Social media is not held to high standards. It is highly emotive medium. For many people, the fact that a professional news service regularly posts news with a leaning in their favour, is enough to support the propagation of that media – no matter the source. Mistrust of traditional western media and the desire for any validation can see users fiercely defending their view. RT and Sputnik aid by highlighting the areas where the view is strong and the weak points of their opponents, then lets the users propagate the view.

Why is Social Media advantageous as a proxy for propaganda?

Social media (SM) sites often have userbases in the multi-millions, with the largest having several hundred million active users. Despite this vast clientele, they are generally run by a relatively tiny team, most of whom are either executive, engineering or marketing. Day to day management of social media is almost entirely automated or moderated by the userbase itself. SM relies upon the userbase to provide the content – User Generated Content (UGC). This is normally done by sharing, retweeting or rebloging of outside material – including news reports. On SM, RT is on an even playing field with established western media outlets. While inertia may keep TV views on the "default" channels (BBC, Sky, ITV), it is just as easy to follow a linked RT article as it is a BBC. As no weighting is placed on the source of the UGC, the only deciding factor in its spread is the frequency over time of how much attention it can gather (measured in the form of likes, retweets, upvotes etc). In this instance, RT's populist coverage thrives as users have a tendency to focus on news sources that validate their own viewpoint. SM gives news RT direct access to various audiences that it cannot otherwise reach.

How is the message delivered?

To aid this user created material, most social media uses an automated system that gauges the interest of the audience in a link by recording views, likes/retweets etc and giving increased visibility to that link. A topic of major significance (e.g. Brussels terror attacks) can up to several hundred million users (frequently across multiple sites) in only a few hours via SM.

There are various manners in which links can be made to "go viral," often used by marketing teams. These methods are not fool proof or flawless, but over a period, if used on many articles it will reliably increase the attention they receive. This can be particularly effective during "breaking news" stories – RT's coverage of the Brussels attacks had 10 times the upvotes on reddit than its closest competitor (BBC) and both had roughly equal retweets on twitter.

Social media also connects individuals with similar interests. These small communities share information relevant to their interest. In this case, an article can be spread to the entire community after being posted by a user. For example, even if 0.01% of a community browse RT and 20% regularly browse BBC if both articles are posted to the special interest forum, then they will receive the same visibility.

There are several main types of SM that have different mannerisms and variables – the ones with relevance to RT, with large numbers of users with interest in news are:

- Social Networks – e.g. Facebook, Twitter.
- Rebloging, bookmarking and sharing sites – e.g. REDDIT, TUMBLR, Twitter.
- Message Boards – e.g. Voat, 4chan.

Social networks have the largest numbers of users, often under real world names and publicly connected to friends. While these sites have the largest installed userbase, intense discussion news

sharing is generally localised to an immediate group of friends, unless in the case of a major news story.

Rebloging, Bookmarking and Sharing sites collect, organise and curate links to other websites. They tend to have a large audience and often have divisions dedicated to sharing and commenting on news, leading to a far more sustained discussion. These sites can be regarded as trend setters, setting the narrative the leaks back into the larger social networks. Unlike social networks these sites tend to allow for anonymous posting and commenting, leading to users feeling more comfortable supporting views that they would not support on social networking sites - which are generally under their real world lives.

Message Boards are small, but often have an active community that will aggressively attempt to propagate their viewpoint.

Measuring RT's penetration of Social Media

There is currently a severe lack of relevant hard data on RT's social media success. RT does not publish its online profile to advertisers on Gorkana (which is uncommon) and regardless, this would not give an accurate picture of the draw from SM. To gain a true picture of flow of viewers from SM to RT, more information must be gathered. It is unlikely that RT or SM sites will be willing or able to disclose that information.

It is also difficult to gather the data by tracking metrics of SM attention. A single RT article might have multiple active links in various sections of the same website and many more across all social media. It is also very hard to retrospectively analyse the success due to the chaotic and often non-existent nature of SM archives. Furthermore, the average number of views a RT article gets is not the important figure – more focus should be on RT's coverage of several critical stories where it has seen the most success, such as RT's penetration of discussion on issues where the public mood is at odds with general western media coverage.

To gather hard data, a focused effort to trawl through several sample sites with reasonable archives and ongoing coverage of several select topics, e.g. European immigration, the Syrian Civil War and the Panama Papers. Comparison between RT penetration and coverage by major western organisations with large online profiles – BBC, Guardian, CNN etc – is important. In the event of a major event, such as a terror attack in Europe, another Jet shootdown or a major escalation or flashpoint event, RT coverage and success should be closely watched.

In this paper, Reddit will be used as a sample site. Reddit boasts a large and active userbase with significant amount of overlap and dispersal to other SM, including large SNs. It also has a significant pageranking influence, meaning that posts that reach the "front page" of Reddit i.e. the most popular, receive higher ranking on search engines. It uses an Upvote/Downvote system, where each account can vote once on each post and comment. Upvotes will increase visibility, downvotes lower and reduce visibility. The net vote is displayed, but voting is weighted – the first 10 votes carry the same weight as the next 100, and the first 100 as the next 1000 etc. Voting is meant to be based on the quality of the content, but more often it is a popularity measure – benefiting RT's populist slant. Importantly, Reddit also has a relatively good archive and curation system.

