The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Welcome to The Machine: Inside the Secretive World of RT

As RT faces fresh allegations of peddling propaganda, The Moscow Times gained an insider view.

By Matthew Bodner, Matthew Kupfer and Bradley Jardine

June 01, 2017



Current and former employees of RT describe an atmosphere of fear and secrecy within the state-backed news organization. **Zurab Dzhavakhadz / TASS**

Russian President Vladimir Putin looked uncomfortable. During a joint press conference with newly elected French President Emmanuel Macron in Versailles—a location chosen to emphasize the dawn of a new era of French-Russian relations—a reporter from Russia's state-funded news organization RT pitched a hardball question: Why did Macron prevent Russian journalists from taking part in his press pool?

Macron was nonchalant in his response. "Russia Today and [sister publication] Sputnik did not behave as media organizations and journalists," he said. Rather than act as journalists,

the state-funded Russian outlets had acted as "agencies of influence and propaganda, lying propaganda—no more, no less," during his presidential campaign.

RT has been quick to respond to the allegations. Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan claims the channel was trying to bring "balance" to the French media environment, which was heavily pro-Macron. And Robert Bridge, one of RT's most recognizable writers, published a piece slamming Macron's comments as a "severe blow" to journalism.

In fact, Macron's appraisal of RT is far from unique. It reflects a growing consensus in Western official and academic circles over the nature of the organization and its supposed leading role in supporting "anti-establishment" political discourse.

But just how influential and functional is RT in reality? The Moscow Times took an inside look into the workings of this notoriously secretive organization.

Related article: France-Russia: An Improbable Reset That Quickly Turned Sour

Long shadow

Founded in 2005 as Russia Today, the network was intended to give Western audiences the "Russian perspective." In 2009, the network rebranded as RT. In the words of Simonyan, as told to the Kommersant newspaper, this was done "so as not to scare the audience."

The renaming broadly coincided with a shift in focus —from promoting Russian news narratives to undermining Western ones. No expense was spared in positioning the channel as an alternative to mainstream media. In 2009, an advertising campaign created by international PR firm McCann Erickson contrasted former U.S. President Barack Obama and then-Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad with the question: "Who poses the greatest nuclear threat?"

RT says it aims its English-language broadcasts at educated viewers "who want to Question More." On its website, the channel claims to "cover stories overlooked by the mainstream media," providing "alternative perspectives" on current affairs.

Critics, however, point to a record of bias.

"RT trades on media ignorance," Ben Nimmo of the Atlantic Council think tank's Digital Forensic Lab told The Moscow Times in written comments. "[RT] claims to be impartial, but it's had more programs found guilty of partiality [by the U.K.'s Ofcom media regulator] than any other broadcaster in the U.K. since 2014."

Across the Atlantic, RT gained the attention of officials in Washington. In January, the former U.S. director of national intelligence released a report on Russia's alleged hack of the 2016 U.S. election. The 14-page document dedicated six pages to detailing RT's operations and connections to the Kremlin.

The high-level attention suggests that RT is a media powerhouse. But several former RT employees suggested otherwise, referring to "disorganization" within the newsroom, to the

extent that it has even had an impact on RT delivering its message. Many of its current journalists and producers are young and inexperienced, the sources said—and RT appeared to be targeting this group when recruiting new foreign staff.

Related article: The Secrets of Russia's Propaganda War, Revealed

Pressure cooker

Problems within RT have remained unreported largely because employees are nervous about talking with journalists. The Moscow Times approached a large number of current and former staff members. Most of them declined to comment in any capacity, citing non-disclosure agreements. Almost all of them described a sense of fear and paranoia when it comes to discussing RT outside of work.

Several sources reported that they had been asked to sign non-disparagement agreements. RT asked, and by some accounts pressured, reporters to sign the document in 2014 amid the crisis in Ukraine.

The Moscow Times has seen a document purporting to be such a non-disparagement agreement. It stipulates that employees will face a $50,000 fine, without proof of loss, in the event that the signatory disparages RT at any time. A source said the document had come about following the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 over eastern Ukraine, and the resignation of British reporter Sara Firth.

The Moscow Times conferred with one lawyer who questioned the legal force of such a document. Two current RT employees said they have never heard of such a document.

Those who did agree to speak painted a picture of an unusually stressful working environment. One source described the editorial office as "a pressure cooker, full of constant stress and yelling." The rate of staff attrition is by many accounts high. RT places great emphasis on social media metrics, which, a source argued, drove "serious" journalists away.

The focus on social media metrics and audience is not, of course, something unique to RT. What distinguishes RT from other news organizations, however, is an unusually strict editorial line. According to a former employee, this line is rarely stated explicitly. Instead, according to the source, it is enforced in varied ways depending on the employee's nationality and political sympathies.

Foreigners hired by RT will often be "cookie cutter" leftists, ideologically driven against the West, sources said. Reporters falling into this category take jobs with RT believing they will be given a platform to challenge establishment narratives in their home countries. Such journalists often lacked political introspection and in-depth knowledge of Russia. Several sources echoed this assessment.

When reporters stray off course, they are nudged back in line. The number one critique of reporters who fail to properly emphasize the agreed line was that "this is not our angle," a former RT employee said—"that phrase 'our angle' came up constantly." When asked about

this policy, the two current RT employees denied that the "angle" is anything but secret. Staff members are in no doubt their job is to promote "Russia's point of view" and to "give platform" to views "unwelcome in the mainstream media."

