



City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Rodgers, J. (2015). New name, old values. *British Journalism Review*, 26(1), pp. 44-48. doi: 10.1177/0956474815575455

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/11952/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956474815575455>

Copyright: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

A spectre is haunting European journalism. As the news organizations of the east of the continent, in its former Communist bloc, find their way in the new societies which have grown up since the collapse of Marxism-Leninism, and those of the west struggle with fractured audiences and dwindling resources, the former capital of the Soviet Union is now home to a new kind of journalism with global ambitions, and the resources to fund them.

In November, I visited Prague to speak at a conference on journalism in former Communist countries. The conference took place on the 25th anniversary of Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution. The city still seemed to shine with pride at having thrown off the shackles of Communism. Like the rest of the European Union, this pride was tarnished here and there – uncertainties over the continent's future direction and prospects inevitably, as elsewhere, made themselves felt. Yet there was something else, too. At the conference to, most of the discussion was nominally about countries which had successfully made the transition to new economic and social systems. Yes, some veterans of dissident journalism bemoaned the rise of tabloid culture; others expressed concern about ownership models which, they felt, favoured oligarchs. Overall, though, many of the concerns were similar to those which one might have heard raised at a conference in Western Europe: budgets, competition from the internet, and a apparent lack of desire from audiences for serious news. Among these near universal contemporary challenges, another forced its way onto the agenda: *RT*, as *Russia Today* now prefers to be known. Not nominally the subject of any of the panel discussions, it still managed to appear at most of them, like an unwelcome spirit at a séance.

For many of the delegates: from elsewhere in the Czech Republic; from Poland; from Hungary; it must have felt like a haunting – especially for those old enough to remember when Moscow held the ultimate authority over their countries, and proved itself willing to enforce that with tanks and troops. An end to communism in those lands was also an end to something else: Russian influence. On reporting trips to Lithuania, and Poland in the 1990s, I remember struggling to communicate. A speaker neither of Lithuanian or of Polish, but of Russian, I was sensitive enough to the political situation to try English first in shops and cafes. When that did not work – English speakers in those countries were fewer then – I tried Russian. Those aged under twenty-five did not understand; those aged over twenty-five showed from their faces first that they did, and secondly that they wished they did not. In any case, they answered in their own languages which I did not understand.

Russia's recent military confrontations with its neighbours – Georgia in 2008, Ukraine today – have dragged from the grave ghosts which many in Eastern Europe hoped had been finally laid to rest. As Moscow has responded to a changing world with a range of military and diplomatic moves – recognized by friend and foe alike as tactical successes, even if questions remain over their wisdom from a strategic point of view – it has sometimes been accused of ignoring the way the world is supposed to work in the 21st century. In another aspect, though, it has shown itself to have mastered some of the media techniques which are an integral part of contemporary international confrontation and conflict.

In this respect, Russia has come a long way in a relatively short time. *Russia Today* began life in the last decade. As many channels are at launch – I write as a veteran of the launches of both GMTV and BBC News 24 – it was clumsy and clunky at times. It also had a style all of its own. The presenters and reporters were either native English speakers apparently in search of a career break, or a career relaunch, or Russians who spoke very good, if accented English. Most of the latter group shared the same accent – a hint of American, a hint remaining of Russian – which tended to suggest that they were scions of that part of the Soviet

establishment which had managed to continue to prosper in the new Russia. The people who proved most successful at this often had a KGB background. Still, it was nothing really to be taken seriously. As BBC Moscow correspondent at the time, I learnt from a visiting western television executive, who had had a meeting with Russia Today, that the global audience had two hotspots. These were the Palestinian Territories, and Australia. The former could perhaps be explained by the desire of some Palestinians to improve their English. The latter seemed to offer little to celebrate. A more detailed examination of the viewing figures revealed that prime time was late in the evening – in other words, once people had come home from the pub and were looking for a bit of a beery laugh.

Two years later, as Russia went to war with Georgia over the separatist Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, *Russia Today* remained in second place – even apparently in the eyes of the Kremlin. Seemingly feeling that they were losing the media battle as Georgian officials, right up to President Mikheil Saakashvili himself, made themselves available around the clock to international news channels, Moscow responded by offering to the international media interviews with the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov. *Russia Today* was not among the recipients, and was reduced to asking for a copy of the BBC's recording for its own output.

