From Russia with Lols: Humour, RT, and the Legitimation of Russian Foreign Policy

How to cite:

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/13600826.2020.1839387

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk
From Russia with lols: Humour, RT, and the legitimation of Russian foreign policy

The Russian state funded international broadcaster RT (formerly Russia Today) is accused of pedalling misinformation, influencing foreign elections, and pursuing an agenda that claims legitimacy for Russian foreign policy. Whilst studies have so far analysed the content of RT's broadcast and social media output, they have yet to interrogate how Russian legitimation claims are often expressed on RT through a humorous form that blurs the lines between the genres of news reporting and comedy. This paper addresses this gap and places humour at the centre of analysis, arguing that humour, comedy and satire are fundamental to how RT claims legitimacy for Russian foreign policy. The article begins by introducing theories of legitimation to recent studies of comedy in global politics. It builds upon work that suggests that narrative and representation are key to contemporary legitimation processes, and highlights the important role that humour plays in such processes. We then examine RT’s social media outputs and audience responses to those, and demonstrate how humour is central to how RT claims legitimacy for Russian foreign policy. From military intervention in Syria, to the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal, humour shapes how RT’s legitimation claims are interpreted by audiences.

Key words: Legitimation, RT, Russia, Comedy, Satire, Social Media

Introduction

In January 2018, the Russian state-funded International broadcaster RT (formerly Russia Today) launched a new sub-brand of short-form online video content titled ICYMI (In Case You Missed It). Upon launching, ICYMI’s social media output consisted of short satirical videos on prominent news topics with titles such as ‘ICYMI: Who’s hotter, left-wingers or right-wingers?’ and ‘ICYMI: Everything is political. And we’re f*cking sick of it’. At the time of their release, none of these videos, nor ICYMI’s broader online presence, featured any branding or mentioned any association to RT, despite ICYMI videos being produced by RT and being mainly presented by RT UK presenter Polly Boiko. Subsequently, ICYMI was exposed as a Russian state funded ‘BuzzFeed-style digital media knockoff’ (NBC News 2018) that sought to influence unsuspecting social media users by avoiding any mention of ICYMI’s associations with, and funding from, the Russian state (Bridge, Rashid, and Woolcock 2018). As an NBC News report put it

ICYMI showcases the increasing complexity of Russia’s efforts to spread its talking points across the internet, often in ways that make it nearly impossible to identify such channels as being backed by a foreign country. The internet-savvy content looks and sounds like many other popular, youth-oriented media brands (2018).
In light of this, this paper seeks to draw attention to the role that comedy and humour play in the contemporary legitimation of Russian foreign policy through an analysis of visual media shared online by the Russian state-funded international broadcaster RT.

Given that recent scholarship has drawn attention to the importance of analysing how political actors articulate claims to legitimate their activities through the projection of strategic narratives (Aronczyk, 2017; Dimitriu and de Graaf, 2016; Edel and Josua, 2018; Iazzolino and Stremlau, 2018), particularly in the context of understanding Russian influence in global politics (Szostek 2017b; 2018; Hinck, Kluver, and Cooley 2018; Miskimmon and O’Loughlin 2017), we provide an original contribution that broadens the study of legitimation. We do so by focusing on satirical videos published on social media by RT, and going beyond the analysis of the content of legitimation claims and a focus on what is said, to an analysis of the style in which legitimation claims are articulated; in our case, how they are deployed through the use of humour. Our research is driven by two questions; first, how does RT use humour to claim legitimacy for Russian foreign policy? And second, given that the efficacy of legitimation claims lie in how they are accepted by audiences, how do audiences engage with and interpret RT’s use of humour?

Our article proceeds in four parts. First, we build upon the nascent scholarship on legitimation in global politics and advocate for the exploration of humour and comedy in studies of legitimation processes. Second, we introduce RT and articulate how and why analyses of RT’s role in contemporary global politics need to study not only the narratives deployed by RT in their news broadcasts, but also how they project such narratives through humour in social media content that blurs the distinctions between comedy, entertainment, and news. The third section provides a detailed discourse analysis of two series of digital videos where RT has used humour to claim legitimacy for Russian foreign policy. Here, we discuss the core themes from 50 videos published as part of the Vipers Views series as well as 50 videos published by the ICYMI channel on YouTube. We also discuss over 600 comments made on several of these videos to reflect on how RT’s use of humour is interpreted by audiences. Finally, we conclude by drawing attention to the broader implications of our study for the analysis of legitimation, humour, and Russian foreign policy in global politics.

**Legitimation: Comedy and the broadening of the legitimation agenda**

Legitimacy is defined as ‘a quality that society ascribes to an actor’s identity, interests, or practices, or to an institution’s norms, rules, and principles’ (Reus-Smit 2007, 159) whereby the attributes or actions of one actor are accepted and consented to by other actors, including subordinate groups (Beetham 1991, 16). Recent work in International Relations has sought to focus on ‘the process of legitimation rather than the attribute of legitimacy’ (Hurrelmann, Schneider, and Steffek 2007, 8 emphasis in original). This approach interrogates the discursive phenomenon whereby actors attempt to justify their own ‘identities, interests, practices, or
in institutional designs’ through the articulation of ‘legitimacy claims’ (Reus-Smit 2007, 159), and other actors endorse or challenge these claims (Wajner 2019).

