

For(e)Dialogue • Vol 4: Special Issue 1: Media and the Far-Right

RT France as an “alternative” media outlet for the extreme right communities in France. An audience study of YouTube comments

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Published on: Mar 24, 2022

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Abstract

RT France is the French branch of Russia Today, a Russian state-funded international television network. Launched in 2017, it has since been accused of acting as a Russian propaganda tool and has been subjected to criticism regarding its endorsing of extreme views. The channel defines itself as an “alternative source of information” as opposed to the “mainstream” media. Despite ongoing criticism, RT France’s audiences have been growing steadily, focusing on social media, especially YouTube, where the channel has a following of 1.07 million subscribers (as of February 6, 2022). This paper, as part of a larger ongoing doctoral research, aims at filling the gaps in the channel’s audience research in France by focusing on the Far-Right active viewers of the channel based on YouTube comments of its content. It shows how RT France’s YouTube channel provides anti-democratic counterpublics with a platform to consolidate and further spread their views. By studying comments on the fifteen most popular RT France’s YouTube videos (representing a variety of topics, formats and lengths) using qualitative content analysis, we demonstrate that Far-Right ideas are mentioned, endorsed and discussed often, though they do not always relate directly to the content provided by RT. We argue that Far-Right counterpublics get drawn to the channel due to its “alternative” positioning and history that amplify these counterpublics’ feeling of marginalization (Holm, 2019). They then claim the channel’s comments area as their own space of “withdrawal and regroupment” (Fraser, 1990), namely through localizing the channel’s international content to the national news agenda, while social media affordances of association and metavoicing (Holm, 2019) allow them to reaffirm these views and share them with wider publics. Made more visible by the architecture of YouTube, these views end up dominating the comments space, while opposing voices, through present, are barely noticeable.

Key words: RT France (Russia Today), audience research, YouTube, far-right communities online, social media comments, anti-democratic counterpublics

1. Introduction

RT France, the French branch of RT (ex-Russia Today), a Russian state-sponsored transnational television channel, was launched in France on December 18, 2017. It

presents itself as an “alternative” media outlet, as opposed to the “mainstream” Western ones. Both in France and internationally, RT is criticized for being a “tool of Russian propaganda”, for spreading views that undermine local authorities (Yablokov, 2015, p. 308) and mobilizing fragilized communities (François & Schmitt, 2015, p. 128), namely those susceptible to conspiracy theories.

Despite growing academic interest in RT, little is known about the channel’s audiences (Crilley *et al.*, 2021, p. 2) both in France and internationally. In France, Limonier and Audinet (2017) and Mattelart (2018) focused on RT’s nature as an instrument of Russian reinvented public diplomacy, with Audinet (2020) later considering the channel as a Russian “soft power” tool, while Gérard, Guilhem and Salamatian (2020) made the first attempt to assess the channel’s audiences on Twitter during the Yellow vests movement. Internationally, the channel’s strategy and effectiveness on YouTube was analyzed by Orttung and Nelson (2019), while Crilley and Chatterje-Doody (2020) explored RT’s YouTube audiences’ response to the channel’s narrative of the Syrian conflict. In a more recent study, Crilley, Gillespie, Vidgen and Willis (2021) advocate for a more nuanced view of the channel’s audiences through a data-driven analysis of its Twitter followers.

This paper represents the first qualitative analysis of RT’s digital audiences on YouTube in France, exploring the widespread assumption that a large part of RT France’s audiences belongs to the Far-Right communities (Mattelart, 2018; Vaissié, 2019) and observing the way their views appear and spread in the YouTube comments and how they relate to the channel’s content. The study is based on a qualitative analysis of roughly twenty-three thousand YouTube comments on the fifteen most popular videos of RT France. Based on our data and analysis we argue that RT France provides a parallel discursive arena (Fraser, 1990) for the existing counterpublics to reaffirm themselves through its positioning as an “alternative” media outlet, while its social-media-centered strategy provides these publics with a platform to consolidate and circulate their views. Though RT’s content on YouTube does not seem to be explicitly based on Far-Right ideas, we believe that it does attract Far-Right audiences through a number of strategic decisions and subtle “hints”, while YouTube’s architecture enhances these views. Our findings show the way Far-Right views are brought up and shared in the comments, namely through the affordances of association and metavoicing (Holm, 2019), moderate patriotism (Strukov, 2016) and “localizing” the channel’s international content to the national agenda and current news.

2. RT France through the lens of “soft power”

Russia Today was launched in 2005 by the RIA Novosti news agency as a nonprofit 24-hour international channel in English aimed at reflecting “the Russian position on the main questions of international politics” and informing “audiences on events and phenomena of the Russian life” (Lenta.ru, 2005). Its strategic purpose dates back to Russia’s new Doctrine of Information Security of September 2000, where “a number of countries’ desire to dominate and infringe upon Russia’s interests in the global information space” is openly considered as a threat to the Russian information security. When Vladimir Putin came to power, the government focused on creating a more “positive” image of the country through a number of objectives, such as breaking stereotypes about Russia, reducing the negative impact of the problems of Russian reality on how the state is perceived abroad and increasing Russia’s trustworthiness as a state and a member of the international community (Budakova & Tolokonnikova, 2019, p. 91-92). The authors argue that Russia Today was created as one of the tools for reaching these goals, given that it is sponsored by the Russian state.

Thus, in France, Mattelart (2018) focused on RT’s nature and *modus operandi* as a tool of Russian reinvented public diplomacy. While traditional or “cabinet” diplomacy focuses on exchanges between the states’ representatives, public diplomacy engages with foreign populations directly (Cull, 2009, p. 12). Audinet (2020), however, considers RT as a tool of Russian soft power. Nye (2008, p. 96) opposes soft power to hard power. While the instruments of hard power are the military and the economy, soft power relies on culture, political values, and the country’s foreign policy.

