to cultivate one instance of citizen and regional or local journalism. On 24 July 2018, Nixon and Stranahan are joined via telephone by local Salisbury resident Gracie Slater (*Fault Lines*, 2018k). However, rather than being one of Sputnik's listeners, Slater apparently met Stranahan (per Stranahan's claim) during a trip to England when Stranahan decided to go to Salisbury to "do some journalism" (*Fault Lines*, 2018k). Slater is an "ordinary citizen" and purportedly the manager of Salisbury's Café Nero branch. Slater purports to have known Charlie Rowley, Dawn Sturgess (who died a few weeks before Slater's appearance on Sputnik) and even the Skripals.

Undoubtedly, the fact that Slater is "on the ground" is intended to lend greater credibility to *Fault Lines's* reporting on the story. When asked by Stranahan, "What do people in Salisbury

think? Do they believe the official government story? What do they think?” Slater’s response is that the locals are indeed skeptical and find the British line “too convenient, suspicious and too drastic to be true”, although that, perhaps inadvertently, amounts to an echoing of the official Russian narrative (Sputnik 2018p). Further to questioning the UK approach to the Skripal affair, Slater stresses the lack of transparency from the local Wiltshire law enforcement and other local power structures, declaring that “they are not making any effort to reach out to people out here and actually help them with even their business, we are losing a lot of sales because of the lack of tourism in Salisbury at the moment ... it’s just crazy really” (*Fault Lines*, 2018k). Slater’s comments do express what were genuine concerns of both Salisbury and Amesbury’s populations about the fact that they were being kept in the dark as to what was happening. Yet, Slater’s appearance on Sputnik as well as her framing of the story still seems contrived and as though it has been included solely in order to further the network’s wider narrative concerning the reluctance of the British security organs to divulge information. Interestingly, Slater’s framing of the Salisbury poisoning also reflects the archetypal populist “us” vs. “them” narrative. In other words, it is ordinary citizens who have suffered economically and psychologically at the hands of British intelligence and law enforcement structures. Whilst the purpose of including interviews from citizens of Salisbury (from the likes of Slater) was clearly meant to strengthen the integrity of *Fault Lines*’s reporting on the Skripal affair, it has a staged and unconvincing quality. The following section comparing Sputnik’s English and Russian language editorial approaches to RT’s botched interview will aim to throw further light on how Sputnik uses audiences as co-producers on the Salisbury poisonings in order to try to control the narrative.

### **RT’s Botched Interview: Divergent Approaches**

In the first six months after the story broke in March 2018, the Skripal affair crystallised the media’s growing prominence in negotiating interstate conflict. Fast-forward to 13 September 2018, however, and the inextricability of the Skripal affair from the broadcasts that mediated it

became abundantly clear. On this autumn day, RT broadcast an “exclusive interview” with the two alleged suspects, “Ruslan Boshirov” and “Alexander Petrov” (RT, 2018). In the interview, they are “questioned” by RT editor-in-chief Margarita Simonyan (RT, 2018). Boshirov and Petrov’s highly dubious account that they were tourists visiting Salisbury twice in two days for a period of 60 minutes to marvel at the cathedral’s 123-metre spire spectacularly backfired, with the pair becoming the butt of many jokes in both English and Russian language internet communities. RT’s editorial reaction to the interview’s failure was simply to not cover it in its television broadcasts, whilst allotting a smattering of coverage to the fallout on its webpages. Russia’s humiliation was only amplified when Boshirov and Petrov’s true identities—decorated GRU agents—were disclosed by the Russian open source and investigative analytic source *The Insider* and published in English via UK-based investigative and fact-checking web platform Bellingcat (2018a; 2018b). Yet, before RT’s colossal blunder and miscalculation, as Tolz *et al.*’s (2020) analysis of engagement with 60 YouTube videos on the Skripal case has demonstrated, RT’s English-speaking audiences appeared to be relatively receptive to the official Russian line. Simply put, some of RT’s audiences found narratives that denied Russia’s involvement to be perfectly plausible (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley, 2018). Despite RT’s initial success in reassuring Russian and English-speaking audiences of Russia’s innocence, Simonyan’s “interrogation” of the suspects reversed this. As a result, many of RT’s Russian and English language audiences turned against the broadcaster. What was Sputnik’s editorial reaction to the interview? And how did it compare across its US-, UK- and Russia-based radio broadcast platforms?

As this section will demonstrate, Sputnik US and UK and its Russian language services adopted different editorial approaches to the Simonyan RT interview with the suspects. Sputnik UK’s Edinburgh-based news team was extremely hesitant to discuss the fallout from the botched RT interview. In fact, on 13 September, *News in Brief* journalists on duty Maud Start and Craig Johnston devote all but one minute of their 15-minute show to the RT interview (*News in Brief*,

2018b). As ever, the Skripal story features in the social media trend section of the show. In addition, Johnston's mention of the botched interview is sandwiched between a trivial exchange between the presenters, further signalling their reluctance to discuss its implications:

Tom: the UK government are idiots if they think the public believe the farce of the story they've been peddling

Charles: so the whole UK investigation was simply about finding some Russians that happened to be in Salisbury that day

Harry: Yeh they looked so nervous in the interview but what does that actually show us? I guess normal civilians in their position would be rather nervous too. (*News in Brief*, 2018b)

True to form, the *News in Brief* presenter simply reads out the email responses to the interview, which is yet further evidence of using audiences as co-producers during a disruptive media event, a practice that is not so pronounced on RT, let alone state-aligned domestic Russian television broadcasts. *News in Brief's* journalists provide no further comment on these responses, which seem unlikely to be representative of audience reactions in general, especially given the fact that the overwhelming majority of viewers of RT's YouTube channels (both in Russian and English) found the interviewees' claims ridiculous and expressed criticism towards Russia and RT, not the UK. Hence, it is probable that Sputnik simply selected a few comments that suited the international broadcaster's purpose but which were not representative. Johnston and Start's unwillingness to delve further into Simonyan and RT's editorial blunder strongly suggests that not only did they personally find the interview with the suspects unconvincing, but they also expected their audiences to. In spite of this, *News in Brief* did briefly mention the exposé of the true identity of one of the Salisbury suspects, Anatoly Chepiga, by Bellingcat on 27 September 2018 (*News in Brief*, 2018c). But once again, there was no comment or analysis or even, on this occasion, audience comments. While RT covered the disclosure of Chepiga's identity in its web articles, Channel One made no mention of it whatsoever. This inconsistency shows that Russian state-sponsored broadcasting operation distinguished between Russian domestic audiences and international ones who they perceive as being better informed.



By comparison, Sputnik's US-based shows *Fault Lines* and *Loud and Clear* allotted the unfortunate exposé prime importance in its shows, with the presenters attempting to save face by emphasising the supposedly sceptical stance adopted by Simonyan in her questioning of the suspects. For *Loud and Clear*, the process of defending the interview's integrity was marked by playing dubbed extracts of the interview while Brian Becker and Kiriakou stressed the sceptical stance adopted by Simonyan in their 13 September episode entitled "Strange Skripal Case Becomes Stranger Still" (*Loud and Clear*, 2018c).

Kiriakou and Becker, along with regular guests Alexander Duran and Jim Kavanaugh, dissect the interview and the suspects' words, agreeing for the most part that Boshirov and Petrov do not seem like professional intelligence operatives. Coming from Kiriakou, a former CIA agent, this analysis ought to have some plausibility. Nonetheless, Kavanaugh's assertion that the interview "won't persuade anyone" amounts to an acceptance by the show of the interview's abysmal failure (*Loud and Clear*, 2018c). Thus, *Loud and Clear's* coverage of the interview attempts to achieve two incompatible things simultaneously: to question the validity of the suspects' identifications but ultimately admit that Russia's denial of culpability has become unconvincing.

*Fault Lines* goes a step further in its coverage of the Simonyan interview. While also opting to play excerpts of the interview, the *Fault Lines* team does not choose to scrutinise it critically. Despite the fact that Nixon and Stranahan do not rule out the possibility that the two men could be GRU agents, the interview fails to alter their sceptical stance towards the official British line. Deploying a characteristically mocking and ironic tone, the pair joke that were this a British soap opera, "one of the suspects would propose to Julija Skripal and the other would be in love with Sergei Skripal" (*Fault Lines*, 2018j). Nixon and Garland's capitulation to humour in this instance is a mirroring of the jeering homophobic reactions of commenters on RT's YouTube channel and indeed of Russian internet communities to the Simonyan interview. Strikingly though, the pair end their coverage of the Skripal affair on 14 September with speculation as to

why the Skripals had turned off the GPS function on their mobile phones for a period of four hours on the day they were poisoned (*Fault Lines*, 2018).

Finally, in a special broadcast that aired on 13 September on Sputnik's Russian language arm, presenter Diana Goršečnikova discusses the RT interview with guest Bogdan Bezpal'ko, a member of the President of Russia's Council for International Relations. Bezpal'ko contends that the suspects cannot be GRU agents given their lack of professionalism and inability to remain undercover. Rather than professional GRU agents, he claims that "they are more like a gay couple or some lads who went to blow off some steam" (*Special'nyj vypusk*, 2018). Once again, Bezpal'ko's high status within the Russian establishment is designed to lend credibility to this assertion. Rather extraordinarily, though, instead of simply accepting his claims about the suspects' innocence, Goršečnikova probes his every claim, highlighting certain holes in the narrative and in the interview: how they do not look like tourists who would visit a British cathedral town, how they got Simonyan's phone number etc. Goršečnikova concludes that the interview has raised more questions than it has answered. Her decision to cross-examine her guest's assertions is extremely significant as it exhibits a degree of scepticism towards the official Russian narrative on the one hand and an attempt to signpost herself as a professional journalist on the other. The fact that this particular broadcast has since been removed by Sputnik strongly suggests that either it garnered disparaging audience interactions, or that its Russian language editors and producers decided it was an embarrassment.

But how do we explain these divergent approaches? On the one hand, these editorial discrepancies imply that Sputnik's presenters had some degree of journalistic agency in covering the humiliating interview's fallout and thus belie scholarly assessments of Russia's international broadcasting as a monolithic structure (Tolz *et. al.*, 2020). On the other hand, the divergence exhibits further evidence of Sputnik's tailoring to different national publics and even suggests that the network has an awareness of what will "wash" with certain audiences and is

consequently attuned to market considerations even when reporting on issues of central importance to Russia's security. Similarly, it also shows that the network and its journalists *do* care about credibility. Equally, Sputnik UK's omission of Simonyan's interview versus Sputnik US and Russia's recognition of the scepticism it engendered amongst audiences, conflated with feeble and valiant efforts to defend its integrity, all have loftier implications. Fundamentally, these reactions to the failed interview underscore the challenges posed to non-democratic regimes by the hyper-networked global media environment in controlling information flows (Birge and Chatterje-Doody, 2020; Tolz *et. al.*, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

As the chapter's analysis of Sputnik's radio broadcasts of the Skripal affair has shown, the bulk of its content closely resembled the *cui bono* frames and conspiratorial narratives present in RT's content, usually in the form of reflexive media centrality or mirroring. Nonetheless, if for RT's coverage the task of narrative speculation was left to its guests, then for Sputnik's it was readily accepted by some of the outlet's journalists, who openly dabbled in wild speculation as to *whodunnit?* Most tellingly of all, though, it was Sputnik's audiences, rather than on-air guests, who were left to fill in the gaps as to what had transpired in the cathedral town in early March 2018.

As the chapter has demonstrated, Sputnik deployed the very distinct technique of trying to control the narrative during a disrupt media event by turning sympathetic audience members into co-producers. Sputnik's hybrid audio media formats seem to offer the perfect means by which to execute its chosen strategy. So long as Russia's official line has a modicum of plausibility, this approach is possible to maintain, but once the plausibility evaporates, the approach fails spectacularly. Yet, even at the juncture when the official Russian line appeared to have more credibility, the fact that Sputnik's active and passive audience numbers are so

meagre shows that forfeiting rigorous journalistic practice for the sake of audience empowerment is not a successful strategy.

These findings challenge some of the main tenets in the Information War discourse, namely the propositions that Russia's communication strategy is top-down, centralised, and has significant "impact" on its audiences. What is more, the differing editorial approaches adopted by RT and Sputnik to the Simonyan interview and its backlash are of great significance for the purposes of my examination of the effectiveness and coordination of Russia's international broadcasting strategy. This finding suggests that the narrative about tightly and centrally choreographed Russian disinformation campaigns—with the same disinformation being simultaneously distributed across multiple media outlets and platforms—does not capture the whole story. Above all, the fact that Sputnik, RT and even Pervyyj Kanal, which ceased coverage of the Skripal story on the day of the infamous interview, did not fully coordinate their output around the interview, tells us much about the limits of centre-driven coordination.

## Chapter IV: #RadioFreeAssange – Sputnik as Alt-Media

### Introduction

On 11 April 2019, images of WikiLeaks founder and former editor-in-chief Julian Assange being forcefully ejected from the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and hurled into a Metropolitan Police van went viral. Assange had taken up residence in Ecuador's London embassy seven years earlier (2012), having lost a legal case against extradition to Sweden where two women had accused him of rape. The WikiLeaks founder sought political asylum from Ecuador, fearing that the US would begin extradition proceedings against him on espionage charges. From his confines in the Embassy, Assange became a central interlocutor in the "Russiagate" debacle, or the ensuing controversy surrounding the 2016 US presidential election amidst claims that Russia had tried to influence the outcome. During the last three months of the 2016 US election campaign, WikiLeaks disseminated troves of private emails on its web platform from the inner workings of the then incumbent Democratic Party that pointed to endemic bias (Democratic National Committee Leaks, July 2016) and corruption within the Democratic Party ranks (Podesta Email Leaks, October 2016) (WikiLeaks 2016a; WikiLeaks 2016b). In the years preceding the 2016 US elections, the Russian state had earned a reputation for aiding and abetting Western whistleblowers—regarded as criminals by the then presiding Obama administration—when in 2012 it gave Assange a broadcasting platform on RT in the form of *World Tomorrow* and a year later granted former National Security Agency employee Edward Snowden political asylum. Shortly after the DNC and Podesta revelations of 2016, allegations surfaced among Western political and mainstream media elites of a WikiLeaks-Russia conspiracy. (Chozick, 2016; Sanger and Perlroth, 2016). The crux of such accusations was that Russian intelligence services were behind the data breaches that formed the material of the WikiLeaks "dump" and that these were part of a larger intrigue to help secure the victory of Republican nominee Donald Trump over his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton and hence advance both Russia's strategic interests and Assange's personal ones. But how did Russia's

international broadcasting operation respond to the arrest of one of its former presenters? How did Sputnik, to which Assange has no personal connection, attempt to appropriate debates surrounding transparency and information flows?

The purpose of this chapter is to throw light on Sputnik's place within the global media ecology (RQ3) by analysing how it constructs its identity and establishes its authority as an "alternative" media outlet in its coverage of Assange's arrest and ongoing legal battles. Amid the emergence of online media and declining trust in mainstream democratic Western institutions, there has been a proliferation of "hyperpartisan" news providers such as Newsmax and Fox in the US, which position themselves as "alt-media". Assange's detention offers a particularly instructive case study through which to gauge how Sputnik inserts itself into and adapts to the global "alt-media" ecology whilst projecting a key Russian state narrative pertaining to Western hypocrisy in relation to the issue of media freedom.

The chapter will argue that Sputnik's self-identification as an "alternative" media outlet is in line with those of Western tabloids and the Fox News model. Using "alternativeness" as a conceptual tool, the chapter shows that Sputnik endeavours to establish its authority under a libertarian umbrella. It does so with a particular—though not exclusive—emphasis on freedoms related to information and communication, to which the Assange case is of pivotal importance. This allows Sputnik to represent Western states and their institutions, including the mainstream media, as corrupt and curtailing the liberties of individual citizens. In principle, the libertarian banner has the capacity to appeal to wide-ranging audiences of left and right inclinations such that Sputnik's editorial line remains intact. However, as the empirical evidence presented in this chapter will reveal, Sputnik's predisposition towards extreme reporting makes it problematic for the outlet to command journalistic authority. Finally, the chapter aims to contribute to scholarly discussions on the conceptualisation of "alternative" media by questioning the validity of alt-media as a theoretical tool.

In recent years, the global media environment has become ever more saturated with complex, often transnational information networks as an array of media platforms has come to proliferate in the wake of web 2.0. This development has been accompanied by a trend towards questioning rationalist legacies, including notions of scientific objectivity, expertise and neutrality (Davies, 2018; 2019). One tangible result of this phenomenon has been growing scepticism about official channels of information as represented by the legacy media, as well as the rise in audiences for new “alternative” ones (Birge and Chatterje-Doody, 2020). Russia’s international broadcasting operation has certainly attempted to capitalise upon this shift. In the context of the digital news era, new questions have arisen surrounding the notion of journalistic authority.

But what do we mean by the term “alternative” media? And how is journalistic authority integral to it? “Alternative media” connotes news outlets that actively position themselves in “corrective” opposition to their mainstream media counterparts (Harcup, 2005). But alternative to *what* exactly? As currently conceived, alternative media (alt-media) tends to evoke a newish trend in news-making that increasingly: rebukes traditional Western journalism’s mantra of objective fact-reporting; derides what it perceives as the mainstream’s deliberate neglect of undesirable content; denounces “corporate media” as corrupt; and decries legacy news media’s authority to report accurately and fairly. Indeed, Sputnik’s mantra of “telling the untold” speaks directly to these alt-media tropes. Yet, as many media scholars acknowledge, when it comes to reporting styles, genres, formats, contributors etc. there is much convergence between these the continually shifting poles of the mainstream and its alternative that coexist in many hybrid forms and are far from binary opposites (Atton, 2015; Chadwick, 2016; Holt, Ustad Figenschou and Frischlich, 2019; Rae, 2020; Waisbord, 2012). Thus, for the purposes of our analysis, the concepts of mainstream versus alternative have twofold application. On the one hand, they are terms of practice that media outlets assign to themselves as part of their identities. On the other

hand, they are theoretical tools through which media scholars seek to understand the various journalistic and editorial practices of news outlets. The chapter seeks to establish which, if either, of these approaches is more fruitful in situating Sputnik within the wider global media ecology.

The concept of “journalistic authority” signifies the right to be listened to (Carlson, 2017, pp. 4-5). Against the backdrop of a digitised media environment abounding with new alternative media outlets, the fundamental question—where does journalism derive its authority from?—has become even more pressing. Authority is arguably the most vital underpinning of journalism, and it is precisely in this domain that alternative media seeks to challenge its mainstream media counterparts (Ustad Figenschou and Ihlebæk, 2019).

In this chapter, I grapple with the following questions. How does Sputnik construct its identity as a media outlet? How does it seek to establish its journalistic authority? Does Sputnik attempt to promote an alternative understanding of authority that would help paint the outlet in a more favourable light? Or rather than seeking to build authority in an affirmative way, does Sputnik merely endeavour to do this in relation to other, Western mainstream media sources? And how successful is it in this enterprise?

The chapter will start with an overview of the literature on alternative media, journalistic authority and the Russia-WikiLeaks nexus. Section two will analyse US-based *Fault Lines*, *Loud and Clear*, *The Critical Hour* and *By Any Means Necessary*'s coverage of the immediate lead-up to Assange's arrest, or the prologue (5 April 2019). Section three will analyse Sputnik's Washington DC studio's adapted special coverage of the breaking news of Assange's expulsion from the embassy and subsequent arrest (11 April 2019). Section four will examine Sputnik's ongoing coverage of the Assange story as he attempts to fight extradition to the US across all of its radio programmes, or the epilogue (July 2019-present). Section five will conclude that



although the libertarian umbrella offers Sputnik a useful means by which to project its identity as alternative outlet, its poor reputation renders its capacity to project journalistic authority problematic. These programmes have been selected for analysis as they provided extensive coverage of the Assange arrest story. Only one of Sputnik's seven regular programmes, UK-based *Shooting the Lip*, provided no coverage of the Assange story whatsoever.

## **Conceptual Framework and Case Study Selection**

This chapter will integrate three areas of scholarly inquiry in the fields of Journalism Studies, Russian Studies and Political Communication: alternative media, journalistic authority and the Russia-WikiLeaks nexus. In so doing, it will demonstrate the peculiarities of alt-media and journalistic authority as they are manifested both in the Russian context and the wider global media environment.

Recent publications in the fields of Media Studies and Political Communication have attempted to shed light on a new digital news-making phenomenon, or an alt-media wave, marked by its iconoclastic content and style. Incidentally, the term alternative media is far from new and has been referred to loosely and inconsistently in media scholarship since the 1980s to describe a plethora of media practices devised by multiple groups and organisations in a number of different contexts using a range of different media (Harcup, 2005). For political communication scholar Maria Rae (2020), it is the wider contemporary political context that has paved the way for alt-media sites such as Breitbart News and the Canary to flourish. But Rae favours the locution "hyperpartisan" media. She argues that this characterisation not only foregrounds the prevailing populist political environment (us versus them) that has engendered the popularity of these news platforms, but also encapsulates their propensity to provide unapologetically partisan and combative reporting, often at the expense of facts, and yet still appropriate many of conventional journalism's practices as well as its financial and hierarchical models (Rae, 2020,

p. 1118). What is more, Rae objects to the term “alternative” on the grounds that it evokes connotations of progressive, democratic and transparent values—and is therefore misleading, since the majority of these news outlets do not adhere to such principles (Rae, 2020, p. 1124).

Rae makes a significant contribution in highlighting the interrelationship between the political, professional and economic aspects of alternative media which essentially reveal areas of commonality between legacy news media and its transgressive counterpart. However, “hyperpartisan” is a very broad, umbrella term that does not tell us much about the specific editorial lines a particular alt-media outlet adopts. This chapter shows that one such line common to a number of alt-right and even left-wing media outlets is the libertarian critique of existing Western democratic institutions and policies.

Yet another term, “citizen media”, has been invoked in academic literature to reflect the latest shifts in digital journalism and media consumption. While “citizen media” is of some pertinence to alternative media practices, the concept’s emphasis pertains to the power relations in information flows. Citizen media platforms, namely those on social media, attempt to promote everyday citizens as legitimate interlocutors on big international new stories. Alternative media outlets like Sputnik endeavour to foster audience participation through instances of citizen journalism; however, the term citizen media only partially represents Sputnik’s larger operation. In fact, according to Mona Baker (2016), citizen media goes far beyond the realm of networks, communications and the information sphere and includes the reclaiming of public space via art and performance (Baker and Blaagaard, 2016). Thus, this term will be of peripheral relevance for the purpose of our analysis on Sputnik’s coverage of whistleblowing practices, even though Assange might want to style himself as a citizen journalist, as he certainly attempted to do when presenting his *World Tomorrow* show on RT.

One ought to stress once again that the characterisations of media as mainstream and alternative have two very different meanings and applications: as a term of self-identification and as an analytical tool. First, they are terms of practice insofar as particular outlets represent themselves as being mainstream or alternative. The former claim to provide (or at least aim for) balanced coverage and impartial news reporting, though in actuality this represents an ideal that has become increasingly skewed and has paved the way for some media actors who position themselves in opposition to this mantra. The latter, who are made up predominantly—but not exclusively—of newer media actors established in the 1990s and 2000s, assert that it is impossible to be completely impartial and non-partisan, yet purport to provide balance. Second, these terms refer to a conceptual framework used by media scholars to explore the journalistic practices and editorial agendas of media outlets. For the purposes of my analysis, this distinction will be of critical importance, since these two applications of mainstream and alternative media will not always converge. To cite one likely scenario, whilst media actors such as Fox News and some tabloid newspapers may self-define as “alternative”, media scholars may well consider their journalistic output to be “hyperpartisan”. Similarly, the convergence in the operational practices of media outlets render the task of conceptualising the mainstream and its alternative increasingly difficult for media scholars and analysts.

Be that as it may, scholars Holt, Ustad Figenschou and Frischlich (2019) have attempted to problematise the alternative media concept by positing a theoretical framework for empirical research by means of which one can measure alternativeness and thereby evaluate alt-media’s self-perception, operation and wider influence. Their framework endorses the concept’s *raison d’être* as a “corrective” to the mainstream but imbues it with non-normative potential inasmuch as it recognises that the extent to which a media outlet is alternative will always depend on its position relative to the mainstream, which in the hybrid media system will always be subject to fluctuation. In this respect, a media outlet’s political predilection, be it right-wing or left-wing, has little or no bearing on its categorisation as alternative. Equally, the scholars argue that there

are different components of a media outlet's operation that could be interpreted as alternative: "micro-level" (content producers, style and format); "meso-level" (publishing routines, editorial values and funding models); and "macro-level" (alternative media's place in the larger media eco-system) (pp. 863-864). Distinguishing these specific elements from one another enables nuanced systematic analysis of a media organisation's alternativeness. Thus, instead of being assigned the classification alternative or not, as the case may be, media organisations can be measured across a continuum of alternativeness. In keeping with this multi-faceted reading of alternative media, we might also remark how in different national media environments the very notion of what is mainstream and consequently alternative could be drastically different to the Western one upon which the majority of the recent scholarship is based. To cite one fitting example, in the Russian media landscape, professional journalists, novice bloggers and political activists have turned to online video platforms to establish an alternative media environment that provides vociferous "corrective" critique on the authority and practices of the predominant state-aligned mainstream. Holt, Ustad Figenschou and Frischlich's (2019) multi-layered approach to conceptualising alternative media will be of substantial value in our analysis of Sputnik's endeavours to project its identity as an alternative media outlet. In considering alternativeness as a conceptual tool, my analysis will prioritise Sputnik's micro-level alternativeness (content, producers, style, format etc.) and meso-level (gatekeeping, agenda-setting and editorial processes). Invoking alternativeness both as a conceptual framework via which to examine Sputnik's journalistic content and practices and as an editorial self-projection mechanism will enable one to draw conclusions about which approach is more revealing in determining the international broadcaster's place in the wider global media ecology.

In addition to offering more nuanced discussions on the nature of alternative media as currently constituted, media scholars have also sought to advance debates surrounding journalistic authority. The term denotes being entitled to an audience. However, legitimacy and knowledge also come into the fore, since journalistic authority is the legitimisation of knowledge that

authorises journalism's right to be listened to. Carlson's (2017) *Journalistic Authority: Legitimizing News in the Digital Era* provides the most thorough exploration of the term to date. Carlson posits a relational theoretical model for grasping the concept. His conclusion is that in the digital era, the politics of journalistic authority plays out amongst a heterogenous set of actors, in which the very foundation of journalism is disputed (Carlson, 2017, p. 26). Carlson's foregrounding of journalistic authority's specificity in the age of web 2.0 has galvanised further publications that have attempted to demonstrate the specific ways in which it is contested. Mark Coddington (2019) shows how increasing aggregation, or the second-hand repurposing of information made possible by social media networks, has led to the erosion of journalistic authority. Norwegian academics Tine Ustad Figenschou and Karoline Ihlaebeak (2019) present an empirical analysis of the ways in which far-right online news sources endeavour to challenge the mainstream's journalistic authority and thereby assert their own across five positions of knowledge: "the insider position"; "the expert position"; "the victim position"; "the citizen position"; and "the activist position" (Haller and Holt, 2018; Ustad Figenschou and Ihlebæk, 2019). These various modes of knowledge intend to challenge the mainstream by questioning its capacity to speak credibly on real life events. The coverage of whistleblowing activity such as WikiLeaks's presents a particularly appropriate case study through which to address this question. At their core, whistleblowing platforms like WikiLeaks challenge the mainstream, which they deem as favouring the interests of the entrenched elite at the expense of "the people". Thus, the so-called alternative to the mainstream frame is central to the identity construction of whistleblowers.

The extant body of literature on WikiLeaks and whistleblowing in the fields of Political Communication, Journalism Studies and International Politics charts their trajectory as well as their influence on a number of fields. These publications evaluate the significance of the WikiLeaks whistleblowing legacy in terms of its enduring impact on activism, journalism and international relations. Although the Russiagate scandal is allotted considerable attention in the

work of Phillip Di Salvo (2020), Mark Fenster (2019), and Stephen Marmura (2018), they frame it chiefly in reference to the politics of Western information flows.

Timely scholarly analyses of Russia's political communication strategy have addressed the WikiLeaks and Russian communication nexus. Public diplomacy expert Pawel Surowiec (2017) sees Russiagate as indicative of Russia's hybridization of soft power. This unique approach, he argues, blends *kompromat*, the dissemination of comprising information deployed for discrediting purposes, with highly tailored media strategies via RT and Sputnik (p. 22). Nevertheless, his account does not deliver any empirical evidence in support of this claim. Michael Orenstein (2019) also understands both Assange's former platform on RT and the Russiagate scandal as emblematic of Russia's waging of hybrid war against the West. Orenstein's thesis is clearly guided by the *a priori* principles of several reports commissioned under the auspices of conservative think tanks that understand Russia's political communication strategy in purely militaristic terms. What is more, political communication scholars Charlotte Wagnsson and Costan Barzanje (2019) and Martin Kragh and Sebastian Asberg (2017) have given scant mention to the WikiLeaks matter in their analyses of Sputnik's narration of Russia's foreign policy initiatives. Wagnsson and Barzanje (2019) have noted the use and potential effectiveness of the Assange legal extradition case in Sputnik's projection of a Russian strategic narrative that presents Sweden as a country in decline. Kragh and Asberg (2017) see the Russian-WikiLeaks connection as evidence of an obfuscation of "active measures" and public diplomacy that in tandem are designed to project Russian geopolitical interests in the Baltic Sea region. Thus, on the one hand the literature on WikiLeaks in Russia's political communication strategy is firmly entrenched in the political discourse of Information War, which—as we have seen in the thesis's preceding chapters—is not a useful conceptual tool with which to approach Russian international broadcasting. Whilst on the other hand, systematic analyses of Sputnik have confined Russia's endorsement of whistleblowing culture to narratives concerning Russian-Swedish relations. There have been no academic studies to date

of RT or Sputnik's coverage of the WikiLeaks story and its implications for the nexus of politics and information and the wider journalistic profession. This chapter's analysis of Sputnik's championing of Assange and whistleblowing culture attempts to make up for these deficits by showing how the outlet endeavours to establish itself as an alternative media outlet and simultaneously challenge the authority of Western democratic journalism.

There is another term that requires qualification and explication, that of "libertarianism".

Libertarianism is a strand of political philosophy that values personal freedoms and choices above all else. In the words of philosophy scholar Eric Mack (2018): "libertarianism is advocacy of individual liberty as the fundamental political norm. An individual's liberty is understood as that individual not being subject to interference by other agents in her doing as she sees fit with her own person and legitimate holdings" (p. 3). As such, libertarianism strongly opposes any impingements on personal liberties by "agents"—i.e., the state and its acting institutions. The libertarian concept is of pertinence to a number of timely topics in Western political discourse, including: climate change; the rights of ethnic minorities; data and personal privacy and information obtainment rights; women's reproductive rights; no-platforming and cancel culture; the question of foreign military intervention; (since the murder of George Floyd) calls to defund the police; and (in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic) anti-lockdown movements. These themes are all recurrent talking points for Sputnik. Crucially though, libertarianism's inherent ambiguity and slipperiness means it escapes the traditional political spectrum and there are left- and right-leaning libertarians, though the latter phenomenon is more common. Accordingly, one can be of any political persuasion whilst simultaneously advocating certain libertarian tenets. Moreover, one can adopt a libertarian stance in certain situations without subscribing to the entire philosophy. Similarly, one may exhibit a libertarian attitude to various areas and not others. Much as one can be conservative with a small c, irrespective of whether one votes for the Conservative Party, so too can one be libertarian with a small l. Thus, for the purposes of our analysis we shall use a lower-case adjective in order to demonstrate that as

with the concepts of alternative media and journalistic authority, libertarian will not be understood categorically, but rather relationally and equivocally.

