RT Online Coverage of US Election 2016: Analyzing Strategic Narratives

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Abstract:
Media in authoritarian systems is often clearly guided by the strategic narratives of political elites. In the new hybrid media ecology, we need to more fully understand how different media sources are used for dissemination of strategic narratives (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2014, 2017). This paper analyzes RT's online coverage of the US during the US presidential election in 2016. A number of scholars have identified communication strategies used by Russian bots and trolls to attempt to affect the U.S. political environment. We look specifically at RT online news stories about the United States during different time periods of the 2016 election to assess whether 1. strategies identified in bots and trolls are also found in RT; 2. there were different strategies associated with different time periods during the election; and 3. to understand Russian strategic narratives more broadly. The findings show that the strategies used by bots and trolls are similarly used in RT RSS feed stories but the strategies were weighted differently across periods. These differences reflect strategies associated with strategic narratives and these strategic narratives are found throughout the coverage – going beyond election coverage itself.

Intro

Media in authoritarian systems is often clearly guided by the strategic narratives of political elites. In the new hybrid media ecology, we need to more fully understand how different media sources are used for dissemination of strategic narratives (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2014, 2017). This paper analyzes RT's online coverage of the US during the US presidential election in 2016. Election news stories were coded for three weeks during the 2016 US election – in April, October and November. Other analyses of FB, Twitter and Instagram suggest a specific communication strategy designed to delegitimize the electoral process, to discourage certain groups from voting, to undermine the candidacy of Hillary Clinton, and to support the candidacy of Donald Trump (Howard, et. al., 2018). Galeotti (2019) argues that

Russian communication strategy is comprised of distracting, dividing, and demoralizing. The question this research addresses is whether a public communication channel openly associated with the Russian government, RT online, reflects the same strategy as bots and trolls whose connection to Russia (at least during the campaign) was hidden from the audience. It also ties the strategies identified by Galeotti to broader strategic narratives meant to affect behavior in the United States among media audiences. By tying specific strategies to strategic narratives, the conceptual distinction between frames and strategic narratives becomes clearer. Frames are component parts of strategic narratives as Livingston and Nassetta (2018, 102) note because conceptually strategic narrative analysis includes a focus on "digital information exchanges in the international system." In addition, narratives are broader in scope, incorporating a temporality and structure that frames per se lack.

Previous Work

The scholarship on Russian strategic communication has grown substantially in the last few years as reports of Russian interference in the 2016 election have come to light. Many studies focus on the role of bots and trolls in promoting particular narratives in social media (Howard, et. al., 2018). Others go further to add insight on Russian media more broadly and strategies employed by political elites in communication (Ramsay & Robertshaw, 2019; Galeotti, 2019; Livingston, 2018; Oates & Steiner, 2018). These strategies, however, can be tied to broader strategic narratives (Miskimmon, et. al., 2013;2017) and this case study can help us understand the distinction between strategic narratives and framing.

Studies of Russian media highlight the use of specific strategies meant to influence audiences. The Oxford study by Howard et. al. (2018), for example, concludes that "Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) launched an extended attack on the United States by using computational propaganda to misinform and polarize US voters." Their analysis of social media – Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram – showed a focus on:

> * campaigning for African American voters to boycott elections or follow the wrong voting procedures in 2016, and more recently for Mexican American and Hispanic voters to distrust US institutions;
> * encouraging extreme right-wing voters to be more confrontational; and
> * spreading sensationalist, conspiratorial, and other forms of junk political news and misinformation to voters across the political spectrum. (Howard, et. al., 3).

Mark Galeotti also identifies specific communication strategies used by the Russians. Specifically, Galeotti (2019) highlights that Russian communication is designed for three strategic goals: Distraction, Division, and Demoralization. Distraction involves drawing audience attention away from issues by focusing on different issues. In many cases, distraction involves covering gossipy or soft or tabloid-type stories to divert attention. Stories, for example, of roving clowns or a "Loch Ness monster" in Alaska would be included here. Division as a communication strategy involves highlighting issues which evoke strong feelings on both or many sides. These often have to do with cleavages in society and push fear and prejudices to the surface. Examples include issues related to race, police violence, and gender fit here. Finally, demoralization as a communication strategy involves undermining the institutions (public and/or private) that the audience depends on. This involves questioning how bureaucracies work, how politicians behave, how policies are implemented, and how private corporations function. Specifically looking at RT, Ramsay and Robertshaw (2019) note that RT's coverage broadly seeks to project Russian strength and to highlight Western political dysfunction. They also note that RT stories can find their way into mainstream UK media.