It may be confusing to determine how public diplomacy relates to soft power, and Nye, though addressing this question both in his 2005 book “Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics” and in his 2008 article “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power”, does not give a clear answer as to how the two concepts are linked. He sees public diplomacy as a tool of smart power (that represents a mix of hard and soft power), while warning that public diplomacy degenerating into propaganda can “undercut” soft power (2008, p. 108). He also lists “public diplomacy” under government policies employed for “soft power” (2005, p. 31). Based on these observations, we can suggest that he views public diplomacy as a tool of achieving soft power, or that while public diplomacy represents a set of government-directed instruments and means, soft power is the outcome gained from its smart use along with other non-governmental actors promoting the states’ culture, values and foreign policies.

Thus, RT can be considered both as a tool of Russian public diplomacy and as its tool for achieving soft power. It is a tool of Russian public diplomacy for its creation was initiated by the Russian state that also finances it, and its aim is to address foreign populations directly to improve the image of Russia abroad. It is also a tool of soft power for it addresses foreign populations by putting forward Russian culture, political values and defending its foreign policy through its international news coverage.

Later on, however, Russia Today’s strategy of “promoting Russia” proved inefficient and was quickly changed to a positioning that was an alternative to mainstream (Kommersant, 2012). This change came in 2008, when Russia-Georgian conflict unfolded, and Russia Today took a clear stance of presenting an “alternative” point of view, as opposed to the “mainstream” or “Western” media. While remaining a tool of Russian soft power, promoting its values, political culture, and foreign policy activities, it focused on undermining the adversaries rather than promoting itself. These views, labeled as “alternative”, most often reflected the official position of Russian diplomacy on controversial events that often clash with diplomatic positions of Western countries, such as armed conflicts in Georgia, Ukraine or Syria, or diplomatic scandals, such as Skripal or Navalny poisonings. RT’s coverage of these subjects was the polar opposite of the “Western” one, leading to accusations against RT for spreading disinformation. Thus, in these cases, the states of RT’s presence tried to limit its influence, namely through formal notices and fines from national media regulating authorities, while American social media platforms including YouTube applied “transparency labels” to the channel’s pages, clearly stating that RT is affiliated with and financed by Russia.

In 2014, when the Russia-Ukraine conflict reached its peak, 3 new branches of RT were launched: the channel RT UK and two online platforms – RT Deutsch and RT France. This period defined the main objectives of RT which are breaking the monopoly of Western media in the international flow of information and finding a standing as an alternative channel in the national media spheres of the countries it operates in (Limonier & Audinet, 2017, p. 132). Thus, these years were marked by the change from a “positive” strategy of promoting Russia abroad, to the “negative” one, aimed at discrediting Western competitors (Jeangène Vilmer *et al.*, 2018, p. 54). While being more careful about news that openly contradict Western governments, RT’s general agenda still appears to be putting forward an overall negative interpretation of local policies : “anything that causes chaos is RT’s line” (Elswah & Howard, 2020, p. 631).

RT France’s TV channel was officially launched in 2017. It quickly shaped a powerful adaptation strategy, already in place in other countries it operated in. The channel adapted its programming to the Western style of international news outlets, while immediately taking the “alternative” stance - as Xenia Fedorova, the French channel’s editor-in-chief, shared in the launching materials:

“There are many opinions that are not expressed and we hope to bring a certain value to the French public by giving a voice to these kinds of points of view and by inviting people who are not always welcome on major media” (Le Monde, 2017).

This alternative position is clearly reflected in the channel’s official slogan: “Dare to question” (*Osez questionner* in French), that mobilizes the idea of challenging the dominant views.

3. Literature review: Filling the gaps on RT France’s audiences

A fairly recent phenomenon on the international media landscape, RT has not yet had a large number of studies devoted exclusively to it, both in France and abroad. A current trend in France is to view RT as a tool of Russian public diplomacy towards achieving greater soft power (Kiriya, 2016; Sidorenko, 2016; Limonier & Audinet, 2017; Mattelart, 2018; Audinet, 2020), as detailed in the previous segment of the article, a point of view that can also be found internationally (Rawnsley, 2015; Hutchings *et al.*, 2015; Miazhevich, 2018).

While a recent study explores the organizational structure of RT (Elsawah and Howard, 2020), shedding some light on its audience-oriented strategy through its editorial practices, most of existing literature focuses on the channel’s content and current international affairs coverage revealing its “pro-Russian” nature, as well as its positioning as an “alternative” to “mainstream” (Hutchings *et al.*, 2015; Widholm 2016; Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020; Tolz *et al.*, 2020).

Research on RT’s audiences can be currently described as “patchy” (Crilley *et al.*, 2020, p. 3). A widespread assumption is that audiences mirror the channel’s content, hence their suggested affiliation to Far-Right communities, especially in France. Thus, in her controversial book Vaissié (2016, p. 168-170) shows links between the Russian influence and the Far-Right communities in France on multiple levels. According to her, financial interests set aside¹ the French Far-Right and Russian agents of influence (RT included) appear to share the same imaginary of Christianity, traditional family values, anti-Americanism, strong state ideology, distrust in the media and beliefs in conspiracy theories. There are, thus, grounds to suggest that RT’s content is

strategically attractive to Far-Right audiences. Limonier and Audinet (2017, p. 132) also argue that RT’s strategy in Europe appears to translate into promoting “geopolitical and ideological principles of multilateralism, sovereignty and conservatism” which may be attractive to the Far-Right audiences. Similarly, François and Schmitt (2015, p. 128) argue that in France the channel has historically drawn these audiences by inviting conservative guests and by broadcasting reports to satisfy those endorsing conspiracy theories (p. 126), as well as “playing with the sentiment of abandonment by elites” and satisfying those “searching for alternative sources of information” (p. 128).

