

The New York Times | <https://nyti.ms/2h4j4N7>

TECHNOLOGY

Russia's Favored Outlet Is an Online News Giant. YouTube Helped.

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SAN FRANCISCO — When the state-backed Russian news channel RT became the first news organization to surpass one billion views on YouTube in 2013, it marked the achievement with a retrospective of its most popular videos and a special guest — one of the Google-owned site's senior executives.

Robert Kyncl, a YouTube vice president who has since become its chief business officer, joined an RT anchor in a studio, where he praised RT for bonding with viewers by providing “authentic” content instead of “agendas or propaganda.”

But now, as investigators in Washington examine the scope and reach of Russian interference in United States politics, the once-cozy relationship between RT and YouTube is drawing closer scrutiny.

YouTube — the world's most-visited video site, owned by one of the most powerful and influential corporations in America — played a crucial role in helping build and expand RT, an organization that the American intelligence community has described as the Kremlin's “principal international propaganda outlet” and a key player in Russia's information warfare operations around the world.

While Kremlin-aligned agents secretly built fake Facebook groups to foment political division and deployed hordes of Twitter bots to stoke criticism of Hillary Clinton, RT worked out in the open, bolstered by one of the largest online audiences of any news organization in the world and a prominent presence on YouTube's search results.

As the presidential election heated up in the spring of 2016, RT consistently featured negative stories about Mrs. Clinton, according to United States intelligence officials. That included claims of corruption at her family foundation and ties to Islamic extremism, frequent coverage of emails stolen by Russian operatives from Mrs. Clinton's campaign chairman, and accusations that she was in poor physical and mental health.

"More than half of American adults say they watch YouTube, and younger viewers are moving to YouTube at staggering numbers," said Senator Mark Warner, Democrat of Virginia and vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, which is investigating Russia's exploitation of social media platforms based in the United States. "YouTube is a target-rich environment for any disinformation campaign — Russian or otherwise — that represents a long-term, next-generation challenge."

Much like the Russian-controlled pages on Facebook, RT's YouTube videos comply with YouTube's community guidelines, which cover things like nudity, copyright violations and promoting violence against a group based on race or religion. But not propaganda.

YouTube carries "a wide variety of news channels" that represent "an array of viewpoints across the political spectrum," said a spokesman for the company, Chris Dale.

RT's reach on YouTube — 2.2 million subscribers, just slightly behind CNN — stemmed from a long and mutually beneficial relationship between the news channel and the video site, according to current and former RT employees and technology industry analysts.

YouTube had the vast audience and global reach that RT needed as it set out to become a worldwide alternative news source with influence and viewers beyond

Russia's own borders. RT has YouTube channels in a number of foreign languages including Arabic, Spanish, German, French and Chinese.

"RT management did view YouTube as hugely important to spreading content," said Liz Wahl, a former correspondent in the United States for RT who quit on the air in 2014 over concerns that the network was whitewashing the Russian annexation of Crimea. "Traditional television ratings weren't important because the aim was to get the messaging out through various digital and social platforms."

The Russian channel was among the first news organizations to recognize YouTube's power and developed content intended to perform well on the platform. RT uploads videos frequently, sprinkling in buzzy viral videos of disasters — plane crashes, tsunamis, a meteor strike — to earn likes and longer watch times, which YouTube's algorithm rewards with better placement among search results and recommendations.

The viral videos, which were often borrowed from other sources, help to build up RT's subscribers, and they became part of the Kremlin's audience for more political content.

"People come for the click-bait material," said Bret Schafer, an official at the Alliance for Securing Democracy, a bipartisan initiative of the German Marshall Fund, the Washington-based public policy research group. "And they eventually land on videos that the Kremlin wants them to see."

While much of RT's traffic stems from nonpolitical videos, the channel's political and foreign affairs content ranks highly in many YouTube searches. Searches on topics on which the Kremlin is typically eager to promote its point of view — American intervention in Syria, the Ukrainian civil war or the rise of Germany's far-right AfD party — will often turn up an RT video as one of the top results.

YouTube also provided RT with the kind of perks it reserved for big publishers, including custom backgrounds for its channel in the early days and a "check mark" that designated RT as a verified news source. Until recently, RT was also among a select group of news organizations included in Google's "preferred" news lineup,

granting them access to guaranteed revenue from premium advertisers. Those advertisers, in effect, subsidized Russia's international propaganda arm.