Miskimmon et. al. (among other scholars) have noted that there are any number of communication goals that can be desired by political actors. These can range from legitimation of specific policies, to undermining faith in an identity or system narrative (2013, 87). Thus these communication strategies tie directly into strategic narratives even if implicitly rather than explicitly.[1] For example, distraction implies that the world is a strange and random place, unpredictable, not rational. It suggests that it is difficult to understand why people do what they do. Division can tie into an identity narrative that the United States is a place that has been, and is, unable to come to terms with race. This leads to violence and misunderstanding. Thus, the diversity of the United States is a weakness and now fits with a system narrative of US decline. Finally, and in a related way, underlining institutions with reports of corruption or allegations of corruption can be designed to demoralize and delegitimize. In this case, the identity narrative is that the United States is full of corruption - from the government and its institutions to the

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[1] We draw distinctions among system, identity, and issue/policy narratives (Miskimmon, et. al., 2013; Roselle et. al., 2014). System narratives describe how the world is structured, who the players are, and how it works. Identity narratives set out what the story of the state or nation is, what values and goals it has. Issue/policy narratives set out why a policy is needed and (normatively) desirable, and how it will be successfully implemented or accomplished.

corporations that are touted so highly. This means that the United States is not a great country with values that should be celebrated (for example, for a professed, if not fully realized, commitment to democracy, human rights, equality, and liberty) but a country that uses this rhetoric to hide its blatant hypocrisy, corruption and reliance on power.

These narratives help us understand the distinction between strategic narratives and frames. Narrative is distinguished by a structure composed of "actors; events; plot, and time; and setting and space" (Miskimmon et. al, 2013, 5). "Strategic narratives are representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors – usually elites – attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives" (Miskimmon et. al., 2013, 5). Frames, as Entman (2018) notes, refers to "*selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution*" (Entman, 2009, 5, emphasis his). As Miskimmon et. al.(2013, 7) have written, "frames as analytical units lack the temporal and causal features narratives necessarily possess." Archetti argues that using narrative as a concept is more effective in explaining political communication because narrative is "relationally constructed and changeable over time" (Archetti, 2017, 228). Livingston (2018, 103) suggests that "frames are less ambitious and are situated *within* the contours of strategic narratives." This does not negate the importance of understanding frames and framing – as the case study of RT coverage of the United States shows.

Methodology

There are a number of reasons why an analysis of RT coverage of the United States during the 2016 election is interesting. First, while we know quite a bit about social media and the 2016 election, there is less work done on RT's coverage of the United States during the US election. It is theoretically interesting to see if a public Russian outlet will employ the same communication strategies as bots and trolls whose association with Russia was most often masked. One might hypothesize that there would be a difference in coverage between channels whose relationship to Russia was hidden and those who openly identified as Russian. After all, source credibility has been recognized for quite some time in the political communication literature as an important variable affecting message reception and influence (Meyer, 188). But more recent literature recognizes the difficulty of assessing sources and credibility in a new

media ecology (Flanagin and Metzger, 2017). It is especially important to recognize that while RT may cover particular stories, the audience for RT is not really that substantial, at least in terms of direct audience – those who go to RT for their news (https://russialist.org/ellen-mickiewicz-rt/). However, there is more likelihood of effects if Russian narratives find their way into other media outlets in the broader media ecology. Ramsey and Robertshaw (2019) show this is the case in the UK. In a new media environment, content can be influential if it travels – so knowing about the content of RT is a first step and understanding its dissemination through the media ecology is a second step. A third step would be to analyze audience reception. This paper only looks at the first step – narrative construction.

In order to determine how RT covered the United States during the 2016 election, three time periods were chosen. The first is April 1-7 when Democratic and Republican party nominees had not been decided. In the race for the Republicans during this time period were Donald Trump, John Kasich and Ted Cruz. In the race for the Democrats at this time were Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders. The Green Party candidate was Jill Stein. The second period analyzed was October 1-7 in the heart of the presidential campaign. The third period analyzed was November 1-7 - the week before the election.