Other studies suggest that RT is followed by a “niche audience of activists” (Orttung & Nelson, 2019, p. 90). They often share “an anti-establishment, anti-capitalist predisposition and anti-Western (especially anti-American) views” (Miazhevich, 2018, p. 578), although they may be both right- or left-wing activists (Yablokov, 2015, p. 306), RT’s political stance remaining volatile (Elsawah & Howard, 2020, p. 640). Similarly, a study of YouTube comments on RT’s Syrian conflicts coverage shows that many viewers mistrust global institutions and display anger at US foreign policy (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020, p. 13-14).

A major study of RT’s international Twitter account has been undertaken recently by Crilley, Gillespie, Vidgen and Willis (2021), challenging previous assumptions and offering a more diverse vision of RT’s audiences. According to the study, RT’s audiences are not always supportive of the channel’s views but are sometimes simply exposed to its content on social networks. The study concluded that the majority of RT Twitter followers follow the channel among other transnational information sources. A similar study was published in France (Gérard *et al.*, 2020), analyzing the interactions of RT France’s audiences on Twitter during the Yellow vests movement, stating that the four major communities interacting with the Russian media’s content during that time were Far-Right, Far-Left, “*En Marche*” supporters (a French political party founded by the country’s current president Emmanuel Macron), and the Yellow vests movement’s participants and supporters. Two other French studies are worth mentioning. Mattelart (2018) shows through an analysis of RT France’s website comments that Far-Right media are often mentioned by readers (p. 945), while immigration remains a major topic of discussion (p. 943), suggesting a strong presence of Far-Right communities in the audiences of the French-language channel. Another interesting study was conducted on the media consumption of students in schools of commerce and administration in France, showing that the ‘few’ students to have consulted and to know of Russia Today were enrolled in most elitist and politicized

programs (Boyadjan, 2020, p. 39), thus confirming Orttung and Nelson’s findings of the channel’s international YouTube viewers being a “niche audience of activists” and mostly highly educated men (2019, p. 90).

It is important to mention that RT’s online presence lies at the heart of its strategy (Simonyan, 2016), with more than a million subscribers both on YouTube and Facebook in France – a success that is worrisome for the countries it operates in. Strategic studies by think tanks or analysis centers in France and abroad often focus on the channel's presence on social networks, RT being considered as a real “threat to democracy” (Jeangène Vilmer *et al.*, 2018; RAND, 2018). Thus, in the report “Countering Russian Social Media Influence” (RAND, 2018), RT is mentioned as being part of the “Russian disinformation network” under the category of “intermediaries”, while social networks are considered as “amplification channels” (p. 7). However, none of these studies attempt to define the audiences reached by the channel’s manipulative techniques.

Our study, while taking previous research on the subject into careful consideration, aims at filling the gaps into RT’s audiences research both in a geographical and a methodological perspective. It represents the first overview of the channel’s YouTube audiences in France and one of the rare qualitative analyses internationally, allowing to test existing global assumptions while observing new and country-specific trends.

4. Methods: Online counterpublics within RT’s audiences and social media affordances

Considering RT’s history and positioning, we are operating in the theoretical framework of counterpublics to approach the channel’s audiences. The concept of subaltern counterpublics was first developed by Fraser (1990, p. 67), who defined them as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs”. The concept was further applied to empirical research mostly as progressive, while online platforms later became easily accessible “parallel discursive arenas” for these counterdiscourses to arise (see for example Travers, 2003; Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016). However, recent research (Cammaerts, 2007; Davis, 2020; Adlung *et al.*, 2021) underlines the negative aspect of creating and circulating harmful, racist, and anti-egalitarian discourses online within the concept of “anti-democratic counterpublics”. This was first mentioned by Fraser (1990, p. 67), who still considered them helping “expand

discursive space”, as long as they “emerge in response to exclusion within dominant publics”.

We find this theoretical framework relevant to the nature of RT’s discourse that opposes itself to the “dominant” Western ones, controlled by “policy makers and business elites” while self-defining as an “underdog” (Yablokov, 2015, p. 306). Thus, according to the channel’s official discourse, RT’s strategy aims at giving a voice to the opinions that are not expressed in major media outlets and to those who lack support from powerful actors and are not always welcome elsewhere, thus excluded from the dominant public.

Fraser (1990, p. 68) underlined the “dual” character of counterpublics. While functioning as spaces of “withdrawal and regroupment” – that is, spaces for like-minded individuals to come together and formulate their common interests and needs internally, they also allow interactions with wider publics by sharing their views “externally”. We argue that RT France, being a major transnational TV channel, creating powerful counterdiscourses and having a strong online presence, helps counterpublics fulfill these two functions by being an “official” and widely accessible media that allows members of counterpublics to come together and reaffirm their common interests and needs “internally” while enabling them to share these views “externally” with wider publics within its audiences online.

However, Fraser’s counterpublics theory alone would not be sufficient to describe the recent, complex, and international phenomenon that is RT, therefore we are expanding our theoretical framework with Holm’s work (2019) on online counterpublics. Indeed, RT’s audiences cannot be described as simply excluded from the dominant public space, for it does not allow to fully comprehend RT’s nature as a tool of Russian public diplomacy, the powerful actors, and strategic objectives behind it. In this light, Holm’s argument that some counterpublics may not be structurally marginalized, but only perceive themselves as such (p. 51) allows a more precise description of RT’s case.

