**Impact case study (REF3)**

# REF2021

| Institution: The University of Manchester |
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| Unit of Assessment: 26 (Modern Languages and Linguistics) |
| Title of case study: Conflict with Russia in the New Information Environment: Shaping Policy Analysis, Broadcaster Practices and Public Understanding |
| Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2010-2020 |
| Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit: |

| Name(s): | Role(s) (e.g. job title): | Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: |
|---|---|---|
| Vera Tolz | Professor of Russian Studies | Tolz: 2004-present |
| Stephen Hutchings | Professor of Russian Studies | Hutchings: 2006-present |

| Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014-2020 |
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| Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N |

## 1. Summary of the impact

A decade of AHRC-funded research at The University of Manchester (UoM) has addressed the changing role of state-aligned Russian media outlets in the global communications environment. The research has impacted on UK and European policy analysis and public understandings of Russia's disruptive interventions in this environment. The findings: (a) informed policy approaches to Russian 'disinformation campaigns'; (b) gave NGOs and the broader public a deeper appreciation of Russia's complex media culture; (c) helped reshape prevailing understandings among international media professionals of Russian journalists as passive servants of a unified state; and (d) recommended to these stakeholders alternative, evidence-based responses.

## 2. Underpinning research

The impact is derived from research at UoM that examined the changing role of Russia's state-aligned media outlets in a digitally networked communications environment. The research findings provide a comprehensive re-evaluation of received wisdom about Russia's strengths and weaknesses as a global communications actor. They have been communicated and disseminated via major media outlets, policy briefs, public debates and workshops with policy makers and international broadcasters.

The research included the first sustained analysis of the output and audiences of international broadcaster, RT (Russia Today). Interdisciplinary in approach, the research applies the combined expertise of specialists in discourse analysis, historical studies, international relations, audience research and big data analysis to explore questions concerning: the provenance and reception of strategic narratives promoted by Russia's main broadcasters; the implications of their recirculation by online non-state actors; how institutional cultures shape broadcasters' relationship with the Russian state; the dynamic driving Russia's information conflict with the West; and Russian media responses to populist mistrust in elites, shifting news reporting standards and emerging audience consumption patterns.

The key findings challenge prevailing accounts of Russia's interventions in the global information sphere, linking them to transnational forces over which states exercise far less control than is habitually assumed. The findings below have transformative implications for public and policy debates.

**1.** Russia is not a unique actor in the global mediasphere; the nation-projecting behaviour of its state-aligned outlets resembles that of other neo-authoritarian media needing to adjust to ever-shifting domestic and international environments (see [1] below). Moreover, Russian broadcasters belong to a heterogeneous state apparatus and are not purely subordinate to the Kremlin; prominent journalists are accorded significant agency, enabling them to act as effective mediators between official policy, popular sentiment and unofficial political opinion [2].

**2.** The influence of market-led 'outsourcing' models and the practicalities of communicating with diverse audiences guarantee that RT narratives undergo re-calibration for individual commercial-legislative contexts [3]. The consequent reliance on journalist teams with non-Russian linguistic and cultural backgrounds complicates RT's messaging strategy, contributing to a split institutional identity. On the one hand, RT internalises its pariah status, re-projecting it as part of a spiralling

conflict with its antagonists; on the other, it seeks legitimation within cosmopolitan spheres of media professionals [4]. This has deep implications for media regulation practices.

**3.** Nonetheless, RT works skilfully with the sensibilities of the 'digital native' generation, including its suspicion of traditional journalistic values like 'impartiality'. Commentary on RT over-emphasises its TV output which generally has low audience reach; its main success is on social media, where its strategy is less to insert disruptive new messages into mainstream media discourse than to disseminate existing narratives from the margins [5].

**4.** RT's audiences exhibit eclectic news consumption practices and are widely networked. The research found little evidence of channel loyalty and occasional missteps in RT's output strategy have provoked widespread audience mockery [3]; however, the channel is developing strategies to deal with the corresponding loss of control, including the adoption of self-ironizing comic forms with roots in late Soviet culture [4].

