

Stephen Hutchings, Vera Tolz, Precious Chatterje-Dooddy, Rhys Crilley, and Marie Gillespie (Eds.), **Russia, Disinformation, and the Liberal Order: RT as Populist Pariah**, Ithaca, NY: Northern Illinois University Press, 2024, 342 pp., \$54.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Tianwei Lv
Xi'an International Studies University

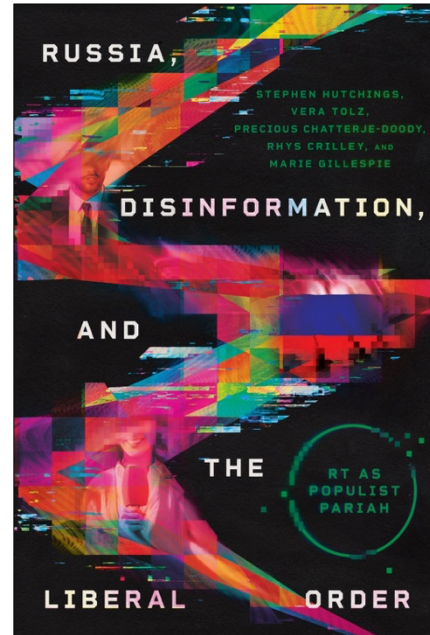
In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the global media landscape has witnessed a sweeping delegitimization of Russian state-sponsored outlets, most notably RT (formerly Russia Today). Banned across the European Union and deplatformed by major digital intermediaries such as YouTube and Facebook, RT has been routinely labeled a propaganda tool, a conduit for disinformation, and a threat to the so-called liberal international order. In such a hyperpoliticized discursive climate, where simplistic binaries of truth and lies dominate, ***Russia, Disinformation, and the Liberal Order: RT as Populist Pariah*** (edited by Stephen Hutchings, Vera Tolz, Precious Chatterje-Dooddy, Rhys Crilley, and Marie Gillespie) offers a remarkably nuanced intervention.

Published in 2024 as the culmination of the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded "Reframing Russia" project, *Russia, Disinformation, and the Liberal Order* critically reassesses RT beyond dominant information warfare narratives that portray it as a Kremlin mouthpiece. Instead, the authors conceptualize RT as a "populist pariah" (p. 5)—a hybrid media actor that simultaneously reflects and contests the contradictions of liberal democracy, digital capitalism, and global populism.

Rather than defending RT, the book offers a multifaceted account of what RT is, how it operates across platforms and languages, and why it resonates with disaffected audiences. Drawing from media studies, international relations, discourse theory, and digital sociology, the authors explore RT's layered identity: as geopolitical instrument, transnational brand, and assemblage of communicative practices. This framing resists simplistic binaries of "truth vs. propaganda," emphasizing RT's strategic embrace of its own notoriety: "RT's willing embrace of its own notoriety as a badge of honor, enabling it to infiltrate the derided populaces whose causes it promotes against sneering elites" (p. 11).

The book's strength lies in its methodological diversity—combining textual analysis, digital network mapping, audience ethnography, and platform analytics. By situating RT not merely as a source of disinformation but as a discursive site where liberal order's crises are enacted and negotiated, the volume reframes global disinformation debates. In doing so, it shifts the question from "how does RT deceive?" to "why do its narratives find traction?"—inviting readers to reflect not only on RT's strategies but also on the epistemic vulnerabilities within liberal democracies themselves.

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The book's 11 chapters—including a substantive introduction, nine core chapters, and a data-rich appendix—each offer distinct analytical lenses through which RT's structure, content, and reception are explored. Together, they form a methodologically diverse yet thematically coherent volume.

The introductory chapter sets the conceptual and political stage. Drawing on discourse theory and international communication, the authors argue that RT occupies a unique position as a "populist pariah"—both a political outcast and a participant in the very liberal order it critiques. Rather than treating disinformation as a deviation from truth, the book reframes it as a contested epistemic boundary object, showing how accusations of disinformation are themselves tools of political ordering (p. 8). This move is both theoretically bold and politically unsettling; however, the dense theoretical language may pose challenges for uninitiated readers.

Chapter 1 contextualizes RT within the evolving media strategies of the Russian state, tracing its transformation from overt state broadcasting to subtler strategies of ambiguity, irony, and emotional resonance. The chapter usefully critiques the dominant "information warfare" paradigm, showing how it flattens diverse communicative forms into threat narratives. This framing is essential for rethinking RT not as an anomaly but as part of a broader global trend toward strategic narrative making.