In fact, as stated by Holm, some groups that are not marginalized but privileged, can also form counterpublics. These groups have the potential of dominating certain arenas “due to their relationally privileged position”. Thus, they have access to “important networks” and are “supported by resourceful actors” (p. 59) – a description that seems more suitable for RT and its audiences, given its access to the dominant public sphere as an “official” transnational media outlet and its access to financial resources of the Russian state. These counterpublics’ marginalization is often not

structural, but rather political, and it can be enhanced by RT’s “alternative” positioning discussed in the previous segment of the article.

How exactly is this “marginalization” enhanced, namely through online media platforms? Here Holm’s work is again particularly helpful for the concept of social media affordances that the author borrows from Gibson (1977) and Hutchby (2001), among others. They can be defined as “the opportunities for perception and action offered by the environment to an organism” (Kaufmann & Clément, 2007, p. 227). In the context of social media, they represent the way different “enablers” of online platforms are used and perceived by people. Holm affirms that online counterpublics “emerge primarily through the affordances of online venues”, however, we mostly agree with her more nuanced idea that affordances help “analyze how online platforms mediate counterpublic dynamics” (Holm 2019, p. 26).

We argue that primarily the affordances of association and metavoicing, particularly relevant to our study, help consolidate existing online Far-Right counterpublics within RT France’s audiences. The affordance of association is understood in the way social media platforms facilitate connections between individuals and individuals and content (Treem & Leonardi, 2012, p. 162), while metavoicing is achieved through “technical enablers” (liking, retweeting, commenting) that help amplify certain voices (Holm, 2019, p. 58) through their enhanced visibility, thus giving them certain “recognition” and “authority” compared to other, less prominent voices. Our findings show the way Far-Right ideas can be reaffirmed and made more visible in the comment section through the affordances of YouTube.

4.1 Data

To get an overview of a part of RT France’s audiences on YouTube, we chose to analyze some 22.677 comments (including replies), of the channel’s fifteen most popular videos on the platform, qualitatively. Data were gathered through the YouTube Data tools software (Bernhard, 2015) that allows researchers to access all public comments and replies, as well as other details for further analysis. The date and time of the comments are visible, as well as the chronological dependencies within discussions. This qualitative method was chosen for the depth of the analysis it allows, based on a relatively small sample of data.

The commentary of the fifteen most popular videos of RT France on YouTube were gathered on July 8, 2021, from 14:45 to 16:00 (UTC+2), which is important to mention considering how volatile YouTube comments are as data - new comments appear

constantly, while others can be moderated or deleted by the authors. One of the most popular videos had comments deactivated. It was added as an additional, sixteenth video to the data sample to show that the channel can control the interactions on the platform, taking away the commenting feature as easily as providing viewers with one.

The most popular videos on YouTube were chosen for the variety of their topics and lengths, allowing us to observe how significantly the comments are linked to the content. They also represented a large timeframe both from before the official television channel launch and after. The first most popular video and the first comments date back to September 28, 2015 – about a year after the YouTube channel was created in September 2014, while most recent comments date from the day of gathering data – July 8, 2021. We thus had a representation of comments of almost six years, that allowed us to trace the evolution (or lack thereof) of discourses throughout this timeframe.

At first glance, the fifteen most popular videos on RT France’s YouTube channel appear to have little to nothing in common: their length varies from less than a minute for a video “Badly beaten under a rain of projectiles, a policeman is exfiltrated by a Yellow vest” (a highly controversial and violent amateur style video, where comments have been deactivated), to almost an hour for an episode of Frederic Taddeï’s talk show *Interdit d’interdire* (“Forbidden to forbid”) with renowned, but nonetheless controversial, French intellectuals Michel Onfray and Juan Branco. Only eight of the sixteen videos are in French or dubbed in French, while the rest only provide French subtitles. A large majority of the comments analyzed are, however, in French, but languages such as Russian, English, and sometimes Spanish or Arabic are also rarely present.

Most of the top-fifteen videos do not seem to have required a lot of editing or resources. There is a lot of live footage (Video 7, 12, 15), excerpts of conferences (Video 1, 2, 3, 5, 10), other channels interview excerpts (Video 6, 9). Only four videos are original documentaries (Video 8, 11, 13, 16), one is a talk show, and one is a humoristic reenactment of a football match. The comprehensive table of data is available in the Additional materials on pages 18-21.

4.2 Limitations and online research ethics

We chose to conduct qualitative online content analysis rather than using quantitative methods for the objective of the current study was to observe the way Far-Right discourses appear and spread in the comments section of RT France’s YouTube

channel. We opted for qualitative analysis after testing a purely semiotic analysis of key words frequency that could not allow a similar depth and originality of the findings. Thus, through qualitative analysis we were able to observe the way YouTube architecture influences counterpublic dynamics, as well as the way first-level comments relate to replies, that gave us additional context.

However, certain limitations of this approach must be taken into consideration. First, the dataset, though quite significant, cannot be considered as sufficiently representative of RT France’s digital audiences of YouTube. Nevertheless, choosing the most viewed videos made for a large field of observation in terms of videos’ topics, publication date and length, as previously described in the Data section. Secondly, our analysis is focused on what may be called a “vocal minority” of RT France’s audiences on YouTube, meaning those actively and openly interacting with the channel’s content. They cannot be considered as representative of RT’s audiences in general, and a further analysis is required to get a more nuanced understanding of the channel’s content consumers. However, as the most active and engaged group of the channel’s audiences, the vocal minority undoubtedly represents an extremely valuable study subject. Finally, the qualitative observations are based on the author’s interpretations and can be considered subjective, though the author’s multicultural experience and extensive knowledge of both Russian and French culture and society were extremely beneficial for interpreting the analyzed content.

