

New Media and National Soft Power Strategy: The Development and Implications of Russia To- day (RT) Postprint

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Addressing the issue of how traditional mass media can leverage technological means and platforms such as the internet and social networks to better implement national soft power strategies, this study examines the practice of the “Russia Today” television channel (RT) as a case study to explore pathways for national-level implementation of soft power strategies through new media.

[Method/Process] Through literature review and case study methods, with national image as the central focus, this paper analyzes RT’ s experience in implementing media strategies aimed at “reshaping Russia’ s national image” and “conveying Russia’ s perspective.”

[Results/Conclusion] The study reveals that by leveraging modern communication technologies, traditional media can achieve successful transformation and more effectively serve national soft power strategies. The insights gained from this research can assist media in China and other emerging countries in building confidence and reconstructing the new global pattern of information and communication.

Full Text

New Media and National Soft Power Strategy: The Development of “Russia Today” (RT) and Its Implications

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Abstract:

[Purpose/significance] This paper examines how traditional mass media can

leverage internet and social network technologies to more effectively implement national soft power strategy, using the case of “Russia Today” (RT) to explore pathways for employing new media in national-level soft power strategy.

[Method/process] Through literature review and case analysis, this study analyzes RT’ s experience in implementing its media strategy of “reshaping Russia’ s national image” and “communicating Russia’ s perspective.”

[Result/conclusion] The findings demonstrate that traditional media can achieve successful transformation through modern communication technologies to serve national soft power strategy more effectively. These insights can help strengthen confidence among media organizations in China and other emerging nations while contributing to the restructuring of global information dissemination patterns.

Keywords: national image; international communication; diplomatic strategy; media brand; media positioning

Classification Number: G13/17

Currently, “hard power” represented by military force has become increasingly concerning and prone to provoking resistance, making “soft power” a new weapon in international competition. Russia, beset by various Western sanctions, has emphasized President Putin’ s “tough guy” image while simultaneously prioritizing national “soft power” construction through Russian traditional culture, science and technology, mass media, and citizen diplomacy. Among these, the television channel “Russia Today” (RT) has emerged as a prominent force in Russia’ s soft power arsenal. Due to its outstanding performance, a 2014 presidential decree integrated the RIA Novosti news agency, Voice of Russia radio, and RT television into a new external communication flagship—the RT news agency—to jointly reshape Russia’ s national image, communicate Russian perspectives, highlight RT’ s media brand value, and attract broad international attention. This paper focuses on national image shaping to analyze the position and influence of new media in national soft power strategy.

1 Soft Power and National Image as Important Components of Russia’ s Diplomatic Strategy

1.1 The Arduous Task of Reshaping Russia’ s National Image

Research by Alexander Olegovich Naumov, Associate Professor at the Department of State Administration of Moscow State University and Candidate of Historical Sciences, reveals that Russia’ s national image has become increasingly ambiguous despite being the legitimate successor to the Soviet Union. On one hand, the “old image” widely promoted by the West during the Cold War—an “aggressive authoritarian state” with “a tradition of threatening neighbors”—has yet to be eliminated. On the other hand, an equally unfavorable “new image” has emerged, portraying Russia as a “disintegrating state” characterized by “stagna-

tion and poverty,” “unprofessional management,” and attempts to “restore the empire.” Both old and new images are decidedly negative, and unfortunately, these portrayals have been amplified by Western media and continuously reinforced, forming a stereotype among international audiences, particularly in Western countries.

According to Pew Research Center surveys conducted in 2014, anti-Russian sentiment in the West strengthened substantially, representing a majority in surveyed countries: across 44 nations, nearly 43% of respondents held negative views of Russia, while only 34% expressed positive attitudes. A similar survey by BBC’s Globe Scan in 2014 ranked Russia 13th out of 17 countries, with 45% of respondents giving negative evaluations and only 31% positive [2-5].

1.2 Soft Power as a Key Component of Russia’s Diplomatic Strategy

At a 2014 Carnegie-organized seminar in New York, American scholars exhibited two extreme views regarding Russian soft power. One side argued that Russian soft power, represented by RT, was winning the current information war, while the other contended that Russia was losing due to outdated media strategies and “axe-like” tools. Professor Nikolas Gvosdev of the U.S. Naval Academy remarked: “When his colleagues heard he would participate in a discussion on Russian soft power, they were all surprised: ‘Does Russia even have soft power?’ ” Indeed, Russia did possess soft power, but for two decades following its inheritance of the Soviet legacy, no one had paid attention to it.

