

Staging the Sochi Winter Olympics 2014 on Russia Today and BBC World News: From soft power to geopolitical crisis

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Abstract:

This article compares how Russia Today (RT) and BBC World News (BBCWN) interacted with audiences on their social media platforms during the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. From the outset, the sporting events were overshadowed by tensions between Russia and ‘western’ nations over human rights. By the time the Sochi Games closed, the world had plunged into one of the gravest geopolitical crises since the Cold War – the confrontation over Russia’s annexation of Crimea, following dramatic regime change in Ukraine. This confrontation led to a disruption of the carefully orchestrated strategies of RT and BBCWN for staging the Games. The collision of a soft power spectacle and geopolitical crisis was most acutely felt and apparent at the interface between international broadcasting and social media where dissonant and dissenting discursive regimes clashed. This geopolitical standoff brought prior international tensions to a head as BBCWN struggled to manage the transition from a

celebratory global media event to a geopolitical crisis. Unimpeded by established media conventions, RT's approach to the transition was to attack and repudiate 'western' media and political discourses. RT, while loathed and despised in western media circles as a crude propagandistic news channel, has proved to be particularly adept in its uses of social media at times of global political events. The article sheds light on RT's appeal to international audiences interested in counter-hegemonic assaults on 'western' media and political debate, and suggests directions for future research. It argues that RT thrives in a 24-hour news environment in which global crises become subject to rumours, counter-rumours and unverified accounts superseding one another in a cauldron of conflicting information and unanswered questions - fertile territory for RT's conspiratorial ethos.

Key Words: Sochi Olympics 2014, International Broadcasting and Social Media, Soft Power, Russia Today, BBC World News

The Olympic Games, International Broadcasting and Soft Power

A key purpose of international broadcasting beyond the provision of news is to enhance the influence and attractiveness of their sponsoring nations among overseas audiences and publics. Alongside other international cultural relations organisations, such as the British Council and the Russkii Mir centres, state-funded international broadcasters function as public and cultural diplomacy tools, the funders (if not always the journalists working in these organisations) hope, will result in soft power benefits. The Olympics clearly offer unrivalled opportunities for the host nation to mobilise its international broadcasting for soft power effects (Price and Dayan 2008). Through its international broadcasting arm, RT (formerly Russia Today), Russia sought to construct a powerful myth of Russia's triumphant return to the international stage, at ease with itself and the world. This image was quickly punctured by the annexation of Crimea.

The Olympics also offer opportunities to other international broadcasters, like BBC World News TV (BBCWN), to project, promote and demonstrate to global audiences the values that the nation and its national audiences cherish. For BBCWN, international sporting rivalries and the inevitable political debates surrounding how the host country manage the task of staging the Olympics are an ideal context in which values, deemed to be British and democratic, can be demonstrated, for example by adherence to the core BBC value of impartiality. International broadcasters vying for the attention of global media audiences also enter a competitive game of constructing national identities through the assertion of differences – some claiming the superiority of their national values over others.

Soft power is most apparent when uncontrived and invisible. In order to retain their global audiences, the competitive game of nation branding via a combination of strategic communications and international broadcasting must be a subtle one. The spirit of internationalism that animates the Olympics alleviates, at least in principle, the excesses of nation branding. BBCWN promotes a sense of British civic-mindedness through its

endorsement of the Olympic myth of apolitical rivalry. RT grounds its claim of Russian reassertion on the world stage by portraying it as a standard bearer for an age-old Olympic spectacle.

The Olympic Games promote audience participation in a festival of international harmony. Here, the potential of social media to widen participation and make it more interactive comes to the fore. Platforms like Twitter create a global arena in which audiences and users can exchange their thoughts and feelings about the Games they are watching with others and with otherwise inaccessible athletes and public figures. YouTube allows audiences to disseminate their own films, at times bypassing and reconfiguring official news agendas. Broadcasters, too, use trending topics on Twitter to validate their own preferred meanings, and to co-create news narratives with audiences. While the uncertainty and indeterminacy of a parallel Twittersphere can be entertaining and invigorating for public debate, it can be disruptive for the media management of the Games.

Researching the International Broadcasting-Social Media Nexus during Olympic Games

The research represented in this article was carried out by a multi-disciplinary team. It included scholars from Russian Studies, Sociology and Computer Science. Our collaborative analysis inserts the international broadcasting – social media nexus into the context of the geopolitical complexities of relations between Russia and the ‘west’ via the specificity of a global media event. We situate our project at the intersection of three fields of enquiry: (1) theorisations of the influence of broadcasting on national identities and practices of citizenship in the context of transnationalisation (Beck 2006; Gillespie 2010, 2013); (2) debates on participatory ‘citizen media’, the ‘democratisation’ of media production and experiments in digital democracy (Jenkins 2008); (3) critiques and revisions of ‘soft power’ theory from cultural and discourse analytical perspectives (Rothman 2011; Hall 2010), since Nye (1990) originally developed the term ‘soft power’ (Wilson 2008; Lebow 2007; Nye 2008 and 2012).

Whilst the BBC’s international broadcasting has been the subject of research (Gillespie and Webb 2012; Webb 2014), RT’s virtual absence from scholarly research reflects its status as a much maligned news provider, worthy only of contempt, and not a suitable object of study. Yet in 2010 it was the US’s second most watched international news broadcaster after BBCWN (Rizvi 2010). The EU feels it is worthy of a response - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-eu-31932005>. Also, RT is expanding, adding new language services (Spanish), so its importance is likely to increase. Its success on YouTube and social media around the Syria conflict indicate that its growing influence on the global media landscape requires investigation. The channel’s tagline, ‘Question More!’, established RT’s aspirations to function as ‘counter-hegemonic news flow’ (Painter 2008), but it has not, unlike Al Jazeera English, been analysed in this capacity. Some scholars touch on RT in the context of analyses of Russian soft power and the problem of national self-representation

(Feklyunina 2008; Strukov 2014). None compare it as a contender for global audiences with the BBC; its image as ‘a state mouthpiece’, poor production values and post-Ukraine degeneration into blatant propaganda appear to mark it as ‘off-limits’ for research. This article seeks to begin to redress this gap in the field via an investigation of how RT reported the Sochi Olympics, how broadcast and social media audiences interacted, and how RT’s coverage compared and contrasted with that of BBCWN. In so doing, it offers a judicious assessment of how the international news ecology is being reshaped by the dual contexts of rapid media convergence and, the shifting geopolitical plates of an emergent multipolar world in a post-Cold War context.

There is now a substantial corpus of work on media representations of the Olympics. Rivenburgh (2002) and Roche (2000) have analysed them specifically as a global media event. Much Olympics scholarship has centred on nation building (Tomlinson and Young 2006), most of it in relation to the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Latham 2009; Brady 2009; Price and Dayan, 2008). Again, in connection with Beijing 2008 (Manzenreiter 2010; Ding 2008), the significance of the Olympics as a soft power resource has received attention. There is increasing interest in new dimensions of audience participation in the Olympics. Gruzd et al. (2011) base an audience sentiment analysis on social media reactions to the 2010 Winter Olympics. None of these works looks at the Games as a site for geopolitical conflict, nor at the interface between social and broadcast media.

Between Nation Branding and Cosmopolitan Bonding

The geopolitical crisis overshadowing, and eventually displacing, established media practices deployed in Sochi 2014 threw into sharp focus the dualities we have outlined between nation branding and cosmopolitan bonding. We selected as the focus of our study two international broadcasters BBC World News (BBCWN) and Russia Today (RT). BBCWN is a commercially funded branch of the BBC’s international broadcasting operation which draws heavily on content BBC World Service, and is tasked with both ‘sustaining civil society’ by impartially facilitating a ‘global conversation’, and with ‘bringing the UK to the world’. RT was launched in 2005 as ‘Russia Today’ with significant government funding and a stated mission to ‘counter the US information monopoly’ and ‘report world news from a Russian perspective’ (Simonian 2013). The selection is motivated by (a) the contrast between the perspective of the host nation and that of a major participating country that it facilitates; (b) the fact that Russia and Britain were at the centre of the Ukraine conflict; (c) the ways in which the respective statuses of BBC World News as a long-established global player and RT as a newcomer determined to challenge broadcasting conventions, enable us to track ideological ruptures in the post-Cold War media landscape.