The question of online research ethics also must be addressed. Though public YouTube comments may be considered as open data, and most of the viewers seem to have used pseudonyms for creating their YouTube accounts and commenting, given the sensitive nature of ideas and topics discussed, we have decided to not quote their names in the article, for they are not essential to our analysis. Approximate translations of their comments from French to English and paraphrasing further complicate their possible identification. We have thus adopted an approach that is similar to that of Paul Reilly studying the “anti-Tesco movement” on YouTube (2014), who opted for anonymizing and paraphrasing comments as well.

5. Main findings: reading between the lines

5.1. “Localizing” international news into the national Far-Right narratives

Most of the videos are not directly related to the national news agenda. In fact, only three of them can be considered as covering French news exclusively – Videos 12, 14 and 15, one being Frédéric Taddei’s talk show, and the two others covering the Yellow

vests movement². The comment section, however, appears to be locally oriented and even constantly adapting to recent local news, while also generalizing certain phenomena to feed into the Far-Right narratives. While Orttung and Nelson (2019) note that RT France emphasizes European news for their audiences (p. 83), we observe that it is not among the most popular on the French YouTube channel. However, international news is used by Far-Right communities through the “localization” of the content to the French political agenda.

A good example of this “localization” phenomenon is Video 2, where the Russian Agriculture Minister makes a mistake saying that people consume a lot of pork in Indonesia, a mostly Muslim country, while Putin corrects him. Commentators immediately mention Emmanuel Macron once saying that French Guiana is an island:

“Well, same stuff happens to Russians and to us in fact ... Except that with us, it is the President (who thinks that Guiana is an island). It's ugly for us” (comment on Video 2, 11.12.2017),

and the conversation quickly turns to the general incompetence of world leaders, criticizing Macron and praising Putin.

The same tendency can be observed in “The Wall of Discord” video about Mexican immigration into the US:

“The Mexicans who criticize the USA but try to get in. It's like the Arabs who criticize France but do everything to get there” (comment on Video 16, 24.07.2018).

We argue that the half-entertaining, half-informing style of the videos gives them a “timeless” aspect allowing people to come back to them and continue the same narrative years later, with, for example, a surge of comments on Emmanuel Macron being slapped in the face in June 2021 in the comments on Video 1, “Emmanuel, you don't need to be afraid” – “Vladimir, I am not afraid” that depicts a heated confrontation between the leaders of Russia and France, where Emmanuel Macron is portrayed as “afraid” and “unexperienced” alongside Vladimir Putin’s clever sarcasm :

“You should especially be afraid of being slapped in the face” (comment on Video 1, 08.06.2021)

Though the video was published back in 2018, in 2021 it remained a space for viewers to discuss recent events and further develop existing narratives.

Even the most entertaining and seemingly “innocent” videos are localized to be used in the Far-Right narratives. Thus, for the “France-Croatia World Cup finale reenactment by kids” (Video 4), where all the kids are white, people share:

“It’s an image of France if Germany had won the Second World War” (comment on Video 4, 01.05.2019)

“Croatsians and Russians are mainly white, while the majority of French people is black”, (comment on Video 4, 22.04.2021)

“Nice match. Real resemblance for the little Croatsians, on the other hand for the little French people, you could have gone to look for some in the suburbs. There are so many, do you want some? Here they are” (comment on Video 4, 18.07.2018)

Another strong Far-Right narrative is mobilized by the emotional representation of content: that of a suffering motherland being humiliated, in demise, needing a rebirth. Thus, the humiliation of Emmanuel Macron in the Video 1 mobilizes humiliation of France as a whole, called *“belittled”* (comment on Video 1, 16.05.2018).

“Do not confuse eternal France and the series of puppets who have governed it (very badly) for 30 years” (comment on Video 1, 26.05.2018)

“Our sweet France is well and truly lost ... always on the wrong side! And yet it doesn't deserve this ...” (comment on Video 10, 13.10.2016)

“France is dead, at least ethnically and culturally!” (comment on Video 15, 08.12.2018)

This “belittled” France needs a savior, a messiah, and in the comments for Video 3 a viewer says:

“Putin-Trump-Le Pen is the last hope to save the world” (comment on Video 3, 01.10.2016).

Thus, Far-Right discourses emerge in the comments namely through the “localization” of international content as well as through using the videos’ narratives as a symbol of the humiliated France as a whole. While the emotional and “timeless” videos help these narratives to emerge, it is mostly through the voluntary “localization” of the international news agenda that Far-Right counterpublics seem to claim RT France’s YouTube comments area as their own space of “withdrawal and regroupment”, to circle back to Fraser’s counterpublics’ internal function (1990, p. 68). Once emerged,

these views are amplified, namely through the affordances of association and metavoicing.

Simultaneously, RT’s “alternative” stance enhances these counterpublics’ feeling of political marginalization, giving them the impression of RT’s being “one of the few islands of freedom”, as one commentator puts it:

“We are on the way to the extinction of opinions and the word to express them. Let's take full advantage of these little islands of freedom while there is still time!”

(Comment on Video 14, 04.03.2021)

Thus, RT’s comment section is viewed as a “safe space” for this kind of comments to emerge in response to assumed “marginalization” elsewhere, and, as we will later observe, to later dominate the discussions to the detriment of the opposing voices.

5.2. The affordance of association: discussions over individual comments

Our data sample shows that most of the comments were systematically part of a larger discussion, replies rather than individual comments – a phenomenon that can be analyzed through the concept of the “association” affordance.