It was not until 2012 that Putin explicitly articulated “soft power” at the Russian Ambassadorial Conference and incorporated it alongside “national image” into Russia’s foreign policy. Putin emphasized that “Russia’s overseas image is not shaped by us, as it has been distorted and fails to reflect our country’s reality, contributions to world civilization, science, and culture, and coverage of our positions in international affairs is always one-sided…Our fault lies in not having adequately explained our stance.” RT has become one of the crucial forces successfully articulating Russia’s position.

2 The Role of New Media in National Soft Power Strategy: The Case of RT

2.1 Clear Positioning: Reshaping Russia’s National Image and Communicating Russia’s News Perspective

RT clearly understands the essence of American-promoted “soft power,” with its editor-in-chief firmly stating that RT represents Russia’s alternative “Ministry of Defense.” Consequently, RT has maintained a clear strategic positioning from its inception: reshaping Russia’s national image and communicating Russia’s news perspective. This strategic positioning can be elaborated into several key points: communicating Russia’s news perspective (viewing news through a Russian lens); amplifying Russia’s voice (Russian values); covering content deliberately ignored

by Western media (the other side of objective events); providing alternative viewpoints (not singing in chorus with Western media); and always supporting one' s motherland (because we are Russian).

RT has effectively and extensively expressed Russian perspectives on international events, posing a significant challenge to the information dissemination monopoly held by English-language mass media for decades. This has drawn close attention and even concern from Western countries, leading RT to be directly accused of threatening national security in some Western nations (such as the United Kingdom)—a development that is hardly coincidental.

2.2 Building a New Media Brand to Avoid Western Stereotypes

As Nathan Gardels and Mike Medavoy, authors of *Soft Power in the Age of Global Media: The American Image After the Iraq War*, argue, power resides in image. Since most people understand reality through emotion rather than reason, strength in the global public square depends on image. In forming worldviews, people tend to adopt stories built around images they can relate to—those conveying dignity, recognition, and status within their own culture. Recognizing this, Russia chose not to reform old media institutions but to start anew when reshaping its national image, thereby eliminating Western society' s entrenched stereotypes about traditional Russian media.

2.2.1 Entering the World Stage as a Non-Profit Organization RT was initially registered as a “non-profit autonomous organization” under Russia' s federal news authority, with RIA Novosti as its founder. Although RT shared office space with RIA Novosti, it maintained high autonomy, with RIA Novosti serving only as the nominal founder without involvement in its operations or management. The RT editor-in-chief enjoys full authority over daily management. Registration as a non-profit autonomous organization has facilitated RT' s acceptance when entering Western societies.

2.2.2 Relying on Government Support to Build a Fully Digital Media Platform RT was Russia' s first fully digital television media organization, equipped with world-class technical facilities and establishing advanced editorial and transmission platforms in Russia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and other locations. A fully digital platform helps alter Western society' s habitual perceptions of Russia as poor, backward, conservative, and ignorant.

To promote RT' s rapid development, the Russian government provided prioritized support. From planning and launch to operations, RT received full support from both Presidents Putin and Medvedev. Medvedev personally launched RT' s documentary channel, while Putin visited RT' s new office building, held discussions with editors and journalists, and instructed the Ministry of Finance to fully guarantee its operational funding. Research indicates Russian government support for RT focuses on two aspects: first, financial support—fully meeting RT' s funding needs and prioritizing RT within the overall external publicity

budget; second, foreign policy support—RT maintains close contact with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, enabling timely understanding of Russian foreign policy to ensure complete alignment in external propaganda, thereby guaranteeing RT’ s function of “reshaping national image” and communicating national perspectives.

2.2.3 Leveraging Social Media to Surpass Competitors and Attract Young Audiences RT initially emerged as a television channel, but its development strategy was far more complex than opponents imagined. The English-language television channel merely represented RT’ s starting point; subsequent developments proved that all-media platforms constitute RT’ s true business direction. A fully digital production and broadcasting system provided convenient conditions for RT’ s strategic expansion. After launching its English television channel in 2005 and accumulating a database over time, RT quickly opened Arabic, Spanish, and Russian channels, expanding from television into the internet and social media with remarkable achievements. In 2012, RT became YouTube’ s largest news video provider. By 2013, it became the first television news channel to exceed one billion views on YouTube, generating over \$500,000 in advertising revenue. On February 28, 2014, RT announced the establishment of a dedicated YouTube section for news reports, documentaries, and television features, becoming the first Russian media organization to partner with YouTube.