## Prologue

Julian Assange was arrested by the Metropolitan Police on 11 April 2019 at the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, where he had been ensconced since June 2012, following Ecuadorian president Lenin Moreno's decision to revoke his citizenship (Valencia, 2019). On 4 April 2019, WikiLeaks published a tweet declaring that "a high-level source within the Ecuadorian state" had informed them that Assange's expulsion from the embassy was imminent as a deal had been struck between American, Ecuadorian and UK actors (WikiLeaks, 2019a). This tweet engendered extensive international coverage both from mainstream and alternative media. In this section I shall analyse Sputnik's coverage of the leadup to Assange's detention across US-based *By Any Means Necessary*, *Loud and Clear*, *The Critical Hour* and *Fault Lines*.

Following WikiLeaks's tweet, four of Sputnik's regular programmes warned audiences of Assange's impending arrest. All four programmes aired on Friday, 5 April. Insofar as US-based show *Fault Lines* occupies the morning commuter slot from 7 am to 10 am, it was the first to comment on the tweet. Its 5 April show was entitled 'Is Julian Assange's Arrest Imminent?' (*Fault Lines*, 2019a). *The Critical Hour* and *Loud and Clear*'s programme titles, 'Rumours Abound: Will WikiLeaks Founder Julian Assange Be Extradited to the US?' and 'Attack on Free Press: Expulsion of Assange from Embassy May Be Imminent', aired live during the late afternoon and evening respectively, showed the story's trajectory over the course of the day (*The Critical Hour*, 2019a; *Loud and Clear*, 2019a). While hearsay about Assange's looming arrest was the first topic of discussion for *By Any Means Necessary*, this was not reflected in the programme's title, 'Why Homicides in US Capital are Rapidly Increasing' (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2019a). However, as its name—a quotation uttered in a famous speech by civil rights



activist Malcom X—makes plain, *By Any Means Necessary's* principal motif pertains to the rights of African Americans and in particular the brutality of law enforcement towards this particular stratum of American society.

The shows interpret the alternative genre in their own way, especially when it comes to format and style. Nevertheless, there are some distinctive parallels, especially at the micro-level, between contributors, style and content. As the thesis's previous chapter on the Salisbury poisonings demonstrated, *Fault Lines* merges the older logics of live talk radio with those of webcam livestream via social media. That being said, older media logics are not necessarily associated with mainstream media. While the logics of talk radio that tend to prioritise audience engagement hark back to the 1990s, they were first adopted by lower brow outlets that identified as alternative. Thus, although *Fault Lines* ostensibly resembles talk radio shows from a variety of mainstream platforms, this is actually an example of how various elements of alternative media became absorbed by the mainstream due to their popularity and the potential boosts in advertising revenue.

The *Fault Lines* prologue broadcast began with its customary jingle, "From Washington DC, the capital of the divided states of America, it's time for the show that brings you all sides of the issue that matter. In the left corner, I'm independent political analyst, Garland Nixon. And in the right corner, I'm populist Republican reporter, Lee Stranahan. Welcome to the most disruptive show in the milky way galaxy" (*Fault Lines*, 2019a). Thus, from the get-go, *Fault Lines's* presenters are clearly assuming an alt-media identity whilst denying that this equates to "hyperpartisan" reporting. Instead, echoing alt-media outlet Fox News' "fair and balanced" motto, Nixon and Strahan insinuate that it is mainstream media that are partisan. Despite the show's purporting to reflect different ends of the political spectrum, there appears to be very little disagreement between the two hosts on most subjects, including Assange's status. The show's introductory informal and casual discussion between the two hosts on 5 April 2019

appears to be no exception, with both endorsing the sentiment of far-right journalist and former Sputnik employee Cassandra Fairbanks that “Okay so you want to arrest Assange and Hillary Clinton is not in jail, we’ll remember that” (*Fault Lines*, 2019a). Nixon uses a conspiratorial metaphor to frame Assange’s predicament as evidence of state corruption: “Here we sit now with the people who are crooked getting to walk free and the people that exposed ... you know this guy robs a bank and the guy who told on him for that robbing a bank goes to jail and the bank robber walks off with the money” (*Fault Lines*, 2019a). In this instance Nixon is referring to WikiLeaks’s disclosures of the DNC and Podesta emails during the 2016 US presidential election. His invocation of “crooked” harks back to the 2016 Trump campaign mantra of “crooked Hillary”. This crude over-simplification of the DNC and Podesta email episodes in popular culture terms of robbing a bank exemplifies alt-media’s paradigm of representing the government and attached institutions, including the mainstream media, as corrupt. Indeed, neither host is willing to countenance the prospect that Assange may have had his own incentives in publishing the DNC and Podesta emails during critical junctures of the 2016 US election campaign. It ought not to escape our notice that Stranahan himself was personally involved in this saga, or at least claimed to be. Stranahan is alleged to have been one of the journalists who had been in touch with Guccifer 2.0, the supposed Romanian hacker who the Mueller report later ruled was a front for Russian Intelligence Services during the 2016 election (Sanger, Rutenberg and Lipton, 2018). At that point in time, Stranahan was a reporter at the pro-Trump Breitbart News. Thus, Sputnik is directly borrowing voices of the alt-right media rather than simply modelling itself on it. As such, Stranahan has a personal connection to the 2016 Russiagate affair. The Russiagate episode also forms the wider subject matter of the one audience phone call they receive in this particular episode, from “Mark in North Carolina”:

Yeh, how are you doing guys? Listen, I just want to let you know I’m fed up with Trump completely but we’ve gotta make it clear to him by either calling the White House or tweeting him or whatever else that his presidency is finished, it’s over if he doesn’t do something to free Julian Assange to drop any charges on him and this man is a hero he just deserve to be treated like this ... there’s no excuse for Trump, show some guts show some spine and backbone like he pretended he had when he ran for president if you don’t do that then you’re no better than Hillary. You stink. If you don’t have the guts to stand that to the powers-that-be then you shouldn’t be president. (*Fault Lines*, 2019a)

Mark's tone, register and use of lexicon reflect a degree of familiarity and informality with the hosts, as if he is a regular contributor to the show. The fact that both hosts burst into laughter upon remarking that "Mark has been fed up with Trump for about nine months now" seems to corroborate this (*Fault Lines*, 2019a). *Fault Lines* is harnessing talk radio techniques to invite audience members to become co-producers on the Assange story. Radio phone-ins are in fact an example of the tabloidisation and embrace of populism by legacy media that occurred under the pressure of market forces, often leading to a deterioration of the quality of journalism.

Returning to the call-in in question and the suggestion of anyone phoning the White House or tweeting Trump in order to press him on the Assange affair seems rather preposterous. And the presenters' reaction to the call, punctuated by mocking sniggering, seems to indicate the deliberate use of humour and deflection (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley, 2020). Ultimately, *Fault Lines*'s mingling of news, political discussion and comedic entertainment recalls what Vera Tolz and Yuri Teper (2018) term "agitainment". Tolz and Teper's analysis shows how this soft news-cum-entertainment genre has been deployed by Russian state-aligned broadcasters to discuss highly controversial and divisive topics related to national identity. Russia's two main state-aligned domestic broadcasts, Pervyj Kanal and Rossiya-1, argue Tolz and Teper (2018), follow the Fox News model. Thus, there appears to be a similarity in the self-styling of Russian domestic and international broadcasting as alternative to Western legacy media. This is of salience for our understanding of what constitutes mainstream and alternative media in conceptual terms as the micro-level (content, producers, format and style) and the meso-level (gatekeeping, agenda-setting and editorial processes) in Russia and the West are antithetical.

*Loud and Clear*, *The Critical Hour* and *By Any Means Necessary* frame the rumours of Assange's impending expulsion with greater seriousness, instead stressing the corruption of Ecuadorian President Moreno and musing on what it portends for journalism and freedom of speech. However, while these shows are more akin to the political podcast format, they are all

embedded in the live news cycle to differing degrees. For *Loud and Clear*, in its routine Friday format—“the week in review” after a quick run-through of the day’s headlines—the rumours assumed the form of a discussion between hosts Brian Becker and John Kiriakou and producers Walter Smolarek and Nicole Roussel on the feebleness of the original sexual assault charges brought by the Swedish authorities that were then dropped due to a lack of evidence (*Loud and Clear*, 2019a). The fact that John Kiriakou is himself a famous whistleblower, the first CIA agent to be imprisoned for disclosing details of torture to ABC, tended to lend greater credibility to their criticism of Assange’s treatment. Kiriakou sees no difference between Assange and himself in the “battle for free speech and media to be able to tell the truth” (*Loud and Clear*, 2019a). Indeed, the presence of a former establishment insider turned defector, i.e., whistleblower, is a running thread in alternative media. For Sputnik, Kiriakou’s appointment is potentially effective in and of itself, since it allows Sputnik to discuss the failings of institutions while projecting Russia as a defender of free speech (Birge, 2019). This is yet another example of the mirroring technique that is widely deployed by Russian broadcasters (Hutchings and Miazhevich, 2009). Of course, the very self-representation of alt-media status as redressing the balance of mainstream media is itself a mirroring technique. In this sense, Kiriakou, his co-presenter and the show’s producers used the mirroring technique to deny the authority of the mainstream media as a repository of truth and even basic facts.

In its prologue episode, *The Critical Hour* framed its response to WikiLeaks’s forewarning tweet with reference to narratives of Western hypocrisy and the libertarian theme of informational transparency. In each Friday edition of the show, Dr Wilmer Leon comments on the week’s “most salient news stories” in a panel discussion format. On 5 April 2019, Dr Leon’s panellists were “network friend” (repeat guests), fellow representative of alt-media platform thepolemicist.net and socialist pundit Jim Kavanaugh and RT commentator Caleb Maupin. The Polemicist is an amateur alt-media source that is effectively Kavanaugh’s personal blogspot from where he transmits various radical convictions and falsehoods. Collaborating with fringe

outlets and individuals that are known for perpetuating exposed falsehoods is a practice that long-established Western international broadcasters do not employ. That said, Fox News does do this. Though the panel format is a fairly traditional custom for current affairs topics in broadcast journalism, it is usually used to structure and stimulate debate among those of varying viewpoints. But in the case of *The Critical Hour*, this aspect of the panel format is lost; all of the discussants are of the same opinion on the wider implications of Assange's expulsion from the Embassy:

Dr Leon: The USA holds itself out as being a protector of human rights and if a publisher of information and news cannot be protected particularly in a country with a First Amendment—that is supposed to be as strong as our First Amendment is—this to me is the height of hypocrisy, Caleb.

Caleb: I couldn't agree more I mean this is a country that goes round the world lecturing governments about the need for more transparency about allegedly violating human rights ... and now they want to go out of their way to jail someone from another country and take action against him simply for publishing information that was given to him by other sources ... that's pretty extreme ... there's no way that anyone can look at the case and not see this as a huge threat to the civil liberties especially of people living in the US but also for the freedom of media in the world. It's almost indefensible. At this point we don't know what's going to happen and there are a lot of potential narratives. I urge people not to act as if they know what's going on when they don't have the facts ... but the alarm bells are going off. (*The Critical Hour*, 2019a)

This exchange between Dr Leon and Maupin is emblematic of the general interaction between host and guests, whereby instead of asking a question, Dr Leon makes his own assertive declaration and simply beckons his guest to chime in. By invoking the "First Amendment", Dr Leon is referring to the First Amendment to the United States Constitution of 1971. Given Dr Leon's Political Science background this is perhaps rather predictable. However, it is significant that the aspect of the US Constitution that Dr Leon cites involves the freedoms, choices and rights of individual citizens in the US, including religious as well as freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Thus, for Dr Leon, in addition to signalling the double standards America imposes on non-democratic countries such as Turkey, Iran, China and Russia as far as suppressing free speech is concerned, Assange's impending expulsion and arrest also threaten the very underpinnings of US democracy. Maupin takes this a step further by hyperbolically

asserting that Assange's arrest poses a threat not only to the civil liberties of Americans, but also to the entirety of press freedom.

Finally, for its prologue episode, *By Any Means Necessary* framed the impending detention and presumable extradition of Assange in terms of US imperialism in Latin America and mass incarceration. For this episode, host Sean Blackmon is joined by yet another network friend, Dan Kovalik. The fact that Kovalik is promoted specifically for having written a book called *Plot to Control the World: How the US Spent Billions to Change the Outcomes of Elections Around the World* (2018) provides some indication as to how the conversation regarding Assange's fate may develop. Kovalik attributes Moreno's decision to expel Assange from the Embassy to the venality of US imperialism, which he asserts was probably *quid pro quo*. For Kovalik, Moreno's expected capitulation to the US to offer up Assange is part of a larger effort to "overturn the pink tide", i.e., to stymie the shift towards socialism in Latin America (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2019a). What is more, while *By Any Means Necessary* hosts Blackman and Puryear do discuss news headlines during introductory "talking points", the show tends to be less embedded in the live news cycle than its counterparts. Blackman and Puryear are prominent Black Lives Matter activists. Therefore, to this end, they are able to focus on their prioritised themes of racial and social injustices in America: the excessive brutality exercised by law enforcement towards African Americans as well as their disproportionate incarceration. Once again, we remark the strategy of directly importing the voices of the movements that Sputnik is advocating for, meaning that it merges with alt-media rather than simply modelling itself on them. Of course, though, there is very little in the way of ideological consistency in this strategy given the differences between BLM activities and the alt right. However, the two respective groups do share a mistrust and suspicion towards the state and its attached institutions.

For media scholar Jennifer Rauch (2016), so synonymous are the practices of mainstream and alternative media that the only legitimate means of delineating the mainstream from alternative

media is via its content, that is to say, whether an outlet produces content that is “critical” of the status quo and pushes for “social change” (p. 757). According to this category, it seems that *By Any Means Necessary* conforms to alt-media. In light of the particular issues that this show addresses, it is perhaps unsurprising that in its prologue broadcast which dedicates its first segment to Assange’s upcoming arrest, Blackmon foregrounds the mistreatment of whistleblower Chelsea Manning:

Blackmon: I can’t help to connect this sort of with the broader trend of how whistleblowers are treated in the US. We’ve seen even recently the ongoing punishment of Chelsea Manning who was reincarnated and had been in solitary confinement although there are reports that she has been released from solitary though continues to be incarcerated. It just seems like Washington is once again making the point that it won’t stand for people revealing the darker side of its mechanisations

Kovalik: well, that’s absolutely right and that process really began under Obama you know, and Chelsea Manning was originally held under Obama in conditions that really amount to torture. And people feared, many people feared that she might have died in prison given what she was subjected to. There’s no question that there is a ramping up of criminal and other tactics against people who have blown the whistle. Again, particularly on US misdeeds in foreign policy. (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2019a)

Once again, we observe presenter and interviewee being in total agreement with one another. Manning was the source of WikiLeaks’s most well-known disclosures that were leaked in 2010 and revealed the malpractices of the US Army in Afghanistan and Iraq. The fact that Manning had been held in such harsh conditions engendered global sympathy for the whistleblower.

This section has demonstrated that although Sputnik’s programmes and presenters interpret the alt-media category differently from each other, they are consistent in their self-identification as alt-media. There are also some similarities, namely those on the micro-level of Holt, Ustad Figenschou and Frischlich’s (2019) theoretical framework pertaining to content producers: political activists, representatives from other fringe alternative sources, citizen journalists and network friends. Yet in another aspect of the micro-level pertaining to content and style, the shows exhibited oscillating amounts of radical content as well as varying degrees of embeddedness in the live news cycle/talk radio genre. Equally, at the meso-level, gatekeeping and agenda-setting were also heterogenous and largely at the behest of the individual

presenter. In the next section, which will analyse the breaking news of Assange's arrest, we shall see how the Sputnik brand as a whole endeavours to establish its authority as an alt-media platform.

## **Breaking News**

Sputnik's Washington DC branch altered its usual programming schedule on 11 April 2019 in order to provide extended rolling live coverage of the breaking news of Assange's arrest. Sputnik's US presenters called their special edition *#RadioFreeAssange*. The one-off special aired live in audio form on 105.5 FM and 139.0 AM in the Washington DC local area and in audio-come-video form via Sputnik's Facebook livestream for seven hours from 12 pm – 7 pm Eastern Time. Throughout the seven hours there was a constant rotation of all of Sputnik's US hosts with up to four presenting at any one time. However, as a general rule, one presenter took the helm by chairing the discussion, announcing breaks and introducing the fellow presenters as well as guest callers. Indeed, the modification of a news programme's standard schedule to provide comprehensive coverage on a major developing story is common practice for mainstream media broadcasters. Common practice notwithstanding, the fact that Sputnik's Washington DC studio interrupted its regular timetable underscores how significant the Assange story was for Sputnik and its respective presenters. Moreover, no Western mainstream broadcasters allotted the story such intensive coverage. Although the *#RadioFreeAssange* special was not archived on the Sputnik website, the bulk of the video version is available (the first five hours) on the streaming platform URL [pscp.tv](http://pscp.tv). In this segment, I shall explore Sputnik's special edition coverage of the breaking news story of Assange's arrest in order to gauge how the outlet establishes its authority as an alternative media platform. Observing Sputnik's presenters working collaboratively will tell us much about the Sputnik brand.



The special edition live coverage assumed the form of open discussion between the presenters and guests with open phone lines enabling some participation from members of the public. In form, the special rolling coverage seemed more akin to traditional live talk radio with its more open-ended format and phone-ins than many of the programmes' usual configurations. The content producers were all well-established network friends and consisted primarily of other alt-media figures: Mark Sleboda, Suzie Dawson, Ted Rowell, Max Blumenthal, Joe Laurie, Peter Lavelle, Patrick Henningsen, to name but a few. The rolling coverage framed Assange's detention according to its latent ramifications for First Amendment tropes: freedom of the press and freedom of speech. It also framed his arrest in terms of its implications for some causes that are associated with modern day libertarianism: privacy and data rights, anti-war activism, anti-incarceration and anti-law enforcement movements. These causes are relevant to libertarian politics insofar as they assert the primacy of the rights of individuals over the state institutions that rule, govern and police them. These were for the most part in keeping with the individual causes advocated by each presenter. What is more, Assange himself was presented as a "hero" and even a "martyr" for alternative media factions (*#RadioFreeAssange*, 2019c). Over the course of the special edition, Sputnik's US presenters received phone calls from members of the American public to express their dismay and outrage not only at Assange's detention, but also at the overall treatment of whistleblowers in the US. One caller named Dana from Northern California, was even reduced to tears (*#RadioFreeAssange*, 2019c). Nonetheless, one caller by the name of "Eric" stood out:

Becker: Eric, are you there?

Eric: Yes, I would just like to illustrate a comparison between the Bradley Manning like link between Bradley Manning and Julian Assange and the pathologist who takes down the Theranos company this fraudulent blood testing company Theranos, which was run by Elizabeth Holmes. The internet tells me that the pathologist was from a city called Columbia which was in Missouri. Now the reporter who is responsible for doing the article that essentially destroys the Theranos company was based in New York and

Becker: Ok

Eric: And in Missouri is which is distance apart wise

Becker: Eric, I think you may be taking us into a story that is maybe too complicated.

Maybe too much in the weeds. We have another caller, let's go onto Dana.

Eric: What if Columbia was the country Colombia?

Becker: Hey is Dana there? (*#RadioFreeAssange, 2019c*)

This interaction between *Loud and Clear's* presenter Brian Becker and this caller is significant for several reasons. First, this almost indecipherable conspiratorial thread seems likely to have been a prank. Second, the fact that the presenters Becker, Kiriakou, Blackmon and Dr Leon glanced at one other with bemused expressions just before the camera moves to the images of *The Guardian's* webpage showing Assange's arrest signals that they communicated about the bogus nature of the call and the need to truncate it. Third, Becker's awkward efforts to silence the caller reveal the limits of Sputnik's capacity to effectively marshal the live talk radio genre even when dealing with a major international news story. Fourth, Sputnik's alt-media branding carries certain risks as by merging with figures from the alt-media world, it loses control over the agenda it is promoting; by engaging actively with audiences, it becomes subject to pranks. Finally, whether the call was genuine or not, it ultimately reveals that US Sputnik's presenters are concerned about their professional integrity as well as Sputnik's journalistic authority, or rather, the struggle to elicit it (Tolz *et al.*, 2020).

Moving on from this embarrassing episode, Sputnik's special episode's live discussion was also interlaced with segment reports on particular aspects of the Assange story. These were clearly intended as openings for individual presenters to demonstrate their knowledge of particular aspects of the Assange story and hence to project their journalistic authority. Puryear's segment traced WikiLeaks's rise to prominence from its inception in 2006 by pinpointing its 2010 film *Collateral Murder*, which documented how the US Army had engaged in the indiscriminate killing of not only civilians, but even Reuters journalists (*#RadioFreeAssange, 2019b*). Kiriakou's extended account of his whistleblowing credentials and his own trial in the Eastern District of Virginia, where Assange's case will be heard before the notoriously harsh Judge Leonie Brinkema, were indicative of Sputnik's endeavours to invoke the "victim" and "insider"

positions in establishing its authority (Ustad-Figenshcou and Ihlebæk, 2019). To this end, in principle, Kiriakou's real-life experience would make him a more authoritative and compelling source on the Assange case than mainstream media journalists.

Furthermore, Becker's monologue included a flagrant attack on the mainstream media in relationship to Assange. Becker recounted WikiLeaks's position as an intermediary between the mainstream and alternative media systems and more explicitly the former partnership between Assange, *The Guardian*, *Der Spiegel*, *The New York Times*, *Le Monde* and *El Pais*. It was WikiLeaks's revealing of the misdemeanours of the Democratic Party, namely the 2016 DNC and Podesta leaks, stressed Becker, that "turned the mainstream against Assange" (#RadioFreeAssange, 2019b). Thus, the implication is that conventional media had exploited WikiLeaks's vast wealth of classified information only to betray it once it had exposed secrets that compromised the integrity of the political establishment. Interestingly, the collaboration between WikiLeaks and these major news publications has been cited as an example of the inextricability of the mainstream from its alternative (Kenix, 2011).

Despite their best efforts, however, Sputnik's US presenters' individual attempts to demonstrate their journalistic authority seem not to have paid off. The special episode received very few views. What is more, over the course of the seven-hour extravaganza, Sputnik's digital audiences decreased steadily. Its first hour of special coverage received 1,200 views on its digital platform, 1,000 views in its second hour, 605 views by the third, a slight increase to 627 for its fourth before diminishing to 568 for its fifth hour (#RadioFreeAssange, 2019a, b, c, d, e). These minute numbers of views are not in line with the quantity one would expect from a major international broadcaster and thus clearly indicate that Sputnik commands little authority.

Casting the question of authority momentarily aside, one should remark upon the fact that the special edition also presented a unique opportunity for the presenters to address existential

questions about the role of alternative media. In the special coverage's fifth hour, in conversation with Joe Lauria of *Consortium News*, *Loud and Clear* presenter Becker summarised the dilemmas and challenges faced by the alt-media landscape:

I want to go back to this because we have enough time to have one those rare discussions where we actually talk about the significance of the alternative media. Joe is right, the premier example of alternative media making a difference is WikiLeaks. Joe, you worked for establishment media like the Wall Street journal you're now the editor-in-chief of alternative media, *Consortium News*. Let's just talk about the issue of principles, in terms of the principles of being a reporter or a journalist. A great deal is made out of the fact that good journalism must be based on an objective faculty, a capacity to work within the truth, within a fact-based/evidence-based narrative. And the same time, we also recognise that's there's no such thing as pure objectivity-that people have feelings, they have ideas, they have partisanship. But when you look at the track record of the establishment media and you think again about principles and the principles of being a journalist. The mainstream media made Donald Trump a thing. I mean they gave him all of that free coverage. Two billion dollars of free coverage. CNN did it. MSNBC did it. They did it and they made a lot of money and they did it explicitly to make money. It wasn't about journalism it was about ratings and it was about profits. And then they turned against Donald Trump after he got the Republican nomination and they've spent the last 2.5 years pursuing the Russia-Trump collusion hoax and you can see they made a lot of money. Now it's one thing to have a political viewpoint but here you had mainstream media helping create Donald Trump and then helping to create a conspiracy narrative against Donald Trump. So, there was obviously no principles whatsoever. It was all about money. Just talk about how that sort of temptation for corporate owned media can be resisted more forcefully and faithfully and consistently by alternative media, that's not focused you know on ratings per se, not that we don't want more people to listen to our shows or read our articles. Just talk about that dilemma that paradox and your own compass for that

Joe: The main principles one has to be guided by are to not have a partisan point of view ... non-partisanship is essential, and you cannot be motivated by money  
(#RadioFreeAssange, 2019e)

Becker's declaration is particularly striking as it touches not just on the ideals of alternative media but also the principles of journalism as a whole. That Becker equates establishment media with private US media seems to suggest that public service broadcasters do not fall into this category. Insofar as Becker targets the mercenariness of "corporate media", namely media channels MSNBC and CNN, are we to infer that mainstream public service broadcasters are somehow acceptable? And that Sputnik, funded under the auspices of the Russian government, is a public broadcaster? Moreover, the fact that he includes MSNBC as an example of mainstream media further complicates the task of defining the mainstream and its alternative in

conceptual terms since this outlet is regarded as the left-leaning equivalent to Fox News in media literature.

What is more, it is clear that Becker does see himself as a journalist rather than just a political activist with a media platform. Conversely though, as per Becker's account, objective fact reporting is fundamentally incongruous with a person's capacity to report on a story and so partisanship is deemed justifiable. Thus, from Becker's lengthy statement we might deduce that Sputnik is seen by its presenters as a public broadcaster that challenges the Western mantra of objective fact-based reporting. In terms of self-styling, this presents a specific alternative to Western left-leaning legacy media, couched another way, a public service broadcaster with an alternative editorial slant. Lastly, Becker's admission of the fact that working for an alt-media outlet inevitably means having narrower reach, which implies less journalistic authority, is telling.

This section analysing Sputnik's special edition live rolling coverage of Assange's arrest has demonstrated once again that at the micro-level of content producers, Sputnik yet again constituted alt-media writ large. Contrary to the prologue episode, where the individual presenters had autonomy regarding a secondary set of features also at the micro-level—style, format and embeddedness in news cycle—for the special edition, these were uniformly similar to tabloidesque alternative media practices, that is to say, rolling live coverage with an open phone line format and breaking news updates. Sputnik's Washington DC presenters clearly struggled in this enterprise, which seems attributable to the fact that the Sputnik brand itself garners little authority from audiences. Additionally, by allotting the Assange arrest story such intensive coverage, unparalleled in broadcast mainstream media, Sputnik's special edition fell under an alternative model at the meso-level. In the chapter's subsequent analysis, I will return to Sputnik's conventional programming schedule and seek to understand whether the identified patterns of alternativeness continue.

## Epilogue

A matter of hours after his arrest, Assange appeared in Westminster Magistrates Court where he was found guilty of skipping his bail. On 1 May 2019, Assange was sentenced to 50 weeks in Belmarsh prison. Assange is currently facing extradition to the US where he was indicted by the Eastern District of Virginia on 23 May 2019 on one charge of computer hacking and 17 counts under the Espionage Act of 1917. If Assange is convicted, he faces up to 175 years in prison (Cockburn, 2020). On 4 January 2021, Judge Vanessa Baraitser, who presided over Assange's extradition case, delivered her verdict that Assange should not be extradited to the US, citing suicide risks. However, the US Government appealed the verdict and the official appeal proceedings began on 27 October 2021 at London's high court. On Friday 10 December 2021, Judge Baraitser's ruling that Assange could not be extradited to the US was overturned. However, Assange's legal proceedings are expected to continue for a considerable length of time. In this section, I will analyse Sputnik's ongoing coverage of Assange's plight after the initial publicity the story had generated waned. I shall examine the entirety of Sputnik's radio programmes' coverage from July 2019 to October 2020 in order to further assess how the outlet attempts to cement its authority as an alt-media platform.

Sputnik's ongoing coverage of Assange's incarceration was pegged mainly to further developments in his case, namely: a CNN exclusive report that highlighted Assange's links to Russian hackers in 2016 (July 2019); a further appearance at Westminster Magistrates Court (October 2019); the start of Assange's extradition trial, which was delayed due to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic (February 2020); and the resumption of Assange's extradition trial (September 2020). Of Sputnik's daily broadcasts, *Political Misfits* provided the most intensive coverage with a total of twelve of its shows including Assange's plight as major topic for discussion, compared to *By Any Means Necessary's* ten, *Fault Lines's* eight and *The Critical Hour's* four. Additionally, Sputnik's UK-produced weekly show, *The Mother of All Talk Shows*, aired six shows that centred Assange as one of the main subjects for discussion.

*By Any Means Necessary* and *Loud and Clear* responded directly to the CNN “exclusive” report in July 2019 that sought to authenticate charges of a Russia-WikiLeaks conspiracy. CNN’s report alleged that Assange had met with Russian hackers from the GRU in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London in summer 2016 in order to discuss the leaking of the DNC and Podesta emails, i.e., Russiagate. Both shows, which aired on 16 July 2019 and were entitled ‘Exposing the Lies in CNN Fake Assange “Exclusive”’ and ‘In the Firing Line: “The Squad” vs Trump,’ allotted the first 30 minutes of their programmes to reflexive media-centricity (*Loud and Clear*, 2019b; *By Any Means Necessary*, 2019b). Reflexive media-centricity denotes the second-hand coverage of stories rather than the actual events that underpin them. Both shows dissected the CNN report, pointing to its inaccuracies. Puryear and Blackmon and their guest Patrick Henningsen, co-founder of alt-media outlet 21st Century Wire and firm network friend, pinpointed the tentative wording of the report, littered with “allegedly(s) and we think here” (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2019b), with Henningsen even labelling the entire report “lazy journalism” (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2019b). Equally, following a brief run-through of the day’s headlines, *Loud and Clear*’s hosts Kiriakou and Becker, along with their guest Kevin Gosztola of alt-media outlet shadowproof.com, summarised the report as containing nothing but “lies”. Far from meeting GRU hackers, asserted both shows, Assange had actually met the head of RT UK, Nikolai Bogachikhin. *Loud and Clear* relayed a short phone call between Kiriakou and Bogachikhin himself in order to substantiate this claim. Bogachikhin confirmed he had been acquainted with Assange for a number of years and that he had in fact visited him not twice, as per the *CNN* report, but rather three times in June 2016 (*Loud and Clear*, 2019b). Thus, *Loud and Clear* and *By Any Means Necessary*’s coverage on the CNN exclusive report amounted to a further repudiation of the Russiagate scandal.

In July 2019, presenter George Galloway launched a weekly three-hour show on Sputnik by the name of *The Mother of All Talk Shows*. Galloway, a former UK politician and staunch critic of the

2003 Iraq War, was expelled from the Labour Party in 2003. On the left of the Labour Party, he has since been a fierce critic of the British political establishment. Hence, his rebellious dissidence makes him a valued figure for Russia's international broadcasting operation. Returning to *The Mother of All Talk Shows*, Galloway had presented a radio show of the same name on *talkRadio* but was dismissed in June 2019 after having been accused of exhibiting anti-Semitic views on Twitter. It is significant that Sputnik's UK producers decided to keep the same branding for Galloway's new platform. One might assume that Sputnik's producers hoped that Galloway's *talkRadio* listeners would follow him to his new radio outlet. *The Mother of All Talk Shows* is available in both podcast format for retrospective listening and video streaming for digital live viewing as well as live radio AM/FM in the Washington DC area. Interestingly, in its video stream format, one can instantly recognise that the show is filmed and produced in RT's London studio on the 16th floor of Millbank Tower. Thus, if one opts to consume the show in visual form, it is almost indistinguishable from an RT broadcast.