Our data shows a clear difference between “first level comments” that are immediate reactions to the content and “second level comments” that are replies to both first and second level ones for the 15 videos analyzed:

Figure 1: RT France’s most popular videos’ comments’ count per video

All comments	Top level comments	Replies
4 759	2 142	2 617
1 368	604	764
2 237	791	1446
536	212	324
2 359	796	1563
1 566	930	636

626	256	370
1 073	309	764
1 083	540	543
948	340	608
2 542	1225	1317
425	201	224
2 081	1272	809
222	127	95
852	275	577

Thus, less than a half of the comments are systematically first level comments, and more than half are replies, which lets us to suggest that RT audiences on YouTube interact with each other more than they interact with RT’s content directly, and that the aim of their comments often goes beyond interacting with content and towards engaging in discussions with others.

It can thus be argued that many people come to the RT France’s comment section not only to interact with the content, but to discuss the topics with fellow viewers, thus creating connections within the counterpublic, while also sharing their views with larger publics outside of their communities. The affordance of “association” is especially pertinent in the geographical context, online platforms facilitating connections beyond state borders. For example, for the Video 15: “Mobilization of the Yellow vests in Paris. Act 4”, a number of people show their support to protesters from different countries, such as Belgium or Russia.

Thus, through “localization” Far-Right counterpublics within RT France’s YouTube audiences seem to “claim” the channel’s comments space as their own to reaffirm their views internally, while the affordance of association allows them to both consolidate their views internally and share them externally with wider publics online, thus fulfilling both functions of counterpublics described by Fraser (1990).

5.3. The affordance of metavoicing: Far-Right discourses’ increased visibility

Even though the comment field represents a variety of different views, the most visible and reoccurring comments appear to be ones sharing Far-Right ideas. Through the architecture of YouTube, only the most “popular” comments are seen directly under the video – for the least popular, one must scroll down for a long time. Our observations show that the most popular and the immediately visible views in the comments are the views that are most often associated with the image of RT’s audiences in France – Far-Right, anti-democratic, conspiracists, while views of the people who do not agree with the channel’s positioning are often ignored, or, very rarely, fiercely attacked by other viewers, and thus practically invisible to a casual user.

The comments appearing at the top of the list are the most liked and commented ones – in part due to their increased visibility, they are most likely to be seen and replied to. As Crilley and Chatterje-Doody rightly note in their research (2020, p. 5), the upvotes and replies may be resulting from bots, but it is unlikely, because most comments seem authentic and related to the discussion, and given YouTube’s efforts to target suspected bot activity. The possibility of RT’s moderating most negative comments also cannot be excluded, but we chose to analyze counterpublic dynamics online assuming they mostly occur naturally.

Here are a few examples of the “top” comments from the analyzed content, that display anti-American, conspiracy-oriented, racist, anti-government, and anti-immigration points of view:

“[Macron,] Of course you are afraid, this is why you always call for Americans to ensure your safety” (952 likes, 326 replies) (comment on Video 1, 25.05.2018)

“I hope Russians don’t think that we support our criminal gang of a government” (476 likes, 62 replies) (comment on Video 10, 12.10.2016)

“France is American-Israeli colony [...]” (152 likes, 28 comments) (comment on Video 10, 16.10.2016)

“Building a wall on the border of a country is completely legitimate. What is not normal is the behavior of Europe which lets in millions of illegal immigrants, moreover, the vast majority of them Muslims. Civilizational madness” (128 likes, 78 replies) (comment on Video 16, 29.01.2018)

Thus, the most visible comments seem to be those revolving around sensible subjects related to Far-Right ideas, while comments questioning RT’s integrity, though present, are hardly noticeable.

Comments of people questioning these opinions, though present, are hardly noticeable to a casual viewer:

“What’s their deal of all these pro-Russians to spit on France and Macron? Can someone explain a little?” (0 likes, 0 replies) (comment on Video 1, 26.05.2018)

Here is an example of a person trying to engage in a discussion, questioning these points of view:

“The misery, where people would rather believe RT (Putin’s propaganda tool) than independent media, disappointing. How can you say this is the truth when there is no independent press in Russia?” (22 likes, 9 replies) (comment on Video 5, 14.12.2016),

and a few of the replies:

“You know nothing on the subject of Syria you repeat like a bot the lines written by NATO” (comment on Video 5, 14.12.2016),

“Dear sir, propaganda exists in all media...” (comment on Video 5, 14.12.2016),

“You must be one of those easily fooled” (comment on Video 5, 14.12.2016).

Unable to prove his point, the commentator concedes with:

“Well let’s stop there, continue to be Putin’s relay in France, continue to believe that Europe is the Devil, that we are governed by Zionist illuminati from the gay lobby or whatever bullshit, continue to believe that only Soral in France who gets it right, and continue to make up stories in your mind on your own by following only the (counter-) information which interests you” (comment on Video 5, 14.12.2016), summarizing the dominant views he observed in the comments.

Thus, we argue that RT France’s audiences are not homogenous in sharing extreme and often anti-democratic views, but the counterpublic dynamic and social media architecture are such that other views often go unnoticed and are casted off as “unpopular”. Indeed, while it is the enhanced feeling of marginalization through the channel’s history and positioning that seems to draw these counterpublics to RT, once they claim this space as their own, these “alternative” discourses actually become

dominant and “privileged” in the channel’s YouTube comments space – namely through the affordance of metavoicing. It helps them fulfill both functions of counterpublics – establishing internal connections and reaffirming their views, and sharing them externally, for their increased visibility and high likes and reply count make them seem the most “relevant” - which was YouTube’s initial idea behind the top-comments sorting feature (YouTube, 2013).

