

An assessment of RT in the Middle East and North Africa: April 2018

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Overview

RT announced on Monday 2 April 2018 the results of a two year study conducted by Ipsos, that more than 100 million people in over 47 countries are frequent RT viewers, with an increasing audience in 38 of those countries. According to the study, 11 million viewers are based in the MENA region; leading this number is Iraq, with 2.2 million weekly viewers.

The CEO of Ipsos, Illie Own, complimented RT, saying: “the reason behind this increase is due to the desire of viewers to seek a different perspective and narrative towards global events”.

Focusing on the influence that RT and related Russian based media outlets have on the Arab viewer, Own does have a point - that Arab viewers are actively seeking a different perspective, a new narrative far removed from what they see as the exhausted conventional “Western” narrative of global and regional events. But this different RT perspective is slanted in a way that can mislead Arab viewers.

An objective inspection of the main headlines in the hourly news on RT during the first week of April allows one to identify a well-designed paradigm determining what gets to make the news and what does not. This clever paradigm makes pinpointing disinformation a hard task, helping to protect RT’s narrative and making it easier to defend their editorial choices.

RT does focus most of its air time on matters that are related either directly or indirectly to Russian policies and events. The developments in the cases of Ghouta and the Skripal poisoning took most of the air time during the first week of April.

Ghouta came over as a “shared victory” for both the Russians and the Syrian regime, with images of people carrying on with their lives in a post-conflict situation in a former terrorist-held area juxtaposed by images of the Syrian flag being raised on top of a building and a Russian officer handing out a pamphlet with a headline that reads “together we make peace”. This headline had a focused close-up shot that stayed on the screen for several seconds. As the RT reporter stood beside the celebrating Russian and Syrian troops, the question might have been asked as to why no interviews were conducted with the people in the area that had witnessed weeks of bombing.

Addressing what it termed the “fabricated Skripal” case, RT tried cleverly, and with a high degree of success in the Arab mind, to dismiss allegations against Russia, to distract the viewers, and to lead them towards the Russian stance and demands on the case. RT’s tactics focused on the actions of Russian officials highlighting: the “still unanswered” 14 questions directed towards UK; Russian demands to take part in the investigation; Russia’s demand to meet with Skripal’s daughter; the origins of the nerve agent, if it ever existed, and; the theory that many nations could have access to such substances. In addition to these arguments repeated and amplified by RT, the most recent question to be raised was: “Did Boris Johnson lie when he said that the lab told him Russia was source of the Salisbury nerve agent?”

RT clearly presented the viewer only with the Russian argument, which focused mainly on the Russian innocence in the case, dismissing allegations with further questions, and asking for 'transparency' in the investigation - which might be obtained only by more involvement of Russian officials. This approach demonstrates their double-edged tactic of keeping the burden of proof on the British officials and focusing on strident refutation and rebuttal of the British narrative.

The Skripal event demonstrates how RT acts as a weapon in the political arsenal. To make the Russian narrative more appealing to Arab viewers, a supporting broadcast reminded Arabs about the assassination of Naji Al-Ali, a Palestinian cartoonist who was shot in London 30 years ago, stressing in the story that Scotland Yard could not identify the murderer. This hostile approach provides Russia's supporters in the Arab world with a counter argument and many questions with which to refute and dilute the British narrative.

Comparing coverage by RT and non-Russian related channels of the same main issues that attract Arab viewers, it would be safe to say that, while the information provided by RT may not be contradictory, it is clear that news is tackled from different angle specifically in order to construct an alternative narrative favourable to Russia, or at least to rubbish the British narrative.

Concerning the Skripal case, Al Jazeera, for instance, focused on the diplomatic angle, highlighting the "close to a cold war" situation between UK and Russia, while avoiding going into technical details. On the Russian intervention in Syria, when it came to Ghouta, Al Jazeera stated that the bombings were targeting children and women and not armed terrorists, showing horrific images of blooded civilians and casualties, and arguing that the "shared victory" is a victory for whom? Certainly not the Syrian people.

RT is currently seen as the most trusted source giving "the other side of the story". It is viewed as providing a new media perspective that suits the recent developments in the region, and as being a relatively new media outlet that is countering the conventional, rather simple narrative. When most media outlets (e.g. BBC, CNN, Al-Jazeera, Sky News Arabic) share a relatively close point of view on the situation in Syria, RT becomes the narrator presenting a different side of the scene. To a great extent, RT enjoys today the image that Al Jazeera had in the early 90's and during the 2003 war on Iraq, i.e. a new media outlet providing a new perspective, which looks sophisticated and sounds advanced, and which enables people to understand the new developments which other broadcasters do not explain.

Arab audiences, then, are intrigued to hear and understand the Russian alternative story, despite the fact that, between their reporting of bombing children and bombing terrorists, huge contradictions are evident. However, pure information is no longer the main concern here, since intellectuals and knowledgeable people generally have for so long witnessed the domination of the Western narrative (led by the US perception of events that surely influenced Arab media outlets) that their main concern now is to see a different side of the argument and, in this case, it is the Russians' side. RT has filled a gap.

Syria has provided clear evidence of this. Before the Russian involvement in the Syrian scene, the news was flooded with the Western images and people started to question what was really

happening there. Then, when the Russians intervened, they provided a new source of news, backed by Russian media outlets intimately reporting what was happening on the ground.

Returning to the Ipsos study which placed Iraqi viewers atop the MENA region list, we can trace the reason for such an increase back to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Arab world saw plenty of American propaganda during the Iraqi war, which had a highly corrosive effect on Arab public opinion. Throughout that episode, the American narrative had no competition and the Arab viewer was fed whatever the Western media wanted to show. But today, a new super power has arrived in the region, backed by its own narrative and its own images to show the people.

