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Digital Spaces of War: Genre and Affective Investments in RT's Representations of the Syrian Conflict

Introduction

Whilst research on media and war has provided sophisticated readings of narratives and images used to represent conflict, there is less attention given to how audiences interpret and feel about these representations. Yet, recent scholarship (Solomon, 2014) suggests that representations of war have political effects not only because of their content, but because of how audiences feel about them. In this chapter, we contribute to burgeoning discussions of affective investment, by analysing how different genres of video elicit different affective investments in representations of war. To do so we analyse a variety of genres of visual media produced by the Russian state-funded international broadcaster RT (formerly Russia Today) that cover the Syrian conflict. We begin by analysing how the visual representations apparent in breaking news reports, late night parody shows, talk shows and short satirical social media videos frame Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict and attempt to invoke emotional responses in the audiences that view them. In order to provide further insight into the extent to which different video genres elicit emotions, we then analyse online comments made on these four genres of video.

Russia in the Syrian Conflict

In September 2015, the Russian military intervened in the Syrian conflict. Supporting the Assad regime, and labelling all opposition groups as 'terrorists', Russian airstrikes and military support seemingly turned the tide of the Syrian conflict in Assad's favour (Souleimanov and Dzutsati, 2018: 42). Whilst Russian intervention in Syria was partly motivated by economic and diplomatic interests, it arguably had a more fundamental strategic aim of helping 'to re-establish Russia's importance on the world stage' (Wood, 2018: 140;

Casula, 2015). Indeed, through a combination of ‘three years of nonstop bombing’ (Frolovskiy, 2019) and diplomatic summits, Russia has emerged as a key powerbroker in the Middle East, claiming that it has achieved what the ‘West’ could not – establishing the pathway to peace in Syria (Ellis-Petersen and Roth, 2018). Such a pathway has been paved with civilian casualties, with some sources estimating that Russia has killed over 8100 Syrian civilians, including almost 2000 children (SOHR, 2019).

Russian intervention in Syria, alongside the crisis in Ukraine, the Russian annexation of Crimea, and Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential election (Jamieson, 2018) have led to the claim that we have entered a ‘New Cold War’ (Osnos et al., 2017). In this supposedly new geopolitical era, one of the key means of confrontation between Russia and the ‘West’ takes place through media and communication – where an ‘information war’ (Hellman and Wagnsson, 2017) sees Russia attempting to win the hearts and minds of global publics through various means. These include state funded international broadcasting through media outlets such as RT and Sputnik (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley, 2019b; Hutchings et al., 2015; Orttung and Nelson, 2018; Yablokov, 2015) as well as more nefarious methods such as spreading disinformation through shadowy online outlets (Hjorth and Adler-Nissen, 2019; Jamieson, 2018). We seek to build upon current studies, not by examining how ‘truthful’ Russia’s reporting of the Syrian conflict is, but by exploring how audiences feel about that coverage. To do so, we draw upon recent scholarship on aesthetics and emotions to inform our study of Russia’s representation of the Syrian conflict.

We argue that the use of different genres of video published by the Russian state-funded international broadcaster RT highlights how actors working under the broad umbrella of the

state can, and do, produce multiple representations of the same conflict. By drawing upon theorising of ‘affective investments’ (Solomon, 2014) we ask three questions:

- 1) How does RT use different genres of video to frame Russia’s involvement in the Syrian conflict?
- 2) How do these different genres of video serve to invoke emotions in their audiences?
- 3) How are audiences of these videos affectively invested in Russia’s involvement in the Syrian conflict?

These questions provide important openings into considering the spaces of contemporary war and conflict. Whilst the space of war has traditionally been conceptualised as limited to battlefields and their immediate surroundings, modern research has recognised the vital role that media play in bringing distant wars directly into our everyday lives, even when we may live half a world away from the battlefield (Gillespie, 2006; Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010; Sylvester, 2010). In the digital age, political and media actors, social media platforms, and crucially, audiences, interact and actively co-constitute the representation and meaning of the world and what happens in it (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley, 2019b: 81; Merrin, 2018; Miskimmon et al., 2017). Social media spaces, therefore, constitute sites at which society engages in representative practices – such as publishing, viewing, and sharing comments, photographs, videos, and memes – that give meaning to political, social, and cultural phenomena such as war and conflict (Cottle, 2006; Couldry, 2008; Couldry and Hepp, 2013).

Within the space of social media political actors’ representations of the wars they are engaged in flow together with audiences’ own expressions of their thoughts and feelings about war. These multi-level engagements are visible to, and frame, the experience of

subsequent viewers. Therefore, social media comments made by ‘the people formerly known as the audience’ (Rosen, 2012: 13) produce interactions, commentary and framing that together shape understandings of war and conflict online. Our concern, then, is not purely with how physical spaces of war are represented by actors engaged in conflict. Rather, we engage directly with how audiences express feelings about those conflicts through the online comments they produce and share in the meaning-making space of social media.

