

## Russian Disinformation Grows Resilient to Western Sanctions and Big Tech Pushback

*Kremlin-backed propaganda thriving thanks to social media and ads*

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Russian state-backed media have long disseminated pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives and have increasingly used English-language subsidiaries to target Western audiences. In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, [Google and Meta "de-monetized" several Russian](#) outlets by disallowing advertising on their sites and channels. This cut them off from a lucrative stream of advertising revenue: According to one estimate, the Kremlin received approximately \$73M between 2006 and 2018 just from Google-owned YouTube. Google also banned all Russian state-funded media from using its ad system on their websites and apps, further crippling its ability to profit from disinformation.

In March, YouTube "de-platformed" Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik News, two outlets funded by the Russian government, reducing their reach and visibility. Since its banishment, RT has shifted its online media strategy and tried to benefit from alternative social media platforms and new advertising networks to spread disinformation and destabilize democratic rivals.

The importance of understanding these efforts and how they may evolve will be vital to safeguarding democracy around the globe.

According to a [report](#) released by the U.S. State Department's Global Engagement Center, RT is a central player in Russia's strategy to influence English-speaking audiences. In its 12-year run as RT America, the network partnered with legitimate journalists such as Larry King and Ed Schultz<sup>1</sup> to promote its brand and lend an air of legitimacy to its state-backed propaganda.<sup>2</sup> RT also made extensive use of YouTube, Facebook, and display ads to spread pro-Kremlin messaging.

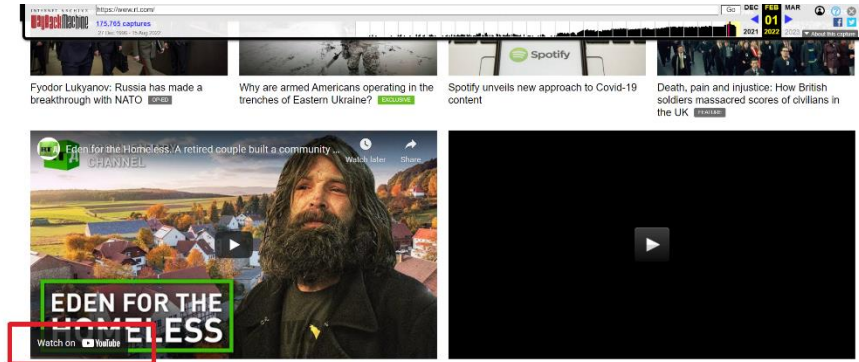
RT's media footprint includes television channels, websites in six languages, and a large social media footprint, with over 3 million followers on Twitter and nearly 7.5 million followers on Facebook . Prior to being de-platformed, RT had over 4.5 million subscribers on its official YouTube channel, which launched in 2007 and had over 60,000 videos and more than 3.5 billion views.

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<sup>1</sup> "Larry King, the Russian Media and a Partisan Landscape" by Jim Rutenberg, The New York Times, Sept. 18, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/19/business/media/moscow-joins-the-partisan-media-landscape-with-familiar-american-faces.html> ("They are the most visible examples of Russia's aggressive attempt to use our free press to make mischief in our political process — lending legitimacy to a network that has at times trafficked in Sept. 11 conspiracy theories, posted one-sided news from Ukraine and presented particularly grim views of the United States and its efforts around the world.")