Returning to the Assange story, Galloway covered Assange's case report hearing at Westminster Magistrates Court in October 2019 (*The Mother of All Talk Shows*, 2019a). Surprisingly, though, by the time of this October broadcast, "Episode 19"—the show's YouTube livestream video—used the RT logo for its branding rather than the Sputnik one (*The Mother of All Talk Shows*, 2019a). After a quick perusal of *The Mother of All Talk Shows* YouTube uploads, it becomes apparent that the Sputnik branding was last used for the show on 22 September 2019 (*The Mother of All Talk Shows*, 2019b). The repurposing of a Sputnik show as an RT one says much about the perception of the two brands amongst their respective producers. The ultimate thrust seems to be that the RT brand implicitly carries more journalistic authority than the Sputnik one. Galloway's previous establishment credentials seem to grant him access to a higher calibre of guests in his shows. Indeed, his Episode 19 broadcast was no exception. On this occasion, he was joined by Craig Murray, a former diplomat and a close friend of Assange, who is an alt-



media actor in his own right and a “citizen journalist” who constantly critiques mainstream media and politicians. Galloway’s introduction of his guest seems to boast of his high status:

Galloway: On the line one now is the Honourable Craig Murray, the former British Ambassador, Foreign Office Official. A man who knows about injustices and perversions of court processes - he saw them many times as a Foreign Official, as an ambassador and his blog about what had happened with Julian Assange last week, chilled the blood of anyone who reads it ... What was the standout for you in the tragic farce in the court room last week?

Murray: Well, there were two standouts. First was Julian’s condition, he was in a dreadful physical and psychological condition. He couldn’t speak properly he has difficulty remembering his own name and remembering his date of birth. He’s lost an awful lot of weight; he’s lost a lot of hair. He’s aged about 20 years by the look of him ... The second standout was that the magistrate simply refused to give the defence team the time to prepare when they asked. (*The Mother of All Talk Shows*, 2019a)

Galloway’s slightly pompous preamble seeks to emphasise not only Murray’s status and former links to the establishment, but also his capacity to speak authoritatively on the peculiarities of Assange’s legal case. Murray’s report of Assange’s fragile physical and psychological condition is clearly intended to engender pathos. If in the prologue and breaking news phase, Sputnik’s US shows sought to link WikiLeaks’s founder’s case to wider libertarian themes, then in the epilogue phase its UK shows attempted to stress how Assange’s individual freedoms and choices were being violated at the hands of the state. As far as journalistic authority is concerned, it does seem that Galloway himself is able to marshal it more effectively than his American colleagues. The *Mother of All Talks Shows* episode in question had 23,284 views with 740 likes, 52 dislikes and 165 comments (*The Mother of All Talk Shows*, 2019a). Though these are hardly ground-breaking figures for numbers an international broadcasting outlet, they far outstrip any of Sputnik’s other shows’ digital engagement. Therefore, it seems probable that adding Galloway to Sputnik’s line-up may have been intended to boost audience engagement and at first glance seems to have had some success.

The Assange story was once again allotted prime time coverage on the eve of his extradition trail, which was initially scheduled for February 2020. For *By Any Means Necessary’s* 20 February show, the coverage was once again conflated with the larger Russiagate and in this

case the sentencing of Roger Stone, an adviser to Trump's 2016 US election campaign, who was convicted of lying to the Mueller investigation (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2020a). A new two-hourly daily Sputnik show, *Political Misfits*, in which presenters Jamarl Thomas and Bob Schlehuber claim to bring "news, politics and culture without the red (Republican) and blue (Democrat) treatment," also pegged coverage of Assange's extradition trial to the Roger Stone episode while emphasising the ill health of Assange as well as covering the Democratic Primary debate in Nevada (*Political Misfits*, 2020a, b). *By Any Means Necessary's* new host Jacqueline Luqman and returning host Sean Blackmon were joined by the familiar voices of Hennigsen and Rall to discuss allegations that Trump had offered Assange a pardon if he would reveal the source of the Podesta emails (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2020a). For Luqman, the mainstream media and wider establishment are guilty of generating misleading headlines in order to keep the Russiagate story firmly on the agenda:

I've been thinking about this case with Julian Assange and the way that information has been reported by the media and it seems to me the way the headlines have been skewed it's almost like this desperate attempt by the corporate establishment to hold on to this Russiagate narrative after all these people who were supposed to have been the smoking gun to provide the demise of the Trump camp through Russian collusion, turned out to be nothing ... and it seemed like the media headlines about Assange's current case, you know his lawyer coming out and talking about some alleged deal to make it look like Trump was trying to convince Assange to cover up the fact that Russians fed him information, although that has never been true, Assange always vehemently denied that anything that came to WikiLeaks came from Russia. But that's not what the headlines read. To me it just seemed like a desperate attempt by the establishment to say no, no there's still Russiagate there (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2020a)

Sputnik's second-ever US female presenter's comments seem particularly odd given that Assange's defence team did officially allege that Trump had offered Assange a pardon in exchange for the source of the DNC leaks. On the one hand, Sputnik's line is that Russiagate has been endlessly pursued by mainstream media due to Russophobia. Yet on the other hand, the Russiagate debacle seems to be a channel via which Russia's underlying significance to both the Assange trial and US presidential elections, and thus to international politics, can be highlighted. The remainder of *The Critical Hour*, *Political Misfits* and *By Any Means Necessary's* programmes that are pegged to his extradition trial continue to situate the Assange case in the wider context

of Russiagate and the First Amendment tropes of freedom of press, freedom of speech and the more libertarian anti-incarceration movements. The recognisable figures of Smolarek and Sleboda appear for these shows with the addition of Taylor Hudak, founder of activist group Action 4 Assange. As we saw in the prologue episode, *By Any Means Necessary* was less embedded in the news cycle than its counterparts, while *The Critical Hour* and *Political Misfits* seek to blend live talk radio news with the political podcast format (*The Critical Hour*, 2020a; *Political Misfits*, 2020b).

*Fault Lines* and *The Mother of All Talk Shows*' coverage of the beginning of Assange's extradition trial on 23 and 25 February both highlighted the encroachment on Assange's individual freedoms and rights as well as the impossibility of him receiving a fair trial. *Fault Lines*' Stranahan was off sick on this day, so *Loud and Clear*'s Kiriakou was brought in as his replacement. The *Fault Lines* broadcast adopted its usual open phone line talk radio format interwoven with convivial chit chat and political commentary. Nixon urged members of the public to phone in and put a question to Kiriakou. This would have offered listeners a rare opportunity to speak directly to Kiriakou as *Loud and Clear* does not use the phone-in format, but rather the podcasts come-news-talk radio one. Kiriakou and Nixon receive a dozen phone calls, including one from a Claudio in Spain, suggesting that the show may have a smattering of an international audience. The most striking call comes from a man in the UK named Ian Shilling:

Nixon: Ian Shilling, we've got plenty to talk about, we're in jolly old England and they're after Julian Assange. What are your thoughts on that?

Ian Shilling: It's terrible what is going on it's a political show trial it's like Stalinist Russia of the 1930s or something. He's being tried in Lubyanko Prison in the dungeon (laughter) and only 20 people could watch what's going on (laughter) it's terrible.

Nixon: Well Ian I didn't realise how big a deal it was in England, but when I was there, I was just there a couple of weeks ago and when I turned on the BBC and turned on Sky News, they report it one way. When I talked to people on the street was sitting with people on the streets, they would say well this is not fair this kid gets run over by a bicycle and American goes back, you know jumps on a plane and they won't extradite him (*Fault Lines*, 2020a)

Ian Shilling became inadvertently embroiled in the disinformation discourse in 2018 when Atlantic Council analyst Ben Nimmo concluded that his Twitter account was probably a Russian bot. As reports of this surfaced, Shilling's Twitter account was then deleted and shortly thereafter he came forward making it plain that he had no connection to Russia (Clifton, 2018). RT and Sputnik have since used Shilling's case in order to project "the victim position" and therefore discredit efforts to expose Russian disinformation sources (Ustad Figenschou and Ihlebæk, 2019). The exchange between Nixon and Shilling once again shows how Sputnik's US journalists struggle to deploy live talk radio's tools effectively. What is more, Nixon's efforts to steer the conversation away from the topic of Soviet show trials to popular anger about the killing of Harry Dunn do not exactly go smoothly given the glaring errors in Nixon's account. The fact that the show only received 521 views, 34 likes, 2 dislikes and 4 comments on YouTube again confirms that Sputnik's US outfit struggles to project authority.

George Galloway's 23 February show sought to move the agenda back to the ramifications of Assange's incarceration for press freedom. For this episode he was joined by fringe author and journalist Ray David. Yet again we observe that Galloway is better placed to establish Sputnik's authority as an alternative media source than many of his US colleagues:

Nothing about the Julian Assange case is normal. His crimes as alleged by the US Justice department are not crimes at all. They're not crimes anywhere and they are certainly not crimes in Britain. It is not a crime to publish material that is true that has been leaked to you by a whistleblower. If it was, we would never have had The Sunday Times Insight team, we would never have had ground-breaking front-page splashes in the Daily Mail, The Guardian, The Times. Not often in the The Times but you know what I mean. We would never have had journalism as we know it if it was a crime for the newspaper or the television station to publish material which had been leaked (*The Mother of All Talk Shows*, 2020a)

Galloway's linking of WikiLeaks with UK mainstream newspapers in this instance seems quite reasonable. The fact that this particular show received 27,583 views, 946 likes, 27 dislikes and 104 comments indicates that Galloway's comparative experience and recognisability mean he is able to claim some journalistic authority, though these are still negligible numbers for what one would expect of a major international broadcaster. This is all the more striking given that the

content producers on his shows are not dissimilar to those on Sputnik's US platforms. Thus, it seems that Galloway's relative success is thanks to his recognisability as a commentator who espouses certain causes.

This section has once again demonstrated that at the micro-level of content producers, Sputnik is an alternative outlet since all its guests are made up of a very small network of individuals from fringe alt-media representatives. As we saw in the prologue, at the level of micro-level alternativeness concerning style and format, the individual presenters also use the tabloid style elements of talk radio with a podcast format. Similarly, the meso-level agenda-setting, gatekeeping and reach also varied across programmes.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter's analysis of Sputnik's mediation of Assange's arrest has demonstrated that Sputnik inserts itself assertively into the alternative media ecology. Whilst its individual programmes appropriate the alt-media self-styling technique in different ways and according to different political and ideological associations, they all do so under an anti-Western hegemonic and libertarian banner.

Using the lens of alternativeness as an academic concept through which to view Sputnik's practices shows that its journalistic techniques at the meso- and micro-level are akin to the those of alternative broadcasters such as Fox News and tabloid newspapers. However, as the analysis has shown, deploying alternativeness as an academic concept yields diminishing returns when attempting to situate a particular outlet in the global media ecology. This is because far from being binary opposites and constituting definitive praxis, the mainstream and its alternative overlap and converge. Thus, exploring how a media actor conceives of itself tells us far more about its place within the wider global media ecology.

While Sputnik's self-identification technique as an alt-media platform is unmistakable and the pliability of the libertarian theme it promotes has potential currency, in practice the Sputnik brand commands little authority. Thus, it appears to have little success in this enterprise. That said, since the killing of George Floyd and the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, the libertarian causes that Sputnik seems to espouse have become major talking points for the very mainstream media outlets to which it establishes itself as an alternative. Whether or not this translates into a more robust command of journalistic authority for Sputnik will be addressed in the next chapter.

## Chapter V: COVID-19 and Audience Engagement

### Introduction

SARS-CoV-2, or the coronavirus, was first detected in the city of Wuhan in China's Hubei Province in late 2019 (Davidson, 2020). The World Health Organisation declared the first outbreak of this novel coronavirus "a Public Health Emergency of International Concern" on 30 January 2020, but it was not until March 2020—when the COVID-19 pandemic took hold across swathes of Europe, America and Asia—that it began to dominate the global news cycle (WHO, 2020). While neo-authoritarian states such as China implemented swift restrictions to contain the virus, for Western liberal democracies the pandemic has led to hitherto unprecedented policies pertaining to the curtailment of civil liberties. In Western societies, the implementation of restrictive legislation and state-wide initiatives to control the spread of the coronavirus has generated debate about the role of the state, its jurisdiction and indeed citizens' willingness to trust it. This, coupled with the unknown nature of the disease, has provided fertile ground for conspiracy theories to germinate and flourish in the social media platforms of the digital media ecology. Therefore, the pandemic is another example of a disruptive media event, an analytical concept that was brought to bear in the thesis's second chapter regarding the Salisbury poisonings (Katz and Liebes, 2007). However, the COVID-19 pandemic is a disruptive media event of an entirely different ilk, as the disruption was not triggered by Russia's activity. Instead, the pandemic was disruptive on a global scale and in theory, Russian and Western governments' strategic goals were aligned in their attempts to curb the virus.

The purpose of this chapter is to assess how audiences engage Sputnik (RQ4) by analysing how audiences responded to its social media coverage during the worst global public health disaster in over a century. The COVID-19 pandemic is a particularly appropriate case study through which to investigate audience engagement given the critical role of broadcasters as transmitters of public health information and the speculation that the coronavirus aroused. How did

audiences react to Sputnik's coverage during the pandemic's initial disruptive phase?

Subsequently, once the pandemic had become quotidian reality, how did Sputnik, which adopts a loosely anti-statist or libertarian editorial stance, attempt to mobilise tropes that COVID-19 has brought to the fore—the role of and jurisdiction of the state? This chapter examines what Sputnik's English language Facebook content audiences reacted to and how they reacted during the pandemic's first and second waves. Conducting an analysis of Sputnik's social media engagement during the coronavirus pandemic will contribute to the thesis's broader project of determining Sputnik's place within Russia's projection strategy by evaluating whether and how audiences engage with one of its social media platforms.

The chapter will argue that during the pandemic's disruptive phase, Sputnik was at its most successful—in generating audience responses—when operating as a traditional purveyor of soft power seeking to cast Russia in a favourable light. During the pandemic's second wave, once it represented a new run-of-the-mill reality, Sputnik's inflammatory anti-statist and libertarian “attack dog” strategy proved most effective in attracting audience engagement. Empirical evidence revealed that Sputnik's social media audiences produced and curated more incendiary content about the pandemic than did Sputnik itself. Finally, the chapter endeavours to contribute to current discussions surrounding crisis communication by illustrating how audiences respond to social media news strategies over the trajectory of a protracted global emergency.

Using a mixed methods approach of quantitative and qualitative data analysis, the chapter examines *which* of Sputnik's main English language Facebook page's posts audiences interacted with—and *how* they interacted—at two of the pandemic's critical junctures: the first wave (19 March 2020 – 2 April 2020) and the second wave (2-16 February 2021). Selecting these particular case studies will allow one to ascertain how on the one hand Sputnik responded to the pandemic in its “disruptive” phase, and on the other hand how the outlet is attempting to



capitalise on an upsurge in anti-statist narratives that are critical of restrictions on individuals' choices and freedoms. It must be said that, in theory, public compliance was and is crucial for the Russian state in its effort to contain the virus, both during the first wave in spring 2020 and indeed now in its efforts to administer vaccines. How does Sputnik attempt to negotiate this apparent contradiction? Finally, by examining this particular time period, which coincided with the aftermath of the US presidential election and the storming of the Capitol, we will be able to comprehend whether and how Sputnik attempted to appeal to the lockdown sceptic and antivax contingent and thus how the outlet is adapting to wider changes in the political landscape.

Which Facebook posts were effective in generating audience responses during the pandemic? Which were not? How did audiences engage Sputnik? The thesis's two preceding chapters on Assange's arrest and the Salisbury poisonings found low audience engagement on Sputnik's social media plugins. Thus, "effectiveness" will be measured in comparison with Sputnik's overall average low engagement figures. Are we to observe a similar tendency with other aspects of its social media output? These are the questions that the analysis poses over the following pages.

The chapter begins with a review of the literature on Russian international broadcasting's coverage of the pandemic, analysis of social media audience engagement and global crisis messaging. Section two will present the quantitative and qualitative findings as to what and how audiences engaged with Sputnik in the pandemic's first wave (19 March 2020 – 2 April 2020). Section three will repeat the above during the pandemic's second phase in winter 2021 (2-16 February 2021). Section four will reflect on the chapter's findings.

### **Conceptual Framework and Case Study Selection**

The chapter's analysis of Sputnik's social media engagement is situated at the intersection of four disciplines: Russian Studies, Political Communication, International Relations and

Journalism Studies. In other words, it brings together four disparate topics of scholarly inquiry: Russian international broadcasting's coverage of the pandemic; RT and Sputnik's social media audience interactions; global crisis communication strategies; and the analytical concept of the disruptive media event.

While there is yet to be any published academic literature on Russia's media strategy during the coronavirus pandemic, several reports have been published under the auspices of EU and US defence initiatives (Weitz, 2020; EU vs Disinfo, 2020a, b, c, d, e; US Department of State, 2020). The Global Engagement Centre of the United States Department of State published a lengthy report entitled *Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Eco System* in August 2020 (US Department of State, 2020). However, the report reads more like a descriptive account of the internal architecture of Russia's communication activities that cites examples on COVID-19 than as a comprehensive examination of its strategy during the largest public health crisis in over a century. What is more, from the report's title alone, it is clear that it is framed in the familiar *a priori* and adversarial rhetoric of the Information War that understands Russia's media strategy solely in militaristic terms. As this thesis has demonstrated exhaustively, these Information War tropes and frameworks are not sufficiently illuminating in the study of Russia's external projection strategy. The report ultimately projects the pandemic as yet another opportunity for Russia and a "hook to push longstanding disinformation and propaganda narratives" (US Department of State, 2020, p. 5). What is more, the report does not attempt to address how audiences reacted to Russia's media strategy during the pandemic.

Another unserviceable analysis of Russia's media strategy during the pandemic emerged in Europe. EUvsDisinfo, founded in 2015, is in its own words "the flagship project of the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force". Underlying the clunky bureaucratic jargon, EUvsDisinfo is in fact an offshoot of a European Commission defence initiative to combat the perceived threat of disinformation. And as its mission statement, "don't be deceived, question

even more”—a direct rebuttal of RT’s “question more”—makes plain, EUvsDisinfo has Russian disinformation chiefly in its sights. The project comprises an online database which collates, identifies and analyses questionable information in over 15 languages from Russian state-aligned media and an active social media presence on Facebook and Twitter. EUvsDisinfo’s target audiences are the publics of member states and those of the Eastern Partnership (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) that remain in Russia’s traditional hegemonic and linguistic orbit and are thus seen as being particularly susceptible to Russian disinformation tactics. According to EUvsDisinfo, the term “disinformation” ought to be distinguished from “misinformation” as it connotes the deliberate dissemination of false information with malign intent, whereas “misinformation” means spreading false information unknowingly.<sup>22</sup>

EUvsDisinfo produced five special reports, or executive summaries, on the coronavirus pandemic from March-December 2020, outlining the key aspects of Russia’s disinformation strategy with additional excerpts from those of China, Turkey, Syria and other malign non-state actors (EUvsDisinfo 2020a, b, c, d, e). The preponderant argument is that Russia’s media outlets are working in conjunction to undermine the public health messaging operation in the West. As the reports were published almost in real time, they came to shape much of the prevailing discourse of Russia’s mediation of the pandemic (Hutchings and Tolz, 2020). EUvsDisinfo’s special reports focus on the substantive content of Russia’s mediation of the coronavirus pandemic with a particular emphasis on conspiracy theories. But in actuality, the special reports are essentially made up of selected snippets from a database that flags and tracks individual items of disinformation from the Russian media ecosystem that includes Russia’s state-funded media—such as Sputnik, whose output prominently features in the database—and media outlets which are independent of and sometimes critical of the Kremlin. EUvsDisinfo’s second

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<sup>22</sup> For a more nuanced account of the distinction between misinformation and disinformation, see Bechmann and O’Loughlin (2020).

report cites two instances from its database where Sputnik was demonstrated to have disseminated exceptionally wild conspiracies via its German and Czech language services, with the former claiming that COVID-19's mortality rate was greatly exaggerated and the latter alleging that lockdown and social distancing measures were part of plot to create a fascist hygiene social order (EuvsDisinfo, 2020b). Yet curiously, none of these special reports cite any of the extensive examples of disinformation that EUvsDisinfo included in its database from Sputnik's regional services in the territories of the *near abroad*, in particular Sputnik Armenia, Belarus and Georgia.

As with the US Department of State's report, there is little effort in EUvsDisinfo's material to address the question of how audiences received Russia's coverage of the coronavirus crisis. However, having said that, in the second and fifth report two rather sweeping claims are made. First, in its assessment of Russia's coverage of the unravelling coronavirus crisis from 20-27 March 2020 in the second report, the author states: "Among COVID-19-related content published by RT and Sputnik, articles covering conspiracy narratives such as that 'the virus was man-made' or intentionally spread, typically received more social engagement than other stories" (EUvsDisinfo, 2020b). Correspondingly, the fifth report states that "since the last reporting period (23 April – 18 May), over 100 new examples of pro-Kremlin linked disinformation about COVID-19 have been added to the EUvsDisinfo public database. Articles containing these examples of disinformation received over 230,000 likes, shares, comments on social media" (EUvsDisinfo, 2020e). In neither case do the report's authors explain the methodological steps that enabled them to arrive at these declarations. As the second report falls into our chosen time window (19 March – 2 April), I will scrutinise this particular claim made by EUvsDisinfo's researchers.

The principal investigators on the Manchester-led "Reframing Russia" project delivered a robust critique of EUvsDisinfo's methodological practices (Hutchings and Tolz, 2020). Analysing

EUvsDisinfo's database, which included items predominantly from Sputnik and RT Arabic, Stephen Hutchings and Vera Tolz (2020) demonstrated its researchers' "tendency to misread or misrepresent sources", which they argued was the by-product of selective quoting, incorrect use of terminology and a salient absence of requisite expertise and knowledge among those conducting the research. Likewise, their analysis of RT's English language web platform, RT International, revealed that its early coverage of the pandemic was fairly neutral (Hutchings and Tolz, 2020). In sum, they posit, a combination of the above-listed shortcomings in EUvsDisinfo's apparatus led to inaccurate and misleading conclusions being drawn about Russia's mediation of the coronavirus crisis. This chapter's analysis of Sputnik's audience engagement during the pandemic strives to build upon Hutchings and Tolz's (2020) critique by examining the strategies that were successful in garnering audience engagement and those which were not, and by demonstrating *how* audiences engage Sputnik on Facebook. Conducting such an analysis will permit us to make more accurate claims about social media engagement of Russia's international broadcasting during the pandemic.

Various Western think tanks have conducted studies of Russian international broadcasting's social media activity that have attempted to measure their influence with a particular emphasis on the former Soviet satellite states. A 2018 Rand Report entitled *Russian Social Media Influence* attempted to measure the reach of Russian state narratives disseminated on Twitter in the near abroad between August 2015 and May 2016 (Helmus *et al.*, 2018). Using quantitative lexical and resonance analyses, the report's authors postulate that their discovery that 15% of Twitter users in Crimea and Donetsk "share the same linguistic pattern as the pro-Russia activist community" reflects the spread and influence of Russian propaganda in these geographical areas (Helmus *et al.*, 2018, p. xi). However, as the report's writers outline, their methodological approach is predicated on the assumption "that Twitter users who use the same language content patterns as a known group of partisans share in that group's ideological beliefs" (Helmus *et al.*, 2018, p. x). To establish a causal link between the activities of pro-Russian

government online communities and Twitter users in the Crimea and Donetsk solely on the basis of a “shared lexical footprint” is spurious. Considering the ethnographic makeup of these territories, one must at least entertain the possibility that users sharing pro-activist Russia content already espoused such views. Additionally, as is commonplace with reports commissioned under the auspices of RAND, a largely neo-conservative think tank, Russia’s communication strategy was understood exclusively in terms of a supposed security threat. The only way to gauge the reach of Russia’s communication strategy abroad is to acquire quantitative data on audience responsiveness. Foregrounding Sputnik’s social media audience engagement during a time of global crisis will allow us to assess how publics respond to Russian international broadcasting on matters beyond immediate Russian foreign policy objectives.

Lisaveta Kuznetsova and Mykola Makhortykh (forthcoming) made a valuable contribution to the field in their analysis of RT’s Facebook coverage of the 2020 US presidential election by demonstrating the dissonance between the material it published and how it was algorithmically curated on the social media platform. The researchers found that Facebook’s algorithms promoted RT’s eclectic content that “lacked an overarching narrative” and thus did not accurately reflect the anti-Biden position taken by RT. The chapter’s analysis of Sputnik’s Facebook’s strategy will consider the role of algorithms in terms of what and how audiences respond to certain content.

The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab has produced several articles on Sputnik’s audiences: measuring the success of Sputnik’s regional pages in the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—using CrowdTangle (Aleksejeva, 2019); in the South Caucasus (Gigitashvili and Ponce de Leon, 2020a); and analysing Sputnik’s covert attempts to boost its Facebook audience data (Aleksejeva *et al.*, 2019). These articles are useful for obtaining quantitative data about Sputnik’s social media audiences in the near abroad as well as the general practices that it deploys in order to promote its Facebook content. But in order to draw

conclusions about Sputnik's social media strategy and audience engagement, a more forensic analysis is required that examines both quantitative and qualitative data across Sputnik's main English language Facebook page.

Publications at the intersection of Political Communication, International Relations and Russian Studies have addressed the question of qualitative audience engagement with Russian international broadcasting channels across its social media plugins, namely YouTube. Audience reaction has been explored in reference to emotions, conflict and the war in Syria (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley, 2020) and with respect to the use of humour in RT's legitimization of foreign policy objectives in the case of the Syrian war and Salisbury poisonings (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley, 2020). Similarly, scholars have analysed audiences' mocking responses to RT's "exclusive" interview with the Salisbury suspects (Tolz *et al.*, 2020). These analyses offer valuable contributions in showing how audiences respond with emotion, humour, scepticism and dismissal to Russian international broadcasting. But how do these audience tropes come into play in a pandemic?

Finally, yet another research dynamic is pertinent to the chapter's analysis of Sputnik's audience engagement during the coronavirus pandemic—that of crisis communication. In their article on how the governments of France, the UK and Germany attempted to frame the pandemic at its genesis, Phillip Brandt and Jan Wörlein (2020) postulate that the leaders of the respective countries personalised the coronavirus crisis while also identifying the key frame of the virus as an invisible enemy of war. Dmitry Chernobrov's (2019) book entitled *Public Perception of International Crises: Identity, Ontological Security and Self-Affirmation* provides an insightful exploration of how audiences in the West and Russia make sense of distant international crises such as the Arab Spring. Using interviews, polls and media analysis, Chernobrov (2019) argues that public perception of distant international crises is determined by local anxieties, hopes, insecurities and ambitions. But how might these local factors be

apparent in the perception of a crisis that unfolds across the global digital media ecology and is unmatched in its ubiquity by any global event in the past 70 years?

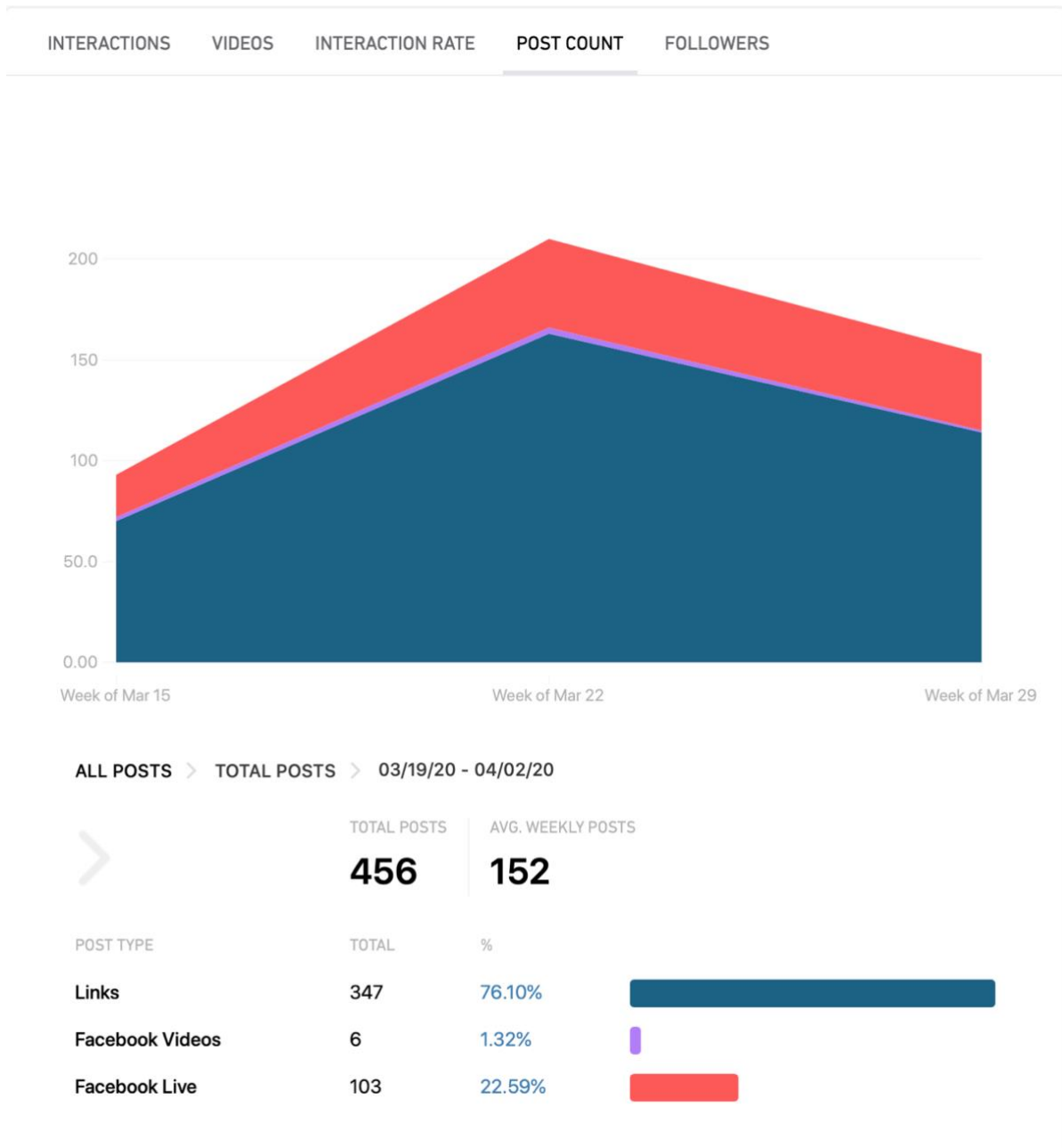
### **COVID-19 First Eruptions: Spring 2020**

By mid-March 2020, the pandemic had entered the height of its disruptive phase. In other words, it dominated the news cycle and additionally, the vast majority of Western governments had either already implemented stringent public health measures in order to contain outbreaks of COVID-19 or were on the verge of doing so. In this section, I will analyse quantitative data obtained from CrowdTangle's "Intelligence" function on how audiences engaged Sputnik's global English language page during its coverage of the pandemic's first wave over a two-week period from 19 March 2020 to 2 April 2020. The questions I shall ask of the data are as follows: how many posts did Sputnik publish during this period? What kind of posts generated the largest number of interactions? What was the total number of audience interactions? What proportion of these were made up by likes, shares and comments? And what of more targeted reactions? Finally, to what extent did Sputnik's Facebook page followers increase or decrease during this disruptive phase?

The graphs (Figures 1-5) featured below provide an overview of key quantitative data on Sputnik Facebook interactions from 19 March to 2 April 2020 including: post counts, interactions per post, interaction post type, interaction type and follower growth rate.

