

# We must rethink Russia's propaganda machine in order to reset the dynamic that drives it



*To understand how Russian propaganda works, we first have to discard the idea that the Kremlin is in charge of a coordinated media machine acting together with cyber-warriors to attack a single audience. [Stephen Hutchings](#) explains why Russian media discourses are much more complicated than often presented.*

The theme of propaganda dominated much British media coverage of the Skripal spy poisoning scandal. Among motivations for the poisoning offered by journalists of all persuasions were that it was itself an example of state propaganda – a public ‘warning’ to other dissidents; and that it was intended to provoke Britain into a new bout of ‘Russophobia’, to which Putin’s firm response would burnish his strong man image in Russia’s state media days before the presidential election.

Inevitably, Russia’s international broadcaster, RT, became embroiled in the affair when OFCOM [announced an investigation](#) into its licence. Several MPs called for it to be banned for its part in a Kremlin propaganda machine responsible for ever more inflammatory assaults on western values at home, and increasingly flagrant efforts to disrupt democracies abroad.

## The vanishing ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’

Underpinning the dominant media account of the Skripal affair was a simple set of assumptions: a single, lurid narrative. It warns of a paranoid but resolute Kremlin deploying a monstrous state security apparatus, primed to commit acts of aggression against anyone who opposes it. This apparatus is supported by compliant media acting in coordination with cyber-warriors, human and non-human – a baneful army seemingly marching under the banner of Russia’s infamous ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ of ‘hybrid warfare’.

Recently, however, Mark Galeotti, who coined the term ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’, issued [a mea culpa](#), clarifying that he had invented it as a convenient umbrella for a range of practices that, whilst serving similar goals, had never, in his view, been deliberately coordinated. Our [research on the Russian media](#) corroborates Galeotti’s position. But it goes much further. It suggests that in order to understand Russian propaganda we have to discard long-discredited ‘transmission belt’ or ‘hypodermic needle’ accounts of media effects in which the press ‘injects’ the toxin of propaganda, or the antidote of truth, into the collective bloodstream. Variants on Noam Chomsky’s and Edward Herman’s later model of propaganda centring on a subtle [‘manufacturing of consent’](#) are barely more helpful. ‘Subtlety’ and ‘consent’ are rare commodities in Russia’s state media.

## Complicating the landscape

Our [earlier work](#) shows that official Russian media discourses do not come ‘ready-made’ for transmission. Instead, they are forged from a dynamic process of interaction between journalists, the Kremlin, and diverse popular and intellectual discourses. State-aligned television channels are as much actors within a global communications network whose information flows they both absorb and contribute to as they are Putin’s dedicated propaganda storm-troopers. Meanwhile, television news narratives under Putin point to an oligarchy that, whilst ruthlessly determined to retain power, is often split and uncertain how to react to events. During last year’s centennial of the 1917 Revolution, the emergence of a stable (and highly negative) media account of the Bolsheviks’ place in Russian history was preceded by months of hesitation as different factions within the elite (military; Orthodox Church; journalistic) indulged their [conflicting narratives](#).

Russia’s state media ‘operations’ increasingly outsource activities, bringing problems characteristic of neoliberal policy. When a digital activist was commissioned to [produce ‘viral videos’ celebrating Putin’s leadership](#), all was well – until he went ‘off message’ with clips adopting a distinctly ambivalent attitude to the Putin cult. This dissonance correlates with theories of the Skripal murder that attribute it to similarly ‘off-mission’ elements within Russia’s vast security apparatus. Leading Russian dissident, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, [recently put to BBC Newsnight](#) the idea that Putin had ceded control of this apparatus to criminal gangs, wrong-footing an interviewer who was following the familiar script pitting anti-Putin dissidents against an all-powerful, dictatorial Kremlin.

Our work underscores the necessity to situate broadcasters like RT within a complex Russian media landscape. This landscape is stalked by Putin's overbearing presence. But it includes space for liberal-leaning, web-based television channels (Dozhd' TV) and radio stations (Moscow Ekho), and for the newspaper, *Novaya Gazeta*, which consistently stands alone against Kremlin orthodoxies. These are more than 'safe vaccines' intended to inoculate the Kremlin against dangers posed by western liberalism in its virulent, contagious form. *Novaya Gazeta* articles are regularly retweeted by RT journalists whose online profiles are more rounded than the ideologically correct face they maintain in news broadcasts. In the online Russian-speaking world, arch Putin-opponent, Alexei Navalny, co-exists with government trolls, and the full spectrum of political opinion is accessible at the click of a mouse.

## Resetting the machine

Kremlin propaganda has multiple targets: domestic Russian audiences, diaspora populations and international publics, all with profoundly different sensibilities. More importantly, leading journalists are not passive state hacks. They are powerful actors who co-author state television narratives with the Kremlin, but with some licence to stray from them, whether to appeal to political fringes, or to indulge their own views.

Most western media critiques of 'the Russian media' restrict themselves to state television news. This, too, can mislead. Talk-shows feature a much broader range of political opinions than news programmes, albeit within controlled parameters. During the presidential election campaign, anti-Putin candidate, Ksenia Sobchak, bitterly attacked Kremlin corruption on talk shows in which she was nonetheless outnumbered, and, in one instance, was [reduced to tears](#). After the election, the same shows hosted guests who speculated openly about electoral fraud – speculation that was clearly evidenced in a [video shared](#) on the website of RT France.

The further one moves from current affairs genres, the more islands of audacity the seasoned observer can identify amidst oceans of conformity. Russia's complex media ecology is a product both of the digital age and of neoliberal economics. Journalistic (and artistic) identities are forged across multiple outlets, online platforms, and genres, within hyperlinked global networks, shaped as much by commercial as by political imperatives. Deviant meanings are therefore sometimes generated not at the peripheries of Russia's media landscape but at its centre. In 2017, Channel 1 hosted a glossy, prime-time serial about American sleeper agents. It was mined for subversive meanings by Russia's liberal intelligentsia, familiar with the script-writer's progressive politics. Having identified what he was looking for, one commentator described the series itself as a [kind of 'sleeper agent'](#).

Why does all this matter? It matters first because misrepresentations of the nature and context of propaganda weaken and distort measures designed to confront it. But secondly, in a hyper-networked world, reductive stereotypes on both sides feed one another, creating toxic spirals of mutual hostility. We must rethink Russia's propaganda machine in order to reset the dynamic that drives it.

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## About the Author



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