24

Post-Truth Blame Games in Public Diplomacy and Media

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This chapter examines how Russian state-funded international broadcaster RT (formerly Russia Today) attributed blame for the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 in eastern Ukraine in 2014 and the chemical attack in the Syrian town of Douma in 2018. On one hand, this is a look at blame attribution by a state-associated actor from a non-democratic country, a media channel widely seen as an actor of propaganda and public diplomacy. On the other hand, this is also a look at blame avoidance and blame attribution on an international level and as a part of international conflict.

The two events that are at the centre of this chapter are different on many levels: they happened in different wars, with different international actors involved. However, they both took place in low-information environments: who shot down MH-17 and who carried out the chemical attack in Douma were initially contested questions, and, crucially, the answers to these questions had political implications for Russia; Russia's varied interests and involvement in the two conflicts present a further point of significance in these case studies. This chapter looks at the RT coverage of these two events, considering literature on blame avoidance and attribution, taking into account that crises initiate a 'contest between frames and counter-frames concerning the nature and severity of a crisis, its causes, the responsibility for its occurrence or escalation, and implications for the future' (Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009, 82). And while researchers of blame have traditionally paid specific attention to crises (see Boin, 't Hart, and McConnell 2009; Hood 2002), their focus was often on domestic politics, the effects of crises and blame attribution on elections, and policy-making, whereas by looking at an international armed conflict, this chapter expands this discussion to the sphere of international politics. This is why this chapter also brings in studies that examine blame in public diplomacy, where scholars have pointed out that public diplomacy becomes even more important in the discussion of these crisis events as the suggestion of the use of force by states engages the attention of international audiences even further and blame has reputation implications (Mor 2009). Therefore, this is also a study of what Hood (2002) called 'presentational strategies' and Schlenker (1980) called 'impression management'—argument strategies that aim to avoid or minimize blame. RT is a complex actor to examine in this situation—on one hand, as a media actor, it is traditionally expected to act as an arbiter, a source of transparency in the blame games following a crisis (Mor 2007), but as a state- linked public diplomacy actor it is also expected to be the source of Russia's state narratives of blame. This chapter will show that the channel is attempting, on a superficial level, to fulfil both roles while clearly remaining a public diplomacy actor.

This chapter also analyses the way the mechanisms of blame and guilt are communicated with reference to the idea of post-truth communication environment in which multiple partisan truths are fighting for attention of audiences. It demonstrates that RT recreates a post-truth environment within its own platform with the goal of minimizing Russia's responsibility for the studied events, and that it

uses its role as a media actor to simulate an appearance of arbitration of the blame debate while undermining the idea that anyone at all is responsible.

This chapter is based on a textual analysis of 187 articles published by RT on their websites on the day of the downing of the flight MH17 and the following three days (17–20 July 2014) and on the day of the chemical attack in Douma and the following three days (7–10 April 2018). Coverage both in English and in Russian was included[1] to cover the fullest picture of blame attribution for different audiences.[2] Only news coverage was analysed as opposed to opinion pieces, and only texts over 100 words were selected for analysis to eliminate the briefest reports and news agency copy.

This chapter starts by outlining the theoretical basis—the concept of public diplomacy and its connection to blame avoidance and blame attribution; it then specifies why RT is seen as an actor of Russian public diplomacy, and how the concept of post-truth fits into the discussion of blame avoidance and blame attribution. Finally, the chapter analyses the themes of blame avoidance and attribution in RT coverage.

