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Three lessons for the future of public service broadcasting

**Precious Chatterje-Doody and
Rhys Crilly**

Information, confrontation and Russia's war on Ukraine

The BBC enters its centenary year as a subject of intense scrutiny. Beleaguered in recent years with political attacks, the corporation has suffered from the increasingly vocal opposition of those who consider that it does not provide good value for money, that the licence fee is unfair, or that it should be funded on a commercial model.¹ Yet these objections lie in stark contrast to how the quality of the BBC's outputs are perceived by their audiences – with public trust in the UK's veteran public broadcaster higher than trust in any commercially funded alternatives.

“The BBC enters its centenary year as a subject of intense scrutiny”

This high level of trust has proven valuable during the international crisis brought about by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as domestic audiences have turned to the BBC in an attempt to understand the reasons behind Vladimir Putin's disastrous military campaign. The British government's recent announcement that the BBC World Service will receive an additional £4.1 million in order “to help it continue bringing independent, impartial and accurate news to people in Ukraine and Russia in the face of increased propaganda from the Russian state”² illustrates an understanding

1 YouGov (2021) ‘How fair is the BBC licence fee?’, YouGov website. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/how-fair-is-the-bbc-licence-fee>

2 UK Government (2022) ‘BBC gets emergency funding to fight Russian disinformation’, press release, 24 March 2022. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/bbc-gets-emergency-funding-to-fight-russian-disinformation>

of the significant role the BBC can play in ‘Global Britain’, despite ministerial attacks on the broadcaster at home.³

In the context of the war in Ukraine, and as significant social and political debates continue to rage inside the UK, the BBC has had to tread a fine line between its commitment to providing due impartiality on topics of political contention and the dangers of implying false equivalence between evidenced and non-evidenced viewpoints in the name of balance.⁴ However, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has brought to the fore not only the importance of the constant striving towards impartial coverage, but also some of the broader reasons why this continues to matter. The war in Ukraine reveals three key issues about the future of public service broadcasting at times of global crisis.

TRUST IS AT A PREMIUM, ESPECIALLY AT TIMES OF CRISIS

Politicians and journalists are two of the least trusted professions in UK society.⁵ Although this reflects long-term social trends over time, the issue of trust has become even more marked online: across the globe, nearly 60 per cent of people are concerned about how to tell the difference between what is real and what is fake on the internet.⁶

This is due both to the diversification of online news sources and the phenomenon of ‘churnalism’, where time-pressured journalists churn out low-quality ‘filler’ content online to drive engagement from fickle audiences. This impacts news quality, particularly around politically divisive issues, when there can be commercial advantages for partisan coverage. The 2016 Brexit referendum marked a particular low point, with, for example, the pro-Brexit *Daily Mail* running an irresponsible and widely criticised front page deriding three High Court Justices as “enemies of the

3 Kanter J (2022) ‘BBC Licence fee a regressive tax, claim ministers’, *The Sunday Times*, 9 April 2022. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/bbc-licence-fee-a-regressive-tax-claim-mini-sters-vh723jsk8>

4 Waterson J (2021) ‘What does impartiality mean? BBC no-bias policy being pushed to limits’, *The Guardian*, 12 November 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2021/nov/12/what-does-impartiality-mean-bbc-no-bias-policy-being-pushed-to-limits>

5 Ipsos (2021) ‘Ipsos Veracity Index: trust in the police drops for the second year in a row’, Ipsos website, 7 December 2021, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-mori-veracity-index-trust-police-drops-second-year-row>

6 Toff B, Badrinathan S, Mont’Alverne C, Ross Arguedas A, Fletcher R and Nielsen RK (2021) ‘Depth and breadth: how news organisations navigate trade-offs around building trust in news’, Reuters Institute website, 2 December 2021. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/depth-and-breadth-how-news-organisations-navigate-trade-offs-around-building-trust-news>

people” for their ruling that parliament must approve the triggering of the withdrawal process.⁷ This approach to news making has seen public trust in journalists at mid-market and tabloid publications fall in recent years. Broadsheet journalists are also widely distrusted but by a reducing margin.⁸

