

Knut Johan Heyeraas

# **Digital Networks, Media and Soft Power**

## **A Case Study of RT**

Master's thesis in Lektorutdanning i samfunnsfag

Supervisor: Peter Maurer

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Department of Sociology and Political Science





## **Preface**

This thesis marks the end of six wonderful years of study. During these years I have experienced personal growth, made new friendships and gained memories for life. For that, I am eternally grateful. Working on this thesis has been both challenging and rewarding. Luckily, people around me have provided me with the inspiration, moral support and encouragement I needed to stay the course and finish my studies in an appropriate manner. I would therefore like to give these people the praise they deserve.

Firstly, a big thanks goes out to my friends and classmates. Without you, the work with this thesis would have been considerably more difficult to overcome. You know who you are and you are invaluable appreciated.

The next token of appreciation is dedicated to my family. Though we live far apart, you have been a constant source of support and compassion through my years at NTNU. A special thanks goes out to my grandfather, who is perhaps the person in the world with the most outspoken faith in my abilities. My soon two year old nephew has provided me with inexplicable joy, pride and motivation. Last, but not least, I am very grateful for my loving and supporting partner, Marte, who has had the patience to stay by my side through the periods of stress and insecurity leading up to this thesis.

The last thanks is directed to my tutor, Peter Maurer. Your guidance and support has helped me materialise my interests and passion into a topic of research, and, ultimately, a master's thesis. Without you, this whole process would not have been as rewarding as it has been.

Though this thesis is the product of my passion for political science, I am confident that it will also strengthen me as a future teacher of social sciences. Digital networks and social media are integral parts of youths' daily lives. It is therefore imperative to possess knowledge on how these entities may manipulate and influence the minds of our future citizens.

*Knut Johan Heyeraas  
Trondheim, 04.06.2019*



## **Abstract**

Developments in information- and communication technology have had massive impacts on the social world. Digital networks span the globe and produce interconnected societies, through which information may disperse and influence the minds of both citizens and political figures. This development has partly changed the game of power politics, as states are increasingly dependent on soft power to reach their foreign political goals. This thesis studies the role of digital networks in soft power, with focus on their ability to facilitate information transmission and interaction between states and foreign publics. A case study on the Russian media outlet RT (formerly known as “Russia Today”) is conducted to approach this theme empirically, as RT has been accused of being a medium of the Russian soft power machinery by both political figures and previous research. The thesis is guided by the research question “*what soft power abilities does RT demonstrate in digital networks?*”, and approaches this through a social network analysis of RT’s Twitter networks and -behaviour. The results indicate that RT may possess a high potential of soft power abilities. They do not, however, imply that RT is an *efficient* medium of soft power.

## **Sammendrag**

Utvikling i informasjons- og kommunikasjonsteknologi har hatt store innvirkninger på den sosiale verden. Digitale nettverk omfatter kloden og skaper sammenkoblede samfunn, og sprer informasjon som kan påvirke sinnet til både borgere og politiske figurer. Denne utviklingen har delvis endret maktpolitikken, ettersom stater nå i økende grad er avhengige av myk makt for å nå sine utenrikspolitiske mål. Denne studien studerer digitale nettverks rolle i myk makt, med fokus på deres evne til å fasilitere informasjonsspredning og samhandling mellom stater og fremmede befolkninger. Et casestudie på den russiske medieorganisasjonen RT (tidligere kjent som “Russia Today”) blir gjennomført for å tilnærme dette temaet empirisk, ettersom RT har blitt beskyldt for å være et medium av russisk myk makt av både politiske figurer og tidligere forskning. Studien følger problemstillingen «*hvilke evner av myk makt demonstrerer RT i digitale nettverk?*», og tilnærmer seg denne gjennom en sosial nettverksanalyse av RTs Twitternettverk og -atferd. Resultatene indikerer at RT kan inneha et høyt potensiale for evner av myk makt. De antyder derimot ikke at RT er et *effektivt* medium av myk makt.





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## 1.0 Introduction

“A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes”. These words, often misattributed to the genius of Mark Twain, are perhaps more true than ever in the globally interconnected world we currently inhabit. In fact, viewed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the fallacy of the quote is arguably that it *understates* the mobility of information. With the speed of light as its only absolute limit, information may disperse across nations and communities within the blink of an eye. The capabilities provided by such mobility has had major impacts on the organisation and communication between civil societies, formerly separated by chasms of territorial, spatial and linguistic boundaries. As materialisations of globalisation, these developments have produced what may be characterised as a *global civil society*, constituted by vast, digital and interconnected networks; entities which are both available and connect all actors with the capability to access them. The result of this, amongst several factors, is an increase in global, social movements and diffusion of political authority and power (Castells, 2008:84; Kenny & Germain, 2005:1).

Correspondingly, the advancements in information- and communication technology can also be said to have brought significant implications for the game of power politics. As in the words of Joseph Nye (2011:104):

Politics has become a contest of competitive credibility. The world of traditional power politics is typically about whose military or economy wins. [...] politics in an information age “may ultimately be about whose story wins”.

Nye (1990:160) further notes that the information age has provided a change in the medium of power, as actors are now increasingly dependent on non-traditional power resources to reach their goals. More specifically, power is linked with information, passing international power “from the “capital-rich” to the “information-rich”” (Nye, 1990:164). This is arguably the central premise for *soft power*, by which *attraction* may aid an actor in shaping the political environment and influencing the opinions and behaviour of others (more on this later) (Nye, 1990:167; 2011:94).

Taken together, the rise of interconnected societies and the corresponding power potential of information has had wide implications on international politics. In congruence with Nye’s (1990:169) emphasis on the potential influence of popular communication channels, digital

networks and social media are characteristic features of the recent decade. This is reflected by NATO's (2019b:26) 2018 Annual Report, in which deception and propaganda are depicted as prominent threats, characterised by "their speed, scale and intensity" and "facilitated by rapid technological change and global interconnectivity". Thus, though information has been utilised as an instrument of power for decades, the scale and potential of such means are arguably more significant than ever. This is also a recurring theme of American threat assessments for 2019, in which adversaries are expected to increase their use of cyber capabilities to achieve influence and political advantages (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2019:5). Almost poetically, the assessment characterises these means as threats to "both minds and machines", as adversaries, including Russia and China, are becoming skilled in the utilisation of social media to alter "how we think, behave, and decide" (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2019:5). Perhaps the most protruding example to illustrate these developments is the 2019 "Mueller Report", which details how Russia employed digital Twitter networks to influence US citizens and provoke reactions from both media, civic organisations and high-profile US figures (U.S. Department of Justice, 2019:26-28).

### **1.1 Empirical focus and research question**

In sum, this thematic and empirical context naturally drew my attention to digital networks and the international political dimensions of soft power. The thesis will approach this theme with special emphasis on the flow of information and communication through digital networks. Hence, the intent of the thesis is not to apply a nation-focused perspective on this topic. It does, however, necessitate a *medium* of soft power, through which this theme may be analysed empirically. By this logic and inspiration from recent developments and reports, Russia was a natural point of departure to locate such a medium. As shall be made clear as this thesis progresses, media as information providers hold significant potential in relation to soft power. Thus, RT (formerly known as *Russia Today*), the Russian and internationally focused media outlet, is an interesting case in this setting, both by its role and eager utilisation of digital networks. The outlet demonstrates several traits of soft power behaviour, ranging between its conduct, ties to the Russian state and accusations from research and politicians (will be elaborated upon in sections 3.0-3.1). Consequently, this thesis will include a case study on RT as a possible medium of Russian soft power.

The study will not, however, apply a foreign political analysis to explore this case. Guided by prior research (3.2), elegant studies have rigorously researched the soft power traits of RT, with the application of mainly qualitative, content-based approaches. This research therefore sheds light on their ability to produce content which may have soft power effects on its audiences. The examination of this research revealed an approach not yet commonly utilised, which is the quantitative method of social network analysis to analyse how RT transmits their content and interacts with publics through digital networks. This may thus contribute with yet another dimension of RT's soft power related abilities, this time in terms of information transmission and digital interaction. As shall be made clear, both these factors constitute important foundations for active approaches to soft power. Thus, this case study will conduct a network analysis of RT, guided by the research question "*what soft power abilities does RT demonstrate in digital networks?*". The results, though numerous, indicate that RT may possess a high potential of soft power abilities. They do not, however, imply that RT is an *efficient* medium of soft power.

## **1.2 The road ahead**

The road ahead will now be presented for the convenience of the reader. The next section provides the theoretical foundation of the thesis (2.0). This section takes the form of a theoretical stream, starting with the pursuit of power viewed through the lenses of structural realism (2.1). As the tradition of structural realism is both proud and vast, this brief introduction will not do justice to it as a whole, but nevertheless contributes with a valuable premise for the thesis. Following this stream, the next subsection defines and elaborates on the thesis' main concept, soft power, with special emphasis on its founder, Joseph Nye (2.2). The natural next step is then to narrow in the focus to provide an in-depth view on the related means of soft power which may utilise digital networks (2.3), focusing on public diplomacy, nation branding and propaganda (2.3.1-2.3.3). Lastly, the theoretical foundation is rounded up by a closer view of the global societal changes following advancements in information- and communication technologies, with emphasis on digital networks and their possible role in soft power (2.4). Next, the case study of RT is presented, starting with a brief recapitulation of the main theoretical points and moving on to the empirical approach of this thesis (3.0). This section also dissects the research question into three sub-questions. Next, background information and recent developments in association with RT (3.1) are presented, followed by a sub-section on previous research (3.2). The latter section contributes by placing this thesis in the wider research

context and clarifies its contribution to the growing body of research on RT. Thereafter, the methodological choices and operationalisations are presented (3.3), with weight on the method of social network analysis, data collection, quality and ethics (3.3.1-3.3.3). The case section is finished by presenting the main results of the analysis (3.4), structured after the three dissected sub-questions (3.4.1-3.4.3). The discussion (4.0) utilises these results to make inferences between the empirical data and the concepts of soft power, before progressing to a larger discussion on the soft power abilities of RT as a possible medium of Russian soft power. The final paragraphs of the discussion provide a few further notes on the results, with emphasis on generalisability and applicability. Finally, a conclusion to the thesis is drawn, based on the main findings and arguments of the discussion (5.0).

## **2.0 Theoretical foundation**

This section will present the theoretical foundation of this thesis. This starts with a short subsection on states' pursuit of power, with emphasis on the concept of power and structural realism (2.1). Thereafter the focus is narrowed in towards soft power and its characteristics (2.2), before moving on to active means of soft power (2.3). Lastly, a subsection on the role and properties of networks in soft power is provided (2.4)

### **2.1 The quest for power in international politics**

As mentioned, this thesis focuses primarily on soft power and will thus not conduct a realist analysis. However, a general and non-exhaustive understanding of the concept of power and pursuit of power in international politics is a useful premise. Defining power, being a multifaceted and contested term, is not an easy task. One approach to defining the concept is by taking a relational perspective. In this way, person A may be seen as having power over person B, to “the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Dahl, 1957:202-203; Nye, 2011:10-12). Thus, while the power is defined relationally between person A and B, it stems from all resources that may be utilised to form this relation, such as opportunities, actions or objects. An actor may for instance coerce or intimidate another into performing or abstaining from actions. A related, but separate, approach is to define power in terms of capacities. In this view, power is defined with reference to the capacities an actor possesses to control or affect outcomes (Guzzini, 2013:7; Nye, 2011:8). To provide this thesis with a general conceptual point of departure, power will be viewed as an actor's ability or capacity to reach desired outcomes or ends.

Though this clarifies the concept of power, it does not fully explain *why* states pursue it in international politics. The tradition of structural realism offers an explanation to this. The basis of this approach is a world characterised by a lack of supra-national authorities, which produces a structure of reciprocal fear among states (Fermann, 2013:58). The ultimate consequence of this is, according to Mearsheimer (2014:29), that “great powers [...] are always searching for opportunities to gain power over their rivals”. With the premise of international anarchy, actors are interested in gaining such power *relatively*, as all states are potential threats, their primary goal is survival and adversaries' intentions are both hidden and fluid (Mearsheimer, 2014:30-32). “Relatively” is an important emphasis in this context, as power is viewed as a means of

survival, thus meaning states will attempt to gain power if it gives them a relative advantage over other actors. In other words, actors assess opportunities with rational calculation (Mearsheimer, 2014:30, 36-37). Such calculation is done with sensitivity towards the balance of power, a theorised principle of equilibrium which produces stability and preserves the existence of all states in the international system (Morgenthau, 2005:180-181). Thus, rational actors will protect their safety by abstaining from actions and opportunities which risk causing severe disruptions in the balance of power or evoking dangerous responses.

## **2.2 Soft power**

But let us come to Commodus, to whom it should have been very easy to hold the empire [...], but, being by nature cruel and brutal [...], little worthy of the imperial majesty, he fell into contempt with the soldiers, and being hated by one party and despised by the other, he was conspired against and was killed (Machiavelli, 2006).

While power is traditionally viewed in concrete terms, such as economic resources or military capabilities, the very definition of power also allows for non-material understandings. As outlined by Machiavelli's description, the demise of roman emperor Commodus was not due to a decline in the material capabilities of the Roman empire, but rather a deterioration in how he was perceived and appreciated. This fits neatly to the concept of soft power, which is the "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye, 2008:94). Consequently, soft power is linked to an actor's ability to produce attraction, and thus, persuasion and beneficial behaviour from others (Vuving, 2009:6). Attraction therefore functions relationally as a third mechanism of power, in addition to the "sticks and carrots" of hard power (Lock, 2010:33). Furthermore, soft power is neither a normative concept nor necessarily a contradiction to realism's traditional approach to power. Rather, it is a descriptive concept, whose absence or presence contributes to an actor's latitude of available actions (Nye, 2011:81-82). Lastly, while soft power may be gained from traditional sources of power, such as attraction from economic affluence, it is mainly derived from three resources: culture, values and foreign policies (Nye, 2011:84-86). Therefore, if an actor's culture, values or foreign policies are viewed as attractive, genuine or morally just, then the potential for soft power may increase correspondingly. This also closely resembles president Putin's understanding of soft power:

Let me remind you that 'soft power' is all about promoting one's interests and policies through persuasion and creating a positive perception of one's country [...]. Russia's image abroad is formed not by us and



as a result is often distorted and does not reflect the real situation [...]. Those who fire guns and launch air strikes here or there are the good guys, while those who warn of the need for restraint and dialogue are for some reason at fault. But our fault lies in our failure to adequately explain our position (President of Russia, 2012).

What is clear from this is that soft power is highly dependent on both agents and targets (Nye, 2011:84). While the agent's access to the resources outlined above is important, the crucial part is how the agent is *perceived* by targets, regardless of the correspondence between this perception and reality (Nye, 2011:100). As president Putin suggests, only by explaining their actions and ideological commitments will Russia's soft power increase. By this logic it is not the agent who demands, but the target that "grants", soft power. Similarly, soft power may be produced by creating consensus around shared meaning, if this consensus works to the benefit of the agent (Roselle, Miskimmon, & O'Loughlin, 2014:72). This power may, in turn, be used for the same ends as traditional power, such as persuasion, agenda setting and shaping of preferences (Nye, 2011:90-91). Furthermore, soft power may be approached by different routes. In a passive route, an actor may be attracted towards another by unintentional means, such as the appearance of an attractive culture. The active route, however, constitutes intentional means of soft power, such as public diplomacy (see 2.3.1). Additionally, the active approach may either seek to influence foreign governments directly, by targeting political leaderships, or indirectly, by targeting foreign populations (Nye, 2011:94). The indirect approach is of particular interest for this thesis, as it seeks to influence public opinions to enable or disable the ability of foreign political leaderships to pursue certain actions or choices.

However, regardless of which route or approach is applied, the successfulness of such an effort will highly depend on many factors. In terms of attraction, an actor should appear with benignity, brilliance and beauty (Vuving, 2009:8-12). Simplified, this involves appearing friendly and compassionate, brilliant by capabilities and beautiful by values and ideals. Next, efforts of soft power are dependent on credibility and trust (Nye, 2011:91). Credibility is especially important, as much of actors' attractiveness is conveyed through information technology. Thus, credibility has become a vital quality and a scarce resource of competition between adversaries (Nye, 2011:103-104). Additionally, the application of soft power has two central problems. Firstly, while the perception of the target is, as mentioned, crucial, it is

difficult to both foresee and control how your appearance and actions will be perceived by others (Nye, 2011:92-93). Secondly, measuring the causal effects of soft power is both ambiguous and may require long-term research data, providing the agent with little immediate feedback and results.

Lastly, Nye's soft power concept has been criticised for confusing relational and structural conceptions of power. In other words, soft power may be viewed in an agent-centred and relationally focused manner, by observing how one agent may influence another through attraction. On the other hand, social structures may be utilised to explain both the agent and the target's behaviours, providing soft power with a structural dimension (Lock, 2010:34-37). While highly relevant in power literature, this thesis will not contribute to this discussion, and will continue with a relational perspective on soft power henceforth.

### **2.3 Active means in the pursuit of soft power**

This subsection will now provide a more in-depth look at active means in states' pursuit of soft power. This takes the form of a conceptual stream, focusing on the concepts of *public diplomacy*, *nation branding* and *propaganda*. Before moving on to these, however, it is first appropriate to touch upon the connection between them. From a magnitude of diverse literature it is clear that these concepts may have theoretical overlaps, and that there is a level of ambiguity connected to whether they constitute separate concepts or different dimensions of the same phenomenon. As Melissen (2005:16) states, all three share a core feature of communicating with foreign publics as means to influence attitudes and opinions. Thus, as contributing to the meta-discussion of these concepts is beyond the scope of this thesis, they will be presented separately in the following subsections, with focus on their characteristic features.