During each period RT RSS feed news headlines were coded by a team of coders at Elon University's Political Communication Research Lab to determine candidates, countries and topics covered. This gives us an overview of the framing of the RT news. We expected there to be differences in coding across the three time periods. In terms of candidates, during the April period, we expected to see coverage of all the candidates, including Donald Trump as just one of many candidates. During the October period we expected Donald Trump to be covered more than Hillary Clinton as the previous literature suggested that RT supported Donald Trump's candidacy. And during the November period we expected Hillary Clinton's scandals to be covered more than any stories associated with Donald Trump. In terms of countries, we expected Russia to be covered extensively even in U.S. focused stories as the media outlet is a Russian outlet.

In addition, codes were used to assess narratives related to those the strategies identified in previous studies of Russian-associated bots and trolls. A distraction strategy is coded with a Random code. Stories that fall into this category include those that stories that are gossipy or soft or tabloid-type stories. A strategy of division was coded by aggregating frames of racial division,

gun violence, police misconduct, gender and protests. Finally, a strategy of undermining institutions or demoralizing was a separate code that included stories related to both government institutions and business/corporate institutions as corrupt, inefficient, unresponsive, etc. This included stories about scandals, including scandals related to the Clinton Foundation, emails, Benghazi, the Trump Foundation, Trump University, Trump and affairs, and Trump and Russia. This also included stories related to the electoral process and the failures of democracy more broadly. We did not expect a difference across the three time periods, as we expected the strategy to be consistent over time.

All the RT RSS feed stories for the sample were pulled, US stories were identified, and then coded using the qualitative coding software package Quirkos. The team worked to standardize their coding and discussions were held over weeks to determine a solid coding instrument. Our preliminary findings are presented below.

Findings

The RT RSS feed contained a very consistent number of total stories and US focused stories. Between 36 and 41 % of stories were about the United States.

Date	Total # of RT RSS feed stories	Total #(%) of US stories
April 1-7, 2016	706	252 (36%)
October 1-7, 2016	697	268 (38%)
November 1-7, 2016	699	287 (41%)

Election stories

In terms of election stories, the numbers of RT stories specifically focused on the US election is less than 10% in April and October, but then jumps to almost a quarter of the stories in the first week of November as the election date approaches.

Date	Total # of RT RSS feed stories on the US	Total #(%) of US election stories of total US stories
April 1-7, 2016	252	24 (9.5%)
October 1-7, 2016	268	21 (7.8%)
November 1-7, 2016	287	68 (23.7%)

Candidates covered

RT coverage of the candidates focuses on Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the earliest period and then focuses squarely on Hillary Clinton and especially the release of her emails in November.

April 1-7, 2016

Mentions of candidates: Trump 16, Sanders 15, Clinton 12, Cruz 7, Stein 2
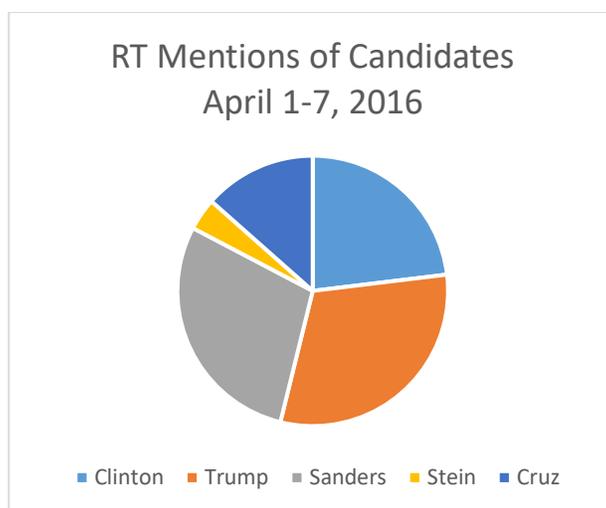
During the first week of April, combined Trump and Sanders mentions constituted 60% of all candidate mentions. This is consistent with what others have found about Russian associated communication being focused on Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders before the nominations were secured. There is not a balance among the Republican candidates. Trump receives much more coverage than Cruz (7 stories) or Kasich (who was not mentioned at all).