## 3. References to the research
1. Stephen **Hutchings** and Vera **Tolz** (2015) *Nation, Ethnicity and Race on Russian Television: Mediating Post-Soviet Difference*, Abingdon: Routledge [excellent reviews in all major journals in the field, e.g. *Slavic Review*, 76/1, 2017; *Nationalities Papers* 46/3, 2018; *European Journal of Communication* 30/5, 2015; re-published in paperback; made available as an open-access e-book: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315722863]
2. Vera **Tolz** and Yurii Teper (2018) 'Broadcasting Agitainment: A New Media Strategy of Putin's Third Presidency', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 213-227, https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2018.1459023 [funded by major AHRC grant; published in refereed journal with the highest Impact Factor in the field of Russian/Area Studies]
3. Stephen **Hutchings** (2019) 'Revolution From the Margins: Commemorating 1917 and RT's Scandalising of the Established Order', *European Journal of Cultural Studies,* vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 315-353, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419871342 [as above]
4. Stephen **Hutchings** (2018) 'Projecting Russia on the Global Stage: International Broadcasting and "Recursive Nationhood"', in Vlad Strukov and Sarah Hudspith (eds), *Russian Culture in the Age of Globalization*, Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 125-46. Available on request. [research supported by major AHRC grant; book endorsed by global experts in Russian media]
5. Vera **Tolz**, Stephen **Hutchings** *et al*. 'Mediatization and Journalistic Agency: Russian Television Coverage of the Skripal Poisonings,' *Journalism* https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920941967 (published online 16/07/2020) [funded by major AHRC grant; published in a high impact journal in Media and Communication Studies]

### Grants
- 'Mediating Post-Soviet Difference'; 3-year AHRC grant, 2010-2013 (value: GBP426,394); grant number: AH/H018964/1; PI: Stephen **Hutchings**; Co-I: Vera **Tolz**
- 'Cross-Language Dynamics: Reshaping Community'; 4-year AHRC grant, 2016-2020 (UoM award GBP956,275; total value: GBP3,231,786); grant number: AH/N004647/1; PI: Stephen **Hutchings** + multiple Co-Is
- 'Reframing Russia for the Global Mediasphere: From Cold War to "Information War"', 3-year AHRC grant, 2017-2020 (UoM award GBP421,821; total value: GBP719,635); grant number: AH/P00508X/1; PI: Stephen **Hutchings**; Co-Is: Vera **Tolz** + Marie Gillespie (OU) and Alistair Willis (OU)

## 4. Details of the impact
**Context and summary of impact**
Russia's (dis)information campaigns in the last decade have generated major security concerns for governments across the EU and North America. For example, its online operations are viewed as a threat by 83% of the UK public (YouGov poll, 2018). When responding to those concerns, however, Western politicians, media and publics have lacked critical evidence about the precise nature of Russia's media strategies, and about their influence on audiences. UoM's underpinning research has addressed these evidence gaps. Since 2014, when disquiet about Russia's activities escalated following its annexation of Crimea, the research has: provided systematic analysis

demonstrating common tendencies both to misconceive Russian propaganda outlets' modes of operation and to overestimate their effectiveness; shown how responses based on such interpretations have proved counterproductive; and empowered key stakeholders to correct their assumptions and improve their responses by promoting evidence-based alternatives. The significance and global reach of this work is demonstrated by the successful knowledge-exchange partnerships that Hutchings and Tolz have built with government offices in the UK and Norway, international think tanks, and print and broadcast journalists from multiple countries. Their research has informed the UK Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Commons Select Committee's approach to Russian broadcasting targeting the UK and their expertise has been sought by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), by the EU's counter-disinformation unit, and by media in the UK, USA, South Africa, Sweden and Turkey.

**Shaping public debate and the practice of media professionals through international media engagement**

Hutchings and Tolz are regularly consulted by Western media outlets as leading experts on Russian media strategies. Since the start of their 'Reframing Russia' (RR) project in 2017 alone, the team have authored 20 articles for media outlets, including *The Washington Post (WaPo), HuffPost, Newsweek and The Conversation* [A], and contributed expert commentary and analysis across leading outlets in the UK, USA, South Africa, Sweden and Turkey [B]. Informed by the research project findings, these contributions have challenged conventional wisdom about the nature of Russian propaganda. Impact is evidenced in three ways:

First, articles published in leading outlets have increased audience engagement with the subject matter and informed public debate. The articles were read by hundreds of thousands of people and commented upon on web-sites and social media by hundreds of people from across the world. An RR blog in *WaPo* (15/09/2018), which debunked politicians' claims about the effectiveness of Russian propaganda, was in the top 10 of *WaPo's* most read and commented upon daily blogs from 2018 (653 comments) [C.1]; an article in *The Conversation* (4/10/2018), related to output [5], that was critical of BBC coverage of Russia's media environment had 100,522 reads [C.2]. Another *Conversation* article (5/4/2018) on Russian media manipulation was reprinted by *Newsweek* (6/4/2018). The article was read more than 15,000 times on *The Conversation* and *Newsweek* websites, and was shared 204 times on Facebook. It generated "This is a must read" Twitter messages [C.3].

