

Pravda Will Set You Free

Russia's answer to Fox News and MSNBC.

By *David Weigel* Posted Monday, June 27, 2011, at 3:26 PM ET

Alyona Minkovski is [on a rant](#). The rants are essential parts of *The Alyona Show*," the series she's hosted on Russia Today—[RT](#), if you please—since 2009. They can be about anything, but they are usually about the rest of the media. This particular rant is about the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, "two major newspapers who won award after award for their hard-hitting journalism," and who, that day, were crowdsourcing an investigation of Sarah Palin's email archives from her time as Alaska's governor. This wins them a spot on Minkovski's regular feature, "Tool Time."

"Why do they need help covering a nonstory?" Minkovski asks. "Sarah Palin quit her job, sold out for fame and fortune, and has spent the last two years making a living by criticizing others. Who cares about her e-mails? Why does the media continue to force coverage of Sarah Palin on us?"

She rolls a clip, a *Daily Show*-esque rundown of cable news anchors frothing over the Palin trove, making themselves look like fools. As she talks, stage right, one of RT's other hosts, [Adam Kokesh](#), finishes taping his show and walks through the studio, catching up with reporters. He's just finished [talking to viewers](#) about the health risks of sitting all day at a desk, arsenic levels in FDA-approved chicken, and the goings-on at the annual meeting of the Bilderberg Group. He has stripped down quickly to jeans and a tank top get-up that reveals his biceps and tattoos. Stage left, the liberal radio host Thom Hartmann, primly dressed and radiating calm, is putting together notes for his [own show](#), which will consist largely of an interview with exited White House economist Jared Bernstein.

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This is Friday for the strangest prime time news line-up on cable television. It's a block of TV news that's professionally produced, widely distributed—20 million American cable subscribers can watch it if they like—and basically immune to market forces. In 2005 RT was hatched, as the *Columbia Journalism Review* [put it](#), as "a soft-power tool to improve Russia's image abroad, to counter the anti-Russian bias the Kremlin saw in the Western media." [Reset button](#) or no, we Americans are not the biggest fans of [Russian propaganda](#).

When RT first drew attention here, it was for its coverage of the 2008 Russia-Georgia conflict, which portrayed the small republic of 4.6 million people as the aggressor. (One fairly typical segment [featured an interview](#) with an American in South Ossetia who blamed America for the violence.) Its coverage of American politics was heavy on interviews with fringe experts and

third party candidates; frequent on-air experts included [radio host Alex Jones](#) and newsletter reporter Wayne Madsen, who'd discuss too-good-to-check stories about the origins of the [swine flu](#) and why WTC Building 7 fell on 9/11.

A couple of years later, the network has a bureau of 70 people in downtown Washington, including veterans of CNN and NBC News; it gets credible guests from places like Talking Points Memo, *Reason*, the Cato Institute, and the *Washington Examiner*. Before he got his own show on MSNBC, Cenk Uygur would go on these shows to riff on the news. Talking out of turn, and not for attribution, these guests have no idea what to make of RT's regular content ("it's always some truther crap"). But the network's most visible, popular presence in Washington is that evening line-up. A watcher of RT always got the impression that America was irrational, oppressive, frivolous and in trouble; a watcher of the prime-time line-up gets the same impression, but it's different somehow. It's somewhere between Jon Stewart's monologue and the world that [Rowdy Roddy Piper](#) sees when he puts on those special sunglasses in *They Live*. Hartmann's show is the most conventional, and his deal with RT is the most independent. He'd previously appeared on the network as a guest, and they offered him space to film and distribute his series, "[The Big Picture](#)."

"I can tell ya, we're putting together the same show we've been putting together for years," says Hartmann. "The question of what would Russia want from my show? That was never part of the discussion. I think they liked that it would draw eyeballs, that it was good programming. This is just a guess, because I'm not privy to their inside thinking, but it seems like they're trying to grow and compete in that space occupied by the CBC and Al-Jazeera, into that space of foreign cable channels that can get audiences in the United States."

