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Russia Today and Conspiracy Theories: People, Power and Politics on RT

Book

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Introduction: the curious case of RT

On 5 July 1881 the unknown author of an editorial in the St. Louis Daily Globe – a Democrat newspaper in one of the Midwest American states, published a piece about the assassination of the 20th US President James Garfield. According to historian Andrew McKenzie-McHarg, this journalist was the first to use the term ‘conspiracy theory’ to reflect upon the myriad of versions of Garfield’s murder that emerged (McKenzie-McHarg, 2017, p. 75). Since then – and especially since the German sociologist Karl Popper used the term in the late 1940s (Butter, 2020), the phenomenon of conspiracy theories has occupied a totally different space in our lives, reflecting how many humans interpret reality. In fact, reality becomes more mind-blowing than the starkest conspiratorial fiction. The 1999 film *The Matrix* depicted the world as an illusion fed to humans whose bodies are used as batteries powering the *Matrix* – an enormous computer run by AI – that keeps the majority of people unable to perceive reality as it is. This postmodernist criticism of capitalism is perceived differently in 2020 when AI algorithms underlie the multibillion businesses of big tech, shaping ‘the surveillance capitalism’ (Zuboff, 2019) in which we all live. The conspiracy of computers against humans doesn’t look as unrealistic as it once was.

Scholars have recognised that uncertainty and insecurity about the true nature of the world lie behind belief in conspiracies (Harambam and Aupers, 2017). As Frederic Jameson (1988) argued, conspiracy theories are ‘a poor person’s cognitive mapping in the postmodern age’. Knight and Butter suggest (2020), that Jameson’s perception of conspiracy theories treats the emergence of conspiracy theories not as a product of a mentally sick mind, but as an allegory of the overly complicated world. This approach helps identify conspiracy theories as a symbol of disbalance of power and influence in society. Often conveyed through populist politics, that divide of the social between the people and the power – a characteristic of conspiracy theories – explains why these ideas have such huge power in politics today (Fenster, 2008).

People, power and politics are the key to understanding the proliferation of conspiracy theories in modern world via the media and, as it stands, the three terms that appear in the subtitle of this book. We come to a focus on these elements of contemporary international broadcasting to explore how conspiracy theories are communicated globally via the means of traditional and new media by (a) claiming to represent ‘the people’, (b) undermining and

relocating power between political actors and thus, (c) shaping subnational, national and global politics.

One may ask: why RT? What made us to write a book on the seemingly obscure media outlet whose viewing numbers are almost impossible to figure out, but which has gleefully repeated politicians' accusations that it is a 'propaganda bullhorn' in its own advertising (RT, 2014)? Well, because RT presents a curious case of an international media organisation that has instrumentalised conspiracy theories and turned them into a tool of international politics. And given the rapidity of global communications and how quickly societies are divided in terms of profits and opinions, it is clear that RT is not the only media that does, or will continue, to benefit from these divides.

RT was established in 2005 (as Russia today) to represent Russia to the world, and to present a Russian perspective on global events. Very quickly, the network began actively producing and promoting conspiracy theories. Whilst some of RT's more overtly conspiratorial output has since been taken off the air, the network remains a source of significant concern for governments and intelligence agencies, who have feared its potential to influence public opinion during recent elections, referenda, and hostile state interventions. Now, more than ever, policymakers, journalists, academics and intelligence services alike seek to understand how RT helps to turn obscure ideas and social doubts into tools of international politics.

This book draws on the fields of International Relations and Politics and Media Studies, and sets conspiracy theories within this context as a populist instrument of power relations (Fenster, 2008). In today's rapidly globalizing world, international broadcasting, and public diplomacy more broadly, are seen as vital sources of potential influence on overseas audiences. RT represents an excellent case for the investigation of how global communication technologies influence the development and dissemination of conspiracy theories, which are also an important component of the post-Soviet Russian intellectual landscape and Kremlin sponsored political discourse (Yablokov, 2018).