To date, studies of legitimation in global politics have investigated the normalisation of nationalistic frames of understanding (Aronczyk, 2017); the specific framing that political actors use to legitimise particular actions (Edel and Josua 2018; Manor and Crilley 2018); and the central role of the media in shaping how legitimation process take place (Iazzolino and Stremlau, 2018). Others, placing more focus on the iterative role of audiences in the evolution and success of legitimation discourses, have variously analysed the role of individuals’ personal and cultural connections in their acceptance or rejection of legitimation attempts (Szostek 2017a); or the functions (such as the creation of appropriateness, consensus, and/or empathy) that legitimation discourses seek to achieve (Wajner 2019).

Given this recognition both of individual, emotive factors, and of the strong interplay between the normative, political, and emotional aspects of legitimation strategies, it becomes clear that the bestowing of legitimacy is reliant on the interaction, interpretation, affective investments and response of audiences. Indeed, there is an ‘increasingly crucial role of international audiences [in processes of legitimation] due to the processes of democratization and globalization...foreign audiences are increasingly becoming the target of the actors’ legitimation strategies’ (Wajner 2019, 1037). Moreover, the development and integration of new media technologies has a fundamental influence on how political discourses are formed, not just on how they are disseminated. Together, internal platform logics, and the individual contributions of audiences, work to shape core messages and identities. Therefore, a linear understanding of legitimation strategies that focuses solely on the official pronouncements of ‘high politics’ is no longer tenable. On the contrary, it is vital to try and make sense of what people think and feel about the legitimacy claims made by others.

According to Chris Reus-Smit, the nature of legitimation will ‘depend heavily upon the prevailing architecture of social norms, upon the cultural mores that govern appropriate forms of rhetoric, argument, and justification, and upon available technologies of communication’ (Reus-Smit 2007, 163). This means that the communicative and interactive logics of the online media environment can substantially influence the nature of legitimation claims. Yet the majority of research on legitimation is focused on the linguistic and narrative content of legitimacy claims rather than the emotive register, genre, or platform conventions in which they are made – all of which fundamentally impact upon the formation of the legitimation messages.

We advocate, therefore, for a threefold broadening of the legitimation agenda. First, we argue that it is crucial to look beyond the ways in which political actors use written and spoken words, and to interrogate the role that visual media make in contemporary legitimation processes given the roles that images play in global politics (Bleiker 2018; Hansen 2011;
Weber 2008). Second, and related to this, we reiterate the importance of contexts beyond the realm of ‘high politics’, with pop culture being one of the key sites where legitimation occurs and where such discourses come into contact with global audiences (Weldes 2014; Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009; Author 2020). For studies of legitimation to remain relevant in today’s media environment, we need to examine how and why popular culture has political salience. In particular, the proliferation of viral memes and social media videos - especially in the context of Russian influence in global politics (Jamieson 2018; Thompson and Lapowsky 2018; Hjorth and Adler-Nissen 2019) - attests to their significance as objects of study (Dean 2018; Hamilton 2016; Highfield 2016). Nonetheless, despite the capacity of humour to drive engagement with social media messaging, ‘scholarship about humour in this new kind of space is still in its infancy’ (Weitz 2017, 3). Third, there are limited insights concerning how comedy and humour are mobilised in the service of claiming that political actors and their actions are legitimate. We contribute to burgeoning studies of how humour is used by political actors (Dodds and Kirby 2013; Ridannpää 2014; Beck and Spencer 2020; Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi 2019) by a) outlining how studies of legitimation should focus on humour; b) providing a framework for how legitimation and humour can be studied through a discourse analysis of satirical social media videos and comments in response to them; and c) providing a timely empirical contribution though a case study focused on RT.

**Comedy and Legitimation**

Comedy and humour are ‘one of the most pervasive elements of public culture’ (Lockyer and Sharon 2009, 3) as they come to be expected in ‘all zones of modern life—politics, education, journalism and even religion’ (Berlant and Ngai 2017, 237). Humour highlights ‘the limits of rationalist discourse’ in global politics (Odysseos 2001, 729) as it is subjective, aesthetic, emotive, and embodied: aspects of human experience long ignored by the orthodoxy of IR scholarship. Given that comedy and humour are ‘a vehicle for social and cultural [and political] identities to be consolidated, constructed, or even challenged’ (Davies and Ilott 2018, 1); and that they have the ability to drive social media engagement (Weitz 2017, 3; Dean 2018) they warrant attention in the study of legitimation.

Recently, scholarship in politics and IR has turned to comedy. Research has analysed the role of comedic forms of popular culture such as films and television in British politics (Fielding 2014), how satire and comedy are an everyday form of political resistance (Brassett 2016; Brassett and Sutton 2017), the capacity of ‘self-reflexive and subversive’ online humour to successfully engage international audiences in political activism (Pahl 2017), as well as demonstrating how comedy constitutes an important ‘form of political communication’ (Higgie 2017, 930). Indeed, comedy and humour can be central to contemporary processes of legitimation; both in how certain identities & actions are claimed to be legitimate, but also in how they are resisted, contested, and challenged.
Humour can occur along two axes – a horizontal axis defined by self-irony, peacefulness and self-empowerment; and a vertical axis in which feelings of hurt, humiliation and power disbalance come to the fore (Pahl 2017, 68). In this study, the specific form of comedy and humour we are concerned with concerns satire, a form of humour that traditionally follows a bottom-up principle in which injustices are laid bare in ways that contest the positions of the powerful (Stott 2014, 152–63). We understand satire as a style of communication that is playful and is designed to elicit laughter, while simultaneously casting judgment... satire questions the existing political or social order, usually by juxtaposing the existing imperfect reality with visions of what could or should be (Young 2017, 873; see also Hoffman and Young 2011; Test 1991).