Minkovski's show is another thing entirely—an in-house attempt at a newsy cult hit. The show was built around Minkovski when she was just 23. Its credit sequence featured the host, toothy and double-take pretty, striking poses and shooting a laser out of her index finger. Its editorial premise was "bringing you the *real* headlines with none of the mercy." Minkovski would mock the rest of the media for focusing on celebrity news and horse races—content like that on her show would be left to the "happy hour" segment, in which pundits riff on the news behind martini glasses. (The vodka is fake; the olives are not.) Her meatiest segments were about [government spying](#), and the Federal Reserve, and America's undeclared wars; it was on her show that [Julian Assange got one of his most sympathetic interviews](#).

"There's a reason we have the largest known incarceration system in the world," says Minkovski. "There's a reason we see an increasing number of violent SWAT raids that go wrong where innocent civilians are killed. There's a reason that Congress, despite being painted as a house divided, has no problem almost unanimously approving increasing defense

budgets each year and can join together to extend the Patriot Act with no debate, with the exception of the few Rand Pauls of the world. And nobody on TV talks about that!"

RT is cagey about the media; my questions about the prime-time line-up were received but not answered. At the same time, the network relishes in its reputation as propaganda. One of the house ads that runs between segments quotes angry comments from its many YouTube pages, with sentiments like "RT clearly is anti-American propaganda." Sure, these stories about America in steep and hilarious decline are funded by the Kremlin. Why hide it?

"I think people are just so scared of an 'other,' something that might be unknown to them and they can't see past that," suggests Minkovski. "So in their eyes, working for RT de-legitimizes you. If you want to find a channel with an agenda, go to Fox News. *They* want to dumb down the masses and scare them so they can't put any pieces of the puzzle together."

Kokesh, whose media career [has been nurtured by RT](#), is even happier to talk about this subject. In 2007, as a leader of Iraq Veterans Against the War, he participated in a mock "patrol" of Washington, wearing camo and toting a fake gun. He became one of the most prominent anti-war protesters in the city as the surge built and the rest of the anti-war movement faded, much of its energy moving into the presidential election. Kokesh became a supporter of Ron Paul. He ran for Congress himself in 2010 in New Mexico, and when that sputtered he got a radio show.

This year, the Russian network that used to have him on once a week or so decided to give him a nightly series, *Adam vs. the Man*. When Ron Paul announced his 2012 exploratory committee, Kokesh saluted him on the air. He got an interview with his political hero and asked him stuff [no one on TV ever has](#): "You've described yourself as a voluntaryist. Can you tell us what that means for the big picture, and what your ideal society would be, as a voluntaryist?"

And the RT model has no prouder defender than Kokesh. "Truth is the best propaganda," says Kokesh, restating the network's pitch in his own terms. "I love it! I really love the concept of that. It's funny: People say we're hiding shit as a network. No, no—we put the fact that this is propaganda right out front. We're putting out the truth that no one else wants to say. I mean, if you want to put it in the worst possible abstract, it's the Russian government, which is a competing protection racket against the other governments of the world, going against the United States and calling them on their bullshit."

Is there a more radical way to say this? Yes, there is. "In Libya, the rebels call for close air support, and they get close air support," he says. "We call for close air support, and they give us a TV show. It's nice to know that in the United States we still have a chance to call for this peacefully. It's got to come from changing the paradigm—taking what we're able to learn from the Internet and being able to see the underlying patterns of exploitation."

How many Americans would agree with that? Lots of them. They read *The Nation*, Alex Jones, [WorldNetDaily](#). It can seem like the entire Internet was created to convince the paranoid reader that he's right—you can't trust the bastards. RT goes one step further: You can trust *the Russians* more than you can trust those bastards. If no one else wants to create a TV channel for the despondent, here it is.