RT's success

In the aftermath of the 24th November 2015 jet shootdown, RT and Sputnik repeatedly released articles pushing the Russian side. The breaking news articles were particularly successful – the RT article post on Reddit reached 11K comments compared to the closest competitor, CNN with 2.2K. In

the following days and weeks, RT repeatedly achieved similar dominance of the discussion, with exclusive access to Russian officials allowing them to release articles before western competition. The general sentiment across SM was on the side of the Russians – or more accurately, against the Turks. RT and Sputnik carried claims by Russian officials of Turkish tacit support for ISIS against the Kurds – who had received glowing praise by western officials as some of the "good guys" in the fight against ISIS. By doing so, many users were influenced to take Russia's side over Turkey's, even when it came to light that Russia had transgressed against Turkey.

In recent days, RT has had success bring focus of the Panama Papers leak onto western leaders, covering the resignation of the Icelandic president and focus on David Cameron's family links. President Putins links were only mentioned to stress that the President has no direct link in the papers and to blame western "Putinophobia". RT managed to play a part in focusing western audiences on the issue closer to home (David Cameron) rather than Putin, taking advantage of natural inclination within western nations to focus on their own scandals.

Coverage of the fighting on the Azerbaijan/Arminian boarder also has significant western support for Armenia, with further anger directed against Turkey, capitalising on sympathy for the Arminian genocide by Turks, in coverage that echoed similar success by RT in creating sympathy for Kurds against the Turks. RT articles on Reddit covering the initial outbreak of violence remained roughly equal in terms of comments and votes with major western organisations. A piece by RT covering President Erdoğan's decision to persecute a German comedian was a top post, with 3.5K comments (more than any other news topic that day) with the comments vehemently anti-Turk, linking the topic to frustrations with Turkish/EU immigration policy, the Arminian conflict and other frustrations. This sentiment is echoed over most SM sites.

The RT article on the Brussels 22/03/2016 terror attacks was posted only 10 minutes after the first explosion attained over 21,000 comments. Its closest competing article – by the BBC – posted more than 30 minutes later attained less than 2000 comments – less than 1/10th of the RT article. The top (most popular) comments, posted very quickly after the main post, included avocation for UK exit for the EU and disparaging and dismissive talk of Belgium security forces. Other subjects included blaming Angela Merkel personally for migration and IS infiltration of the EU.

RT's success should not be overestimated however. While many are willing to let RT validate their views, this is not the majority. Major western news groups such as BBC, CNN, the Guardian and such still retain generally greater attention and respect on most topics. However, on several key topics – notably Syria, EU migration, coverage of western political scandals – where users are at odds with the mainstream journalistic narrative, RT thrives as these alienated users flock to the RT's validation. By building on this initial niche audience, RT entrenches and legitimises the viewpoint. RT has most success when it supports populist and highly emotive groups, adding fuel to the fire and encouraging further debate.

Perception of RT on social media.

RT has been able to capitalise on growing mistrust of western media among westerners. During the breaking of the coverage of many political scandals, RT articles aggressively raised issues that many felt were not being pursued by the western media, which is frequently seen as covering up non-PC stories. Many users believe that RT is willing to talk about incidents that western media will not, a belief that RT actively encourages. As such, many users of a both far-right and far-left disposition are willing to listen to RT, even being aware of RT's control by the government, rather than western media.

Addition.

In addition to its public presence, in the form of RT and Sputnik, Russia also employs a team of "trolls" to exert its influence over social media quietly. Often acting anonymously, these Russian users work to discredit opposing groups and opinions and to lend support to Russia's line. By pretending to be a member of the general audience, they create an artificial atmosphere of support for the ideas – which works to deceive genuine users into believing that the proposed idea has widespread support amongst their peers. They also deploy well versed, articulated and pre-prepared arguments to comments and debates. These comments are usually the first comments on the topic and are hugely influential, gaining attention and exposure. As genuine users are influenced into adopting the comments view as their own, they propagate the message further. Many users will not even read the article beyond a headline, but will turn to the comments section to hear the opinion of their peers – by controlling the most visible comments, Russian "trolls" set the narrative of the audience.

The ability of Russia to turn unknowing members of the public into messengers is possibly their most effective and powerful weapon in their propaganda arsenal. The weight of numbers lends huge credence to the message, even making its way into western media outlets that seek to capitalise on the sentiment (and viewing numbers) by posting articles that further support the view. Knowing that users will propagate articles supporting their viewpoint, but will not propagate (or worse, may supress) articles that go against it. Russia understands that on social media, it is not quality journalism or balanced reasoning that succeeds, but populist reinforcement and herd mentality.

It is very difficult to make a measure of Russia's "soft" cyber footprint, but it is possible with experience. These comments often make arguments that will fall apart under close scrutiny – but they are rarely subjected to any reviewing.

Global modelling system.

Two target audiences

Group 1 – Traditional contacts for statecraft, including interested parties

- Aware of Russian propaganda
- Likely to accept information directly published via statecraft website
- Not targeted by RT
- Likely interested in findings in depth

Group 2 – the audience targeted by Russia, both in western nations and in other spheres of influence

- Unknowing or uncaring of propaganda nature
- May be mistrusting of statecraft and major media groups (e.g. Guardian)
- Needs a simplified and aesthetic presentation of the study
- Not an entirely rational audience.
- Hugely diverse, made up of many different groups that do not align.