“time-pressured journalists churn out low-quality ‘filler’ content online to drive engagement from fickle audiences”

In this overwhelmingly distrustful social environment – and despite remaining social dissensus on the broadcaster – it is the BBC that stands as the most trusted news brand in the UK.⁹ In part this seems likely due to the BBC’s institutional reputation and its public service role throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, when audiences considered it the most trustworthy of the media helping to navigate the crisis.¹⁰ As well as appointing its first specialist disinformation and social media reporter, Marianna Spring, in 2020, the BBC has become increasingly proactive in producing media literacy and anti-disinformation educational resources.¹¹

THE LINES BETWEEN MEDIA AND NATIONAL SECURITY LOOK INCREASINGLY BLURRY

News media has long played a prominent role in war, conflict and national security. From the media censorship of the First and Second World Wars to embedded journalists and military combat camera teams in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is clear that when states wage war they attempt to utilise media for their own ends. However, Russia’s attempt to craft its own public relations (PR) campaign around its invasion of Ukraine demonstrates just how mutually reinforcing Russia’s media and security strategies have become during Putin’s long term in power.

7 Pells R (2016) ‘Daily Mail’s “Enemies of the People” front page receives more than 1,000 complaints to IPSO’, *The Independent*, 10 November 2016. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/daily-mail-nazi-propaganda-front-page-ipso-complaints-brexiteu-enemies-of-the-people-a7409836.html>

8 Ibbetson C (2020) ‘Do people trust journalists?’, YouGov website, 26 March 2020. <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2020/03/26/trust-newspaper-journalists>

9 Reuters Institute (2021) *Digital News Report*, Reuters Institute. <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/>

10 YouGov (2020) ‘YouGov survey results’. https://docs.cdn.yougov.com/d4iq9gv8ev/Internal_CoronavirusTrust_200428.pdf

11 See, for example, BBC (no date) ‘The seven types of people who start and spread viral misinformation’, BBC Bitesize website. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/zdb4vwx>

“when states wage war they attempt to utilise media for their own ends”

Since Putin’s first accession to the presidency in 2000, a series of strategic foreign and military policies – as well as designated information security doctrines – have asserted that media and information are matters of national security. Russia’s official position is that the West has long waged an aggressive ‘information war’ against Russia, which must respond by representing itself positively on the international stage. It is not for nothing that Margarita Simonyan, the head of the Russian state-funded international broadcaster RT, infamously said that Russia needed RT for “the same reason the country needs a defence ministry”.¹² Consistently focused on the failings of the West, RT’s coverage of current affairs has been most problematic when defending Russia’s official line at times of armed conflicts and crises: it was fined by Ofcom for breaching due impartiality rules around both Russia’s intervention in Syria and the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal.

Indeed, since the 1990s, Russia has gradually refined its approach to combining media and military operations.¹³ A catastrophic media free-for-all in the first Chechen campaign prompted restrictions on media access in the second. Foreign PR firms were employed during the Georgian war of 2008; blatant lies accompanied the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russian troops; and a myriad of conspiracy theories and disinformation were spread around the 2018 Skripal poisonings.¹⁴

Russia clearly intended to apply its lessons learned from years of information campaigns to this year’s invasion of Ukraine too, but after being on the back foot in recent years, political and media institutions in the West have begun to push back. As Russian troops congregated around Ukraine’s borders, US and UK intelligence agencies leaked information to the media, pre-emptively and repeatedly debunking Russian denials of an imminent invasion. Once Russia did invade Ukraine, few in the West were convinced that anyone other than Russia was to blame for the war.

