

Facebook Temporarily Suspends 'RT' Ahead of Trump's Inauguration, and Moscow Is Pissed

The TV network that's definitely not controlled by the Kremlin temporarily lost some rights on social media

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Zurab Dzhavakhadze / TASS

The Kremlin-funded news outlet RT, formerly known as “Russia Today,” temporarily lost its right to share content on Facebook, following a confusing copyright dispute. According to statements by RT representatives, the channel would be restricted to text-only posts until Saturday, Jan. 21, at 10:55 p.m., Moscow time — meaning the station would not be able to share or stream video content during the Friday inauguration of Donald Trump in Washington.

RT's representatives and officials in Moscow were quick to accuse the U.S. government of having a hand in the Facebook suspension, arguing that the American establishment is working against RT's "alternative" coverage of U.S. politics.

Facebook reportedly restricted RT's sharing rights after mistakenly flagging a copyright violation in RT's live-stream of President Obama's final press conference on Wednesday. The event was streamed by the Associated Press news agency, with which RT has a paid subscription in order to rebroadcast its material.

According to a screenshot of Facebook's warning, shared online by RT staff, the network claimed the video content belongs to the Current Time television channel, which is part of Radio Liberty, a broadcasting organization funded by the U.S. government.

RT's chief editor, Margarita Simonyan, is convinced that Washington had a hand in the Facebook snafu. "I'm not surprised. If the Department of State could block oxygen to us, they would do it," she told RIA Novosti.

Earlier this month, the U.S. intelligence community released a declassified report detailing the Kremlin's effort to meddle in American politics. Much of that report consisted of an annex dedicated to the work of RT, which Washington presented as a key component of Moscow's propaganda. Following these accusations, RT has insisted that it is not owned and operated by the Russian government, citing its formal status as "an autonomous non-profit organization" — a technical loophole the media company uses to skirt laws on foreign agents in countries like the United States.

Despite RT's supposed independence from the Russian government, Facebook's decision to limit the network's sharing rights prompted a swift response from Moscow. Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson for Russia's Foreign Ministry, blamed the incident on the "familiar problem" of discrimination in the media against Russia, calling it "censorship as an instrument of competitive battle."

Russian state censors have also threatened "countermeasures," if not against Facebook then against unspecified U.S. news organizations.

Alexander Zharov, the head of Roskomnadzor (the Kremlin's censor), said, "Many American media outlets work in Moscow, including TV channels. They have the same rights and opportunities as Russian outlets. Yet, if American social networks continue to place this unprecedented pressure on RT, we will be forced to take countermeasures."

Current Time denies that it filed any complaint with Facebook. One reporter at the Prague-based channel told The Moscow Times that Facebook's algorithms often fail to take broadcast agreements between different media outlets into account when blocking "suspect" material.

"It's just an unfortunate problem across Facebook," the reporter said.

The Facebook suspension came as Dataminr, the Twitter-based news-breaking service, suddenly terminated its contract with RT, reportedly explaining the decision as the result of “how we work with government agencies.”

Twitter recently denied the CIA access to Dataminr services, as well, citing fears that the agency could illegally track and gather data on individual users. Some experts then alleged that the Kremlin could use the service for similar means through RT's subscription.

“We’re very disappointed,” RT's Head of Social Media Ivor Crotty said. “Dataminr has a monopoly on analyzing the Twitter ‘firehose’ [the full flow of all Tweets in real time] and we’ve been using it successfully across the RT group for a year. It's an unfortunate symptom of the fear and loathing gripping the United States and I hope it alleviates soon.”

After about 20 hours, Facebook lifted the suspension, according to reports by the TV channel. “Facebook has restored RT's ability to post content to its page on the social network, following an as yet unexplained blackout,” the network said in an article on its website.

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