October 1-7, 2016

Mentions of candidates: Clinton 27, Trump 26, Sanders 4, Stein 1

RT Mentions of Candidates
October 1-7, 2016

■ Clinton ■ Trump ■ Sanders ■ Stein
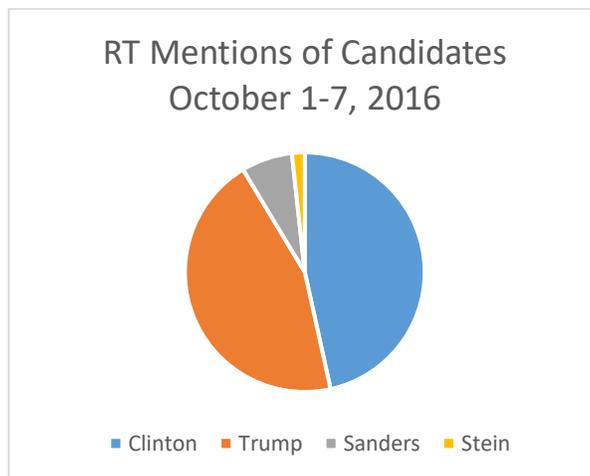
By October, when the nominees have been decided upon by both major parties, the RT RSS coverage of candidates is split between Clinton and Trump.

November 1-7, 2016

Mentions of candidates: Clinton 59, Trump 35, and Sanders 4

RT Mentions of Candidates
November 1-7, 2016

■ Clinton ■ Trump ■ Sanders ■
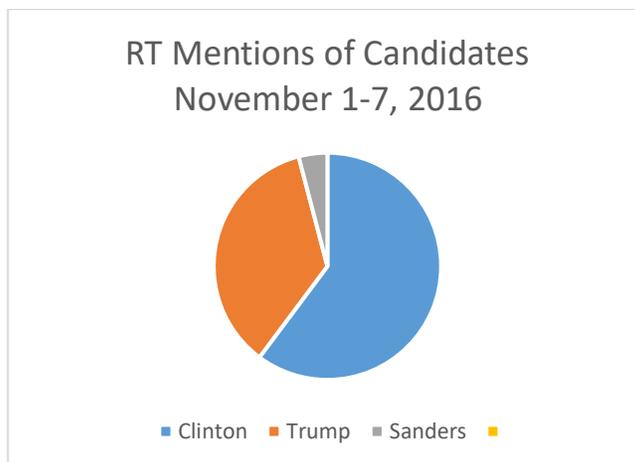
During the first week of November, RT stories cover Clinton and her email scandal as 60% of the election stories mention her.

Narratives

A Narrative of Randomness

There are a number of stories that fit into a narrative associated with the random nature of the world and the inability to control or predict the chaos.

Date	# of Stories coded Random	% of Random stories of Total US stories	% of Election Stories of Total US Stories (from above)
April 1-7, 2016	30	11.9%	9.5%
October 1-7, 2016	42	15.7%	7.8%
November 1-7, 2016	25	8.7%	23.7%

Interestingly, in April and October there were more stories that fell in to the Random category than election-focused stories. The stories that fell into this Random category included: air fresheners triggering an emergency response at a South Carolina nuclear facility; a U.S. artist making dinnerware from human ashes; Alaskan "Loch Ness Monster" sending the internet into overdrive; a Utah hospital charging $40 for skin-to-skin contact with new born; and creepy accounts of roaming clowns the United States, among other gems. These stories fit into a broader narrative of chaos and uncertainty.

A Divisive Narrative

There are also a number of stories that fit within a narrative that emphasizes division in society.

Date	# of Divisive Stories	% of Total US Stories	% of Election Stories of Total US Stories (from above)

April 1-7, 2016	53	21.0%	9.5%
October 1-7, 2016	64	24.9%	7.8%
November 1-7, 2016	66	23.0%	23.7%

Almost a quarter of all US focused stories in all weeks analyzed contained stories that supported a narrative of division. Many of these stories focused on race and gun violence, pitting police officers against community members, or reported on racial division and the targeting of African Americans for discriminatory treatment in society. For example, one story reported that six Dillard University students were arrested while others were maced during protests against (the former KKK grand wizard) David Duke's appearance at the historically black college. Another reported that a top Democratic donor was caught on video saying black voters who supported Trump were "seriously f***ed in the head" at a fundraising in North Carolina for US Senate candidate Deborah Ross. There were stories about the shooting of Walter Scott, a study that found that Uber & Lyft ditch black, female riders or keep them waiting, and NYPD's "stop and frisk" program – and the list goes on and on.