These were times of transition, and there was a feeling that Russia was feeling its way. Part of their approach involved hiring western public relations companies in an effort to seek more favourable coverage. This had limited success. Russia's military confrontation with Georgia, wherever the blame lay, was always going to be a hard sell because of the countries' relative sizes and military strength. Lingering Cold War attitudes, added to the fact that Russia's most powerful politician, Vladimir Putin (at the time of the war, Prime Minister rather than President, but evidently still very much the boss) had been in the KGB, meant that stereotypes emerged to stalk the news pages once more. Russia's attempts to promote its version of events were further hampered by its own lack of understanding of the way the international – in this case, western – media functioned. In a country where cynicism had flourished after the short-lived excitement of the end of Communism, journalism had suffered too. Oligarchs' desire to settle scores through the media outlets they had acquired, combined with the poor rates of pay offered to many reporters, meant that editorial space was often for sale. Conversations with western PRs in Moscow at the time revealed that some in the higher levels of Russian officialdom believed the same to be true of the international media – and that consequently, poor coverage in the western press just meant their media advisors were not influencing the right people in the right way. The overall effect was that Russia seemed to feel that it was being forced to take part in a game of which it did not understand the rules. It was fighting a losing battle in what was in effect a media war of necessity.

Almost six years after Russia and Georgia went to war, Moscow found itself involved once more in a former Soviet republic: Ukraine. Much had changed. The Russian military had overcome inefficiencies which the campaign in Georgia had laid bare. Huge resources had gone into fixing the shortcomings. Something similar had happened to Russia's media, too. In fact there was almost a common approach to fighting both the military campaign, and the media one. Both involved a degree of disguise, and playing on the resulting uncertainty.

In the military campaign, troops without insignia – but resembling in every other respect Russian Army regulars – took over key sites in Crimea: the first stage in what was to be a Russian annexation (albeit one subsequently approved by a questionable referendum). As Vitaly Shevchenko of BBC Monitoring noted at the time, 'This poses a challenge to the

media covering the crisis: what do you call people who are officially not there?’¹ While members of western military intelligence presumably had no doubts, it was a headache for journalists wanting to be certain of what they were saying. Russia was in effect not only exploiting a military vulnerability, but a characteristic of the western tradition of impartial reporting, too.

Nor is this the only weak spot which Russia had found. In the same way that the Russian army was back, better resourced and in disguise, so was Kremlin-sponsored media. Somewhere along the line (you will look in vain on the *Russia Today* website ‘History Section’ for a date) *Russia Today* became the much more neutral sounding *RT*: the media war equivalent of going into battle without insignia. Along with its rebranding, it acquired something of which few western media organizations can boast in today’s tough climate: massive resources. Reporting in the autumn of 2014 on *RT*’s launch of a specific channel for the U.K., *The Guardian* website said that the Kremlin-backed channel’s budget for 2015 was expected to be ‘about £250m’ -- an increase of ‘nearly 30% on its funding from 2014.’ The same article quoted President Putin as having urged staff to ‘break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams’².

RT may still have a credibility problem – especially in the eyes of those who continue to think of it as *Russia Today* – but to see it purely in those terms is to miss the point. For *RT*’s purpose is not necessarily to see its version of events established as undisputed. Its purpose is to challenge, and to disrupt: to ‘break the Anglo-Saxon monopoly’ rather than create its own. It has set about its task with admirable efficiency. Its posters – minus the word ‘Russia’, naturally – now adorn the corridors of the London underground. Its very watchable programming can be seen pretty much everywhere – including in Prague, as I discovered (not to my surprise) when checking the channels on the TV in the hotel where I was staying for the conference.

The transformation from clunky copy of western news channel to something slick, well-resourced, and watchable has been remarkable – even if the idea that Russia has become some kind of global defender of alternative views, and unshackled reporting, is itself surprising. The country has never scored highly in surveys of press freedom. In 2014, Reporters without Borders placed it 148th in the world³. Any channel really concentrating on Russia today would probably need to cover stories like that – but they would also need to reflect the fact that many in the country are full of approval for Mr Putin’s foreign policy.

RT’s approach fits well into a time when trust in politicians is low, and Western Europe looks timidly to the future unsure of what security or financial problems may lie ahead. *RT* is no longer an outsider in a global media game which Russia does not understand. Its days of begging from the BBC copies of news-making interviews are over. Western journalistic

¹ Shevchenko, Vitaly (2014) “‘Little Green Men’ or ‘Russian Invaders’” *BBC News* website. Posted 11 March 2014. Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-26532154> . Accessed 23 January 2015.

² Plunkett, John (2014) ‘Kremlin-backed RT to launch UK TV news channel’. *The Guardian* website. Posted 28 October 2014. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/oct/28/kremlin-rt-uk-news-channel-russia-today> . Accessed 23 January 2015.

³ Reporters without borders (2014) ‘World Press Freedom index’. Available at <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php#> . Accessed 23 January 2015.

techniques, and western technology in the shape of social media platforms, have been copied and adapted.

That is how *RT* has come to haunt European journalism, especially in former Communist countries. Like any ghost, this spectre comes to unsettle, to plant doubt, to make those who see it unsure of what they think they know. *RT* urges its viewers to 'question more'. It is sound advice. One question might be 'Why did you drop the word 'Russia' from your name?'