RT, therefore, comes over to many Arabs as simply another professional news channel. Arguing its bias and lack of credibility is very hard in that, as the Arab viewer now understands, each side will naturally play its own tune. Arguing that RT provides only the Russian view is in no way a stigma that could discredit RT. The alternative should also be viewed relative to the original; and where does the Arab viewer find the “original story” from a source they trust?

Looking again the Syrian situation, since it is the closest to the Arab viewer, in the Arab perspective it provides a clear example of a two-sided global media, where each side has equal credibility. Arab public opinion is prepared to accept an alternative narrative or alternative media perspective without any preconditions or especial discernment because a common argument in the Arab public sphere is that ‘Arabs have always been cheated by media serving foreign priorities’. This paves the way for the ready acceptance of new players regardless of what Westerners see as their dubious qualifications.

So now where do we go to find the original story? It is hard now for the West to play the honesty card, calling the other party a liar. The louder, juicier and more provocative perception of recent events will be the most listened to, and RT does play its instruments raucously. The Arab viewer naturally tends to focus most on relevant issues such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, rather than the wider global events which can preoccupy Western audiences. And Arabs are well aware of the internal turmoil within Western societies; they see what they interpret as the West pursuing a strategy in its own interest, rather than theirs; they sense a Western loss of interest in and engagement with the region.

The bottom line is that many Arab viewers still regard the leading Western media outlets as being nothing more than a reflection of the American (and its allies’) agenda in the region. As a result, the integrity of these media outlets is seriously compromised. Moreover, Arab conventional wisdom, backed up by plenty of evidence, is that this Western agenda usually leads to destruction and war in the areas it affects. The Arab viewer’s default setting is that the Western stories are misleading in the first place. It is this deeply held prejudice which more than anything has paved the way for a different narrative to be listened to.

As taking sides generally determines whose story you will listen to, then after decades of American and western influence in the region it seems to many Arabs like a good idea to start listening to a different story and, in this case, the Russian story is the one that is most easily available. Add to that, when both sides are given equal credence, the loudest narrative is the one that gets most attention.

Detail

- *What issues get coverage on RT?*

- 1- Current international affairs, with special focus on regional issues, mainly Syria, Palestinian Israeli conflict.
- 2- Recent History to provide an alternative understanding for some events (American space program, the Cold War, WW1 and WW2, the 1967 war).
- 3- Fine classic arts including theatre and classic music and culture related dancing style.
- 4- Literature.
- 5- Alternative scientific narratives towards the western scientific history (Apollo 11, RT provides interviews with experts arguing that the US fabricated the moon landing in 1969).
- 6- Stories, interviews, Documentaries to demonstrate the immorality and unethical political behaviour of Western statesmen.
- 7- The ugly face of the Western financial giants and multinational corporations.
- 8- Current affairs and daily news that provides alternative stories about events to what is presented in the regional pro-western media outlets.
- 9- Special achievements of the Russian economy, scientific institutions and political endeavours.

- *How does this compare to the coverage of the same issues on other channels?*

This question requires more intensive and closer monitoring of multiple media outlets which needs more time will be answered later.

- *How does RT put over a news item to make a particular point?*

Reconstructing details while injecting Russian elements.

- *What are the main themes of RT's messages?*

The main message is that the West is the embodiment of evil in its recent history in the region and that Russia, with its admirable qualities, has the will and the might to challenge this evil and counter its regional presence. RT has published a series of announcements by Russian officials who have issued real threats against what they claim is the US intention to attack Syria. These statements include Russian readiness and will to strike back against any source of such an attack.

- *Who does RT choose as "experts" to give commentaries on issues; what are their qualifications?*

Russians experts for a historical perspective and special stories.

Arab witnesses to provide selective testimonies.

People present on the ground as a story component.

- *What other TV channels/media outlets regularly use RT material or other Russian material?*

Media outlets that support the Russian policies and its allies, mainly pro Iranian Al Mayadeen TV channel. More elaboration will require further monitoring.

- *To what extent are RT's views reflected or repeated in mainstream media?*

The answer to this question also requires further monitoring and observation. However, some stories resonate widely in social media according to their nature, such as the above-mentioned announcements by Russian defence officials against the US threats to Syria.

- *How big is RT's social media impact in Jordan and the region?*

Attractive pictures and short stories do resonate in social media, although a numerical measurement for the impact of this requires further study. One of the numerical indicators could be the percentage of the RT sources compared to other sources in the social media on a given issue.

- *What is the Jordanian government view of RT?*

There is no clear stand from the Jordanian government on RT; it stands mid-way between pro and against.

- *What do ordinary people and knowledgeable people think of RT?*

There is a real difference between the average viewer and the intellectuals, the intellectuals and specialists are critical and suspicious of RT and they do understand to some extent what lies behind RT messages. However, less analytical individuals are emotionally driven and more prone to be influenced by RT messages. For example, Putin's interview during his election campaign, which was published by RT TV and website, widely resonates on social media, especially when he talks about the latest weapons in the Russian arsenal that manifest new Russian might.

- *Is it understood that RT is a propaganda arm of the Russian government and not a genuine "alternative" media outlet?*

Only by the sophisticated and professional people. For the average viewer, this issue does not matter as far as RT provides material appealing to their emotions.

- *Do people equate RT with BBC or DW etc? do they notice any difference and do they care? Or are these all seen as having the same credibility?*

They know the differences between RT and other media outlets, yet it may not be a negative comparison, as most of the people perceive RT as a new voice which provides a new perspective on issues which concern them. There is a sense of fashion, a trend that gives RT a margin of acceptance and tolerance of its professional shortcomings that Western media outlets do not enjoy.

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