

Sputnik and Russia Today Under Investigation by US Department of Justice (DOJ)

Is it news or propaganda? And what about the First Amendment?

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Somehow everything keeps coming back around to Russia. In one of its recent initiatives, the Justice Department (DOJ) appears to be attacking the First Amendment as part of the apparent bipartisan program to make Vladimir Putin the fall guy for everything that goes wrong in Washington. In the past month, the DOJ has revealed that [the FBI is investigating](#) Russian owned news outlets Sputnik News and RT International and has [sent letters to the latter](#) demanding that one of its business affiliates register as a foreign agent by October 17th. The apparent line of inquiry that the Bureau is pursuing is that both are agencies of the Russian government and that both have been spreading disinformation that is intended to discredit the United States government and its institutions. This alleged action would make them, in the DOJ view, a propaganda arm of a foreign government rather than a news service. It also makes them subject to Department of the Treasury oversight under the Foreign Agents Registration Act of 1938.

[Sputnik](#), which is owned by a Russian government media group headed by Putin *consigliere* Dimitri Kiselyov, has been under investigation due to the accusations made by a fired broadcaster named Andrew Feinberg. Feinberg, the former Sputnik White House correspondent, reportedly took with him a thumb drive containing some thousands of internal business files when he left his office. He has been interviewed by the FBI, has turned over his documents, and has claimed that much of the direction over what the network covered came from Moscow.

[RT America](#), more television oriented than Sputnik, operates [through two business entities](#): RTTV America and RTTV Studios. The Department of Justice has refused to identify which of the businesses has been targeted by a letter calling for registration under FARA, but it is believed to be RTTV America, which provides both operational support of the broadcasting as well as the production facilities. Both companies are actually owned by Russian-American businessman Alex Yazlovsky, though the funding for them presumably comes from the Russian government.

I have noticed very little pushback in the U.S. mainstream and alternative media regarding the Department of Justice moves, presumably because there is a broad consensus that the Russians have been interfering in our “democracy” and have had it coming. If that assumption on my part is correct, the silence over the issue reflects a certain naïvete while also constituting a near perfect example of a pervasive tunnel vision that obscures the significant collateral damage that might be forthcoming.

News organizations are normally considered to be exempt from the requirements of FARA. The Department of Justice action against the two Russian major media outlets is unprecedented insofar as I could determine. Even Qatar owned al-Jazeera, which was so vilified during the early stages of the Afghan War that it had its [Kabul offices bombed](#) by the U.S., did not have to register under FARA, was permitted to operate freely, and was even allowed to buy a television channel license for its American operations.

The DOJ is in effect saying that RT and Sputnik are nothing more than propaganda organs and do not qualify as journalism. I would have to disagree if one goes by the standards of contemporary journalism in the United States. America's self-described "newspapers of record" the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* pretend that they have a lock on stories that are "true." The *Post* has adopted the slogan "Democracy Dies in Darkness" while the *Times* proclaims "The truth is more important now than ever," but anyone who has read either paper regularly for the past year knows perfectly well that they have been as often as not leading propaganda organs for Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party, pushing a particular agenda and denigrating Donald Trump. They differ little from the admittedly biased television news reporting provided by Fox News and MSNBC.

What exactly did the Russians do? According to [last January's report](#) signed off on by the FBI, CIA and NSA, which may have motivated the DOJ to take action, RT and Sputnik "consistently cast President-elect Trump as the target of unfair coverage from traditional U.S. media outlets that they claimed were subservient to a corrupt political establishment." Well, they certainly got that one right and did better in their reporting of what was going on among the American public than either the *Washington Post* or *New York Times*.

Regarding Sputnik, [Feinberg claimed](#) *inter alia* that he was "pushed" to ask questions at White House press briefings suggesting that Syria's Bashar al-Assad was not responsible for some of the chemical attacks that had taken place. One wonders at Feinberg's reluctance as Sputnik and RT were not the only ones expressing skepticism over the claims of Syrian involvement, which have been widely debunked. And why is expressing a credible alternative view on an event in Syria even regarded as propaganda damaging to the American public?

There is a difficult to distinguish line between FARA restricted "trying to influence opinion" using what is regarded a fake news and propaganda and legitimate journalism reporting stories where the "facts" have been challenged. Even real journalists choose to cover stories selectively, inevitably producing a certain narrative for the viewer, listener or reader. All news services do that to a greater or lesser extent.

I have considerable personal experience of RT in particular and, to a lesser extent, with Sputnik. I also know many others who have been interviewed by one or both. No one who has done so has ever been coached or urged to follow a particular line or support a specific position insofar as I know. Nor do I know anyone who has actually been paid to appear. Most of us who are interviewed are appreciative of the fact that we are allowed to air views that are essentially banned on the mainstream media to include critique of maladroit policies in places like Syria and Afghanistan and biting critiques of the war on terror.

Sputnik, in my opinion, does, however, lean heavily towards stories that are critical of the United States and its policies, while RT has a global reach and is much more balanced in what it covers. For sure, it too criticizes U.S. policies and is protective of the Russian

government, but it does not substantially differ from other national news services that I have had done interviews for. I find as much uniquely generated negative reporting about the U.S. (usually linked to violence or guns) on BBC World News, France24 and Deutsche Welle as I do on [RT International](#). To describe it as part of an “influence campaign” driven by a “state-run propaganda machine” has a kernel of truth but it is nevertheless a bit of a stretch since one could make the same claims about any government financed news service, including *Voice of America*. Governments only get into broadcasting to promote their points of view, not to inform the public.

There is a serious problem in the threats to use FARA as it could advance the ongoing erosion of freedom of the press in the United States by establishing the precedent that a foreign news services that is critical of the U.S. will no longer be tolerated. It is also hypocritical in that countries like Israel that interfere regularly in American politics are exempt from FARA registration because no one dares to take such a step, while Russia is fair game.

Going after news outlets also [invites retaliation](#) against U.S. media operating in Russia and, eventually, elsewhere. Currently Western media reports from Russia pretty much without being censored or pressured to avoid certain stories. I would note a recent series that appeared on CBS featuring the [repulsive](#) Stephen Colbert spending a week in Russia which [mercilessly lampooned](#) both the country and its government. No one arrested him or made him stop filming. No one claimed that he was trying to undermine the Russian government or discredit the country’s institutions, even though that is precisely what he was doing.

And then there is the issue of the “threat” posed by news media outlets like RT and Sputnik. Even combined the two services have limited access to the U.S. market, with a 2014 study suggesting that they have only [2.8 million actual weekly viewers](#). RT did not make the cut and is not included on the list of 100 most popular television channels in the U.S. and it has far less market penetration than other foreign news services like the BBC. It can be found on only a limited number of cable networks in a few, mostly urban areas. It does better in Europe, but its profile in the U.S. market is miniscule. As even bad news is good news in terms of selling a product, it probably did receive higher ratings when the intelligence agency report slamming it came out on it in January. Everyone probably wanted to learn what RT was all about.

So it seems to me that the United States’ moves against RT and Sputnik are little more than lashing out at a problem that is not really a problem in a bid to again promote the Russian “threat” to explain the ongoing dysfunction that prevails in America’s democratic process. One keeps reading or hearing how the American government has “indisputable” proof of Moscow’s intentions to subvert democracy in the U.S. as well as in Europe but the actual evidence is still elusive. Will Russiagate end with a bang or a whimper? No one seems to know.

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