

What It Was Like to Work for Russian State Television

Until RT America ended abruptly, life as a journalist there was “actually so normal.”



By Cecilia Kang

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For eight years, Lee Camp hosted a weekly show on RT America that aimed to satirize American politics, finding punchlines in subjects like sanctions against Afghanistan and student debt forgiveness. That ended unceremoniously on March 3, a week after Russian airstrikes began in Ukraine, when the Russian-state-funded network suddenly shut down.

Now, Mr. Camp is fuming about it.

He blamed the “U.S. government war machine” for RT America’s defeat and lamented what he saw as corporate media’s victory in squelching alternative views like his.

More than 100 people lost their jobs at the network, which the Russian state media outlet RT created more than a decade ago to offer a counternarrative to CNN, MSNBC and Fox News. It had headquarters in Washington and bureaus in New York, Los Angeles and Miami, and produced a full slate of news, comedy and political commentary programs available on cable and satellite television and online.

A role at RT America was a rare job in an industry where if you had screwed up, were washed up or were completely new to the field, there weren’t many other options. RT America was where Rick Sanchez, who had lost his anchor gig at CNN, was given a second shot, and where Mr. Camp, a standup comedian, made his way to the television set with the potential to reach tens of millions of cable subscribers with RT America on their menus.

Opportunities abounded. Young reporters were promoted to anchors and teleprompter technicians to control room operators within months. Rachel Blevins co-hosted a show, “Boom Bust,” four years out of college.

For the employees who swiped into the second-floor office in downtown Washington, a few blocks from the White House, RT America offered good pay and benefits in the fiercely competitive cable news job market.

It looked and felt like a typical American cable news network, with flashy live studios ensconced in fishbowl glass walls, stylish leather furniture in the green room and free bagels with schmears on Fridays.

“It was actually so normal,” Ms. Blevins said.

In interviews with 11 former employees of RT America, some who were working there when it shut down and some who worked there in the network’s earlier days, many stressed that they were against Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and some had criticized the invasion on air.

But they are now grappling with having worked at a company that American television distributors kicked off their platforms days before RT America closed down. Several former employees would discuss their experience only on the condition of anonymity for fear of drawing attention to the affiliation.

One junior producer who is looking for a job decided to list T&R Productions, the company that ran the RT America office, on LinkedIn instead of the network’s name.

Anna Belkina, deputy editor in chief of RT, said that “mounting pressure from all quarters” made it logistically impossible for RT America to continue, but that RT would continue to cover the United States and reach an American audience.

“The team’s work has always been free of interference from all governments, and no instructions were ever given regarding terminology to use in association to Ukraine or other stories,” Ms. Belkina said. “It was precisely this absolute editorial independence that enshrined RT America’s success.” (Representatives for RT America and RT initially declined requests for comment, but responded hours after the story was first published online.)

In the week since the network shut down, RT America’s on-air talent has been publicly defending the network.

Yes, it was funded by President Vladimir V. Putin’s Russia. Yes, the Department of Justice described RT America and the company that finances it as “alter egos of the Kremlin.” But the former employees said that despite instances when they were forbidden to refer to Russia’s 2014 attack on Ukraine as an “invasion,” they had a pretty free hand.

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“I had complete free rein over whatever I wanted to say and was never censored,” Mr. Camp said in a video that he posted on Patreon, a subscription site for creators and artists.

“People want to make out RT America to be this crazy propaganda network where we have a hotline to Vladimir Putin and he rings my Bat Phone regularly,” Manila Chan, a news host for eight years, said recently on her podcast, “Chan’s Mouth.”

But with RT America’s assemblage of counterculture, anticorporate and military skeptics, Russia didn’t need to make such calls. Why criticize Mr. Putin when you’re able to criticize the U.S. prison industrial complex?

Staff members were interested in holding a mirror up to dysfunction in the United States, a country where divides were only deepening. No one at RT in Moscow prodded them to do differently. Presumably that was the subject they were interested in, too.