As satire is viewed as a tool of the powerless used to critique the powerful, it is often seen to have emancipatory potential that can ‘unsettle privilege, and invert established hierarchies’ (Dodds and Kirby 2013: 49). However, satire is not inherently progressive, and as our case study focused on RT shows, it can be used by state actors to frame themselves as ‘punching up’, when in fact they are powerful actors themselves (see also Beck and Spencer 2020).

Following this, our approach involves an analysis of what Holm refers to as the ‘political aesthetics of humour.... its form, style, palette, rhythm, narrative, structure and form’ (2017, 12) which are all bound up with the construction of identities, ‘the negotiation, contestation and distribution of power’ (2017, 12), as well as the claiming of legitimacy. Specifically, we recognize that,

Though humour is an abstract aesthetic and affective category, it only emerges through specific examples: one is therefore forced to engage with humour at its own level: as it manifests within individual texts (Holm 2017, 16–17).

The study of how comedy plays a role in legitimation processes is then driven by empirical analysis. For us, this involves a discourse analysis of two cases of satirical social media video series shared by RT. The two series of videos we examine are Vipers Views and ICYMI, which have been chosen because they are two of the most popular of RT’s comedic outputs, have published videos regularly and have gained thousands of views, comments and followers. Furthermore, these video series have caused controversy and have been accused of being important examples of the Russian state using comedy to influence foreign audiences (Bridge, Rashid, and Woolcock 2018). They are therefore an important case for understanding how humour is used to legitimise Russian foreign policy, which during the time both video series have been produced has involved deteriorating relations between Russia and the ‘West’ due to controversial actions such as the annexation of Crimea, intervention in Syria, and the poisoning of the Skripals in the UK.
Second, in our discourse analysis attuned to the political aesthetics of humour we follow other scholars of discourse in IR (Blei-Ker 2015; Hansen 2011) and pay attention to how identities, actions, and power relations are given meaning through the use of language, visual media, and other aesthetic registers such as sound and the use of humour. Our discourse analysis of videos focused on analysing the visual, textual, and aural representations of the videos shared by each series and analysing their ‘strategies of depiction’ (Hansen 2011: 64) in terms of presupposition (what knowledge they deem to be true), predication (how they connect attributes to what is represented), and subject positioning (how they the link subjects vis-a-vis one another in terms of identities, opposition, and similarity) (Doty 1993: 306). In particular, our analysis of the videos explores two key aspects of satire - how they are ‘playful and.. designed to elicit laughter’ (Young 2017, 873) and how they cast judgement of their subject material by questioning ‘the existing political or social order’ (Young 2017, 873).

Third, ‘the meaning of humor is not in the text itself. Instead, it is in the reconciliation of the incongruity which, in turn, is at the mercy of whatever the listener brings to the text’ (Young 2017, 878). Therefore, our analysis not only focuses on the content of the satirical social media videos shared by RT, but also on social media comments made in response to them. Just as effective legitimation is reliant on the consent and approval of an audience, for comedy to be effective an audience has to get the jokes and find them funny. Audience interpretation and emotion are therefore key sites of analysis in understanding comedy and legitimation and can be studied through an attention to what audiences say online (Authors 2019; 2020). Given the high volume of comments in response to the 100 videos in our study, our analysis focused on the first 150 comments made on the first and last video published by each series. This provides a sample of 300 responding to Vipers Views and ICYMI. These videos are exemplary of the series, and whilst the comments analysed are not a representative sample of what wider audiences thought – given that it is impossible to say exactly who the audiences of these videos were without access to the social media metrics available to the uploader of the videos (in this case RT) - they do provide an insight into how an active audience of comment makers interpreted the content of the videos (Authors 2019: 173). In January 2020 we studied these comments through a discourse analysis that drew upon the same framework as our analysis above, focusing on how they responded to the videos in terms of whether they approved of their content or not, what they deemed to be true, how they made attributions to what was represented in the videos, and how they linked together subjects, identities, and actions.

RT and the legitimation of Russian foreign policy

RT is an international broadcaster set up in 2005 with funding from the Russian government. According to RT itself, ‘RT creates news with an edge for viewers who want to Question More. RT covers stories overlooked by the mainstream media, provides alternative perspectives on
current affairs, and acquaints international audiences with a Russian viewpoint on major global events’ (RT 2018). Others take a different view on RT, describing it as a ‘propaganda blitzkrieg’ (Weiss 2015) feeding ‘the huge western audience that wants to believe that human rights are a sham and democracy a fix’ (Cohen 2014). In reality, the network’s outputs vary greatly across both platform and language service. In the US, RT has had to register as a foreign agent due to its role in Russian attempts to influence the 2016 presidential elections. In the UK, RT has been found in breach of broadcasting regulations, including for a lack of due impartiality in its reporting of the Syrian conflict and the 2018 Skripal poisonings.

