

Censorship, witch hunts and dirty money at the New York Times

By Andre Damon
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On Wednesday, the *New York Times* announced that its revenues grew substantially last quarter, driven by a 46 percent increase in digital subscriptions over the previous year.

Notably, the 166-year-old “newspaper of record” had its paid user base grow at a rate usually seen only at start-ups, adding 105,000 digital-only subscriptions in December and January, and hitting a new record.

The newspaper’s stock price has shot up 40 percent since October.

Reporting matter-of-factly on the *Times*’ earnings statement, Reuters attributed the newspaper’s high earnings and favorable stock performance to two factors:

“Chief Executive Mark Thompson told Reuters that the newspaper will ... benefit from Facebook Inc’s initiative to prioritize high-quality news outlets in its social media posts to counter fake news and sensationalism.”

Reuters added:

“Subscriptions in the quarter also got a boost from the newspaper’s coverage of Harvey Weinstein’s sexual harassment story, helping the company post the highest-ever annual subscription revenue of \$1 billion.”

The Reuters reporter did not feel compelled to note the apparent contradiction between Facebook’s promotion of the *Times* for its lack of “sensationalism,” and the fact that a major driver of subscription growth for the newspaper has been salacious and explicit tabloid gossip about the sex lives of Hollywood celebrities like Weinstein, actor Kevin Spacey and comedian Louis C.K.

On numerous occasions over the past four months, the “newspaper of record” has led with or run front-page features consisting of breathless and graphic sexual allegations against film or media figures,

displacing major international news.

In fact, there is no contradiction, because the promotion of “trusted” news outlets such as the *Times* and *Washington Post* by the US technology giants has nothing to do with ensuring the public has access to high-quality, objective reporting.

In 1971 the *Times* published the Pentagon Papers, which exposed the crimes of the Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon administrations in Vietnam. In the intervening decades, on the other hand, the newspaper has become a clearinghouse for leaks and other disinformation from the American intelligence agencies and military, helping to sell to the public US-led wars in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and elsewhere.

Meanwhile the *Times* has made one of its most critical tasks the blocking of the dissemination of damaging and revealing state secrets. According to former *Times* journalist James Risen, the publication had access to much of the information revealed by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden, but, at the demand of the White House, suppressed the evidence of rampant criminal behavior by the government.

The *Times*’ transformation into little more than a state propaganda outlet posed serious commercial problems for the newspaper. The explosive growth of the Internet in the late 1990s, and then social media in the mid-2000s, gave readers access to a broad range of oppositional reporting, expressed in the growth of “viral” social media videos exposing, among other things, police brutality, social inequality and the crimes of the American military.

Both print media circulation and broadcast television viewership have plummeted, so that last year, for example, more than two-thirds of Americans were getting their news from social media.

The campaign around “fake news” and “Russian propaganda” has provided the *Times* with a means to offset this decline in readership. The term “fake news” burst into public discourse via a *Times* article, headlined “Media’s Next Challenge: Overcoming the Threat of Fake News,” published only days before the November 8, 2016 presidential election.

Taking off from there, the *Times* and the *Washington Post* published dozens of articles, mostly quoting intelligence figures, both named and unnamed, who argued for various forms of Internet censorship. According to Google trends, searches for the phrase “fake news” grew sevenfold after the *Times* started using the term in November 2016.

The campaign to legitimize censorship in the name of fighting “fake news,” led by organizations with a great financial—and ideological—interest in blocking the spread of independent journalism, has paid dividends for the *Times*. The newspaper has generated substantial revenue as a result of Google’s actions to promote “authoritative” news sources to the detriment of “alternative viewpoints,” and considerable share price increases resulting from Facebook’s more recent—and even more explicit—censorship regime.

The sexual misconduct campaign has proven another boon. The *Times*, appealing to the worst instincts in its readership, has made its mark by publishing gossip and unproven allegations and generally spearheading the Democratic Party’s #MeToo movement.

Here you have a picture of the “newspaper of record” for the new Gilded Age of inequality, war, and dictatorship: a sewer where war propaganda, sexual smear campaigns and money derived from political censorship join in one filthy stream.

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