A Demoralizing Narrative

We found that the narrative of division ties directly into the narrative of demoralization and delegitimation and we have been experimenting with a code called "undermining institutions" which is coded when the news story brings up corruption or allegations of corruption, inefficiency or ineffectual actions by a government institution or a US business entity. In our November sample 25% of stories related to the US were coded as "undermining institutions." Stories included: calls for investigations into big Pharma, accusations against both presidential candidates, candidate Clinton and ISIS funded by the same money, retaliation against whistleblowers, US servicemen perhaps aiding and abetting war crimes in Yemen, German investigations into Facebook.

Our team is experimenting with some other ways to visualize and analyze which frames fit into a demoralizing or undermining institutions narrative. Quirkos has the ability to show you coding overlaps visually. When team mentions coded for an undermining institutions narrative, we can see the frames that go into that narrative. Here one can see that the undermining institutions code was most often associated with law/courts/crime and then with the military, police and police targeting, and US business and Hillary Clinton.

Broader system narratives

While the narratives identified by others have been identified in the RT coverage as well, there is a broader system narrative that can also be identified. A system narrative is one "that describe[s] how the world is structured, who the players are, and how it works" (Roselle, et. al, 76). The coding of countries gives us an overview of which regions of the world (and countries within those regions) are deemed important. Here there are some interesting findings. We coded for countries and grouped these by the following regions: Russia, Europe, the Middle East, Asia. Countries coded within Europe were the UK, Germany, France and Ukraine along with the EU

and NATO. (No other countries within Europe were found in the news stories in this sample.) The Middle East included Iraq, Syria, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Yemen, Turkey, Israel, Qatar, Jordan, Libya and the broader reference to the Middle East. Only China and N. Korea were mentioned and are included in the Asia category.

Countries

Region	April 1-7, 2016 #(%) of mentions within US stories	October 1-7, 2016 #(%) of mentions within US stories	November 1-7, 2016 #(%) of mentions within US stories
Russia	12 (4.0%)	36 (13.4%)	29 (10.1%)
Europe	10 (4.0%)	25 (9.3%)	29 (10.1%)
Middle East	17 (6.8%)	64 (23.9%)	65 (22.7%)
Asia	4 (1.6%)	6 (2.2%)	3 (1.1%)

The countries covered in RT during these time periods places Russia prominently in the news as hypothesized. Perhaps more interesting is that the Middle East is covered so extensively in connection with the United States. (These were mentions of other countries within US stories – tying together the United States and these countries in one way or another.) In October and November almost a quarter of all stories covering the United States included a Middle Eastern country. In Europe the focus is on NATO (21 stories), the UK (25 stories) and to a lesser extent Germany (7 stories) and France (only one story on France). This suggests a system narrative in which the United States is embroiled in the Middle East as central to the international system.

Conclusions

The patterns found in the data from our sample of RT RSS feed coverage of the United States during 2016 are similar to those found in social media and in RT coverage more broadly. We found distracting (random) stories, divisive stories, and demoralizing stories. These are tied to broad narratives that structure the way the world is presented and options assessed, and his suggests broader strategic narratives across Russian communication channels. We also saw a

focus on Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders in the early time period, and a focus on Hillary Clinton and her email scandal in the November period right before election day.

It is important to recognize that identifying the content of RT coverage is only step in understanding Russian strategic communication. We cannot determine with this data whether RT stories found their way into US mainstream and/or social media. We've begun to look at this, but do not have complete data. For example, the RT story on air fresheners causing an emergency at a South Carolina nuclear plant was posted on November 3 and November 4. *The State*, a Columbia, SC online news source, printed a story on this episode on November 2. Other outlets picked up the story on November 3 and 4 but it is unclear whether this came from RT or *The State*. In addition, we need to know much more about the audience reception of narratives of distraction, division, and demoralization, and points to the importance of following narratives through the media ecology.

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