#### **2.3.1 Public diplomacy**

As an overall point of departure, public diplomacy (PD) can be defined through three different approaches. In conjunction with Snow (2014:70) and Cull (2008:31), PD is an international actor's attempt to advance or accomplish goals of foreign policy by engaging with foreign publics. In other words, it is a means to influence and manage international public opinions in a direction that favours your own political goals. Pamment (2013:1) adds to this by viewing PD

as “communication of an international actor’s policies to citizens of foreign countries”. The term *citizen* is used in a wide sense with reference to a multitude of different targets, such as private individuals, representatives, non-governmental organisations, media institutions and journalists. Consequently, this distinguishes PD from traditional diplomacy, which focuses solely on foreign state officials (Melissen, 2005:5). Lastly, according to Sharp (2005:106), PD is the “process by which direct relations are pursued with a country’s people to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented”. This may therefore be said to add an ideological component to PD, by emphasising the importance of promoting one’s values in foreign populations.

Furthermore, PD may be viewed in terms of its internal components. According to Cull (2008:32-34), PD is characterised by collecting data and analysing targets, promotion of policies and ideas, physical and cultural exchanges and, most typically, international broadcasting through different media (Snow, 2014:67). The common denominator of all the aforementioned definitions and components is that they all include intent and means of communicating and interacting with foreign populations. Being a tool of soft power, among the aims of this is to create attractive impressions of yourself as an international actor in the minds of foreign populations (Nye, 2008:101). As in the words of Kunczik (1997:58, 74), the image of a nation, appearing trustworthy or not, may translate into political and material support or scepticism from other nations. Hence, this contributes to widening or limiting an actor’s latitude of available actions. PD seeks to benefit from this by developing favourable impressions through the mechanisms of information transmission and relationship building (Nye, 2011:104-105). According to Nye (2011:105-106), this is done through three layers of communication. These range from daily communication for explaining and justifying political actions, strategic communication for promoting certain themes and frames, and developing relationships with influential figures.

While public diplomacy has existed both as a concept and phenomenon for centuries, recent developments have perhaps made it more complicated and potent than ever. Like Snow (2014:68) puts it, PD “is like old wine in new bottles, those new bottles being the democratization of information and new information and communication technologies that have shrunk, if not collapsed, borders between global publics”. In terms of the latter factor,

information and communication technologies, global communication has become available for all, including non-state organisations and private citizens (Nye, 2011:100-102). Thus, information has become democratised. Additionally, in an information age where information has become increasingly synonymous with soft power, power structures have become more diffused and less hierarchical, providing significant roles for credibility and social networks (Nye, 2011:100-103). This can be said to have two effects on actor's behaviour in international politics. Firstly, in a situation where states compete for influence and attention of citizens, the inclusion of PD initiatives in diplomatic repertoires has become increasingly frequent (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012:288; Melissen, 2005:8). Secondly, as will be elaborated in the next paragraph, this has forced PD to adapt to these developments.

According to Snow (2014:71), there are several features that characterise “new” public diplomacy. One of which is an increasingly active, interactive and participatory role of citizens. Thus, this focuses more on relationships, systems and networks than previously, with emphasis on two-way and multi-directional, rather than one-way, communication (Melissen, 2005:13; Pamment, 2013:3). Additionally, new PD is employed more longitudinally for achievement of behavioural changes. Lastly, developments in communicational technology have opened the field of PD to new actors, in which unofficial and non-governmental organisations and actors, as well as celebrities and other influential characters, have become important agents of influence (Gregory, 2012:119; Melissen, 2005:12; Snow, 2014:70-71). In fact, association with official governmental bodies may be detrimental for credibility, thus increasing the role of independent and non-governmentally affiliated actors (Nye, 2008:105; Simons, 2018:138, 150). In other words, such actors may work as mediums contributing to the same ends as state-run PD.

### *2.3.1.1 Subtypes of new public diplomacy*

Looking back at Snow's wine bottle analogy, it becomes apparent that while the phenomenon of “old” PD has survived, much of the structures and frameworks around it has changed. One general manifestation of new PD may be referred to as *network public diplomacy*. According to Hocking (2005:35; 2008:63), technological and political developments have enabled PD practitioners to move away from a hierarchical approach, characterised by state-centered and top-down information flows, to network approaches. This model of PD distinguishes itself by

viewing networks as near necessities in increasingly complex policy environments. Such networks include both governmental and non-governmental actors, bound together by joint interests, cooperation and stable, interdependent relationships (Hocking, 2005:37). Furthermore, the networks are characterised by non-centralised, multidirectional flows of information, and are, following Pamment (2013:35), “fundamentally relationship and communication structures”. Consequently, another central feature of network PD is the role it ascribes to publics. While the older, hierarchical model of PD viewed publics as targets and means towards foreign political ends, network PD approaches them as partners and producers for collaboration (Hocking, 2008:63-65).

One particular, non-hierarchical network approach is *digital diplomacy*, which utilises social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, in an attempt to reach PD ends (Bjola & Jiang, 2015:71; Kampf, Manor, & Segev, 2015). In this regard, digital diplomacy may be defined as the network PD that adopts *social* digital networks to engage with publics online. The utilisation of networks allows actors to widen their digital presence and generate topic-specific conversations, which may thus amplify their abilities to build relationships and influence opinions in terms of space and efficiency (Adesina, 2016:171; Bjola & Jiang, 2015:72; Kampf et al., 2015). Furthermore, this may allow actors to more precisely engage with specific social groupings and adjust messages to resonate with the cultural and social identity of target populations (Adesina, 2016:171-172; Pamment, 2013:35). While there are vast amounts of social media sites which allow such conduct, Twitter is of particular interest for this thesis. In fact, Twitter is so widely employed by states in diplomatic practices that the concept *twiplomacy* has been coined to describe this phenomenon (Adesina, 2016:174; Dumčiuvienė, 2016:93, 97). One of the reasons for this preference of Twitter is that it is built on information and opinion sharing (Kampf et al., 2015). It therefore facilitates political debates and shaping of preferences and allows actors to instantly review reactions from foreign populations (Dumčiuvienė, 2016:98-99). Consequently, in terms of Nye’s layers of PD communication, Twitter is particularly well suited for both daily and strategic communication, allowing actors to foster relationships and transmit carefully framed and loaded messages (Dumčiuvienė, 2016:98-99).

Networks, then, carry several advantages over traditional public diplomatic approaches. Firstly, according to Fisher (2010:10), network approaches are more resilient to external interferences, due to its non-centralised and multidirectional character. Thus, this underscores the new PD focus on establishing strong and enduring relationships. Secondly, networks increase agents' abilities to accurately and rapidly distribute, acquire and process information (Cull, 2008:48-49, 52; Hocking, 2005:37; Pamment, 2013:35). This is amplified by including populations as networks partners, meaning that they may contribute to spreading information through interconnected networks. Thirdly, networks facilitate agents' communicative skills by removing *transactional barriers* (Hocking, 2005:37). Social media and digital networking sites may thus be powerful tools for potentially global influence (Dumčiuvienė, 2016:93; Fisher, 2010:72; Snow, 2014:70).

Another manifestation of new PD is mediated public diplomacy. According to Entman (2008:88), mediated PD is “shorter term and more targeted efforts using mass communication (including the internet) to increase support of a country's specific foreign policies”. The setting of mediated PD may be located in the characteristics of the interconnected world, in which global media outlets has increased the visibility of war and foreign political actions of states. This underlines the potential power of media and causes international actors to compete for the influence and the scarce attention of media (Sheafer & Gabay, 2009:447; Sheafer & Shenhav, 2009:275). Thus, means of mediated PD often seek to gain influence and attraction from sympathetic media coverage in foreign nations through two different approaches (Sheafer & Gabay, 2009:447). The first, international agenda setting, is the process of influencing what is legitimate and news-worthy issues in international media (Cobb & Elder, 1971:905; Sheafer & Gabay, 2009:448). The second approach, international frame building, is the promotion of specific interpretations or evaluations of events (Entman, 2008:90). While taking many different forms, this may include promotion of particular issues, causal attribution, moral judgement and treatment recommendations (Sheafer & Gabay, 2009:449-450). The latter approach therefore highly corresponds with Nye's aforementioned second layer of communication, which focuses on promoting selected themes and frames. Lastly, the amenability of media for means of mediated PD may be illustrated by Watanabe's (2017) study, which, without reference to PD, demonstrated that Russian-produced narratives were reproduced by Western media during their coverage the Crimean crisis.

### 2.3.1.2 Challenges

Before progressing from the section on public diplomacy, it may be beneficial to note some of the many challenges to its efficiency. Firstly, the cliché “actions speak louder than words” is accurate in this context, as means of PD seldom will be able to trivialise unpopular actions (Melissen, 2005:7; Nye, 2011:106; Simons, 2018:145). Secondly, as in the case with soft power in general, the perception of one’s audience is hard to control and anticipate (Melissen, 2005:16). Lastly, some points may be derived from Entman’s (2008:93-94) emphasis on the necessity of cultural congruence. By following this logic, it becomes clear that attempts at PD may inevitably fail or be counter-productive, especially in cases where the population is, by principle, hostile towards the agent or incompatible with the impression it attempts to produce (Entman, 2008:90).

### 2.3.2 Nation Branding

Already from an initial and linguistically superficial analysis the concept of “nation branding” seems to share features with PD, in terms of being concerned with how the nation or actor is perceived internationally. Indeed, following Dinnie’s (2008:14-15) elegant steps towards a conceptual definition, a *brand* is a symbol or feature of a product which distinguishes it from similar and/or competitive products. Next, a *nation brand* is “the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences” (Dinnie, 2008:15). A nation brand may serve to distinguish states in the international sphere, and will thus potentially influence the way it is perceived by foreign publics. Like commodities in commercial settings, brands can constitute visual symbols associated with the producer, representing ideas and values to produce attraction in target audiences (Aronczyk, 2013:16; Olins, 2005:178). Following this line of reasoning, and with conceptual support from Aronczyk (2013:15), *nation branding* is the process by which nation brands are created and communicated, using “tools, techniques, and expertise from the world of corporate brand management”. This signals a clear convergence with PD’s concern for international reputation, perhaps with the most significant difference being nation branding’s focus on identity and PD’s focus on relationships (Melissen, 2005:19-21).

Another similarity with PD is that while nation branding may be viewed as a means of soft power, there are many ways in which its effects may materialise. According to Aronczyk

(2013:3), nation branding is aimed at emphasising a nation's relevance and importance. As in the words of Melissen (2005, p. 20), part of this may be to "stand out from the pack", either by projecting an existing identity or reshaping it to improve its attractive qualities (Dinnie, 2008:17). Furthermore, nation branding may contribute to boosting a nation's appearance of credibility and legitimacy, alter reputations and manage impressions (Aronczyk, 2013:16; Dinnie, 2008:17). This therefore corresponds with the concern for credibility in soft power theory. Lastly, nation branding may have international political implications, both in terms of increasing influence and encouraging partnerships (Dinnie, 2008:17). Consequently, although the effects of nation branding can take considerable time to materialise, its possible rewards may be substantial. However, as nation branding depends on individual perception, it is both unpredictable and difficult to measure (Dinnie, 2008:15).

### ***2.3.3 Propaganda***

Propaganda, being the subject of political and academic discussion for decades, has many different meanings and connotations. Thus, its conceptual content will vary across time and between academic traditions (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012:1-2; Melissen, 2005:16; Thomson, 1999:7-12). Jowett and O'Donnell (2012:7) provide a definition in terms of propaganda's communicative dimension, and conceptualise it as the "deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist". Some notes are required on this. Firstly, by emphasising it as a deliberate and systematic attempt, it becomes clear that propaganda is a highly organised, instrumental and conscious approach to communication. Secondly, propaganda constitutes an attempt to influence the perceptions, behaviour and cognitive patterns of targets (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). Lastly, this serves as the means to an unspecified end of the agent, separating propaganda from mere persuasion (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012:45; Soules, 2015:4).

Furthermore, in the view of Benkler, Faris and Roberts (2018:29), propaganda may be perceived as a means to specific political ends of propagandists. This may include both promoting political ideologies or inducing political behaviours fitting the agent's agenda (Soules, 2015:5). What is worth to emphasise in this context is that the propagandist is not seeking to promote thinking or reflection in its objects, but rather their passive acceptance of transmitted messages or values (Melissen, 2005:18; Soules, 2015:5). This resembles Lasswell's



(1927:627, 630) depiction of propaganda as the “management of collective attitudes” through principles of stimulus-response reactions. One last approach to propaganda is *network propaganda*, a concept describing large-scale changes in collective attitudes and opinions (Benkler et al., 2018:33). As Benkler and colleagues (2018:33) state, such large-scale changes do not originate from single stories or sources, but rather from dynamic and multifaceted networks. In such networks the propagandist may only control some outlets or nodes (i.e. units of a network), but a variety of other actors may still (perhaps) unknowingly contribute to its agenda by internalising, reproducing and distributing the propagandist’s narratives. As in the case with network PD, the potential influence of such networks is likely amplified by developments in information technologies and digital networks (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012:48).

Despite having clear characteristics for what it constitutes, propaganda is multifaceted and may vary by degrees of clear origins and factual accuracy. Thus, some approaches to propaganda may operate with correctly identified sources and accurate information, but be utilised with the intent to manipulate targets. In contrast, it may also operate with both concealed origins and information of distorted, deceptive or false nature (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012:17-18). A particular subtype of propaganda frequently utilised by political actors is disinformation, the covert spreading of false information to specific targets (Benkler et al., 2018:32; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012:23-25). Such efforts may follow two different patterns, either by creating a new outlet for distributing disinformation or by placing disinformation in legitimate sources. Common for both these patterns is that the propagandist remains unaffiliated with both the source and the information being spread (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012:26).

In addition to taking many forms, there are also several factors that will facilitate the potential success of propaganda. One of these factors is, according to Soules (2015:6-8), the domination of individuals’ information spheres. Without such domination, individuals may be exposed to information that contradicts the intention of the propaganda. Similarly, the propagandist should often conceal its true identity and exercise tight control of information to alter its flow and convergence with intended goals (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012:45-46). Regulation and infiltration of media will be powerful means to gain such control. Finally, in order to produce a specific reaction in a targeted population, messages of propaganda need to be adapted to the cultural,

social and political environments of its targets (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012:20; Lasswell, 1927:630).

## **2.4 Networks and soft power**

Lastly, to fully appreciate the soft power potential of media and digital networks, it is beneficial to take a closer look at the role and properties of networks in today's global societies.

According to Castells (2008), the development and emergence of communication networks has had significant impacts on individual societies and the world as a whole. On one hand we live in a *network society*, in which civil society is increasingly constituted and organised by interconnected networks (Castells, 2008:79-80; Kenny & Germain, 2005:1). On the other hand this interconnectedness has produced an *international* public sphere, spanning the globe and consisting of networks of both governmental and non-governmental actors. Consequently, this has contributed to a *global civil society*, which in a simplified view is partly characterised by two concepts (Castells, 2008:83-86). Firstly, in terms of social movements, various social actors are creating and organising in global networks to oppose dominating values and redefine global socio-political relations (Kenny & Germain, 2005:1-2). Secondly, following the same lines, global public opinion has emerged from networks that facilitate worldwide debate and dialogue. Another consequence is an increase in the power of media through the *translocal information space*, which has torn down national borders of news and information (Castells, 2008:86; Volkmer, 2003:12-13). In this space, the power of media has become, according to Stevenson (2005:67), "more significant than that of any single nation state". This is partly conceptualised by Robinson's (2002:2-3) *CNN effect*, which describes the media's ability to affect global political opinions and behaviour through international communication networks (Volkmer, 2003:13). In sum, these developments are arguably highly potent factors in the pursuit for cross-national political changes (Castells, 2008:90). Correspondingly, they may potentially provide highly fertile grounds for modern approaches to soft power.

However, while possibly providing such fertile ground, actors must understand and utilise the properties of networks to fully take advantage of their potential (Fisher, 2010:8). Overall, networks may be viewed as systems of ties (i.e. connections), through which information,

knowledge, norms and identity flow (Marin & Wellman, 2014:12). Furthermore, in network perspectives, networks are provided with the causal mechanism often attributed to personal properties. Consequently, it is not the personal attributes of an individual that determines his/her opportunities or outcomes in life, but rather the surrounding network and the individual's relative position within it (Marin & Wellman, 2014:4). To elaborate this point more clearly, it is beneficial to examine network structure and positions more in-depth.

To begin with structure, it is useful to employ Hansen, Shneiderman and Smith's (2011:11) elegant building analogy. In buildings, the structural organisation will affect the frequency and manner of individual interaction within them, and, consequently, the physical flow of information. This is also applicable to the structure of networks. While there are several structural factors of networks, this thesis will focus particularly on three different aspects of the property of *interconnectedness*. Firstly, interconnectedness may be viewed as the *density* of a network, depicting the collective degree to which nodes are connected to each other (Hansen et al., 2011:40; Himelboim, forthcoming:13; Oliver, 1991:173; Rowley, 1997:896-897). This has different implications on networks as a whole. High density may constitute a measure of cohesion and solidarity, increase the efficiency of information and norm diffusion, produce conformity and depict tightly connected, highly interactive communities (Himmelboim, forthcoming:13; Marin & Wellman, 2014:14; Oliver, 1991:171; Rowley, 1997:897-898). Thus, this resonates with the multidirectional and non-hierarchical approach of network PD and -propaganda. Furthermore, a related metric is *reciprocity*; the collective degree to which ties between nodes are reciprocal. As a structural property, high rates of reciprocity may indicate relationship building, cooperation, trust and information exchange (Himmelboim, forthcoming:11, 13; Himelboim, Golan, Moon, & Suto, 2014:368-369).