In response to our research questions we analyse the visual representations apparent in examples of RT’s breaking news reports, documentaries, satirical videos, and talk shows that frame Russia’s involvement in the Syrian conflict. In order to understand the audiences’ affective investments in Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict we then analyse online comments made on these genres of video. We discuss the implications of these genres and different affective investments in Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict, and we argue that research must be attuned to the complex milieu of digital representations, genres, and emotions that now form digital spaces of war, and which profoundly influence how audiences feel about the conflicts portrayed on-screen.

Media and War: From Aesthetics to Affective Investments

It is important to understand how contemporary wars are represented through media because the words and images used to describe events, issues, actors and actions in global politics produce meanings that determine what can be thought, said, and done in response to them (Bleiker 2001: 510). As the philosopher Jacques Rancière notes ‘politics revolves around what is seen’ (2006: 13) where visual media (such as photographs, news reports, movies, and digital images) provide a ‘distribution of the sensible’ (2006: 12). In these terms, and in the context of war – as Judith Butler argues – visual media help to cultivate and sustain political

violence by presenting war as ‘an inevitability, something good, or even a source of moral satisfaction’ (2010: ix).

Ultimately then, modern war and conflict cannot be made sense of ‘unless one carefully accounts for the role of media in it’ (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010) especially given the emergence and spread of interactive digital communication technologies that permeate both the battlefield and the daily lives of people in places at a far remove from warzones (Cottle, 2006; Merrin, 2018). Central to understanding the significance of visual media and war has been an attention to how media representations invoke emotions (Åhäll and Gregory, 2015; Maltby and Keeble, 2007; Zollmann, 2017). Some scholars have found that war reporting that features ‘emotive and graphic coverage’ has more influence over policymakers than non-graphic coverage (Robinson, 2002: 25); others have paid attention to how ‘suffering is portrayed on screen and how the suffering is narrated’(Chouliaraki, 2006: 3); whilst Butler and others have analysed how visual media frame some lives as grievable and others as not (Butler, 2010; Hutchison, 2016).

We build upon studies of media representations of war and emotions by recognising the importance of audiences (da Silva and Crilley, 2017; Gillespie et al., 2010; O’Loughlin, 2011; Pears, 2016) and by using the concept of ‘affective investments’ (Solomon, 2014) to help us both analyse the content of visual media and the responses of audiences that view them. For, whilst researchers often study the ‘form’ of the language or images used in media representations of identities and actions (Laclau, 2004: 326) they often overlook the ‘forces’ by which such media appeal to those who view them (Laclau, 2007: 111). As Ty Solomon suggests, media alone ‘cannot carry the power that they often have —the force of affect is needed to explain how [they] resonate with audiences and have political effects’ (2014: 729). Media representations of war do not only matter because of how they represent the world, but

because of how audiences that view them feel about, and respond to what they represent. Following Solomon, we understand affective investments to be a linkage between the representation of identities in media and how these identities are given credence, significance, and power due to how audiences feel that those representations express a ‘deeper nerve or ‘essence’’ to what is being represented (Solomon, 2014: 735; O’Loughlin, 2011).

We build upon the study of affective investments by exploring how the genre specificity of images of war and conflict may influence audiences’ affective investments in the substantive content. Given that affective investments help to explain the linkage between media content and potential media effects, it is imperative to study not only *what* audiences say in response to online representations of war but also *how* different genres may shape those responses. With this in mind, we now introduce our case study and outline our methodology.

RT and the Syrian Conflict: Recognising the Importance of Genre

From the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, the government of President Bashar Al-Assad used a combination of physical threats and visa denial to constrain professional media reporting of events on the ground (Khamis et al., 2012). As a result, social media became the primary source of information about the conflict for many people (Lynch et al., 2014; Powers and O’Loughlin, 2015). Various actors attempted to use social media to gain support and legitimacy for their causes, with the Syrian Opposition actively using citizen journalists to engage international audiences with their resistance to the Assad regime and revolutionary ambitions (Al-Ghazzi, 2014; Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti, 2013; Crilley, 2017; Saleh, 2018).

What had initially started as a peaceful revolution against Assad and his regime escalated into a civil war between groups including government forces, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, and various Salafi Jihadi groups such as the Islamic State and al Nusra. The progression of the conflict took Syria from being ‘a significant regional player into an arena in which a multitude of local and foreign players compete’ (Hokayem, 2013: 11). This competition was reflected by state funded international broadcasters, which reported the conflict in ways that aligned with their host states’ foreign policy interests (Matar, 2014; Salama, 2012). Whilst ‘Western’ states supported the Syrian Opposition (Geis and Schlag, 2017), Russia sought to maintain the Assad regime’s control of Syria (Orttung and Nelson, 2018).