Second, the research has informed and enhanced media coverage in leading outlets. RR's high profile has led to frequent citation of its research outcomes in leading media outlets (*The Guardian; The Observer; NYT; The Daily Mail; MailOnline; Wired; London Review of Books*) and requests for expert commentary [B]. *HuffPost* (21/05/2018), for example, commissioned an analysis by Hutchings of OFCOM's investigation into RT, publishing his policy recommendations [B.11]; *Wired* (18/9/2017) sought and published Hutchings' advice on identifying Russian online propaganda activity [B.24, C.4]. *LRB* (3/12/2020) solicited Tolz's analysis of how the tendency to represent misinformation as, above all, a threat to democracy from foreign, authoritarian actors misidentifies the origins of the problem and potentially hinders the ability of democratic governments to address it [A.1]. These research-based articles have generated high audience reach and engagement. For example, with additional postings by *HuffPost* of [B.11] on Facebook, Twitter and Reddit, one of them had potential reach to *HuffPost's* total online audience of 28,500,000 users [C.5].

Third, the research has shaped debate among journalists and informed their opinions and approaches to the subject matter. This snowballing of recognition and exposure enabled the team's research to substantively influence the terms of the debate about Russian media among the international journalistic community. In this context, Hutchings was interviewed live on the South African Broadcasting Corporation's leading current affairs programme, *The Globe* (14/12/2019) [D.1]. Tolz's article in *The Conversation* (4/10/2018) led directly to her appearance on BBC's *Newsnight* (9/10/2018), which prompted the first proper acknowledgement by the BBC, with *Newsnight* presenter (Kirsty Wark) referring specifically to Tolz, of the work of Russia's opposition journalists in uncovering evidence of Russia's role in the Salisbury poisoning [D.2]. Similarly, the RR blog in *WaPo* (27/03/2019) [A.5] correcting *The Guardian*'s inaccurate claim

about the Russian media's role in promoting Nigel Farage, generated a substantive online dialogue between *The Observer* journalist, Carole Cadwalladr, and research team members about their data interpretation [D.3].The Moscow correspondent of the Swedish public broadcaster SVT pointed out that, at a time when *"it is difficult to get things right when we cover Russia",* reading RR project outputs and talking to its team encouraged him *"to reflect on my area of coverage in a more analytical way".* He confirms that *"the input that SVT has received from Reframing Russia has undoubtedly helped us in our effort to make our viewers better informed"* [D.4]. The BBC Russian Service Moscow Bureau chief commented that the RR project "*made him reconsider how the relationship between facts and opinion should be understood by journalists"* [D.5].

**Enhancing professional and public understanding through targeted events**
Hutchings and Tolz organized two major events to facilitate debate and promote engagement with the research on the part of journalists, civil servants, diplomats and members of the public. A public debate on Russia's role in the global 'information war' (12/10/2017) featured renowned journalists and policy-analysts as speakers, including from *The Independent*, BBC and Chatham House. The event attracted approximately 100 representatives from the diplomatic community, NGOs, and members of the public and was covered by *The Observer* (14/10/2017). Participants confirmed that the event had clarified or changed their views and praised it for offering a *"good balance"* of opinions [E.1]. The second targeted event was a roundtable discussion on 'populism, post-truth and challenges for journalists' at Frontline Club, London (07/11/2019). This event brought together representatives of Russian and leading Western media, including the BBC, *The Independent*, ABC and Swedish public television, for an experimental dialogue across 'battle lines', to exchange views on how Russian and world media operate. Participating journalists confirmed that it was "*by far one of the most constructive forums in which I have participated in years*" [E.2] and a major *"building-bridges"* initiative [E.2]. [text removed for publication]

**Shaping the work of policy practitioners through evidence-based interventions**
Hutchings' and Tolz's research has served as the basis for collaborations with the UK parliament; the UK and Norwegian Foreign and Defence Ministries; BBC Monitoring; and leading UK and Russian think tanks. These collaborations have informed professional understanding and practice among policy practitioners.