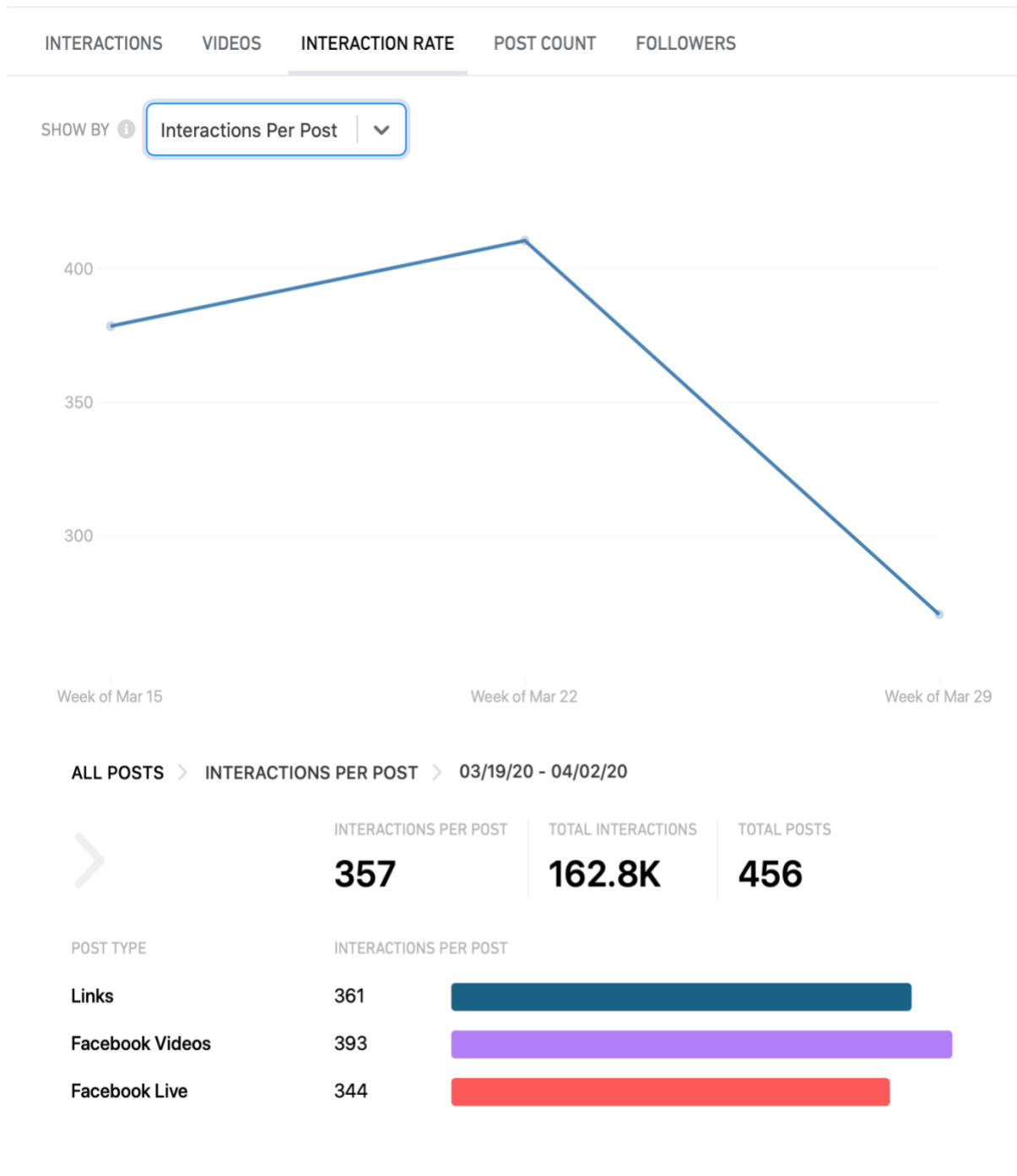


**Figure 1: Post Count, 19 March – 2 April 2020**



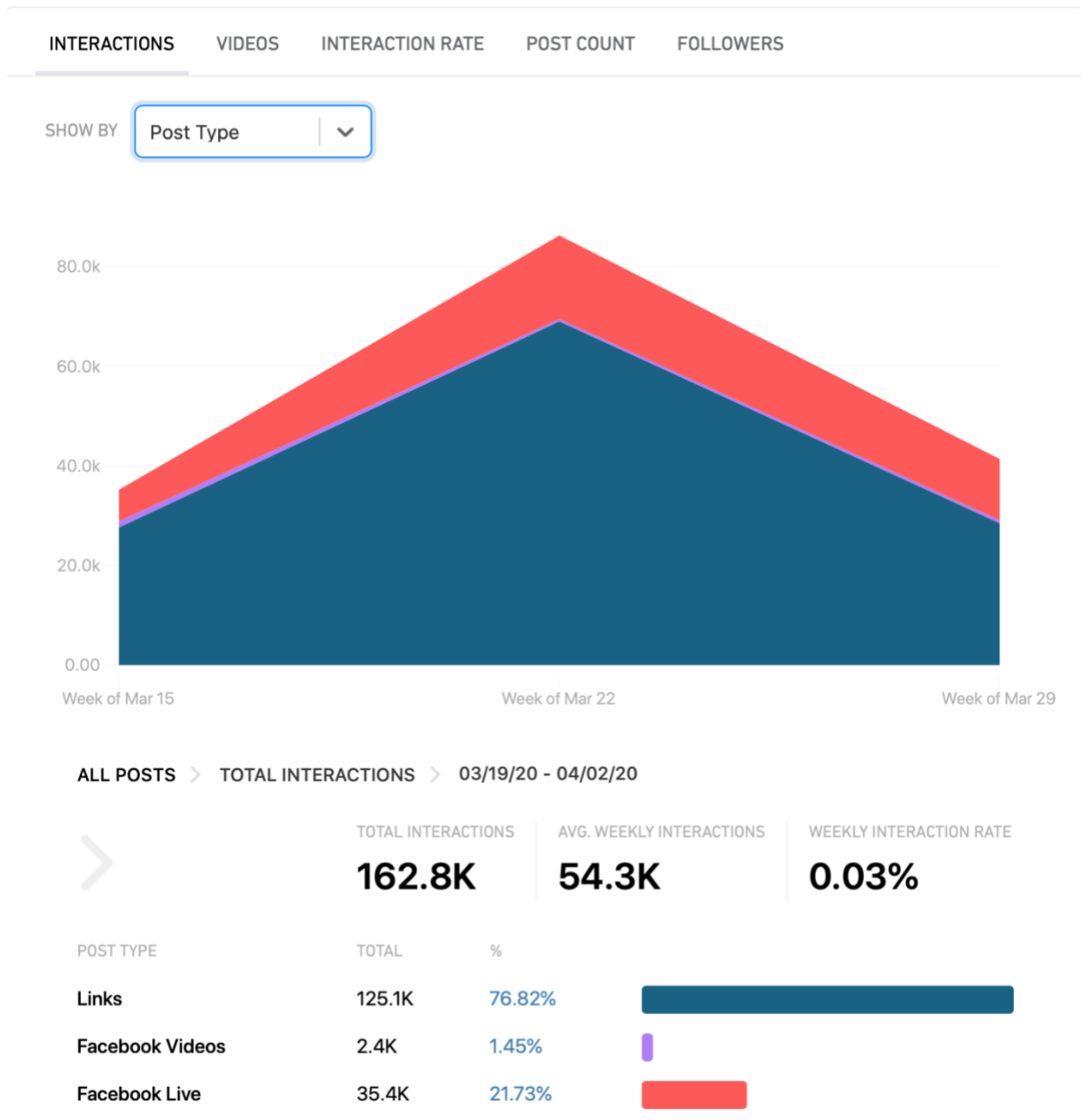
Source: CrowdTangle

**Figure 2: Interactions Per Post, 19 March – 2 April 2020**



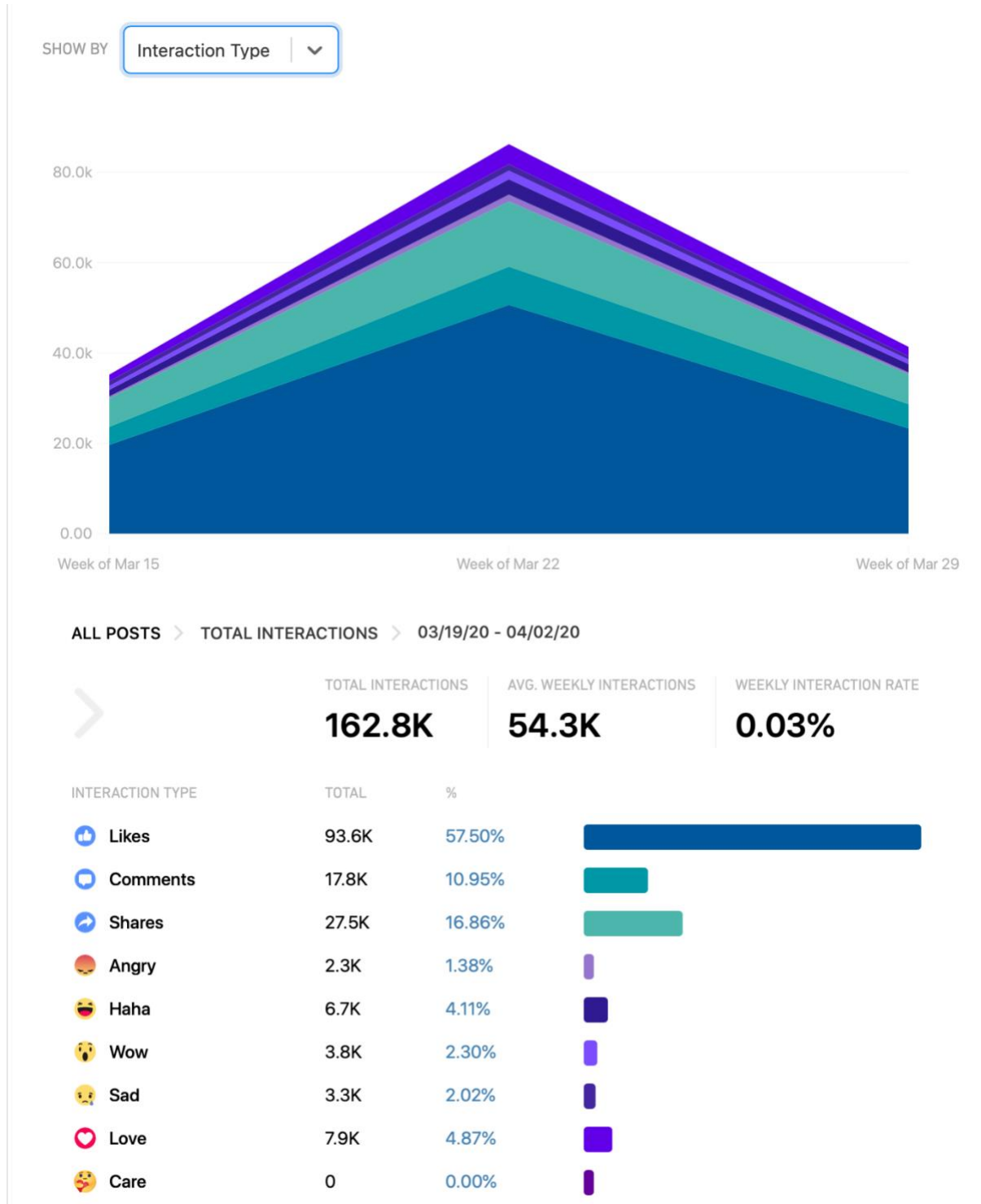
Source: CrowdTangle

**Figure 3: Interaction Post Type, 19 March – 2 April 2020**



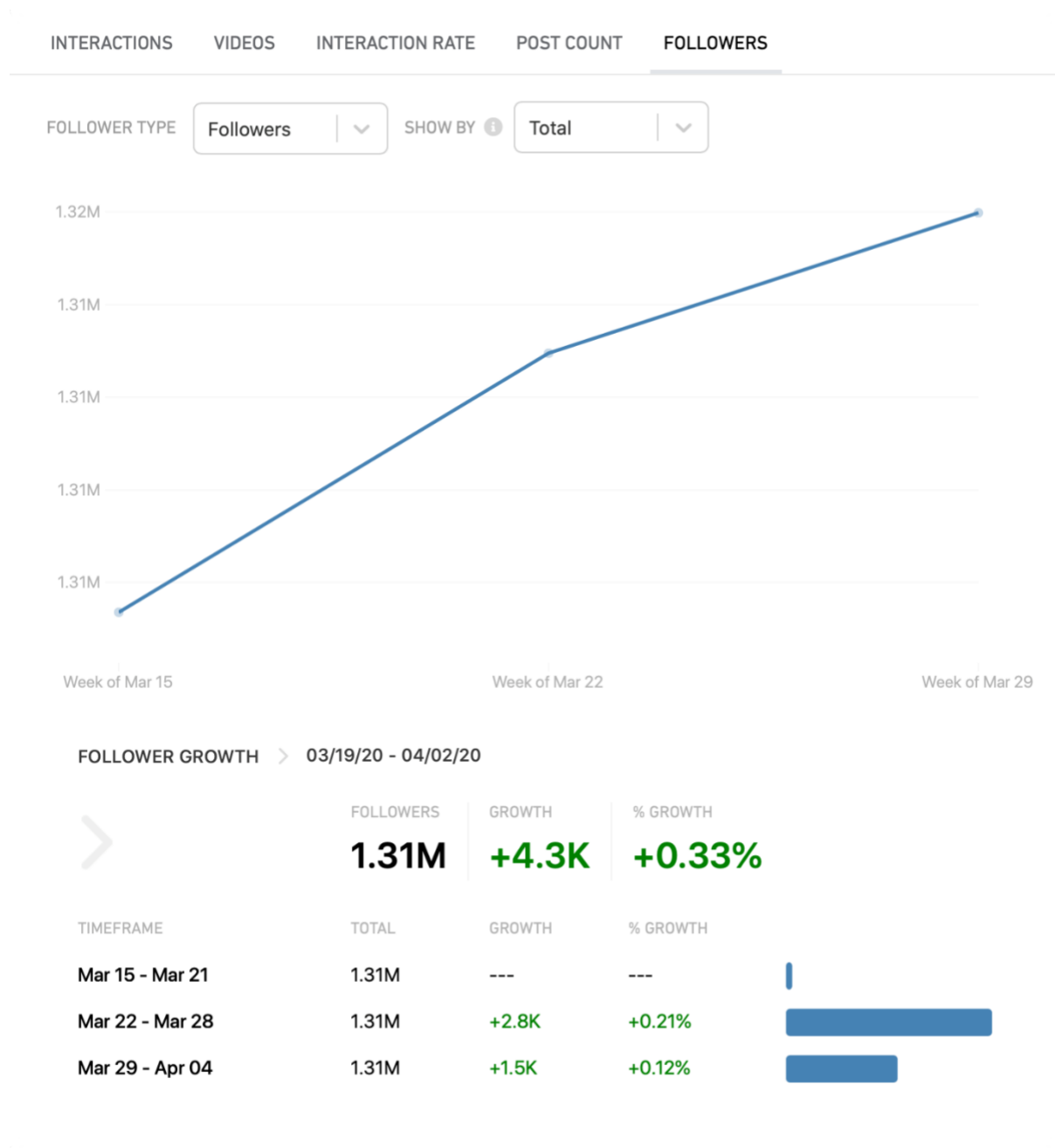
Source: CrowdTangle

**Figure 4: Interaction Type, 19 March – 2 April 2020**



Source: CrowdTangle

**Figure 5: Follower Growth Rate, 19 March – 2 April 2020**



Source: CrowdTangle

Several significant facts emerge from Figures 1-5 concerning Sputnik's audience engagement on social media during the first outbreaks of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, in the analysed period, Sputnik published a total of 456 posts with a weekly average of 152 posts. Of the 456 posts, 76.10% (347) accounted for links; 1.32% for videos; and 22.59% (103) for Facebook livestreams. Thus, Sputnik News's Facebook posts with links generated the most responses within the surveyed time period while those with videos generated the least. Second, there were a total of 162,800 audience interactions with the average number per post being 357. Third, there was a weekly average of 53,400 interactions which peaked around 22 March before steadily declining. Fourth, of the total interactions, the vast majority constituted likes at 57.50% (93,600) followed by shares at 16.86% (27,500) and comments at 10.95% (17,800). Therefore, likes made up the overwhelming mass of Sputnik's interactions during this period. Fifth and finally, Sputnik acquired 4,300 new followers in these two weeks of the pandemic's first wave, in other words, a growth in its active followers of 0.33%. By comparison, mainstream news outlet BBC News had an international viewership of 438 million people in the year 2020 and alt-media broadcaster Fox News has a primetime audience of 2.372 million viewers (BBC News, 2020; Joyella, 2021). Having provided a basic quantitative overview for Sputnik News's Facebook audience reactions from 19 March to 2 April 2019, the following section will conduct a closer examination as to the specific character of these interactions.

### **Initial Eruptions of COVID-19**

Now that we have gathered an illustrative sketch of Sputnik's general activity and interactions on Facebook during the first outbreaks of the coronavirus pandemic, or its disruptive phase, we can proceed to the next stage of the analysis. In order to grasp how audiences engaged Sputnik International, how the outlet attempts to elicit audience interaction, which particular strategies are fruitful for Sputnik in garnering audience engagement and which are not, I will analyse the content and audience comments of the ten Facebook posts with the highest and lowest numbers

of interactions. Though one must be wary of arriving at generalisations from a sample of this size, it is sufficient for the purposes of my analysis in ascertaining how audiences engaged Sputnik's English language Facebook platform at two junctures of the pandemic. The first part of this section will address the substantive content, theme, format and style of the post, while the second part will examine the nature of reactions to the posts by analysing the audience comments pegged to them.

The table below (Table 1) lists the ten Facebook posts that received the largest number of audience interactions from 19 March – 2 April.

**Table 2: 19 March – 2 April 2020, Ten Highest Total Interactions**

ID	Date	Type	Interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares	Love	Wow	Haha	Sad	Angry	Care	URL	Promo Message	Link Text
1	2020-03-31 09:23:41 BST	Live Video Complete	2,070	1375	180	368	104	22	9	5	7	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/2600801413465912">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/2600801413465912</a>	Beijing begins to resume its normal pace as coronavirus restrictions eased	Beijing begins to resume its normal pace as coronavirus restrictions eased
2	2020-04-01 03:59:50 BST	Link	1,962	1069	171	556	114	29	19	0	4	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158004262276181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158004262276181</a>	Fighting coronavirus together 🤝	Russian Aircraft Carrying Medical Equipment Heads for US - Russian Defence Ministry
3	2020-03-25 10:26:27 GMT	Live Video Complete	1,902	1112	189	385	192	12	6	3	3	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/198916634871326">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/198916634871326</a>	President Vladimir Putin addresses Russians on the current coronavirus situation	President Vladimir Putin addresses Russians on the current coronavirus situation
4	2020-03-30 08:02:22 BST	Live Video Complete	1,815	1202	153	292	89	43	13	22	1	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/2778931515495700">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/2778931515495700</a>	Moscow streets amid citywide quarantine	Moscow streets amid citywide quarantine
5	2020-03-25 06:53:07 GMT	Link	1,626	1170	85	185	167	11	4	3	1	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157976984216181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157976984216181</a>	URGENT	Another Plane From Russia Delivers Coronavirus Aid to Italy – MoD



6	2020-03-20 01:06:32 GMT	Link	1,427	669	136	297	26	21	264	7	7	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157955743841181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157955743841181</a>	Make quarantine, not war	Pentagon Cancels Deployment of 20,000 Troops to Poland for Anti-Russia War Games
7	2020-03-25 22:01:13 GMT	Link	1,269	915	91	137	97	11	6	6	6	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157979168291181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157979168291181</a>	Russophobia continues	Russia's Aid to Italy Neither Bargain Nor 'Payment' for Lifting Sanctions - Ambassador
	2020-03-23 13:02:46 GMT	Link	1,247	865	80	158	136	5	2	1	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157969515706181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157969515706181</a>	Talk the talk, walk the walk	Russian Military Cargo Planes Deliver Medical Equipment to Italy Amid Raging Coronavirus - Video
9	2020-03-25 03:22:20 GMT	Link	1,159	469	96	226	3	157	4	202	2	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157976647621181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157976647621181</a>	BREAKING	Magnitude 7.5 Earthquake Strikes Near Russia's Kuril Islands - USGS

10	2020-03-26 11:17:16 GMT	Link	1,136	747	77	188	81	12	29	1	1	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157981237536181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157981237536181</a>	BREAKING	Putin: Russia May Defeat Coronavirus in Less Than 3 Months
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As the table above shows, six of the top ten most interacted with posts were promotional links to articles on Sputnik International's main webpage<sup>23</sup>, three of ten were livestreams and one was a video. The conspicuous absence of any promotional posts for Sputnik's radio broadcasts on the list is particularly telling as it points to low audience engagement in this particular enterprise. Instead of attracting audience engagement via the two-pronged digital radio livestream on Facebook, it appears that Sputnik online content, or Facebook newswire, had the greatest success in obtaining interactions. Nevertheless, we ought to remark that even the total interactions that these top ten posts received are extremely modest compared to what one would expect from the social media reach of a major international broadcaster during a pandemic.

Meagre audience engagement figures notwithstanding, in terms of subject matter all but one of Sputnik's Facebook posts that received the highest number of interactions between 19 March 2020 and 2 April 2020 were related to the unfolding coronavirus pandemic (Sputnik, 2020, a, b, c, d, e). The only post featured in the list that does not pertain to the coronavirus pandemic is a breaking news story about an earthquake in Russia's Kuril Islands (Sputnik, 2020i). Indeed, the fact that nine out of ten of the posts were about COVID-19 demonstrates that the coronavirus pandemic was of the highest order of importance for audiences—even those of alt-media outlet Sputnik. Consequently, as is customary during a disruptive media event, Sputnik's journalists and content creators clearly had little room for manoeuvre when it came to agenda-setting (Katz and Liebes, 2007). Another salient feature of the posts' content is that 90% of them are about Russia. The only post that bears no relevance to Russia is the one that received the highest number of interactions, which is a livestream video with a length of two hours and 27 minutes depicting the resumption of business as usual in the Chinese capital, Beijing, after the successful containment of a coronavirus epidemic (Sputnik, 2020a). The implication of this post

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<sup>23</sup> Sputnik International refers to the English language URL where Sputnik publishes news articles that are clearly intended to reach an international English-speaking audience, while the radio broadcasts were clearly tailored for specific US or UK consumption.

appears to be that as major urban centres in the Western world closed up shop, China had already prevailed over its COVID-19 outbreak.

For the majority of Sputnik's top ten posts, these broad topical areas—the unfolding COVID-19 crisis and Russia—coalesced, with seven out of ten of them addressing the official Russian response to the coronavirus pandemic both domestically and internationally. Four of these foreground Russia's donation of external aid to foreign partners Italy and the US and were part of the official "From Russia with Love" soft power campaign organised by the Russian government. Therefore, there was a close correlation between Sputnik's output and Russia's foreign policy agenda. The remaining three posts focused on internal responses to the public health emergency. The four posts that highlight Russia's benevolence in supplying essential equipment to other nations and comparative preparedness to tackle the virus were pegged to official announcements from the Russian Defence and Foreign Ministries. Thus, rather remarkably, during the first eruptions of the pandemic, Sputnik International Facebook audiences seemed to be most engaged by items on COVID-19 relating specifically to Russia. This is noteworthy given that these posts essentially amount to crude PR exercises and that Sputnik usually tends to focus on employing "attack dog" images of Russia's adversaries to project the official Russian position. That Sputnik adjusted its media strategy during this unparalleled event is significant, as it signals that its producers and editors were aware that its customary provocative reporting style would not be well received. Thus, it reveals that Sputnik's editorial team have an acute awareness of the larger global media ecology in which it operates and the capacity to adapt quickly to unfolding events and respond to audiences.

Blatant promotional stunts aside, a closer examination of these seven particular posts reveals that to varying degrees they all attempt to project the narrative of Russia as a global great power as well as a reliable and equal partner (Sputnik, 2020a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h). Sputnik's post entitled "Fighting coronavirus together" from 1 April 2020, which boasts of Russia delivering

medical supplies to the US, perhaps best captures these tropes. The post in question features a handshake emoji presumably intended to present an image of Russian solidarity whilst simultaneously affirming Russia's status as an equal world player to Western powers (Sputnik, 2020b). In addition, the attached image of an aeroplane being loaded by uniformed Russian army personnel is an assertion of Russia's military might. Analogously, Sputnik's seventh most-interacted-with post deploys a similarly gloating tone but this time in reference to medical aid delivered to Italy, countering the all-too-familiar leitmotif of Russophobia (Sputnik, 2020g). In this particular instance, claims that Russia's delivering of medical supplies to Italy is a bribe masquerading as aid (intended to induce a softening stance in economic sanctions against Russia) are presented as empirical evidence of Russophobia writ large. Another photo depicting the loading of equipment onto a plane adorns the post, again to project Russia's military prestige and global great power status (Sputnik, 2020g).

Two of the posts use colloquial and snappy tongue-in-cheek headlines to entice audiences. The first, from 20 March 2020, reads "Make quarantine, not war", which is of course a reference to the anti-war slogan of the 1960s American pacifist movement. This particular post refers to the US cancelling military activity in Poland as part of a large NATO exercise (Sputnik, 2020g). Similarly, another post showing Russian shipments of medical supplies in landing at the Pratica di Mare Air Base in Italy is labelled "Talk the talk, walk the walk", implying that Russia delivers on its promises and is therefore a trustworthy international partner (Sputnik, 2020h).

Switching our attention to the posts that concern Russia's domestic response to the coronavirus outbreak, we remark that two out of three of these feature announcements from Putin. The first, from 25 March 2020, is a 17-minute and 25-second dubbed livestream of his official address to the Russian nation on the country's coronavirus prevention strategies (Sputnik, 2020c). The video livestream shows the Russian president "at work", ostensibly in his official Kremlin office, his desk topped with a pen and some files and two flags—the Russian tricolour and the coat of

arms—positioned either side of him. During the address, Putin pageants his traditional performance as a paternal, decisive, strong, calm and sober-minded leader who is adept in times of crisis. He warns the Russian public that the country, like its European counterparts, faces a significant threat from the novel coronavirus and so urges citizens to adhere to the recommended guidance to stay at home; he lays out a host of economic measures that the state is adopting to protect livelihoods; and he concedes that the Referendum on Amendments to the Russian Constitution, then scheduled for 22 April 2020, may have to be postponed due to the new public health emergency (Sputnik, 2020c). The second post that features an official declaration from Putin is a “breaking news” piece from Sputnik News’s webpage in which he claims Russia will “defeat” the coronavirus epidemic in three months. Thus, not only did Sputnik’s Facebook audiences interact with posts relating to Russia and its international response to the pandemic, but also with those that project images of Putin as Russia’s “great leader”.

Casting images of Putin as strong leader aside, it is particularly noteworthy that the data procured from CrowdTangle in the above table seems to be directly at odds with EuvsDisinfo’s claim that in the period 20-27 March “articles covering conspiracy theories such as that ‘the virus was man-made’ or intentionally spread, typically received more social engagement than other stories” (EUvsDisinfo, 2020b). In fact, while these posts promoted some routinely crude and partisan content from Sputnik News’s URL, not a single one of them contained any conspiratorial content about the virus’s origin. Therefore, it is rather baffling to compute exactly how EUvsDisinfo’s researchers could have arrived at such a finding. Perhaps this is explained by the fact that most of EUvsDisinfo’s examples of Sputnik’s malpractice in this early stage of the pandemic were from its non-English language services.

While the ten posts that received the highest number of interactions during the pandemic’s “disruptive” phase are heterogenous in terms of how they were promoted, this section has

nevertheless gleaned several conspicuous commonalities among them. First, the majority were promotional links for Sputnik articles on its English language URL. Second, they are about the unfolding coronavirus pandemic, substantiating the crisis's classification for Sputnik's audiences as a seismic event. Third, they are overwhelmingly Russia-centric, with the majority of them parroting crude state-endorsed narratives about Russia as a great power and equal world player and Putin as Russia's great leader. Therefore, one can infer that in the initial phase of the COVID-19 global emergency, Facebook audiences were most likely to interact with content that promoted Sputnik's web articles about Russia's response to the coronavirus pandemic and was framed in accordance with official state narratives surrounding Russia's international status. In other words, it looks as though Sputnik's social media strategy, which adopted a more traditional approach to soft power by actively promoting Russia rather than critiquing its adversaries, attracted the most interactions. Nevertheless, the quantity of interactions does not necessarily equate to constructive or positive engagement. Later in the chapter, I will address the specific reactions that these posts generated in order to understand the precise nature of these interactions. Nonetheless, before embarking on the *how* element of our analysis, I will also consider which social media strategies were *not* successful in generating audience responses.

**Table 3: 19 March – 2 April 2020, Ten Lowest Total Interactions**

ID	Date	Type	Interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares	Love	Wow	Haha	Sad	Angry	Care	URL	Message	Text
1	2020-03-19 15:16:21 GMT	Live Video Complete	28	25	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/528846371363971">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/528846371363971</a>	A brief round up of international #news from our team in #Edinburgh.	Sputnik UK: Coronavirus latest. Barnier diagnosed, UK school closures and more...
2	2020-03-30 19:03:05 BST	Live Video Complete	29	22	4	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/166324687810420">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/166324687810420</a>	We're back with another episode of By Any Means Necessary with Sean A. Blackmon and Wyatt Reed with special guest James Early. Call 202-521-1320 to join the show live between 3:20 - 4:00 PM EST.	Hoping for Only 200k Deaths, Trump Extends Social Distancing Until May
3	2020-03-31 16:40:17 BST	Live Video Complete	32	23	2	6	0	0	0	1	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/2642291359341223">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/2642291359341223</a>		Labor Militancy Goes Viral, Pandemic Power Grabs
4	2020-03-25 14:18:50 GMT	Live Video Complete	32	21	5	4	1	1	0	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/1064908070541107">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/1064908070541107</a>	Is this a relief? Who's rescuing who? Political Misfits is live on radio Sputnik with Bob Schlehuber and Jamarl Lamont Thomas.	Is this a relief? Who's rescuing who?



5	2020-03-20 15:34:23 GMT	Live Video Complete	33	20	6	3	2	0	2	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/204526360808969">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/204526360808969</a>		Unemployment Surges as Reports Allege Insider Trading by US Senators
6	2020-03-27 18:02:54 GMT	Live Video Complete	34	19	5	6	4	0	0	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/241292663725144">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/241292663725144</a>	<p>We are joined LIVE by Dr. Dave Ragland, Senior Bayard Rustin Fellow at the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Co-Founder of the Truth Telling Project to talk about the House of Representatives passing a coronavirus "stimulus" bill, Donald Trump brushing off the serious need for ventilators and other protective equipment for hospitals as the coronavirus continues to spread and more. At 3:20 PM EST give us a call at 202-521-1320!</p>	#WeCantBreathe: Trump Wavers on Coronavirus Ventilators

7	2020-03-29 16:02:37 BST	Link	34	26	5	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157993815671181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157993815671181</a>	With borders closing left and right...	UFC Head Confesses to Having Problems With Organising Khabib-Ferguson Fight
8	2020-03-28 00:01:03 GMT	Link	36	34	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157987476241181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10157987476241181</a>	Another chance to clarify	NASA-Funded Mission Proposal Seeks to Detect Exoplanet Habitability Via Radioactivity
9	2020-04-01 19:02:20 BST	Live Video Complete	38	28	3	5	2	0	0	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/3356016067745053">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/3356016067745053</a>	We're back with another episode of By Any Means Necessary with Sean Blackmon and Jacquie Luqman with special guest Ted Rall. Call 202-521-1320 to join the show live between 3:20 - 4:00 PM EST.	Trump Refuses to Reopen Obamacare Enrollment Amid Spread of Outbreak
10	2020-04-01 07:02:21 BST	Link	41	31	3	2	3	0	2	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158004752581181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158004752581181</a>	Robert Weighton has 10 grandchildren and 25 great-grandchildren 😊	British Citizen Enters Guinness Book of Records as World's Oldest Living Man

As the table above listing the ten posts that received the fewest reactions shows, the vast majority of these, seven out of ten (70%), accounted for live videos, while the remaining three were promotional links to articles on Sputnik's main web platform. Upon closer inspection, these seven live videos are in fact promotional posts for Sputnik's regularly scheduled radio shows. Three of them are episodes from Washington DC-based programme *By Any Means Necessary*, with another three being from another US-produced show, *Political Misfits*. The remaining promotional broadcast post—which incidentally was also the least interacted-with Facebook post during the chosen time frame, or disruptive phase—was *News in Brief*, produced in Sputnik's now disbanded Edinburgh studio. Given the undeniable journalistic amateurship on display in this particular show, which the thesis's chapter on the Salisbury poisonings scrutinised in detail, it is not surprising to learn that it featured bottom in terms of audience interactions during the pandemic's disruptive phase. As with our top ten posts, the single organising principle of the majority of these posts is the unfolding crisis engendered by the pandemic. Yet, as the promotional messages for the US broadcast livestreams tell us, these are framed in terms of criticism of the status quo and specifically the Trump administration's capacity to cope with the unravelling public health crisis. We might therefore infer that in the first instance of an unprecedented and disruptive crisis, audiences do not seek out politically-orientated journalism. This conjecture is further bolstered by the fact that, as we have gathered, Facebook content that projected affirmative depictions of international solidarity in tackling the crisis (Russia's delivery of aid to the US and Italy) attracted the most interactions from audiences.