12 Kommersant (2012) ‘Net nikakoi ob’ektivnosti’, 7 April 2012. <https://archive.ph/Vy4i0>

13 Rodgers J and Lanoszka A (2021) ‘Russia’s rising military and communication power: from Chechnya to Crimea’, *Media, War & Conflict*, doi: [10.1177/17506352211027084](https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352211027084)

14 Tolz V, Hutchings S, Chatterje-Doody PN and Crilley R (2021) ‘Mediatization and journalistic agency: Russian television coverage of the Skripal poisonings’, *Journalism*, 22(12): 2971–2990

RT – which replicated the Kremlin’s portrayal of its activities – was banned by the EU, deplatformed by YouTube, dropped from US cable providers and lost its licence in the UK. Meanwhile, public service broadcasters including the BBC and DW actively dismantled some of the Kremlin talking points that RT used to support Russia’s actions.¹⁵ For instance, a short video featuring the BBC’s Ros Atkins unpacking the evidence behind Russian claims about Ukrainian neo-Nazis¹⁶ has been watched and shared via Twitter almost two million times. This is crucial work in a war where propaganda plays such a prominent role in Russia’s military strategy. Where Russia successfully mobilised international doubt in previous conflicts, its efforts at shaping the narrative around Ukraine have fallen flat. In the US and the UK, for example, the number of people who view Russia as a hostile threat has doubled since its invasion of Ukraine.¹⁷

“Where Russia successfully mobilised international doubt in previous conflicts, its efforts at shaping the narrative around Ukraine have fallen flat”

DURING A CRISIS, THE CREDIBILITY OF THE COMMUNICATOR MATTERS

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine comes at a time of widespread global smartphone and social media access. In this media ecology, a variety of news outlets, brands, individuals, influencers and institutions vie for our time on our personalised news feeds; it takes something special to go viral and grab our attention. Although Russian state-funded international broadcasters like RT and Sputnik had previously built up a reputation for being effective viral influencers, when Russia has most needed to convince foreign audiences that Putin’s actions are legitimate, they have proven singularly ineffective – even before the various bans and blocks.

15 DW (2022) ‘Fact check: do Vladimir Putin’s justifications for going to war against Ukraine add up?’, DW website, 25 February 2022. <https://www.dw.com/en/fact-check-do-vladimir-putins-justifications-for-going-to-war-against-ukraine-add-up/a-60917168>

16 Atkins R (2022) Tweet, 25 March 2022. <https://twitter.com/bbcrosatkins/status/1507264052938129412>

17 Pew Research Center (2022) ‘Public expresses mixed views of U.S. response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine’, Pew Research Center website, 15 March 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/03/15/public-expresses-mixed-views-of-u-s-response-to-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>; Smith M (2022) ‘Invasion of Ukraine shifts public attitudes to Russia... and the USA’, YouGov website, 1 March 2022, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/03/01/invasion-ukraine-shifts-public-attitudes-russia-an>

One of the key reasons for this has been the effectiveness of Ukraine's leader Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his communications team in touching people's hearts across the globe. As a former actor and comedian, Zelenskyy clearly understands how to engage different audiences. He has spoken directly to parliaments and peoples across the globe, incorporating personalised cultural references with a strong emotive pull. On social media his selfie videos direct to camera have captured the public imagination in ways that Russian state media never could – despite their cringeworthy attempts at influencing young people through comedy.¹⁸

Conversely, Vladimir Putin's attempts to portray himself as a hyper-masculine strongman doing the right thing in Ukraine have failed to gain appeal with people across the planet. Russian state media is on the back foot, censored and lacking credibility in its stand-offish attempts to justify hostile actions and the murder of civilians. It is easily undermined by the personal credibility of Zelenskyy, whose emotive speeches as leader of a nation defending itself from hostile action have inspired international audiences. They have warmed to a man who they now know was the Ukrainian voice of Paddington Bear¹⁹ and the winner of Ukraine's *Dancing With The Stars*.²⁰ As one viral tweet put it: "BREAKING: every woman in your life now has at least a small crush on Volodymyr Zelenskyy and there's absolutely nothing you can do about it."