The variation evident across RT’s outputs is reflected in the academic research on the network. Various studies suggest that in reporting matters close to Russian foreign policy priorities, RT’s outputs are based around mass production of disinformation (Kragh and Åsberg 2017; Ramsay and Robertshaw 2019). Others note the network’s focus on stories that promote Russian ‘nationalism, patriotism, imperialism’ (Liñán 2010, 169), suggest that its outputs are reliant on the threat of hard power (Just 2016, 86), or that they emphasise perceived foreign policy accomplishments, such as military intervention in Syria (Orttung and Nelson 2018; Dajani, Gillespie, and Crilley 2019). Research on the network’s special projects suggests an institutional openness to creative experimentation (Hutchings 2019), audience engagement (Crilley, Gillespie, and Willis 2019) and collaboration (van Noort and Chatterje-Doody, forthcoming). The network’s outputs have included criticism of the Russian state and its affiliated actors (Hutchings et al, 2018), and studies on RT’s audiences suggest they are less atypical and more critical news consumers than is often assumed (Authors, forthcoming). This is not, however, to say that RT produces balanced news coverage – quite the opposite. RT’s reporting draws disproportionately on Russian officialdom, or on a select group of repeat guests (Hutchings et al, forthcoming). The network often uses populist, anti-elitist, conspiratorial framing to undermine the US-led global order (Yablokov 2015, 312) and in doing so represents the ‘west’ as corrupt and hypocritical (Miazhevich 2018). Essentially, RT plays a role in attempting to ‘justify Russian government policies and create an image of Russia as the leader of global resistance to the US’ (Yablokov 2015, 312) and it does so overtly and explicitly, with an ‘outsider’ brand identity that fits well with the circulation logics of an integrated online media environment (Authors 2020).

**RT, Comedy and Legitimation**

Few studies pay attention to the central role that comedy, humour and satire play in RT’s brand identity, broadcast and social media output. Yet, humour is one of the key ways in which RT internalises and re-performs and confronts its ‘pariah’ status (Hutchings 2019). Indeed, RT’s recent global advertising campaigns have sarcastically encouraged audiences to tune in to find out ‘who we are planning to hack next’ and to ‘blame it on us’ if they have missed a train, as well as showing high-profile guests ironically reclaim the ‘useful idiot’ label as proof that they are unafraid to speak truth to power (Neal 2017).
In covering international news stories RT adopts transnational populist communication logics. This communicative style works to garner public attention and engagement by prioritising particular news values and storytelling techniques. The lines between news production and consumption are blurred, as are the boundaries between genres (Authors 2019, 76). Populist communication logics are defined by certain formal discursive qualities relating to the full spectrum of factors involved in the development of communicative messaging: the substance of what is being said; the actors who are producing them; their reasons why they are thus involved; and crucially, how assertions are produced (De Cleen, Glynos, and Mondon 2018). Here, the key feature of populist communication logics are the discursive construction of opposition between an in-group of the “people”, and an elite “other”; the preference for informal, or even ‘inappropriate’ cultural forms; the affective framing of issues as crises; and the promotion of audience engagement via emotive signifiers (Authors 2019, 82).

In the case of RT, these discursive framings are articulated at the transnational level, in order that the broadcaster’s criticisms of its viewers’ home countries come not from Russia, but as the personal appeals of a transnational people against a US-led global elite. Specifically, we see public opinion (whether through vox populi accounts of first-person experience, or by selective quotation of social media) being strongly represented in coverage; and sarcasm used to buttress core narratives, even being interwoven within traditional news items on matters of global significance, where such a tone is not the industry norm. Clear examples of this phenomenon recurred throughout RT’s coverage of the chemical poisoning of former Russian intelligence officer, Sergei Skripal, and his daughter Yulia, by two men later revealed to be decorated Russian intelligence officers. This was, according to RT, a ‘novi-cock up’ (Waterson 2018) that had done more damage to Salisbury’s reputation as a tourist destination than to the suspects’ credibility as private citizens, a point underscored by RT’s cynical marketing of t-shirts inscribed with quotes from the interview (Hutchings et al, forthcoming). Such examples give a sense of how comedy and satire are integral to RT, their media content, and legitimation of Russian policies. To understand how exactly this is so, this paper takes a look at two examples of RT’s comedic, satirical output shared online in recent years.

The first is a series of videos called Vipers Views which are 3-minute video clips made for YouTube and also broadcast as part of Sam Delaney’s News Thing, which aired on RT’s television channel between 2016-17. The second is a series of short videos released under the RT brand of ICYMI, made for YouTube, twitter and Instagram, aimed at millennials, and occasionally reproduced in full within RT’s daily news broadcasts. ICYMI launched in 2018 and continues to publish weekly videos. Given the role that RT plays in mediating contemporary Russian foreign policy (Yablokov 2015; Miazhevich 2018; Orttung and Nelson 2018), analysis of these two sets of intentionally humorous video series can offer useful insight into the legitimating function of humour on RT.
Vipers Views

Vipers Views is a series of short videos by Irish comedian Chris Tordoff who played the role of Francis ‘the viper’ Higgins in the Irish comedy show Hardy Bucks - a comedic mockumentary about young men trying to make money in post-2008 financial crisis rural Ireland - that he co-wrote. When Vipers Views launched on RT it was billed as giving ‘Higgins a regular platform for his comedic streams of consciousness after being shunned by what he describes as the "soft sh*t" of the mainstream media’ (The Viper quoted in RT 2016). RT’s press report of the launch of Vipers Views continues, stating ‘Higgins believes that together, viewers of the Thursday online show can help change the world. “Like and share it so that we can smash down the walls of Babylon,” he says.’ Subsequently, the way in which Vipers Views is launched as challenging the mainstream media suggest not only an alignment with RT’s anti-elite agenda (Miazhevich 2018) but also that this playful and humorous style is a key aspect of the video series.