Having identified *what* posts engendered the largest and smallest number of interactions, we can now address the question of *how* audiences interacted with them. In this section, I will scrutinise the reactions these posts received as well as examining audience comments that were pegged to them. In so doing, I will also be able to acquire an idea of *who* Sputnik's audiences are.

As Table 1 shows, the vast majority of the reactions that these posts received were likes, or what I term “soft reactions”. After likes, the next reaction category to accrue the largest number of interactions was shares, which for the purposes of my analysis will be designated “medium reactions”, followed by comments or “hard reactions”. Given the above, it is unsurprising that the post that received the largest number of likes was also the one that received the highest number of total interactions: the livestream video portraying various scenes from Beijing as it emerges from an extended lockdown (Sputnik, 2020a). But which posts generated the most medium and hard reactions? The post with the second highest number of total interactions—a promotional link to a web article on Russia’s delivery of medical supplies to the US—generated the most shares (Sputnik, 2020b). The post that attracted the largest number of hard reactions (comments) was the post third on the leader board in terms of total interactions: the dubbed English version of Putin addressing the Russian nation on coronavirus containment strategies (Sputnik, 2020c). In addition to the basic like function, Facebook also allows audience to record other, more targeted reactions to posts: love (to demonstrate strong approval); wow (to demonstrate astonishment); haha (to demonstrate amusement); sad (to demonstrate sadness); angry (to demonstrate frustration); and care (to demonstrate compassion). Returning to Table 1, we remark that Sputnik’s top ten most interacted-with posts received far fewer of these more nuanced reactions than the standard like, share and comment. The post that garnered the most “love” reactions was the dubbed livestream video of Putin addressing the Russian nation on COVID-19 measures (Sputnik, 2020c). Breaking news of an earthquake in Russia’s Kuril Islands received the most “wow” and the most “sad” reactions (Sputnik, 2020h). Rather fittingly, the post that received the most “haha” reactions was the one that was mockingly entitled “make quarantine, not war” (Sputnik, 2020f).

But what of hard reactions, i.e., audience comments? Were Sputnik’s Facebook posts successful in engendering discussions among its audiences? Are the audience comments suggestive of affirmative engagement? If the top ten most interacted with posts did not themselves contain

any conspiratorial content per se as to the virus's origin, then for audience comments the opposite was true. The audience comments attached to these particular posts were riddled with wild conspiracy theories surrounding the root cause of the pandemic. Though these comments may tell us something about Sputnik's audiences, one cannot draw wide-reaching conclusions about them for the simple reason that only a small fraction of them opt to comment. Analogously, one can find extreme and conspiratorial comments pegged to almost any mainstream media broadcaster's social media content.

The post portraying the unlocking of Beijing—which as we know received the most interactions among our list—was showered with audience comments that expressed wide-ranging criticism of the Chinese state. These comments varied in terms of the particular object and extremity of their criticism. However, the majority of these were voiced in respect to the pandemic and adopted the form of angry condemnation at China's perceived negligence in failing to contain the coronavirus within its borders; intolerance teetering on discrimination; or overblown conjecture as to the virus's origin. This suggests that these posts were published by genuine users, given that Sputnik's strategy would likely have been to generate audience sympathy for China.

The most responded-to comment in the post read: "Corona is an opportunity for China to lead the economy" (Sputnik, 2020a). However, this comment was met with ridicule by all the 14 responses it received, which either amounted to mocking rebuttals or requests for the user to elaborate. The sardonic responses were made chiefly, but not exclusively, in reference to China's distribution of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), which two Facebook users from India described as "useless". Nonetheless, audience disapproval of China among the responses did not stop at PPE. A US-based user scathingly asserted "in slave labour" (Sputnik, 2020a), while another individual from the subcontinent exclaimed, "China will be taken to International Court by People & Countries to pay for all damages and losses...if not the world will boycott China"

(Sputnik, 2020a). The insinuation here is that China was ultimately culpable for the coronavirus's global spread and thus the ensuing economic damage wrought by its flareups.

Many members of Sputnik's digital online audiences who chose to comment conveyed their exasperation that China had failed to prevent the spread of the virus abroad. These grievances were expressed with differing degrees of hostility. On the more reasonable end, comments from users in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Ghana included: "China lied, world died"; "only after spreading corona globally"; "whole of world devastated, thanks for people carelessness"; and "My country including the rest of the world is lockdown now, except China. Chinese are complicit to what the world is facing now, they must pay for it" (Sputnik, 2020a). Another user in Qatar posted a link to an article from mainstream media publication *The New York Times* with the headline "China May be Beating the Coronavirus, at A Painful Cost" (Qin, 2020). Are we to interpret this as an attempt to direct Sputnik's Facebook audiences towards a more "reliable" source of information on China's handling of its coronavirus epidemic?

On the more extreme end, other audience comments acquired a reactionary and vitriolic edge. Users from the UK and the US used obscenities to express their disapproval of China: "Cunts"; "Can somebody nuke this diseased shit hole?"; and "Ya now that these lying fucks got the whole world infected with their disease from their nasty way of life and food" (Sputnik, 2020a). Thus, one can detect a certain populist or alt-right predilection amongst some of Sputnik's Western Facebook audiences. That said, this phenomenon is far from unique to Sputnik. On the contrary, the alt-right trope is a common thread among online communities. Alt-right prevalence notwithstanding, one associates such unapologetically disparaging remarks towards a particular nation or ethnic group with Trump. Simply put, the comments evoke Trump's designation of coronavirus as the "China virus" as well as his wider attempts to deflect his own administration's inaction by personifying the threat posed by the pandemic. However, the negative sentiment expressed towards China by Sputnik's Facebook users intensified further

still, moving from vulgar profanities to conspiratorial notions relating to the virus's origin. This marks another departure from EUvsDisinfo's database, which found that Sputnik's Belarussian outfit in particular had tended to blame the West and defend China. Here is an illustrative sample of comments from users in India, Georgia, Russia, France, Sweden and the US:

China has spread....these Virus thorough the world .....How can dey control  
...everywhere ...in the world ....people r suffering n dying .....Never believe diz country.....

china had put rest of the nations to coma stage and reaping profits out of it.

China fooled the whole world china have to pay for this they made coronavirus in their labs

Wuhan leakage is China's gift to the world a pandemic and she recovered fast to lead world economy like buffaloes. How did she transport the virus into the world?

I think China did this intentionally sending that virus around the world

They turned off the 5G

Beijing is responsible for this weaponized outbreak. The good news, everything made in China is junk and won't last long.

Bacterio weapon

So it is gone, just like that !! 😏😂😂😂😂😂  
Lies! 🙄👎🦠

(Sputnik, 2020a)

These audience comments seem to be emblematic of the general breadth of COVID-19 conspiracy theories that have circulated in the online media environment: that the virus is an instrument for totalitarian control; was engineered in a lab; is part of a plot to render world economies impotent; was created by 5G networks; and/or is a military weapon. Be that as it may, the projection of China by Sputnik's Facebook audiences is of a malign, deceitful, destructive and untrustworthy player with ambitions to preside over the international system at whatever cost. In addition to the Chinese management, or mismanagement as it were, of the unfolding coronavirus crisis, users conveyed their disapproval on other topics: human rights issues, specifically the plights of China's Uighur minority, and ecological issues such as China's consumption of fossil fuels and air pollution. Though we can only surmise that this particular post was intended to broadcast an image of a China fully on top of its public health crisis (in

sharp contrast to its Western counterparts), it seems that audiences did not engage with this narrative as Sputnik would have hoped. Returning to EUvsDisinfo's special report on Russia's mediation of the coronavirus pandemic during this particular period, its authors claimed that they presented China as being superior to Europe (EuvsDisinfo, 2020b). Whether or not that was a genuine editorial intention, this promotion of China certainly did not resonate with the majority of Sputnik's Facebook audiences. Hence, once again, EUvsDisinfo's account of Russia's media strategy during the pandemic turns out to be one-dimensional and therefore misleading.

Yet a small minority of users did seem to engage positively with the livestream showing China's return to normal activity, that is to say, these users expressed approval of China's efficient containment of the coronavirus. However, most of these statements were made by one particularly prolific commentator, who appears to be based in the UK and of socialist political persuasion. The user in question commented on the post a total of 21 times. What is more, their posts varied from positive assessments of China and its place in the international system to scathing critiques of the West's dilatory response to the unravelling public health crisis to full-blown conspiratorial assertions that the US was in fact behind the coronavirus pandemic. Here is a selected illustrative sample of this user's comments:

Overseas social media platforms are also helping the spread of rumours and slandering of China, and even censor voices attempting to uphold the truth.

Extreme poverty is decreasing largely due to Chinese investments in Africa and SE Asia.

Chinese and Russian medical teams are stepping in to help Italy in the battle to stave off the coronavirus plague that has brought the country in the heart of Europe to a virtual standstill.

Last week Serbian President Aleksander Vucic dismissed European solidarity as a "myth" and thanked China for sending five million much-needed masks to Serbia, which it could not get from the EU bloc.

The USA has a track record of using both biological and chemical weapons against countries it wishes to dominate. These countries include the DPRK, Cuba and the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam.

Synthetic GMO virus produced as a consequence of the current ongoing "Cold War" being waged against China by the United States, logically it had to be deliberately



created and released by the Amrid Biological Warfare laboratory at Fort Detrick, Maryland, USA.

China sends medical supplies to other countries, meanwhile, the US imposes sanctions and embargoes on other countries and supplies weapons. to dictators

(Sputnik, 2020a)

Strikingly, this sample of comments echoes many of Sputnik's editorial strategic narratives vis-à-vis the West. What is more, despite these comments addressing various pro-China and anti-Western tropes, there is a striking uniformity, pointedness and scrupulousness to them (combined with their frequency) that makes it entirely plausible that they are the work of a Russian troll. Furthermore, the fact that the commenter explicitly mentioned Russia's international response to the pandemic and specifically its delivery of aid to Italy, which we know Sputnik promoted tirelessly, is even more suggestive of their inauthenticity. Lastly, the fact that this particular user does not appear in the comments pegged to the other posts on our top ten list is again suggestive of their spuriousness. Nevertheless, despite this copious user's valiant efforts to circumvent negative appraisals of China, these were largely brushed off by other users. The responses of two users from the UK and US, "China's responsible for this mess dumbass" and "are you retarded this is all down to China", aptly encapsulated the general nature of the rebuttals (Sputnik, 2020a).

Although not wholly constructive, audiences did react overwhelmingly positively to posts about Russia's international and domestic response to the coronavirus pandemic (Sputnik, 2020b, c, e). Among the most popular audience comments pegged to Sputnik's post detailing the arrival of medical aid to the US and posted by users from Bangladesh, Germany and Australia were:

At least a tiny virus could bring USA and Russia together. Hope now they will act together now to end all conflicts in countries around the globe. Thank you Russia. Great humanitarian job done. Bravo.

One thing I know and believe is that, at the end of this pandemic, there'll be a drastic change in the world other. It won't be business as usual, there will be socio-political, economic and geopolitical reformation....

Congratulations to our orthodox brothers, let's educate these people from this country.



Thank you Russia 🇷🇺 for helping the USA in its time of need! 👍 I wonder what the freakin' right wing quacks have to say about this?!?! I'm sure that they'll come-up with some absurd story about how this is bad for the USA, and it's part of a Russian plot to invade the USA! 🙄

Do you guys gonna have any shame to look Mother Russia in the face and say sorry for everything you have done in History. You attacked, blamed and disrespected Russia and now Russia gonna save you all from dead.

Thank you Russia from Texas 😊

(Sputnik, 2020b)

Thus, as per the above comments, Russia is framed by audiences as a benevolent and humanitarian international actor that has proceeded according to its magnanimous Orthodox principles while also fulfilling its historical role as “Mother Russia”. The depiction of the Russian nation as maternal and thus as protective and nurturing harks back to a key Soviet narrative from the Great Patriotic War of the Motherland (*Rodina mat'*). In addition, these comments are emblematic of pivotal Russian foreign policy narratives that present Russia as having been malevolently vilified, “disrespected”, scapegoated and overlooked by Western powers, namely the US. Thus, audiences are themselves co-producing favourable representations of Russia compared with the West in response to these Facebook posts. Therefore, during the first wave of the pandemic, it appears that Russia’s communication strategy was at least partially successful in capitalising on the disruptive media event by using it as soft power exercise. However, we should allow for the possibility that these particular posts were in fact curated.

Similarly approving audience responses were posted to Sputnik’s Facebook post entitled “talk the talk, walk the walk” boasting of Russia’s delivery of medical supplies, this time to Italy. Users from Norway, India, the UK and Africa expressed their approval:

Europe needs to redefine its relationship in a very positive way toward Russia. They need to understand who the real aggressor is and it's not Russia.

GREAT COUNTRY IN WORLD RUSSIA

great thanks to president Putin and all the Russians and not forgetting the Cubans doctors may the almighty God remember and bless your nations

Love you Russia RU 🥰🥰🥰🥰

Bravo Russia. This is humanity. Thanks to Mr. Putin.

Defenatly not Russia, russian people very kind people and not what bbc telling us about russia all lies

Then after that you will hear Italy IT imposing sanctions on Beloved Russia RU

(Sputnik, 2020e)

Hence, once again we observe how Sputnik's Facebook audiences react positively to a more traditional soft power strategy of projecting Russia favourably. These particular comments are significant for several reasons. First, Sputnik's Facebook audiences demonstrate hyperbolic affection towards Russia, never mind approval. Second, a couple of these particular Facebook users from India and Norway have commented on previous posts and so it seems that Sputnik has some regulars on its Facebook page. Third, the implication from these comments is that Russia is a great power worthy of recognition and is distinctly European. Fourth, some audiences seem to automatically equate Russia with Putin. We observe a similar tendency with audience comments pegged to Sputnik's two further Facebook posts about medical supplies being delivered to Italy: one that was inflammatorily labelled "Russophobia continues" (Sputnik, 2020d) along with another labelled as "URGENT" (Sputnik, 2020e). Facebook users from Uganda, Nigeria, Panama, India, the Maldives and the Democratic Republic of Congo commenting on the first post pronounced their support for Russia's philanthropic act towards its European partner:

A country suffering from sanctions extending a hand of help to people that were against it....God bless Russia.

Russia doesn't need them to lift those illegal sanctions. Those aids show they are doing so well. Big up Russia and Cuba.

The fiasco of the corrupt NATO oligarchy has to be hidden from sight by demonizing Russia in MSM. The oligarchs didn't have a problem supporting Hitler and don't have a problem starting another war (based on propaganda) if that can save their neck.

Shame on to the enemies of Russia . They never have been able to help Italy while it was in need of it , but now when Russia helped unconditionally , these enemies covering their shame by insulting Russia .. Shame on you . Shame on the countries who insult Russia.

Russia has always stood along side humanity . Russia is a great nation. Very well done Russia . I wish all the best for Russian people and Russian govt.

Why should Russia be crucified for helping the Italian Govt? You're not helping, they are helping despite their own problems and that is a bad thing?! Whatever the reason is, lives are been saved. Save lives ! Send your own aid to help another country for favour if you must, just go and save lives. Iranians can't get all their needs and are dying because of sanctions, if you care about lives, save lives by lifting sanctions because of the masses such country without sending a soul to save them if you can. The Russians have done well. Who can do better? Do if you must.

(Sputnik, 2020d)

And users from the US, Spain and Greece posted comments in a similar vein on the second post:

should be the beginning of a beautiful friendship between the two nations

Russia, not the useless EU saving the day in Italy

Russia is the only super power country,stand for huminity, Weldon Russia, Weldon Putin, 🌸🌸🌸👍

To those who are 'using' a good deed for political backlash....this is not the time. It's time to realise the earth is round and we are all on her ! Save your opinions for another chance to spread negativity.

(Sputnik, 2020e)

In both these instances, the comments in support of Russia’s altruistic act allude to the hostilities that underpin Russian relations with the West, that is to say, the economic sanctions that the European Union imposed on Russia following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Thus, the upshot of these audience comments is that despite Russia having been hit by stringent economic sanctions, it has magnanimously come to the aid of Italy in order to “save lives”. Furthermore, it has done so in stark contrast to other major world powers, even the European Union, under whose jurisdiction Italy falls. By the same token, the comments demonstrate a contemptuous attitude the cynical misrepresentation of Russia’s act of generosity as a bargaining tool to ameliorate its economic standing. Another important feature of these posts is that there are three “top fans” among the commenters. “Top fan” badges are awarded to users by Facebook for “being one of the most active followers on your page” (Facebook, 2021). Thus, this is supplementary evidence that while its audiences are very modest, Sputnik nonetheless manages to retain something of a regular following of active users. What is more, as exemplified

by above audience comments, posts that depict overt attempts to portray Russia in a flattering light in contrast to the West are engaged constructively by Sputnik's Facebook audiences, even when they adopt a more confrontational and aggressive tone. Therefore, the comments attached to these particular posts point to further empirical evidence that Sputnik's Facebook audiences interact constructively with content that endeavours to project Russia in a positive light.

Rather remarkably, we see these positive renderings of Russia from Sputnik's Facebook audiences echoed further still in response to Putin's official address to the Russian nation on coronavirus prevention strategies (Sputnik, 2020c). Reverting to Table 1, it is worth underscoring that this particular post garnered the most comments of all the posts within our chosen timeframe, with a total of 189. The overreaching majority of these comments heap praise on Putin. Users from Bulgaria, Bangladesh, Tanzania, Australia, the UK and Ethiopia voiced their approval:

Regards from Bulgaria Mr.Putin! You are the best president in the world!

putin is best president

Best speech for your people and for the people of the world thnks from Tanzania

Excellent decesion Mr. President. Message is very clear. You are the greatest . Greetings from Canberra, Australia. Our government stinks .

Putin is a hero. Just the west does what they can to make out he's the devil

Come Vladimir come to Italy to teach our politicians how ti behave...you are nr 1  
The most smartest and kindest president , wonderful how you have helped Italy .  
Greetings from UK

By the standards of all the modern times Putin of the Russian Federation is known to be as one of the best leaders in the world today.

Powerful true leader , knowledgeable, secular n loved by their countrymen...

(Sputnik, 2020c)

Not only do the commenters exalt Putin's personal and leadership qualities, but they also paint him in a favourable light compared to leaders and politicians of liberal democracies with free and fair elections. Yet again, Sputnik's Facebook audiences are co-producers of even the crassest

of Russian state narratives usually deployed for domestic legitimisation purposes. Likewise, the fact that some commenters announced their nationality in their posts demonstrates that while audiences consume media globally, their national identity determines how they process and respond to that information. A similar tendency can be observed with the fourth most popular video on our list that captured various scenes from the centre of an eerily quiet and locked-down Moscow in real time (Sputnik, 2020d). Here the bulk of audience comments amounted to declarations of solidarity on behalf of a particular nationality or a pronouncement of the particular geographical location they were watching it from.

Overwhelmingly positive assessments of Russia and its international response in the first phase of the crisis notwithstanding, we ought to note that not all comments reflected these affirmative sentiments. A smattering of Facebook users decried Sputnik's authority as a news outlet with users from the US, Italy and the UK posting comments in response to these posts:

why is it headlined as "URGENT"? SPUTNIK; the Russian government propaganda tool!  
Russians in Russia are in worst condition, yet the government is busy only digging mass grave sites in Siberia!

propaganda

(Sputnik, 2020a)

And a scornful:

hahahaha help yourselves first- half of the country is starving and living without hot water and you are arranging pictures here

(Sputnik, 2020e)

The implication of these comments is that Russia is indulging in tasteless PR stunts while its own citizens suffer. Nonetheless, negative estimations of Russia's soft power strategy were greatly dwarfed by positive audience perceptions from audiences to these particular posts.

When it came to a Facebook post with a quote from Putin declaring that Russia would defeat its coronavirus pandemic in three months, audience comments revealed a more mixed response. Comments pinned to this particular post ranged from endorsement to outright conspiracy,

encompassing optimism, scepticism and incredulity. Below is a selected example of some audience comments that reflect the full spectrum of responses to this rather implausible claim made by Putin:

Russia can and Russia will  
I hope Russia defeats it very soon.  
Hopefully, good luck Putin 👍  
How?  
With vodka????????  
U cannot defeat the enemy which is unseen, for this only vaccination can defeat. So don't give blind statement.

How?  
Unbelievable unbelievable  
Maybe you knew the answer before it started ?

(Sputnik, 2020j)

As demonstrated by this sample of audience comments, Putin's ambitious declaration—which framed the virus according to the signature enemy of war metaphor, used by a plethora of national leaders—was received heterogeneously (Brandt and Wörlein, 2020). Nonetheless, as the comments also demonstrate, the audience tended to express humorous doubt, evoking stereotypical images of Russia as a nation of vodka drinkers and responding with reasonable cynicism that the virus could be contained without scientific intervention. The last comment on the list went a step further by implying that Russia was perhaps complicit in coronavirus conspiracy. Moreover, as observed in other instances, audiences also engaged Sputnik in the form of GIFS and memes. In this particular case, a user in Bulgaria posted a satirical meme entitled “St. Covid de Put” that depicted Putin as a saint in a yellow gas mask with the signature Orthodox iconography of gold leaf halo against a celestial blue sky with two cherub angles either side of him. Thus, it seems there were indeed limits to Russia's ability to marshal soft power during the disruptive phase of the pandemic. While audiences responded remarkably positively to PR stories that boasted of Russia's substantial delivery of aid to its afflicted adversaries and even to Putin's direct domestic reaction, audiences drew the line at the most unrealistic assertions.

This section examining audience comments pinned to the ten most interacted-with posts in our first time window, or the disruptive phase of the pandemic, has established several findings about how audiences engage Sputnik. First, audiences responded overwhelmingly positively to traditional soft power renderings of Russia. Second, it was Sputnik's Facebook audience comments rather than the content itself that generated conspiratorial speculation as to virus's origin. Third, though modest, Sputnik's audiences are international and in particular there seems to be a following in English-speaking parts of Africa and the subcontinent. Fourth, Russia, and in particular Putin, seems to inspire genuine affection and admiration from Sputnik's Facebook audiences. Fifth and finally, while Sputnik demonstrated success in mustering more conventional forms of soft power during the disruptive stage of the pandemic, when it shifted the agenda to other foreign policy objectives such as the positive representation of China and the preposterous notion that Putin could defeat the virus in three months, audiences no longer engaged constructively. To understand whether these tendencies are peculiar to the pandemic's disruptive timestamp, the subsequent section will explore audience responses in the pandemic's quotidian, ongoing phase.

### **Second Wave and "New Normal": February 2021**

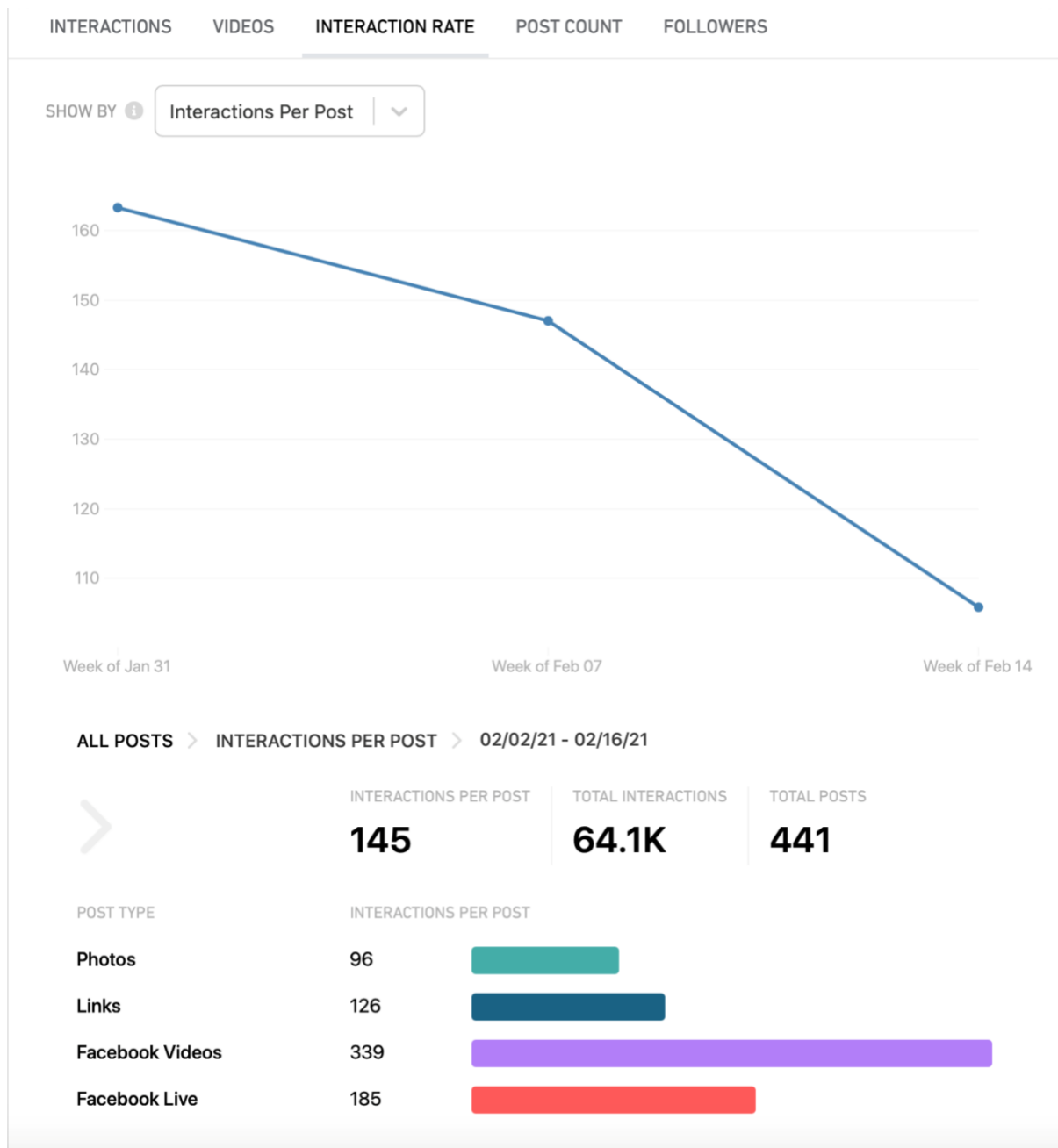
By early February 2021, much of the Western world was in the grips of a deadly second wave. Be that as it may, the pandemic no longer had the disruptive edge that it had engendered during its first wave in spring 2020. In early 2021, the coronavirus crisis and ensuing ramifications were already a new reality for most. Hence, the pandemic was an ongoing event and even a quotidian news story. Adding to this, we might also note that at this juncture, vaccine diplomacy was well under way. But how did Sputnik News's audience interactions fare during this particular period?



As in the preceding section, below is a sequence of graphs that provide an overview of key quantitative data on Sputnik News's Facebook interactions from 2-16 February 2021 including: post counts, interactions per post, interaction post type, interaction type and follower growth rate.