Public Diplomacy and Blame

The most commonly operated definition of public diplomacy describes it as a type of communication that 'happens between a government and a foreign audience and deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies and cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries' (Jowett and O'Donnell 2012, 287). The actors of public diplomacy could be connected to the state, or could be private, including media and non-governmental organizations (Jowett and O'Donnell 2012; Yli-Kaitala 2014). RT is a state-funded non-profit organization, and as an international broadcaster it is crucial in promoting Russia's interests among global audiences as broadcasters help to deliver messages about the country, increase trust and confidence in an international actor, and create news messages that reinforce the agenda and help build links with foreign audiences (Yablokov 2015, 303). Thus, the main objective of public diplomacy is to improve the foreign public's opinions for the benefit of the communicator state. But when a state is blamed for an event which can negatively affect the opinions of the foreign public, blame avoidance and attribution become the objective of public diplomacy, similar to how blame attributions in domestic politics may affect the formation of public policy agendas, institutional structures and communicative behaviour in government (Hinterleitner 2020; Hood 2011). The goals of public diplomacy in situations of blame match those of political actors engaged in blame avoidance or attribution as impression management (Schlenker 1980). For example, Mor (2007) examines public diplomacy as a form of self- presentation, where states try to affect the attributions that foreign publics make with respect to the state's identity. He discusses the strategies of blame avoidance (avoiding or reducing responsibility or reducing the negativeness of the actions or outcomes) and blame attribution (imposing or increasing the opponent's responsibility or increasing the negativeness of opponent's actions or outcomes) as strategies in public diplomacy, and outlines a list of tactics, including denial, reframing, justification, excuses, concessions, association, disassociation, delegitimization, and offensive reframing (ibid., 669). Thus, we can see that the objectives, strategies, and tactics of public diplomacy change when blame games come into the picture; therefore, when this chapter examines the work of a public diplomacy actor involved in a blame games, it, by extension, examines the blame games of Russia as a state.

[1] RT International was used for the English coverage and RT in Russian (RT на русском) for the Russian coverage.

[2] Russian coverage of RT is included as it is widely understood to be targeting Russian speakers around the world rather than Russian citizens exclusively as RT does not have a broadcast service in Russia.

RT as Russian Public Diplomacy in the Post-Truth Era

Founded by the state-owned media conglomerate RIA-Novosti (now called MIA Rossiya Segodnya) in 2005, RT is an international broadcaster funded by the Russian Federation. Until February 2022 it ran six broadcast channels (three in English: RT International, RT America, RT UK; as well as RT Arabic, RT Spanish, and RTDoc) and websites in English, Russian, Spanish, Arabic, French, and German. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, RT had its licences revoked as it was seen as a major disseminator of disinformation and propaganda about the invasion; operations of RT UK, RT America, and RT DE were shut down (Barr 2022; DW 2022; Ofcom 2022).

Researchers have varying views on the nature of RT's association with the Russian government, with some describing it as 'state-controlled' (Makhashvili 2017), 'state-linked' (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2019), 'state- aligned' (Chatterje-Doody 2018; Chatterje-Doody and Tolz 2019), or 'Kremlin-controlled' (Hansen 2015, 149), while others call it 'propaganda' (Makhashvili 2017; Orrtung and Nelson 2019), a tool of soft power or public diplomacy (Dajani et al. 2019; Kalugina 2018; Kuznetsova 2018; Miazhevich 2014; Strukov 2014; Yablokov 2015), or a tool of information warfare (Krug 2017; Meister and Puglierin 2015). However, many researchers reject the idea of RT as a Kremlin mouthpiece (Dajani et al. 2019; Szostek and Hutchings 2015; Kuznetsova 2018) and argue that Russian media such as RT, even though 'editorially aligned with the government's priorities', don't just broadcast the official discourse of the state but also play a crucial role in its construction (Chatterje-Doody and Tolz 2019, 336).

For example, utilizing the concept of strategic narratives to analyse the RT Arabic coverage, Dajani et al. (2019, 5) argue that the narratives they observed did not follow a pre-determined agenda but instead shifted and attempted to seize the discourse 'as a way of negotiating its role in an ongoing political process', thus suggesting that while the generalized, 'main' strategic narratives may persist over time, smaller-scale narratives are set to be modified by the changing circumstances in which they exist. Therefore, it's important to understand that the blame avoidance and attribution discussed in this chapter, while most always aligned with the state interests, do not always come directly from the Kremlin and could be originating in a combination of state-editorial direction, journalists who are aware of the relationship between their employer and the state, and genuine agency. RT's editorial management is officially de-centralized even though doubts have been expressed about the editorial freedom (Strukov 2014).

