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## TikTok's Efforts to Curb Reach of Russian Media Fall Flat

TikTok has become a battleground in the war for influence over the minds of American youth.

The video-streaming platform has taken measures to crack down on content created and shared by accounts with ties to the Russian states, but, according to reports, those efforts have been unsuccessful.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine last year, TikTok enacted a policy of labeling videos that appear to be Russian propaganda. As the [Associated Press](#) reports, researchers at the Alliance for Securing Democracy — a

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nonprofit focused on “authoritarian disinformation,” published a [report](#) in which they were able to identify 80 TikTok accounts that are either run by the Russian government (RT, Sputnik) or by individuals with ties to the state.

Of these, more than a third were unlabeled, meaning they are flying under the radar of TikTok’s safeguards. According to the policy put into place last year, content produced by the Russian government is supposed to feature a tag reading “Russia state-controlled media.” The user can tap on the label to open up additional information, including the statement “the government has control over the account’s editorial content.”

“This is an ongoing process and we’ll continue to review new accounts and add labels as and when they join the platform,” TikTok owner ByteDance said in an emailed statement to AP.

The outlet further reported:

Other tech companies have taken a more aggressive approach to Russian disinformation. Last year, Google blocked YouTube channels operated by Russian state media within Europe. The company also has initiated “pre-bunking” programs designed to blunt the effect of disinformation. Meta, which owns Facebook and Instagram, also labels foreign state media and has exposed and eliminated sprawling disinformation networks tied to Russia.

...Labels have become a common way for social media platforms to designate content from state-controlled media and alert users without removing the content. TikTok announced its labeling effort in March 2022, saying that “in response to the war in Ukraine, we’re expediting the rollout of our state media policy to bring viewers context to evaluate the content they consume on our platform.”

Despite these procedures, TikTok user engagement with alleged Russian propaganda has not gone down, meaning users either don’t pay attention to the labels or simply do not care that it’s produced by Russian state actors.

Russia’s wide reach on the platform can be seen in the fact that the outlet Russia Today (RT) has more TikTok followers than *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

And RT’s Spanish-language outfit on TikTok, RT en Espanol, has gotten more likes even than big-name Spanish-language media stations such as Univision and Telemundo.

Russia also increases its reach thanks to individual influencers who are not officially tied to the state, and thus are able to evade the labels. The Alliance for Securing Democracy report notes:

Active accounts that are likely tied to Russian state media but are unlabeled have also reached large audiences. The 22 accounts in that category have more than 1.7 million followers and 25 million likes. RT’s Editor-in-Chief Margarita Simonyan operates the most followed unlabeled account. Though Simonyan’s account might not fall under TikTok’s labeling policy, she is one of Russia’s leading propagandists and her TikTok videos regularly reach millions of users.

However, while American media zeroes in on Russia’s use of the popular video app for propaganda purposes, the reality is that the U.S. government is doing the same.

In one of the most notable examples of the American government’s use of TikTok, the U.S. military has recruited e-girls (attractive young female influencers) to win over Gen-Z youth and persuade them to join the armed forces.

One of those influencers is Hayley Lujan, also known as lunchbaglujan. Many of her videos revolve around jokes, dancing, and memes, but she sprinkles in military-related content, such as posing with weapons or recording herself at military bases.

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Eventually, TikTok users discovered a part of her academic background that raises eyebrows — she received Psychological Operations Specialist Advanced Individual Training at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School.

While Lujan claims the government doesn't tell her to make pro-military posts and that psy-op agents are not allowed to influence American citizens, the long history of covert campaigns launched against the people, such as the CIA's Project MK ULTRA, gives us little reason to believe her assurances.

The Biden White House is pressuring ByteDance, the Chinese firm that owns TikTok, to sell the app or else be subject to a ban in the United States.

In response, TikTok has unleashed lobbyists and influencers upon Washington, D.C.

There are certainly important national security factors to be considered in determining whether TikTok should be allowed in the United States. After all, we cannot allow an instrument of Chinese spying to freely be waged against us.

At the same time, though, another consideration that should be weighed is: Is there a way to safeguard against spying without flat-out restricting Americans' freedom to access the information of their choice?