Given Russia’s substantial military engagement in Syria, RT’s coverage of the conflict is a worthy object of study. The network’s coverage reflects ‘the Russian government’s official position... one way or another’ (Putin quoted in The Russian Presidential Executive Office, 2013ⁱ), and their representations of the Syrian conflict therefore serve to provide insight into how RT claims legitimacy for Russian foreign policy activities that have been widely condemned by members of the international community (Orttung and Nelson, 2018: 3). We have chosen to study different genres of videos shared by RT’s English-language channels on YouTube, because this provides chosen highlights of their broadcast reporting and thus gives an insight into their key messages and demonstrates how they attempt to set the news agenda and influence audiences (al Nashmi et al., 2017: 169–170). Furthermore, YouTube is at the heart of RT’s social media strategy (al Nashmi et al., 2017; Chatterje-Doody and Crilley, 2019a; Orttung and Nelson, 2018), and also enables direct audience engagement via up- and down- voting functions and the ability to leave comments and replies on the video and in response to other audience members.

Studies to date have provided welcome insight into RT's use of YouTube and have accounted for differences between RT's different language services (Orttung and Nelson, 2018). We build upon this research by focusing on RT's use of different genres of video across their English language YouTube channels. We do so because genres, as we understand them, are 'patterns/forms/styles/structures which transcend individual [media] products, and which supervise both their construction by [producer] and their reading by audiences' (Ryall, 1975: 28). Genres provide a common 'repertoire of elements' (Lacey, 2000: 133) that shape how media are produced and interpreted. Alongside news reports hosted by television anchors, RT produces media in a range of genres including, but not limited to, talk shows, documentaries, and satirical short clips. However, studies of RT often remain focused on single genres of RT's output, such as their news broadcasts (Chatterje-Doody and Crilley, 2019b; Hutchings et al., 2015; Hutchings and Tolz, 2015; Miazhevich, 2018; Rawnsley, 2015), their coverage of conspiracy theories (Yablokov, 2015), or their social media reenactments (Crilley et al, forthcoming). Our study builds upon this work by placing genre at the heart of the analysis and exploring different forms of genre beyond those listed above. This helps us understand how media actors attempt to frame war and conflict in different ways in an attempt to invoke different emotions, and how in turn this may appeal to different audiences, thereby providing an insight into the complexity of how political actors claim legitimacy for their actions in multiple ways in a the hybrid media ecology.

In order to understand how RT uses different genres of video to frame Russia's involvement in the Syrian conflict, we focus our analysis on one particular event: the chemical attack in Douma on April 7th 2018 which caused the deaths of approximately fifty people and injured one hundred more. The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), USA, France, and Britain attributed the attack to the Assad regime. Despite this, the Syrian

regime and their Russian allies argued that the attack was carried out, or staged, by opposition forces and their ‘Western’ allies. This event thus warrants attention because it marks a critical moment at which the Russian government sought to claim legitimacy for their own foreign policy in Syria whilst delegitimising the policy of ‘Western’ states who conducted military airstrikes in response to the chemical attack. Our study explores examples of several different genres of video about the Douma chemical attack that RT published on YouTube. These are: 1) a breaking news video; 2) a late-night parody show; 3) a talk show; 4) a short satirical video.

Breaking News

On April 13th 2018 RT English uploaded a news broadcast to YouTube titled ‘Solid evidence Douma ‘chemical attack’ was staged – Lavrov’ (RT, 2018c). The video follows the genre conventions of a news broadcast: introduction by news anchor; featured interview with official statement; interview with journalist; accompanying footage of the event. Throughout, a banner chryon at the bottom of the screen displays headlines such as ‘Russian FM: Solid evidence Syria’s Douma ‘chemical attack’ staged’. At first glance, the video appears objective through the presentation of accounts from the Russian foreign secretary, other ‘Western’ media outlets (countering the Russian foreign secretary’s claims) and the reactions of the US ambassador to the UN to the events. However, such a reading belies an inherent bias in favour of the Russian foreign minister’s account noted through the anchor affirming that Lavrov has ‘the solid proof... that pretty much one hundred percent goes against what you’ll read and hear everywhere else’. The support of Russian claims is further emphasised by the dismissal of ‘Western’ news sources as deceptive, and the use of graphic imagery depicting the White Helmets as Islamist jihadists. Such characterisations serve as a portfolio

of ‘evidence’ through which the news item can be seen to invoke mistrust and doubt in the US, opening space for trust and credence in Lavrov and Russia.