Low density, on the other hand, signals higher network fragmentation (Rowley, 1997:898). Although this involves less tightly connected nodes and less efficient information transmission, such networks may, according to Granovetter (1973), provide actors with more diverse and novel information, as they connect nodes with less connections between them (Borgatti & Lopez-Kidwell, 2014:2-6). Taking into account that "birds of a feather flock together", this can translate to more socially diverse groupings, who consequently may provide novelty to the network. Furthermore, another characteristic of interconnectedness is *clusteredness*. This

depicts the degree to which a network is fragmented into separate clusters, which are tightly knit subgroups of nodes who are significantly more connected to each other than to nodes outside the subgroup (Himmelboim et al., 2014:364). Thus, clusters include people who eagerly interact and communicate, and may form boundaries for what information its members are exposed to (Himmelboim et al., 2014:360; Himmelboim, Smith, & Shneiderman, 2013:219). Once again, following the “flock analogy”, this may translate to little internal diversity in terms of information and opinions. High clusteredness may therefore indicate groups forming for selective exposure. In the worst case, it may produce echo chambers or enclaves, in which individuals develop narrow views from solely engaging with like-minded people and little diverse information (Himmelboim et al., 2013:199-200, 205; Sunstein, 2006:77).

Next, dependent on the structure of a network, some network positions may be of superior value compared to others, in terms of strategic value and access to resources (Fisher, 2010:7). Of particular importance for this thesis is the position of *social mediator*. Following Himmelboim et al. (2014:361), social mediators are actors that mediate and influence relations between publics and organisations on social media. Furthermore, such mediators (short for social mediator) may be of particular strategic value if they act as *bridging hubs*. Bridging hubs are well-connected and influential nodes spanning *structural holes*; spaces where there are no effective alternative connections between a set of nodes (Hansen et al., 2011:40; Himmelboim et al., 2014:365-367). On Twitter, users are highly dependent on direct and in-direct connections to communicate to wide audiences. Thus, as organisations in social media are largely bound to such connections, social mediators and bridging hubs may contribute to networks by spreading information further and working as mediums through which new relationships can be created (Himmelboim et al., 2014:363-364). For instance, an influential social mediator may be a valuable resource for agents of soft power by bridging the connection between its own population and the agent.

To fully appreciate the role and relevance of bridging hubs and social mediators (henceforth treated as one as *social mediators*) for agents of soft power, there are two factors worth to emphasise. Firstly, targeting influential social mediators may extend one’s network reach and access to information. Secondly, and perhaps more significant, social mediators may take the role of network collaborators, who facilitate agents’ ability to transmit information and build relationships with publics through social media (Himmelboim et al., 2014:361).

### **3.0 The case of RT**

After presenting the theoretical foundation of the thesis, it is now time to progress to the empirical work. To briefly summarise the thesis hitherto, however, three points need to be emphasised. Firstly, soft power, including its associated means, is dependent on the perceptions and attitudes of targets. Thus, active approaches to soft power necessitate a degree of engagement or interaction with its targets. Secondly, the technological developments of the last decades have had significant impacts on societies and the pursuit of soft power. In terms of society, national borders are transcended and a global public sphere is easily and reasonably available for actors to access and utilise. In addition, the same developments may be said to have partly changed the game of soft power, both in terms of conduct and potency. Public diplomacy, nation branding and propaganda may utilise information technology and digital networks to transmit information and interact with wide scopes of audiences. Thirdly, these developments have opened the doors for new actors to both gain, possess and contribute to soft power. Non-governmentally affiliated media especially hold high potentials of soft power through credibility, information transmission and opinion management, both as agents, targets and possible mediums of states' soft power ambitions.

Thus, in the contemporary context of soft power and its requirement of engagement with foreign citizens, there may be said to be three factors of particular interest: non-governmental actors, media and digital networks. These factors have guided the empirical approach of this thesis. As described in the introduction, Russia is a natural starting point when it comes to the use and pursuit of soft power. Several statements from official Russian figures further support this. Firstly, Alexander Yakovenko, Russian ambassador to Great Britain, views Russia as among the great powers of twiplomacy (Adesina, 2016:179). Secondly, according to Chernenko (2013), The Russian Foreign Ministry refers to digital diplomacy as “innovative diplomacy”, depicting a Russian tool to influence public opinions. Thirdly, and perhaps most interestingly, President Putin views digital diplomacy as “among the most effective foreign policy tools”, and instructs Russian diplomats to utilise it to explain the policies of the state (Permyakova, 2012). This resonates with the president's aforementioned statement on soft power. Furthermore, as recently as the 3<sup>rd</sup> of April, 2019, NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg emphasised the “sophisticated disinformation campaigns” of Russia as a prominent threat to the north Atlantic alliance (NATO, 2019a).

The strong basis of Russia as a prominent actor in this context underlines the relevancy of RT as a possible *medium* of Russian soft power. As shall soon be elaborated thoroughly (3.1 and 3.2), there are two initial factors that highlight this. Firstly, in terms of the three aforementioned factors, RT is an officially autonomous media outlet with a strong presence across different platforms of social media. Secondly, both traits of the organisation, recent developments and prior research indicate that RT may play a part in Russia's soft power machinery. As soft power necessitates engagement and interaction with targets, the case of RT seemingly fits neatly to the theme of this thesis.

This section therefore provides a case study on RT and their utilisation of digital networks to communicate and interact with audiences. While RT has a presence across various social networking platforms, this thesis does not have the capacity to analyse an exhaustive selection of these. Thus, it will limit itself to Twitter, which is frequently employed by states as a means of public diplomacy and typically facilitates debate and opinion sharing. The research question which the case aspires to answer is, as previously stated, "*what soft power abilities does RT demonstrate in digital networks?*". However, this question is both broad and multifaceted, covering many different dimensions of RT's network behaviour and presence. Thus, it will be dissected into three sub-questions approaching different angles of this question. Inspired by the theoretical foundation, there are three particularly interesting features that should be explored in relation to soft power abilities. Firstly, the sub-question "*what does the structure of RT Twitter networks indicate about their internal flow of information and interaction?*" will be utilised to shed light on how the structure of RT networks facilitate information transmission and interaction. The next question, "*what characterises the social mediators in RT Twitter networks?*", explores the mediators who contribute to extend the network reach of RT. The last, "*how does RT interact with their mediators and publics in Twitter networks?*", focuses on RT's general network efforts to interact with other users of Twitter.

Background information on RT as an organisation and relevant empirical developments will be provided in the next subsection (3.1). Thereafter follows a subsection of previous research on RT (3.2), before the focus is shifted towards the methodological approach of the case study

(3.3). Lastly, the results of the analysis are presented, setting the premise for the upcoming discussion (4.0).

### **3.1 RT: background information**

RT (formerly known as “Russia Today”) is a Russian news outlet, with several affiliated TV channels and online newspapers (Rawnsley, 2015:276; RT, undated). The organisation is indirectly financed through governmental funds to the NGO TV-Novosti, and has seen its funds steadily and significantly increase since its launch in 2005 (Borchers, 2011:92; Rawnsley, 2015:278). Despite this, RT maintains a self-proclaimed status as an “autonomous, non-profit” and globally oriented news organisation, with several sub-channels, availability in over 100 countries and broadcasts from Moscow, London, Washington and Paris (RT, undated). This orientation is a shift from its original intentions of broadcasting news and stories on Russian culture (Dougherty, 2013:53). Although there is some uncertainty regarding actual numbers, RT holds an estimated 100 million weekly TV viewers worldwide, is most popular in Europe and attracts substantial audience numbers in social media such as Youtube and Twitter (Miazhevich, 2018; Pomerantsev, 2015:45; Rawnsley, 2015:284; RT, undated:577). Perhaps surprisingly, RT beats both CNN and BBC in terms of views and subscriptions on Youtube (Intelligence Community Assessment, 2017:11). Lastly, as signalled by its slogan “Question More”, the organisation intends to focus its journalism on “stories overlooked by the mainstream media”, while approaching such stories from alternative and Russian viewpoints (RT, undated). As in the words of managing director of RT, Alexey Nikolov; “there is no such thing as objective reporting” and “there's always a Russian way to look at a situation” (Alexey Nikolov, quoted in Pomerantsev, 2014:20).

Having kept this focus since their rebranding, RT has become a prominent and controversial figure in the international news sphere. However, its credibility has suffered several blows over the recent years. Reporters Without Borders (2018) has repeatedly rated Russia poorly in their World Press Freedom Index, most recently with 148<sup>th</sup> place in the 2018 report. Additionally, the combination of RT’s governmental funding and close ties with Kremlin has resulted in much controversy over the last decade. Perhaps the worst case stems from RT’s coverage of the Crimean crisis, prompting Secretary of State John Kerry to label the organisation as the “propaganda bullhorn” of Russia for distorting information on the events playing out in the

Ukrainian peninsula (LoGiurato, 2014). The same situation also caused internal controversy, with RT presenter Abby Martin criticising Russia's actions in her show "Breaking the Set" and news anchor Liz Wahl's on-air resignation (Hutchings, Gillespie, Yablokov, Lvov, & Voss, 2015:646). According to Wahl, her resignation was the consequence of ethical and moral challenges from working for a network "that whitewashes the actions of Putin" (RT, 2014). This was later followed by the resignation of reporter Sara Firth, declaring on Twitter that "I have huge respect for many in the team, but I'm for the truth" (Firth, 2014).

Following the frequently discussed Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election, American intelligence research has placed RT as a part of the Russian "state-run propaganda machine" (Intelligence Community Assessment, 2017:3). This label is in part derived from its funding, supervision and staff ties to Kremlin, and part from partial coverage of the US election (Intelligence Community Assessment, 2017:3-4, 8-9). Overall, the Intelligence Community Assessment (2017:6-7) perceived RT as a Kremlin instrument to fuel political protest and undermine trust in the US government and democratic procedures. Correspondingly, RT's US branch was forced to register under the Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA) in 2017, to disclose to the American public their connections and possible agenda for the Russian government (Department of Justice, 2017). Echoing RT's partial coverage of the 2016 presidential election, the British regulator for communications services, OFCOM, recently investigated RT UK for possible breaches of broadcast codes in their coverage of the Salisbury poisoning of March 2018 (OFCOM, 2018a:4; 2018c). The results were another hit for RT's credibility, with seven out of ten programmes deemed in violation of impartiality rules (OFCOM, 2018b).

### **3.2 Previous research**

RT is also a topic within academic research, regarding its nature, function and objectives. Borchers (2011:92-93) views RT as a foreign political tool of Russia, given the Kremlin's strong media control and RT's strategic position in the international sphere. This may be illustrated by viewing three different examples. In his study, Borchers (2011) conducted a content analysis of RT's show "Spotlight", with focus on their coverage of Russian and Baltic relations. The analysis uncovered various strategies employed by RT, ranging from biased selections of topics and guests, partial angling and discreditation of political opponents.



According to Borchers (2011:104), the objective of such conduct is to present a grand narrative of Russia as the righteous part in the Baltic relations and isolate the Baltic states in international politics. Similarly, Hutchings et al. (2015) studied the competition between BBC World News and RT in their coverage of the 2014 Olympics and soon-following Crimean crisis. Through a discourse analysis, they found that RT covered the Olympics with a meta-narrative of Russophobia, claiming that critics of Russia were part of a western propaganda campaign (Hutchings et al., 2015:641). This narrative was later transferred to the emerging conflict in Crimea, with allegations that the West was distorting the situation in an attempt to preserve its hegemony (Hutchings et al., 2015:645). In addition, much of RT's coverage is openly critical to the US and its place in international politics. Cruikshank (2009) demonstrated this by comparing news coverage of the 2008 US election by Al Jazeera, BBC and RT. Her results showed that RT distinguished itself through its focus on possible faults in the electoral system and thus by putting its democratic legitimacy into question (Cruikshank, 2009:69).

Although these examples illustrate coverage of specific cases and conflicts, Shevtsova (2015:30-31) places RT in the larger propaganda machinery of the Kremlin, used to misinform the West, undermine western principles and create pro-Russian segments in foreign populations. According to Yablokov (2015:305-306), one of the organisation's main objectives is to challenge Anglo-saxon narratives and position itself as a source for stories neglected by western press. Pomerantsev (2014:19) follows these same lines, by characterising RT as an instrument behind Putin's wish to mobilise ideas and information in international politics. According to him, RT's editorial decisions and angles are made by Russian producers and editors, leaving foreign employees the job of making content seem authentic in native languages. Thus, when international conflicts emerge, Kremlin may use RT to flood the information sphere and distort perceptions of current events (Pomerantsev, 2014:20). The possible impact of this is perhaps facilitated by two different factors. Firstly, as noted by Rawnsley (2015:275), RT has adopted the style and approaches of its western counterparts and is thus increasingly being viewed as legitimate and credible by its audience. Secondly, RT's appeal and ability to flood the information sphere may be amplified by their apparent ideological eclecticism, whereby angles of left- and right-wing appeal are non-consistently mobilised to defend Russia or critique the West (Hutchings et al., 2015:642-643; Yablokov, 2015:306). Furthermore, this opportunistic approach to news results in frequent focus on

governmental conspiracies, criticism of the EU and international order, democratic deficits and the use of controversial figures as political experts (Pomerantsev, 2014:19-21; 2015:45).

The apparent ideological eclecticism may also be a symptom of RT as a tool of Russian soft power. The previously Borchers (2011:104-105) study views RT as an instrument for mediated public diplomacy, exploiting the power of media to influence foreign public opinions. According to Yablokov (2015:301, 306), RT works as a Russian PD tool by employing conspiracy theories aimed at both undermining the US and promoting Russia as an international actor. Similarly, Miazhevich (2018) recently explored how RT contributes to Russian soft power through nation branding. The results of the study indicate branding through a counter-hegemonic agenda, whereby Russia is branded by counter-attacks against Russian stereotypes, discreditation of opponents and omission of stories of negative value (Miazhevich, 2018:581-584, 589-590). Thus, several of the aforementioned studies seem to support Dougherty's (2013:96) and Rawnsley's (2015:281-282) assertions that RT is part of a multi-faceted and oppositional Russian approach to soft power. Although RT editor-in-chief Simonyan denies these assertions, the organisation can still contribute to Russian soft power unintentionally (Dougherty, 2013:53, 56-57).

However, it is important to note that while RT may, intentionally or unintentionally, be an instrument in Russia's pursuit of soft power, its successfulness to this end remains unclear (Borchers, 2011:105; Yablokov, 2015:310). This thesis will neither focus nor make assertions to explore this. Rather, it seeks to contribute to the growing research on RT by approaching the case from a network perspective. As the previous pages make clear, the majority of research hitherto has employed content-focused methods to explore RT in soft power perspectives. Thus, studying how RT interacts and transmits information through digital networks may contribute with yet another dimension of understanding to its possible soft power abilities. Perhaps of particular value, the thesis may contribute with accurate and detailed data on how RT and populations interact digitally.

### **3.3 Methodology**

In the following subsections the methodological foundation of this thesis will be presented. This starts with a section on methodology and corresponding method (3.3.1), before the process of data selection and -collection is described (3.3.2). Lastly, some initial remarks are provided on the quality and ethics of the thesis (3.3.3).

#### ***3.3.1 From methodology to method***

To ensure quality of research, there should be a degree of correspondence between one's methodological basis, including basic assumptions on the world, and method of approach (Moses & Knutsen, 2012:1-2). The social world can be argued to be constructed by countless patterns of interactions and relationships. These vary greatly in form and agency, and may be of a digital or physical nature, between various actors and with different types of connections. In this view, relations between actors constitute the basic building blocks of the world, with the aggregate product of this being social networks (Hansen et al., 2011:3, 32; Marin & Wellman, 2014:2). As previously mentioned, these networks are assumed to have the primary causal effect, determining the flow of information, nodes' outcomes, and network interaction.

Regarding the thesis' empirical approach, three points may be made from this. Firstly, the object of analysis will be RT's Twitter networks. As a result, this implies a naturalist approach, in which actual patterns of interactions and relationships are to be analysed, independently of subjective reflections and experiences (Moses & Knutsen, 2012:8, 49). Secondly, the structures and available positions of these networks will directly influence and possibly facilitate their usefulness in terms of pursuing soft power. This has two implications for this case study. The first implication is that it is not the internal attributes of nodes that are primarily relevant in this context, but rather the relational data between them. Furthermore, while not being able to directly measure abilities of soft power, studying networks in light of network metrics will provide a foundation from which inferences may be drawn towards such capabilities. Lastly and consequently, this requires a method with the ability to produce data which reflects the objective qualities of such networks.

Luckily, on this last note, a social network analysis is highly useful. Such analyses allow research to analyse social networks, with primary focus on quantitative patterns of social relationships and the possible implications of these (Hansen et al., 2011:3-4; Himelboim et al., 2014:361-363; Himelboim et al., 2013:199). This approach is therefore neatly suited for this thesis. One particular strength is that it removes the geographical barriers of traditional network analyses. Furthermore, the utilisation of NodeXL Pro facilitates highly accurate gathering of data on vast and existing RT networks (see 3.3.2 and 3.3.3) (Himelboim et al., 2013:219). This allows for the non-subjective approach which the ontological basis of this thesis demands. Perhaps most importantly, this approach has the ability to capture cross-national interaction and information transmission between RT and publics, which otherwise would not necessarily be visible (Marin & Wellman, 2014:6). Consequently, this method facilitates the ability of this thesis to study the case of RT in the thematic context of digital networks and soft power (Moses & Knutsen, 2012:133-134, 137).

Before moving on to the conceptual operationalisations of this case study, a note is warranted on the study of RT. As has been demonstrated previously, the theoretical basis of soft power and its associated means is vast. Additionally, soft power is, often, pursued covertly and thus hard to measure empirically. This thesis therefore attempts to provide more valid insight into the soft power abilities of RT by employing a “mimic” of triangulation in the form of the dissected sub-questions (Hancké, 2009:104). It is important to note “mimic” in this context, as the same method is employed throughout, but with three different points of focus: structural metrics, social mediators and efforts of interaction. These approaches will, successively and in combination, provide a deeper understanding of the main research question, than one approach could alone.

