

# **The RT Challenge:** **How to respond to Russia's international broadcaster**

**Professor Stephen Hutchings**

**Professor of Russian Studies**

Division of Russian and East European Studies

**Professor Vera Tolz**

**Professor of Russian Studies**

Division of Russian and East European Studies

**Dr Precious N Chatterje-Doody**

**Research Associate**

Division of Russian and East European Studies

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## **The RT Challenge: How to respond to Russia's international broadcaster**

### **In Summary**

1. In late 2018, Ofcom's investigation into RT's (Russia Today) broadcasts around the poisoning of the Skripals in Salisbury found seven out of ten programmes to be in breach.
2. The investigation has reignited political concern about RT as a [tool of Russian disinformation](#) and a [threat to democracy](#).
3. Work undertaken within the '[Reframing Russia](#)' project indicates that RT's reach and impact in the UK remains limited.
4. After investigating, [The University of Manchester](#) and [The Open University](#) suggest that a measured and evidence-driven approach to RT will produce the most effective response.

## **In Detail**

### **1. Current status**

On 10-11 July 2019, the UK and Canada co-hosted a global conference on media freedom in London. RT journalists were [denied access to the conference](#) because of what the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) refers to as the network's "active role in spreading disinformation". This decision is linked to the FCO's announcement that an [£18 million fund](#) had been allocated to support press freedom and fight disinformation, following a speech made by UK Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, to mark Press Freedom Day on 1 May, in which [he described RT](#) as a "weapon of disinformation". Hunt accused Russia of "spreading fake news and destabilising fragile democracies", claiming that RT is a key part of that effort.

These concerns were also echoed in relation to the [European parliamentary elections](#). RT is currently awaiting the outcome of [a judicial review](#) into Ofcom's most recent investigation into the network. The investigation examined ten of RT's programmes broadcast in April-June 2018, around the time of the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal, in Salisbury. The final report, published in December 2018, found that **[seven of RT's programmes were found to be in breach for failing to include a sufficiently diverse range of opinions on matters of significant controversy. RT appealed these findings, and is pursuing a judicial review of Ofcom's decision.](#)** Its core arguments were that: RT's viewers knowingly chose the network, reasonably expecting it to report a Russian viewpoint; that alternative perspectives had been presented within the

programmes; and that Ofcom's guidance was ambiguous and open to subjective interpretation regarding what might constitute sufficient reporting of alternative viewpoints.

## 2. Background

RT was founded in 2005 as 'Russia Today', an international broadcaster funded by the Russian state to present Russia to the world and to give a Russian perspective on global events. It was rebranded as 'RT' in 2009, and began advertising under the 'Question More' campaign from 2010. The focus was less on Russia and more on providing an alternative to mainstream Western voices.

In the period up to 2018, RT UK was sanctioned 15 times by the British regulator, Ofcom.

RT's initial establishment was met with little concern, but the broadcaster has become the subject of intense scrutiny and political speculation in recent years, alongside increased fears of Russian meddling in international democratic processes. However, **the evidence base relating to RT to date is small and flawed: most assessments have been extrapolated from unrelated Russian information activities**, including hacking and provocative 'astroturfing' – when state-sponsored social media activity is presented as coming from grassroots organisations.

Numerous UK politicians have recently advocated for boycotting the network. Following the poisoning of the Skripals in 2018 (and the subsequent interview that RT broadcast with the prime suspects), the prospect of a ban of the network was raised in parliament. Most recently, the FCO excluded RT from its global media freedom conference.

### 3. Key considerations

Broadcast content created by RT for its different language services differs markedly. **Content produced for RT UK (under Ofcom's remit) is markedly more balanced than content produced for RT America.**

Prior to 2018, Ofcom's 15 sanctions of RT were "not materially out of line" with its sanctions of other broadcasters. The majority of these sanctions related to insufficient breadth of opinion being presented on matters of significant political controversy – RT is biased towards a pro-Russian perspective. Sanctions for "materially misleading content" were far less frequent, and related primarily to cases in which the Russian military was active, ie, in Georgia and Crimea.

RT's primary topics of focus are the inequities of Western-centric political economy. Core arguments are predominantly voiced as opinions of figures internal to the societies in question, including personalities with a pre-existing political and media profile.

RT's UK broadcast channel attracts around [0.01% of UK TV viewing figures](#). RT has greater reach online, but this nonetheless remains limited: despite the

network's claims to be the most-watched news [network on YouTube](#), its most popular YouTube content is satire and licensed video shorts. [Changes to YouTube's algorithm](#) since 2019 should minimise the likelihood of follow-through to RT's political content.

RT has 2.8 million Twitter followers. This is far fewer than, for example, BBC World News (25 million followers) and CNN Breaking News (55 million).

Our analysis of the media consumption habits of 2.8 million of RT's Twitter followers found that, rather than inhabiting echo chambers at the political margins, they consult the network as part of a varied media diet, which includes mainstream international sources.

Our focus groups and audience witness seminars indicate that followers of RT's special projects choose it with awareness of RT's national affiliation, either for specific aesthetic reasons or to balance out perceived biases of mainstream sources.

At times of political controversy, RT's saturation coverage can help it to outperform rivals, circulating beyond self-selecting followers: four of the six most popular Twitter and Facebook articles on the Skripal poisoning in the week commencing [28 March 2018](#), were from RT, generating 63,000 shares.

RT portrays political criticisms as hysteria and Russophobia, or cites them as evidence of its counter-mainstream credentials, including them in its [advertising campaigns](#).

Fact-checking articles are less influential than the stories they attack, and can [increase audience interest](#) in the false stories, which audiences later [misremember as fact](#).

#### **4. Recommendations**

To avoid implementation of counterproductive short-term policy responses, measures against RT must be based upon evidence-driven quantitative understanding of its circulation, together with qualitative analysis of the motivations, affiliations and news consumption practices of actual RT followers.

**Policy makers should be aware that over-punitive measures are liable to reinforce the broadcaster's own narrative, and that responses designed to undermine dubious narratives may backfire by drawing unwelcome attention to them.**

Oversight under Ofcom's existing mechanisms should continue without political involvement, which would only strengthen RT's argument that it speaks uncomfortable truths to a corrupt mainstream. Ofcom's focus and procedures should be kept transparent and consistent, with no indication that special measures are in place for dealing with RT as opposed to other media actors.

Policymakers should avoid actions that give the impression that RT is being treated differently from other states' international broadcasters, which opens them to charges of hypocrisy or Russophobia.

In the longer term, policy makers can undermine RT's appeal on divisive issues by addressing the trends upon which RT bases its coverage and appeal: social inequality, the rise of populism, declining trust in traditional news, and increased tendency to trust alternative, [preferred sources](#).

Audiences' desire to engage critically with their own news media consumption should be supported with long-term policies focused on improving low levels of critical skills and media education.

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## Authors



**[Stephen Hutchings](#)** is a professor of Russian Studies. He is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences, and former President of the British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies. His work focuses on Russian cultural and media studies and Russian and Soviet literature and literacy/cultural theory.



**[Vera Tolz](#)** is Sir William Mather Professor of Russian Studies and Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences. She has held research fellowships at Harvard and Princeton Universities and published widely on various aspects of Russian nationalism, identity politics and the media.



**[Precious Chatterje-Doody](#)** is a post-doctoral research associate. She has published research on historical narrative and the politics of national identity, Russian security policy and global governance.

The authors form part of the project team of the AHRC-funded [Reframing Russia](#) project (AH/P00508X/1).

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