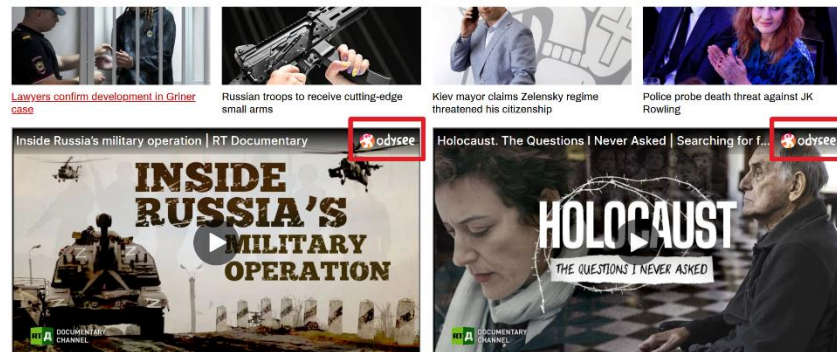
<sup>2</sup> "RT wants to spread Moscow's propaganda here. Let's treat it that way" by James Kirchick, The Washington Post, Sept. 20, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/09/20/rt-wants-to-spread-moscows-propaganda-here-lets-treat-it-that-way/>.

De-monetizing and de-platforming by Big Tech have increased financial burdens on Moscow and forced Kremlin-backed outlets to find alternative channels to spread their messages and generate ad revenue. The rise of alternative social media platforms that practice little to no content moderation has provided Kremlin-backed media new — albeit smaller — vehicles for propaganda narratives. Alternative platforms have attracted disaffected users unhappy with Big Tech’s efforts to tamp down political, environmental, and health-related misinformation. RT has found a welcome home on these platforms and relies on some of them to reach English-speaking audiences. For instance, RT has replaced the embedded YouTube videos on its homepage with videos from the blockchain-based platform Odysee — a YouTube alternative that claims it is “not in a position to adjudicate the truthfulness of postings.”



February 1, 2022

August 15, 2022

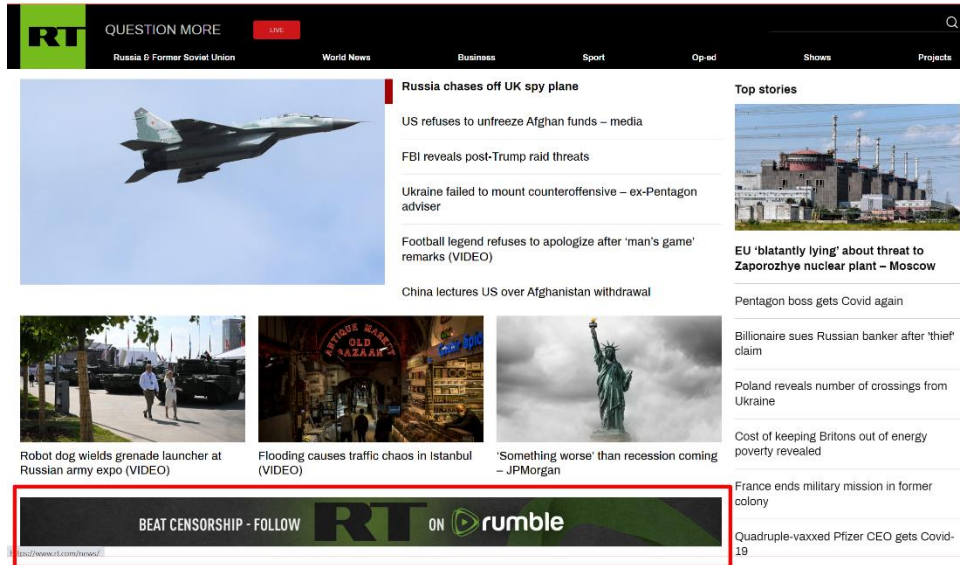


Top: Screenshot of RT.com homepage on Feb. 1, 2022 (via Internet Wayback Machine).

Bottom: Screenshot of RT.com homepage on Aug. 15, 2022.

