Exploring changes in RT DE narratives and its audience activity after the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war

Keywords: disinformation, topic modeling, alternative media, Russian-Ukrainian war, deplatforming

Extended Abstract

The Russian state-sponsored media outlet RT was developed initially as a 'soft power' diplomacy tool dedicated to internationally spreading a positive image of Russia. The media outlet drastically changed its approach to interacting with international audiences after the 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict and transformed itself into an aggressive information weapon of the Kremlin, endeavoring to attack the information environments of western democratic countries (Elswah & Howard, 2020). After this reinvention, RT was not interested anymore in informing international audiences about Russian historical and cultural heritage or the current political situation in the country and entirely focused on undermining the reputations of mainstream politicians and their policies in targeted countries (Glazunova et al., 2022).

We focus on the case of the German regional channel RT (RT DE) and compare its narratives and audience activity before and after the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war. After the beginning of the war in February of 2022, RT DE accounts on mainstream social media platforms, and their website pages were banned on the territory of Germany for spreading anti-Ukrainian disinformation and conspiracy theories. As a response to the bans, RT started actively using alternative media which are not subject to legal regulation by the European Union (Gerster & Arcostanzo, 2022). One of these platforms is the Russian social networking site VK (Vkontakte). Initially created as a platform for Russian-speaking users, VK is now actively used by European and US users deplatformed at mainstream platforms for their extremist views or hate comments (Johnson et al., 2019).

The study has two main goals. First, we are interested in how the deplatforming of RT DE on mainstream social media platforms affected the activity of their audiences on VK. Second, we focus on the content posted by RT DE for a German-speaking audience and endeavor to understand how the narratives of the media changed after the beginning of the war.

The primary data source for the analysis was the page of RT DE created on VK in 2016. RT DE used this page for posting the URL links to their stories. RT DE regularly posted stories on their page until the 8th of January 2021, when they wrote that they stopped their activity on VK and suggested their supporters read them on other media. On the 8th of March 2022, they returned to VK, explaining their return by bans and moderation on mainstream social media platforms.

For the analysis, we parsed the textual data from all links (links leading to the main website that is blocked now and links for many mirror websites RT DE created to circumvent bans) published by RT DE on the VK page since the page's inception until October 2022. We also collected all the comments for these news stories via VK API.

The analysis of RT DE audiences showed that users' activity drastically increased after RT DE returned to VK in 2022 after the beginning of the war. We observed a significant increase in average number of comments per post from 7.5 before the beginning of the war to 19.4 after the beginning of the war (p-value < 0.001). The average number of unique commenters per

post also increased significantly from 5.2 to 12 (p-value < 0.001). It is worth mentioning that only 18 % (n=708) of active commenters after the beginning of the war were active in the past. We assume that the other 72 % (n=3120) of users moved to VK from mainstream platforms after the deplatforming. Based on these findings, we can speculate that VK, being initially rather a backup platform for RT DE, became a key space for discussion of RT news stories for their German-speaking audiences.

To analyze the narratives of RT DE, we applied the structural topic model (STM) (Roberts et al., 2014) to the contents of their news stories. We used the binary variable 'before the war started - after the war started' as a covariate in the model to see how topic proportions changed after the beginning of the war. After experimenting with a different number of topics, we found that the 40-topics model gives the best result.

RT DE significantly changed the approach to interacting with German-speaking audiences (see Figure 1). The narratives RT DE spread before the beginning of the war show a similar picture described by Glazunova (2022); the news stories did not touch on Russian politics and covered mostly international events or criticized mainstream politics of Germany. In the news stories published after the beginning of the war, in addition to critics of German politicians' decisions regarding their support of Ukraine, RT DE also started putting Russia on the agenda. RT DE wrote about the support Russia gets from many countries (Topic name: *'Russia in the international arena'*) and explained why Russian values are superior to western ones (*'Russia vs. West'*). Thus, we can observe that in the context of the war and massive critics of Russian military actions on the territory of Ukraine in the western European public sphere, RT DE reinvented its approach to interacting with German-speaking audiences and, in addition to critics of mainstream politics, took on the function of shaping a new image of Russia as a strong country with morally superior values. It is surprising to observe the presence of the topic dedicated to the very detailed description of successful Russian attacks on the territory of Ukraine (*'Russian-Ukrainian war'*), taking into account that RT always avoided openly describing Russian military actions in the Post-Soviet space. This change can be explained by the fact that after the deplatforming RT DE is not able to reach hesitant audiences, who read RT only because they had similar negative attitudes to German mainstream politics but not because they supported Russia, and targets now only very loyal to Russia readers.

References

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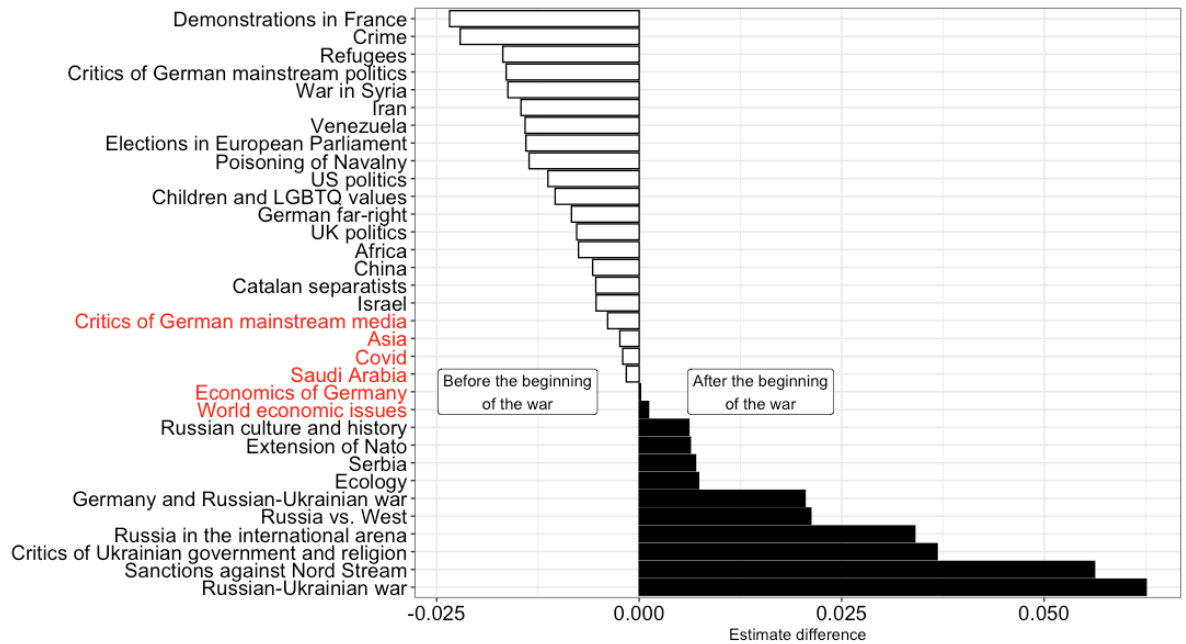
Figure 1. Estimate difference of the topic proportions before and after the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war (the difference for topics marked by red color is not statistically significant)