Vipers Views videos are consistently irreverent in style and content. They focus on a broad range of topics ranging from ‘hard news’ issues such as war and conflict, to celebrity gossip, as well as references to sporting events, comedic sketches, animations, and songs. The videos adopt the conventions and aesthetics of YouTube videos with fast paced editing, sharp cuts between scenes, bright graphics, and an informal style of presenting that is light-hearted and funny. Together, these features constitute an irreverent political aesthetics of humour (Holm 2017, 12) that is focused on ridiculing Western political and celebrity elites, events and culture. Vipers Views mock the likes of David Guetta making a song for the FIFA World Cup, whilst also making jokes about Western military force in Syria. In the first Vipers Views video, scenes of explosions are overlaid with the Viper saying ‘fuuuuucking hell… the madness continues over in Syria’ as the caption on screen states ‘lunatics in Syria’ before Viper jokes about flying with the French air force over Syria. As the screen shows aerial footage of a bombing raid, Viper states ‘woah! Someone setting off fireworks down there man. You what? We’ve killed them all? Aw Jesus. Oh fuck. Oh Jesus Christ no. Oh my god.’ (Vipers Views 2016).

This stands as an example of Vipers Views using a form of satire that ‘attempts to reveal, and make an example of, political and/or social injustices in order to harm the powerful’ (Pahl 2017, 68). In this case, the humour punches up to highlight the contradictions of ‘Western’ humanitarian intervention and draw attention to the human costs of conflict conducted by states such as France, the USA, and the UK.

Figure 1: French airstrikes in Syria in Vipers Views
Vipers Views also appear to take aim at both sides of political spectrum – left and right. One video jokes about Hillary Clinton’s campaign to be president, whilst also mocking British Brexiteers. ‘Should Britain be in or should Britain be out?’ Viper asks, ‘Personally I’m Brits out and always have been and I’m gonna stick to my guns’ he replies, making a joke about Irish republicanism. Such jokes reveal in a self-aware style of irony, also highlighted in jokes about Putin. Here, the final Vipers View video opens with footage of Putin scoring an ice hockey goal as Viper sates:

He brought the Olympics to Sochi, and he likes playing hockey. Vladimir Putin. Technically he’s my boss, but I never let that get in the way of unbiased reportage. Here he is making a glorious dribble to finish what is the greatest goal ever scored on ice by man. What a legend. (Vipers Views 2017)

This section of the video closes with a short song – ‘thanks for the job Vlad, mind if I call you dad?’ as the RT logo appears on screen. This joke explicitly pokes fun at Vipers own relation with Putin through being broadcast on RT, and seems to almost be a case of ‘stiob’ – a Soviet form of humour – defined as:

a peculiar form of irony that [requires] such a degree of overidentification with the object, person, or idea at which this stiob was directed that it was often impossible to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two (Yurchak 2006, 249–50).
These examples reveal how Vipers Views uses humour to self-deprecate and mock the relationship between Viper, RT, and the Russian state. However, whilst humour directed towards ‘Western’ actors highlights political injustice, the humour directed at Russia and Putin provides no explicit critique.

**Figure 2: Putin in Vipers Views**

Ultimately then, Vipers Views videos don’t explicitly make claims that Russia is legitimately doing anything. Rather, they use humour to defuse criticism of Russia and allegations of illegitimacy by making such charges appear redundant in the face of irreverence. Light-hearted humorous commentary presents an insider’s view of Western politics and culture as laughable. Vipers Views videos show a level of self-deprecation and awareness that suggests that no topic is off limits as a source of ridicule – even Vladimir Putin himself. Yet, this criticism is articulated along a horizontal axis, with a soft note of performative self-deprecation evident in the light-hearted reference to Putin playing ice hockey. Whilst the actions of the ‘West’ and RT’s relationship with Putin are both mocked throughout the series, the use of different forms of humour is revealing. On one hand the power structures and actions of the ‘West’ are derided, and on another, references to Putin are performative and self-deprecating – offering little substantial critique or comment (Pahl 2017, 68). By contrast, the humorous criticisms of weightier topics – as in the French air force killing people in Syria – is structured not horizontally, but vertically, mocking ‘Western’ power structures and actions in a way that clearly deems them as illegitimate.
Audience interpretations of Vipers Views

As audience interpretation and response is both a crucial aspect of both legitimation processes and the functioning of humour – because audiences have to accept legitimacy claims for them to be successful but they also have to understand the jokes for comedy to be funny, then it makes sense to look at how people actually engage with these videos on social media. Our study of 300 YouTube comments on the first and last Vipers Views videos reveal several points of interest. First the audience express support for Viper and his views. One comment notes ‘shtick to your guns is right Francis!’ and suggests an identification with the presenter of the video and a repetition of their anti-British imperialist world view. The audience of Vipers Views also find the videos and their presenter funny. One viewer notes ‘This is the best thing I’ve seen today. Well done.’ Another comments ‘Keep making me piss myself laughing anyway and you’ve a fan in me no matter where you whack-a-mole up next on the interwebs. Legend.’ Again, these comments state support for the videos and their representation of the world.