“Putin's attempts to portray himself as a hyper-masculine strongman doing the right thing in Ukraine have failed to gain appeal”

In bearing these contrasts in mind, public service broadcasters would do well to remember that the trust of audiences is reliant on the credibility and compassion of communicators rather than the slickness of their communication capabilities. While Russian international broadcasters may have been well funded, they have proven ineffective in influencing international audiences during the invasion of Ukraine largely due to their sheer inability to be credible, impartial and trustworthy. Here, the lesson

18 Saunders RA, Crilley R and Chatterje-Doody PN (2022) 'ICYMI: RT and youth-oriented international broadcasting as (geo) political culture jamming', *The International Journal of Press/Politics*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/119401612211072771>

19 Yossman KJ (2022) 'Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was voice of Paddington Bear', Variety website, 28 February 2022. <https://variety.com/2022/film/news/ukrainian-president-zelenskyyukrainian-president-volodymyr-zelensky-voiced-paddington-bear-1235191660/>

20 See Abu K (2022) Tweet, 27 February 2022. <https://twitter.com/abughazalehkat/status/1497768813860896770>

for the BBC – and other public service broadcasters – is that at times of crisis they must engage the heart as well as the head but remain credible, duly impartial and independent in their coverage of global politics.

“at times of crisis they must engage the heart as well as the head but remain credible, duly impartial and independent”

WHAT’S NEXT? THE UKRAINE WAR AND THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SERVICE INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING

After 100 years of broadcasting, the BBC has built an international reputation as a respected broadcaster even while, at home, conservatives attack it for being too progressive and progressives critique it for being too close to the establishment. For all of its failings, the BBC is still viewed internationally as the pinnacle of public service broadcasting.

The war in Ukraine has seen the BBC, and other well-respected state-funded international broadcasters like Germany’s DW, come into their own by creating content that has resonated with audiences. According to the Meta-owned social analytics platform CrowdTangle, content published by both outlets falls within the top most interacted with Facebook posts about Ukraine since the start of the Russian invasion. Blocked in Russia following a dramatic crackdown on independent media, these outlets are seeking new ways to reach Russian audiences – including by shortwave radio. By contrast, Russian state broadcasters have not only failed to gain much serious interaction on social media in the West, but have also generated catastrophic blowback.

Ultimately, during times of crises, when media and security are so intertwined, people seek out information sources they feel that they can trust, and that reflect how they view the world. Some people tuned in to Russia’s state broadcasters in recent years due to dissatisfaction with mainstream media. Yet, when the actions of the Russian state are so blatantly aggressive and violent, Kremlin claims that this war was provoked by Ukrainian ‘Nazis’ lack any international credibility.

“While Putin might be the man with the big missiles, the public are rooting for the man who once played Paddington Bear”

By the same token, international public service broadcasters now operate in the age of the digital influencer, in which engaging personalities can

capture the public imagination and trust that was once associated with the big hitters. Zelenskyy has proven that he understands this new media ecology far better than Putin or any of the journalists who work for Russian state media. While Putin might be the man with the big missiles,²¹ the public are rooting for the man who once played Paddington Bear. In this context, effective communication is underpinned by credibility and audiences' feelings of who is trustworthy. Public service broadcasters cannot rely on impartiality alone – they must hold tight to audiences' trust in their broader educational mission.

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Dr Rhys Crilley is a Leverhulme early career fellow in politics and international relations at the University of Glasgow (UK). His research explores the role of political communication, popular culture, and social media in contemporary global politics, with a focus on war and conflict. He is currently writing his first book, and tweeting at @rhyscrilley.

21 A recent press conference Putin gave in front of a giant rocket was widely derided on social media. See, for example, Ioffe J (2022) Tweet, 13 April 2022. <https://twitter.com/juliaioffe/status/1514048155238682627>