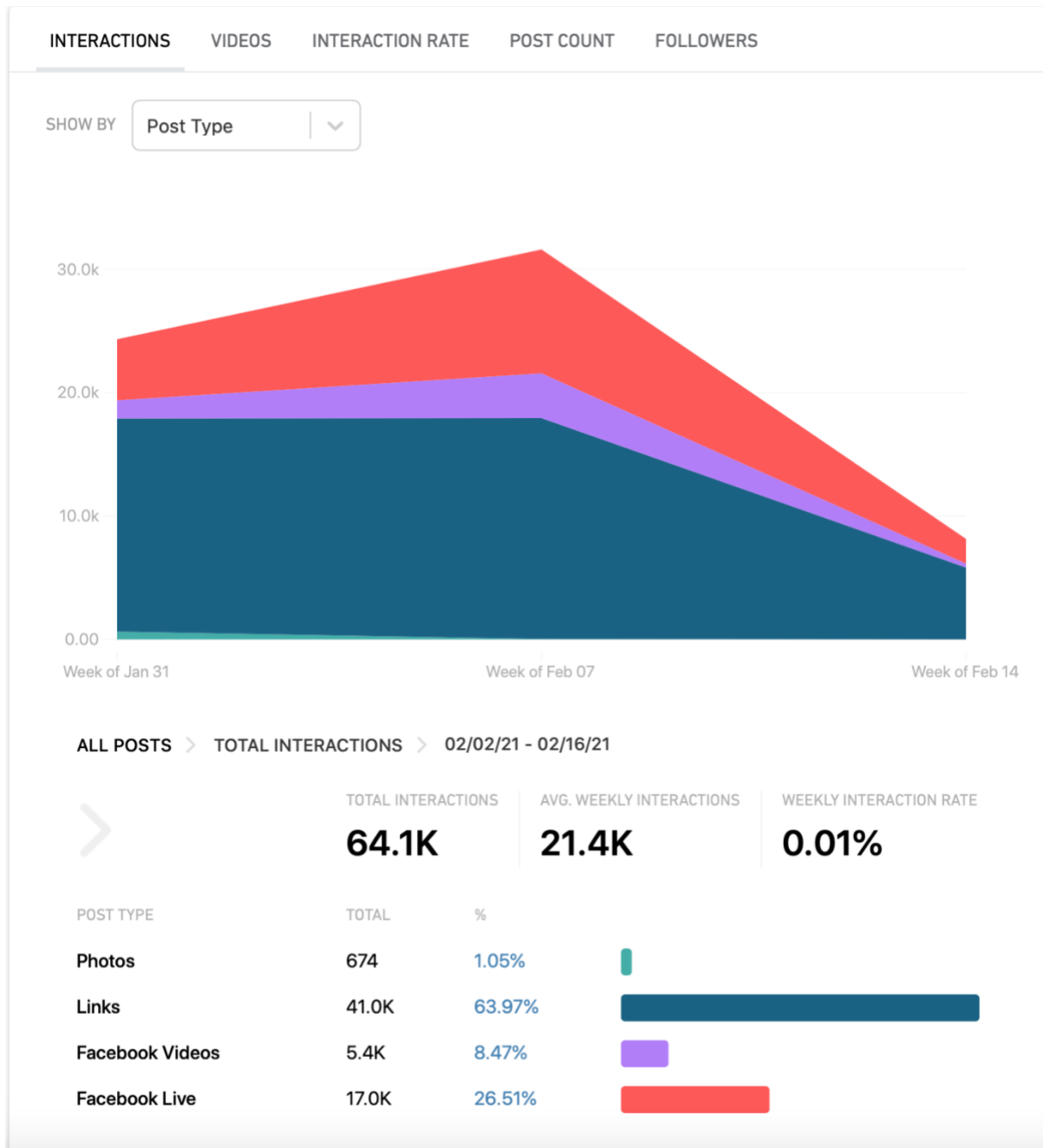


**Figure 7: Interactions Per Post, 2-16 February 2021**



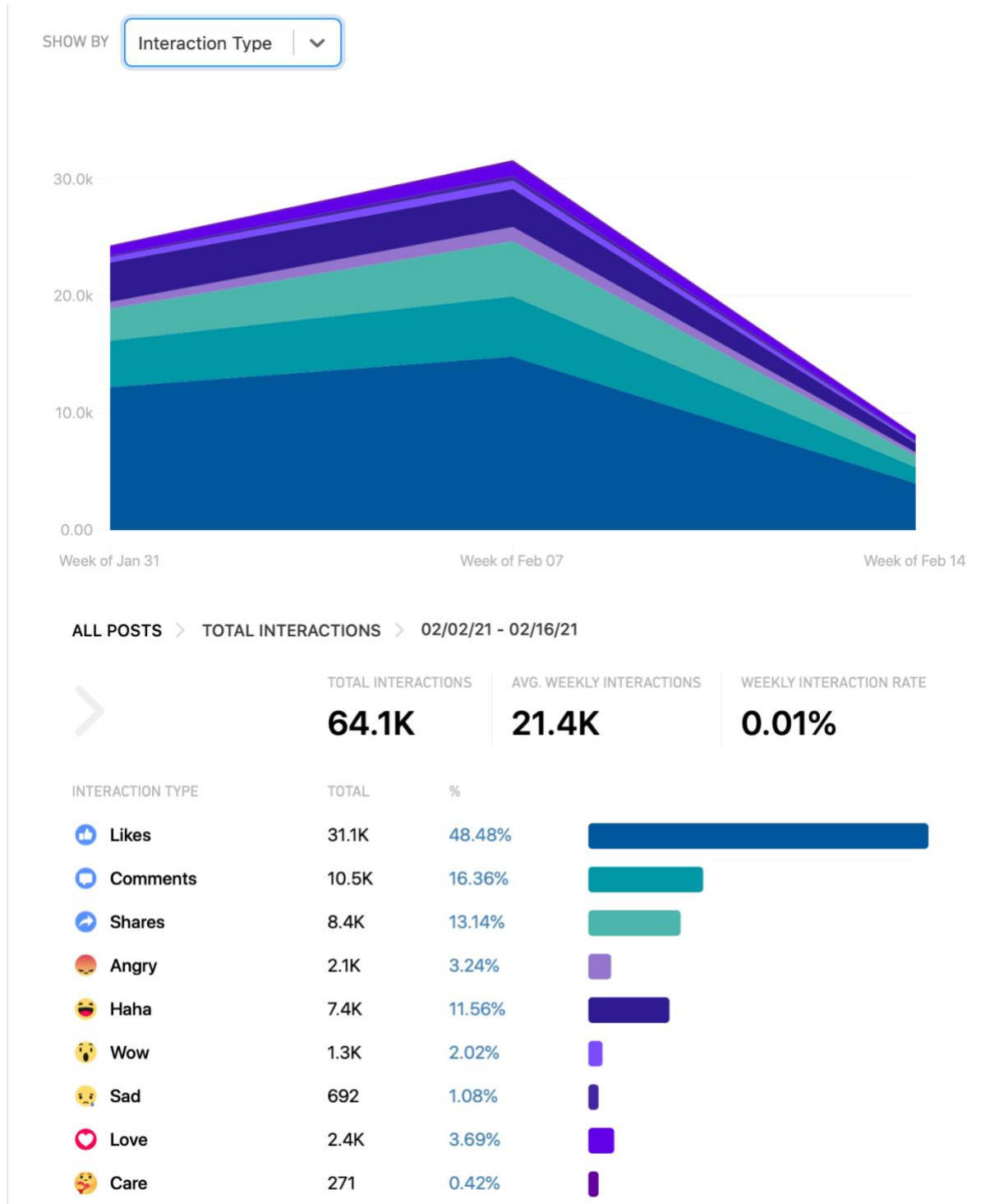
Source: Crowdtangle

**Figure 8: Interaction Post Type, 2-16 February 2021**



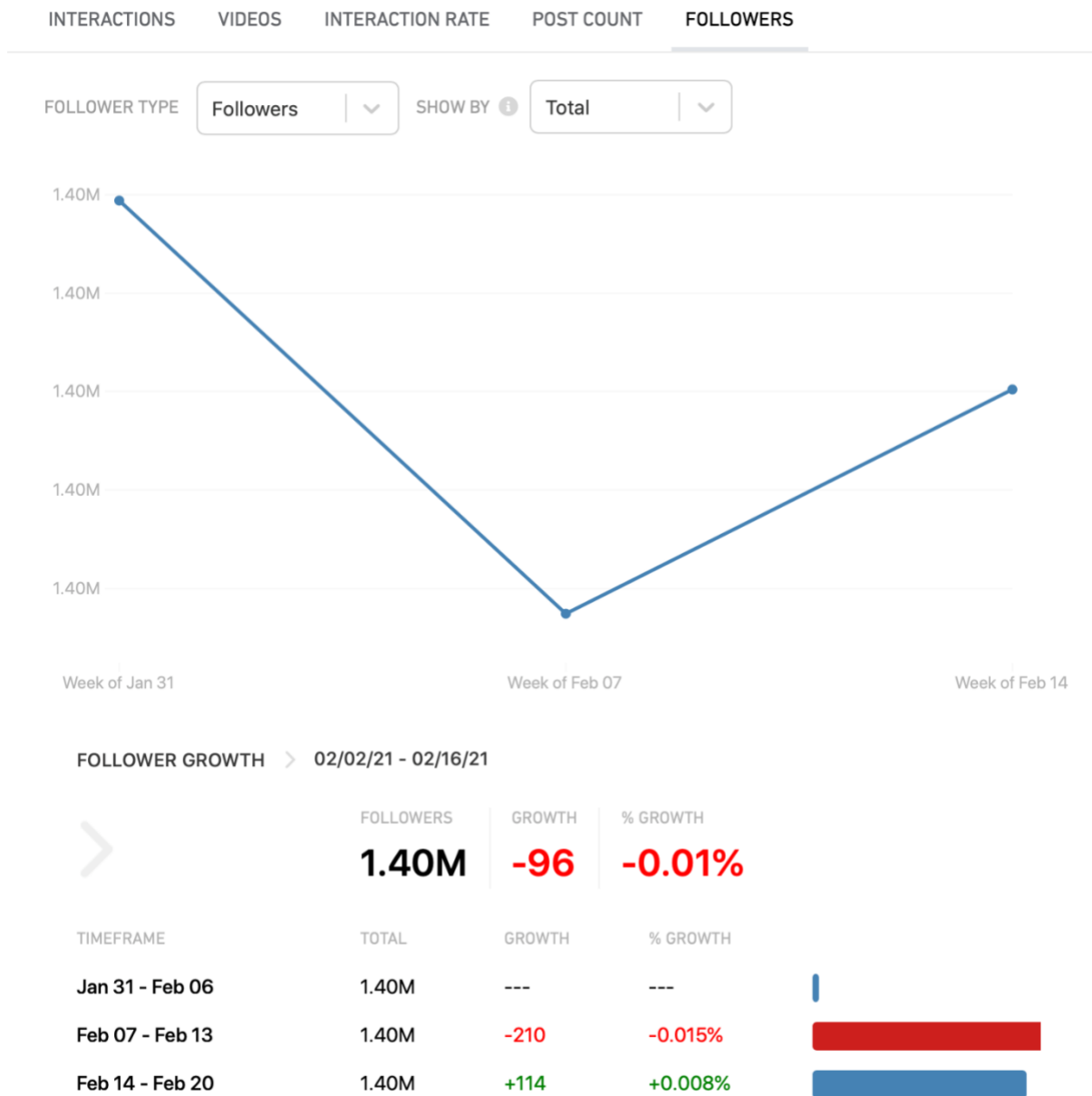
Source: CrowdTangle

**Figure 9: Interaction Type, 2-16 February 2021**



Source: CrowdTangle

**Figure 10: Follower Growth Rate, 2-16 February 2021**



Source: CrowdTangle

Figure 8 reveals that from 2-16 February 2021, Sputnik published a total of 441 posts, down by a total of 14 on 19 March – 2 April 2020. As with the first wave, and despite a reduction in total posts, the vast majority of these posts assumed the forms of links to articles on Sputnik’s URL—a total of 326 or 73.92%. Additionally, as Figure 9 shows, there were a total of 64,100 interactions and an average of 145 interactions per post during this period—less than half of the figures for the first chosen time frame. Similarly, Figure 10 shows that there was a weekly average of 24,100 interactions—yet again less than half the 54,300 recorded in the pandemic’s disruptive phase. Reduced audience interactions notwithstanding, Figure 11 shows that as with our first selected time window, likes accounted for the bulk of audience interactions at 31,000 or 48.8%, but these are still down 9% by March-April 2020. Be that as it may, as Figure 11 also reveals that after likes, comments made up for 10,500 or 16.36% of the total interactions, followed by shares at 8,400 or 13.14%. Thus, despite receiving far fewer interactions than the preceding spring, a larger total share of its interactions were comments. Finally, as Figure 12 makes plain, Sputnik’s Facebook page followers declined very slightly by 210 or 0.015%.

Having acquired a quantitative sketch of our second time frame, we can now proceed to addressing what kind of posts generated the most interactions. To comprehend how audiences engaged Sputnik, which particular social media strategies are fruitful for Sputnik in garnering audience engagement and which are not, I will analyse the content and audience comments of the ten Facebook posts with the highest and lowest numbers of interactions. The first part of this section will address the substantive content, theme, format and style of the posts themselves, while the second part will examine the nature of reactions to posts by analysing the audience comments pegged to them.

## **2-16 February 2021 – Highest Total Interactions**

Below is a table listing the ten posts with the largest number of interactions from 2-16 February 2021.

### **Table 4: Ten Highest Total Interactions, 2-16 February 2021**



ID	Date	Type	Interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares	Love	Wow	Haha	Sad	Angry	Care	URL	Message	Link Text
1	2021-02-13 12:58:56 GMT	Live Video Complete	2,054	791	198	841	178	8	11	0	9	18	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/228355058959448">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/228355058959448</a>	LIVE: Protesters gather in Vienna to oppose coronavirus-related restrictions	LIVE: Protesters gather in Vienna to oppose coronavirus-related restrictions
2	2021-02-11 14:59:23 GMT	Native Video	1,922	1345	68	296	72	104	34	0	0	3	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158909807811181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158909807811181</a>	Estonia was graced with fantastic scenes as Matsulu Bay froze over. A local called Laanemaa Ants Ale decided to revisit an idea he had a few years back, by making an ice disk carousel on top of the frozen Baltic Sea. It's a true work of art.	Ice Carousel On the Sea

3	2021-02-05 06:59:47 GMT	Link	945	362	181	87	60	13	227	1	10	4	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158892231051181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158892231051181</a>	Celebrity interventions inflame sentiments in India as police investigate pro-farmers toolkit	Greta Thunberg Burned in Effigy in India After Series of Tweets on Farmers' Protests
4	2021-02-09 13:59:55 GMT	Link	821	110	386	75	5	4	74	6	160	1	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158904456771181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158904456771181</a>	'There will be more pandemics'	Bill Gates Pinpoints Two Main Threats to Humanity After Coronavirus Pandemic
5	2021-02-02 07:05:00 GMT	Link	806	110	221	40	6	3	367	2	55	2	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158883747776181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158883747776181</a>	'The United States will stand up for democracy wherever it is under attack'	Joe Biden Threatens Myanmar With US Sanctions Over Army Takeover

6	2021-02-05 14:59:17 GMT	Link	806	525	94	57	91	6	27	1	1	4	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158893054986181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158893054986181</a>	URGENT	Russia Expels Three EU Diplomats For Participating in Unauthorised Rallies
7	2021-02-04 13:04:43 GMT	Live Video Complete	792	304	105	307	57	3	3	1	5	7	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/237628764605239">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/237628764605239</a>	DISCLAIMER: The position of the anti-COVID protesters does not correspond to the position of the government and health authorities	LIVE: Protests in Paris against the government's COVID recovery plan amid nationwide strike
8	2021-02-14 01:00:38 GMT	Link	761	469	85	34	107	5	50	0	4	7	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158916193921181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158916193921181</a>	A possible Trump 2024?	Trump After Senate Vote Says 'We Have So Much Work Ahead of Us', Denounces Trial as 'Witch Hunt'

9	2021-02-09 04:00:52 GMT	Link	728	297	127	99	7	14	11	12	161	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158903620326181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158903620326181</a>	And this is reportedly not the first military convoy that has entered Syria since President Joe Biden took office	59 Vehicles in Two Convoys Reportedly Snuck Into Syria From Iraq Carrying Equipment for US Forces
10	2021-02-03 07:38:24 GMT	Live Video Complete	707	540	40	89	20	4	1	6	3	4	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/482174786110613">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/482174786110613</a>	LIVE: Situation in Yangon after military seizes power in Myanmar	LIVE: Situation in Yangon after military seizes power in Myanmar

As per Table 3, six of the ten most interacted-with posts were promotional links to articles on Sputnik's main URL, while the remaining four were videos: three Facebook livestreams and one "native video". Compared with the preceding time frame, the themes of the top ten most reacted-to posts are far more varied. Topics included: coronavirus restrictions and recovery in Austria and France and the prospect of future pandemics (3 posts); the military coup in Myanmar and the potential imposing of sanctions (2 posts); a possible Trump 2024 presidential bid (1 post); Syria (1 post); Indian farmers' protests in India and Greta Thunberg (1 post); diplomats attending a protest in Russia in support of Aleksei Navalny (1 post); and an artificial ice carousel in Estonia (1 post) (Sputnik, 2021a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j). The range of thematic content among these posts underscores the fact that despite its prevalence, the coronavirus pandemic was no longer disruptive, but rather had become "normalised" and hence was no longer dominating the agenda-setting and gatekeeping processes as it had done the previous year. Some of the posts that promoted material from Sputnik's URL were provocatively packaged by inserting inflammatory statements or selective quotations. For example, the fourth most interacted-with post was promoted with a citation from Bill Gates declaring "there will be more pandemics"—presumably intended to elicit conspiratorial responses given that Gates himself became embroiled in the formation of various COVID-19 conspiracy theories (Sputnik, 2021d). On a similar note, posts that promoted articles on various foreign policy themes like Syria were titled "And this is reportedly not the first military convoy that has entered Syria since President Joe Biden took office" and on a possible US response to Myanmar's military's staging of a coup, "The United States will stand up for democracy wherever it is under attack" (Sputnik, 2021e, i). Furthermore, a post was promoted by attempting to generate a discussion amongst audiences by posing the question: "A possible Trump 2024?" (Sputnik, 2021h). Therefore, we can infer that during this particular phase of the pandemic, Sputnik's traditional attack dog social media strategies received the most responses. In addition, it is also fairly clear that Sputnik's anti-statist editorial direction had not changed since Trump's defeat in the 2020 presidential election and the storming of the Capitol, insofar as its social media content

disparaged the Biden administration, i.e., the status quo, and flirted with the idea of a future Trump presidency. The fact that these particular posts engendered high numbers of responses also suggest that Sputnik's Facebook audiences were this way inclined.

US politics aside, the post that generated the largest number of interactions was a live video stream of an anti-lockdown protest in Vienna with a duration of four hours and 43 minutes with a total of 2,054 interactions (Sputnik, 2021a). Thus, it seems, Sputnik's libertarian stance still has traction for its audiences. Furthermore, this was also the post that generated the largest number of shares at 841 (Sputnik, 2021a). But when it came to comments, the fourth most interacted-with post, a link to an article on Bill Gate's pinpointing of the two major threats to humanity—climate change and bioterrorism (the deliberate development of illnesses to weaken adversaries)—stole the show with a total of 386. Consequently, while audiences interacted with posts on a plethora of topics in this particular period, it appears that COVID-19 related topics were most likely to garner medium and hard reactions.

But what was the nature of these reactions? As with the chapter's previous analysis, in order to understand exactly *how* audiences responded to Sputnik's social media content, an examination of the specific types of interactions and audience comments is required. However, before moving on to this section of the analysis, I will consider the particular social media strategies that had little success in eliciting audience responsiveness.

**Table 5: Ten Lowest Total Interactions, 2-16 February 2021**

ID	Date	Type	Interactions	Likes	Comments	Shares	Love	Wow	Haha	Sad	Angry	Care	URL	Message	Link Text
1	2021-02-15 23:02:25 GMT	Link	15	11	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158921592931181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158921592931181</a>	Larry the cat has held his position longer than the leader of any British political party, says his Twitter page	UK's Chief Mouser Larry Marks Decade in Office at Downing Street
2	2021-02-05 13:59:13 GMT	Link	15	10	3	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158892898141181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158892898141181</a>	In this particular case Downing Street RULES	Court Rules Against Campaigner's Bid to Hold Scottish Independence Vote Without UK Govt's Consent
3	2021-02-12 00:00:53 GMT	Link	14	12	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158910972941181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158910972941181</a>	Read about the video that caused the account's lockdown	Twitter Suspends Project Veritas Account For 'Violation of Rules'

4	2021-02-15 19:10:48 GMT	Link	14	10	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158921148536181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158921148536181</a>	The price of oil has risen to its highest level since 20 January this year due largely to recovering fuel demand	Oil Prices on the Rise Amid Frosty Weather in Texas, Possible Norway Strikes
5	2021-02-04 00:01:09 GMT	Link	13	12	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158888458751181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158888458751181</a>	The football star said he was 'bruised but fine'	Argentinian TV Channel Releases Footage of Maradona Just Days Before His Death
6	2021-02-03 20:59:27 GMT	Link	12	8	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158888127596181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158888127596181</a>	Oooops	Texas Authorities Reportedly Apologize for Sending Out Creepy Alert About Chucky Doll by Mistake




7	2021-02-11 02:00:54 GMT	Link	11	9	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158908618171181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158908618171181</a>	☹️	Minnesota Republican Gets Stuck Upside Down During Virtual Committee Hearing
8	2021-02-13 01:07:28 GMT	Link	10	6	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158913792296181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158913792296181</a>	"Do you have an ex-Valentine and know they have outstanding warrants?"	N Carolina Sheriff Office Rolls Out Pretty Specific Valentine's Day 'Special' For Exes
9	2021-02-15 20:59:54 GMT	Link	10	8	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158921332076181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158921332076181</a>	The newly appointed WTO director-general Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala says the organization and the US share priorities	New WTO Chief Says Biden Administration 'Wants to Bring Agency Back to Its Purpose'

10	2021-02-11 19:59:39 GMT	Link	8	5	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158910459231181">https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10158910459231181</a>	URGENT	Germany's Bayern Munich Wins FIFA Club World Cup, Beating Mexico's Tigres
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Having gauged which of Sputnik’s Facebook strategies were effective in provoking responses in the pandemic’s second wave, we must now explore the character of these interactions during the non-disruptive phase. Did audiences engage constructively? Or obstructively? Or both? These are the questions that this section seeks to answer.

Audiences’ comments pegged to Sputnik’s post that attracted the largest number of interactions from 2-16 February 2021, a livestream video depicting scenes from an anti-lockdown protest in Vienna, were largely supportive of the protesters’ cause. Audience comments ranged from libertarian lockdown sceptic to covid sceptic to antivax and wild conspiracy. Here is a selective sample from the total 186 comments including those of users in Australia, the UK, the US, France, Sweden, Bulgaria, Cyprus and New Zealand:

We unite with you AUAUUAU


Sending love from Australia guys well done keep it up xx 

Bravo, be proud you have some intelligence. Show the rest of the world how it’s done.

Praying for Vienna and the world. Educate yourself on these very rushed vaccines!! In America almost 1200 people have died from the vaccine!!

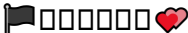
Let’s go humanity it’s time to wake up

Protesting with your muzzle on is not a protest at all

Love and respect from Cyprus 

Stop wearing the nappies.. australia is with you

Why do they wear masks on their faces ... They follow the agenda of globalism, they have no free will of their own ... Georg Orwell 1984 or COVID-19 (84) ... Wake up now ... !!!

Wonderful to see! I’m ready to make a stand In Scotland 

GRGRATAT 





Froud- PLANdemia BG

(Sputnik, 2021a)

Rather than express their endorsements of the libertarian anti-lockdown sentiment in words, some audiences opted for the visceral messages conveyed in the form of heart, strength and applause emojis. Strikingly, both in national flag emojis and the comments themselves, some audiences pronounced their national identity when expressing their support such that the Facebook users almost represent what Beck and Levy (2013) term a “cosmopolitan nation” or even what Levy (2018) calls a “cosmopolitanised solidarity”. Here the global risk that underlies this “cosmopolitan nation” or “cosmopolitanised solidarity” is that of future pandemics and with it a permanent restructuring of the social contract that demands citizens be more obedient to their governments and therefore constrains their everyday freedoms, movement and data privacy—a kind of libertarian global risk, if you will. Beyond these messages of solidarity, a few of the audience comments demonstrated outright disdain for various coronavirus prevention methods, let alone lockdowns, namely those who described masks as “nappies” and “muzzles”. So, as well as being lockdown sceptics, some of Sputnik’s Facebook audiences are also unashamedly disdainful of even basic public health prevention strategies insofar as they constitute an affront to individual liberties. Nevertheless, a further proportion of audiences reacted with even greater cynicism about the pandemic—raising the prospect that it was in fact intentionally manufactured for political purposes as well as the spurious statement that vaccines are killing Americans. Thus, we can deduce that at least some of Sputnik’s active audiences are of the anti-statist or libertarian persuasion foregrounded in the thesis’s preceding chapter on Assange’s arrest.

We observe a similar pattern with audience comments pegged to the post with the largest number of comments, a promotional link to a suggestively provocative article that selectively quoted bits of an interview Microsoft founder Bill Gates gave to YouTube channel Veritasium on 4 February 2021 outlining the biggest threats to humanity (Veritasium, 2021). The article was promoted using the selective quotation: “there will be more pandemics” (Sputnik, 2021d).

Though we can only speculate as to the editorial intention of this particular post, given the prevalence of coronavirus conspiracy theories involving Gates and his Foundation that continue to circulate on social media, we can prudently assume that such content was meant to spark conspiratorial exchanges amongst Sputnik's Facebook audiences. True to form, the audience comments pinned to this post were full of wild conspiracy theories. As before, here is a selective sample of audience comments of users from the UK, Greece and Iran:

Why haven't any of them caught these so called viruses? Is it only us commoners that get it and die. I've not heard of one of them working so closely with this virus catch it or become ill or die. Why is that.

He should know I believe he has the next one ready to release ,and said ,they will take notice if this one , lovely man. 🙄🔪💀

Yes, he's already working hard on the next one!

I had a friend who was a British intelligence officer in WW2. He had a saying ' when someone shouts fire, check to see if that person is holding the match'.

Naturally caused?! I'm afraid not, and he knows it. A paper in the Lancet last feb showed the bat narrative to be a falsehood.

It was already in progress before it arrived at the market, according to Daniel Lucey of Georgetown university.

Moreover, Greek scientists reported in January'20 that it bore little resemblance to prior entities in the subgenus, and has a unique middle section never seen in any cv.

Basically, it is man made and brand new.

Isn't he one of the main threats to humanity?

One is Gates and the other Gates, funny how he wants to control everyone while he and his stay untouched

Porkies. He and his rich relatives and cronies are the only threat to humanity. Says it all when he wants to kill 2 billion people as he believes the planet is over populated. Hence the plandemic and vaccine that is killing people.

He is engineering all this. This is all done to control world population and start NWO.

Threat #1: Bill

Threat #2: Bill's wife

One of them would be Bill himself depopulation his agenda 🙄

(Sputnik, 2021d)

The sample of audience comments reflects the extremity of theories linking the virus, its prevention measures and its antidotes to Gates: the idea that he and his wife, through their

Gates Foundation, engineered it for depopulation purposes. Curiously, the vast majority of the audience comments appear to have been posted by users in the UK. In addition, among the commenters there are very few “top fans”. In light of these facts, it is clear that these particular commenters already had these conspiratorial predispositions and that Facebook’s data algorithms simply promoted this particular post to them on the basis of other content they had viewed or engaged. Consequently, in the second wave of the pandemic, Sputnik had some success in garnering audience reaction from a particular contingent of COVID-19 conspiracy proponents in Liberal Western democracies.

The third post on our top ten list that addresses COVID-19 features is a live video stream of a protest march in Paris on 4 February organised by its major employment unions that railed against what were deemed to be insufficient economic support packages from the French government (Garda, 2021). To this end, the protest was not anti-lockdown per se. Nonetheless, this did not deter Sputnik from promoting it according to its trademark anti-statist banner “DISCLAIMER: The position of the anti-COVID protesters does not correspond to the position of the government and health authorities” (Sputnik, 2021g). Nor still did this dissuade Facebook users from appropriating the rally to publish more highly dubious content about the pandemic:

Wearing masks as they could be arrested or fined if they don't

The tests are fake, with so many different Corona viruses they can't determine Covid 19 from a common flu.

WHY R THEY WEARING MASKS ?? Loads of crap



The World against Gates,Soros and K.Schwab. 🇺🇸🇬🇧 Liberty for mankind.

CoNvid 1984 , greatest hoax perpetrated on humanity !

Hello from UK ❤️

(Sputnik, 2020g)

These audience comments succinctly encapsulate the overall form and character of interactions we have observed on the specific topic of the pandemic. That is to say, a kind of “cosmopolitan nation” or “cosmopolitanised solidarity” of libertarian COVID-19 sceptics predicated on the “global risk” of an erosion of individual rights and freedoms in the event of future pandemics that seems to traverse traditional political orientations (Beck and Levy, 2013; Levy, 2018). In addition, there is a coronavirus sceptic questioning of even minor public health interventions such as the wearing of face masks. Lastly, there are the conspiratorial frames of COVID-19 as a manifestation of an Orwellian dystopian nightmare of totalitarian control and a plot involving billionaires Bill Gates and George Soros (often himself the target of a virulent type of anti-Semitic conspiracy theories).

Moving on to audience comments published in response to the fifth most interacted with post that promoted an article labelled as “URGENT” on the expulsion of three EU diplomats from Russia who attended an unauthorised political rally in support of Navalny, we remark similarities with the pandemic’s first wave (Sputnik, 2021f). In other words, audiences became co-producers of a particularly partisan rendering of Russia. Comments from users in Australia, Malaysia, Greece, the US and the UK all expressed their approval of Russia’s decision to expel the diplomats:

These diplomats have no business in participating in rallies. It is not part of their job!

Use all the nukes. Let's start anew.

Disgrace, the western leaders still don't understand RUSSIA, can western leaders will understand the difference between RUSSIA and Ukraine???,??????,

Mentally il Diplomats..what they Think on!

That`s just like being in America

Well done ! 👍

Finally! The west should feel some pressure, The World count on russia

I love mother Russia. The west are stupid to think we shall allow their puppet to rule so they can destroy us again. Never again

The west thinks they have their Yelstin 2.0 in the Navalny Clown!

(Sputnik, 2021e)

Once again, we witness uncritical endorsement of the official Russian position that on this occasion extends even to domestic Russian politics. Couched in another way, Sputnik's Facebook audiences co-produced the narrative that Navalny is in fact a "foreign agent" working on behalf of the West to usurp Putin. Incidentally, six out of these commenters happen to hold "top fan" status. Hence, as we saw in the preceding analysis during the pandemic's disruptive phase, Sputnik's most active Facebook audiences tend to co-produce even the most suspect of Russian foreign policy objectives vis-à-vis the West. But given the hyperbolically pro-Kremlin character of these comments, it seems plausible that these are in fact the work of trolls, who are known to post pro-Russia messages on news reporting websites (Garmažapova, 2013; Korotkov, 2014).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter's examination of Sputnik's audience engagement across its English language Facebook platform at two critical junctures during the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed several significant findings. First, during the pandemic's initial or disruptive phase, when, as we know, political establishments struggled to direct information flows, Sputnik's Facebook content was closely pegged to official foreign policy objectives, i.e., its soft power operation. Second, in this disruptive phase, Sputnik's Facebook content that promoted Russian soft power received the most interactions and comments from audiences. Third, once the pandemic had become normalised, Sputnik's Facebook content assumed an anti-statist or libertarian slant that was critical of the stringent public health measures adopted by Western countries to contain the virus. Fourth, in this "new normal" phase of the pandemic, it was precisely these kind of Facebook posts that generated the most responses and interactions from Sputnik's audiences. Five, at both the disruptive and new normal junctures, Sputnik's audiences produced the most



incendiary content. When Russian foreign policy objectives were at stake, these audience comments were invariably the work of Russian trolls. That said, many of the inflammatory audience comments relating to the political handling of the pandemic would not have been incongruous for an alt-right media outlet—or even a mainstream one—given that audience comments on social media tend towards the extreme and bizarre. Thus, we may conclude that while Sputnik appears to have an extremely modest but loyal international following of audiences that engage constructively with its brazen attempts to paint Russia in a flattering light vis-à-vis the West and its inflammatory anti-statist editorial stance, it is by and large preaching to the converted.

## Thesis Conclusions

This doctoral thesis, *Sputnik and the “Information War”: Projecting Russia in the Digital Age*, sought to offer a contribution to questions of major academic and political significance: Russia’s national projection operation and media strategy. To realise this objective, the study foregrounded Russia’s radio-cum-multimedia outlet, Sputnik. Though there have been a limited number of scholarly investigations of Sputnik—Kragh and Åsberg, 2017; Wagnsson and Barzanj, 2019; Birge and Chatterje Doody, 2020—scholars of Russia’s political communication have not incorporated systematic explorations of Sputnik’s output and reporting strategies into their analyses. Omitting the radio-cum-multimedia broadcaster from empirical analysis has hitherto left a significant gap in our understanding of Russia’s external projection strategy and of Sputnik’s specific function within it. Thus, by excluding Sputnik, the extant literature is not able to offer a holistic account of Russia’s efforts to project itself for the global media ecology. This thesis undertook to remedy this oversight by placing Sputnik centre stage.

The thesis’s research aim was twofold. Its primary purpose was to establish how Sputnik projects Russia for the global media ecology so as to fulfil its secondary aim of determining whether Sputnik plays a distinctive role in Russia’s outward projection strategy. I endeavoured to contribute to recent scholarship at the intersection of International Relations, Politics, Russian Studies and Journalism Studies by exploring: how Sputnik represents official discourse on Russian identity (RQ1), how it negotiates disruptive media events (RQ2); how it projects itself onto the wider global media ecology (RQ3); and how audiences engage with it (RQ4). To address these questions, I selected four appropriate case studies through which to examine Sputnik’s media coverage across its radio programmes, social media plugins and Facebook posts: the centenary of the Russian Revolution (2017); the Salisbury poisonings (2018); the arrest and detention of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange (2019); and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020). To gauge Sputnik’s place in the wider global media ecology, I deployed the theoretical lenses of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2016), the disruptive media event (Katz and

Liebes, 2007) and strategic narratives (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2013) where suitable for each case study. Each of the thesis’s four chapters offered its own specific contribution to the first systematic analysis of Russia’s foreign projection strategy as communicated via Sputnik.

## **Discussion Outline**

First, I addressed the question of official discourse on Russian identity by analysing Sputnik’s coverage of the centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution. Much can be gleaned about a nation’s self-perception and identity by examining how it commemorates or disregards its historical past. Since Putin’s ascendancy to the Russian presidency (2000), the Great Patriotic War (*Velikaja otečestvennaja vojna*) has once again become deeply embedded in Russia’s national story and imagination. By contrast, the Russian Revolution is an episode in Russia’s past about which members of the political elite are divided and towards which Russia’s population feels apathetic. Conversely, in many Western countries, 1917 is a major source of cultural capital for Russia. Examining Sputnik’s Russian and English language coverage of a historical event to which no official historical narrative is attached domestically but which presented an attractive soft power opportunity internationally demonstrated how the broadcaster deployed contradictory ideational and identitarian narratives. As the analysis showed, Sputnik adapted its framing of the Russian Revolution’s centennial for diverse audiences. On the one hand, its English language coverage invoked contemporary identity politics that represented 1917, and by extension Russia, as the cradle of all subsequent progressive political movements throughout the globe. On the other, Sputnik’s Russian language coverage aimed at domestic audiences attempted to accommodate a diverse set of possible interpretations that were: nostalgic for the Soviet Union and its legacies; virulently anti-Soviet and pro-Russian Orthodox Church; and emblematic of themes of “reconciliation and accord”. Divergent media renderings of 1917’s centennial notwithstanding, there was one common thread that linked Sputnik’s domestic and

international coverage—Russia’s historical-facing great power strategic narrative (O’Loughlin and Miskimmon, 2017, p. 115).