Late-Night Parody Show

The second video we examined is a late-night news parody show. This genre is perhaps most associated with shows such as *The Daily Show* and *Last Week With John Oliver*, which feature a news anchor-like presenter satirising the news using a combination of humorous characterisations and images. Published on RT’s documentary YouTube channel, the series *ClipaRT with Boris Malagurski* employs the conventions of this genre. In a video published on September 12th 2018 (RT, 2018d), Malagurski uses sarcasm and expressive verbal- and body- language throughout. Excerpts from ‘Western’ media sources are used but Malagurski adopts a clear line of argument in favour of Assad and Russia, explicitly alleging that the Douma attack was staged. Whilst the Syrian opposition and their backers are presented as untrustworthy proponents of ‘propaganda’ and terrorism, whereas Assad is framed as a rational, trustworthy actor whose military are ‘the real heroes in Syria’.

Talk Show

On 16th April 2018, RT published a half hour segment of their flagship talk show *Crosstalk* to YouTube. The episode, titled ‘Syria attacked’ (RT, 2018a) brings the regular presenter, Peter Lavelle, together with two guests to discuss US airstrikes in Syria in response to the Douma chemical attack. Whilst typical genre characteristics of current affairs talk shows consist of debate between guests, *CrossTalk’s* guests often share a critical perspective on the ‘West’ and a supportive vision of Russia and its allies. This was precisely the case in this video. Guest Mark Sleboda is described as an ‘international affairs and security analyst’ and Dmitry Babich as ‘a political analyst with Sputnik International’. Whilst these introductions suggest

trust in the guests' independence from RT, they can also be interpreted as obscuring their partisanship: Sputnik International is RT's sister outlet, and both Babich and Sleboda - previously described as 'a blatantly pro-Kremlin apologist' (Williams in Meade, 2018) - are recurrent guests on RT.

Throughout the talk show, the participants depict the US-led airstrikes as illegitimate breaches of international law; 'dangerous' provocations against Russia; and a cynical 'distraction' from significant domestic crises faced by the leaders of the US, UK, and France. Russia, by contrast, it is claimed 'hasn't reacted militarily'. The debate also focuses on how the Syrian opposition are 'jihadis' and 'terrorists' whose areas of Syria are 'just not safe'. Furthermore, the participants also speak to conspiracy theories, describing the chemical attack as 'a hoax' being used by the 'West' as 'a pretext... to attack everyone they want.' Lavelle says the west 'can dance on the global stage with impunity' and the participants agree, discussing how the strikes violate international law, how 'western' justifications are 'gobbledygook', and further emphasising how the 'west' should not be trusted.

Satirical Social Media Short

The final video analysed for this study was uploaded by RT's most recent YouTube channel – *ICYMI* – a channel dedicated to publishing short satirical social media videos, designed for young audiences and featuring informal presenting, fast editing, bright colours, and the use of animation and memes. Published on 20th April 2018, 'ICYMI: Be reassured, people of Syria - the West has humanitarian missiles ready to intervene!' (RT, 2018b) is hosted by the RT UK news presenter Polly Boiko. The ICYMI channel adopts the conventions of satirical social media short videos, which are often limited to a few minutes in length, feature a presenter expressively talking to camera and using humour, alongside comedic images to report on and

make light of a political issue. ICYMI’s video on the Douma chemical attack begins with Polly Boiko’s sarcastic assessment that ‘after allegations of a chemical attack, Syrians were immediately reassured because, in case you missed it, heavily armed Western warplanes were on their way with a humanitarian intervention.’

The hypocrisy of ‘western’ states is ridiculed by Boiko who reminds viewers of the global arms trade - with one section featuring the logos of ‘western’ arms companies - whilst Boiko claims ‘the message to despots and terrorists is stick to conventional weapons and if possible buy them from western arms dealers - because that way you can fire them safely from the moral high ground.’ References are made to ‘the Syrian clusterfuck,’ and by using humour the ‘west’ is framed as a hypocritical, irresponsible, and deceitful. The video ends by again emphasising the hypocrisy and the untrustworthiness of ‘Western’ actors, as Boiko implies how the airstrikes on Syria are used as a distraction: ‘surgically striking a lesson into Syria makes for much better headlines at home than Stormy, Comey, Brexit, and Parisian protesters getting a police gassing of their own.’