In the context of COVID-19, Hutchings and Tolz advised the UK DCMS Commons Select Committee about RT's coverage of the pandemic. At a meeting (25/03/2020) with the Committee chair, Julian Knight MP, and the Select Committee's Digital and Technology Policy Specialist, Hutchings and Tolz provided advice on whether RT should be referred to OFCOM in connection with this coverage. The Committee confirmed that this advice *"fed into our future programming and so clearly made an impact"* [F.1]. In April 2020, Hutchings and Tolz published a report on major shortcomings in the work of the EU's main counter-disinformation taskforce in relation to COVID-19 coverage. On the basis of this report, members of the FCO's diplomatic service and an FCO policy analyst who benefitted from the RR earlier policy blogs, solicited a meeting with Hutchings and Tolz to consult them on how to interpret Russia's media activities around the pandemic (24/04/2020). In their words, they found the meeting *"invaluable"* [F.2]. The report was further endorsed by the UK's leading security and defence think tank, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), whose Director for International Security Studies commented: *"Responding effectively to Russia's threat requires understanding the actual nature of that threat and how best to respond. The report offers useful contribution on both accounts"* [G.1]. The significant debate aroused by the report resulted in an approach from the EU counter-disinformation unit, the quality of whose database was criticized in Hutchings and Tolz's report. The unit sought advice as to how their methodology of identifying disinformation could be improved [G.2].

According to the Head of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs Research Group on Russia, Tolz's invited lecture at the Norwegian Foreign Ministry (15/05/2014), based on output [1], helped in *"improving the understanding of local policy analysts and diplomats of the media's role in shaping public attitudes towards migration in Russia and beyond*" [F.3]. Cooperation with BBC Monitoring led to an internship at this organisation. It was filled by an RR-affiliated doctoral student who used it to produce reports on Russian media coverage of Russia's corruption scandals for the

FCO and MoD. BBC Monitoring confirmed that the student's "*research made a distinct… contribution to enhancing the knowledge and understanding of UK policy makers and policy analysts regarding Russian media strategies*" [G.3].

Other policy practitioners have consistently acknowledged that Hutchings' and Tolz's research has improved their understanding of how Russian media operate, using evidence from team research to inform their policy discussions. For instance, Moscow's Analytical Centre for monitoring race-related crimes in Russia (SOVA) based their report on the impact of television on Russian public perceptions of race entirely on Hutchings' and Tolz's research within output [1], saying it "*significantly shaped*" their "*understanding of the relationship between media coverage of racism and public attitudes… to the problem*" [G.4]. [text removed for publication]. The fact that such outputs successfully challenged dominant perceptions is further reflected in the public endorsements of Hutchings' policy-blogs (04/04/2018 and 10/04/2018) on "*rethinking the Russian propaganda machine*" from a prominent Latvian politician (Veiko Spolitis, MP) and a manager of a leading European media-development company [text removed for publication] [H.2]. Spolitis, for example, agreed with Hutchings' argument that "*we have to discard the idea that the Kremlin is in charge of a coordinated media machine*", adding that "*in a hyper-networked world, reductive stereotypes on 2 sides feed one another, creating toxic spirals of mutual hostility*" [H.2]. Evidence presented by Tolz in the Scottish Parliament (13/10/2018) about the exaggeration of RT's influence on Western audiences resulted in acknowledgement and promotion of the finding by the Royal Institute of Royal Affairs, Chatham House, a key provider of policy-analysis for the FCO, which had hitherto subscribed to the opposite position [G.5].

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact**
A. **Articles for media outlets** (PDF): URLs for articles A.1-A.20.
B. **Expert commentary in media and specialist outlets** (PDF): URLs for contributions B.1-B.27.
C. **Examples of audience engagement with authored media articles** (PDF): C.1 *WaPo* blog; C.2 *Conversation* article; C.3 *Conversation/Newsweek* article; C.4 *Wired* article; C.5 *HuffPost* article.
D. **Influence on international journalistic community debates** (PDF): D.1 Hutchings on *The Globe*; D.2 Tolz on *Newsnight*; D.3 RR team dialogue with *Guardian* journalist; D.4 Letter from SVT correspondent; D.5 Letter from BBC Russian Service Moscow Bureau chief.
E. **Enhanced professional and public understanding through targeted events** (PDF): E.1 Engagement and feedback on RR event; E.2 Feedback on the 'Populism, post-truth' event, including comments from media executive [text removed for publication].
F. **Impact on government organisations** (PDF): F.1 Emails from DCMS Select Committee; F.2 Email from FCO; F.3 Statement from NUPI (1/2/2020).
G. **Impact on think tanks and policy analysis units** (PDF): G.1 RUSI Twitter responses to RR reports; G.2 Email correspondence with East StratCom; G.3 Statement from BBC Monitoring (28/1/2020); G.4 Statement from SOVA (13/2/2020); G.5 Documentation of, and response to, Tolz's participation in a panel at the Scottish Parliament.
H. **Impact on other policy practitioners** (PDF): H.1 [text removed for publication]; H.2 Online responses to Hutchings' policy blogs by Veiko Spolitis, MP [text removed for publication].