In addition to using Odysee, RT has begun to livestream its state-backed propaganda on the video-sharing platform Rumble, which markets itself as a place for users “who believe in authentic expression.” Links to RT’s Rumble channel have been prominently displayed on the RT homepage along with an embedded Rumble web player broadcasting its 24/7 live-stream. RT has taken advantage of the permissibility of these platforms to repeatedly advance the Kremlin’s narrative of “de-nazifying Ukraine” as a justification for war and characterizing Western nations as aggressors. RT’s channels on these platforms have a smaller footprint than they had on Big Tech accounts. However, the adjacency of its

content to anti-establishment content creators allows RT to target audiences primed to distrust traditional media. Also, while the number of views may be lower, the share of advertising revenue for content creators is greater. Rumble reportedly shares up to 60% of its ad revenue with creators, compared to the 10-15% shared by YouTube.



*Screenshot of the RT.com homepage on Aug. 15, 2022.*

Before Big Tech de-platformed RT, the outlet tried reaching a broad audience through large social media platforms. With its migration to Odyssee and Rumble, RT is trading reach for targeted messaging to more sympathetic audiences. It is also worth noting that while Facebook, Twitter and other Big Tech companies may restrict the presence of official RT accounts, platform users are still permitted to share links to RT content. Thus, users active on both Big Tech and alternative platforms can post links to Russian propaganda created on Rumble or Odyssee on Facebook and Twitter. This enables RT and other Kremlin-backed media to benefit from content amplification on Big Tech platforms and collect the advertising revenue from alternative platforms.

To provide safe havens for Russian propaganda — and share in the advertising revenue spoils — alternative social media platforms have sought to shield themselves from external pressures. In 2021, the alternative platform Parler was shuttered by Amazon Web Services, which terminated its hosting service agreement because of inadequate content moderation. To avoid a similar fate, Rumble has raised capital to expand its business and establish its own hosting services and market them to other alternative platforms. Meanwhile, Odyssee leverages blockchain technology that distributes hosting duties to countless servers worldwide and so can't be shut down by a centralized hosting service. These platforms have cultivated walled gardens within which only the site administrators can decide whether to weed out bad actors. It would appear that under the guise of preserving freedom of expression, the lucrative relationship between the Kremlin and alternative platforms may only grow.

While Russian state media has found alternative channels for content dissemination, it is also developing alternative methods of monetizing its content online. The current complexity and opacity of the online advertising ecosystem presents an opportunity for propaganda outlets to find complicit or dishonest ad exchanges and protect themselves from future de-monetization.

By relying on alternative marketplaces linked to Russian businesses to circumvent Western ad exchanges like Google, pro-Kremlin sites may develop resilience to industry action designed to protect advertisers from content that threatens brand security and prevent the proliferation of disinformation and propaganda.

Current efforts to increase transparency in the ad marketplace focus on the prevention of fraud and misrepresentation of ad space. In 2017, the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB) created a voluntary system to prevent fraud by creating a “ledger” of authorized ad sellers for a website. This system has been widely adopted and relies on two webpages — one hosted by the website (e.g., nytimes.com), which lists all approved sellers for its site, and another hosted by the ad seller, which lists websites on which they are authorized to sell.

While this system was designed to prevent fraud, it also provides a glimpse into the online advertising ecosystem around RT and how Russia may seek to monetize propaganda in the future. Google is the largest seller of online ads, but there are hundreds — if not thousands — of other ad sellers that offer similar services, allowing websites to sell ad space and advertisers to buy ad space.

The Carter Center and the McCain Institute analyzed more than 400 ad sellers for the presence of known sources of misinformation. Sources of Russian propaganda and misinformation rarely appeared, with only one seller including RT on its authorized site list. This ad seller, Relap Pro, is based in Mexico and sells ads for numerous media sites across Latin America and lists the “RT Group” with the Spanish language URL (actualidad.rt.com) for RT as the domain of record for the account.

```
{
  contact_email: "contact@relappro.com",
  contact_address: "Calle 45, Num. 321 por calle 24 Fraccionamiento Aurea, CP 97203, Mérida, México.",
  version: "1.0",
  identifiers: [ ],
  - sellers: [
    - {
      seller_id: "00001",
      seller_type: "PUBLISHER",
      name: "Relap México SA de CV",
      domain: "relappro.com",
      ext: "None"
    },
    - {
      seller_id: "00002",
      seller_type: "PUBLISHER",
      name: "RT Group",
      domain: "actualidad.rt.com"
    }
  ],
}
```