Figure 1: Summary of key features of each video

	Breaking news	Late-night parody show	Talk show	Satirical social media short
Conventions of genre	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calm presenters • Impartial • Discussion of various views 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressive presenter • Humour/satire • Bias/subjective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impartial moderation • Discussion and debate of various views 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expressive presenter • Humour/satire • Bias/subjective

Programme narrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attack staged • Solid evidence • Earlier ‘attacks’ also appeared staged – conspiratorial insinuation • Biased mainstream media (MSM) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attack staged • Earlier ‘attacks’ were staged – explicit conspiracy theory • Complicit MSM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Syrian war is a proxy conflict • ‘Western’ intervention contravenes international law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No humanitarian motive for ‘Western’ missile strikes • Financial motives (arms trade) • Political motives (distraction) • Prior Western use of WMDs
Framing of actors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lavrov: trustworthy • US government: untrustworthy • White Helmets: terrorist enablers • MSM: biased 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White Helmets: US-funded; US proxies; terrorist enablers • US government: untrustworthy; warmongering • Assad: rational actor • Syrian army: heroic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Syrian opposition: terrorists • ‘West’: untrustworthy • Russia: effective; restrained; deserving of respect • Assad: legitimate; effective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘West’: source of ridicule; hypocritical; untrustworthy; deceitful
Invocation of emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust in Lavrov and Russia • Fear of Syrian 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trust in Assad regime • Mistrust of White 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of Syrian opposition • Mistrust of ‘West’ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mistrust of ‘West’

	opposition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mistrust of the US • Suspicion of White Helmets 	Helmets, Syrian opposition and the US <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of the Syrian opposition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect for Russia 	
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Affective Investments in Different Genres of RT’s Syria Coverage

Since analysis of RT’s media content can only tell us about their emotive *representations* of the Douma attack, we now focus on comments made on each of these videos in order to establish how audiences of these video genres were affectively invested in Russia’s involvement in the Syrian conflict. YouTube comments are socially significant, not just because of the site’s mass user base (Thelwal et al, 2012: 617), but precisely because of their capacity to approximate a community-based negotiation of video content which, through the space of comments sections brings particular identities and non-geographical connections between users to the fore (van Zoonen et al 2010). In shaping the media space in which war is viewed and experienced, such discussions and negotiations are vital to understanding the affective investments of viewers in the video content: they form part of the media consumption of subsequent viewers, thus potentially shaping their perceptions of it.

In order to interrogate RT audiences’ interpretations and expressions of emotion in response to RT’s videos, we opened each YouTube video in an incognito web browser, gathered data on video views, upvotes, downvotes and comments, ordered according to YouTube’s algorithm which determines how comments appear below videos. Factors such as the popularity of the comment maker, the date/time the comment was posted, the number of

upvotes the comment receives, and the content of the comment determine the order in which comments appear (YouTube, 2016). The top 10 comments published therefore give an indication of how some of the audience has interpreted the video. Whilst the expressions of emotions in these individual comments is not generalisable to all audience members, their prominence as top 10 comments based on YouTube's algorithm suggests that the sentiments they express resonate with other audience members.

Given the fact that the majority of YouTube commentators choose to remain anonymous and register under pseudonyms (Thelwal et al, 2012: 617), it is difficult to discern who exactly is commentating on YouTube videos. YouTube purports to be effective at removing automated 'bot' accounts (YouTube, 2018), and by viewing the profiles of those who published the top 10 comments on each video we discern that the commentators - although mainly being anonymous and using pseudonyms - appear to be genuine YouTube users as they have published videos of their own, made playlists (not necessarily of political content, but of music videos for example), and they also subscribe to other non-political channels. One commentator went by the name 'Pro Russian', and another user by the name of 'Supreme hatred' has 'Pro Russian!!' in their biography, but this is also followed by the statement that they 'support all forms of death metal worldwide'. Even so, given the Russian state's efficacy of making associated social media accounts appear as genuine non-Russian users (Jamieson, 2019) it is almost impossible for anyone other than social media platforms themselves to discern who may be making comments on the behalf of the Russian state. Subsequently, this means first that the analysis below comes with the caveat that it could be shaped by actors associated with the Russian state itself, but second, and perhaps most importantly, it means that the analysis of social media comments should not be concerned with ascertaining their truthfulness or being caught up in unanswerable questions around the 'true' identity and

intentions of the commentator. Rather, what we can study is how the comments published in response to videos of war are aspects of discourse that express feelings and represent identities in certain ways. In this way, social media comments such as those on YouTube are a space which provides a snapshot of audience sentiment to which subsequent audience members are subjected regardless of whether those sentiments are ‘true’ or not.