We examine the influence of the geopolitical conflict on Sochi coverage in three domains:

Media Narratives: Here we compare the main broadcaster narratives with topics identified through an analysis of Twitter engagements with the Games, defining narrative as the

packaging of a sequence of connected events or themes to generate particular meanings or embody particular values (Rimmon-Kenan 2002). We show how, in positioning their narratives with respect to those engagements, and in how they reflect the critical discourses around human rights issues, the broadcasters each strive to reconcile their soft power agendas and their transnational audience strategies. This links our analysis to the Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism theme highlighted in this special issue.

Media Events: We then tackle how the broadcasters handled the transition from the planned media event to the media event as geopolitical crisis. We juxtapose this change with the manner in which the transition plays out on Twitter, tracing how the broadcasters managed disruptions to the conventions of Olympics coverage and mapping our discussion to the highlighted theme of Soft Power and Geopolitics.

Intermedia reflexivities: Finally, we foreground how the channels not only respond to social media trends, but openly exploit the resources offered by new platforms to authenticate their agendas. Treating the broadcasters in their conscious orientation towards the wider media sphere, we also discuss sensitivities displayed to other media outlets. Our discussion corresponds to the topic of Broadcasting Adaptations to Maximise Engagement.

Mixed, Mobile and Real-Time Methodologies

The media event framework provides our loose theoretical umbrella. We work within the parameters of critiques of Dayan and Katz's (1992) original notion of state-broadcaster collaborations promoting shared societal values, following Fiske and Hartley's (1996) redefinition of those collaborations as 'points of maximum turbulence' exposing power differentials. We combine this insight with Hepp and Couldry's (2010) insistence that media events are: 'situated, thickened, centring performances of mediated communication that are focused on a particular thematic core, cross different media products and reach a wide and diverse multiplicity of audiences and participants' (p.12).

This multi-modal approach locates the media events in an environment in which post-Cold War ideological and technological transformations converge. It requires an integrated approach to how news is broadcast on screen, mediated online, re-mediated through other platforms, and disrupted by political developments in which residual cold-war legacies still resonate.

The methodological framework for this study is based on that of the London 2012 Olympics study reported in this journal (Dennis, Gillespie and O'Loughlin, this issue). We adapted this framework by focussing on two complementary strands. One centred on a discourse analysis of 69 television broadcasts across RT and BBC World News (including news, discussion shows, interviews and current affairs and occurring between 7 and 23 February 2014, the opening and closing dates of the Winter Olympics), though we also looked selectively at later material relating to the Crimea annexation. Our main focus was

on the opening and closing days, since this was when the political issues relevant to our concerns came to the fore.¹

By discourse analysis we understand a study of the ‘role played by ... structures ... and strategies of text in ... the exercise of power and ... concealment of dominance’ (van Dijk 1993:250). In particular, we identified the narratives shaping broadcasters’ coverage, the political and other inflexions they give them and the coherence with which they are applied. In studying those narratives, we drew on Bakhtinian dialogism, particularly his notion of the ‘addressivity’ of an utterance and on Fairclough’s theory of ‘interdiscursivity’ (Fairclough 2003). We touched on issues of (i) voice (who speaks, in what context and with what influence); (ii) mode of address (how viewers are spoken to, the tone adopted and the linguistic register selected); (iii) discourse types (which linguistic and media genres are selected, within what hierarchy, and with which specialist jargon); and (iv) intermedia reflexivity (references to other platforms and outlets indicating broadcasters’ consciousness of their own status and authority).

The other strand consists of an analysis of relevant Olympics Twitter interactions using social media analytics based on a total of 17.2 million Tweets collected via the Filter Endpoint of the Twitter Streaming API (Procter, Voss and Lvov, this issue).

The tweets were collected over the course of the Olympics from February 7 to February 24 2014. We collected data on the basis of a set of keywords and hashtags as well as through tracking a number of accounts associated with the Olympic Games. The selection criteria were chosen to include Twitter messages (tweets) about the Games as well as about Russia and related topics we expected to feature during the Games such as the issue of gay rights.

To assure robustness and completeness of the collection criteria, we used several techniques to iteratively refine them *before the start* of the Games. First of all, we used our prior domain knowledge, news media monitoring and simple search to formulate the initial short list of relevant keywords and accounts. Second, based on this list we monitored the Twitter discussions that anticipated the Games, discovered new collection criteria and thus formulated an enhanced criteria list. Third, we performed a preliminary short data collection with the Streaming API using the second criteria list. Then we identified the most frequently used hashtags in the collected tweets and used them as the last addition to the collection criteria.

For the subsequent analysis,² we selected a subset of Twitter messages from the overall collection to restrict the data analysed to tweets directly and explicitly related to the Games and/or Russia. These were tweets containing the following terms:

“bbcsochi”, “sochi2014”, “сочи2014”, “olympics”, “олимпиада”, “sochi”,
“сочи”, “sochiproblems”, “sochiproblemz”, “winterolympics”,
“openingceremony”, “opening ceremony”, “russia”, “cheerstosochi”

Having identified the subset of tweets, we then set out to analyse the co-occurrence of a set of hashtags identifying key topics (#lgbt, #putin and #sochiproblems) within the Olympic Games tweets in order to analyse the discussions of these topics in the context of the Games. We scrutinised them for their links with dominant broadcaster narratives, their relative prominence and their ebb and flow over the period of the Games. We focused on these topics (and hashtags) because they appeared to be among the most frequently used hashtags during the Opening Ceremony – the peaking day for the Olympics-related Twitter discussions.

For each of the selected topics we analysed the scope and the dynamics of the discussion: for that we computed the total numbers of tweets for each of the hashtags posted during each day of the Olympics. Then we qualitatively examined the most popular tweets on each of the topics (the popularity was assessed with the number of retweets). Finally, for #lgbt and #putin we assessed the role of various accounts in the Twitter discussions by the number of retweets and replies they received. We used this mode of analysis to determine whether or not the accounts of BBC and RT played a significant role in those discussions.

We integrated the strands by juxtaposing the trends they reveal and by identifying points of intersection (examples of how narrative trends in one medium are appropriated by another; borrowings of tone and style; inter-media references of broadcaster to social media or vice versa; broadcaster engagements in social media activities), thus capturing the multi-modal complexity of the convergent Sochi and Ukraine media events.

Tweeting Sochi 2014: The Key Topics

We begin, then, with a brief overview of the key trends on Twitter during the time period we are covering.

For the opening day, three distinct, Russia-related topics were revealed: (1) the issue of LGBT rights, (2) Putin as a symbol of Russia's fading legitimacy and (3) various organisational failures known as 'Sochi Problems'. While the 'Sochi Problems' topic was less prominent in the broadcast material, on Twitter it became the most discussed topic. Our data identifies more than 432k relevant tweets compared to about 51k for LGBT and 28k for Putin.

Selecting subcorpora of Tweets that contained the respective hashtag (#lgbt for LGBT analysis, etc.), we estimated the flow of those conversations, establishing timelines for numbers of tweets on a day-by-day basis. The most prominent tweets were scrutinised for the opinions they expressed, the narratives they captured, and the tone and the form of their content.