The digital production and broadcasting system has brought tremendous convenience for content conversion and development across RT’ s various media platforms. After placing related content on YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms, RT’ s registered users and traffic have far exceeded those of mainstream Western media, substantially enriching RT’ s brand connotation through its leading position. In RT’ s view, the future world belongs to today’ s young social media users; only by capturing this demographic can RT secure its future.

3 Implications from RT’ s Development

RT has now established its own communication network, including three global news channels broadcasting in English, Arabic, and Spanish, RT America, RT UK, RT Documentary (broadcasting in English and Russian), and online platforms in Germany and France. Its video news center, RUPTLY, wields enormous influence on social networks. Currently, RT reaches over 700 million audiences across more than 100 countries, becoming a multilingual Russian new mainstream media organization with television channels as its core and comprehensive development across the internet and social media. While its experience cannot be replicated entirely, it offers valuable insights for media development in other emerging nations.

3.1 New Technologies Provide Opportunities for Successful Transformation of Traditional Media

When RT was still in the planning stages in 2005, it faced widespread rejection. Opponents collectively argued that television represented traditional media, making its launch ill-timed in the internet era. Western media further insisted that the landscape dominated by mainstream Western television broadcasters could not accommodate emerging Russian television media, concluding from the outset that RT had chosen the wrong direction. However, RT' s practice has demonstrated that traditional media can play an even greater role under new technological conditions, consciously transforming into new media organizations and even breaking the long-standing information dissemination monopoly of Western mainstream media.

3.2 Innovative Government Management Models Facilitate the Exercise of Media “Soft Power”

RT is undoubtedly a Russian state-owned news media organization, with its editor-in-chief' s clear “Russian stance” ensuring reliable political orientation, while its journalistic professionalism has altered the stereotypical impressions of Soviet-era traditional media among Western audiences, attracting a cohort of independent-thinking Western viewers. In terms of actual impact, RT' s achievements in both content influence and market expansion cannot be ignored. Perhaps for this very reason, the Russian President ordered the reorganization of the former RIA Novosti into the “Russia Today International News Agency.”

Throughout RT' s development, the Russian government, as the national investor, has effectively managed the relationship between government investment and media self-governance. Although RT receives financial support from the Russian government, it operates under an editor-in-chief responsibility system with relative independence. It maintains complete autonomy in content gathering, editing, and market development; apart from appointing the editor-in-chief and providing financial and foreign policy support, the government does not interfere in daily operations and management. Both its editorial and management teams are assembled according to journalistic principles and market rules rather than through appointments by supervisory departments. This flexible management space and sufficient autonomous authority enable RT to boldly employ various public relations tactics, handle challenges as an independent market entity, adapt to Western audience reception psychology and media usage habits, and successfully resolve various crises without concern for domestic audience or management department reactions.

Therefore, RT' s practice reveals that innovative state management approaches are crucial for media development. Financial support for media should not affect operations according to journalistic principles and market rules, and correct news orientation does not require meticulous government intervention in media content and operations. Properly managing the relationship between state in-

vestment and media autonomy enhances the social and economic benefits of national investment and constitutes an important condition for successful external communication.

3.3 Clear Brand Awareness and Communication Goals Facilitate the Formation of “Soft Power”

From an investment perspective, the Russian government’s funding for RT is not substantial, with its annual budget comparable to that of CNN and BBC, yet RT is a latecomer that “started from scratch.” By not reforming existing television stations, the Russian government successfully avoided Western biases against established channels. Simultaneously, RT established a seemingly impossible yet clear and specific goal from its inception: to compete with CNN and BBC.

Practice has proven that Russia’ s concentrated efforts to build the RT brand demonstrate strong awareness of quality, avoid fund dispersion, and improve fiscal efficiency, making it a cornerstone of the national soft power strategy. This offers particularly valuable lessons for developing countries on conducting external communication with limited funds.

In conclusion, RT’ s development brings confidence and hope to media organizations in China and other emerging developing nations. Traditional media, equipped with modern digital technologies, can similarly develop into new media organizations, becoming important components of national soft power and playing greater roles in shaping national image and communicating national perspectives, even breaking existing communication patterns, altering the absolute monopoly of Western mainstream media, and gradually achieving balanced information flow.

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Author Contributions:

Xie Xinzhou: Proposed the main ideas and viewpoints of the report and analyzed the implications of Russia Today; Chen Chunyan: Collected materials, drafted parts of the initial manuscript, and participated in revisions.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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