Chapter II argued that the audio medium granted Russia’s political elite and state-aligned media executives greater scope to transmit heterogenous and conflicting narratives of official discourse on Russian identity. It revealed that radio’s pliability renders it a particularly convenient tool by which to project ideational and identitarian narratives that have the potential to appeal to wide-ranging demographics. Thus, theoretically Sputnik is better placed than RT to serve the short-term political needs of the regime pertaining to official discourse on identity both at home and abroad. However, given the anachronistic nature of Russia’s 1917 strategic narrative, the unnuanced nature of Sputnik’s coverage of the Russian Revolution, and its lack of journalistic rigour, the potential offered by the audio medium to serve short-term political needs in projecting official discourse on Russian identity according to the particular target audience was squandered.

Chapter III moved on to examining Sputnik’s hybrid audio coverage of and audience responses to an incident of cardinal importance to Russia’s security elite (*siloviki*) and soft power campaign, the 2018 Salisbury poisonings. The purpose of this chapter was to gauge how authoritarian media actors attempt to control and shape a narrative during a disruptive media event when the dominant global media (i.e., Western mainstream media) challenge the official position of an authoritarian state that sponsors its media actors (Katz and Liebes, 2007). The chapter argued that Sputnik deployed a distinct tactic in its mediation of a disruptive media event—that of ceding the floor to the audiences by turning them into co-producers as a tool for controlling the narrative. Yet it also revealed Sputnik’s extremely limited success in this enterprise. Consequently, the chapter challenged some of the principal assumptions in the literature on Russia’s Information War discourse.

In chapter IV, I addressed Sputnik's place within the wider global media ecology by analysing how it constructs its identity as a media outlet. To do this, I examined Sputnik's radio broadcast coverage of the arrest, detention, and ongoing legal proceedings confronting WikiLeaks founder and former editor-in-chief Julian Assange. In this chapter, I sought to ascertain how Sputnik adapts to and inserts itself into the global alternative media ecology. The chapter argued that Sputnik implants itself assertively into the alt-media ecology under an anti-Western hegemonic and loosely libertarian banner. It does so editorially by rejecting legacy news media's mantra of objective fact-based reporting as a fanciful and fraudulent myth, whilst also purporting to offer a balanced news coverage. Additionally, Sputnik positions itself as an alt-media outlet in terms of its broadcasting practices—breaking news and audience phone-ins. In both these endeavours, then, Sputnik's self-identification as an alternative media outlet is very much akin to that of television broadcaster Fox News and UK radio broadcasters talkRADIO and LBC.<sup>24</sup> However, given that these broadcasting techniques initially associated with alt-media have become extremely widespread, scholarly attempts to ascribe a mainstream or alternative status to an outlet on the basis of its journalistic practices and operation are at best redundant, and at worst misleading. In fact, as the analysis showed, the notions of mainstream and its alternative are not fixed, but rather exist on a continuum and thus are constructed by the media outlet in question. While the chapter found that Sputnik boldly affirms its identity as an alt-media outlet by championing alt-media figures, it clearly struggles to elicit journalistic authority, i.e., to establish the right to an audience.

Finally, in chapter V, I focused on audience engagement. By analysing Sputnik's social media interactions at two critical junctures during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was able to gauge how Sputnik adapted its coverage during a global disruptive media event—rather than one initiated by Russia—in which Russian and Western strategic goals were aligned. Using a mixed methods

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<sup>24</sup> Incidentally, both Fox News and talkRadio are owned by subsidiaries of Rupert Murdoch's international media holding, News Corp.

approach of quantitative and qualitative analysis and with the help of social media tracking tool CrowdTangle, I examined which of Sputnik's Facebook posts garnered the most and least interactions as well the nature of the responses (reactions, shares and audience comments). I argued that during the pandemic's initial disruptive phase, Sputnik was at its most successful in generating audience responses when operating as a traditional purveyor of soft power and seeking to paint Russia in a favourable light. But once the initial disruptive magnitude of the pandemic had dissipated and was replaced by a new everyday, run-of-the-mill reality, Sputnik's aggressive and incendiary strategy proved most successful in attracting audience engagement. The chapter concluded that in the pandemic's initial disruptive phase, the unabashedly pro-Russia comments were clearly the work of Russian trolls, though many of the conspiratorial ones posted in the new normal phase would not be out of place in the comments section of most broadcasters, alt-right or otherwise.

## **Main Findings**

While each chapter of the thesis offered its own contribution to my analysis of Sputnik's distinct function within Russia's external projection strategy by addressing specific research questions, there are numerous overlapping observations that warrant reflection.

Unlike RT, Sputnik's branding and media strategy clearly opts for an unadulterated "Voice of Russia" approach. However, this does not mean that Sputnik's broadcast content simply parrots a singular official line on matters of strategic importance to Russia both internally and externally. On the contrary, Sputnik's radio broadcasting content has shown itself to be remarkably heterogenous in its renderings of the same stories. This is most conspicuous in its effort to adapt its content for different linguistic audiences. Yet its propensity to adopt divergent takes on the same topic is not limited to addressing different foreign publics as it tends to be with RT. In actuality, the thesis even noted contrasting framings of the same news items across

its different radio broadcast programmes in the same language. Sputnik affords Russia's self-projection strategy unmatched pliability, largely thanks to the audio medium which offers comparative ease, adaptability and low production costs when pitted against television. Thus, in principle, radio-cum-multimedia broadcaster Sputnik is better equipped to serve the short-term political objectives of the regime in its public diplomacy operation.

The medium of radio also lends Sputnik perhaps its most distinctive instrument in Russia's external projection toolkit, which its elder sibling RT and cousins—the state-aligned domestic television broadcasters Rossiya-1 and Pervyj Kanal—place far less emphasis on: inviting audiences to become co-producers on news items both Russian and non-Russia specific. As we saw in chapters III and V, this tactic becomes particularly pivotal for Sputnik when covering disruptive media events.

Sputnik's appearance on the local Washington DC and Kansas City airwaves (AM/FM) was clearly designed to expand the outlet's potential reach by targeting those inclined to flick through radio stations and therefore stumble upon Sputnik rather than actively seek it out. This speaks directly to the logics of daytime talk radio. However, technological advances in how the audio medium is produced and consumed have further enhanced its capacity to elicit audience engagement, with webcams now being placed in production studios and broadcasts increasingly being streamed live on social media platforms and plugins from Facebook to Twitter to YouTube, meaning that audiences can like, share and comment. As the thesis has demonstrated throughout, Sputnik is very much responding to these innovations. Or more precisely, Sputnik's broadcasting techniques, which blend audience phone-ins with webcam livestreams over social media, are emblematic of the larger hybrid media system where older and newer logics converge. The amalgamation of these more traditional and state-of-the-art media logics is clearly intended to augment Sputnik's reach and audience engagement. Nevertheless, despite the promise that these broadcasting techniques offer Sputnik, the outlet's extremely meagre

audience interactions expose its exceedingly limited success in effectively marshalling the hybrid media logics of the global media ecology. The fact that Sputnik's production team took the decision to close its UK hub in Edinburgh in April 2021 speaks to its failure to have an impact on British shores.<sup>25</sup> Be that as it may, the fact that Sputnik's editorial and production teams opted to expand its English language content in the US and Moscow following the Edinburgh studio's closure strongly suggests that its producers and editors are at least partially satisfied with its results.

Could it be that Sputnik's US-based journalists are able to garner a larger international listenership than and its UK-based ones? From the empirical evidence presented in chapter IV, this is highly implausible as British journalist George Galloway was shown to have the largest audience following across all of its shows, presumably thanks to his recognisability and connections to the former British establishment. If we recall that the former Edinburgh production studio was operating entirely digitally and did not benefit from access to local airwaves, it is conceivable that Sputnik's access to both digital and AM/FM radio in the United States was a factor in the decision to move some of its international English language edition to the US. Given the impossibility of obtaining audience figures regarding Sputnik's AM/FM listenership in the US, we can do little more than surmise that this may be the case. Since Sputnik's departure from the UK succeeded this thesis's empirical analysis by two months, investigating whether this overhaul has altered Sputnik's media strategy and or affected its audience engagement outcomes would be a valuable line of future scholarly inquiry.

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<sup>25</sup> Officially, Sputnik cited an "increasingly hostile" political environment as the reason for its departure from the UK. However, given that the UK did not follow the lead of the US in forcing Sputnik and RT to register as foreign agents in 2017, this seems a dubious claim. Thus, is it far more likely that its UK broadcast production was no longer considered a worthwhile operation.



## **Projecting Russia in the Digital Age**

But where and how exactly does Sputnik slot into Russia's larger projection strategy? And how exactly has our understanding of Russia's larger projection been enriched by this doctoral thesis's systematic analysis of Sputnik? Unquestionably, when it comes to projecting Russia in the digital age, Sputnik is the yang to RT's yin so to speak. To put it another way, Sputnik adopts the strategy of the assertive, aggressive and assured "Voice of Russia" that projects an unapologetically pro-Russian point of view in its critique of the West. On the other hand, though RT produces incendiary content that is also very disparaging of the West and implicitly pro-Russian, though it does not adopt an explicitly pro-Russian stance. Thus, Russia's outward projection strategy can be said to be two-pronged. Since Sputnik represents the official unalloyed perspective of the current regime, it is a particularly useful case study for addressing the Russian perspective on international affairs.

Despite Sputnik often depicting events in a grossly biased fashion that overtly favours the Russian side—or what many would term "propaganda"—I contend that this ill-defined term is neither appropriate nor useful in conceptualising Russia's external projection strategy. Moreover, in the prevailing academic and official discourse, to label something as "propaganda" essentially means to discard and disregard it, such is the stigma associated with it. What is more, Sputnik has long been overlooked as a case study for examining Russia's soft power operation precisely because of its designation as a tool of propaganda (Sherr, 2013; Van Herpen, 2016). Rather than simply denouncing Sputnik as an agent of propaganda as per Sherr and Van Herpen or superficially invoking credibility to distinguish between public diplomacy and the pejorative charge of propaganda as per Rawnsley's (2015) thesis, I argue, it can be seen as part of a newer tradition of public diplomacy that I term "defending attack". How can this term "defensive attack" public diplomacy help us to pinpoint Sputnik's distinctive role in Russia's outward projection strategy? Sputnik's defending attack approach to public diplomacy connotes its signature aggressive and inflammatory parrying of perceived negative images of Russia

involving both negative portrayal of other actors—particularly but not exclusively Russia’s adversaries—and the direct projection of Russian foreign policy initiatives. RT, on the other hand, is primarily concerned with the latter, i.e., the critique of Western politics and socio-cultural norms.

A third outlet, *Russia Beyond the Headlines*, engages in traditional approaches to soft power by drawing on Russian culture and history to present it in a favourable light. Thus, Sputnik’s distinctive strategy is to deploy an amalgam of the former and the latter, or a defending attack. The fact that Russia’s three public diplomacy outlets fashion themselves so differently strongly suggests that far from having an overarching strategy, Russia might be simply experimenting.

Although it may be tempting to interpret Sputnik’s self-assured, incendiary and malleable takes on Russian identity, foreign policy objectives and strategic narratives as reflective of a carefully orchestrated and grand strategy, one must at least entertain the prospect that it is not. In today’s hyper-networked digital age, where information and communication wield increasing power and influence in domestic and international politics, possessing an international broadcaster is prerequisite for claiming great power status. And after all, beneath bravado one can usually detect insecurity, anxiety and fear, and Sputnik is no exception. Indeed, Russia’s insecurity, anxiety and fear about its future role and status in a newly multipolar and polycentric international order are palpable; Sputnik’s media content aptly reflects Russia’s misgivings.

On the other hand, whether by design or happenstance, Sputnik’s distinctive truculence is consistent with Russia’s overall communications strategy as it performs disruption, seemingly without achieving it, and in so doing provokes Western establishments into increasing its recognisability by reacting to its defensive attack.

As a clearer picture emerges of a future multipolar order—and as the production and consumption of information becomes inevitably more digitised and the conventions of public diplomacy shift—Sputnik should remain at the forefront of future academic study on Russia’s foreign projection strategy in order to track whether and how Russia’s sense of self, of other actors and of the international system change.

## Epilogue

On 24 February 2022, months of speculation ended when Russia finally invaded its post-Soviet and sovereign southern neighbour, sparking immediate condemnation from Western political actors. Russia's incursion into Ukraine has already cost thousands of civilian casualties, injured many, caused untold suffering and trauma through heinous war crimes, displaced millions and destroyed homes and large parts of the country's major infrastructure. Globally, it has sparked economic turmoil: raw material and food supply chains have been disrupted and their prices greatly inflated, and threats of famine and fuel poverty loom over large parts of the world. The war represents the greatest threat to European security since the Second World War and has prompted an unprecedented shift in Germany's defence policy. It has also terminated a 30-year period of so-called engagement between Russia and the West and ushered in a new epoch of containment and confrontation. The West's decision to supply Ukraine with defensive weapons now means that Russia and the West are in a state of proxy war. The war looks set to drag on for the foreseeable future, so this new nadir in Russian-Western relations will also be prolonged.

As with previous episodes of confrontation between Russia and the West, albeit less intractable ones, the information, communication and media environment has been a key site of conflict. Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy has deployed media and communications to boost morale among the domestic population and to capture the hearts and minds of the international public while garnering support for Ukraine. In Russia, the war has given rise to a major crackdown on independent and opposition media, with the last remaining outlets all being forced to move their operations overseas or cease publishing and broadcasting. Beyond Russia's domestic media landscape, international broadcasters RT and Sputnik came under renewed scrutiny from Western policymakers after Russia's launched its military assault on Ukraine. For the UK broadcasting regulator OFCOM, the invasion was the final nail in the coffin for RT's broadcasting licence (OFCOM, 2022; Muvija, 2022). And in the unregulated corporate US media

ecology, a string of production, cable and satellite carriers announced they had cut ties with the television broadcaster (Sharp, 2022). As such, the war has effectively brought an end to RT's Western English-language operations and permanently damaged its brand.<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, while there are access restrictions in place in the UK, Sputnik's Washington DC broadcasting continues uninterrupted.

In short, Russia's decision to attack Ukraine has had seismic consequences for international relations and for Russia's external projection strategy. Thus, although the war is not within my four-year analysis timeframe, the implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine for my doctoral thesis on Sputnik require reflection. The epilogue's analysis will consider the thesis's four research questions—how does Sputnik depict official discourse on Russian identity? (1); how does Sputnik respond to disruptive media events? (2); how does it present itself within the wider global media ecology (3); how do audiences engage with Sputnik? (4)—in light of Sputnik's coverage of the invasion and ongoing war in Ukraine. As it falls outside the temporal scope of my doctoral research and because of web access restrictions to Sputnik in the UK that make analysing radio broadcasts problematic, the addendum to this thesis seeks to provide a descriptive overview rather than a close text analysis as in chapters II to V (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 2022). It does so by examining Sputnik's radio broadcasts' web pages using a web archive search application, <https://web.archive.org/>, that allows one to access screen captures from websites that have been deleted or are blocked by search engines. The epilogue analyses promotional articles for Sputnik's radio programmes at three critical junctures of the invasion—each spanning one week—by exploring the presentation and framing of the invasion in the broadcasts' titles and synopses. While summarising the general makeup and tone of Sputnik's radio broadcasts will not allow one to reach overarching conclusions about how Sputnik has covered the invasion and ongoing war, it

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<sup>26</sup> While the RT brand is no longer viable in the West, it is soon to have a new English language hub in the South African capital, Johannesburg. See Sguazzin (2022).

will allow for a reflection on the thesis's main findings in view of this major event in international politics. Likewise, the advertising and packaging of shows is the main vehicle through which broadcasters attempt to entice audiences. They are usually put together by producers and editors and contain verbatim quotes from the programmes, so they can tell us much about how broadcasters conceive of themselves and how they wish to be seen by audiences. Section one explores the leadup or prelude to the war (17-24 February). Section two examines breaking news of the invasion (24 February – 3 March). Section three analyses Sputnik's coverage two months into the war (24 April – 1 May). Section four evaluates Sputnik's follower growth rate using social media analytical tool CrowdTangle at these three different time stamps. Section five will conclude that Sputnik's mediation of the war bolsters the thesis's core argument about Sputnik's distinctive place in Russia's external projection strategy as that of defending attacker, sparking outrage from the West and thus performing disruption rather than actually achieving it.

### **Prelude to Russian Invasion of Ukraine**

In the ten days leading up to 24 February 2022, three key events fuelled long-lasting speculation about the possibility of Russia invading Ukraine. First, on Tuesday, 15 February, Putin announced the withdrawal of Russian troops from the Southern border with Ukraine (Roth and Olterman, 2022). Second, on Friday, 18 February, Denis Pushilin and Leonid Pasechnik, pro-Russian separatist leaders of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions of south-eastern Ukraine, announced the mass evacuations of citizens to Russia on the grounds that they faced imminent danger at the hands of Ukraine (Balmforth, 2022). Third, on Monday, 21 February, in an enraged televised address to the Russian nation, President Putin lambasted Ukraine's historical right to sovereignty and announced the recognition of the autonomous Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) (*Doneckaja Narodnaja Respublika*) and the Luhansk People's Republic (DPR) (*Luganskaja Narodnaja Respublika*). While the first of these downplayed the prospects of

a Russian military intervention in Ukraine, the second and third developments were sufficient to convince sceptics that Russia indeed had military designs on Ukrainian territory. This section explores how Sputnik's radio broadcasts packaged and advertised their shows through their titles and synopses during this period. As the thesis demonstrated, much can be gleaned from titling and descriptions of the shows, as this is how Sputnik endeavours to entice audiences.

Sputnik's Washington-DC studio broadcast a total of 24 shows during this period. Fourteen of the 24 shows featured Russia or Ukraine in their programming titles. The fact that Sputnik's radio broadcasts in the week leading up to the invasion focused on the worsening tensions between Russia, Ukraine and the West speaks to Sputnik's specific function as Russia's unadulterated foreign policy purveyor. The programmes' titles were also emblematic of Sputnik's signature provocative headlining. To cite but a few examples: "Ukraine Invasion Hoax Falls Flat US Media Parrots CIA Narrative" (*The Critical Hour*, 2022a); "Antony Blinken Alleges Russia Will Stage an Attack Using Chemical Weapons" (*The Backstory*, 2022b); and on the eve of the Russian invasion (23 February), "Mainstream Media Omits Crucial History in Anti-Russia War Drive" (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022d). From these three titles alone, a few key Sputnik tropes emerge: the conspiracy theory narrative of the "hoax"; faking of chemical weapons attacks in Syria; and "anti-Russia drive" in mainstream media.

The principal recurring non-Ukraine story was the Canadian convoy protest staged by truck drivers that was triggered in response to mandatory vaccination policies in the country (*The Backstory*, 2022a; *Political Misfits*, 2022a, b; *The Mother of All Talk Shows*, 2022a). Three of the four shows that elected to designate their central discussions to matters beyond Ukraine and that featured different stories in their titles were from *By Any Means Necessary*. Unsurprisingly, these broadcasts focused on themes relating to the anti-racist movement in the US. True to form, these three shows were entitled "Super Bowl Halftime Show is Another Capitalist Cooptation of Black Culture" (17 February); "Cuba Fosters Black History and Culture as US

Attempts to Erase it” (18 February); and “Anti-Racists and Internationalists Solidarity are Key to Liberation” (19 February) (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022a, b, c). Anti-imperialist themes aside, the last of these shows featured a segment on teenage Russian figure skater Kamil Valieva, who failed a drug test at the Winter Olympics (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022d). Following a discussion of racism in sports, *By Any Means Necessary*’s presenters Blackmon and Luqman package discussion of the doping scandal as “how the scandalization of Valieva connects to recent historical and current demonization of Russia as the US and NATO continue to threaten war with Russia over Ukraine” (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022d). Thus, Sputnik was exercising its customary mission of attempting to parry negative images of Russia. In this particular case, it was claiming injustice and unfairness in Valieva’s treatment on the basis of her identity as a Russian athlete. But the synopsis also sought to play down the prospect of a Russian invasion of Ukraine by attempting to draw a parallel between the treatment of Russia in the international system and the plight of African Americans in the US (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022d).

Returning to the 14 programmes dedicated to covering Russia and Ukraine, the vast majority structured their titles and synopses around the three key events outlined above. That said, in keeping with Sputnik’s heterogenous rendering of Russia, the shows presented the topic according to their own signature styles, with some markedly more provocative than others. On the more extreme end were *The Critical Hour* and *By Any Means Necessary*. The former’s presenters Leon and Nixon repeatedly labelled the prospect of a Russian invasion a “hoax”, citing Putin’s withdrawal announcement (*The Critical Hour*, 2022a, b, c). While the shows that anchored their coverage on Russia’s official recognition of the DPR and LRP as autonomous entities openly flirted with the idea of an all-out war between Russia and Ukraine, the possibility of an unprovoked Russian invasion was still denied (*Fault Lines*, 2022b; *Political Misfits*, 2022d; *The Critical Hour*, 2022d). Even by 22 February, at which point many expected a military incursion, *By Any Means Necessary*’s synopsis still dismissed Western intelligence-



gathering about the build-up of Russian military personal on the Ukrainian-Russian border as an “anti-Russia drive” (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022d).

On the very eve of Russia’s invasion, Sputnik’s promotional articles continued to deny that Russia intended to invade Ukraine. The *Fault Lines* 23 February show was entitled “No, Russia Did Not Invade Ukraine” (*Fault Lines*, 2022c). The show’s synopsis reads: “On this episode of *Fault Lines*, hosts Jamarl Thomas and Austin Pelli talk about Russia being the most useful villain for the US and its allies, billions in Covid funds getting handed to fraudsters, and if there’s any court willing to convict Hunter Biden for his shady business dealings” (*Fault Lines*, 2022c). This recalls a key Russian narrative that it is a victim of Western imperialism, whilst also touting a Trumpian one about the wrongdoings of President Biden’s son, Hunter.

The 23 February episode of Lee Stranahan’s solo Sputnik endeavour, *The Backstory*, represented the story in a similar vein. The right-wing commentator and former *Fault Lines* co-presenter’s show was captioned according to his usual trademark populist agenda: “The Globalist Elite Want to Destroy Russia” (*The Backstory*, 2022e). Therefore, according to Stranahan’s conceptualisation, Russia is the victim rather than the aggressor, and the unfolding “emergency” in Ukraine is first and foremost an existential matter for Russia. The Russian victimisation trope and the invocation of the Iraq War in *The Backstory*’s synopsis echo a key strategic narrative often repeated by Russian state actors about the double standards of Western imperialism (*The Backstory*, 2022e). Additionally, the tone and rhetoric are remarkably similar to that that of Putin’s official address given the next day announcing the launch of the “special military operation” (Putin, 2022b). Interestingly, the show’s summary included a note on “how Russia will move militarily in Ukraine and the effectiveness of Russian tanks” with a former UN weapons inspector and weapons of mass destruction whistleblower Scott Ritter making one of his many guest appearances (*The Backstory*, 2022e). Thus, it also hinted at a full-scale war. As the thesis’s analysis demonstrated, whistleblowers appear frequently on Sputnik’s

airwaves as their anti-statist credentials are intended to lend plausibility to Sputnik's loosely libertarian and anti-Western editorial line.

*The Critical Hour's* eve of war episode framed its denial in its title: "Ukraine Crisis is Part of a New Cold War with China and Russia: is NATO a Dead Man Walking" (*The Critical Hour*, 2022e). Referring to the Russian invasion as a "crisis" echoes the language used by members of the Russian political elite to describe the ongoing war there. Similarly, it is noteworthy that China is listed before Russia and that it should have been mentioned at all. Though the rather ambiguous concept of a multipolar international order—equating to the countering of US hegemony—is nothing new for Sputnik, the framing of it as a Cold War 2.0 is. Hence, speculation about the invasion of Ukraine appeared to have prompted a clarification as to how Russia conceptualises a multipolar order, i.e., an anti-Western alliance that includes Russia with China at the helm. New clarity on multipolarity notwithstanding, the description of NATO being doomed or a "dead man walking" is emblematic of Sputnik's attack dog delivery style. What is more, it seems to provide further elucidation as to who and what Russia regards as comprising the West. The irony here is that far from being a "dead man walking", Russia's own actions, allegedly triggered in part by the threat of NATO expansion, have strengthened the alliance. Finally, the episode's subtitle: "The US Empire is working to subordinate Europe and subvert its economic partnership with the new Eurasian superpowers" reiterates *Critical Hours* presenters Nixon and Leon's anti-US hegemony and multipolar slant.

*By Any Means Necessary's* eve of war episode on 23 February framed its denial of Russia's intention to invade Ukraine according to the show's political and ideological slant. It bore the title "Anti-Imperialists in the US Must Place Their Full Focus on Washington" (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022e). As per the title, *By Any Means Necessary* is attempting to move the focus onto the "imperialist" US political establishment even though Russia has just invaded a sovereign country. The first two segments were dedicated to issues such as women's health in the Senate,

Haitian workers' rights and illegal evictions in Philadelphia with grassroots activist organiser guests. Thus, it centred its denial about Russia's invasion of Ukraine by focusing on the US and its wrongdoings—a strategy that seems sure to fail. The summary of the show's third segment with the discussion on Ukraine reads:

the rapid-fire propaganda being pushed by the corporate media on Ukraine and the potential for war with Russia and what history such coverage conveniently leaves out, the misplaced “neither Washington nor Moscow” attitude among some members of the movement and why full focus should be on the US because of its dominance in world affairs, and why it's important to fight against US imperialism in solidarity with poor, working, and oppressed people who are subject to imperialism all over the world. (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022e)

The themes, tone and register of the above embody some of Sputnik's archetypal tropes and narratives, that is to say: the charge of propaganda and the notion of the Western “corporate media”; the deliberate distortion of history by the Western establishment; and the evils of US hegemony and imperialism and its many victims in the form of global “oppressed people” (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022e).

Strikingly, every single one of these shows featured an individual with whom we are all by now well acquainted, Mark Sleboda, to discuss this particular news item. True to form, all 24 shows platformed “alternative” voices, that is to say, they featured guests from the grassroots progressive and activist movements: anti-Racist or Black Lives Matter-affiliated organisations, radical left-wing groups affiliated with the Party for Socialism and Liberation and network friends—repeat guests—across Russia's international broadcasting operation.

This overview of how promotional articles for Sputnik's radio broadcasts framed events in the week leading up to Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrated that denial was the defining feature of the coverage. While each of the shows framed the denial according to their specific editorial agendas and deployed varying levels of provocation, their synopses repeated many official Russian state foreign policy narratives—efforts to counter “negative” renderings of Russia—and often adopted the same tone and rhetoric as Russian state actors. Additionally, the

featured contributors were invariably either network friends, organisers and activists from the radical left or colleagues from across Russia's international broadcasting's professional community. These observations suggest that Sputnik's function continues to be performative rather than purposeful. The next section will examine if Sputnik pursued a specific strategy at the story's breaking news juncture.

## **Breaking News**

On 24 February 2022, the world awoke to news of a Russian march into Ukrainian territory. In yet another televised address to Russian citizens, Putin repeated the mantra of the West's contempt for Russia's security concerns and announced the start of a "special military operation" with the strategic aims of "demilitarising" and "denazifying" Ukraine—a de facto declaration of war despite the notable absence of the word (Putin, 2022b). While Western pundits and commentators believed a Russian attack on Ukraine was imminent, it still falls under the disruptive media event category insofar as it disrupted the flow of the news cycle. This section provides a descriptive summary of how Sputnik's radio broadcasts covered breaking news of the invasion and the following week.

Sputnik broadcast a total of 23 shows in the week from 24 February to 3 March 2022. The analysis first foregrounds the four very first breaking news shows' promotional articles individually and then provides a descriptive summary of the recurring themes, framing, language and tone of the remaining 19 synopses from the first week of the invasion.

Each of Sputnik's Washington DC-based radio shows dedicated their 24 February programmes to Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine. That Sputnik adapted the entirety of its programming schedule to coverage of the war reinforces its role as the unmediated purveyor of Russian foreign policy objectives and defending attacker. What is more, it speaks to the

invasion's disruptive potency as a media event and points to attempts to manage the international backlash.

The first programme to break the news of the invasion was *Political Misfits* (*Political Misfits*, 2022f). *Political Misfits* presenter Michelle Witte is joined by RT journalist Peter Oliver and repeat guests Sleboda and Lazare. The show bore the title "Russia's Special Military Operation in Ukraine" (*Political Misfits*, 2022f). While less provocatively headlined than the majority of Sputnik's other shows, the *Political Misfits* title and description invoked the rhetoric from Putin's special televised address given that very day, e.g., "special military operation" and the description of Russia's official strategic objectives underpinning the invasion, i.e., "demilitarizing and denazifying the government" (*Political Misfits*, 2022f). Though parroting official Russian state discourse on the invasion and refraining from presenting it as an invasion, the show's subtitle toyed with the prospect of a "potential occupation of the country" (*Political Misfits*, 2022f). Long-term occupational matters aside, the show's synopsis was framed around how diplomacy had failed to address Russian security concerns, with the inference being that Russia was left with no choice (*Political Misfits*, 2022f). Other themes included potential economic sanctions and the ramifications for global energy markets. Strikingly, the show's description also raised the topic of Russian public opinion about the military campaign in Ukraine, asking: "How do Russians feel about military action and occupation of Ukraine? Does it help Putin with voters?" (*Political Misfits*, 2022f). Thus, as we saw in the thesis's main analysis, Sputnik endeavours to legitimise Russian foreign policy objectives by citing Russian public opinion. Thus, the *Political Misfits* response to this disruptive event of Russia's own making appears to have been to double down on the defending attack tactic in projecting Russia's foreign policy objectives.

The next show to break news of Russia's invasion of Ukraine was former *Fault Lines* presenter Stranahan's show, *The Backstory*. Stranahan was also joined by Lazare and Sleboda, and the

show was egregiously entitled “Russia Tried the Diplomatic Route” (*The Backstory*, 2022f). Once again, the implication here is that Russia was left with no other option but to pursue a military campaign to achieve its security guarantees and therefore does not bear responsibility for the conflict. *The Backstory*’s synopsis is less timid than that of *Political Misfits* in referring to the Russian attack as a “War in Ukraine” (*The Backstory*, 2022f). As well as adopting a more defiant defending attack tone, the show’s summary also featured the topic of the Russian military’s “readiness” to achieve Russia’s strategic goals. The themes of economic sanctions and the effects on global energy markets with a particular emphasis on European superpower Germany—one Western country that is heavily dependent on Russian gas—were also present (*The Backstory*, 2022f). Thus, once again, it appears that Sputnik’s strategy during the invasion’s disruptive phase was to double down on its defending attack.