However, despite the support expressed for the videos, viewers are aware of and point out how RT’s hosting of Vipers Views is perhaps serving a political purpose. On his first video, one audience member notes ‘Francis is now Russian property ay... not complaining.’ Whilst other commenters discuss the political implications of the videos being hosted by RT. They note:

A: the Putin agenda is evident, now that he's on RT’s payroll - no mention of the Russian hooligans & the shift of focus to NATO bombings in Syria

B: noticed that too. very biased. still funny though

C: How will I know what the radical feminists are up to now?

D: war in Syria or football hooligans fight? one of those is news

This discussion highlights that the audience are aware of the ways in which RT’s funding of the videos may make them bias, yet they still find them funny. In engaging with the videos, the audience replicate the use of humour and irony. In response to the criticism of Vipers videos and their association with RT, one viewer sardonically states ‘I depend upon Viper to provide independent, unbiased coverage of World News’ here making light of the fact that Viper is a fictional character whose videos serve an entertainment purpose, not an impartial news service.

In comments on his final video, audiences suggest that Viper’s views videos are the only reason they have subscribed to RT, and this goes some way to suggest that the use of comedy for legitimation purposes may be limited. One audience member comments ‘I'm unsubbing if
this is the last Vipers view’, another states ‘Final? 😔 😢 😨 Time to unsub RT UK’, whilst someone else replies ‘Excellent funny commentary on current events! I really hope this comes back biys, it's the only reason for us to watch RT!’ These comments demonstrate the limitations in using satire for legitimisation purposes given that audiences have been attracted to the content and its style and form, but not the broader politics – or the foreign policy goals – of the actor that hosts and produces the content such as RT. As one commentator put it:

Well now I can go back to not ever watching any of the shit that this channel puts out, sad that the show is gone but happy that viper isn't working for a propaganda outlet anymore and hopefully he picks up a new show somewhere!

ICYMI

Created and launched by RT in 2018 on YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, ICYMI’s videos are also irreverent in style and content. The ICYMI sub-brand includes videos in a number of different formats covering topics including soft news, popular culture and voxpops with members of the public. However, its mainstay is the series of to-camera videos fronted by presenter Polly Boiko, in which political and news developments are satirised at length. Again, they adopt the conventions and aesthetics of YouTube videos with fast paced, sharp cuts, graphics, a repetitive signature soundtrack and a presenter speaking directly to the camera - generally using an informal and sarcastic tone to indicate her frustration and/or incredulity at current events, and with a suspension of the musical soundtrack used to emphasise key points.

ICYMI’s videos consistently represent contemporary global politics as both opaque and ridiculous, seemingly attempting to stoke a sense of apathy with claims about how awful everyone is, and a sense of foreboding, if hilarious, doom surrounding the ills of modern (Western) society. Political correctness, ‘snowflakes’ and ‘woke’ culture are recurrent objects of ridicule. Indeed, the scripts and presentation style of ICYMI tend to performatively reject such mores, with the frequent (self-)objectification of the presenter, as in videos dedicated to debating whether left- or right-wingers are “hotter”. In addition to this recurrent conservative social commentary, a great deal of ICYMI’s content is dedicated explicitly to developments related to ‘high politics.’ For example, the first ICYMI video satirises the construction of a US embassy in London, and the final video in our sample of 50 videos critiques the election of former comedian Volodymyr Zelensky as President of Ukraine.

ICYMI videos include a level of self-aware horizontal humour, apparently intended both to make the presenter relatable to audiences, and to pre-emptively defuse potential criticisms over her, and ICYMI’s Russian provenance. For instance, Boiko subtly, but repeatedly, indicates her credentials as a Londoner; notes ‘oligarchs’’ use of the London property market to launder their money; effects incredulity at a Star Trek visual reference inserted by an editor (ICYMI 2018b); and in comparing electoral politics with reality TV, laments the universally-
applicable ‘truth’ that ‘politicians are useless and voters are stupid’ (ICYMI 2019). By far the bulk of the humour in ICYMI, however – and especially as it relates directly to the headline topics of the videos - is of an overtly vertical, satirical nature. In this way, the power differential between the people and the ‘establishment’ on a national level is foregrounded, as is the differential between the people and elites on an international level.

Figure 3: Reference to ‘establishment paedo ring accusations’ in ICYMI

For example, in drawing parallels between the US embassy’s construction and historical castle construction, ICYMI compares the historical insulation of ‘tyrants’ from ‘shit covered peasants’, with the present insulation of US politicians from ‘anti-Trump protesters’. In a shift away from its ostensible subject matter – but one which drives home this horizontal power differential - the video notes the geographical proximity of the Embassy’s site to Dolphin Square, which Boiko describes as having been the centre of ‘establishment paedo ring accusations’. With similar references to the geographical proximity of MI6 headquarters and the Houses of Parliament to the Embassy’s site, Boiko provides a number of humorous examples of how this practically facilitates the UK’s status as a US client state (ICYMI 2018b). In a similar way, the video dedicated to President Zelensky’s election weaves together its targeted satirical critique of the specific situation with a broader horizontal mocking of the US in global affairs. Thus, even though in ICYMI’s representation, ‘Ukraine’s President is such a joke that voters replaced him with a TV comedian’, the presenter sarcastically notes that
‘This would never happen in a serious country like the US. Twice. Or maybe…. [with visual reference to the 2020 US Presidential election] Three times?’ (ICYMI 2019).