On one of the network’s last days, Sean Stone, a son of the filmmaker Oliver Stone and an RT America co-host, streamed in from San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, to criticize celebrities for speaking out against the invasion of Ukraine. On the show, “In Question,” he falsely said Oprah Winfrey had banned Leo Tolstoy’s “War and Peace” from her book club.

“We’re kidding ourselves if we think Putin is some kind of dictator,” Mr. Stone said. “We have similar types of corruption here in America.”

Russia’s Answer to CNN



RT America was run by Mikhail Solodovnikov, a veteran of Russian state-backed news. John Angelillo/UPI

RT America officially began in 2014, according to a foreign agent filing to the Justice Department. But the network was up and running years earlier, and like most basic information about the network — its ownership, editorial leadership, audience size and budget — the details are fuzzy. It was the outgrowth of Russia Today, a state-owned English-language television network established in 2005.

As early as 2010, RT America was running programs from its small office at 1325 G Street. By then, Moscow-based Russia Today had rebranded itself RT, and was expanding around the world with Spanish- and Arabic-language satellite operations.

“The idea was that CNN and the BBC were setting the tone for conversations in the international space and Putin wanted a Russian voice in that conversation,” said Robert Orttung, a research professor of international affairs at George Washington University, who wrote a paper on Russia Today. “It was to drown out the Anglo point of view and to use it to strengthen Russia and undermine democracies in other nations.”

The person in charge was a tall and ginger-bearded veteran of Russian state-backed news, Mikhail Solodovnikov, who went by Misha. He ran the company through T&R Productions, a limited liability corporation, which declared in a 2017 Foreign Agents Registration Act filing to the Justice Department that he was the sole member and general manager and that he handled duties both as chief executive and head of editorial. He added that he “respectfully disagrees that FARA should apply” to RT America.

In an email on Saturday, Mr. Solodovnikov said he had been privileged with “legendary” show hosts and “scores of young and aspiring intellectuals and journalists,” and he pointed a finger at mainstream U.S. media for hypocrisy. “It is plain to see that most of the U.S. media establishment is celebrating an act of blunt censorship that happened to us on their watch,” he said.

In the network’s early days, he recruited budding online personalities. In 2012, Abby Martin, a vocal critic of mainstream media and a skeptic of the Sept. 11 attacks, started the show “Breaking the Set”; in the opening credits, she swung a sledgehammer at a television set airing clips of cable news stars like Anderson Cooper of CNN.

In 2013, Ms. Martin invited Tyrel Ventura, who is the son of Jesse Ventura, the former pro wrestler and Reform Party governor of Minnesota, as a guest on her show. He had a YouTube talk show, on which he often spoke out against war and was skeptical of mainstream media. After his guest appearance, he said, Mr. Solodovnikov said he

liked what he had heard. He also told Mr. Ventura, who is lean with a clean-shaven head, that he had a good TV look, Mr. Ventura said.

Mr. Ventura was soon recruited to bring his online show, “Watching the Hawks,” hosted with Mr. Stone, to RT America.

Around the same time, Mr. Solodovnikov got a huge break. In May 2013, RT America signed a deal with Larry King’s Ora TV to distribute shows by Mr. King and eventually other personalities, including William Shatner and Dennis Miller. Some of the programs would be created out of RT America’s Washington office. Suddenly, the network had household names on its roster. Ora Media’s chief executive, John Dickey, declined to disclose the value of the contract.

Soon, RT America faced a major public test. In February 2014, Russia invaded and soon annexed the Ukrainian territory of Crimea, then stepped up its aggression and backed separatists who attacked Ukrainian forces in the country’s Donbas region.

RT America generally portrayed the events differently from American news outlets. A former anchor, Liz Wahl, said her news director had told her not to use the word “invasion” and to refer to Russian soldiers as “peacekeepers.”

