

The New York Times and the criminalization of dissent

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The campaign within the American media and political establishment over allegations of Russian “hacking” and manipulation of the US elections is being transformed into an increasingly frenzied demand for the criminalization of dissent.

During the first months of the Trump administration, the charges of Russian interference in US politics were primarily used to prosecute a struggle within the American ruling class centered on issues of foreign policy. The anti-Russian campaign has now developed into an effort to associate all opposition within the United States to the actions of a “foreign enemy.”

A series of increasingly ludicrous articles have appeared in the US press, channeling information supposedly gathered by the Senate Intelligence Committee from social media companies. The latest appeared on Tuesday in the *New York Times*, which has played the central role in the media campaign. The front-page article (“Russians Spun American Rage Into a Weapon: Facebook Posts in US Fueled Propaganda”) is a piece of pure political propaganda, filled with unsubstantiated statements, wild speculation and unsupported conclusions.

Social media posts from Americans, the *Times* asserts, have become “grist for a network of Facebook pages linked to a shadowy Russian company that carried out propaganda campaigns for the Kremlin.” The newspaper claims to have reviewed hundreds of these posts, concluding, “One of the most powerful weapons that Russian agents used to reshape American politics was the anger, passion and misinformation that real Americans were broadcasting across social media platforms.”

The article names several Facebook pages that it baldly asserts, without proof, were owned and controlled by the unnamed Russian company, including United Muslims of America, Being Patriotic, Secured Borders, and Blacktivist.

The entire premise of the *Times* article is absurd. Pages associated with Russia, it is claimed, are reporting and sharing expressions of anger, sowing discontent and divisions. United Muslims of America, for example, “frequently posted content highlighting discrimination

against Muslims.” This, somehow, is criminal activity. Those who originally produced the content or shared the posts are acting, at best, as Russian patsies, and, at worst, as co-conspirators. The *Times* cites one Trump supporter who shared a post from the Being Patriotic group, characterizing him as “not bothered...by becoming an unwitting cog in the Russian propaganda machine.”

The claims of Russian manipulation read like the ravings of individuals suffering from paranoid delusions. According to an earlier statement from Republican Senator James Lankford, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Russian “trolls” are responsible for pushing the controversy over NFL players kneeling during the national anthem to protest police violence. Russian “troll farms,” he claimed, were working to “raise the noise level in America.”

Clint Watts, a former top FBI agent who has testified at Senate Intelligence Committee hearings on Russian intervention in the elections and has been frequently quoted in the media, replied to Lankford’s comments by declaring, “The Russians can just sit back and say: ‘Amplify on both sides. Make people angry.’ And it works, man, God, it works.”

Such claims reproduce the worst tactics used during the period of McCarthyite redbaiting. What used to be called “Commie dupes” are now “Russian dupes.” (Unconcerned by the fact that the Soviet Union was dissolved over a quarter century ago, *GQ* magazine recently posted an article that featured a graphic replacing the “G” in “Google” with a hammer and sickle). Dissent and opposition, according to this line, are to be interpreted not as the product of internal divisions and social tensions, but the nefarious workings of a foreign power.

The *Times* article includes lines that read like they came straight from the proclamations of Senator Joe McCarthy or the files of J. Edgar Hoover. “The Russians,” it states, “appear to have insinuated themselves across American social media platforms and used the same promotional tools that people employ to share cat videos, airline complaints, and personal rants.” The article speaks of the need to “purge social media networks of foreign influence.”

And what was supposedly involved in this major “covert propaganda campaign?” According to US Senate investigators, Russian companies spent a total of \$100,000 on Facebook advertisements to promote messages like those cited by the *Times*.

Another article appearing in the *Times* on Tuesday (“Google Inquiry Connects Election Ads to Russians”) asserts that “accounts believed to be connected to the Russian government” purchased a grand total of \$4,700 worth of ads, while “a separate \$53,000 worth of ads with political material...were purchased from Russian internet addresses, building addresses or with Russian currency...”

This is an infinitesimal fraction of what is spent by political campaigns awash in money from corporate executives and American plutocrats. Some \$2.65 billion was spent by the Clinton and Trump campaigns and organizations supporting them during the presidential race. Nearly \$7 billion was spent on all US federal elections last year. Yet the Russian government’s supposedly massive campaign of subversion and propaganda amounts to a few tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars on Facebook, Twitter and Google!

The conclusions would be laughable if the consequence were not so serious.

The *New York Times*, in close coordination with the Democratic Party and the US intelligence agencies, is engaged in a campaign that is nothing less than criminal. It is engaged in a political conspiracy to outlaw dissent in the United States and justify state efforts to prohibit, blacklist and suppress speech, particularly on the Internet. If the Russian government is merely amplifying content produced by others—including videos depicting police violence and other crimes—then the logical conclusion is that this original content must be proscribed.

Any content or article, including from the *Times* itself, that examines social discontent in the United States is susceptible to being picked up by the Russians and promoted. Halting such “foreign intervention” requires a regime of censorship and self-censorship of and by all media outlets—precisely what exists in a dictatorship.

The basic target of the lying campaign over Russian manipulation of US public opinion is not Russia, but the American population. The state institutions and the two parties, Democratic and Republican, are deeply discredited and broadly hated. The working class does not need the Russian or Chinese governments to know that American society is massively unequal, that the political system is controlled by the rich, and that the police engage in brutal acts of violence on a daily basis.

Control of the Internet and the suppression of free speech online is a basic strategic issue for the American ruling

class. The emergence of online communication and Internet platforms broke the control of the major media conglomerates over the distribution of information. Under conditions of growing popular opposition to social inequality and war, and deepening political crisis, establishing state control over the Internet is seen as a matter of the greatest urgency.

This is what Google has already begun to do. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has documented, changes to Google’s search algorithm in April, introduced under the pretext of combating “fake news” and promoting “authoritative content,” have resulted in a fall in referrals from Google to the WSWS by nearly 70 percent, and to 13 other left-wing sites by between 19 and 63 percent.

The actions of Google are only the beginning. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other platforms are preparing or have already begun to implement similar measures. The US Justice Department has demanded that staff at the American branch of Russian news agency RT register as foreign agents by October 17 or face possible arrest. This action will be used as a precedent for targeting left-wing and antiwar websites and organizations as agencies of a “foreign enemy” that must be shut down or censored.

It is necessary to organize the working class and youth against this neo-McCarthyite assault on free speech and the Internet, connecting the defense of democratic rights to opposition to social inequality, war, dictatorship and the capitalist system. Meetings must be organized throughout the country and internationally to expose what is taking place and mobilize opposition. The WSWS urges all its readers to sign the petition against Internet censorship and contact the Socialist Equality Party today.

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To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>