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POLITICS

Right-wing influencers were duped to work for covert Russian operation, US says

BY **ALAN SUDERMAN AND ALI SWENSON**

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NEW YORK (AP) — They have millions of followers online. They have been major players in right-wing political discourse since Donald Trump was president. And they worked unknowingly for a company that was [a front for a Russian influence operation](#), U.S. prosecutors say.

An indictment filed Wednesday alleges a media company linked to six conservative influencers — including well-known personalities Tim Pool, Dave Rubin and Benny Johnson — was secretly funded by Russian state media employees to churn out English-language videos that were “often consistent” with the Kremlin’s “interest in amplifying U.S. domestic divisions in order to weaken U.S. opposition” to Russian interests, like its [war in Ukraine](#).

In addition to marking the third straight presidential election in which U.S. authorities have unveiled politically charged details about [Russia’s attempted interference in U.S. politics](#), an indictment indicates how Moscow may be attempting to capitalize on the skyrocketing popularity of right-wing podcasters, livestreamers and other content creators who have found successful careers on social media in the years since Trump was in office.

The U.S. Justice Department doesn’t allege any wrongdoing by the influencers, some of whom it says were given false information about the source of the company’s funding. Instead, it accuses two employees of RT, a Russian state media company, of funneling nearly \$10 million to a Tennessee-based content creation company for Russia-friendly content.

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After the indictments were announced, both Pool and Johnson issued statements on social media, which Rubin retweeted, saying they were victims of the alleged crimes and had done nothing wrong.

“We still do not know what is true as these are only allegations,” Pool said. “Putin is a scumbag.”

In his post, Johnson wrote that he had been asked a year ago to provide content to a “media startup.” He said his lawyers negotiated a “standard, arms length deal, which was later terminated.”

Kostiantyn Kalashnikov and Elena Afanasyeva are charged with conspiracy to commit money laundering and violating the Foreign Agents Registration Act. They are at large, and it was not immediately clear if they had lawyers.

U.S. officials have previously warned of [Russia's use of unwitting Americans to further influence operations](#) in the 2024 election, but Wednesday's indictment is the most detailed description of those efforts to date.

At a forum on Thursday, Russian President Vladimir Putin [appeared to suggest jokingly](#) that he would support Vice President Kamala Harris in the upcoming U.S. election. Intelligence officials have said Moscow has a preference for Trump.

Putin authorized [influence operations to help Trump in the 2020 election](#), while his 2016 campaign benefited from hacking by Russian intelligence officers and a covert social media effort, according to U.S. law enforcement and intelligence officials.

With the decline of traditional media like newspapers and limits on direct advertising on social media platforms, influencers are increasingly playing a key role in politics and shaping public opinion. Both the Republican and Democratic parties invited scores of [influencers to their respective national conventions](#) this summer. But with little to no disclosure requirements about who is funding influencers' work, the public is largely in the dark about who is powering the messaging online.

Though the indictment does not name the Tennessee-based company, the details match up exactly with Tenet Media, an online media company that boasts of hosting "a network of heterodox commentators that focus on Western political and cultural issues." Tenet's website lists six influencers who provide content, including Pool, Johnson, Rubin, Lauren Southern, Tayler Hansen and Matt Christiansen.

Tenet Media's six main influencers have more than 7 million subscribers on YouTube and more than 7 million followers on X.

Fueled by public outrage and online fandom, the influencers who make up the bench of talent at Tenet Media have amassed millions of loyal followers who agree with their staunch conservatism and brazen willingness to voice controversial opinions. Their channels also have created communities for conservative Americans who have lost trust in mainstream media sources through Trump's 2020 loss and the COVID-19 pandemic. Several of them have faced criticism for spreading political misinformation.

The indictment shows that some of the influencers were paid handsomely for their work. One unidentified influencer's contract included a \$400,000 monthly fee, a \$100,000 signing bonus and an additional performance bonus.

Tenet Media's shows in recent months have featured high-profile conservative guests, including Republican National Committee co-chair Lara Trump, former Republican presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy and U.S. Senate candidate Kari Lake. The nearly 2,000 videos posted by the company have gotten more than 16 million views on YouTube alone, prosecutors said.

Pool, a journalist-turned-YouTuber who first gained public attention for livestreaming the Occupy Wall Street protests, hosted Trump on his podcast earlier this year.

Johnson is an outspoken Trump supporter and internet personality who was fired from BuzzFeed after the company [found evidence](#) he'd plagiarized other works.

Rubin was previously part of the liberal news commentary show "The Young Turks" but has since identified as a libertarian. He boasts the largest YouTube following of Tenet's influencer roster and hosts a show called "The Rubin Report."

Tenet Media President Liam Donovan is the husband of Lauren Chen, a Canadian influencer who has appeared as a guest in several Tenet Media videos. Chen is affiliated with the conservative youth organization Turning Point USA and has hosted shows for the right-wing network Blaze Media. RT's website also lists her as a contributor of several opinion articles from 2021 and 2022.

Suderman reported from Richmond, Virginia. AP reporter Garance Burke contributed from San Francisco and researcher Rhonda Shafner contributed from New York.

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