Figure 2: Audience engagement with each video

	Breaking news	Late-night parody show	Talk show	Satirical social media short
Number of views	99,822	20,126	42,947	16,655
Number of upvotes	1900	555	1200	571
Number of downvotes	99	28	49	37
Net upvotes ('approval')	1801	527	1151	534
Net approval as % of views	1.8	2.6	2.7	3.2
Number of comments	894	82	551	184
Ratio views:comments	112:1	245:1	78:1	91:1

As can be seen in Figure 2, audience engagement with RT's videos on the Douma attack and its aftermath displayed some interesting contrasts. First, whilst the breaking news video was the most-watched in absolute terms, it demonstrated the lowest net approval as a percentage of view count. Conversely, the satirical social media short, whilst least watched, boasted the highest net approval as a percentage of views. As we discuss below this appears directly related to its perceived entertainment value. The talk show and late-night parody show enjoyed comparable net approval for views, yet the talk show was three times more likely than the late night parody to provoke viewers to comment, suggesting a greater intensity to their engagement. Our examination of the top ten comments on each of the videos gives an indication of the role of genre in stimulating audiences' affective investments in portrayals of conflict.

The high approval of the satirical short on 'humanitarian intervention' is reflected in top comments that engage not only with the video's content - 'Beating up the evil western media! Enlightening people!' – but express support for the genre, presenting, and style of ICYMI's video, such as 'spot on and sweetly presented' and 'the one and only ICYMI'. This indicates that the audience enjoys the way in which ICYMI satirises global politics, and the resonance of ICYMI's humour is demonstrated by comments including laughing emojis, and 'hahahaaaaaaaa' designations. Others explicitly praised the effectiveness of the humour at conveying serious messages: 'Nothing like a good bit of British irony to get the message home. Nice video + subscribed'. Such comments reflect the fact that positive, humorous video content tends to be responded to in positive ways on YouTube (Thelwal et al, 2012: 619). Subsequently, the major affective investment in RT's satirical genre of videos appears to be one grounded in the comedic style and humour of these videos, rather than simply about the specific claims they make about the conflict in Syria. This affective investment creates a

sense of community across the audience who share this sentiment, and can be noted in the upvotes that comments such as the aforementioned one above receive, but also in replies such as:

Yes RT is funded by the Russian government. Which makes one realise that they are also great at using a cute chick and Top Gear level irony as persuasion tactics. But to be frank, without the truth also, the irony and cute chick wouldn't actually work, so they have a triple whammy.

Comments like this reveal how audiences who may be critical of RT – recognising it as being state funded and engaging in ‘persuasion tactics’ – are still affectively invested in their framing of the Syrian conflict because of their narrative claims and, importantly, the ironic style in which they present them.

The talk show episode was the genre that enjoyed the highest ratio of comments to views, supporting Thelwall et al’s (2012; 627) observation that audiences of controversial topics engage in more debates via comments due to the fact that such topics often provoke strong opinions. Here, too, the top comment engaged with the programme in form as well as content: ‘It’s programs like this that are making it increasingly difficult for the U.S. and its lackeys to justify their crimes.’ Other top comments replicated the show’s guests’ mistrustful characterisation of ‘Western’ actors and their motivations for involvement in Syria, suggesting that the ‘West’ is responsible for ‘imperialist aggression’ or motivated ‘to kill Syrians and take away their resources’. Upvotes for these comments, and replies that state their support such as ‘you are absolutely right’ highlight how, in this instance, social media comments - as a space in which the identities and actions of actors at war are debated and

contested - resonate with RT's framing of the conflict through an overarching sense of conspiratorial mistrust.

In the discussion that emerged from this understanding of the conflict, shared anti-imperialist, 'Western'-sceptic and conspiratorially-inclined identities came to the fore. So, despite the video itself not having been anti-Semitic, its conspiratorial nature - and the 'conspiratorial' community that dominated the discussion space - facilitated the expression of overt anti-Semitism. Such sentiments are often associated with the kind of conspiracy theories that RT has been noted to have a tendency to explore (Yablokov, 2015), and in this case, were expressed by commenters declaring that the 'elephant in the room' is 'ISRAEL', or that 'Mossad' was responsible for the chemical attack and that the airstrikes against Syria were 'All to do with that pipeline going through Syria and the gas oil in Israel. Zionists.' Here, the significant affective investment in RT's talk-show depiction of the Syrian conflict concerns how the audience's sense of mistrust in the 'West' and belief in conspiracy theories aligns with, yet extends beyond, the conspiratorial, mistrustful views espoused by the talk-show guests.

Top comments on the breaking news and late-night parody show were devoid of anti-Semitism, which would be coherent with the likelihood that audiences of these genres were motivated less by a desire to engage in online discussion, and more by immediate interest; and entertainment purposes respectively (see Thelwal et al 2012). Nonetheless, their audiences displayed affective investment in RT's portrayals of key actors in the conflict, including by replicating those videos' disparagement of, and conspiracy theories about, the White Helmets and their origins. So, comments on the breaking news video joked that the chemical attack was 'staged'; that the 'White helmets live in [the] white house'; and that 'The

White Helmets could 'stage' a lunar landing if you gave them enough money'. Late night parody show viewers agreed that the White Helmets were 'THE REAL TERRORISTS'; 'the propaganda arm of Al Qaeda'; and 'as credible as CNN'. These kinds of assessments extended to expressions of affective investment in the identities of a trustworthy Russia and a deceitful 'West' in the top comments on both videos.