We present below details of the flow of conversations relating to our three primary topics:

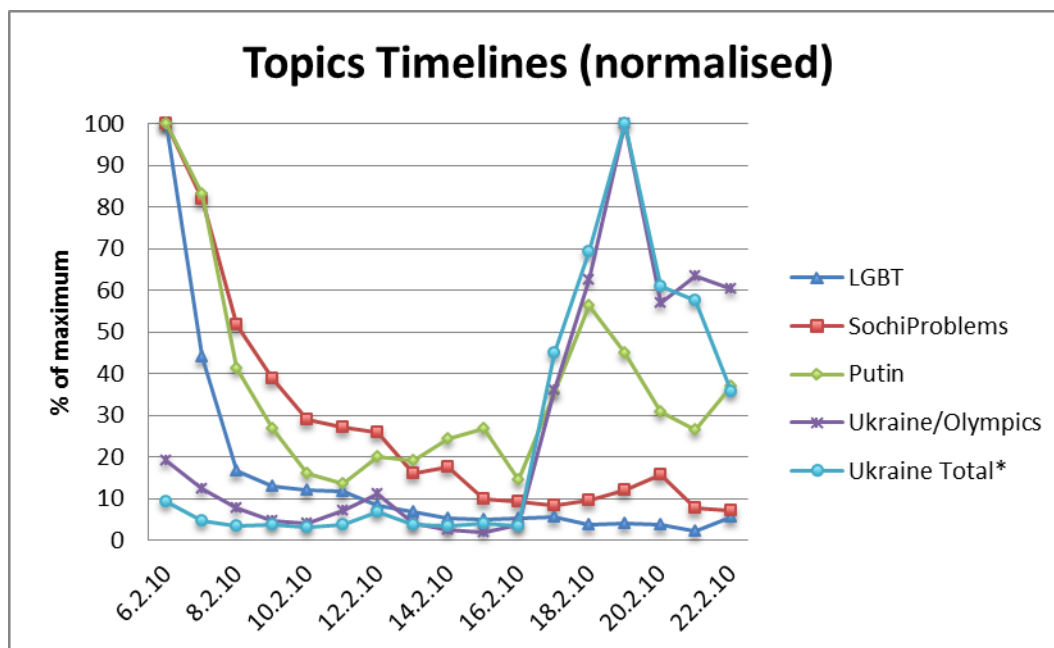


Figure 1: Twitter Conversation Flows during Sochi Olympics 2014

The patterns are consistent across all three topics with a rapid fall-away in prominence once the games were underway, but with a significant spike for Putin coinciding with the peaking of the conflict in Kiev, and the rapid emergence of Ukraine as a new Twitter topic, both in its own right, and in combination with Sochi.

We will return to our social network analysis in the final section of this article, but we must now consider how the patterns are reflected in the IB narratives.

BBC Media Narratives: Corruption, Security and Putin as Symbol of Russia

On the day of the Opening Ceremony, the Games featured prominently on BBCWN news throughout the second half of the day. Our analysis of eight programmes took into account the headlines under which the Olympics were presented, and the lexical content of the newsreader's account and that of any accompanying report. It revealed four main themes, each of which generated simple narrative sequences subsumed by an overarching meta-narrative centring on perceptions that the suspiciously high cost of the Games reflected widespread corruption, which was in turn a reflection of broader Russian misdemeanours.

The meta-narrative was realised through a series of topics that recurred throughout February 7. Every news broadcast made reference to Sochi 2014's status as 'the most expensive games in the history of the Olympics'. In the GMT edition of the News at midnight, viewers were reminded that Sochi 2014 was 'four times more expensive than planned' (BBCWN News 7/2/14).³ Each edition was accompanied by a 'ticker' running at the bottom of the screen, reading alternatively '\$50 billion games are Russia's first since Moscow 1980', or 'Costliest games in history to officially open later'.

Given its politicised implications, the link to corruption tended to occur outside the presenters' discourse. However, in interviews, they frequently posed questions about the

role of corruption in inflating the cost of the Games. The issue was raised by an opposition activist (to Putin's government) who cited corruption as the reason for Russia's inability to finance the Games (BBCWN *World Have Your Say* 7/2/2014). In common with other opposition-minded interviewees, the same activist located his abhorrence of corruption in the context of his broader outrage at a range of other injustices propagated by the Russia government.

The second most prominent theme relates to concerns about security linked to the decision to hold the games close to the troubled North Caucasus. The topic generated its own sub-narrative connecting the fear that Sochi may be subject to terrorist attack with Putin's hubristic mode of governing. It was realised through the systematic scrutiny given to security issues within every Sochi report. On each occasion, the report began with the newsreader asking the correspondent about preparations to counter security threats. The consistent reply was that 'once you are inside the Olympic village, you are safe', implying that a threat remained to those in the vicinity unable to access the village. The security issue featured prominently in the first part of the *World Have Your Say* discussion. The fact that the remainder of the programme focused on other controversies (including gay rights) reconnected the security sub-narrative to the overarching meta-narrative.

Concern over rights issues contributed to a sub-narrative portraying Russia as a semi-pariah state making token gestures at accommodating the criticism levelled at it. Every half an hour, the newsreader posed variants on a question about whether Russia's new law banning the promotion of non-traditional sexualities accounted for the absence of major world leaders from the Opening Ceremony. Human rights was at the centre of the 'Sports and Politics' segment of *World Have Your Say*, and it dominated the second half of the programme which focused exclusively on the 'gay propaganda' law.

The final sub-narrative addressed Putin's image, his role as an embodiment of Russia in the world, his ties to its repressive Soviet past and his efforts to portray the country as a modern state. Much was made of Putin's personal ambitions. Headlines like 'Putin's Gamble' and 'Putin's Vanity Project?' introduced lead reports in several news editions. Putin's links to the Soviet past were ever-present, and the 18:00 edition of *BBC Middle East* included discussion in response to the question, 'Is Putin a fan of Joseph Stalin?'

The Soviet legacy also linked to the theme of Russia's attempts to present itself as a modern nation. In reporting the Opening Ceremony on February 8 and 9, repeated mention was made of the absence of symbolism relating to the Soviet period. Even just prior to the ceremony, the tone of the BBC's reporting began to shift from political controversies to Russia's aspirations, its powerful historical and cultural legacy, and its capacity to function as a major global actor and intermediary in, for example, the crisis in Syria.

Impartiality or Sustaining Civil society?

The controversies shaping the BBC meta-narrative were not presented as negative 'truths' but rather as the topics dominating public discourse. True to its impartiality principles, the BBC distanced itself from the discourse, striving to explore it from as many viewpoints as

possible. For example, Dmitrii Linnik of the Kremlin-sponsored radio station *Voice of Russia*, was a frequent interviewee, as was Aleksandr Nekrasov, a former Kremlin advisor.

The impartiality principle also manifests itself in an indifference to other media outlets, and an arguably 'post-imperial' confidence that the BBC occupies a privileged position 'above the fray'. 'Contra-flow' broadcasters like RT and Al Jazeera adopt a different approach; for example, Al Jazeera's *Listening Post* focuses on how other global broadcasters are reporting world events, targeting audiences for which 'studied distance' is not necessarily preferable to 'bold engagement'.

With its emphasis on plurality, impartiality dovetails with BBCWN's mission to facilitate 'global conversations in new digital space', thereby meeting the goal of 'sustaining citizenship and civil society' set out in the BBC Trust's 'Public Purposes' (BBC Trust 2010). BBCWN's flagship TV political debate show is *World Have Your Say* (WHYS). This is a one-hour weekly show in which a single debate topic is discussed by audiences from across the globe. A large studio to which multiple guests are invited on a rotating basis accommodates live video-links, with extensive use of social media, YouTube video clips, email and Skype phone-ins to maximise viewpoints. The Olympic arena in which a slice of the 'global public' comes temporarily together, provided a valuable soft power opportunity for BBCWN. Through the enhanced participatory opportunities offered by new media, the WHYS audience effectively 'effaced' the presenter, now merely a passive 'facilitator', moving centre stage to become both subject and object of speech. The pun in the title performs a triple gesture, eliding soft power goals (this is BBC *World's* flagship and a beacon for Britain), its promotion of pluralist values (*World: Have your Say!*), and its intention to exploit digital media to these ends (new technology allows the 'world' to 'have its say' in a global conversation).