The first step of this triangulation is measuring the structural characteristics of RT networks. As previously mentioned, the information flow and interaction of networks are affected by their structural metrics, more specifically their interconnectedness. Thus, the interconnectedness of these networks will be operationalised in terms of *density*, *reciprocity* and *modularity*, calculated by NodeXL. Density ranges from 0 to 1 and measures the ratio between the network’s actual number of ties and number of potential ties. Reciprocity also ranges from 0 to 1 and measures the ratio between the network’s number of reciprocal ties and total number of

ties (Himmelboim, forthcoming:13; Ranjan & Sood, 2016:326). Both of these metrics share two characteristics. Firstly, the closer the score is to 1, the closer the density or reciprocity is to a perfect “100 percent” (e.g. all ties are reciprocated). Secondly, the metrics are thus highly relative in terms of network size and other networks. Hence, a baseline of comparison will be provided by including the corresponding Twitter networks of BBC World (see 3.3.2). Following the approaches of Himmelboim et al. (2013:205) and Himmelboim et al. (2014:370), clusteredness will be measured in terms of modularity, which indicates the quality of cluster divisions. The higher the score of modularity, being measured from 0 to 1, the more divided and fragmented the clusters are from the overall network. As this metric is less sensitive to network size, degree of modularity will be determined by the thresholds employed by the aforementioned studies. Thus, scores in the interval 0.0-0.4 indicate low, 0.4-0.6 moderate and 0.6-1.0 high modularity.

The next step is to identify and analyse the social mediators who contribute to the network reach of RT. This is executed over three stages. Firstly, following Himmelboim et al. (2014:370), social mediators shall be identified as bridging hubs by selecting users who occupy spots in the overlap between the top 2,5% of in-degree centrality and top 10% of betweenness centrality. In-degree centrality refers to the number of ties to a social mediator initiated by other nodes, and thus constitutes a measure of received attention. Betweenness centrality refers to how often a social mediator falls on the shortest path between other nodes (Himmelboim, forthcoming:9-10).

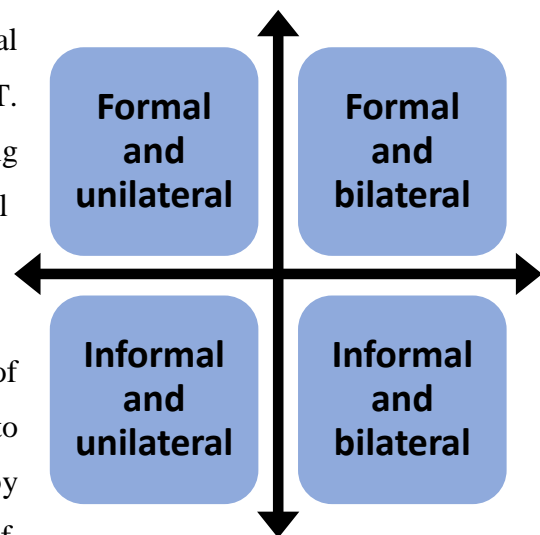


Figure 1. The main categories of the classification. Formality is measured along the y-axis and interdependence along the x-axis

In other words, it measures a mediator’s ability to bridge connections between other nodes in the network. In sum, then, nodes identified by this procedure are particularly attention receiving and capable in terms of bridging connections. Secondly, also following Himmelboim et al. (2014:362), these social mediators shall be further explored by classifying them along two different axes: *formality* and *interdependence*. Formality ranges from formal to informal. Formal refers to whether mediators constitute an organisation, are associated with an organisation or hold a role as information providers (such as news media). Informal mediators

are “grassroot”, fitting neither of the aforementioned criteria. These characteristics may therefore shed light on the mediating abilities of mediators. The process of determining formality follows the same procedure of content analysis as described in the next paragraph. Interdependence refers to a mediator’s involvement in the network, being unilateral (only passively available for interaction) or bilateral (allows for bilateral ties to be formed by also forming ties with others). As the latter mediators form ties with other nodes, these contribute more actively to RT networks. This is determined by examining out-degree centrality; the number of ties the social mediators have initiated with other nodes (Himmelboim, forthcoming:9). Thus, the cut-off point between uni- and bilateral nodes is a minimum of 1 out-degree centrality. In sum, this classification results in four main groups, as displayed by figure 1. Lastly, users that cannot be fully and accurately identified are categorised into the category of “unidentifiable”. A note on this procedure is warranted. As highly influential and attention receiving nodes, such as Donald Trump, are likely to be social mediators in many networks, there will likely be several duplicates in this data. However, these are included in the metrics, as mediators may have different roles and functions across networks.

Next, to further explore the social mediators, each of the four main groups are categorised further into sub-categories of specific actor types. Inspired by Himmelboim et al. (2014:370), this involves a content analysis to categorise mediators into the following sub-categories: *media*, *journalist*, *RT media*, *RT journalist*, *politician*, *government*, *international governmental organisation (IGO)*, *non-governmental organisation (NGO)* and *individual*. The first four categories are based on whether the mediators are official accounts of a media outlet, associated or independent journalists, or RT affiliated media channels and journalists. Politicians are nodes who hold active political roles in assemblies or governments. The next three are the accounts of official governmental branches or organisations (e.g. FBI or POTUS, the official, non-personal account for the US President), trans-national or supranational governmental organisations (e.g. EU, UN) and organisations without official governmental status or connection (e.g. Wikileaks). The last category, “individual”, is for mediators who display neither of the aforementioned characteristics and appear as personal accounts. Duplicates of each main group will be removed to clarify the distribution of unique actors within them. The data used for the content analysis is gathered primarily from the Twitter users’ profile descriptions and cross-referenced with hyperlinks provided by their profiles and google searches (Himmelboim et al., 2014:370).

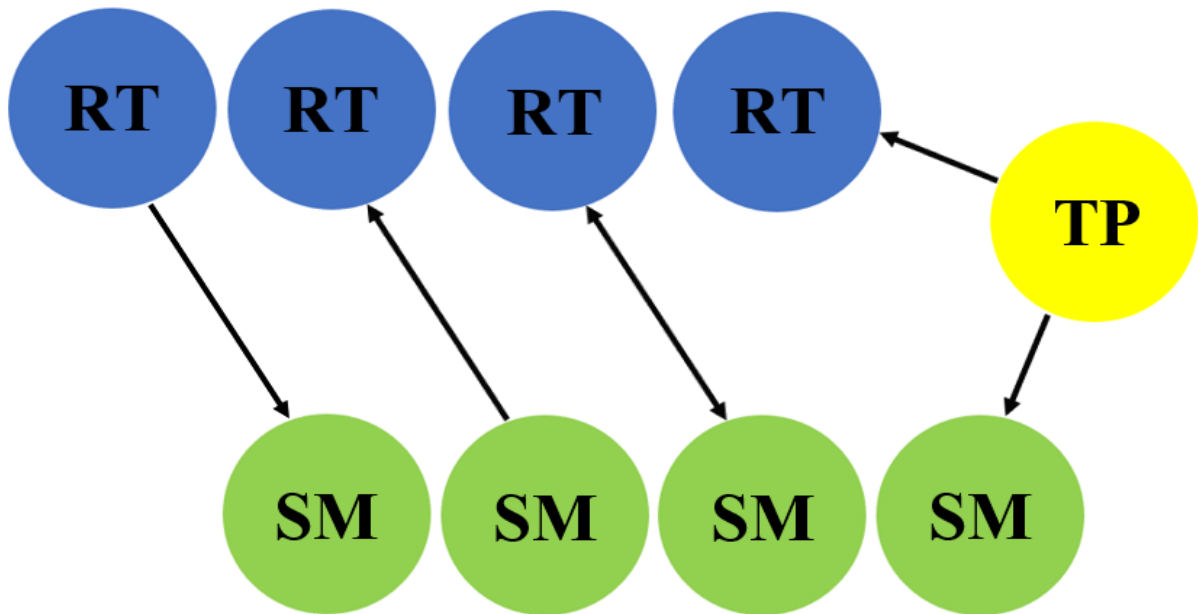


Figure 2. Types of connections between RT and social mediators (SM). From left to right: initiated by RT; initiated with RT; reciprocal; example of connection bridged by third-party (TP).

The last approach is to analyse how RT interacts with their social mediators and networks in general. Such data will shed light on RT's efforts to extend their networks and interact with others. Also this approach is executed over three steps. The first picks up where the former approach left off, with focus on how RT is tied to and interacts with social mediators in its networks. This is done by analysing and categorising RT's connections with mediators into four distinct categories: *reciprocal*, *initiated with RT*, *initiated by RT* and *third-party*. These categories therefore differ in whether ties are *reciprocal* (two-way), their *direction* (initiated with or by RT) or if they are *indirect* (i.e. connected via third-parties) (figure 2). As this involves utilising the sub-categorisation from the previous paragraph, unidentifiable social mediators are excluded. Duplicates, on the other hand, are not, as mediators may be tied to RT differently across networks, and as each tie to the same user is relevant for the overall picture. Lastly, the distribution of actor types (e.g. NGO or individual) in each category of ties is analysed. The second step is to measure RT's general network activity in terms of out-degree centrality, measuring the number of ties directed from RT to other users. The final step involves collecting RT's most frequently employed hashtags (#example) in each of the networks. NodeXL limits this to the top ten most frequently employed. As hashtags constitute active means of creating groupings and engaging in discussions on Twitter, this provides valuable insight into RT's active attempts to engage with others in their networks (Fisher, 2010:60-63). By extent, this

may partly provide the same function as social mediators, in terms of extending the size and reach of one's networks. To put this into perspective, the same data is produced on BBC World to provide a baseline for comparison.

### ***3.3.2 Selecting and collecting data***

The first step of collecting data was to select an RT Twitter account to use for the analysis. This initial choice was to be made between the multiple Twitter accounts run or associated with RT, ranging from language specific news accounts to accounts of certain programmes and shows (Twitter, undated-c). Although both the Spanish and Arabic RT accounts are larger at the dates of data collection, the choice landed on the Twitter account @RT\_Com, by two considerations. Firstly, the account is not directed towards any specific nations or linguistic communities. Thus, this provides reason to believe that this account has the potential to draw the most attention of publics in an international perspective. Secondly, according to Golan and Himelboim (2016:1157), English is both the most common language on Twitter and the most frequent language among social mediators in non-English speaking nations. This choice therefore neatly complimented this thesis, as it potentially includes wider audiences and major social mediators.

As previously described, a baseline for comparison is needed with regard to providing meaning to the structural metrics of RT networks and their network behaviour. The next step was therefore to select a Twitter account that provides a useful baseline. Following Hutchings et al. (2015), the choice landed on the international branch of BBC, @BBCWorld. As @RT, this account is not targeted towards any specific nations. Furthermore, BBC World can be claimed to carry two further characteristics which makes it suited for this task. In terms of funding, BBC receives its funding from the British government and various other organisations (BBC, undated). This is therefore another characteristic it shares with RT. Lastly, in response to the OFCOM investigations, Russia has responded by launching a similar investigation into BBC World News (BBC, 2018). A case can therefore be made, without regard to its accuracy or credibility, that BBC World News may be a utility of Great Britain's soft power machinery.

Before collecting data on these accounts, the networks for analysis must first be defined. Unimodal and multiplex networks were chosen as a point of departure, as Twitter only includes



one type of node (e.g. Twitter accounts), but several types of ties (i.e. follow-relationships, likes, mentions, replies and retweets) (Hansen et al., 2011:36-37). However, due to restrictions in data processing capacity and relevancy, follow-relationships were excluded from the analysis, as other ties are better indicators of information flow and active engagement (Golan & Himelboim, 2016:1157). In other words, while follow-relationships indicate that users have chosen, reciprocally or not, to associate with each other, this does not indicate that the users actually interact and pay attention to each other's activity. Additionally, the networks are of a directed character, meaning that the directions of ties are specified in the data. Furthermore, to explore RT's Twitter networks in-depth, two different types of networks were included. Firstly, community networks were chosen, which map all ties including a specific *handle* (username) (e.g. retweets, likes, mentions or replies to @RT\_Com) (NodeXL, undated). Thus, such networks are of a general scope, as they do not pay attention to the thematic content of interactions. Next, several topic networks were included. These networks are constituted by nodes interacting over specific topics, determined by keywords, hashtags or hyperlinks (Himmelboim et al., 2013:199). Such networks were therefore included to analyse networks built around specific handles and topics and thus diversify the collected data.

The last step before data collection was to determine which topic networks were to be included for analysis. As it is the patterns of interactions and structure of networks that are in focus, the thematic value of topics themselves are not important. Thus, this allowed for a pragmatic approach to choosing topics. Topics were selected by two steps. Firstly, keywords were intuitively chosen based on large incidents and topics in recent international news. Secondly, these topics were kept if they produced networks of a minimum of 350 nodes for both RT and BBC World. This resulted in the following keywords paired with the respective handles (@RT\_Com or @BBCWorld): *Brexit, Trump, Assange, Notre-Dame, Venezuela, Russia, Brazil* and *Israel* (e.g. "@RT\_Com Brexit"). Networks collected by this manner will thus include all interaction (e.g. retweets and likes) and tweets (e.g. replies and mentions) that mention these keywords and the Twitter handle in focus. For example, the topic networks of "Notre-Dame" are likely all in reference to the tragic fire in April 2019, paired with a reference to either RT or BBC World. In contrast, the "Trump networks" likely include several different discussions. In sum, this selection produced a total of 18 networks (including the community networks), with nine for each handle. These networks and their structural metrics are presented by table 2.

All data was collected during the days between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of April, 2019, by utilising NodeXL Pro, a powerful digital tool of network analysis. The programme is an open source Microsoft Excel addon, which allows users to directly collect, analyse and visualise data from social mediums such as Twitter (Himmelboim et al., 2013:196, 202). Data was collected using the tool's "import from Twitter search network" function, which excludes follow-relationships and allows both community- and topic networks to be collected. Four restrictions in terms of data amount may be mentioned here. Firstly, the search import produces network boundaries based on whether users have interacted with the topics and/or handles. Secondly, to provide the analysis with data that was processable and visually intuitive, the number of tweets were limited to 1500 tweets for topic networks and 2000 tweets for community networks (Hansen et al., 2011:47). Thirdly, there is a date limit when NodeXL imports data. However, whether this limit is "up to a month or so", as Himmelboim et al. (2013:202) reports, or nine days, as according to the Social Media Research Foundation (2018), is unclear. Part of the reason for this is that an inspection of the collected data demonstrated that while the majority of data stemmed from recent dates, some data entries are dated to both months and years prior the date of collection. This should therefore be noted. Lastly, NodeXL was instructed to merge duplicate ties, if the data included several instances of identical ties in terms of nodes and tweet content.

Lastly, as previously described, the research questions are approached in terms of several data metrics. An automated sequence was developed to produce these metrics for all networks. Furthermore, different algorithms provided by NodeXL were used to detect network clusters and visually present the data. Following Himmelboim et al. (2013:205) and Himmelboim et al. (2014:370), the Clauset-Newman-Moore algorithm was used to identify clusters. The algorithm essentially groups highly connected nodes into clusters by maximising the aforementioned value of modularity (Berry, Hendrickson, Laviolette, & Phillips, 2011:1, 4-5). The Fruchterman-Reingold algorithm was used to visualise the networks, mainly by organising nodes by their ties and clusters (Gajdoš, Jeżowicz, Uher, & Dohnálek, 2016:57-58).

### ***3.3.3 Remarks on quality and ethics***

Before moving on to the results of the analysis, a few initial notes on quality and ethics should be made. By starting with quality, NodeXL provides a highly accurate and efficient collection of network data, and thus potentially increases both the reliability and validity of the thesis

(Bryman, 2016:41, 156-158; Himelboim et al., 2013:219; Ringdal, 2013:96-97; Skog, 2013:89). Additionally, this minimises the personal self-report bias that survey approaches to network analyses can be vulnerable to (Himmelboim et al., 2013:200; Marsden, 2005:10). The measurement process can therefore be viewed as reliable, but may nevertheless be at risk to user deficiencies or errors. One possible source of measurement error may be detected in potential overlaps between the collected Twitter networks. For instance, networks may be interlinked, as several topics may be touched upon in individual tweets. NodeXL does not control for this. However, the treatment of these networks provides little reason to fear considerable error from this. In terms of social mediators, the criteria from which these are detected will ensure that only users with considerable attention and bridging abilities will be selected. Thus, while a node may function as a social mediator in one network, it will not necessarily carry such a significant role in interlinked networks. And, in case the same node has this function in several networks, this is also relevant for the mapping of social mediators. In terms of structure, the inclusion of several networks may minimise the effect of possible random measurement errors (Ringdal, 2013:97). In sum, this may increase the thesis' potential for "test-retest reliability" (Bryman, 2016:156-157).

Furthermore, while supported by a substantial theoretical foundation, the validity of the study may be vulnerable to little variety in data. As noted by Himelboim et al. (2013:200), triangulation is an efficient tool to increase the accuracy of data measurement and analysis. In the case of RT, this could be handled either by studying RT's conduct across different social media, to triangulate the data, or by combining different methods, such as content analysis. However, as this regrettably goes beyond what is practically feasible for this thesis, this is sought to be corrected by applying a "mimic" of triangulation. In terms of content validity, it is important to note that the theoretical foundation of this thesis is not applied to determine the nature of RT, but to interpret and draw inferences to their network- and possible soft power abilities. Thus, as both the method and theory is inspired by former research and various theoretical angles, the content validity is viewed as satisfactory for this task (Ringdal, 2013:98). In addition, when applying content analysis to categorise social mediators, self-reported descriptions on Twitter may be inaccurate, providing a reliability challenge. However, cross-referencing of this information with the hyperlinks provided by their profiles and general google searches may detect inaccuracies and minimise this possible source of error.