The network removed a question she had posed to Ron Paul, the former Texas representative and presidential candidate, about how the United States should respond to Russia. She recoiled, she said, as she watched a correspondent refer to Ukrainian forces as having “neo-Nazi elements.” On March 5, 2014, Ms. Wahl resigned on the air in protest.

“RT is not about the truth,” she said later in an interview with CNN. “It’s about promoting a Putinist agenda, and I can tell you firsthand, it’s about bashing America.”

Boom Days



Liz Wahl, an RT America anchor, resigned on the air on March 5, 2014. RT America

The dramatic departure was rare counterprogramming. Other staff members said they had never been asked to inject pro-Russian views into their broadcasts or omit negative portrayals of Mr. Putin and his government.

Ms. Wahl’s critique didn’t curtail the network’s expansion. Audiences were apparently connecting with RT and RT America online. In 2015, RT said it reached more than 50 million unique viewers online via its website and YouTube. RT America wasn’t a Nielsen client, making it difficult to track its television audience.

The network was expanding, and Mr. Solodovnikov sought bigger names. He went to Princeton, N.J., to meet with Chris Hedges, a Pulitzer Prize-winning former foreign correspondent for The New York Times, to pitch the idea of starting a show.

Mr. Hedges had covered military regimes in the Middle East and Latin America and had become staunchly antiwar. He doesn't own a television and didn't know much about the network. But he liked the idea of a show where he could interview authors on political, cultural and social theories — the kind of programming that used to exist on public television.

Mr. Solodovnikov promised complete editorial freedom. Mr. Hedges had resigned from The Times in 2005 after what he described as an internal dispute over his opposition to the Iraq war. He thought it was the end of his career.

"I wasn't only finished at the paper, I was finished anywhere," Mr. Hedges said. "I was looking for a job to teach high school."

For nearly six years at RT America, he hosted the talk show "On Contact" just as he had envisioned it. It taped out of RT America's New York City bureau, and he interviewed guests like Cornel West, the Princeton professor and philosopher, and Richard Wolff, a left-leaning economist. His favorite show was a celebration of the 100th anniversary of the publication "Ulysses," by James Joyce.

"We maybe only had five viewers, but I loved it," Mr. Hedges said.

Managers in the Washington office never questioned his decisions, even with his small audiences for some episodes, he said. But it was evident that Mr. Hedges was valuable in other ways. He helped give the network credibility, a former junior staff member said. She was concerned about applying for a job at RT America, she said, but was reassured when she saw that a Pulitzer winner and celebrities like Mr. Shatner and Mr. Miller were associated with it.

Mr. Hedges fit in with the network's anti-establishment point of view at a particularly contentious time in American politics. He, like many at RT America, supported the Green Party candidate, Jill Stein, in the 2016 presidential election. Others were vocal supporters of Senator Bernie Sanders.

Mr. Hedges described the media's portrayal of Russia's interference in that election as "lazy" and was scathing about an intelligence report that concluded the Kremlin had used RT America as a "tool to undermine faith in the U.S. government and fuel protest." In 2017, his show was nominated for an Emmy Award for outstanding informative talk show, RT America's first major award nomination. He lost to Steve Harvey's show "Steve."

Mr. Solodovnikov began to expand the newsroom, taking over the rest of the second floor of the G Street building and updating studios with the most modern cameras and sophisticated control room, a kitchen with a big marble island and free espresso, and modern leather sectional sofas.

His personal touch: a few chess boards so people could play in their downtime.

Foreign Agent

On Aug. 17, 2017, the Justice Department sent a 10-page letter to RT America's lawyer, Brian Dickerson, ordering the media organization to register as a foreign agent. The letter described RT as a vehicle for Russian propaganda and linked RT America to the Moscow newsroom.

RT America and RT "act as alter egos of the Kremlin in ensuring dissemination of the Russian government viewpoint on key political events," the Justice Department wrote. Mr. Dickerson did not reply to a request for comment.

