

Russian-backed cable news network RT America shuts down

Kevin Reed
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RT America, the Russian state-funded cable news network in the US, was shut down on Thursday and all 120 of its employees were laid off.

T&R Productions, the firm that operates RT America, informed its staff in writing that it was “ceasing production” due to “unforeseen” events. The employees at the channel’s offices in New York, Washington, DC, Los Angeles and Miami were also told of the decision during a company-wide town hall meeting on March 3.

CNN Business reported the shutdown after obtaining a memo from T&R Productions general manager Mikhail Solodovnikov, which said: “As a result of unforeseen business interruption events, T&R Productions, LLC (‘T&R’) will be ceasing production and, therefore must lay off most of its staff who work at all of its locations,” and, “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.”

RT America was the US division of the RT (formerly Russia Today) network, a global multilingual television news network based in Moscow. RT America was distributed through a select group of cable TV providers, streaming services and live streamed through its website.

On March 1, in an act of anti-Russian hysteria, the International Academy of Television Arts & Sciences suspended the general membership of T&R Productions manager Solodovnikov and removed him from its board of directors. A representative of the organization told *Deadline*, “Due to the ongoing invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the International Academy is suspending Mikhail Solodovnikov’s membership and board position, as well as the membership of Elizaveta Brodskaya.”

Brodskaya is head of news at the RT International and RT Russia based in Moscow. Several other Russian members were also stricken from the Academy’s membership list.

RT America ran numerous programs that were hosted by popular talk show figures with a wide range of political views and perspectives such as Dennis Miller, William Shatner, Peter Lavelle, Chris Hedges, Lee Camp and Jesse Ventura. The channel was launched in February 2010. RT’s sister channels in Canada and Europe have also been shut down.

RT’s deputy editor-in-chief Anna Belkina told CNN, “We are sad and disappointed that our groundbreaking channel RT America had to go off the air after more than 10 years, and that the company that supplied much of its content, T&R Productions, had to cease most of its operations, due to challenging external circumstances.”

Although details about the “external circumstances” have not been officially stated, it is known that DirecTV, the multichannel video programming distributor with 15 million subscribers and a major source of RT America’s viewing audience and revenue, dropped the network on March 1, two days before the shutdown. Roku, a supplier of television streaming equipment, also removed RT America from its channel store on March 1.

Ora.TV, the producer of the *Dennis Miller + One* and William Shatner’s *I Don’t Understand* programs, released a statement on March 1 that said, “Given the invasion of Ukraine and the tragic humanitarian crisis, Ora Media has paused production of content we license to T&R Productions. Future business decisions will be made based on the evolving situation.”

In a statement, Shatner said, “Ora TV sold the show to RT America. I had no say in the matter.” He added

that the show is “informative, entertaining and totally, absolutely non-political. My contract for seventy half-hour shows this past year has been with Ora TV. Those seventy shows are in the pipeline, and I have no voice in that matter as well.” Shatner also expressed sympathies for the Ukrainian people.

The shutdown of RT America follows a pattern of censorship measures imposed by the European Union (EU) that banned RT and Sputnik, the Russian state-run news agency and radio broadcast service. The official EU ban was followed shortly by all of the major tech and social media platforms—YouTube, Facebook and TikTok—shutting down access to RT and Sputnik across Europe. Apple removed the Russian news services from its app store everywhere in the world except for Russia.

Among those whose programs were terminated in the RT America shutdown is the stand-up comedian, author and activist Lee Camp, the host of the weekly *Redacted Tonight*. Camp, who identifies himself as anti-war, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, also had his podcast called *Moment of Clarity* removed from the audio streaming service Spotify.

Appearing on the YouTube channel *The KatieHalper Show*, Camp said his TV program was shut down suddenly and with very little information. He said, in his view, it was obvious that RT America was terminated by either a directive from the US Justice Department or the sanctions regime imposed on Russia that made it a crime for the network to continue to operate.

Camp said that being dropped by platforms would not cause an immediate shutdown of the channel since the organization had financial resources that should have enabled it to continue operating even if it had to scale back. Camp said that the fact that RT America was shut down instantly meant, “the only thing that would ever cause that would be a fear of the executives getting arrested or literally the Justice Department saying, ‘shut it down’.”

Camp went on, “For anyone to celebrate this brand of McCarthyism, this kind of mass censorship—I was censored on three platforms in the span of three days. My YouTube videos of *Redacted Tonight* were banned throughout Europe and the UK, my show was gone. And, on top of that, my personal podcast *Moment of Clarity* was deleted from Spotify in three days ... the idea that anyone would celebrate this level of

censorship is really tragic.”

In response to a question from Halper about the attempt to silence critical voices on the war in Ukraine, Camp said, “I said clearly in all my videos that I was opposed to this, I think Russia’s invasion is wrong. But I also give context to what’s going on in the situation, you know, how NATO has expanded over the years, how there are literally Nazis with Nazi emblems like swastikas on their helmets involved in the Donbass region. And giving context, if people think giving context is somehow justifying, that’s utter nonsense. We should be intelligent; we should understand the context of these issues.”



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