The next breaking news of the invasion came from left-wing and civil rights focused show, *By Any Means Necessary* (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022f). True to form, the show is captioned “Anti-Imperialists Must Hold Firm in the Struggle Against War with Russia” (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022f). As such, for Luqman and Blackmon, Russia and the West are already at war. What is more, instead of condemning Russia’s irridentist stance towards Ukraine, the show’s subtitle and summary decry “US complicity in extending and exacerbating the Ukraine Crisis” and “NATO aggression”. The views expressed here are espoused by certain (predominantly left-wing) anti-war activist groups—and undoubtedly by many of Sputnik’s presenters who have direct affiliations with many of these organisations—who oppose NATO on the grounds that it is the true military aggressor and regard Russia’s security concerns about it as legitimate (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022f). But even prominent radical left-wing intellectual and former frequent guest on RT, Slavo Žižek, has lambasted this approach. In an op-ed for *The Guardian* entitled “Pacifism is the wrong response to the war in Ukraine”, he argues that we need a stronger NATO (Žižek, 2022). As the thesis’s analysis postulated, Sputnik would be extremely hard-pressed to achieve any impact by attempting to court anti-war groups, thus it

continues to serve a performative function—feigning disruption without actually achieving it. In an analogous vein, the show’s summary accuses the Biden administration of “waging war and destruction on the world while ignoring the economic needs of workers here in the United States” (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022f). This rather feeble attempt to shift the agenda from the invasion of Ukraine to workers’ rights in the US is *By Any Mean’s Necessary’s* mantra writ large. Thus, even in its coverage of critical importance to Russia, *By Any Means Necessary* frames it according to the political agendas of its presenters, no matter how marginal.

The last show to break news of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was *Fault Lines* (*Fault Lines*, 2022d). The show contemplated the wider implications of the war for international relations, with its title asking, “Russia Launches Military Operation in Ukraine—Now What?” (*Fault Lines*, 2022d). In its traditional defending attack style and with network friends Mark Frost and Chris Ritter listed as guests, the show’s synopsis framed the invasion as “a response to the US, NATO and Ukraine disrespecting their security demands” (*Fault Lines*, 2022d). Thus, Russia is projected as having no agency with respect to its actions in Ukraine. The show’s synopsis also mentions a key foreign policy objective of Russia’s, i.e., that NATO represents “an imminent threat to their national security” (*Fault Lines*, 2022d). Beyond Russia-Ukraine, the show’s blurb raises the prospect of whether Russia’s “special military operation” has paved the way for a possible invasion of Taiwan by China. The conflation of the Chinese and Russian irredentist claims on sovereign territory and the fact the word “invasion” is used essentially amount to an admission that Russia’s has in fact invaded Ukraine.

Following from the very first broadcasts, Sputnik’s remaining 19 breaking news episodes continued to focus on the unfolding war in Ukraine. Recurring themes in the Sputnik shows’ promotional articles included the war’s economic fallout in relation to sanctions (*Political Misfits*, 2022g, h, i; *Fault Lines*, 2022g) and global markets and stocks (*The Critical Hour*, 2022g, h, i). In all of these bellicose synopses, Russia was portrayed as the victim of economic injustice

whilst also being projected as a reliable partner that is ready to negotiate with Ukraine (*The Critical Hour*, 2022f). Another key theme that featured in the remaining shows' promotional articles was that of NATO. In the *By Any Means Necessary* 26 February show, NATO was once again held as being ultimately responsible for the war as per its provocatively worded subtitle: "Corporate Media Offers Anaemic Coverage of NATO Aggression in Ukraine" and "NATO Aggression Behind Ukraine Invasion" (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022b). On the contrary, the title of the *Political Misfits* 1 March show asked if the unfolding situation in Ukraine would make for a "weakening NATO" (*Political Misfits*, 2022h). The irony here of course is that the war has greatly reinvigorated the alliance, with Sweden and Finland formally submitting membership applications in May 2022. While Turkish president Erdogan initially attempted to prevent the Nordic countries from joining NATO, their applications for membership signal the relinquishing of decades of so-called neutrality.

Moving on from NATO and the mantra of Russian's security discourse, these shows' promotional articles punctuated their coverage of the invasion of Ukraine with virulent criticism of incumbent US president Biden, including the charge of warmongering (*Fault Lines*, 2022e, f, g; *The Backstory*, 2022j; *The Critical Hour*, 2022i). In addition to Sputnik's trademark anti-status quo mantra, there were several other noteworthy themes that featured in some of these show descriptions. First, the matter of identity. Two of *By Any Means Necessary's* broadcasts from 2 and 3 March respectively were entitled "Russophobia Motivates Corporate Media's Portrayal of Black Liberation" and "How Ukraine Fits into the Anti-Black Politics of the US" (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022h, i). Highlighting the racial injustices wrought by US imperialism is the central underpinning of *By Any Means Necessary's* editorial agenda. And as the thesis's analysis demonstrated, this often entails presenting Russia and the Russian people as oppressed by the Western superstructure that oppresses non-white identity groups. Nonetheless, to draw such direct parallels between US-Russia relations and the Black Liberation Movement is not credible. Thus, in the invasion's disruptive phase, Sputnik appears to have



doubled down on its invocation of progressive anti-racism politics in its projection of official discourse on Russian identity. *By Any Means Necessary's* 2 March episode's features a quote from former host Eugene Puryear, who makes a guest appearance on the show. In it he rails against "the casting of Black liberation movements as Russian disinformation and the insult that this implies against Black agency and intelligence, and the double standard employed to criticize Russia while ignoring the destruction the US has waged domestically and internationally" (*By Any Means Necessary, 2022h*). This is yet further evidence of Sputnik deploying its signature whataboutism, i.e., its defending attack.

Correspondingly, the synopsis of *By Any Means Necessary's* 3 March show included a mention of the racism experienced by African and Caribbean students attempting to flee Ukraine at the hands of border officials (*By Any Means Necessary, 2022i*). Curiously though, it was the "inaction by many African organizations and embassies to help people leave Ukraine" that was emphasised and compared unfavourably to the Indian government's efforts to evacuate its citizens (*By Any Means Necessary, 2022i*). Russia's own problems with racism and a general culture of intolerance are conspicuously omitted from the discussion. The show's description also pitted NATO and the Black Liberation Movement against one another, professing to enlighten audiences as to "why NATO aggression matters to Black people despite the common assertion that it is a conflict between white people" (*By Any Means Necessary, 2022i*). Hence, Sputnik continues to appropriate identity politics in order to project its foreign policy target, in this case, that of NATO as the aggressor.

As well as marshalling identity in its defending attack, Sputnik also touched upon the fate of Russia's international broadcasting operation in light of the war. In its 3 March episode synopsis, *Political Misfits* juxtaposed the war and Russia's communication strategy with its title and subtitle: "The Info War Intensifies as the Conflict in Ukraine Continues" and "Censorship of Sputnik and RT" (*Political Misfits, 2022j*). This demonstrates a clear awareness on the part of

Sputnik's producers, editors and presenters of the Information War discourse. While the application of the Information War analytical framework is predicated on some assumptions that the thesis demonstrated to be misleading, the invocation of the term suggests that Sputnik does see itself as being engaged in some kind of information battle with the West. The show's synopsis provides a more detailed account of the overarching context that germinated the Information War discourse:

The Russians over the past several years have been accused of fixing the 2016 presidential election, of causing Brexit, and forcing a vote on Scottish independence. In today's Telegraph newspaper from London, we're now seeing an accusation that the Russians are responsible for causing a subway workers strike because one of the union members expressed pro-Russian sentiment a year or two ago. They talk about how and if it is even possible to counter this kind of disinformation? (*Political Misfits*, 2022j)

In this instance, Sputnik frames the Information War and disinformation discourse according to another common narrative peddled by Sputnik—that Russia is forever the West's convenient scapegoat. The mention of British broadsheet newspaper *The Telegraph* article and the charge of disinformation against it are yet further evidence of reflexive media centrality and mirroring (Hutchings and Miazhevich, 2009). Thus, Sputnik is very much operating within its comfort zone of assertively projecting itself onto the anti-Western and alt-media ecology by defining itself in stark opposition.

This breaking news section has demonstrated that Sputnik doubled down on its defensive attack during the invasion's disruptive phase. Parroting Russian foreign policy objectives vis-à-vis NATO, the West and Ukraine and repeating state jargon, the synopses of Sputnik's shows were in line with their various editorial agendas. We saw an intensifying of Sputnik's invocation of progressive identity politics to project official discourse on Russian identity. Equally, we observed it drawing on a similarly small pool of voices and confidently asserting itself into the alt-media ecology according to its anti-Western, statist editorial agenda. Finally, the egregiously incredulous representation of the invasion and its root causes bolsters the thesis's conclusions that Sputnik's distinctive purpose is to attract performative provocation rather than achieve

actual audience impact. How Sputnik's coverage fared two months into the war the next section will endeavour to demonstrate.

## **Two Months of War**

By the end of April, it was abundantly clear that Russia's military had failed to achieve some of its key aims. Earlier that month, Russian troops withdrew from Kyiv and the northern city of Chernihiv with the objective of regime change no longer feasible. Poor logistical and operational management in the upper echelons of the Russian Army, low morale and poorly equipped soldiers (many of whom were conscripts), as well as an underestimation of the Ukrainian resolve to resist, all contributed to Russia's failure to advance (Jones, 2022). What is more, following the liberation of prosperous commuter suburbs Bucha and Irpin and reports from the besieged port city of Mariupol, the systematic use of war crimes by the Russian Army against Ukrainian's civilian population was now apparent. As such, Russia refocused its efforts on seizing control of the Donbas and establishing a land corridor with Crimea. In sum, not only was Russia's international prestige in tatters, but its claims of great power status looked increasingly dubious. How did Sputnik's radio broadcasts' synopses frame the ongoing war during a period when it would have been particularly difficult for Russia to "manage" the narrative?

In the week from 24 April to 1 May, there were a total of 24 Sputnik radio broadcasts. At this stage, RT's UK and American hubs had ceased their operations. Thus, Sputnik was by now Russia's principal international English language broadcaster. While the unfolding war in Ukraine still featured prominently in these programmes' blurbs, it did not dominate Sputnik's agenda-setting processes. The shows' promotional articles focused on other international news events: French presidential elections (*Fault Lines*, 2022h; *The Critical Hour*, 2022j; *The Backstory*, 2022k) and tech billionaire Elon Musk's bid to buy social media platform Twitter (*The Backstory*, 2022k; *Fault Lines*, 2022i; *The Critical Hour*, 2022k; *Political Misfits*, 2022k, m).

Fewer than half the shows touched on the war and its wider implications in their titles. For some this pertained to a dispute between Russia and Poland about the purchase of gas (*Fault Lines*, 2022j; *The Critical Hour*, 2022l, n). None of the shows discussed or mentioned Russia's heavy military losses in Ukraine. On the contrary, coverage of the war in Ukraine in the programmes' titles and synopses was predicated on the critique of Western and US foreign policy towards Russia: "Russophobia" (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022j); "weakening Russia" (*Political Misfits*, 2022j); Biden's \$33 Billion package of aid to Ukraine would "prolong the conflict" (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022l; *Fault Lines*, 2022l); and the US sponsorship programmes for Ukrainian refugees, which "[e]xpose Opportunism and Racism of US Imperialism" (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022k). Whilst the rest of the shows provided "updates" on the ongoing war, these were tucked away in their synopses and emphasised the far-right or fascist Azov Regiment in Mariupol (*Fault Lines*, 2022k; *The Backstory*, 2022k; *By Any Means Necessary*, 2022l). The synopsis of *By Any Means Necessary's* 28 April show brazenly decried the Israeli government's "continued supplying of arms to Ukraine and Nazi groups like the Azov Battalion" and pondered "why Israel would support Nazis in Ukraine despite the Holocaust and other anti-Semitic acts from Nazi and neo-Nazi groups" (*By Any Means Necessary*, 2022l). Russian state actors' flagrantly anti-Semitic distortions of history, used to justify the invasion, were conspicuously absent from the blurb. Failures to call out anti-Semitic rhetoric notwithstanding, *By Any Means Necessary's* 30 April show featured discussion of the fortieth anniversary of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in its synopsis. However, this was represented solely in terms of its potential to "endanger lives of Russian soldiers" and the perils of nuclear energy overall. Once again, no mention was made of the Russian Army's reckless assaults on nuclear power stations in Ukraine.

The overwhelming majority of the shows from 24 April – 1 May focused on the theme of free speech, or lack thereof. They headlined Biden's announcement to establish a Disinformation Governance Board to counter disinformation under the auspices of the Department of

Homeland Security, with research analyst Nina Jankowicz as Board leader (*The Backstory*, 2022m; *The Critical Hour*, 2022m; *Political Misfits*, 2022m; *Fault Lines*, 2022l; *The Critical Hour*, 2022n; *Political Misfits*, 2022n; *The Backstory*, 2022n). Three of the shows' programmes titles invoked George Orwell's dystopian chef d'oeuvre, *1984*, with the *Backstory's* 29 April show named "The Biden Administration Sets Up Ministry of Truth" (*The Backstory*, 2022m), *The Critical Hour's* broadcast the same day, "Biden Creates Orwellian 'Disinformation Governance Board'" (*The Critical Hour*, 2022m) and *Fault Lines's* "Biden Launches Orwellian Disinformation Board" (*Fault Lines*, 2022l). Curiously, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokeswoman Maria Zakharova repeated the Orwellian reference in a statement on 23 May when she claimed that the book was about Western liberalism rather than the authoritarian Soviet Union. This absurd statement demonstrates how Sputnik's defending attack strategy has been adopted by the political actors charged with representing the official Russian position to foreign audiences. That Biden's "anti-disinformation" initiative was paused three weeks after its launch, following the resignation of Jankowicz—who was on the receiving end of an excoriating backlash by right-wing Republicans citing First Amendment violations and was called a "fake Russia expert" by Sputnik—was undoubtedly grist to Sputnik's mill.

Another striking feature of Sputnik's radio broadcasts' promotional articles at the ongoing war juncture is their social media marketing. Having already been banned by most social media platforms—Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter—Sputnik was now advertising its channels on another social media platform, Telegram. These were labelled for "US", "India" and "Global" audiences. Despite Sputnik's lack of emphasis on garnering large audiences, the inclusion of India in a separate category of its own tells us something about the future of Russia's international English language broadcasting.

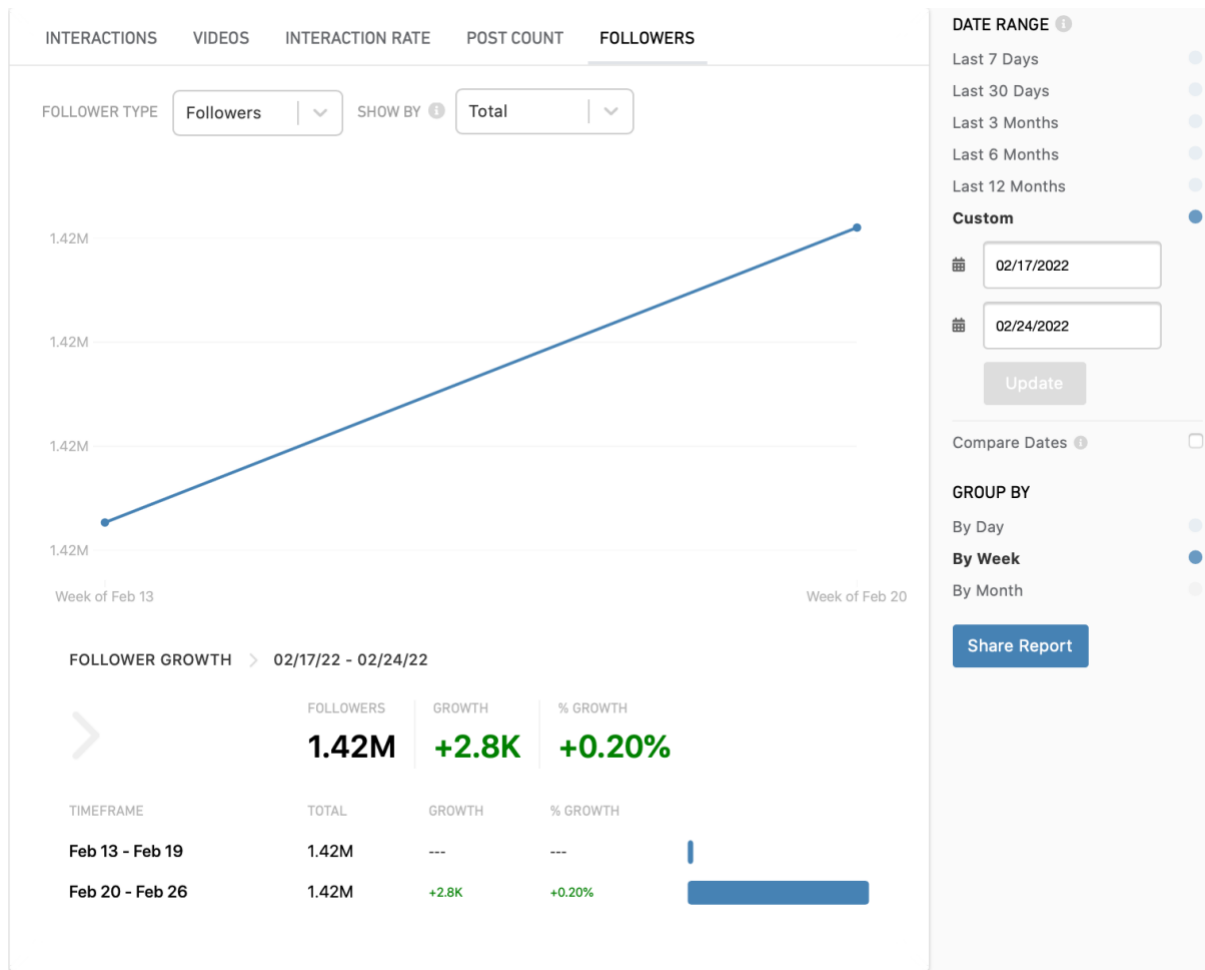
As this section has demonstrated, two months into the war, Sputnik's overarching strategy was to attempt to distract and deflect from Russia's military failings and accusations of war crimes

by deploying its defending attack, particularly on issues relating to freedom of speech. When it came to representing official discourse on identity, Sputnik did so by seizing upon the narrative of Ukraine as a Nazi and Fascist state aided by the imperialist US and Israel, with Russia defined as “anti-imperialist”. Once again, in drawing on its narrow pool of contributors, whistleblowers, former RT journalists and network friends, Sputnik continued to assert itself confidently into the alt-media ecology with its anti-Western and anti-statist editorial agenda.

## **Audiences**

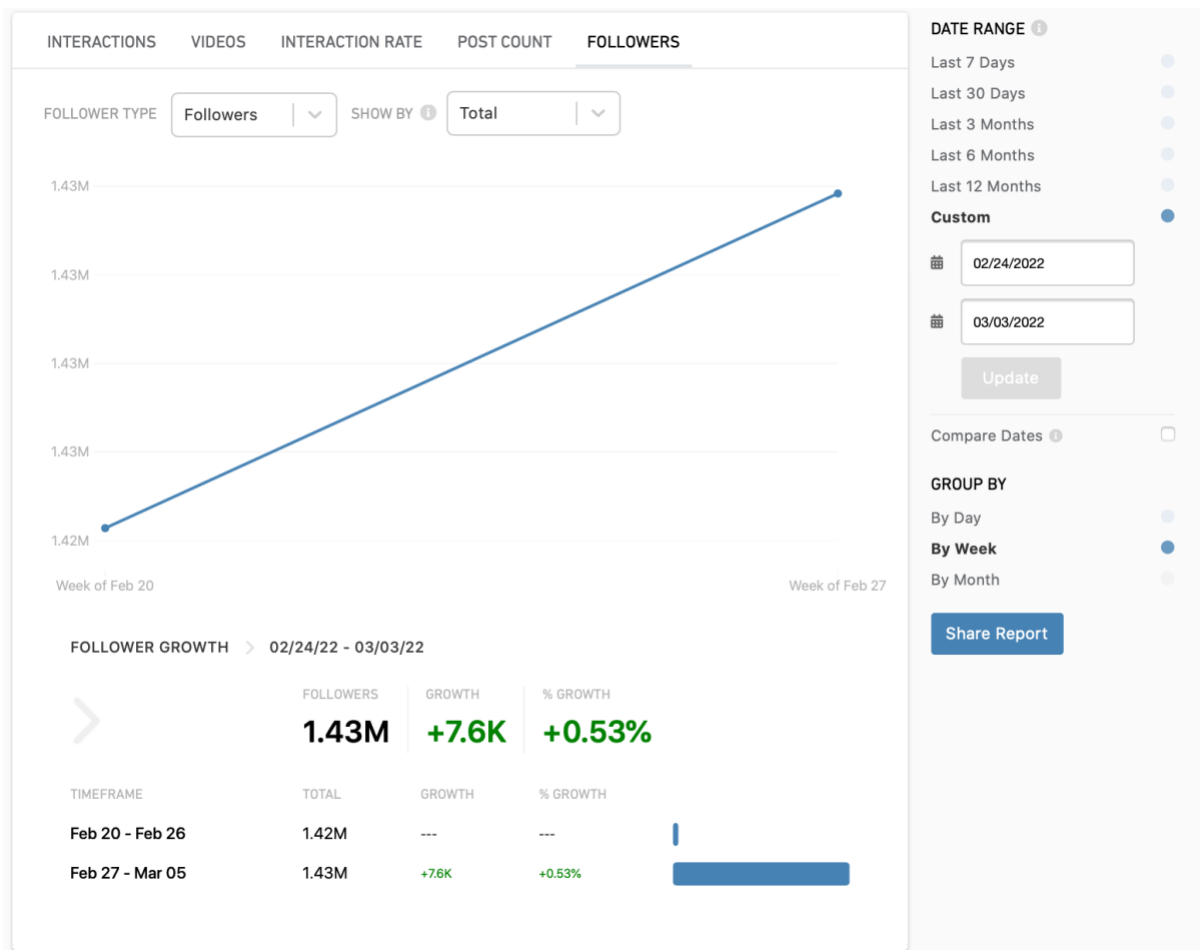
Extracting data from CrowdTangle, this section looks at Sputnik’s Facebook page’s follower growth rate for each of the weekly periods of analysis: prelude to war (17-24 February 2022); breaking news (24 February – 3 March 2022) and ongoing war (24 April – 1 May 2022). It also provides an overview of the entire timeframe from 17 February – 1 May in order to understand the connection between follower growth rate and the war. Figure 11 shows the follower growth rate from 17-24 February 2022. Figure 12 shows the follower growth from 24 February to 3 March. Figure 13 shows the follower growth rate from 24 April – 1 May. Finally, Figure 14 shows the follower growth rate over the entire period of the epilogue’s analysis on a weekly basis from 17 Feb to 1 May.

**Figure 11: Prelude to War Follower Growth**



Source: CrowdTangle

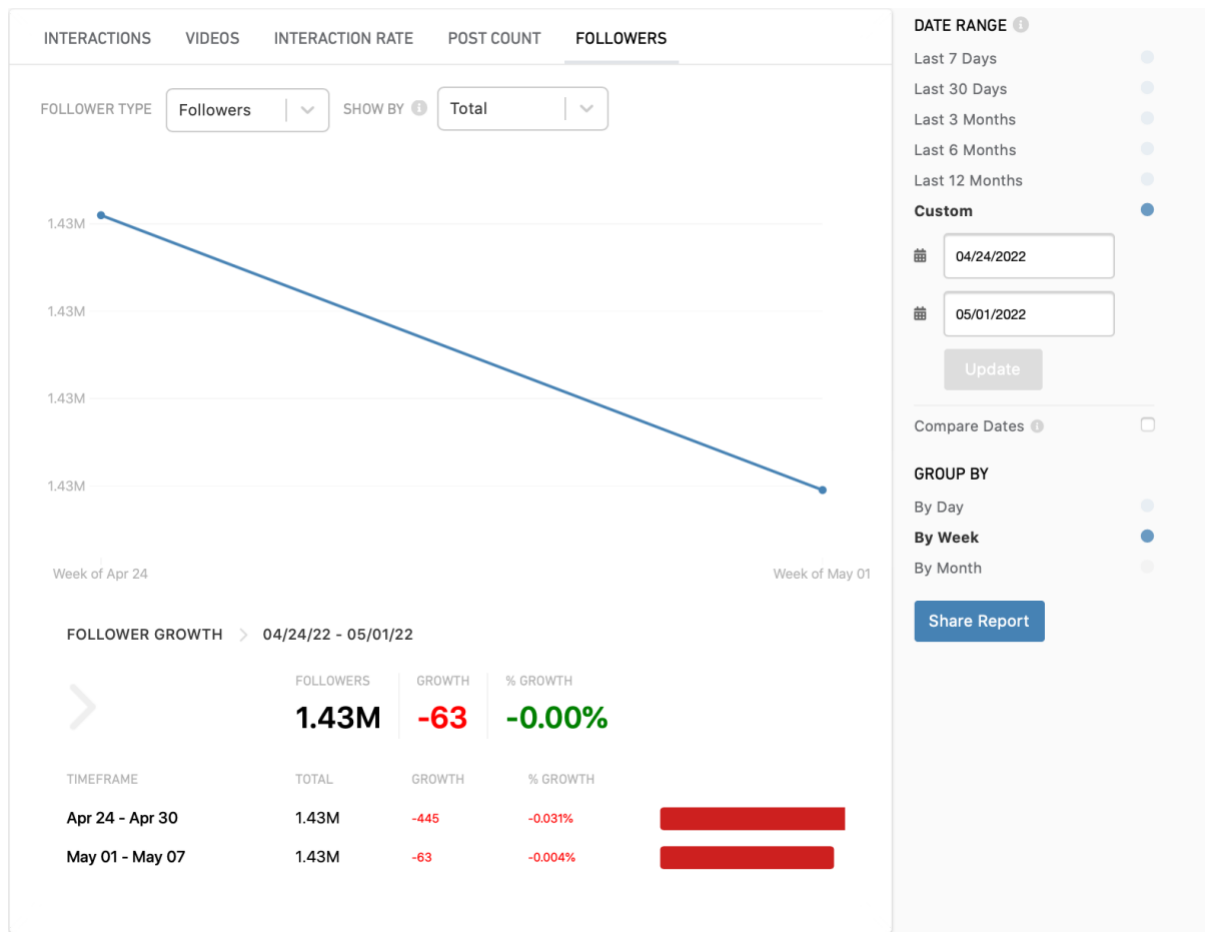
**Figure 12: Breaking News Follower Growth**



Source: CrowdTangle

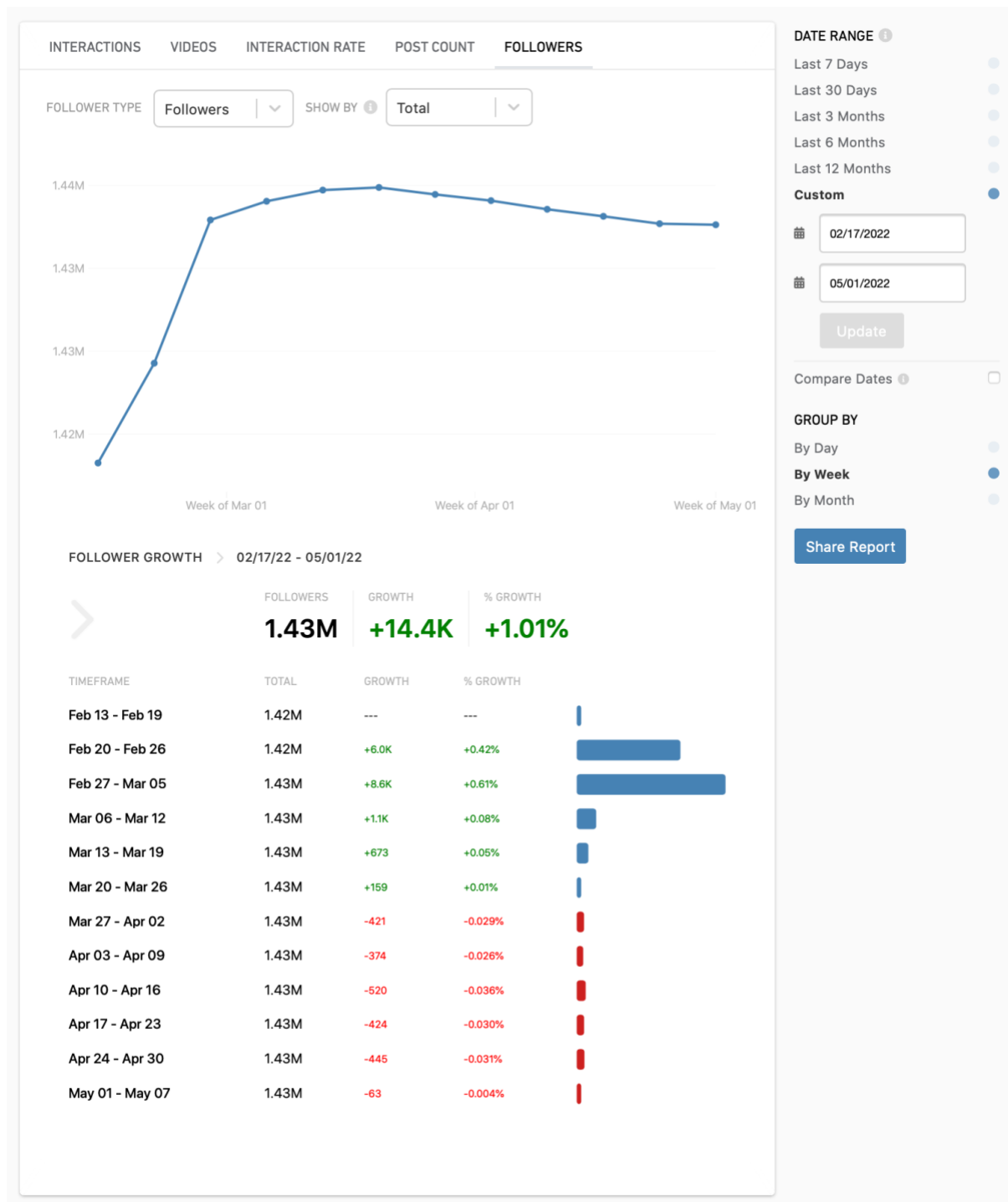


**Figure 13: Two Months of War Follower Growth**



Source: CrowdTangle

**Figure 14: Prelude, Breaking News and Ongoing War Follower Growth**



Source: CrowdTangle

As Figures 11 and 12 show, in the prelude and breaking news phases, Sputnik's follower rate increased. During the former, its follower rate increased by 2,800 (0.20%) and in the latter period it increased by 7,600 followers (0.53%). These are extremely modest growth figures for a major international broadcaster, especially given the global dominance of the invasion of Ukraine and allowing for the possibility that some of these could have been Russian bots or trolls. Equally, Figure 13 demonstrates that during the ongoing war phase, Sputnik lost 63 followers. Looking at the entire period as per Figure 14, we can see that Sputnik's follower rate stayed relatively stable at around the 1.43 million follower mark—a remarkably low number for a global media outlet. In sum, the quantitative data above support the thesis's conclusions that Sputnik serves a performative function rather than a productive one in Russia's external projection strategy.

## **Conclusion**

This epilogue's analysis of Sputnik's coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine has demonstrated that the war did little to change the outlet's defending attacker strategy. At each stage in the story's development, Sputnik deployed customary techniques in its defending attacking toolkit. First, in the prelude to the war, Sputnik attempted to capitalise on the uncertainty about whether Russia would invade Ukraine by engaging in outraged denial. Second, in the breaking news phase, Sputnik doubled down on the official Russian position by defending the invasion and viciously attacking Western actors. Third, in the ongoing war stage, when Russian claims to great power status were undermined by its poor military performance, Sputnik pursued a strategy of distraction.

But what of Sputnik's coverage of the invasion and ongoing war and the thesis's research questions? The descriptive overview showed that Sputnik continued to: appropriate history and anti-racist politics in projecting official discourse on Russian identity (1); echo Russian state

actors when covering a disruptive media event (2); project itself stridently onto the alternative media ecology (3). However, as the last section of this epilogue revealed, Sputnik's follower growth neither increased nor decreased as a result of the war (4). Thus, the empirical evidence shared in this epilogue reinforces the thesis's argument that Sputnik's function within Russia's external projection strategy is performative rather than operative.

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