Google dropped RT from the preferred lineup last month. Andrea Faville, a Google spokeswoman, said the decision was unrelated to the congressional inquiry, and that RT had been dropped as part of a "standard algorithmic update." But Google also noted that it was not placing any other limits on RT: The channel could still sell regular ads on its videos and the status downgrade only applied in the United States. Google later clarified that RT was downgraded in other markets, but it would not say which ones.

Kirill Karnovich-Valua, RT's deputy editor in chief, said the organization had not been informed of Google's decision and it was puzzled about why it was dropped despite being "one of the most watched YouTube channels in the world."

"This speaks to the unprecedented political pressure increasingly applied to all RT partners and relationships in a concerted effort to push our channel out of the U.S. market entirely, and by any means possible," Mr. Karnovich-Valua wrote in an email.

Last month, RT said the Justice Department had demanded that a private company affiliated with RT America register as a "foreign agent" — a term that dates back to a law originally enacted in 1938 to deter Nazi propaganda. On Thursday, after the deadline set by American officials had passed, an RT spokeswoman said that the news organization was "doing everything possible for RT to avoid having to register." Registration could impose voluminous disclosure requirements on RT, a particular burden for a media organization producing frequent content.

Russia's president, Vladimir V. Putin, responded in more forceful terms: Should the United States impose restrictions on Russian media, Mr. Putin said last week, Russian would act "symmetrically and quite swiftly."

RT's use of other technology platforms is also under investigation. Last month, officials at Twitter told a Senate Intelligence Committee that three RT accounts targeting an American audience — with a combined following of roughly six million users — had spent \$274,100 to promote tweets in 2016.

But none of RT's social media activities or its presence in cable and satellite TV lineups has delivered the impact of its YouTube channel. RT launched its YouTube page in March 2007, roughly four months after Google paid \$1.65 billion for the fledgling video site. At the time, YouTube was better known for pirated content and videos of cute animals than news programming, but RT caught on quickly.

The Russian channel recruited talent from within the burgeoning world of YouTube-born media stars, people who had already shown a knack for creating viral or popular video content.

One RT contributor, the British blogger Graham Phillips, built a large following on YouTube with videos from Ukraine's civil war, many of them critical of Ukraine's central government. RT often featured Mr. Phillips and at one point employed him as a part-time freelancer before he was arrested and deported by Ukrainian authorities. His personal YouTube channel has earned more than 60 million views.

Another RT contributor, Lori Harfenist, began her career on public-access television in New York City, and eventually moved her self-produced show, "The Resident," to YouTube. Ms. Harfenist was one of the platform's first revenue-sharing partners, according to a biography on Ms. Harfenist's personal website.

Ms. Harfenist was eventually recruited by RT, which began featuring her on segments with titles like "America is a Hypocrite." During the presidential campaign, RT's Twitter account promoted a video from her that claimed the existence of an anti-Semitic conspiracy involving Hillary Clinton, Google and the Illuminati. (She later claimed the segment was meant as satire.) Ms. Harfenist did not respond to emails and Facebook messages seeking comment.

Today, RT ranks among the top news channels on YouTube for views, subscribers and "engagement" such as comments or likes. The most-watched clips on RT are not political or anti-establishment videos, they are snackable content. A clip of a homeless man with a gifted voice for radio is the most popular video on RT, viewed 40 million times since it was uploaded six years ago.

Mr. Karnovich-Valua said RT's primary aim is to provide an alternative point of view on current events so its audience can get a full picture of world events. "Where

relevant, RT does present a Russian perspective on current events, but we don't promote the Russian point of view, we explain it alongside with presenting others," he said.

Some lawmakers, including Mr. Warner, have called for tighter regulation and disclosure requirements for political advertising on social media platforms. Yet RT's embrace of YouTube shows how difficult it could be to limit foreign influence.

"It's not a secret. It's not rocket science, but they're just doing it much better," said Christoph Burseg, who runs VeeScore.com, an analytics and strategic consultancy that tracks YouTube use. "Unless YouTube decides to manually step in, they will continue to be very present. RT isn't doing anything wrong, they're just riding the algorithms."

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A version of this article appears in print on October 24, 2017, on Page A1 of the New York edition with the headline: YouTube Gave Russian Outlet Portal Into U.S.

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