Another important note to make is how the concept of causality is to be treated in this analysis (Skog, 2013:23). While network structure and RT's network behaviour may carry significant implications as to how such networks may foster relationship building, information flow and communication, it does not imply any explicit or necessary connections with concepts or abilities of soft power. Thus, the empirical data presented in the next section is analysed in terms of network metrics. The data then provides a foundation for the discussion (4.0), in which descriptive inferences will be drawn between the results and soft power concepts (Burnham, Lutz, Grant, & Layton-Henry, 2008:172-173). In other words, this constitutes an explorative approach to RT's possible abilities of soft power. Related, a possible weakness of this thesis is its limit in time span. In an ideal situation, the network activity of RT could be tracked over a considerable period of time and thus provide a more accurate basis for deriving consistent patterns. However, the time scope of this thesis did not allow for such long-term measurements. This is therefore sought to be compensated by applying considerable width to the analysis, in terms of collecting several networks across different topics. An ultimate consequence of this a reduction of generalisability. This is viewed as acceptable, though, as the generalising ability of case studies are, by nature, limited (Hancké, 2009:61; Moses & Knutsen, 2012:141). The upcoming results should therefore not be interpreted as inferences to general trends independent of time, but rather to differences in the collected data.

Lastly, in terms of ethics, there are few, if any, concerns related to the empirical work of this thesis. As the analysis will soon reveal, there is no sensitive data exposed. A select number of Twitter accounts will be referred to by personal names, but this information and the link between it and the account is made publicly available by the respective users. Furthermore, and perhaps even more important to emphasise, all data employed is available by individuals' explicit and implicit consent. When joining social networking sites such as Twitter and interacting within the networks they provide, users explicitly agree to have their information publicly available and all network interaction is implicitly consented to become traces of their online activity. Thus, while retaining focus on discretion and restricting data collection to what is required for analysis, there is little concern of violating personal rights or unnecessary exposure of individuals.

### 3.4 Results

In the following subsection the results of the analysis will be presented, structured by the chronology of the aforementioned sub-questions. This starts with a closer view on the structural properties of RT networks (3.4.1), followed by an examination of RT's social mediators and the actors who assume these roles (3.4.2). Lastly, the focus is shifted towards how these mediators are connected to RT and their networks, before the results section is rounded up with RT's general network activity and interaction (3.4.3).

Table 1 below demonstrates descriptive statistics of RT's and BBC World's Twitter accounts (Twitter, undated-a, undated-b). Though not directly linked to the dissected sub-questions, the table overall demonstrates different levels of activity on Twitter. BBC World attracts a substantially higher number of followers on Twitter. The number of "following" and "likes" shows how many different users the organisations have tied themselves to by actively subscribing to or interacting with their content. In this regard, RT displays much higher activity, both by the numbers themselves and in comparison with their respective pools of followers. This impression is further reinforced by their numbers of published tweets and ratio of tweets published per day.

|                        | <b>@RT_Com</b>                 | <b>@BBCWorld</b>                |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>Following</i>       | 626                            | 70                              |
| <i>Followers</i>       | 2 750 604                      | 24 869 965                      |
| <i>Tweets</i>          | 298 800                        | 292 782                         |
| <i>Likes</i>           | 892                            | 12                              |
| <i>Date of joining</i> | August 11 <sup>th</sup> , 2009 | February 1 <sup>st</sup> , 2007 |
| <i>Tweets/day</i>      | 84.65                          | 67.76                           |

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of respectively @RT\_Com and @BBCWorld, as of 10.04.2019.

### 3.4.1 What does the structure of RT Twitter networks indicate about their internal flow of information and interaction?

The results of the analysis in terms of network structure are presented in table 2 (note that the table stretches over two pages). A few initial comments may be made from this. Despite the substantial difference in “followers”, the number of nodes in the collected networks are fairly similar, averaging with a mean total of 106 more nodes in the RT networks. A possible explanation for this disproportionality is the generally higher activity of RT on Twitter, reflected by table 1. This aside, the metrics on density and reciprocity are, as mentioned, relative with regard to network size. Thus, the following interpretations of these metrics will take this into account.

| <b>Network</b>    |                    | <b>@RT_com</b> | <b>@BBCWorld</b> |
|-------------------|--------------------|----------------|------------------|
| <b>Community</b>  | <i>Nodes</i>       | 2209           | 2498             |
|                   | <i>Density</i>     | 0.0008         | 0.0008           |
|                   | <i>Reciprocity</i> | 0.0241         | 0.0166           |
|                   | <i>Modularity</i>  | 0.4544         | 0.5819           |
| <b>Brexit</b>     | <i>Nodes</i>       | 354            | 1057             |
|                   | <i>Density</i>     | 0.0040         | 0.0023           |
|                   | <i>Reciprocity</i> | 0.0040         | 0.0070           |
|                   | <i>Modularity</i>  | 0.5921         | 0.5331           |
| <b>Trump</b>      | <i>Nodes</i>       | 1620           | 1675             |
|                   | <i>Density</i>     | 0.0010         | 0.0010           |
|                   | <i>Reciprocity</i> | 0.0141         | 0.0129           |
|                   | <i>Modularity</i>  | 0.4320         | 0.4770           |
| <b>Assange</b>    | <i>Nodes</i>       | 1395           | 977              |
|                   | <i>Density</i>     | 0.0012         | 0.0017           |
|                   | <i>Reciprocity</i> | 0.0033         | 0.0113           |
|                   | <i>Modularity</i>  | 0.4966         | 0.5496           |
| <b>Notre-dame</b> | <i>Nodes</i>       | 1278           | 1451             |
|                   | <i>Density</i>     | 0.0008         | 0.0007           |
|                   | <i>Reciprocity</i> | 0              | 0                |
|                   | <i>Modularity</i>  | 0.3042         | 0.1461           |
| <b>Venezuela</b>  | <i>Nodes</i>       | 878            | 770              |
|                   | <i>Density</i>     | 0.0019         | 0.0016           |
|                   | <i>Reciprocity</i> | 0.0139         | 0.0064           |

|                        |                    |        |        |
|------------------------|--------------------|--------|--------|
|                        | <i>Modularity</i>  | 0.4663 | 0.4555 |
| <b>Russia</b>          | <i>Nodes</i>       | 1389   | 667    |
|                        | <i>Density</i>     | 0.0009 | 0.0043 |
|                        | <i>Reciprocity</i> | 0.0023 | 0.0021 |
|                        | <i>Modularity</i>  | 0.3353 | 0.4715 |
| <b>Brazil</b>          | <i>Nodes</i>       | 400    | 380    |
|                        | <i>Density</i>     | 0.0025 | 0.0037 |
|                        | <i>Reciprocity</i> | 0.0050 | 0      |
|                        | <i>Modularity</i>  | 0.1280 | 0.4189 |
| <b>Israel</b>          | <i>Nodes</i>       | 1545   | 859    |
|                        | <i>Density</i>     | 0.0008 | 0.0023 |
|                        | <i>Reciprocity</i> | 0.0152 | 0.0188 |
|                        | <i>Modularity</i>  | 0.4662 | 0.5253 |
| <b>MEAN<br/>VALUES</b> | <i>Nodes</i>       | 1254   | 1148   |
|                        | <i>Density</i>     | 0.0015 | 0.0020 |
|                        | <i>Reciprocity</i> | 0.0091 | 0.0083 |
|                        | <i>Modularity</i>  | 0.4083 | 0.4621 |

*Table 2. Network metrics for @RT\_com and @BBCWorld. The table starts with the community networks of both channels. The following rows are topic networks for each channel, with the keyword marked by the leftmost column. The bottom row lists mean average metrics for each channel.*

The first metric to be interpreted is density. By reviewing the mean values, it becomes apparent that BBC World has slightly denser networks on average, with 0.0005 separating the two news organisations. However, considering the relativity of both this difference and the difference in average network size, this margin is put into question. RT’s higher mean average of nodes may contribute to this observation. By inspecting these values further, there appears to be a pattern where the largest networks produce the lowest density, with exception to the community networks and topics of Trump and Venezuela. This also fits with expectations, as density is highly affected by network size. Despite this, two instances contribute to reinforce the interpretation of BBC World having the most dense networks. Firstly, the Trump networks produce equal density. However, the BBC world network is larger by 55 nodes, making the network relatively more dense. Secondly and more significantly, BBC World has a larger community network than RT by 289 nodes, but both community networks produce equal density. As community networks are samples drawn from the totality of the organisations’

Twitter networks, this signals that BBC World may, on average, produce slightly more dense networks than RT.

The next metric to be interpreted is reciprocity. By once again starting with the mean values, RT has a higher average reciprocity score by 0.0008, compared to BBC World. While this does not imply a considerable difference, the interpretation is further reinforced by RT's higher average network size. RT's reciprocity rate is also higher in six of the total nine sets of networks, including the community networks. On the other hand, in the Brexit networks, BBC World has the highest number of both nodes and rates of reciprocity (703 more nodes, 0.0030 higher reciprocity). However, this is to a degree mirrored in the Russia networks, where the opposite is the case (RT has 722 more nodes and 0.0002 higher reciprocity). Thus, overall in the collected data, these numbers suggest that RT does indeed have networks that are characterised by higher rates of reciprocated ties than the baseline of BBC World, indicating higher rates of two-way information exchanges and interactions.

Modularity is less sensitive to network size and should thus be easier to interpret. In terms of mean values, both news organisations display values that are within the moderate modularity range. However, BBC World has a mean average score of 0.0538 higher than RT, indicating higher clusteredness in BBC World networks. RT, by comparison, is above the cut-off line to *low* modularity by a mere 0.0083. This interpretation is further reinforced by inspecting the community network metrics, where BBC World displays values close to high modularity (0.5819) and RT is firmly placed in the moderate spectre (0.4544). The RT networks only attain a moderately high value in the Brexit topic network (0.5921), but fall below the moderate line in the networks on Notre-Dame (0.3042), Russia (0.3343) and Brazil (0.1280). In total, this data suggests that RT has less clustered networks than BBC World, indicating less fragmentation in terms of social groupings.

In sum, several points may be derived from this in relation to the flow of information and interaction in RT networks. As RT displays less fragmentation through lower modularity, this serves to shed further doubt upon the difference in density between RT and BBC World. Thus, treating both with practically equal degrees of density, RT's networks may be viewed as equally



efficient in transmitting information. With lower modularity, RT's networks may also display less tendencies towards selective exposure groups and consist of less diverse social groupings and opinions. In other words, this may indicate a more cohesive online community. Lastly, given equality in density, the higher rates of reciprocity in RT networks may indicate more relationship building, two-way interactions and trust, compared to BBC World.

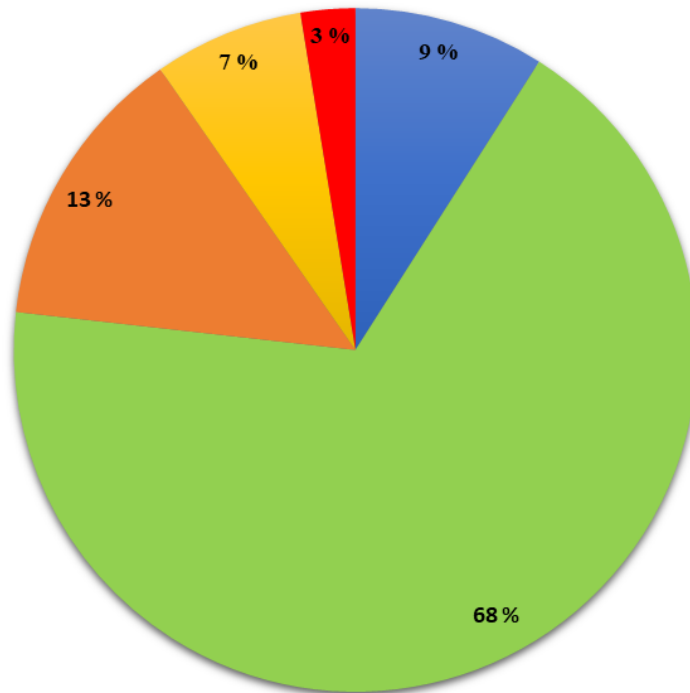
### 3.4.2 What characterises the social mediators in RT Twitter networks?

As previously mentioned, social mediators, conceptualised by this thesis as bridging hubs, function as mediums through which new network connections may be made. As these nodes are identified based on the level of attention they receive and their bridging abilities, they may aid RT by extending the reach of their networks and thus potentially provide grounds for influence and new relationships. The procedure of identifying RT's social mediators and classifying them along the lines of formality and interdependence produced a total number of 155 mediators. This data is represented in its totality by table 3 and by respective shares of percentage in figure 3.

|                   | <b>Formal and bilateral</b> | <b>Formal and unilateral</b> | <b>Informal and bilateral</b> | <b>Informal and unilateral</b> | <b>Unidentifiable</b> |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Community</b>  | 2                           | 14                           | 3                             | 0                              | 0                     |
| <b>Assange</b>    | 3                           | 10                           | 1                             | 1                              | 1                     |
| <b>Brazil</b>     | 0                           | 6                            | 2                             | 0                              | 1                     |
| <b>Brexit</b>     | 1                           | 2                            | 0                             | 0                              | 1                     |
| <b>Israel</b>     | 2                           | 22                           | 3                             | 3                              | 1                     |
| <b>Notre-dame</b> | 3                           | 16                           | 6                             | 7                              | 0                     |
| <b>Russia</b>     | 1                           | 12                           | 1                             | 0                              | 0                     |
| <b>Trump</b>      | 1                           | 15                           | 3                             | 0                              | 0                     |
| <b>Venezuela</b>  | 1                           | 8                            | 2                             | 0                              | 0                     |
| <b>Total</b>      | 14                          | 105                          | 21                            | 11                             | 4                     |

*Table 3. Number of social mediators identified by networks (rows) and category (columns). The bottom row represents the total number for social mediators by category.*

## Social mediators, by percentage



■ **Formal and bilateral**   ■ **Formal and unilateral**   ■ **Informal and bilateral**  
■ **Informal and unilateral**   ■ **Unidentifiable**

Figure 3. Categories of social mediators, displayed in a pie-chart by respective shares of percentage.

The first results to be emphasised in this context are the differences in size between the categories. Luckily for this analysis, the smallest and least significant category was “unidentifiable”, consisting of three percent of the total social mediators. While these four nodes may have displayed identifiable activity in the networks, this data is excluded as they were not possible to identify in terms of formality. The second smallest group of mediators were the informal and unilateral nodes, constituting seven percent of the total sample. Thus, this group consist of grassroot actors who remain inactive in the networks. Next, the group of formal and bilateral mediators were the third largest, with nine percent of the total sample. The second largest group, with 13 percent, were the informal, bilateral mediators. In other words, a larger share of the grassroot mediators assumed active rather than passive roles in RT networks. Lastly, the largest group was formal and unilateral, constituting a clear majority with 68 percent of the total sample.

Further insights are gained from these results by lifting the point of focus to the two main lines of classification: formality and interdependence. By starting with formality, it is clear that the formal groups by far outweigh the informal groups, with a total of 77 percent of social mediators. The informal groups, on the other hand, constitute a mere 20 percent. Though the difference between formal and informal mediators is large, it is also an expected outcome of such an analysis. This may be clarified by three reasons. Firstly, grassroots actors are, arguably, less influential than formal actors, whether these are media outlets, politicians or NGOs. Thus, they possibly receive less attention than formal actors. Secondly, following the same line of reasoning, formal actors may receive a lot of attention in networks, reinforcing their positions as hubs. Thirdly, such influential actors likely possess higher amounts of followers in their respective networks, thus increasing their ability to bridge connections between formerly unconnected nodes. In sum, it is therefore an expected result, which may also have large implications for the size and outreach of RT networks.

In terms of interdependence, a clear majority of RT's social mediators (75 percent) assume unilateral, or passive, roles in their networks. These mediators are therefore performing the role of bridging hubs, but have received these roles by neither contributing with content nor actively interacting with other nodes of the networks. By contrast, the most active, or bilateral, group of social mediators are informal. This is especially apparent as they constitute the second largest group overall, and also a substantially larger share of the total amount of informal actors compared to the ratio between uni- and bilateral formal actors. In other words, formal actors are the least active social mediators in the collected RT networks, while grassroots mediators assume the most active roles. The latter may also be viewed as more representative mediators for online publics.

In sum, it is thus far clear that the majority of RT mediators are formal, unilateral and likely efficient bridging hubs, while grassroots mediators partake most actively. Next, further insight may be gained by exploring the distribution of different sub-categories of actors in these four main groups of social mediators. This involved removing all unidentifiable and duplicate mediators, resulting in a reduction from 155 to 116 mediators. The result of this sub-categorisation is represented in bar-charts by figure 4-7 (note different scales on y-axes).