5.4. Admiration for Putin and moderate patriotism

Another quite surprising and controversial observation is the admiration that many viewers seem to share for Vladimir Putin. Putin is present in 7 out of the 16 videos, and almost always his name is mentioned in the comments, in an overwhelmingly positive light. To cite a few:

“The true French people support Putin” (699 likes, 42 replies) (comment on Video 6, 01.05.2021)

“Russians, can we exchange your president against ours?” (308 likes, 74 replies) (comment on Video 6, 02.06.2021)

Similarly, those criticizing Putin’s regime often go unnoticed or are attacked:

“I disagree with most of these comments. Macron knows we have to stand up to Putin. Otherwise, he will not have the respect of this Stalinist dictator” (0 likes, 0 replies) (comment on Video 1, 22.05.2019)

While Crilley and Chatterje-Doody (2020, p. 13) come to a similar conclusion, that “respect and gratitude for Russia” are highly present in the comments for the Syrian conflict coverage, in our case of exploring Far-Right audiences may appear contradictory. Indeed, Far-Right communities seem to usually demonstrate and vocalize a strong attachment to their home country. However, we believe this only confirms our argument through the theory of “moderate patriotism” – a concept developed by Nathanson (1993) and later by Ward (2010), that Strukov (2016) applies to the global media dynamics. In his study on digital conservatism, he explains that “moderate patriotism” allows one to see the home country as “one of many objects of loyalty” that can be constantly scrutinized (p. 192), while “journalists can utilize the contradictions between the patriotic and global perspectives in order to appeal to and manipulate their audiences to gain a geopolitical advantage.” According to Strukov, the notion of patriotism constructed by RT “rests on the public’s anti-Western sentiment” (p. 199). Far-Right counterpublics present in the channel’s audiences seem

to identify with Russian values, as described by Vaissié (2018), that go “beyond” Putin and it is thus not considered as a “betrayal” of one’s home country, but a desire for France to follow a seemingly successful path of a state that shares the same worldview. Moreover, RT being Russia’s “second-tier agency” (Strukov, 2016, p. 193), operating in their home country, adopting the media coverage style they are used to, inviting hosts and guests that are their compatriots, creates the necessary “distance” between Russia as a foreign country and the values it promotes through RT, thus allowing Far-Right communities to identify with them while remaining “patriots” of France.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Our research aims at filling the gaps into RT’s global audiences research and is original in its geography, methodology and approach. Firstly, this study is the first one focusing on RT France’s digital audiences on YouTube, thus contributing to a very limited number of RT’s French audiences’ studies (Mattelart, 2018, Gérard *et al.*, 2020). We were thus able to test the existing assumption of a strong presence of Far-Right communities in the French channel’s digital audiences while confirming Crilley and colleagues’ (2021) findings for Twitter on the diversity of the channel’s international audiences in a different country, on a different platform (YouTube) and with a different methodological approach.

Secondly, our methodological approach and dataset make our study more original and inclusive than the existing ones that focus mainly on audiences’ reactions to some event-specific content. By choosing to focus on RT France’s most popular YouTube videos, we accessed content that is more general than the reactions to its Yellow vests movement coverage in France (Gérard *et al.*, 2020) or the Syrian war internationally (Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020). While the Yellow vests movement represents a strong moment of the channel’s popularity growth in France and its Syrian conflict coverage is one of the most controversial, having costed the channel formal notices of media regulating authorities in several countries for its way too “alternative” approach, the most popular YouTube videos we chose represent a larger scale in terms of dates, topics and genres of content – thus allowing us to observe the channel’s audiences interactions in a more continuous way; observing a more “day-to-day” activity instead of periods of strong confrontations or surges in the channel’s popularity. We were able to conclude that it is not only the channel’s most controversial topics that attract Far-Right audiences, but many different kinds of regular content can be claimed by them through localization and application of specific topics or emotions to a larger national narrative.

Our qualitative analysis approach that included YouTube’s architecture allowed for interesting observations as well, that would not have been possible should we choose a data-driven approach explored by Gérard and colleagues (2020) in France, or Crilley and colleagues (2021) in the UK. Through qualitative analysis of a relatively small dataset, we were able to observe the way Far-Right narratives get drawn to RT through the enhanced feeling of marginalization, emerge in the comment space through localization and generalization, and later consolidate and gain visibility through the affordances of association and metavoicing to the point of dominating the comment space.

Finally, our theoretical framework based on counterpublic dynamics offers an original approach to the RT’s audiences’ interactions, and does not contradict with other scholars’ approach, namely the publics’ affective investment in the channel’s content developed by Crilley and Chatterje-Doody (2020). On the contrary, it offers a possible cross-application of the two in the context of affective publics (Papacharissi, 2016). Indeed, the counterpublics theoretical network along with the concept of affordances allow for interesting observations of the way Far-Right discourses emerge within RT’s audiences despite not always being directly related to its content, while YouTube’s architecture influences these counterpublics dynamics in a significant way, making Far-Right discourses more powerful.

Thus, through the overview of RT France’s history and controversy followed by a qualitative analysis of the YouTube comments of the channel’s most popular YouTube videos, we have established that RT France, having historical and ideological links with the Far-Right communities in France, may be contributing to creating and spreading Far-Right narratives or “counterdiscourses”, providing a platform for counterpublics to express and share their views on social media. YouTube architecture may also be in part responsible for spreading these views, mainly through affordances of association and metavoicing. As we saw through our analysis, YouTube comments of RT France videos represent a variety of different points of view, but it is the Far-Right ones that get the most exposure, sometimes even to the detriment to the channel’s image. It is hard to say if this phenomenon is absolutely voluntary of the channel or is in part natural, since our analysis shows that comments often have a weak correlation with the content itself. Far-Right narratives are enhanced mainly through discussions between viewers and localizing international events and issues to the domestic affairs. Within the online counterpublics theoretical framework, we observed the way Far-Right counterpublics’ feeling of marginalization gets amplified by RT’s positioning and content, while social media affordances allow them to dominate the alternative

discursive arena that is RT’s YouTube comments section, completely overpowering opposing views.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank The Analysis and Interdisciplinary Research Centre for Media colleagues for the encouragement and advise.