On February 7, an entire edition was dedicated to the Olympics. The discussion was structured around the familiar topics. The presenter was assiduous in ensuring that she posed questions that made no presumptions about the guilt of the host nation. The first half of the discussion grouped many of the issues under the heading 'Can Sport and Politics mix?' The whole of the second half of the programme focused on the new 'anti-gay' law. Invited guests included Russian and British human rights activists, a Putin supporter, a Danish athlete, and many others. The emphasis was on their status as ordinary people and the register of much of the discourse was informal and oriented towards sentiment; the ticker throughout the programme invited viewers to tell the presenters what they 'feel' about the games and the surrounding controversies.

Visual backgrounds were carefully chosen and sequenced to reflect WHYS's impartial position. A guest by the name of Gevorg spoke from Moscow against the backdrop of Red Square to represent his endorsement of the official position. The section on LGBT rights was accompanied by images of anti-Kremlin posters. A section dealing with global media negativity towards Sochi took place against the backdrop of an image of a Tweet carrying the #SochiProblems hashtag, but already exposed as conveying false information. Its inclusion exemplified the BBC's balanced stance towards the global public sphere.

WHYS performs impartiality through its very format and its deployment of visual backdrops. But its efforts to integrate impartiality with the BBC's 'sustaining civil society' remit exposed tensions linked to the burgeoning geopolitical conflict. The first part of the discussion featured a robust exchange of very different opinions. During the second half, the balance shifted markedly towards those sympathetic to the Kremlin viewpoint. This is unsurprising in light of the priority accorded to the views of ordinary Russians, state control over Russia's major media outlets and the consequent rise in patriotic support for official policy. As more speakers got to 'have their say' on the western chorus of criticism of Russia, those who shared those views became increasingly marginalised.

In the final exchange, the presenter sought to restore some balance. Inviting one speaker to comment on the suggestion that criticism of Russia's LGBT rights record may be excessive, it was clear from his demeanour (he was an informally dressed experimental rock musician), that she expected him to reject the suggestion. In fact, his reply was ambiguous and confusing (a common trait of spontaneous conversations with people unaccustomed to public exchanges). Her gloss revealed an inept attempt to restore the established frame of 'Russia's problem with LGBT rights':

Host: No country likes to be lectured to, especially when that criticism is disproportionate. Kolin, could you identify with that comment?

Guest: Yeah, absolutely! I heard the previous commentator say that gays are doing well in Russia. But just imagine, there are 225 athletes in the Russian team and we do not know if there is one gay among them!

Host: So, Kolin, that's an interesting point you are making. In some ways we hear that gay rights are free in Russia but that's not always the case. Thank you for joining us here. (BBCWN 'World Have Your Say' 7/2/14)

The exchange reveals a fault line in BBCWN's dual remit: its duty to maintain impartiality and its commitment to fostering civil society through a conversation with ordinary people at the centre of world events. The fault line is linked directly to re-emerging East-West tensions. It is one thing to give ordinary citizens a voice in shaping broadcasting output, and another to expect them to reflect the pluralism that is impartiality's lifeblood when exposed daily to polarising rhetoric from monopoly state broadcasters.

Challenging Hegemony and Promoting Russia: RT's Counter-Narratives

BBCWN's primary narratives were equally prevalent on RT. Like the BBC, it was bound by the concerns of the global public sphere as reflected in the social media trends which, with other media outlets, it helps to shape. RT's response to those concerns reflected both its ethos as a broadcaster and its responsibility to 'defend' the interests of the host nation in the eyes of its international audiences. RT's self-image as a 'contra flow' channel aiming to subvert 'mainstream media' orthodoxies, offer an alternative view of world events and draw attention to issues avoided by other broadcasters accorded well with the need to rebut the

barrage of hostile commentary on Russia. The response was systematic and multi-faceted, taking the form of direct refutation, rebuttal by inference and performative negation.

RT's meta-narrative asserted that as a rapidly advancing nation threatening to disturb the hegemonic balance of power, Russia was being subjected to a hysterical propaganda campaign whipped up by hypocritical western nations whose machinations it would reveal by laying on a well-organised Games true to the Olympic spirit.

In refuting accusations of excessive expenditure, reports focused repeatedly on the long-term benefits for the infrastructure of the Sochi region. References were made to 'the hefty heritage for Sochi citizens', the 'regeneration of an entire region' and Russia's wise foresight regarding the protection of nature (RT 'Olympic Special' 7/2/14).

In a direct polemical counter assault on 'mainstream media' anxieties over the terrorist threat, Sochi was declared to be 'the safest city in the world'. Invidious comparisons with security arrangements at other Olympic venues were frequent. RT's Martyn Andrews drew on his experience as a British citizen during the London 2012 Olympics, declaring 'I have not seen any missiles on the top of apartment blocks, as in London'. Andrews reminded viewers that 'security is a sensitive thing everywhere', but also referred to the 'Cold War mentality' behind western fears of Sochi's proximity to the troubled North Caucasus.

RT devoted considerable airtime to promoting a dynamic image of the Russian nation. Putin was absent from this sub-narrative, which centred on Russia's hospitality, ordinary Russians' sense of pride in their nation and Sochi as an emblem of Russian prowess. If these themes constituted an implicit response to the mainstream media's 'obsession' with Putin's overbearing authoritarianism, other strategies contributed to a direct, polemical riposte. Andrews drew on his 'cultural capital' as a cosmopolitan, well-travelled British man to reinforce his insistence on Russia as a 'normal' nation belonging within the civilised western world. In his review of initial Olympic-related Twitter activity, RT's social media editor, Ivor Crotty, mocked those Tweets that indulged in crude, anti-Russian stereotypes.

RT was most concerned with countering the 'western' media's focus on human rights which they attacked as fabrications concocted to undermine Russia. These fabrications were portrayed as doomed to failure owing to their breach of the popularly endorsed Olympic spirit of goodwill. This sub-narrative was enacted on several levels.

First, the campaign against Russia's human rights record met with direct refutation in the form of interviews with dignitaries pointing out that, contrary to western 'disinformation', a dedicated space for political protest had been set aside on the outskirts of Sochi (RT 'Sophie & Co' 7/2/14), or assertions that gay people lead fulfilled lives in Russia, and that stories of their persecution are hugely exaggerated. This line was, in turn, inserted into the broader context of the geopolitical 'information war' being waged against Russia.

Secondly, RT strove to undermine the western human rights narrative through invidious comparisons with the situation elsewhere. An edition of *Truthseeker* focused on the repression of gay rights in Southern states of the USA. In the *Worlds Apart* programme

broadcast on February 23, the host, Oksana Boiko, interviewed Greg Louganis, a gay American athlete, repeatedly invoking instances of US homophobia.

The most ambitious feature of the RT counter-narrative was a bold, performative gesture highlighting what RT 'does' in support of LGBT rights rather than what it 'says' about them. Martyn Andrews is himself an openly gay British journalist who lives and works in Russia. His presence at the heart of RT's Sochi coverage constituted a more than symbolic rebuttal of the mainstream western media account. He persistently reminded viewers of his pride in his sexuality, both verbally and paralinguistically. Andrews gave several extended, tabloid-style 'insights' into 'Sochi fashion, tourist and lifestyle scenes' and 'Sochi celebrity gossip' delivered in an overtly 'camp' style. He also participated in the *Cross Talk* international discussion show edition devoted to the 'New Cold War' frenzy whipped up by western media outlets in the lead-up to the Games. Andrews's interventions in the discussion were impassioned, but nuanced, and highly personal:

I do not defend the Russian government. Also, I do not agree with this law. That said ... if I were not happy living in Russia, I would not live here. There is a club here in Sochi called *Maiak*, the gay club ... It shows you the bubbling and thriving subculture that gay people have here ... You have to think what Russia is, where it comes from. It is new. Places need time, they need patience; they need understanding. (RT, *Cross Talk*, 8/2/14)

Andrews polemically asserts a 'truth' about the real state of affairs regarding Russia's gay community, performatively authenticating it via his affirmations of his own gay self-identity. He also provides an on-air demonstration of Russian free speech and seeks to ameliorate Russia's 'shortcomings' by placing them in the context of a 'new' nation striving to modernise.