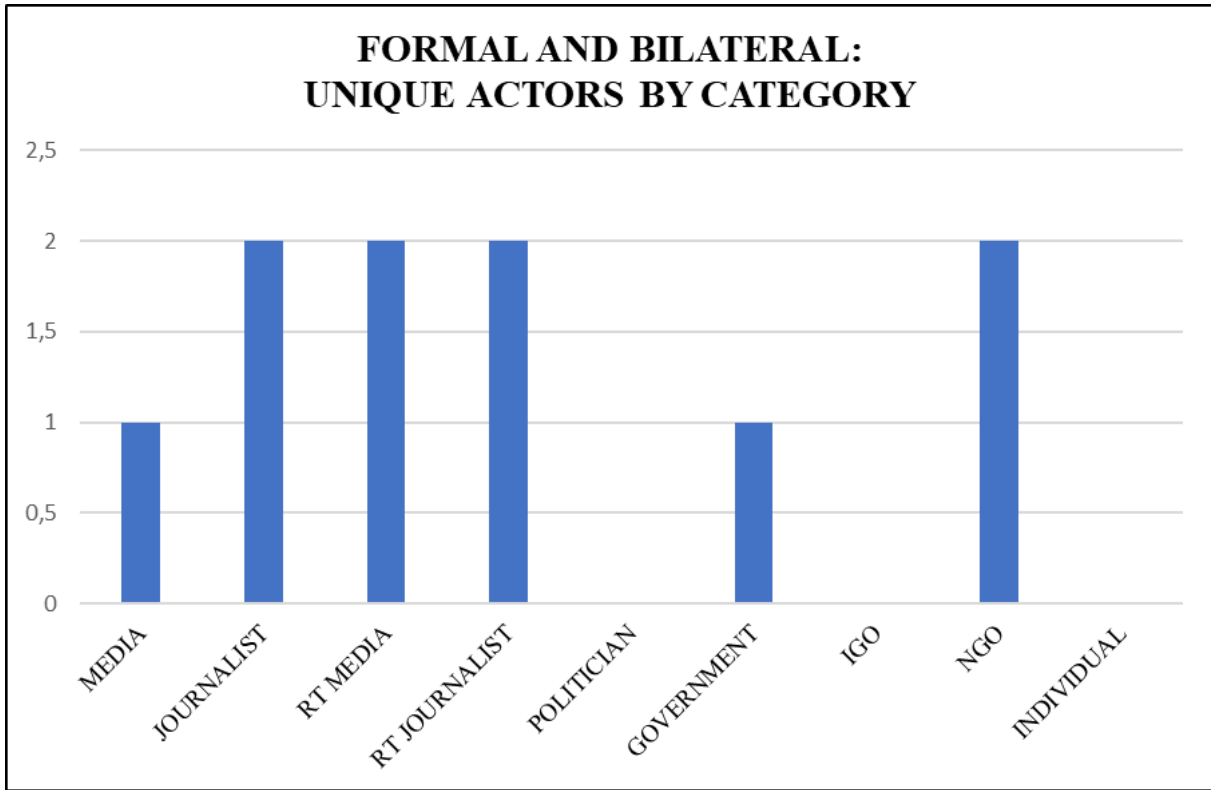


Figure 4. Bar chart of formal and bilateral social mediators, sub-categorised by actor type. Minimum value is 0, maximum is 2.

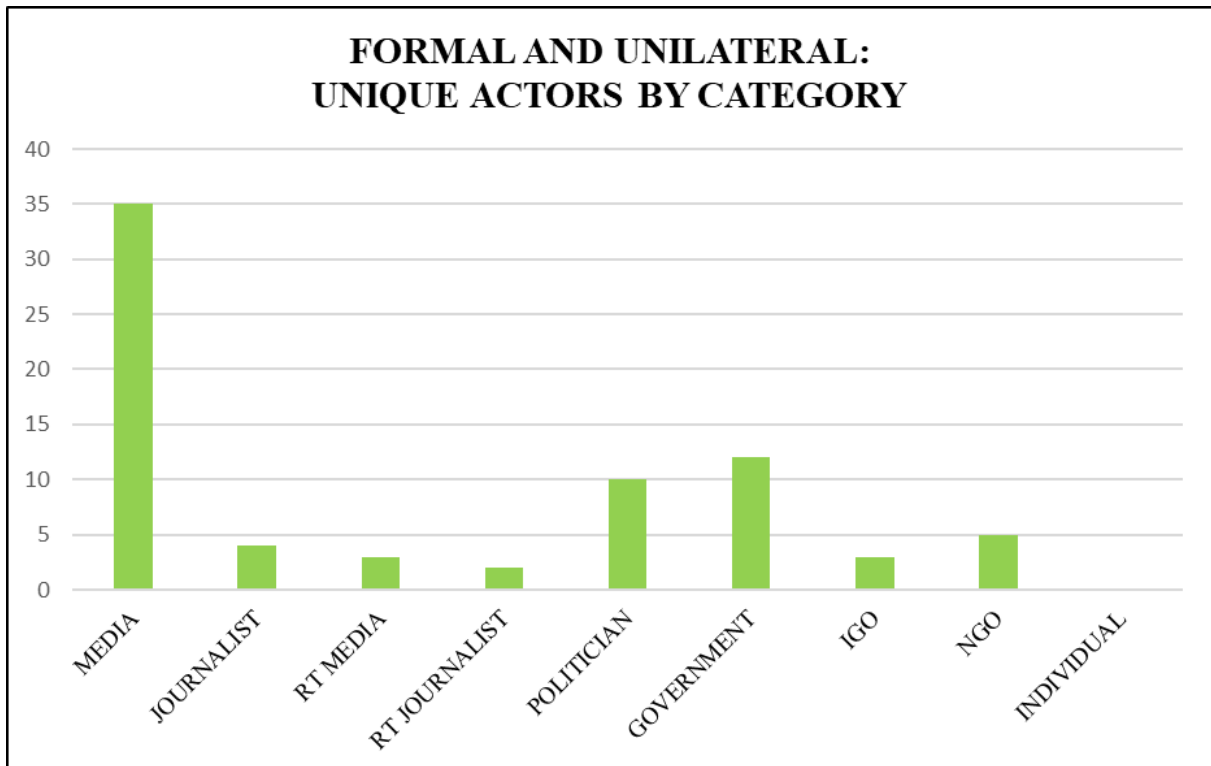


Figure 5. Bar chart of formal and unilateral social mediators, sub-categorised by actor type. Minimum value is 0, maximum is 35.

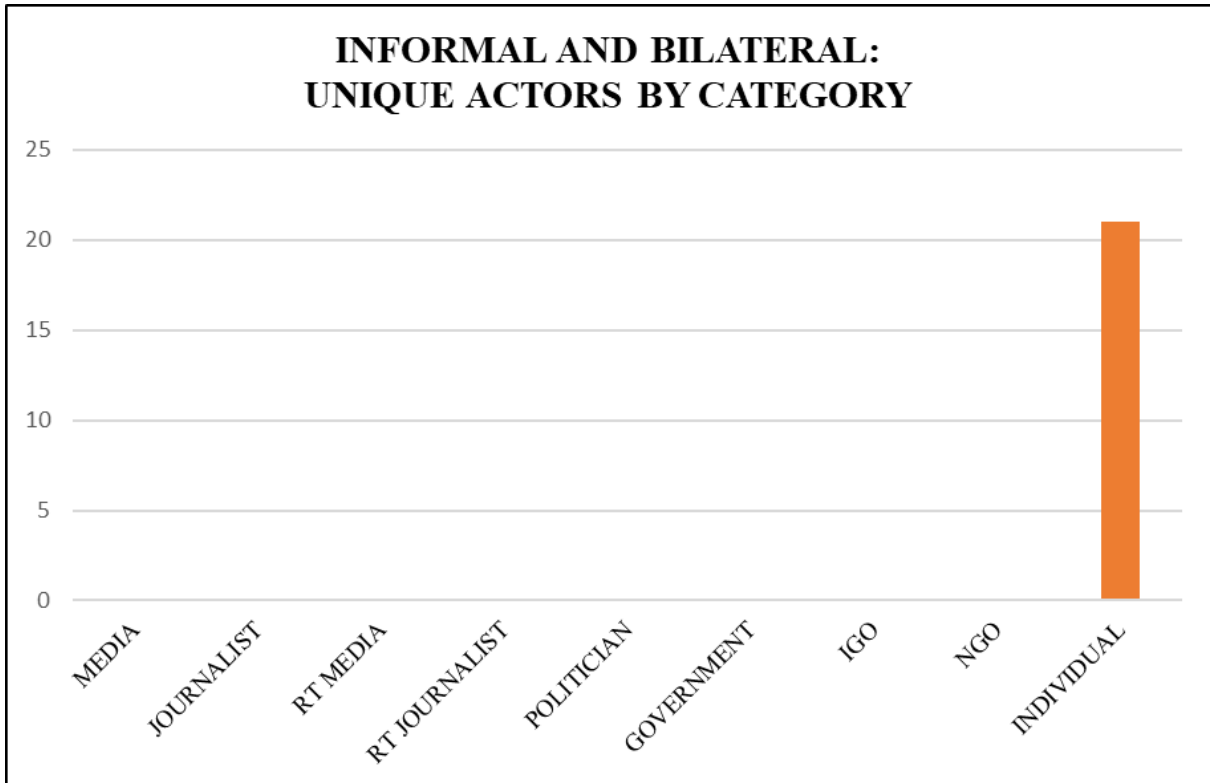


Figure 6. Bar chart of informal and bilateral social mediators, sub-categorised by actor type. Minimum value is 0, maximum is 21.

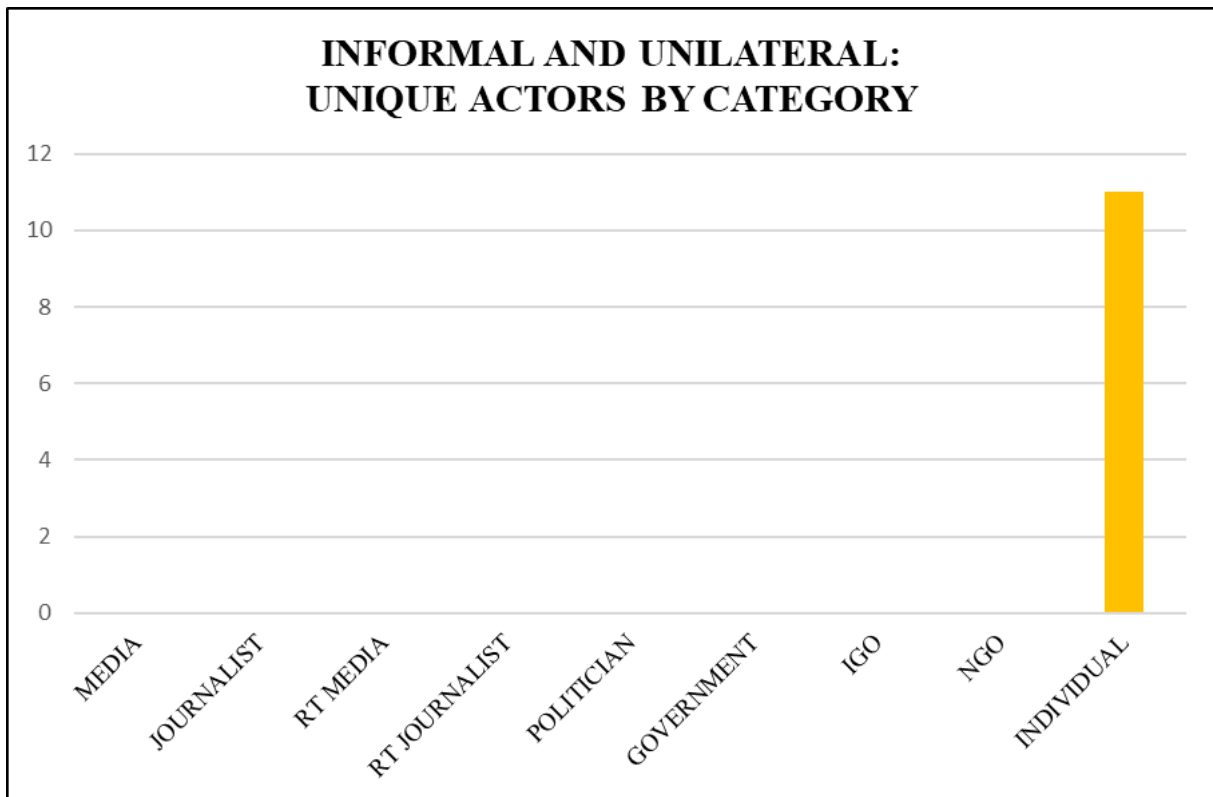


Figure 7. Bar chart of informal and unilateral social mediators, sub-categorised by actor type. Minimum value is 0, maximum is 11.

By starting with the group of formal and bilateral mediators (figure 4), it becomes clear that, though few, journalists, NGOs and RT affiliated journalists and -media outlets were the most active formal social mediators in the collected networks. In contrast, no politicians or IGOs assumed active roles as mediators in these networks, despite there being several of them in total (figure 5). Next, in the formal and unilateral group (figure 5), media constitutes the largest sub-category, and also the largest across all four the main groups. As these mediators are both hubs receiving much attention and network bridges with large audiences, they likely serve to passively connect RT with their respective networks and followers. Two additional points are worth to emphasise in this group. Firstly, after media, politicians and governmental mediators constitute the largest sub-categories. By the same logic as the bridging ability of the aforementioned media nodes, these are likely efficient bridges to the populations they represent. Secondly, media outlets and journalists associated with RT are also represented in this group. However, perhaps surprisingly, though an equal amount of RT journalists are bi- and unilateral, more RT media nodes assumed passive rather than active roles.

Lastly, some of the previous results are underlined by the groups of uni- and bilateral informal actors (figure 6-7). Perhaps interestingly, neither of these groups had duplicates, meaning that new individuals assumed social mediator roles for each collected network. Furthermore, across all the groups and subcategories, bilateral individuals constituted the second largest sub-category of social mediators, with a total of 21 nodes. Unilateral individuals, on the other hand, is the fourth largest, just behind the sub-category of unilateral government mediators, with 11 nodes. This seems to underline the notion that RT networks are efficient in attracting grassroots individuals as social mediators.

### ***3.4.3 How does RT interact with their mediators and publics in Twitter networks?***

As previously mentioned, this sub-question involves three different steps. One of these continues where the former sub-section left of, by analysing how RT connects and interacts with its social mediators. Therefore, this is presented firstly. Next, data on RT's general network activity is presented in comparison with BBC World, both in terms of out-degree centrality and use of hashtags. For illustrational purposes, below is the RT topic network "Assange" (figure 8).

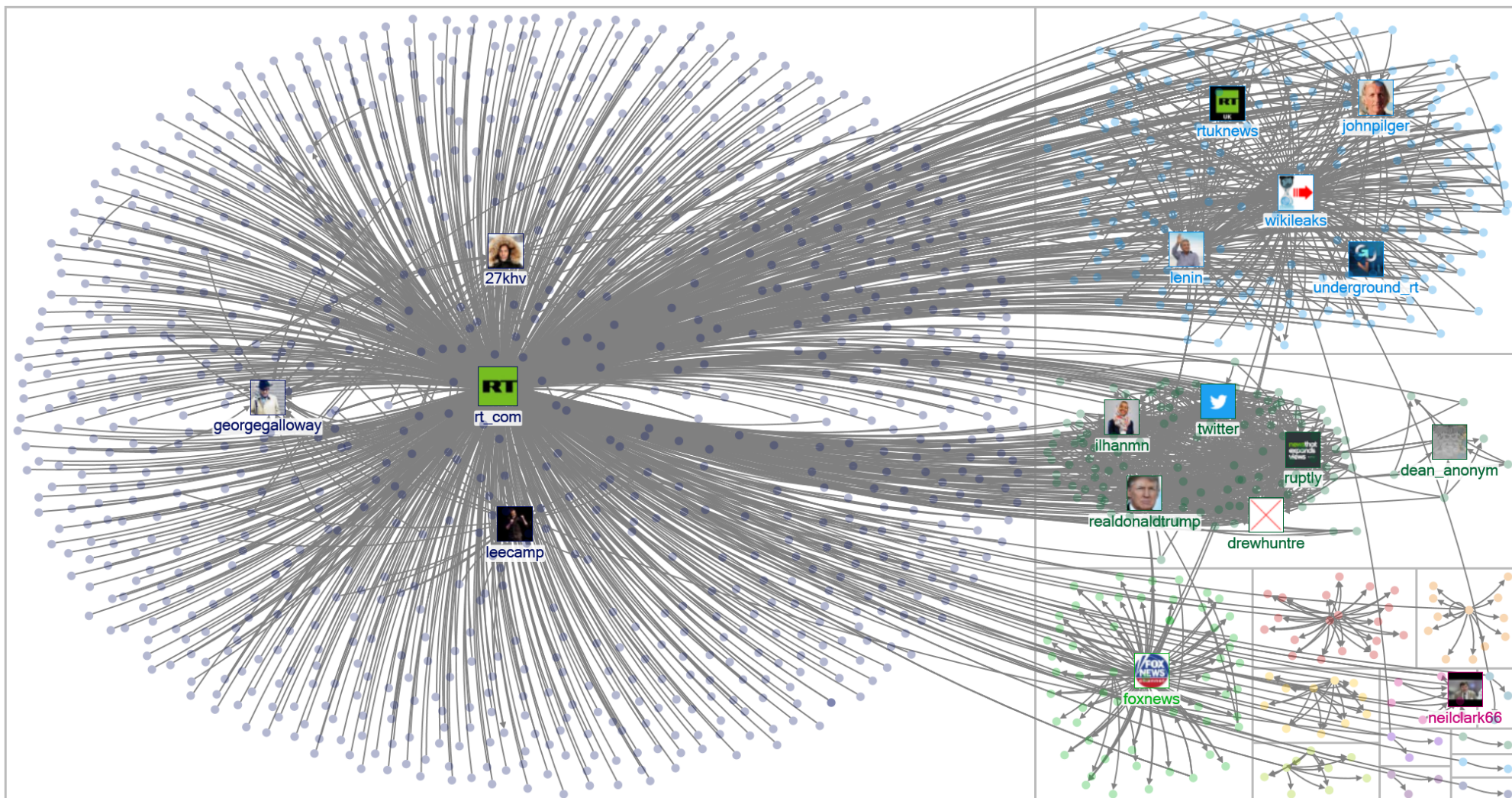


Figure 8. The RT topic network “Assange”, generated by NODEXL and consisting of 1395 nodes. Clusters are divided by the vertical and horizontal lines. RT\_com is the centre of the largest cluster. Social mediators are labelled with name and profile pictures from their Twitter accounts. Other nodes are represented by small dots, at 30 % opacity (to highlight central nodes). Ties (retweets, likes, mentions, replies) are represented by inter-node lines.

Figures 9-13 illustrate the connections between RT and social mediators by categories of ties, as well as the distribution of mediator sub-categories within these (note different scales on the y-axes). Removing all unidentifiable social mediators resulted in a reduction from 155 to 151 connections to analyse. Starting with figure 8 (above), the direct and indirect connections between RT and social mediators in the network “Assange” are visible. This figure is a network-level visualisation of the ties between RT, social mediators and other nodes, and will be referred to throughout the next paragraphs.

