

The disinformation campaign behind the allegations of Russian “disinformation”

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Amid new exposures of Wall Street criminality, the White House’s mass imprisonment of immigrant children, and growing demands by US workers for decent wages, the US media was preoccupied Monday with the supposed efforts of Russian President Vladimir Putin to make people believe that life in America is not a paradise.

Throughout the day, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and Google News all led with breathless stories about Russian efforts to “sway American opinion and divide the country” (in the words of the *Times*). The propaganda barrage was based on a set of reports submitted to the Senate Intelligence Committee by organizations with close ties to the US state and intelligence apparatus.

Like countless other stories about alleged Russian “disinformation,” Monday’s media blast followed a script. Reports and testimony from nominally independent organizations, which are, in reality, mouthpieces for the intelligence agencies, are commissioned by Congress. They are “leaked” to the *New York Times*, which publishes a front-page article promoting them as “independent,” scientific and authoritative, without, however, presenting any serious analysis of the actual evidence or the social and political forces behind the studies. The reports in the *Times* (or the *Washington Post*) are then cited by countless media outlets and politicians as new and irrefutable “evidence” of Russian “meddling” and “fake news.”

The new “proof” of Russian subversion is then used to demand even more sweeping measures to censor the internet, in the name of securing “our democracy.” With each successive wave of stories, foreign “disinformation” is more directly identified with opposition to social inequality, police brutality and the capitalist system.

The first of two reports submitted to the Senate Intelligence Committee, “The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency,” was published by an organization known as New Knowledge, which purports to be a cybersecurity company, but whose primary public presence consists in advocacy for internet censorship.

Ryan Fox, the co-founder of New Knowledge and a co-author of the report, worked for the National Security

Agency (NSA) for 15 years. New Knowledge’s website notes that “prior to his civilian roles as a Counter Terrorism Fellow and NSA Representative European SIGINT partners, he served under US Joint Special Operation Command (JSOC) as a CNO Analyst for the US Army.” His partner, the company’s CEO, is Jonathon Morgan, who has published for the state-connected Brookings Institution and worked as a special advisor to the State Department.

New Knowledge was established with a \$1.9 million grant from Moonshots Capital. Moonshots’ founders are Kelly Perdew, who, according to the biography on the company’s website, “served in the US Army as a military intelligence officer,” and Craig Cummings, who “spent 17 years in the Army, most of that time as an intelligence officer serving in support of the National Security Agency.”

The second report, “The IRA and Political Polarization in the United States,” published under the imprimatur of Oxford University’s Computational Propaganda Project, in collaboration with the social media analysis firm Graphika, was likewise authored by figures with deep connections to the state and the military. Graphika staffer Camille Francois, a co-author, served as chief technical officer to the French prime minister and worked at the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA).

In line with the by now well-established playbook, Democratic Senator Mark Warner, the leading advocate of internet censorship in the US Senate, took to the airwaves to proclaim that these “independent” reports were a “wake up call.” He continued: “These attacks against our country were much more comprehensive, calculating and widespread than previously revealed.” He added that “addressing this challenge” was “going to require some much-needed and long-overdue guardrails when it comes to social media.”

Democratic Senator Ron Wyden, like Warner a member of the Intelligence Committee, appeared on the Public Broadcasting evening news program to chastise Facebook and demand that it be more “aggressive” in shutting down “disinformation.”

In regard to their content, both reports are highly dubious

and clearly politically motivated. The raw data is based on information turned over to the Senate Intelligence Committee last year by Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter. After initially rejecting as “crazy” claims that “Russian meddling” helped swing the election to Trump, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, together with the leaders of other major technology companies, provided a list of accounts that they asserted—without providing any details on how this conclusion was reached—were controlled by Russian operatives.

Even if one were to assume that this data and the content of the reports were accurate, whatever Russia may or may not have done pales in comparison to the operations of US intelligence agencies all over the world, including within the United States itself, not to mention the billions of dollars spent by the corporate and financial elite to manipulate US elections and determine their outcome.

The claim, moreover, that Russian Twitter and Facebook posts are responsible for social discontent in the United States—the most unequal country in the world—is beyond ludicrous.

It is highly significant that the posts cited by the reports as responsible for manipulating public opinion and undermining American democracy are predominantly left-wing in character.

The New Knowledge report attempts to muddle this reality by categorizing content opposing police brutality as neither left-wing or right-wing, but “Black.” It states that of 62 Facebook pages allegedly tied to Russia, “Overall, 30 targeted Black audiences and amassed 1,187,810 followers; 25 targeted the Right and amassed 1,446,588 followers, and 7 targeted the Left and amassed 689,045 followers.”

The content of the accounts labeled by New Knowledge as targeting “Black audiences” is made clear in a subsequent section dealing with the video streaming service YouTube. Of 1,063 videos turned over to the committee, the majority “related to the police and focused on police abuses.”

Commenting on the New Knowledge report, the *New York Times* declared that the Russian government’s “tactics echo Soviet propaganda efforts from decades ago that often highlighted racism and racial conflict in the United States.”

Here, the *Times* demonstrates the utterly reactionary pedigree of the campaign against “Russian meddling.” During the American civil rights movement, Southern segregationists claimed that African American workers were being stirred up by “communists” and “outside agitators.” The strivings of African Americans for equal rights were denounced as a Soviet plot.

Now, too, the deeply-felt hatred by American workers and youth of all races for police brutality and the epidemic of police murders is presented as a “Russian” plot to “sow

division” among “Black audiences.”

“Left-leaning [Russian-inspired] pages,” the report states, “criticized mainstream, established Democratic leaders as corporatists or too close to neo-cons, and promoted Green Party and Democratic Socialist themes.” These left-wing pages expressed “antiwar opposition” and “objections to US involvement in another country’s affairs.”

The clear intent of the campaign by Warner and his co-thinkers is to de-legitimize such views as the product of “foreign meddling,” and to effectively criminalize them. Their concern is not with Russia, but with the American working class.

As the year 2018 concludes, the intensification of the global economic crisis and heightening of war preparations are accompanied by a renewed upsurge of the class struggle throughout the world.

The American ruling elite has made clear its intention to respond to this growing movement of the working class with censorship and repression. Writing about the recent “yellow vest” protests in France, the *New York Times* warned that “the power of social media to quickly mobilize mass anger, without any mechanism for dialogue or restraint, is a danger to which a liberal democracy cannot succumb.” The implication of such statements is clear: the campaign to censor the internet must be intensified.

The orchestrated hysteria over “disinformation” is itself a gigantic disinformation campaign, and the narrative about the sinister spread of “fake news” is an example of real “fake news.”

The ruling class and the corporate media are frustrated that their claims have had little impact on popular consciousness, and very few people really believe that Russia is responsible for social discontent in the United States. But this only intensifies their efforts to uphold and strengthen the grip of the “guardians” of information—that is, themselves.

The growth of working class opposition provides the means to counter these efforts to censor the internet. As workers enter into struggle, they must take up the fight to defend freedom of expression on the internet as inseparable from the fight for social equality.

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