Reconciling and Disrupting the National and the Cosmopolitan?

Encapsulated within Andrews's performative role is an irresolvable tension pitting the broadcaster's national prerogatives against the cosmopolitan strategies deployed to realise them. He epitomises RT's efforts to reflect a Russia aspiring to embrace progressive values and appeal to a global, 'metrosexual' community steeped in the shared tabloid discourses of consumerist lifestyles. Yet those efforts are at odds with (a) RT's pitch to niche leftist and ethnic minority audiences sympathetic to the channel's counter-hegemonic agenda but hostile to tabloid culture; and (b) the official line on Russia's mission to lead a world-wide conservative backlash against western liberal 'tolerance', based on the values of family, religion and tradition (a line reflected in the frequency with which RT now invokes social conservatives like Nigel Farage when attacking Ukraine's integration into Europe).

RT's apparent ideological eclecticism illustrates its opportunistic approach to defending Russian interests. But this potentially impedes its mission to build a coherent identity and the loyal audience constituencies that are key to its long-term soft power goals.

The contradiction is exacerbated at moments, like Sochi 2014, when Russia finds itself at the centre of two simultaneous storms of protest (over its approach to sexual minorities, and its hostility towards Ukraine's integration into Europe), each requiring different ideological ripostes.

But the same storms highlight parallel tensions within BBCWN. It deploys the latest technological means of linking its audiences to a 'global conversation' in which citizens from across the world participate in an exchange of views inspired by the cosmopolitan ideals of the Olympics. Yet those very aspirations are undercut by the need to preserve Britain's global reputation for 'fair play', the hallmark of the BBC's putative impartiality and balance, Britain's international flag bearer that is sorely contradicted by the descent of *World Have Your Say* into a clash in which only one side of the argument threatens to prevail.

Handling the Transition: *BBC World News* between Soft Power and Geopolitics

The forces driving internal contradictions in BBCWN outputs received added momentum as controversy turned to open conflict. The BBC had a delicate task to manage in retaining its focus on a world crisis with Russia at its centre, whilst respecting the Olympic spirit by showing deference to the host nation.

The Olympics are of course an established media event in which state and broadcaster agree to coordinate the celebration of a twin national and international festival. As a broadcaster with close ties to the British state, the BBC was duty-bound to observe the implicit rituals that coverage of the Olympics has cultivated. This was evident in the news trajectory on the opening day. Throughout the early editions, the themes dominating BBCWN bulletins were those centring on political controversies surrounding the host, juxtaposed with updates on the growing tensions over popular protests in Kiev. However, the BBC strove to maintain an impartial distance from the protagonists in what was becoming a global stand-off, giving prominence to the scandal surrounding a leaked telephone call between Victoria Nuland, the US's Vice-Secretary of State, and the US Ambassador in Ukraine appearing to confirm covert American intervention in the crisis.

But, as the Opening Ceremony drew closer, reports began referring to public sentiments of anticipation rather than to political tension. Putin's role in centring the BBC narrative was now that of a leader on the brink of an unprecedented opportunity. The discourse acquired a more positive tone as the BBC entered the orbit of the Olympics reporting genre, according to whose rules politics is temporarily put aside.

From the Opening Ceremony onwards, coverage focused exclusively on the occasion itself, and subsequently on the sporting action (with a brief 'relapse' on 18-19 February when members of Pussy Riot were beaten by Cossacks in Sochi for performing an anti-Putin punk song). Its approach accorded with its commitment to impartiality, for, within the framework of a global agreement to observe the Olympic 'Truce', and given that, by the

BBC's own admission, impartiality is measured in relation to shared consensus (BBC Trust 2010); ignoring that consensus could compromise impartiality.

As the Ukraine crisis loomed larger, the BBC found its strategy increasingly difficult to maintain. When the Euromaidan revolt boiled over into regime change on the eve of the Closing Ceremony, the BBC confronted a clash between two radically different categories of media event: the planned, state-broadcaster celebration and an unanticipated global crisis. On the night of the Closing Ceremony, BBC World found itself having to report on ritual speeches expressing gratitude to the host city. In the 18:00 edition of the *News*, the words of Thomas Bach, President of the International Olympic Committee, were cited in full, including his declaration that: 'Russia delivered all that it promised. It showed the face of a new Russia: efficient, friendly, patriotic, open to the world' (BBCWN, *News*, 23/2/14). By the 19:00 and 20:00 broadcasts, Bach's speech was cursorily glossed by a visibly embarrassed presenter, who minutes earlier, had reported on Russia's obstructive approach to the Ukraine situation. The spirit of internationalism central to planned global media events like the Olympics was hastily jettisoned in favour of an emergent set of conventions for dealing with the overthrow of oppressive regimes.

As the Olympics ended, BBCWN faced another dilemma. The Ukraine crisis was characterized throughout by confusion and uncertainty and unfolded as a series of questions which still lack undisputed answers: 'How did ex-President Yanukovich escape?'; 'Who fired on the demonstrators in Kiev?'; 'Who shot down Malaysian Airlines Flight MH 17?' In a networked world, multiple media platforms disseminate competing narratives which the BBC must navigate, unable to occupy its habitual vantage point. Because the 24-hour news environment exacerbated the urgency of the need to extrapolate from them an impartial 'meta-narrative', BBCWN paid more attention than usual to what outlets on all sides were reporting, forced to mediate hesitantly between contingent 'partialities' rather than speak from its traditional position beyond contingency; it attracted recriminations from RT for clumsily pulling an interview with the channel's Abby Martin about her unexpected criticism of Russia's annexation of Crimea (Martin 2014).

Given its loss of vantage point, and despite adopting a line on Russian involvement in East Ukraine significantly more non-committal than other western outlets, the BBC also came under criticism in the UK for pro-Ukrainian bias from commentators like Rod Liddle (Liddle 2014). Meanwhile, under the heading 'BBC Silence: Leaked Ashton Phone Call Known to EU Leaders Days Ago', RT attacked the BBC for failing to report a second leaked phone-call scandal of central significance to the Russian narrative: that in which the Estonian Foreign Minister, Urmas Paet, informed Catherine Ashton, EU Foreign Policy Commissioner, of a reliable source claiming that opponents, not supporters, of Yanukovich may have been responsible for the sniper gunfire on Kiev demonstrators (RT 2014).

The comparison with the earlier leaked call is indeed stark. Despite initial scepticism about its authenticity, the Nuland call featured prominently in BBC World News headlines (it ran as an on-screen ticker throughout its Opening Day Sochi coverage), whilst the Ashton one was ignored. The contrast is attributable to a dramatic change in circumstances: that of

a geopolitical crisis pitting western nations against a Russian government riding roughshod over the sovereign territory of neighbouring states, rather than merely a rise in political tensions occasioned by the ritual pre-Olympic spotlight on the host nation's flaws.

The earlier noted impartiality/civil society contradiction derives from the resurgence of East-West tensions. It is deepened through the deterioration of the tensions into open geopolitical conflict. The uncertainties of that conflict, exacerbated by the new communication environment, eroded the BBC's impartial vantage point. But they also generate a new reluctance to give equal weight to the narratives of both sides. Meanwhile, the sudden encroachment of the unanticipated crisis onto the space of the pre-planned state-media collaboration left the BBC stranded between two modes of coverage.

RT and the Militarisation of the 'Information War': Soft Power or State Propaganda?

Russia Today

For RT, the transition to geopolitical crisis was easier to manage. Its coverage proceeded according to plan. A 'Sochi Roundup' concluding its Games coverage focused on 'debunking' 5 'myths' which had dominated western media accounts, and on confirming Russia's re-emergence as a world power (RT 'Olympic Special' 23/2/14), and deriding the mainstream media's 'politicisation' of Sochi 2014 for its breach of the Olympic spirit. The tone throughout the closing day was emotive and the discourse decidedly vernacular as presenters mimicked the wistful regret experienced by global audiences, and ordinary Russians' sense of pride at the Games' extraordinary success. In a final flourish of polemic, and as earlier mentioned, the post-Sochi edition of the *Worlds Apart* discussion show featured a combative interview with the gay US athlete, Greg Louganis (RT 'Worlds Apart' 23/2/14).