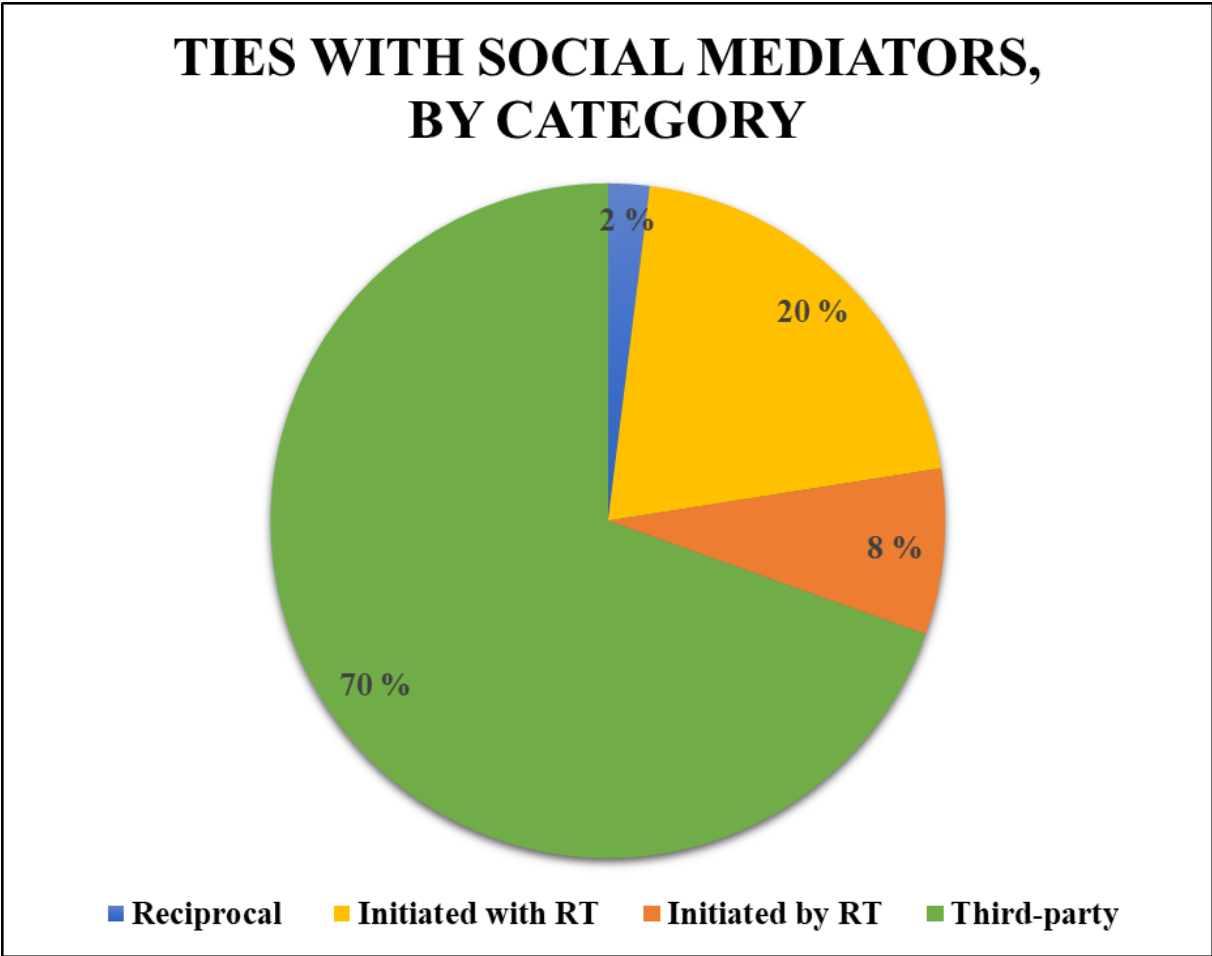


Figure 9. Pie chart of ties, in total and by category, between RT and social mediators.



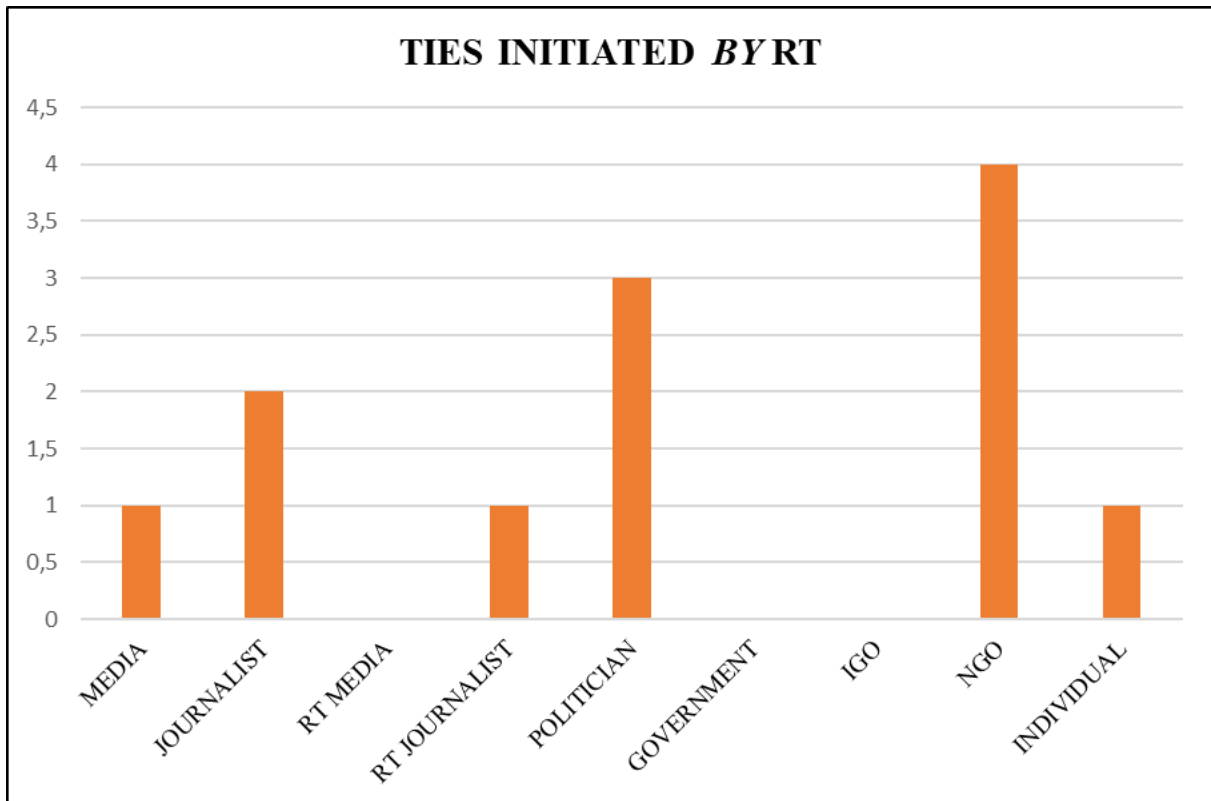


Figure 10. Bar chart of ties initiated by RT, in terms of targeted social mediator. Minimum value is 0 and maximum value is 4.

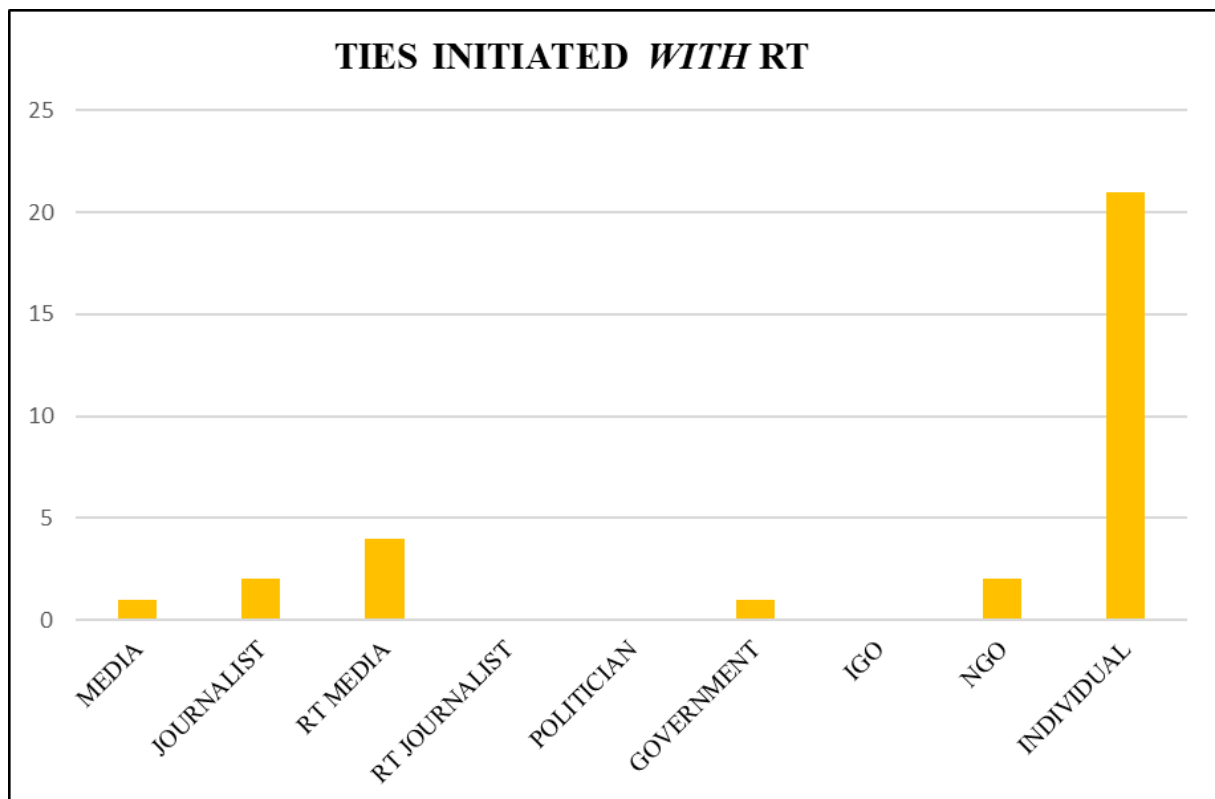


Figure 11. Bar chart of ties initiated with RT, in terms of agent social mediator. Minimum value is 0 and maximum value is 21.

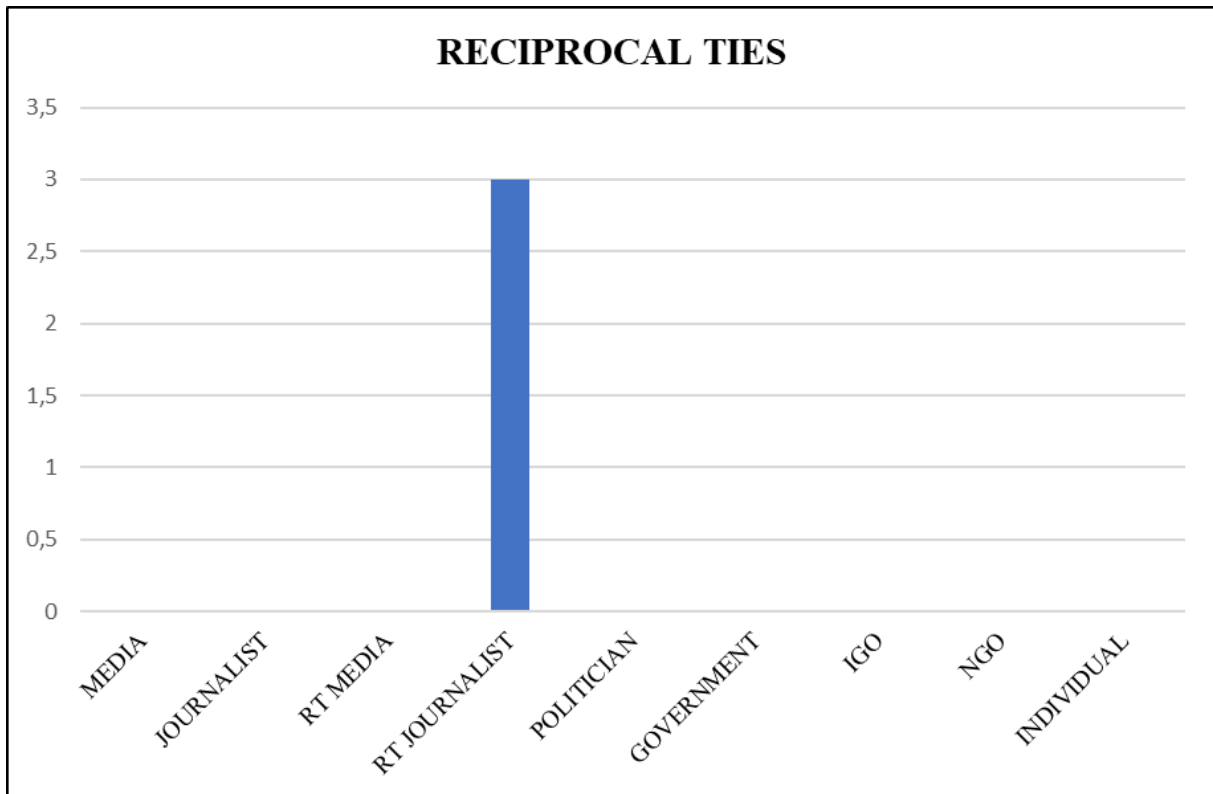


Figure 12. Bar chart of reciprocal ties between RT and social mediators. Minimum value is 0 and maximum value is 3.

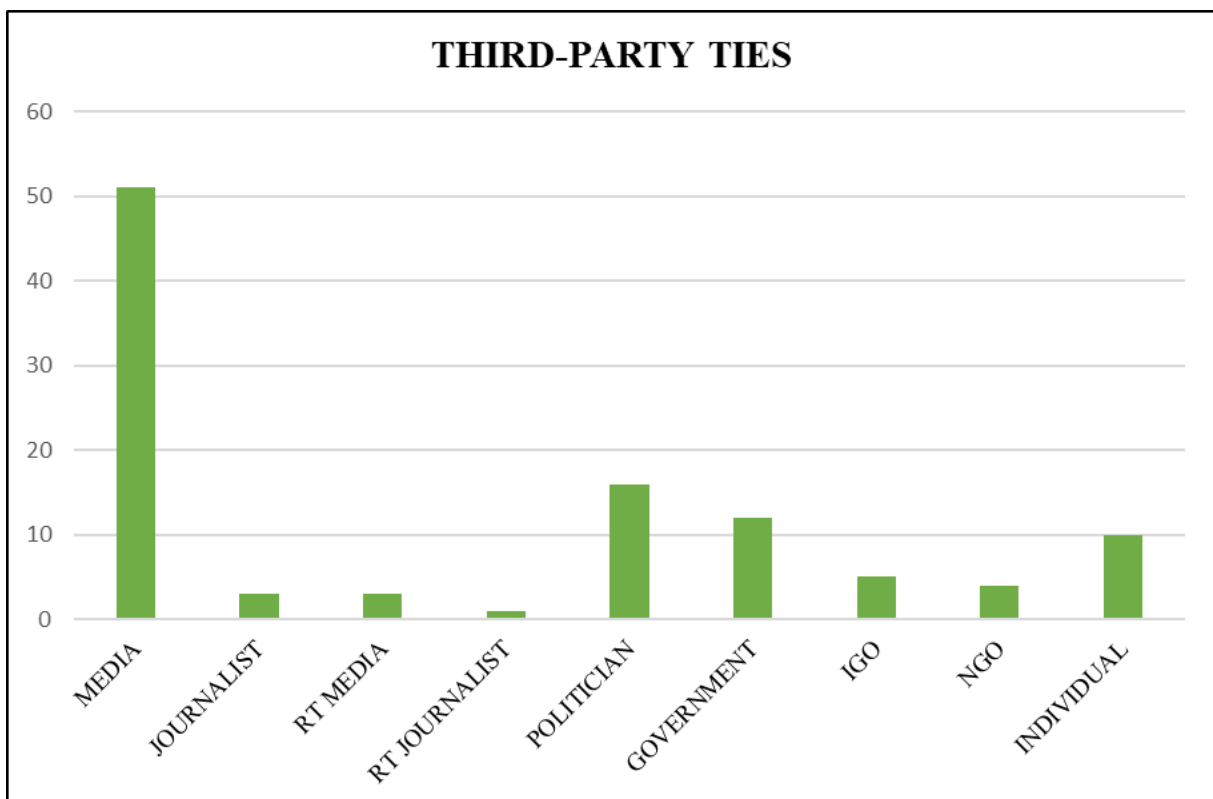


Figure 13. Bar chart of ties between RT and social mediators, initiated by third-parties. Minimum value is 1 and maximum value is 51.

By viewing figure 9 and 13, it becomes clear that the vast majority of social mediators are connected to RT by *third-party* connections (70%). Consequently, although these provide a function in RT networks, their inclusion is neither the result of RT's nor their own initiatives. The group "media" constitutes the largest sub-category of social mediators connected by third-party ties, with a total of 51 ties. This sheds further light into one of the findings from the last section, as it is now clear that while these largely unilateral mediators may connect RT to their respective audiences, it is also not the result of RT's efforts. Figure 8 illustrates this neatly. In this visualised network, the media outlet Fox News functions as the only social mediator of its cluster, despite it being connected by third-parties and holding a unilateral role. Nevertheless, the link between this mediator and RT arguably serves to connect RT with Fox News' audience, the majority of who are likely American citizens. Furthermore, by comparing figures 10-13, the majority of all political figures and politicians (politician, government and IGO) are also connected to RT by third-parties. These likely provide RT with bridges to the nations that they represent or include. Perhaps the best example of this by figure 8 is the user "realdonaldtrump", who was connected by third-parties and held a unilateral role in the network.