Figure 4: ICYMI criticises the ‘reality show’ of Presidential politics

The launch of ICYMI without any RT branding suggests that the original intention was to occlude its relationship with the Russian state. However, over time the series has taken a humorous approach to confronting these links, as in joking references to oligarchs in London, or by warning wannabe hackers that that particular proclivity is ‘Russia’s, so back off, comrade!’ (ICYMI 2018a). Such allusions tend to be passing swipes at Russia rather than substantive humorous examinations of ICYMI’s links with Russia. The varied use of humour in ICYMI’s videos suggest that RT uses self-referential horizontal humour in ways intended to engage audiences with the presenter and topic, defuse potential scepticism about the series’ Russian links, and to make them feel affectively invested at the videos’ substantive content and overarching themes – most notably, a parallel sense of injustice and apathy around ‘Western’ politics. In presenting these substantive themes, it is sarcastic humour presented on a vertical axis that is used to lay bare the injustices and hypocrisies of contemporary global politics in ways that appear realistic and knowing, rather than didactic. Whilst with Vipers Views there appeared to be no clear strategic narratives or explicit pro-Russian framing of events, with ICYMI, the content is a more explicitly aligned with Russian state agendas. The mocking of Russia is horizontal, inclusive and benign, whereas the mocking of Western culture and decision-making is vertical, exclusive and judgemental.
Yet, even if the humorous content of ICYMI aligns more or less with the Russian state’s strategic objectives, that is not necessarily to say that it is an effective mechanism by which to further them. In particular, to have any idea of how useful humour is as a tool for legitimating Russian perspectives on global politics, it is necessary to ascertain the extent to which audiences actively engage with the deeper political meanings of the content. In order to address this question, we analysed 300 social media comments made by audience members in response to ICYMI’s first and final video published during our period of analysis.

**Audience interpretations of ICYMI**

Our analysis of comments made in response to these videos suggests a wide variety of responses – positive and negative – to RT’s humorous content. There tends to be a significant degree of approval of the main presenter, with the insinuation that her brand of comedy reveals politically-salient truths: ‘Polly Boiko rocks! Well done RT for placing satire in the front row of punch bags for truth!’ and ‘Polly Boiko for president of Russian Federation!’ Yet, audience approval is often expressed in a very gendered form, making clear reference to Boiko with comments such as ‘I love her too 😍’. In many ways, then, it appears that audiences do subscribe to the perspectives presented in ICYMI.

This is further reflected in a number of comments outlining agreement with the general sentiment of the positions that RT presents in its ICYMI videos. It is, however impossible to speculate on the provenance of these comments, and several bear the hallmarks of non-native English speakers (including the misuse of the (in)definite article common to Russian-speaking learners of English). Nonetheless, the ideas produced by these audience members are documented within the publicly-viewable comments attached to ICYMI videos and here, ideas about the absurdity of the Ukrainian Presidential election process are reproduced by audience members who agree that “One clown replaced another clown. It is Ukrainian game of thrones,” and that “The country as a whole is a joke. Zelensky is just the cherry on top... 😂😂😂😂 The embarrassment... 😊😊😊😊”. This can be considered a clear reproduction of Russian strategic narratives about Ukraine’s status and the legitimacy of its electoral processes, but arrived at via the circuitous route of humour. In some cases, the take-home messages that audiences articulate are even more generalised in terms of a mistrustful attitude to the democratic process: “People are so fed up with these morons that run our planet, (not just in Ukraine) that they will vote for just about anyone” and “Democracy belongs to dustbin...hit 👍 if you agree....” At times, it seems likely that these positive messages come from regular viewers or subscribers to the series: “Well that settles it. You just gave another great argument on why Government should not exist. Another great video.”

However, despite the positive uptake of core messaging by this particular segment of the audience, it is far from clear that the overall reception of ICYMI’s videos is a positive one.
Indeed, many audience members seem unconvinced by the videos, in part because they simply don’t find ICYMI, or Boiko’s informal presentation style, funny: ‘Good luck with the new show but I think satire stopped being funny twenty odd years ago, please prove me wrong. BTW, just throwing in the odd swear word won’t help make it funny.’ In fact, for some, the failure of ICYMI to hit the mark stands as indication of its status as a tool of Russian government messaging: ‘Is this supposed to be funny? This has Russian style trolling written all over it.’ In fact, the links to Russia are highlighted by a number of commenters, who remain unsatisfied by Boiko’s brief, sarcastic pre-emption of such concerns, and see ICYMI’s sarcastic criticism as an exercise in hypocrisy: ‘Hey look at this, a Russian propagandist from a country without free and fair elections is attempting to undermine the legitimacy of countries that do have free and fair elections’; and simply, ‘That’s enough Russian propaganda for today.’

