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“The Kremlin’s mouthpieces”

by Masha Gessen

When a journalist admits that he has been lying to the public for years, this usually results in a flurry of media coverage castigating the guilty party, along with a dose of self-flagellation by his employer for having failed to notice the lies sooner. When this wave of humiliating publicity ends, the offending journalist is allowed to slink away in shame.

But sometimes journalists who admit having lied for years get to be heroes for a few days, garnering praise for their honesty and bravery. These public liars get to depart the story with their heads raised high and every reason to expect to continue a career in journalism.

Take [Sara Firth](#), a London-based reporter who resigned from the Kremlin’s propaganda channel RT this month. Announcing her [resignation on Twitter](#), she wrote, “I have huge respect for many on the team, but I’m for the truth.” Or [Liz Wahl](#), Firth’s former colleague in the network’s U.S. bureau, who [announced her resignation on-air](#) a few months earlier: “I cannot be part of a network funded by the Russian government which whitewashes the actions of [Vladimir] Putin. I’m proud to be an American, and believe in disseminating the truth.” In the early days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, another U.S.-based American employee of the station, [Abby Martin](#), rebelled on-air without resigning. “Just because I work here, for RT, doesn’t mean I don’t have editorial independence, and I can’t stress enough how strongly I am against any military intervention in sovereign nations’ affairs.” She was not telling the truth: Being employed by the Kremlin’s mouthpiece most certainly means she does not have editorial independence.

For most viewers, the station formerly known as Russia Today is just that channel you seem to get in any hotel room in the world. Its graphics are sleek, even if the staging can appear amateurish, and its rhetoric is an unlikely mix of the standard leftist critique of Western governments with heaps of praise for Putin and his allies. For young college graduates from English-speaking countries, RT offers an opportunity to get a well-paying first job and to get in front of a camera faster than they could ever hope to achieve at any conventional Western television operation. In the hierarchy of television operations funded by authoritarian states, RT is the lowest rung of the ladder: After a few years there, these young Americans and Brits might hope to step up to Chinese English-language broadcasting and eventually, perhaps, climb all the way to Al Jazeera.

Russia Today was founded in 2006, just as the West’s stubborn infatuation with Putin finally waned. The Kremlin wanted an outlet to counter a growing wave of criticism as it fully reverted to authoritarianism. The goal was to project a portrait of Russia as a different sort of democracy while pointing out the failures of Western powers, such as income inequality, racism and abuse

of power. Native English speakers were essential to the project. A couple of years ago, Russia Today recast itself as RT so that viewers who had accidentally stumbled on the channel wouldn't immediately know whose propaganda they were watching. Indeed, one could tune in during an interview with, say, an ACLU lawyer talking about National Security Agency surveillance, and watch for a few minutes before realizing that the channel was broadcasting a very skewed perspective on the world.

As the chasm between Russia and the West widened, RT's reports became more bizarre. In December, for example, it [aired a half-hour report](#) in which it was suggested that the U.S. invasion of Iraq was the result of a "larger plan" for the creation of a "greater Israel." This month, it ran [a half-hour documentary](#) that claimed the United States was an even worse place for gay people than Russia — and also homosexual relationships carry "risks of mental and physical health problems and other social pathologies." And, of course, as far back as December, it was portraying the Ukrainian protest movement as pawns of the Europeans who wanted the country's legitimate elected government overthrown. This month, YouTube blocked RT's news stream, apparently after a series of complaints about inaccuracies in its reporting from Ukraine.

Lying is not a side effect of what RT does; it is the channel's heart. "Every single day we are lying and finding sexier ways to do it," [Firth told BuzzFeed](#) upon her departure from the channel. She described the manipulation of reporting to suggest that the Ukrainian government was responsible for shooting down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 on July 17. In [an interview with the Guardian](#), she said, "It was the most shockingly obvious misinformation, and it got to the point where I couldn't defend it anymore."

In other words, the lies in which she participated for five years at the channel were bad but not bad enough to quit over — but lying about the airliner was just too much. It makes sense that, with all that RT experience, she would try to spin her departure as an act of bravery and standing up for the truth. What makes no sense, however, is why real journalists would let ex-RT staff get away with this narrative.

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