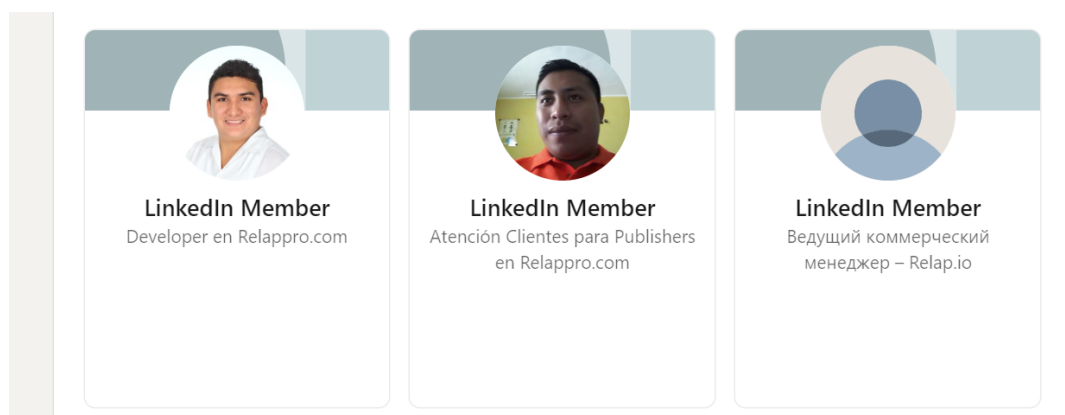
*Screenshot of the sellers.json file that lists the websites on which Relap Pro is authorized to sell ads.*

*This screenshot was captured at relappro.com/sellers.json on Aug. 15, 2022.*

Its list of web clients indicates that Relap Pro focuses on selling online ads for Spanish-language content. However, the company is tied to a Russian ad seller, Relap.io, that [sells ads for the state broadcaster, Ria Novosti](#). The connection is more than nominal. According to the LinkedIn profile of Relap Pro, staff associated with the company include a Moscow-based employee at Relap.io. The relationship between

these companies is not made explicit on either of the companies' websites. (It is important to note that the connection between Relap Pro and Relap.io and the authorization to sell ads for RT does not confirm that any ads have been sold, or that either company monetizes disinformation.)

However, given the comprehensive removal of RT from authorized ad seller lists since the Ukraine invasion, the presence of RT on Relap Pro's list shows a lack of responsiveness to unprecedented industry action. Coupled with the company's business ties to a Russian ad seller that works with Russian state media, the existence of Relap Pro highlights the potential of a parallel ad selling market that is sympathetic to Russian state interests and that may be helping monetize media that that would be banned from the traditional ads market.



*Screenshot of the employees' section of Relap Pro's LinkedIn profile. This screenshot was captured on Aug.15, 2022.*

As the Kremlin is being stress-tested by Western economic sanctions and Big Tech moderation actions, it is finding novel channels and deceptive means to spread its propaganda. The shift to a targeted social media outreach strategy and the establishment of parallel markets for online advertising pose new challenges for mitigating Russian disinformation. While the war in Ukraine persists, Russia will continue waging an information war on Western audiences to sow distrust and generate public dissatisfaction with Western leaders because of their support for the Ukrainian cause. In response to these challenges, we must continue to expose Russian efforts to undermine democracy, as [sunlight](#) is often the best disinfectant, and the [electric light is the best policeman](#). With the exposure of these dynamics, policymakers, businesses, and social media platforms can be empowered to make decisions that limit the reach and influence of Russian propaganda without unduly restricting the right to free speech. Democracies thrive on accurate information and commitments to human rights, and any response to Russia's blatant attack on Western democracy must hold true to these responsibilities.