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Conflict of Interest

Gulnara Zakharova declares that she has no conflict of interest in regards to this paper.

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Appendix

Figure 2: Data sample representation

N°	Original Title	English Title	Language	Type of video	Date	Link	Length	Number of views	Number of comments
1	« Emmanuel, il ne faut pas avoir peur » - « Vladimir, je n'ai pas peur »	"Emmanuel, you don't need to be afraid" – "Vladimir, I am not afraid"	Ru/Fr Dubbed in French	Extract of interview (St. Petersburg International Economic Forum)	25.05.2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSR20Y9ldA8&t=1s	01:38	2 278 579	4 759 (2 142)
2	Poutine hilare en réalisant que son ministre de l'Agriculture est à l'ouest en géographie	Putin laughs realizing his Minister of Agriculture knows nothing about geography	Ru French subtitles	Extract of a press conference	14.10.2017	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TsaCX_8pL_k	00:40	2 247 881	1 368 (604)
3	Vladimir Poutine : « Donald Trump est une personne haute en couleur »	Vladimir Putin: "Donald Trump is a highly entertaining person"	English/Ru French subtitles	Extract of interview (St. Petersburg International Economic Forum)	18.06.2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xWt4o1MnO8&t=1s	04:15	1 967 761	2 237 (791)
4	La finale France-Croatie rejouée par des enfants	The finale France-Croatia replayed by kids	N/A	Sports/Entertainment	18.07.2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l42AhqdyYCg	01:52	1 555 885	536 (212)
5	ONU : une journaliste démonte en deux minutes la	UN: A journalist dismantles traditional media rhetoric on Syria	English French subtitles	Extract of a press conference	13.12.2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0DZSPy5KkWG	03:28	1 492 785	2 359 (796)

	rhétorique des médias traditionnels sur la Syrie								
6	L'interview de Vladimir Poutine aux chaînes américaines : les meilleurs extraits	Vladimir Putin's interview for American channels: best moments	English/Ru Dubbed in French	Extracts of Vladimir Putin's interview to the American news channels	28.09.2015	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jESupEEUcZ0	19:41	1 327 436	1 566 (930)
7	Kim Jong-un est arrivé à Vladivostok à bord de son train blindé	Kim Jong-un arrived in Vladivostok on board on his bulletproof train	Fr	Live footage/report	24.04.2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRzsthKamcU	14:25	1 176 741	626 (256)
8	MiG, Sukhoï : les secrets des avions de combat russes	MiG, Sukhoi: the secrets of Russian combat planes	Fr	Documentary	22.03.2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j8-TiKauufl	25:51:00	1 075 045	1 073 (309)
9	«Laissez-moi parler !» : interrompu, Poutine répond en allemand à un journaliste autrichien	Let me speak! interrupted, Putin answers in German to an Austrian journalist	Ru French subtitles	Interview	05.06.2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laW_7cA19zY&ab_channel=RTFrance	00:43:00	959 675	1 083 (540)
10	Vladimir Poutine explique ce qui s'est réellement passé entre la	Vladimir Putin explains what really happened between France and Russia	Ru French subtitles	Extract of Vladimir Putin's interview during the 8 th VTB Capital	12.10.2016	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9sQ_bC11Erk	05:48	946 537	948 (340)

	France et la Russie			"Russia Calling" Investment Forum					
11	Dépigmentation : la douleur des Sénégalaises	Depigmentation: the pain of Senegalese women	French/Wolof	Documentary	05.04.2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQcTKxyOLYw	26:19:00	892 266	2 542 (1225)
12	Roué de coups sous une pluie de projectiles, un CRS exfiltré par un Gilet jaune	"Badly beaten under a rain of projectiles, a policeman is exfiltrated by a Yellow vest"	N/A	Live footage	01.12.2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZffWpGm4w	00:53	882 600	Comments are disactivated
13	Le mystère du permafrost	The mystery of permafrost	Ru Dubbed in French	Documentary	30.01.2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUIYnuoD8To	26:23:00	880 384	425 (201)
14	Interdit d'interdire : Michel Onfray et Juan Branco : le pouvoir en question	Interdit d'interdire: Michel Onfray and Juan Branco : the power in question	Fr	Talk show	05.06.2019	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dR0DF8znfuQ&t=1s	55:06:00	877 769	2 081 (1272)
15	Acte 4 de la mobilisation des Gilets jaunes à Paris	Mobilization of Yellow vests in Paris. Act 4	N/A	Live footage	08.12.2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMN2TkDihmM	10:25:11	844 830	222 (127)
16	USA : Le mur de la discorde	USA: The Wall of Discord	English	Documentary	29.01.2018	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZdleSRBUIU	51:08:00	839 372	852 (275)

Footnotes

1. Front National, a French Far-Right political party that now goes by the name of Rassemblement National (National Rally), allegedly received a large loan of 9.4 million euros from Russia through the First Czech Russian Bank in 2014. The scandalous revelation was made by a French media outlet Mediapart (Turchi 2016) and remains a strong argument for proving the links that exist between Russia and the French Far-Right. [↵](#)
2. See table on pages 18-21 for more details. [↵](#)