Following this line of analysis, the second largest group of ties are initiated *with* RT (20%, figure 9). More specifically, figure 11 displays that the majority of ties initiated with RT are made by grassroots individuals (21 ties). This therefore demonstrates that, among social mediators, RT received most of its attention from individuals. In contrast, when comparing this to figure 10, there is a clear asymmetry between how many grassroots social mediators that interact with RT and how many of the same category RT actively interacts with (1 tie). In addition, figure 11 reveals that RT received more attention from media outlets directly associated with RT (RT media), than from other media. This may be illustrated by figure 8, wherein the UK outlet "RTUKNews" created a tie to RT by mentioning it in a tweet. Lastly, this figure also shows that of all sub-categories of political social mediators, only one node interacted with RT. This node was identified in the "Russia" topic network and was the Indian Embassy of Moscow, interacting with RT by mentioning it in a tweet.

The second smallest group of ties are the ties initiated *by* RT (8%, figure 10). As figure 9 demonstrates, the connections between RT and social mediators that were initiated by RT were few, with a total of 12 ties. Among these ties, the sub-category of mediators that were most

frequently targeted were NGOs (4 ties), politicians (3 ties) and journalists (2 ties). In total, these connections constituted 75 % of RT initiated ties. Examples of these may be derived from the second largest cluster in figure 8. In terms of NGOs, the Twitter handle “Wikileaks” was included by being mentioned by RT. The same of type of tie was also established to the handles “Lenin” and “Johnpilger”, respectively belonging to the president of Ecuador, Lenín Moreno, and journalist John Pilger. Figure 10 also demonstrates another asymmetry, as RT did not actively connect to any other RT affiliated media branches, despite several connections were made the opposite direction. Thus, while not initiating numerous ties to social mediators, RT largely targeted mediators who are likely influential and efficient bridging hubs.

Lastly, the smallest group of ties were the *reciprocal*, constituting two percent of the total ties to social mediators (figure 9). On the surface, this provides little indication of relationships or relationship building with social mediators. Furthermore, all reciprocal ties were created with RT journalists, mediators who already have a direct relationship with the RT organisation. An example of this may also be derived from the “Assange” topic network in figure 8. In this network, RT and RT journalist George Galloway created a reciprocal tie, with the former mentioning the journalist and the latter retweeting RT’s content.

Thus far, it is clear that the majority of likely efficient and influential social mediators were connected by third-party ties, and a small proportion of these were included by being targeted by RT. Furthermore, RT received most interaction from grassroots mediators, and did not form reciprocal ties with actors unaffiliated with the RT organisation. The next step is to analyse how RT interacts in its Twitter networks in general. The results of this part are presented below in table 4, measuring and comparing RT and BBC World in terms of out-degree centrality and a count of most frequently employed hashtags.

|                   | Out-degree centrality |           | Hashtags employed |           |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|
|                   | @RT_Com               | @BBCWorld | @RT_Com           | @BBCWorld |
| <i>Community</i>  | 11                    | 3         | 10                | 0         |
| <i>Assange</i>    | 11                    | 1         | 10                | 0         |
| <i>Brazil</i>     | 1                     | 1         | 4                 | 3         |
| <i>Brexit</i>     | 3                     | 1         | 4                 | 1         |
| <i>Israel</i>     | 5                     | 1         | 10                | 0         |
| <i>Notre-dame</i> | 1                     | 2         | 2                 | 0         |
| <i>Russia</i>     | 1                     | 1         | 10                | 0         |
| <i>Trump</i>      | 5                     | 3         | 10                | 0         |
| <i>Venezuela</i>  | 4                     | 1         | 10                | 0         |
| <b>Mean</b>       | 4,67                  | 1,56      | 7,78              | 0,44      |

*Table 4. The values of @RT\_com and @BBCWorld across the collected networks (first column), in terms of out-degree centrality and hashtags employed. Note that NodeXL limits the collection of hashtags to the 10 most frequently employed.*

Starting with out-degree centrality, there is a clear divergence between RT and BBC World, indicating differences in their active outreach in the collected networks. In terms of the mean values, RT had a higher mean average of out-degree centrality than BBC World, with a total difference of 3,11. This difference is also neatly captured by the two largest networks, the community networks, where the news organisations respectively scored 11 and 3 on out-degree centrality. Although these metrics do not imply reciprocity, they do indicate that RT put more active effort into interacting with other nodes in their Twitter networks.

This difference in activity is perhaps better captured by the count of most frequently employed hashtags. As mentioned, the use of hashtags is an active means towards creating network groupings and discussions on Twitter. With a difference of 7,34 mean average, RT clearly utilised this option more frequently than BBC World. Examples of RT's utilisation of this means is the use of hashtags such as "Assange", "wikileaks" and "freedom" in the Assange network, "westbank", "holocaust" and "Gaza" in the Israel network and "russiagate", "Putin" and "muellerreport" in the Trump network. This difference is amplified by the fact that NodeXL limits this collection to the top ten most frequently employed hashtags, a limit that RT reached in six of nine collected networks. This does not provide grounds to generalise to a proposition about the organisations' overall activity on Twitter, but does mark a large difference in activity and means of extending network outreach in the collected data.



## 4.0 Discussion

Thus far, the empirical focus of this thesis has been on RT's networks and networking abilities. Now, the results of the previous section will be discussed in light of the wider theoretical foundation to provide a greater base for inferences to the main question of "*what soft power abilities does RT demonstrate in digital networks?*". This involves three steps of discussion. Firstly, a closer inspection is provided into the different results of the previous sub-sections, this time in light of soft power concepts. Next, this inspection is utilised as a point of departure to discuss the results and RT in a larger perspective, to shed light on their abilities as a possible medium of soft power. Lastly, the findings are discussed in general, with emphasis on applicability and generalisability.

By starting with interaction and information transmission in RT networks, there are several findings which may shed light on RT's soft power abilities. In light of the soft power requirement of transmitting information, the practically equal density of RT and BBC World networks suggests that RT has equally efficient networks for such efforts. However, in light of lower clusteredness and fragmentation, RT networks may be less suited for providing access to novel information and socially diverse groupings. In terms of propaganda, lower fragmentation may be a weak trait of their soft power abilities, as the efficiency of propaganda requires little diversity in individuals' information environments. By contrast, the combination of less social diversity and higher rates of reciprocity may provide fertile ground for soft power initiatives. Less social diversity may be a facilitating factor when adjusting content and messages to be politically and socially congruent with targets. Higher reciprocity indicates a digital network community of reciprocally interacting nodes, echoing networked approaches' emphasis on non-hierarchical, multidirectional communication and relationship building. As reciprocity may indicate trust, this can provide RT with targets who are susceptible for information, impressions and relationships. Furthermore, though reciprocal interaction does not imply positive or negative sentiments towards RT, it does indicate that nodes are, nevertheless, interacting and discussing content related to or produced by them. Thus, this is an important sign and pre-requisite of influencing the opinions and perceptions of targets, indicating a high potential for soft power acquisition.

The analysis of RT's social mediators and the connections between them provide further insight into the soft power abilities of RT. Perhaps of particular interest in this context is the group of third-party connections to social mediators. This group has large proportions of media and political nodes, who, largely, assume unilateral roles in RT networks. Thus, while these are not included by RT's or their own initiatives, nor actively participate in the networks, they may be integral factors of the organisation's soft power abilities. This may be illustrated by revisiting the different routes of active approaches to soft power. In the active, indirect approach, these social mediators arguably constitute bridges to wide audiences. High proportions of the media nodes were of Western origins. Hence, each of these connections constitute a bridge from RT to these respective populations and audiences, whose opinions may influence the political environment of their countries. Furthermore, an identical inference can be made in relation to political and governmental mediators. The multitude of connections to media organisations may also be illustrative of perhaps unintended agenda setting and frame building, as the content of RT tweets may have an influencing or inspiring effect on these organisations. In sum, such ties are therefore essential prerequisites for far-reaching efforts of public diplomacy, nation branding and propaganda. Next, ties to political and governmental mediators may also provide RT with grounds for active and direct approaches to soft power. While these nodes were largely unilateral in the digital networks, they may nonetheless read and be influenced by RT tweets and publications passively. Thus, digital networks may also be utilised in approaches which omit populations in the causal chain of soft power.

By contrast, the proportion of reciprocal ties and ties initiated *by* RT provide little indication of active networking efforts by RT. As connections with social mediators may have significant value, one may expect that a medium of soft power would actively seek to connect and build relationships with possible and highly influential mediators. However, though few in total, the mediators with who RT actively connects are largely influential actors, such as NGOs, politicians and journalists. While this may indicate such efforts, these connections may also be natural and expected, as the mediators are likely figures related to prominent news stories. Furthermore, the low proportion of RT affiliated media and -journalists among the social mediators provides little indication of coordinated and large-scale attempts at constructing RT dominated networks. This could feasibly be expected of soft power oriented organisations, especially one applying propaganda techniques, as it could increase its ability to control the supply and flow of information in digital subnetworks. While such mediators constitute the



totality of mediators connected by reciprocal ties, the low number of them is a weak indicator of such tendencies.

Another important finding may be derived from focusing on the proportions and inclusion of grassroots social mediators, of both uni- and bilateral roles. Though RT demonstrates little effort to connect with these, the majority of ties initiated *with* RT and the second largest bilateral group in total is constituted by grassroots mediators. This may also be indicative of soft power abilities. These mediators may hold negative or positive sentiments towards RT, but nevertheless interact with RT content and function as network bridges. Thus, these grassroots actors may spread such content further through their interactions and therefore also provide bridges with further grassroots nodes and communities. As follow-relationships are essential to which information one is exposed to, these mediators may arguably provide bridges into different groupings and communities than formal mediators do. Additionally, as the majority of these mediators assume bilateral roles, they may actively contribute to the networks as both partners and collaborators. As in the aforementioned case with reciprocity, this converges with networked approaches' weight on non-hierarchical communication and collaboration. Thus, this may once again indicate an important foundation for all efforts of soft power, whether it is in terms of public diplomacy, nation branding or propaganda.

These insights are further emphasised by a deeper view on RT's general network activity. As a possible "twiplomat", RT joined Twitter one and a half years later than BBC World, but has published approximately 6000 more tweets and 16,89 more tweets daily on average (table 1). Furthermore, RT outperforms BBC World both in terms of the number of ties they initiate and the number of hashtags employed to widen their network size and reach. Both of these metrics may provide valuable insight into the soft power abilities of RT. In terms of the former, all ties initiated may be the foundation on which relationships and influence may be built. The latter may provide a similar bridging effect to networks such as social mediators, by linking RT's tweets with wider discussions and conversations on Twitter. Thus, this may connect RT with nodes and audiences with who they are not yet directly tied with. This is perhaps amplified by the notion that NodeXL does not capture those who passively receive content by or related to RT, which likely massively outweighs the number of nodes who choose to interact with such content. However, a note on these points is warranted. The network activity of RT is partly

given its significance by comparison with the baseline of BBC World. As the baseline account is considerably larger than RT in size and outreach, RT may be more dependent on such means. Thus, this may explain the measured difference in network activity between the two Twitter accounts.

Though these insights into RT's soft power abilities are interesting, several notes are warranted at this point of the discussion. Firstly, as previously touched upon, all results thus far may be both expected and integral parts of utilising social media, independent of an organisation's nature, governmental connections or agenda. In the case of social mediators, while these provide important bridges for RT's networks, they are, again, largely included by third-party ties. Furthermore, as social mediators constitute a network *position*, different nodes, of varying influence and bridging abilities, will always fill these positions in all networks. Secondly, as a primary need of all news media is arguably to maximise the number of individuals to whom they deliver news and information, all means taken to widen their networks may be viewed as natural consequences of this. Therefore, though RT demonstrates several means of extending their reach, this is, by itself, largely expected. Consequently, all findings thus far are not sufficient in isolation to imply active abilities of soft power or uncover a "smoking gun" of the Russian soft power machinery.

However, the inference, I would argue, is highly relevant. A central premise of such inference is what previous research and recent developments indicate about RT. Previous research make several links between their content and strategies and an oppositional approach to soft power. Additionally, the recent and various governmental responses and connections to RT, combined with Russia's utilisation of information technology and explicit appreciation of digital diplomacy, further underline this. Another premise may be derived from the pursuit of power in general. As structural realism states, rational actors will seek to gain relative power over adversaries, if risks and benefits are deemed acceptable. The utilisation of digital networks and an officially non-governmental organisation may be highly efficient and beneficial in this context, as it is both cost efficient, covert by nature and ambiguous by effect. Thus, this may imply considerably lower risk of counter-productive repercussions and destabilisation of the balance of power. Furthermore, autonomous news media carry significant power in the contemporary and interconnected world. RT's self-proclaimed autonomy may thus serve as a

facilitating basis for possible abilities of soft power, both as it may provide credibility and allow Russia to remain unaffiliated with its conduct. The latter factor is particularly important for means of PD, propaganda and disinformation. In sum, this serves to make RT a potentially highly potent medium of soft power, especially since they are, as according to Rawnsley (2015:275), increasingly perceived as both legitimate and credible by their audiences.

This is not to say, however, that it is an *efficient* medium of Russian soft power. The discussion hitherto has indicated that RT displays and possesses several traits which may indicate soft power abilities. This does not imply that the abilities are successful in terms of their utilisation or achieved results. Soft power is, as previously described, highly reliant on whether an actor is perceived as attractive and credible. Furthermore, as in the case of public diplomacy, propaganda and arguably also nation branding, efforts are contingent on a degree of cultural congruence between the agent, content conveyed and target. Thus, the Achilles' heel of these indications is possibly that they may be expressions of both counter-productivity and failure if RT is unable to produce attractive, credible or culturally compatible impressions. Thus, despite high rates of reciprocity, wide reach and active means to interact with publics and transmit information, RT may nevertheless be an unsuccessful medium of soft power. Regrettably, it is beyond the scope and capability of this thesis to explore this further, making this an important note to take into account. With this in mind, it is more accurate to claim that RT may possess a large potential of soft power abilities, but that it is unclear how and whether this potential materialises in the real world.

Before approaching a conclusion to this thesis, a few notes should be made on the generalisability and applicability of the findings. As previously mentioned, the case study of RT does not provide large grounds for generalisation, both with regard to other mediums of soft power and inferences to larger patterns of RT's digital network behaviour. However, the results and theoretical inferences do provide greater insight into how and to what extent RT may possess abilities of soft power. Perhaps the greatest strength of the thesis is to contribute with another dimension to the existing literature on RT, by measuring and visualising the interaction between the media outlet and its surrounding digital networks. As soft power theory makes clear, such means may materialise longitudinally in political opinions, changes and foreign policies. Thus, in light of a near consensus in research on RT's connections to Russia and soft

power, this is highly relevant. Next, the results display differences in the network behaviour and capabilities of RT and BBC World. While these differences are apparent in the collected data, it does not imply and should therefore not be interpreted as significant differences in the *statistical* sense. In this regard, BBC World is neither a focus nor an object of discussion or inference in this thesis. The comparison should thus only be treated as what it is intended to be: a means to provide a baseline from which RT's behaviour and utilisation of digital networks may be interpreted.

Lastly, some notes are warranted on the validity and reliability of the thesis. One previously mentioned concern was possible overlaps between the collected networks. While this cannot be fully excluded due to the vastness of the collected data, closer inspections on tweet contents did not indicate signs of overlap. In terms of the grouping and subcategorization of social mediators, only four mediators were not possible to accurately identify. Thus, as these merely constitute three percent of the total sample, this is not expected to affect the validity of the results. Finally, the thesis has provided a wide inspection into the networks of RT. However, this only attempts and does not fully compensate for the lack of longitudinal data to uncover patterns of network structures and behaviour over time. In terms of the structural metrics, this would be especially useful to provide more reliable data on the collected networks. A practical example to emphasise in this context is the insignificant difference in density between RT and BBC World, which could, possibly, be more reliably distinguished by longitudinal data. Nevertheless, this does not imply that such measurement necessarily would provide more distinguishable data.

## 5.0 Conclusion

A final answer still remains regarding the question of “*what soft power abilities does RT demonstrate in digital networks?*”. With the aforementioned limitations in mind, this thesis has provided several insights into this question. RT networks are approximately equal in their ability to transmit information as BBC World networks, but has less indications of social diversity. However, their higher rates of reciprocity corresponds with non-hierarchical and relationship oriented approaches to soft power, and indicates higher rates of reciprocal interaction with content and tweets associated with RT. As reciprocity may indicate trust, this can provide RT with an audience of higher susceptibility for soft power means. Largely without active efforts, the networks are aided by the bridging abilities of possibly highly influential, unilateral social mediators, who provide channels through which active direct and indirect approaches to soft power may be employed. Though the clear majority of social mediators are connected by third-party ties, RT receives most of its attention from grassroots mediators. The majority of these participate actively in their networks and may serve as bridges to further grassroots communities and different groups than formal mediators. Compared to the baseline of BBC World, RT displays higher activity in general and more active efforts to initiate ties and extend their networks by employing hashtags. This may serve as the basis for relationship building and far-reaching influence. Finally, these indications, in the context of knowledge from prior research and the Russian use of information technology and digital diplomacy, underline that RT may possess a high potential of soft power abilities. They do not, however, imply that RT is an efficient medium of soft power.

Lastly, despite little grounds for generalisation, it is my intention that this thesis may function as an inspiration or possible template for further research, either on RT or other soft power related studies. The field and focus of soft power is perhaps more relevant than ever, with a magnitude of questions and answers yet to be discovered. With this in mind, I would encourage future research on RT to employ longitudinal network analyses, ideally across different social media platforms, to gain deeper insights into their utilisation of digital networks. Furthermore, I encourage research endeavours of larger scales to combine this with content based methods or analyses of popular opinion, to explore both the nature, manner and possible effects of such soft power efforts.

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