The Justice Department's move was part of a growing information Cold War. A few months later, the Russian government declared Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty foreign agents. U.S. lawmakers around the same time called the top lawyers of social media companies, including Facebook and Twitter, to testify at a hearing about Russia's manipulation of their platforms to disrupt the 2016 presidential election.

The new scrutiny on RT America didn't deter Rachel Blevins, a 2017 graduate of Texas Tech University. Ms. Blevins grew up in Mineral Wells, a town west of Dallas with a population of 16,000. She studied journalism in college, and her father, a postal worker, got hooked on independent radio shows and encouraged his daughter to seek alternative media voices.

She was concerned about American foreign policy and wrote articles about the Obama administration's drone strikes in Yemen and the Israeli-Palestinian war in Gaza for sites like Truth in Media, which has trafficked in conspiracy theories about Sept. 11 and vaccines. One of her mentors from Truth in Media worked at RT America and helped her get a job as an entry-level reporter. She packed two suitcases and moved to Washington.

RT America's registration as a foreign agent wasn't alarming to her as much as it was a nuisance for her reporting, Ms. Blevins said. The designation meant the network couldn't send her or other reporters to White House press briefings. So she staked out the White House lawn each day, trying to speak to White House officials and visiting foreign leaders.

Within two years of reporting on Black Lives Matter protests and other stories, she was promoted to co-host of "Boom Bust," a show on finance and business. She said that she had never felt pressure to present Russia positively and that accusations that RT America was an arm of propaganda had hindered her ability to hold powerful U.S. policymakers to account.

"It's incredibly frustrating to me," Ms. Blevins said. "What is so important for me, especially when it comes to the coverage of U.S. foreign policy, has been to point out the context of all of it and also hypocrisy that comes with it."



Lee Camp speaking at a 2016 rally in support of a lawsuit seeking to halt the Dakota Access Pipeline. Getty Images

Around the time Ms. Blevins joined the network, Mr. Camp began to see online views for his show flag. He came to believe that Facebook, YouTube and other channels were "shadow banning" it, effectively making it less likely to appear in algorithm-driven recommendation engines and news feeds.

But they weren't worried about their jobs. Both had worked for RT America for years and had enviable titles and creative license to continue to create shows each week for niche, but faithful, audiences.

Off Air

On Thursday, March 3, employees streamed through the front doors of RT America. They held news meetings and began to write scripts and sketch out guest schedules. There was intense anxiety in the office.

In a matter of days, DirecTV and Dish Network had taken RT America off their distribution networks. Ora TV announced on March 1 that it would suspend production of content for RT America. Companies were distancing themselves from the Russian government-backed media company in protest of the invasion of Ukraine.

That same day, Russia had stepped up its attacks, shelling a nuclear power plant and firing strikes in the northern Ukrainian city of Chernihiv, hitting an apartment complex.

A little after noon, a memo went out to all employees. RT America was ceasing all production immediately because of "unforeseen business interruption events."

"Unfortunately, we anticipate this layoff will be permanent, meaning that this will result in the permanent separation from employment of most T&R employees at all locations," the memo said.

Later that afternoon, Mr. Solodovnikov appeared in a brief meeting with employees. He said that they would get two months of severance pay and that the office would be effectively closed after that day.

Ms. Blevins and several other employees were in tears. Many hugged. They had to pack up their desks that afternoon.

Days later, the reality of life after RT America began to settle in.

Ms. Blevins said she worried about her ability to get a new job. She was frustrated that Twitter still hadn't removed the "Russia-state affiliated media" label it put on her account, and those of others at RT America, for what Twitter deemed war-related misinformation.

Others continued to speak out online. Ms. Blevins, Mr. Camp, Ms. Chan, Mr. Ventura and Mr. Hedges have appeared in a flurry of videos and podcasts, sharing reactions to RT America's closure. They found new ways to reach their audiences on sites like Patreon and Telegram.

Ms. Blevins also posted a video to Twitter saying she planned to be back to making content soon.

"I'm not done fighting," she said.

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