Those commenting on the breaking news video concluded that 'once again Russia proves to the world that the US government is doing what it does best which is lying'; and 'The US leaders and their masters are definitely the terrible monster's [sic] to our world'. What is key here is the fearful emotion implied by this commenter which is echoed by another, who expresses concern over 'the Islambic [sic] invasion'. Again, such comments, alongside replies that state their agreement such as 'Agree 100%' and 'Yes. You are right', as well as upvotes for these comments all highlight how RT's narratives resonate with audiences who feel mistrust towards 'Western' actors. Furthermore, they suggest that the audience also feels affectively invested in a sense of fear for 'outsiders' and others such as Muslims.

Meanwhile, top comments on Boris Malagurski's late-night parody show displayed similar affective investments in the notion of trustworthy Russia and deceitful Western identities, as in assessments that 'It is really tragic and sad how much evil USA is'; and 'USA THE MORE THEY SPEAK THE MORE THEY LIE'. One commentator explicitly endorses Malagurski's characterisation of Assad as the 'West's' scapegoat, opining that the Douma chemical attack 'was carried out by the UK and blamed on Assad'. Such comments highlight that these audience members are affectively invested in RT's framing of the 'west' as an actor that cannot be trusted and view it as a source of 'evil', that lies and commits atrocities whilst blaming them on others.

What emerges from this study is a typology of sorts concerning the affective investments audiences feel for RT's representations of the Syrian conflict. The first concerns how satirical videos – even when they concern war and conflict - solicit an affective investment in the humorous style of the video and the manner in which they make audiences laugh. Second, and as evidenced in response to the talk show video featuring two guests who are mistrustful of the 'West', audiences appear to be affectively invested in a belief in conspiracy theories and the sense that the 'West' is evil and can not be trusted, whereas they believe Russia is good and trustworthy. Third, the audience of the breaking news report and the late-night parody show appear to be mainly affectively invested in a sense of mistrust for the Syrian opposition and a sense of fear that the Syrian opposition forces are actually radical terrorists.

A Complex Milieu of Representation, Genre, and Emotion in War

All genres of RT's video outputs responding to the Douma attack and its aftermath reiterated both key pro-Russian narratives of those events, and normatively-loaded characterisations of the actors involved. Social media provided a space in which audiences could interact with both the video representations of war, and with each other through upvotes and replies. The top comments on these videos indicated that RT's audiences had invested affectively in the identities of a trustworthy Russia contrasted with a deceitful 'West'. This indicates that RT's narration of the Syrian conflict, and the role of Russia within that, resonates with how their audiences feel about the conflict.

Our analysis suggests that the genre of video impacts how audiences engage with RT's representation of the Syrian conflict given the different rates of engagement; the intensity of engagement; and the audiences' propensity to replicate specific allegations about the actors and events portrayed on-screen. The genre of the videos also helped to shape the social

media space in which they were discussed, echoing earlier findings of Thelwal et al (2012), and drawing attention to how different genres of videos invoke different affective investments in RT's representation of the Syrian conflict. It is not, however, possible to determine whether this is a result of having viewed a particular genre of content, or whether it is because people likely to interact in particular ways are more likely to select certain genres of content to view.

Our first observation was that the breaking news video – a genre whose entire form is based around the stimulation of affect and immediacy – was the one with the highest total number of views. Yet, compared to some of the genres that attract lower, but more specific audiences, the breaking news video had relatively low levels of approval, and of substantive engagement in the form of comments. This implies that a wider and more general audience may have viewed it, but that it did not engage the majority of these viewers enough for them to comment on it.

Second, the specific content of the videos does have an impact on *how* audiences interact with it. In the case of the breaking news video and the late-night parody show, for instance, comments expressly replicated the conspiratorial allegations about the White Helmets, their motivation and their backing. On the videos not focused on such claims, they were similarly absent from the top comments. Furthermore, it appears that more in-depth programming such as talk shows are likely to stimulate more in-depth responses, and that the emergence of community identities centred around a mistrust of the 'West' and a belief in conspiracy theories enables the extension of discussion beyond topics or framings included in the original video, but coherent with a perceived shared conspiratorial world view. This was indicated by the increased propensity of viewers of the extended talk show to leave

comments on the video, and the emergence of anti-Semitic tropes in the comments, as well as replies to comments that stated their agreement and support. Whilst there were examples of others replying to RT and other comments and challenging their claims, such as ‘dont listen to these russian propaganda’ and ‘This video is sponsored by the Russian government. You've been goofed, ya big goof,’ such comments and replies were a small minority across the comments on all four videos in our analysis. Thus, the discussion appears to lend itself to the promotion of further agreement and connectivity amongst RT’s audience base, rather than a contestation and challenging of how they frame the Syrian conflict.