With the Games over, RT turned its full attention to the 'information war' over Ukraine, treating the global media environment as an arena of counter-hegemonic struggle in which there can be no 'objectivity'. However, the theme of anti-Russian prejudice provided a bridge between the two categories of media event; if mainstream outlets previously distorted Russia's human rights record for their own purposes, they were now misrepresenting Russian actions in Ukraine in the interests of continued western hegemony. In an inversion of the western narrative, Russian homophobia (the abiding Olympic controversy) was transmuted into western 'Russophobia' (the dominant theme of RT's Ukraine counter-narrative). A post-Crimea edition of *Cross-Talk* addressed the questions: 'What does Russophobia mean? Where does it come from? What are the West's Russophobic stereotypes? And why is Russophobia dangerous?' (RT 'CrossTalk' 16/4/14).

RT thrives in a 24-hour news environment in which global crises become subject to rumours, counter-rumours and unverified accounts superseding one another in a cauldron of conflicting information and unanswered questions - fertile territory for RT's conspiratorial

ethos. It accounts for the eschewal of dialogic debate; the truth is a conspiracy to be uncovered by elite 'experts' rather than an elusive equilibrium emerging from the balancing of different viewpoints. The 'tag lines' of its flagship shows are revealing (*Truthseeker*: 'Seek Truth from Facts'; *The Big Picture*: 'What's actually going on in the world').

It was in the conspiratorial spirit that RT promoted the 'scandal' around the leaked Ashton-Paert phone call. The scandal headlined in its news programmes for several days and it was first to break the story, suggesting that it may have had privileged access to intelligence sources. As RT transitioned from international festival to global crisis, its strategy switched from a soft power emphasis to a full counter-assault mode. RT's entire rationale foregrounds the need to repel ideological offensives from wherever they emerge; hence its radically eclectic approach to the political voices it invokes. In this sense, too, the change between event categories produced fewer of the problems that BBCWN encountered.

However, RT faced its own difficulties, revolving around an on-air protest against Russia's actions in Crimea from its star presenter, Abby Martin, and the subsequent on-air resignation of newsreader, Lisa Wahl. The scandals garnered scorn in the US (where the presenters are based) and bemused curiosity in the UK (both were discussed by BBCWN and Martin was, as noted earlier, invited for an abortive BBC interview).

RT's transition to the Ukraine crisis amounted to the transformation of a soft power strategy promoting a powerful, modern Russia, albeit one with a counter-narrative edge, into a semi-militarised propaganda campaign on behalf of a beleaguered, repressive state. Nor was the channel's 'persecution complex' without grounds; RT was targeted by US Secretary of State John Kerry as the Kremlin's 'propaganda bullhorn' (Logiurato 2014). The defensive posture was expressed vividly in an editorial piece by RT Editor-in-Chief, Margarita Simonyan:

Every ... single hour the guys who work for us are told, 'You are liars, you are no journalists, you are the Kremlin propaganda mouthpiece. You've sold yourselves to the Russians'... I can see very clearly why I continue to work for a channel that stands alone, showing everybody the other side of the story. It's my country. I have no choice. (Simonyan 2014)

RT aligned its own counter-hegemonic mission with Putin's portrayal of Russia's actions as 'a strike against the unipolar world'. Just as the Kremlin has, following the imposition of economic sanctions, presented itself as the leader of a rival power bloc, so RT now seeks out audiences beyond the progressive anti-American left as represented by Abby Martin (who came to prominence within the American 'Occupy' movement). The fact that it turned frequently to voices from the socially conservative, anti-European right in its coverage of both Sochi and Ukraine, is one indication of this. Another is the attention accorded to western critics of US-led unipolarity. New York-based commentator, Eric Draitser, published a feature on the RT website entitled 'Sanctioning Russian into a Multi-Polar World' (Draitser

2014). Significantly, RT Spanish has recently launched in Argentina. The cult of balance is less rooted in non-western media cultures than in Europe and North America. What is perceived here as crude state propaganda may elsewhere be seen as refreshingly honest.

Intermedia Reflexivity: Broadcasting Adaptations to Maximise Engagement

Similar sensibilities prevail on social media platforms, where the ‘stale’ convention by which the Olympic Truce requires a temporary suspension of political conflict went unobserved. As our social network analysis revealed, far from keeping the encroaching Ukraine crisis apart from the sporting action, tweets combining references to Ukraine with commentary on Sochi rapidly emerged as a major Twitter trend. Humour, satire and irreverent mockery contradicting the formal registers and discourses which predominate in traditional broadcasting outlets are characteristic of social media platforms and were in evidence during Sochi 2014:



Tweets posted at Dave Mercer’s and ‘Hot Women’s Twitter accounts. Available respectively at <https://twitter.com/FactsofFishing/status/431503463168475137> and <https://twitter.com/h0twomen/status/431676283593183232>

Russia’s reaction to the Euromaiden uprising prompted more sharp-tongued commentary:



Tweet posted at Mark Galeotti’s Twitter account. Available at <https://twitter.com/markgaleotti/status/436951015360049153>

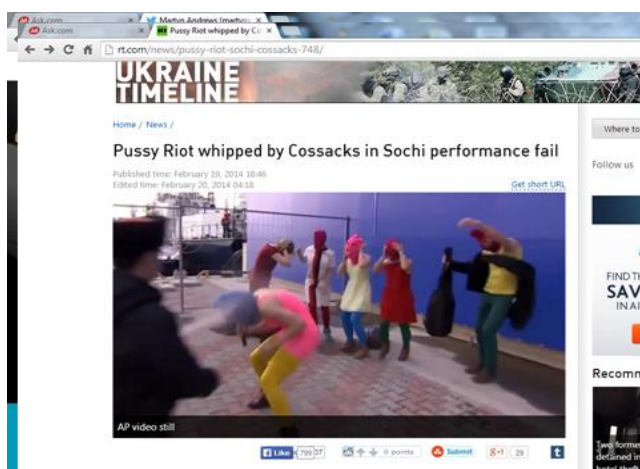
Irreverence and the same 'throwaway' disregard for media convention are typical of RT's broadcasting style, which cultivates a pronounced intermedia reflexivity. One of its most successful shows is *Breaking the Set*, hosted by Abby Martin. Its title encapsulates her media convention-shattering approach.

Much of RT's irreverence is spontaneous: the careless 'laughing off' of technical glitches marring the hand-overs between the Moscow studio and the on-site Sochi reporting team; and the vernacular idiom (terms like 'bullshit' were bandied around repeatedly in the *Cross-Talk* show on the West's 'New Cold War' against Russia broadcast whilst the Games were under way). But RT also explicitly mines the resources of social media and other new media platforms. During the Olympics its social media editor, Ivor Crotty, delivered two reports on declining Twitter interest in Sochi controversies, using them to authenticate the RT narrative of a hostile, out-of-touch western media:



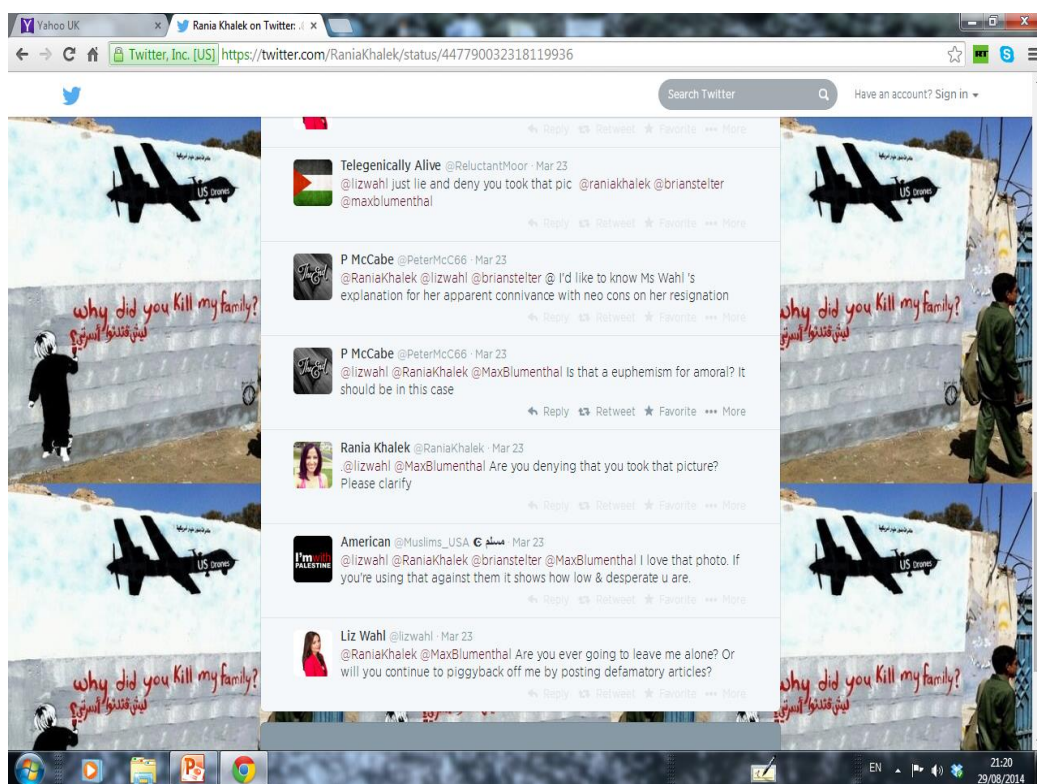
Screen shot from 'Sochi Closing Ceremony' broadcast on RT, 23 February, 2014

And in a debunking of the furore surrounding the Pussy Riot incident, the RT website featured the incident under the heading 'Pussy Riot whipped by Cossacks in Sochi performance fail', subverting the politics of the #SochiFails hashtag:



Screen shot from article posted on RT's website, February 19, 2014. Available at <http://rt.com/news/pussy-riot-sochi-cossacks-748/>

RT's reaction to the Martin scandal represents a more complex attempt to exploit the uncertain meanings generated by new media platforms. The fact that it followed criticism of Margarita Simonyan on Twitter for running a propaganda outlet casts suspicion on the authenticity of the protest which was, however, successfully exploited (and almost certainly initiated) by RT to disrupt the mainstream narrative portraying it as a Kremlin mouthpiece; Martin concluded her polemic against Russia's annexation of Crimea with an assertion to camera that she benefits from 'full editorial independence' (RT 'Breaking the Set' 5/3/2014). Its careful staging appeared to escape western broadcasters (though doubts were raised online). In an example of intermedia reflexivity in the reverse direction, the Wahl resignation was addressed through an intensive Twitter campaign designed to expose Wahl's resignation as a neo-conservative provocation:



Tweets posted to Lisa Wahl's Twitter Account, March 23, 2014. Available at <https://twitter.com/lizwahl/status/447795727251415040>.

There was a different response to a later, equally unanticipated, YouTube video made by an independent Australian comedy collective and consisting of comical 'rap' accounts of the Ukraine crisis, satirically dubbed Putin's 'Paramilitary Games'. Because it also targeted hypocritical 'mainstream media' attacks on the Kremlin's repression of free speech by including a scene featuring Abby Martin's anti-Russian 'protest', RT uploaded it to its website, enabling it to bolster its efforts to link Sochi and Ukraine via a single narrative, and reinforce Abby Martin's own implicit refutation of the notion that RT eschews independent thought.



Screen shot from 'Juice Rap' YouTube video, 'Crimea: Media War Games', posted March 17, 2014. Available at www.facebook.com/juicerapnews/posts/805408092820613.

RT makes frequent use of YouTube, adapting to the medium's chronotopic specificities; YouTube videos are at once cast into the spatially indeterminate realm of the web and limited by the platform's 'here today, gone tomorrow' temporality. It works with the grain of the indeterminacy characterising an online world in which, rather than being 'broadcast' from a centre to a periphery, meaning develops in decentred, 'rhizomic' mode. It monitors emergent social media themes and aligns itself with the tones and discourses favoured by new platforms. But it also actively uses social media tools to promote the RT agenda. Simonyan herself uses Twitter skilfully, blending informal daily trivia with personalised political proselytising. During Sochi 2014, Martyn Andrews engaged in vigorous polemic with the LGBT Twitter community:



Tweets posted to Martyn Andrews's Twitter account, 23 February 2014. Available at <https://twitter.com/halstedvodka/status/437667036739551232>.

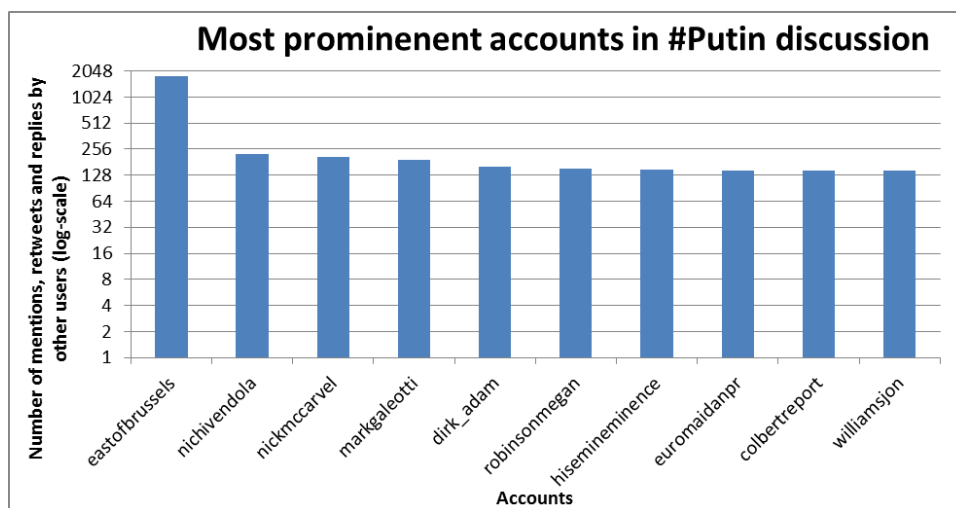
There is, however, little use of social media in co-production or audience participation contexts. This would contradict RT’s ‘revelatory’ ethos according to which a select elite of ‘experts’ with privileged knowledge *uncover* the ‘truths’ which are being hidden from audiences by shady, hegemonic forces.

BBC World News

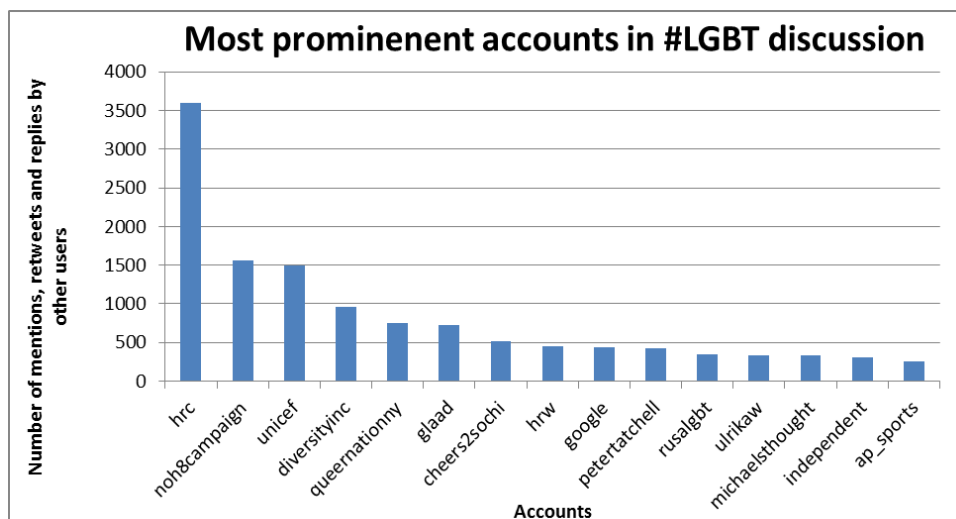
The styles and modes of address and registers adopted by BBCWN presenters also exhibit relative informality, featuring numerous phatic markers of contact between broadcaster and audience (‘You’re watching BBC News, live from Kiev - Hello, and a warm welcome to you!’). The *World Have Your Say* presenter signs off the Sochi edition by informing viewers she is now rushing home to watch the opening ceremony on television – something difficult to imagine her domestic counterparts declaring. Presenters frequently employ first and second person form of address (‘Let’s take *you* now directly to Maidan Square’; ‘Thanks, Tim, for giving *us* some thoughts there from Kiev’).