What is more, there is a degree of negative pushback from commenters unconvinced by ICYMI’s relentlessly negative tone – precisely the kind of vertical sarcasm through which criticisms of existing power structures are brought to the foe. For one such commenter, ICYMI’s deliberate divisiveness is a bore: ‘Amazing, another channel trying to cash in on the division of people... Wow how original, and crazy and wacky too 😎 you guys are like omg crazy 😴😴😴😴 😴.’ Some of the criticisms of RTs claims appear to come from Trump supporters unimpressed by the videos’ negative treatment of the US President as well as broader US hegemony: ‘i just love how women like this cant stand trump swinging americas sword lol GET USED TO IT’; and “…Trump is one of the very few politicians who actually isn’t a joke, knows what he’s doing, does most of his homework, etc. Same goes for Putin. You want a joke? Take a look at the "leaders" of the EU…” Intriguingly, despite the ostensible criticism of ICYMI’s representation here, the commenter clearly echoes one of the recurrent RT (and ICYMI) themes about the deficiency of the Western democratic status quo.

**Conclusion**

Comedy is a central aspect of RT’s social media output. It is used both to attract audiences, and also to project political content that is critical of the ‘West’. If we are to understand how RT claims legitimacy for Russian foreign policy, then we need to pay attention to how the network uses comedy and how audiences respond to it. With Vipers Views and ICYMI, RT is adopting the styles and conventions of social media platforms, providing irreverent forms of news coverage intended to be of interest to those for whom straight news coverage is unappealing. In many ways this mirrors the prevailing strategy in Russian domestic media in recent years, whereby highly the proportion of politicised content has been increased through the saturated scheduling of ‘agitainment’ products (Tolz and Teper 2018). With Vipers Views and ICYMI, there are seemingly no clear ‘strategic narratives’ being used to claim legitimacy, instead they appear to be ‘centrally sanctioned communication of ideologized political messages, delivered in accordance with an entertainment logic’ (Tolz and Teper 2018, 216) which has ‘now emerged as the main media output of Russia’s neo – authoritarian
regime, putting global communication trends and innovation to its own advantage’ (Tolz and teper 2018, 224) and appealing to less engaged and sceptical audiences. In RT’s case, the substance of its videos satirises ‘Western’ culture, political and security institutions.

Vipers Views was produced by an outsider to the network and featured a high level of explicit irony running throughout the show about Viper’s relation with Putin and the Russian state.ICYMI, on the other hand, is an example of in-house production of comedic content, which reflects RT’s openness to experimentation, and perhaps also the network’s desire for greater predictability in its comedy outputs. Here, ICYMI looks like something of an adaptation of the comedy format and style of Vipers Views and other satirical social media shorts in ways more aligned with the interest of their Russian state funders.

Together, Vipers Views and ICYMI highlight how the legitimation of Russian foreign policy is neither simply about the projection of strategic narratives, propaganda, or fake news. RT’s comedic, satirical output rarely provides linear narratives that legitimate specific Russian actions; they are not falsehoods, nor disinformation; and they do not make threats about Russian hard power – as much of RT’s content is accused of. Rather, the videos are about making people laugh. They use comedy to make people emotionally invested in RT’s claims about global politics, and to draw their attention to structural injustices that appear to support a very particular vision of Russia’s role in the world.

Audience comments suggest that RT’s attempts at using humour might be effective in some cases. For example, a few comments on these videos are indicative of the audience being emotionally invested and supportive of RT’s satirical claims. Whether that is people agreeing with RT’s scepticism of democracy by opining that it ‘belongs in the dustbin’, or by lauding RT as a funny alternative to the mainstream media, it seems that RT’s satirical shows attract audiences to RT with a sceptical, humorous, anti-elite identity. Despite this, other comments imply that RT’s comedy quite often falls flat. Audiences seem aware of RT’s funding from the Russian government – even referring to it as propaganda. Although some regular viewers appear heavily invested in the network’s comedic outputs, many appear to be choosing what they view purely on the basis of comedic preferences – including those planning to unsubscribe following the network’s last airing of Vipers Views, and those who state simply that they do not find the ICYMI videos funny. RT’s use of comedy and satire serves to claim legitimacy for Russian actions in ways that are more ephemeral and perhaps more complex than current research suggests – and in many cases it appears to be audiences’ perceptions of the comedic nature of these representations that define their responses to these claims.

As the audience comments show, the use of use of humour on a vertical axis to foreground and critique imbalances of political power can work effectively to gain traction amongst those positively predisposed to such messages. Yet, the use of horizontal forms of humour to render RT’s voice that of a relatable, benign commentator are not wholly convincing to its online
audiences. What is more, the relentlessly negative tone of the comedy, together with an insufficient addressing of the Russia’ question can render the finished product unsatisfying to audiences on both comedic and political grounds. By analysing the content of RT’s satirical shows alongside the discussion and debates in social media comments about these videos, we can better understand the role that comedy plays in the legitimation of Russian policies.

References


ICYMI 2018a. ICYMI: Appreciating Other Cultures MUST Be Stopped, One Innocent Prom Girl’s Dress at a Time! https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbphjD1om6s&list=PLQvcaetS_k4za-pi02pcUpmC-8lSG52fc&index=81&t=0s.
Orttung, Robert W., and Elizabeth Nelson. 2018. ‘Russia Today’s Strategy and Effectiveness on YouTube’. Post-Soviet Affairs 0 (0): 1–16.
https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1531650.