Third, audience approval for particular videos was not simply related to the extent to which they agreed with the arguments put forward within it, but also to their overall satisfaction with the entertainment experience. So, in this case, the satirical social media short was particularly successful at entertaining its target audience. Whilst this is coherent with research indicating that some audience subsets are more motivated by entertainment objectives than political ones (Thelwal et al, 2012), it nonetheless suggests that the social media space enables international broadcasters to represent their narratives of war through genres such as satirical videos that blur the line between entertainment and politics – demonstrated here by the commenters noting not only their approval of the form in which the message was delivered, but also of the message itself. As humour plays an important role in creating and consolidating a shared sense of political community (Davies and Illot, 2018; 1) RT’s humorous framing of those involved in the Syrian conflict serves to be central to evoking an affective investment in the audience. However, Whilst the late-night parody show also utilised a humorous genre, it proved less successful at generating audience approval. It is possible that this is due in part to the explicitly partisan nature of the parody show’s pro-Assad message, the tone of which was one of advocacy rather than comedy. The ICYMI

short, by contrast, did not so much support a pro-Russian reading of the Syrian conflict, as satirise the overall hypocrisy of the ‘Western’ actors involved.

Another possible reason for the disparity in the two comedy products’ apparent success may be related to their closeness of fit with genre- and audience expectations. The ICYMI satirical short video is a slick, punchy product fronted by a female millennial presenter with whom the average YouTube user can likely identify given that YouTube’s audience is predominantly made up of millennial males (Thelwal et al, 2012: 626). As such, it is well-calibrated for its intended dissemination on social media. ClipArt, on the other hand, meshes an established parody-show format with a social media short form. In the late-night parody video, given his age, style of dress, and mode of presenting – lecturing the viewer and talking down to them from behind a desk – Malagurski himself lacks the informal style common to parody videos and it is unclear how the video fits the preferences of any particular audience demographic.

Conclusion

When consuming images of war and conflict, audiences engage not only with the overall content of the narratives contained within, but also with the genre and form of the video content. So, whilst breaking news videos have more of the urgency required to stimulate viral circulation to large number of potential audiences, other genres had greater ability to substantively engage their audiences. This might be in terms of stimulating greater levels of audience approval in the content, or stimulating additional discussion within the parameters set out by the video. However, genres of output most suited to stimulating audience approval – such as the social media short video – are perhaps the least effective in projecting coherent strategic narratives. This is because successful political comedy writing involves questioning,

criticism, and disruption rather than the clear articulation of other political viewpoints and possibilities (Young, 2017: 879).

As a digital space of war, YouTube enables actors who are engaged in war to represent themselves and their actions to audiences through the use of different genres of videos. Through the use of comments, audiences can interact with these representations, expressing their thoughts and feelings, and in doing so shaping the viewing experience for others who also view the video and reply to comments. In our analysis we found that comments supported the claims of RT, and that audiences generally shared the sentiments espoused in the videos as well as agreeing with the thoughts and feelings of others expressed through comments. This involved expressing support for the style used in the satirical video, invoking a sense that the 'west' is evil, deceitful and engaged in conspiracies in response to the talk show video that expressed similar views, and also sharing a mistrust and fear for the Syrian opposition like the breaking news video and the late night parody video did. As such, the comments shared on social media sites become a space (of war) where meaning is given to the identities and actions of those at war. This matters because this enables a collapsing between the physical and affective spaces of war, where audiences come to feel strong feelings about wars and conflicts they experience in mediatised form, and then they express these feelings for others to view and engage with online. If spectatorship is one of the most significant ways in which many of us experience war (Sylvester, 2010) then in the digital age it needs to be recognised that social media enables people to not only view war from afar but to comment, reply to, like, share, and upvote media representations of war. Given that our study suggests that genre plays a key role in exerting an influence on audience emotions, it demands further comprehensive study of genres and audience engagement in these digital spaces of war. RT's willingness to innovate and utilise different genres of video as part of

their remit to promote the interests, perspectives, and actions of the Russian state is seeming to be effective in engaging the audiences who view their content. As viewers appear to be affectively invested in RT's different representations of the Syrian conflict across different genres of video, we require further research into not only the arguments and claims projected by actors at war, but the ways in which such claims are expressed through different genres in the digital age.

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