When foreign staff protested RT's coverage of Ukraine, sources say the management's solution was simple. They took them off Ukraine-related coverage and handed the assignments to Russian staff. RT continued to demonstrate tone-deafness during the French presidential election, displaying a clear bias against the likely victor Macron.

Embed:

> .@RT_com's @M_Simonyan: 'We weren't either pro- or anti-Macron'. All Macron headlines on https://t.co/LKjuhGOxY0 in order of appearance: pic.twitter.com/QE6HSentJO
>
> — Alexey Kovalev (@Alexey___Kovalev) May 31, 2017

According to our sources, most of the Russian staff are apathetic or apolitical, with no prior experience in journalism. Often they are linguists by training, or the "children of Russian diplomats" with fluent English. Besides leftist Westerners, who view RT as a platform to push anti-establishment views, RT has also recruited long-time apolitical expats "looking to leave English-teaching jobs." There are also, of course, some foreigners who could be described as "true believers" in RT's pro-Russia mission.

Sources were clear that the staff is granted some autonomy in how RT delivers its message. At the same time, several former employees reported that there are "untouchable" stories that come "from above." Low-level writers and editors were usually not privy to the process of how these stories were ordered and created. The current RT employees said editors can "debate" and influence what goes out, but ultimately the decision is taken by managers.

Two former RT employees also independently reported how senior managers would ask subordinates to write op-eds with predetermined editorial lines—regardless of whether the author agreed with it.

"They did not view your opinion as important, you were merely an instrument through which to communicate a message," one source said.

This is, perhaps, the fundamental difference between RT and the Western press it claims to challenge. The top down dictation of an editorial line is unheard of in other international broadcasters, such as the BBC. But Simonyan insists the Western media is just as bad. In defending RT's coverage of the French election, Simonyan said that "according to Macron's logic, all Western media should be expelled from Russia." In her opinion, the entire Western press is "absolutely always" disparaging Putin, campaigning for the political opposition, and interfering in Russian elections.

Questioning more

Most of the sources said that the conflict in Ukraine, and specifically the annexation of Crimea, marked a pronounced shift in RT's approach.

"When the channel was first created, it was presented as an effort to present news from a Russian perspective," says Professor Ann Cooper, who ran an RT monitoring project at Columbia University. "Now the point seems to be much more about promoting conspiracy theories."

Today, some of RT's most outlandish content features UFOs, 9/11 truthers and Hollywood celebrities like Steven Seagal and Pamela Anderson serving as "experts." Anderson appeared on RT in February to defend embattled Wikileaks editor Julian Assange from rape charges.

Since 2014, several prominent RT journalists have quit for ideological reasons and spoken publicly about their decisions. The day after the Crimea annexation, anchor Liz Wahl announced her resignation during her live broadcast. "[P]ersonally, I can't be part of a network funded by the Russian government that whitewashes the actions of Putin," she said.

Two of the current RT employees The Moscow Times spoke to say they believe the network is professionalizing. Although RT maintains its focus on "alternative" views, they say the RT now works harder to vet experts in order to filter out those with extreme views. "Within the framework of state-funded media, we try to do our best to do balanced reporting," they told The Moscow Times.

"We care a lot about their credibility," they added. "We often invite commentators with alternative views who are not welcome on mainstream stations. Some are quite renowned, such as [Slovenian philosopher] Slavoj Zizek."

Embed:

> We have hit peak Russia Today with this "op-edge" on the MSM notion that... the earth is round. Question more!!! https://t.co/dictEta2O6 pic.twitter.com/T5QUdDABpk
>
> — max seddon (@maxseddon) May 26, 2017

Russia tomorrow

And, to a degree, that's true. RT does attract commentators with legitimate credentials. More often, however, legitimate experts and commentators stay away from a channel often viewed with distrust. Network producers "worked very f---ing hard" to get good guests, but often were limited in choice, a former employee said.

"The presenters and the producers knew some of the people were whack jobs, but they

couldn't get better people," the source added.

RT's expert problem appears to persist to this day. In the wake of the May 22 bombing in Manchester, England, the channel invited several so-called experts to comment on the terror attack. The commentators included two obscure Western journalists and a serial apologist for Syrian President Bashar Assad. They all blamed the attack on Western foreign policy in the Middle East.

RT's inefficiencies hinder the organization's ability to deliver on its mission statement, several sources say. Such accounts stand in stark contrast with the channel's official claims of runaway international success. While RT enjoys a prominent social media presence and is broadcast around the world, its influence is usually overstated. A 2015 investigation by the Daily Beast news site found that, of RT's 100 most watched videos over the previous five years, footage of extreme weather, accidents and crime received 81 percent of all views. Much of that content wasn't even original but rather purchased by RT for distribution.

Since 2015, several dissenting voices within the organization have left, after realizing that efforts to change the channel's behavior were futile: "RT is unreformable," a former employee said.

"Our attempt to change RT, to make it more professional and objective, would likely have just made it a more effective propaganda medium," the source said. "I am glad that a combination of apathy, a lack of professionalism and a dearth of real talent keep RT from being more effective than it currently is."

RT did not respond to a request to comment on this article.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/06/01/welcome-to-the-machine-inside-the-secretive-world-of-rt-a58132