Chapter 2 introduces a threefold model of RT as tool, actor, and node—a useful heuristic that avoids both determinism and voluntarism. RT is neither wholly controlled by the Kremlin nor completely autonomous; rather, it exists in a negotiated space shaped by transnational logics, platform infrastructures, and audience expectations. The chapter stands out for its synthesis of structural and performative perspectives, though it might have benefited from deeper engagement with theories of organizational hybridity.

Focusing on RT's news formats, chapter 3 outlines three editorial logics: curation of oppositional sources, insinuation via ambiguity, and delegation of meaning-making to guests or social media users. These tactics create a veneer of openness while evading accountability. Through close readings of programs like *Going Underground*, the authors compellingly show how RT constructs a "distributed ethos" that masks its ideological orientation. This is one of the volume's strongest chapters in both empirical and conceptual terms.

Chapter 4 presents a case study of RT's coverage of the 2019 European Parliament elections, using both content analysis and discourse mapping. The findings suggest that while RT does not always engage in overt manipulation, its narratives subtly favor anti-establishment and far-right actors. While analytically rigorous, the chapter could benefit from stronger connections between content and audience reception.

Chapter 5 applies mediatization theory to RT's coverage of the 2018 Salisbury poisonings, arguing that RT's role was less to persuade than to sow epistemic confusion. Through multiplatform coverage and contradictory narratives, RT staged a performative challenge to truth itself. The authors' insight that RT thrives on informational friction is particularly provocative, though the broader implications for audience trust remain underexplored.

Using social media data (e.g., Twitter retweet networks), chapter 6 maps RT's global audience distribution and interaction patterns. The chapter offers detailed visualizations and quantitative findings, showing that RT's reach extends far beyond Russian diaspora communities. However, the analysis sometimes veers into descriptive statistics without fully theorizing the cultural or affective drivers behind audience engagement.

Addressing this gap, chapter 7 presents ethnographic interviews and focus groups with RT viewers in Germany and the United Kingdom. The respondents describe RT as an alternative source that provides "the other side" of the story, appealing especially to those alienated from mainstream media. The authors resist caricaturing these audiences, instead exploring how mistrust and affect shape media reception. This chapter exemplifies the book's commitment to audience-centered analysis.

Chapter 8, ambitious in scope theoretically, examines RT's use of identity discourses in the context of war and conflict. It shows how RT exploits geopolitical grievances, cultural anxieties, and historical revisionism to construct emotionally resonant narratives of victimhood and resistance. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) theory of hegemony, the authors argue that RT's discourse works by floating antagonisms that resonate across ideological lines. While rich in insight, the theoretical density may limit its accessibility.

The final core chapter, 9, turns the lens back on the liberal order itself. It argues that RT challenges not just liberal policies but the liberal onto-epistemology—the very idea of who can speak, know, and be recognized. The authors suggest that liberal democracies are complicit in producing the epistemic conditions for RT's appeal. This provocative argument reframes RT not as a deviant actor but as a mirror reflecting the West's democratic contradictions.

The concluding chapter synthesizes the book's core arguments, emphasizing that RT should not be understood as a singular propagandistic force but as a coproduced media phenomenon shaped by global epistemic tensions. It reiterates the call to move beyond moral binaries and toward structural critique.

Russia, Disinformation, and the Liberal Order makes a vital contribution to global media and disinformation studies by reframing RT not as a propagandistic anomaly, but as a site of epistemic contestation. Rather than pathologizing disinformation, the authors view it as a symptom of deeper contradictions within liberal democratic orders. RT, in this account, reflects and exploits systemic tensions around objectivity, authority, and pluralism—challenging Western epistemic privilege by revealing how concepts like truth and liberalism are historically and politically contingent.

Methodologically, the book impresses with its integration of textual analysis, ethnography, digital mapping, and platform studies. Particularly noteworthy is its attention to audience agency, a dimension often neglected in securitized accounts of information warfare. By focusing on how RT's narratives resonate rather than simply how they are constructed, the volume shifts disinformation discourse from moral panic to structural critique.

Nevertheless, the book has limitations. Some chapters' theoretical density could deter nonspecialists. Its empirical scope is largely Euro-Atlantic, underrepresenting RT's operations in the Global South. It also downplays RT's instrumental role within Russian state strategy and offers only limited engagement with platform governance. While the absence of policy prescriptions is a deliberate choice, it may reduce the book's practical uptake beyond academia.

Ultimately, this is not a handbook for counterpropaganda but a critical inquiry into the communicative architectures of global politics. Its provocation is clear: To understand RT is also to interrogate the exclusions and assumptions underpinning liberal media systems. The book does not offer solutions—but it compels us to ask sharper questions.

Reference

Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (2001). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. London, UK: Verso.