The description of the channel on its About Us page on their website states that as a channel RT covers 'stories overlooked by the mainstream media, provides alternative perspectives on current affairs, and acquaints international audiences with a Russian viewpoint on major global events' (RT n.d.). This promise of alternative perspectives is connected to the concept of post- truth that pervades discussions of RT: the notion that it aims 'to create the impression that everyone is lying and that there are no unequivocal facts or truths' (Meister and Puglierin 2015). Discussions of the channel's post-truth strategies are widespread (Chatterje-Doody 2018; Hutchings et al. 2020; Korneyev 2019; Rosulek 2019; Scholsberg 2017), and researchers compare this idea of the channel promoting 'many truths' to the highly ideological messages of the Soviet propaganda, where communist truth was the central message, thus highlighting one of the main differences between the propaganda produced in USSR to that in modern Russia (Fedchenko 2016). This departure in messaging reflects both the end of communism as a state ide- ology and the changing global media ecology, where statements from the challenging actors cannot be ignored and instead have to be shaped to fit the country's strategic narratives (Oates 2014).

This argument echoes discussions among researchers about post-truth and the challenges of defining the concept—the idea that there are multiple partisan truths competing for audiences' attention in the modern world. Rather than focus on the content of the multiple 'truths' (such as, for example, the emotive nature of communication), they highlight that it is the conditions of the modern

communication environment that are central to understanding the ‘multiple truths’ nature of post-truth as a phenomenon (see Beckett 2017; Frangonikolopoulos and Poulakidakos 2017; Hannan 2018; Hutchings 2017; Kalpokas 2019; Lewandowski et al. 2017; Waisbord 2018). Post-truth can be therefore understood as a ‘complex communication environment where the audiences are offered multiple “partisan truths” as actors on new media, social media, and in traditional media compete to work in a climate of political and social polarisation’ (Raspopina 2021, 42). This is of particular interest to this chapter as the analysis discovers multiple versions of truth in the coverage of both the downing of MH17 and the chemical attack in Douma; these versions of truth deal precisely with blame attribution/avoidance—the questions of ‘who shot down the plane’ and ‘who launched the chemical attack’.

There are few studies of RT that engaged with the concepts of blame: Ram- say and Robertshaw (2019) and Birge and Chatterje-Doody (2020) looked at narratives in the channel’s coverage of specific events and found blame to play a significant role, and Hansson et al. (2022) demonstrated that Russia, through RT as its public diplomacy channel, uses blame narratives to further its foreign policy goals in relation to its anti-US and anti-Western stance. Of these, only Hansson et al. (2022) centred the blame attribution and avoidance theory, though they focus on issues in international security rather than cri- sis events. Therefore, this chapter furthers the understanding of the way RT engages in blame games in general and how Russia assigns and avoids blame in crisis events in particular.

Multiple Versions of Blame Attribution

In the analysis of RT coverage of both events at the centre of this chapter a major theme emerges—that it is not clear who is responsible for the events, that there are many possible versions or scenarios of what happened, and that they all need to be considered before blame can be placed; in some cases, even the fact that the event took place was put into question. Most of the longer articles in the sample (600 words and more) discuss more than one version of both events, often providing conflicting versions of the same event in one article. Notably, all the texts studied in this chapter remain on the RT web- site with no updates or amendments, even though some of the versions and statements have since been proven wrong by the official investigations and fact-checking efforts. Table 24.1 lists the blame-attribution and -avoidance themes in the coverage of the downing of MH17, along with the explanations and reasoning provided in the coverage.

As Table 24.1 shows, six main actors were presented as potentially responsible for the downing of MH17. Two of them—Russian-backed insurgents in eastern Ukraine and Russia itself—are absolved of any blame in the same articles in which they were presented as potential culprits. In these cases, support for blame attribution is significantly less robust than for other actors. For example, various articles present up to ten explanations of guilt of the Ukrainian army, while explanations of the possible guilt of Russia and Russian-backed insurgents are undetailed and brief. However, lengthy explanations are provided in the articles for why Russia and Russian-backed insurgents are innocent: ‘We simply don’t have such air defense systems. Our man-portable air defense systems have a firing range 3,000–4,000 meters. The Boeing was flying at a much higher altitude’, Sergey Kavtaradze, special representative for the prime minister of the Donetsk People’s Republic, explained. This means that when RT talk about Russia or Russian-backed insurgents, the blame attributions are barely contextualized at all, and blame avoidance is backed up by detailed explanations with quotes from experts and stake- holders. The picture is the opposite when Ukraine and Ukrainian actors are concerned: blame attribution is robust with detail, while the potential that these actors are not guilty is not discussed at all.