Such traits, however, indicate the channel’s semi-commercial ethos rather than its affinity with new media cultures. Indeed, unlike RT, BBCWN seems uninterested in exploiting social media trends to legitimate its narratives. Nor does it replicate RT’s broader intermedia consciousness. Until it confronted the uncertainties of the Ukraine crisis, BBCWN maintained the meta-broadcaster position required by its impartiality ethos. Meanwhile, the political use of social media platforms would constitute a clear breach of BBC editorial guidelines.

To contextualise the contrast with RT, however, we should note that neither broadcaster featured prominently among the Twitter accounts we analysed:



Whilst constituting a parallel public sphere, the Twitter community intersects with that in which broadcasters operate in the context of audience engagement. The edition of *World Have Your Say* we examined was exemplary in its efforts to utilize social and other new media platforms to foster a ‘global conversation’ and promote ‘cosmopolitan citizenship’.



However, the problems that this edition encountered point to a wider issue relating to the very concepts of ‘global conversations’ and ‘cosmopolitan citizens’. Craig Calhoun argues that in aspiring to transcend the local and embrace the universal, cosmopolitanism masks its own concrete embodiment in particular circumstances:

[B]eing a competent actor on the scale of ‘global citizenship’ ... has its own material and social conditions ... Cosmopolitanism is a presence not an absence, an occupation of particular positions in the world, not a view from nowhere or everywhere. All actually existing cosmopolitanisms ... reflect influences of social location and cultural tradition. (Calhoun 2003:541)

BBCWN’s difficulties in realising the participatory potential of new media reflect what happens when the abstract ideal of the global conversation rubs up against material conditions which draw that ideal towards one of the very political positions the facilitator of the conversation is mediating.

Conclusion

There are three overarching conclusions to be drawn from our analysis. First, whilst the combination of the demise of the Cold War settlement and the concurrent online revolution has transformed the scope and purposes of international broadcasting, it has also introduced deep contradictions at the heart of their dual requirement: (a) to contribute to ‘soft power’ strategies by projecting national interests on a global stage; (b) to perform well in an intensely competitive market with a proliferating number of global players and, in the case of the BBC, to fulfil a public service remit (whether through fostering cosmopolitan citizenship, or by unifying transnational, niche constituencies around a shared counter-hegemonic agenda). Global media events with a strongly celebratory, participatory dimension, like the Sochi Olympics, provide fertile territory on which geopolitical tensions are flagged and negotiated.

Secondly, the contradictions facing international broadcasters caught between the dual forces of the post-Cold War settlement and a more competitive and conflicted global media landscape became more visible during the Ukraine conflict. This geopolitical standoff brought these problems to a head, as established broadcasters struggled to manage the transition from the genre and rituals of an Olympic celebration to a geopolitical crisis. In contrast, unimpeded by the requirement to conform to established journalistic principles, RT's approach to this transition was to attack competitor broadcasters for their duplicitous pretence at reporting in an impartial manner and to present what they described as an alternative, more authentic, more truthful but conspiratorial style of news broadcasting. In so doing, RT played the 'soft power' game to a different set of rules.

Finally, social and other new media platforms are re-inventing the rules of engagement allowing audiences to interact with broadcasters in novel. RT has been particularly adept in its uses of social media and in appealing to audiences interested in conspiracy theories and counter-hegemonic political discourse. It has demonstrated that the democratising, participatory potentials that they offer, and which BBCWN is keen to exploit, do not represent the only, or even the most productive, context in which they might be deployed. This was, rather belatedly, acknowledged by the US's Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Richard Stengel, who, in proposing that, in light of RT's success in the 'information war' around Ukraine, the US should fund its own Russian-language channel, commented:

One of the things I've seen and have been surprised by in my time here is just how sophisticated [RT's] messaging is on social media, and ... I think this is the area that we should own and we don't own it. (RT 14 August 2014)

A research team undertaking a follow-up project on coverage of the World Cup that Russia will (or may now not) host in 2018, would find a very different international news media environment than the one whose sudden ruptures transformed our research agenda in February 2014. What is clear is that further comparative research is needed to address the dissonances and disjunctions between international broadcasters in the post-Cold War context. We still know precious little about the way in which international audiences interact with news organisations like RT and a host of others that are populating the news media landscape but we ignore them at our peril. For at a time when publics lack trust in both legacy news media and conventional politics, organisations like RT may be slowly changing the rules of engagement while we disregard them with disdain.

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Notes:

¹ We analysed the following programmes:

BBC World Service: News bulletins, which cover the main news throughout the day (from 7 to 23 February 2014).

GMT – a midday show that broadcasts at 12 o'clock and provides more detailed coverage and discussion of the news highlights of the day.

World News Today – a major news bulletin broadcast at 7 pm that reports on the main news of the day (we focused on the 7 February 2014 edition).

World Have Your Say – a talk show of the BBC World Service that discusses the major international news of the day with viewers and invited guests through various media channels (social media, Skype, phone etc). – 7 February 2014

Dateline London – a weekly talk show which hosts various foreign correspondents based in London who discuss the major news of the week and how this news is perceived around the world (8 February 2014).

RT programmes: News bulletins broadcast daily at 7 pm from 7 February to 23 February.

Documentary 'Following The Olympic Torch' - showed the preparation of the host country for the Games and followed the Olympic torch in different regions of Russia (broadcast 7 February 2014, 4 pm GMT, and several days before the opening ceremony).

Special live show centring on the Opening ceremony: 7 February from 4 to 8 pm GMT.

Special live show centring on the Closing ceremony: 23 February, from 4 to 8 pm GMT.

Cross Talk - a daily talk show hosted by Peter Lavelle that discusses recent news often related to Russia. The shows we considered were broadcast on 5 February 2014 and 12 February 2014.

Truthseeker – a documentary-style show hosted by Daniel Bushell that covers controversial issues, such as the New World Order conspiracy theory. Currently it is off air and the archive of the shows is unavailable. We examined an edition of the show broadcast on 23 February ('"Bag a F*g" – the silent US anti-gay campaign').

Worlds Apart – a talk show hosted by Oksana Boyko in which she interviews a guest on the pressing issues of the world news agenda. For our research we analysed editions broadcast on 20 and 23 February (‘Olympic Target’ and ‘LGBT: Making a Splash’)

Sophie&Co - a talk show hosted by Sophico Shevardnadze, the granddaughter of the USSR’s last Foreign Affairs Minister, Eduard Shevardnadze. We focused on the edition broadcast on 7 February 2014 - an interview with the mayor of Sochi (‘No gay rights abuse in Sochi. We’re tolerant to all’ – Sochi mayor).

² The initial processing of the data was done using a set of programs written as part of the COSMOS project for the Hadoop platform for big data analysis (<https://hadoop.apache.org/>). These tools output a set of simple statistics to Excel sheets so they can be further analysed using widely available software tools.

³ Until otherwise indicated, further quotes from, and references to, BBC World News TV and RT relate to news broadcast on 7 February 2014. Henceforth, we provide in parentheses only the first in sequences of references to broadcasts on any given day.