In uniting these two research areas, this book explores how RT's engagement with conspiracy theory allows it to articulate a critique of the policies of the US and Western European governments as if from *within* those societies. Far from delivering the external critiques of a foreign power, RT performs as a vessel for aggrieved parties within its audiences, who are actively involved in packaging conspiracy theories. RT's strategic use of new media feeds into this process by enabling targeting of outputs to specific audience contingents, thus

transforming international broadcasting into a phenomenon of peculiar domestic relevance. With this foregrounding and engagement with different types of conspiracy theories which have currency among the general public as an interpretative frame of reality, RT's outputs conform to what Peter Knight defines as a "conspiracy culture". This allows RT to infuse the current social and economic inequalities of Western society with conspiratorial allegations, thereby addressing international audiences with a distinctly anti-elitist message (Knight, 2000).

According to RT, global media heavyweights (like CNN) are in league with the political establishment. So, RT's development has to be situated in relation to both the abundant tradition of populism in the US, and the rise in populist movements and trends across the globe. With its slogan encouraging audiences to "Question more", RT brands itself as a direct challenge to these elites and their visions of current affairs. Its expansion of broadcast and online service provision to cover media markets across Western Europe, Latin America and the Arabic speaking world demonstrates sustained Russian interest in influencing and interacting with public opinion across a range of global societies. For this reason, it is crucial to explore the ways in which RT's programming incorporates, and responds to, the perspectives of anti-establishment right-wing and left-wing communities in the societies where it targets its outputs. To do this comprehensively, we have focused our analysis on the English language outputs of RT and their circulation within the international Anglophone media space. We don't engage here with the stories that have been broadcast in French, German, Spanish or Arabic, nor how these distinct language services have interacted in their own respective sections of the international media.

This interactivity is crucial to understanding how the expression of populist sentiment adopts new forms in the digital era, as core and peripheral audiences across multiple platforms co-produce, re-write and disseminate these ideas. Thus, media actors as varied as RT, the platforms upon which it makes its outputs available, its media contributors and audiences all contribute to producing the emotional arguments that stimulate engagement, to influence wider transnational discussion, and enable today's conspiracy myths to flourish.

The book interrogates these processes of production, evolution and dissemination of conspiratorial ideas on and around RT. This means not only tracing the origins of some conspiratorial ideas in the political culture of America or particular Western European states, but also investigating the more dynamic processes of how RT's outputs interact with global

conspiracy cultures and trigger further conspiracy myth making among both sub-national and transnational communities. Presenting evidence from a series of recent case studies, the book investigates the political implications of conspiracy theories on and around RT – ranging from the network’s overt engagement with conspiracy theories as a genre, through to their more subtle integration into the reporting of newsworthy events.

Structure of the book

The first chapter provides a short overview of how the form and dissemination of conspiracy theories have been historically intertwined with the evolution of communication technologies, before taking a deep dive into the contemporary media environment, and the ways in which this facilitates the spread of conspiracy theories. Chapter 2 outlines the network’s history, explaining the Kremlin’s motivations behind its creation, and the reasons that RT developed into a media outlet focused specifically on the spread of conspiracy theories. The subsequent chapters explore the editorial strategies chosen by RT’s staff, and their intertwinement with conspiratorial narratives. In chapter 3, we investigate two programmes – *The Truthseeker* and *The World according to Jesse Ventura* – which serve as examples of how RT has instrumentalised conspiracy theories from both far right and left wing ideologies, providing both with an arena for expressing dissatisfaction. Chapters 4 and 5 deal with stories of immense international political significance to Russia’s political leadership, and in which RT has played an important mediating role. First, Donald Trump’s unexpected victory in the 2016 presidential elections, and second, the 2018 poisoning of former Russian-British double agent, Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the British city of Salisbury. Together these events fed into the Kremlin’s reputation as a global ‘bad guy’ prepared to hack foreign governments and poison civilians to sow chaos and panic. RT’s reporting, however, adopted conspiracy theories to report them as in terms of Western governments’ anti-Russian provocations. Our final chapter, number 6, investigates RT’s outputs over the pandemic period – bringing to light how inter-related conspiracy theories have permeated coverage of both COVID-19 and the highly contentious 2020 US Presidential election campaign. Written as the impact of these massive social and political ruptures continues to be felt across the globe, the conclusion of the book reflects on the curious place of RT within the broader context of contemporary conspiracy cultures that are unlikely to disappear any time soon. It offers a range of recommendations for addressing how the perennial politics of conspiracy theories permeates our contemporary age.

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