

US intelligence think tank conducted “false flag” operation impersonating Russian election interference

By Will Morrow
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A series of articles published in the past week have revealed that the New Knowledge think tank conducted a “false flag” operation to influence the 2017 Alabama state election and make it appear that Russia was conducting a Twitter campaign to back its preferred candidate. New Knowledge is closely connected to the US intelligence agencies and has been widely cited as an impartial investigator of “Russian meddling” in US politics.

The story was first reported by the *Washington Post* on December 18 and the *New York Times* on December 19. Only a day earlier, both newspapers had carried lead front-page articles based largely on a New Knowledge report that claimed to provide new evidence of Russian social media operations to influence American politics.

As is the now well-established procedure, the report by New Knowledge was presented by the *Times* and *Post* as “independent” and scientific. The articles in the *Times* and *Post* were then made the basis for countless news articles and television reports breathtakingly reporting the latest nefarious activities of the Kremlin as established fact.

The New Knowledge report, entitled “The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency,” cited hundreds of predominantly left-wing social media posts on Facebook, including on police violence and government spying, to argue that Russian activities were sowing political divisions in the United States. It amounted to a brief for mass internet censorship directed against working-class political opposition. (See: “The disinformation campaign behind the allegations of Russian ‘disinformation’”)

In its December 19 article, the *Times* admits that New

Knowledge CEO Johnathon Morgan was involved in an effort to promote the election of Democrat Doug Jones against Republican rival Roy Moore in the 2017 Alabama Senate election. The operation, codenamed “Project Birmingham,” included creating fake Facebook pages to attract conservative voters and promote an obscure write-in conservative Republican candidate likely to draw votes away from Moore. The operation also sought to artificially inflate click rates on anti-Moore news stories in order to encourage more such articles. Moore ultimately lost the election.

Most significantly, the *Times* report includes the admission that the project “involved a scheme to link the Moore campaign to thousands of Russian accounts that suddenly began following the Republican candidate on Twitter, a development that drew national media attention.”

The *Times* goes on to quote an internal report by New Knowledge, summarizing Project Birmingham: “We orchestrated an elaborate ‘false flag’ operation that planted the idea that the Moore campaign was amplified on social media by a Russian botnet.” Moore’s Twitter account was followed by numerous accounts with an obviously fake and Russian appearance, featuring profile pictures of celebrities and Russian cyrillic characters.

In other words, the very body cited as an impartial expert on unsubstantiated allegations of Russian “disinformation” itself carries out actual disinformation fabricating evidence of Russian meddling.

The *Times* article is itself an exercise in damage control aimed at preserving the credibility of New Knowledge and the intelligence agencies’ anti-Russia campaign, for which the *Times* and the *Post* have been

leading voices.

As is suggested by the headline, “Secret Experiment in Alabama Senate Race Imitated Russian Tactics,” it argues that New Knowledge and Morgan’s actions were a small-scale “experiment” aimed at testing the impact of Russian-style tactics. It further warns that New Knowledge’s actions were a sign that Russian tactics are being copied by other political groups, and that a further intensification of government censorship of social media is required.

It has since been revealed that the project went beyond the *Times*’ initial report—and that the *Times* knew of New Knowledge’s role long in advance but did not mention it even as it promoted New Knowledge’s own report. An article by *Buzzfeed* on December 27 reveals that Scott Shane, the *Times* national security correspondent who wrote a December 17 article based on New Knowledge’s report on Russian meddling, was one of a handful of speakers at a September meeting in Washington that discussed “Project Birmingham.”

The Project also involved another organization, American Engagement Technologies, which is run by Mikey Dickerson, a former Obama administration official and Google engineer. The organization received \$750,000 from Reid Hoffman, the billionaire CEO of LinkedIn, and spent approximately \$100,000 on Project Birmingham. The collaboration of New Knowledge in this operation underscores the close nexus between the intelligence agencies, the Democratic Party, and the technology companies that are leading the campaign for censorship.

New Knowledge and its CEO, Johnathon Morgan, epitomize the collection of state propaganda outlets, staffed by former intelligence agents and advisors, who are trotted out in media television panels and featured in news articles as sources for unsubstantiated allegations of Russian interference. New Knowledge’s co-founder, Ryan Fox, was an NSA agent for 15 years, and previously worked as an analyst for the US Joint Special Operation Command in the military.

Morgan himself was an advisor to the US State Department and helped create the Hamilton 68 “dashboard,” a project run by the German Marshall Fund, ostensibly tasked with tracking Russian disinformation activities, that is headed by Clint Watts, a former FBI agent and advocate of internet censorship.

Even if the allegations of a Russian social media operation since 2016, involving approximately \$100,000 of paid Facebook ads, are true, they would pale in comparison with the actions of the US intelligence agencies, which are responsible for overthrowing governments, sponsoring coups, destabilizing governments and providing fake intelligence (“weapons of mass destruction”) for illegal US wars.

If the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, the so-called “newspaper of record” of what previously passed for American liberal journalism, were operating with a shred of journalistic integrity, the revelation of such compromising actions by New Knowledge would compel them to issue an immediate retraction of their previous promotion of New Knowledge’s investigations.

Neither will do so, because they do not function as houses of genuine journalism, but rather of government propaganda. The campaign over Russian-backed “fake news” is not based on actual facts but is itself the greatest fake news story of all. Its purpose is to justify mass censorship of the internet. Its target is not only Russia, but political opposition among workers and young people inside the US, and their determination to obtain information outside of the control of the corporate media, and to organize struggles against social inequality on social media.

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