

Paranoias of Interference: Russia, Reddit and the British Election

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In some ways, it is a very British thing: fair play is expected; the reasonable person with all faculties intact, going about the business of living and voting. Little thought is given to the fact that these assumptions are as much constructions, façades of rhetorical merit rather than reality. Voters need not be reasonable, and often vote against their interests. As for fair play? Perish the thought.

No election takes place in a vacuum, and for all the assertions of fact-checkers, monitors and gatekeepers of order, some agency, be it corporate, national or international, is involved. To persuade is to interfere. The intensity of this has become more relevant with the saturation, and velocity, of information spread. Often, it is impossible to assess how that distortion in an election might have changed results. The information age was meant to produce the informed voter; arguably, it has given us a different form of misinformed voter, drowning in the data sea.

In Britain, the distortions sowed by *The Sun* have been far more significant than any single Russian bot or “rogue” site. The [famous headline](#) of April 11, 1992 should still chill readers: “It’s The Sun Wot Wont It.” That, in reference to ensuring the re-election of a Conservative government, despite internal bloodletting that saw the deposing of Margaret Thatcher. The ripe target of Rupert Murdoch’s spear carrier of trash and demagoguery was the Labour opposition leader, Neil Kinnock. “If Kinnock wins today will the last person to leave Britain please turn out the lights.”

Such splendid garbage has been combed through by psephologists, with the conclusion that the Murdoch Empire, a far more sinister enterprise than most keyboard manipulators and bogus sites in the pay of foreign regimes, has much truck in the way it convinces its readers to vote. Electoral swings of 2% for *The Sun* alone [have been suggested](#).

This is the stuff of distant memory. The media moguls might well be fiddling and diddling in the background but the mantle of chief meddler these days is regularly given to President Vladimir Putin. Those on the losing side of the Brexit referendum in 2016 have been anxious to explain it away as the handiwork of dark forces inspired by the Kremlin.

Much of this crippling anxiety comes from across the pond, with many US politicians and officials keen to keep Russian influence in the headlines. A [report](#) prepared for the Committee on Foreign Relations of the US Senate in 2018 made its intention clear in the title: “Putin’s Asymmetric Assault on Democracy in Russia and Europe: Implications for US National Security.” The letter of transmittal observes that “Putin’s Kremlin employs an asymmetric arsenal that includes military invasions, cyberattacks, disinformation, support for fringe political groups”.

The Russian bogeyman has again reared its head of convenience in the 2019 UK election. Here come the fair play spoilers, we are told. And they come from accounts on the sharing site Reddit. On Friday, the site [released a statement](#) claiming that a post “included leaked documents from the UK.” The documents were drawn from the account u/gregoriator, which was subsequently reposted by the account u/ostermxnn. “Additionally, we were able to find a pocket of accounts participating in vote manipulation on the original post.” A “pattern of coordination” was detected, similar in nature to a previous effort mounted on Facebook by a purported Russian-sponsored campaign called “Secondary Infektion”. An investigation by Reddit resulted in banning 1 subreddit and 61 accounts.

The leaked document in question purported to cover UK-US trade negotiations, coming to a hefty 451 pages. The Labour Party duly capitalised, claiming that this showed that the National Health Service would be up for sale to US private pharmaceutical and health insurance companies should the Conservative Party be re-elected. “We have now got evidence,” a confident leader Jeremy Corbyn [trumpeted](#), “that under Boris Johnson the NHS is on the table and will be up for sale. He tried to cover it up in a secret agenda and today it has been exposed.”

The anger that followed seemed directed, not at any misinformation, but at the fact that it had been revealed to begin with. (The authenticity of the document has not been openly questioned.) This showed, again, the rattled nature of the Russia-interference argument: either they sow seeds of doubt through misinformation, or they dare leak documents that disclose the inner machinations of government. Either way, the elector is treated as an ignoramus best kept ignorant and incapable.

For Corbyn, [this was all fair game](#), the Russia argument a mere sideshow. “When we released the documents, at no stage did the prime minister or anybody deny that those documents were real, deny the arguments that we put forward. And if there has been no discussion with the USA about access to our health markets, if all that is wrong, how come after a week they still haven’t said that.” To date, Corbyn has declined to reveal the source of the documents.

The thrust of the government’s argument was one of shifting focus. A British government spokesman [told](#) NBC News Sunday that “online platforms should take responsibility for content posted on them, and we welcome the action Reddit has taken.” As for the contents disclosed, “We do not comment on leaks, and it would be inappropriate to comment.”

Nor, indeed, has the Johnson government been very keen on commenting about anything that might show Russian connections, notably to the Conservative Party. The trail of donors is a rich one. To date, the Parliamentary intelligence committee report on suspected Russian interference in British politics remains under a lock and key, a factor that has [led to concerns](#) that intelligence oversight in the UK is becoming heavily politicised.

What has become increasingly normal is the sense that Russian interference has been plugged into the political weaponry of parties and the politics of many states. This UK election sees virtually all sides sniping and snarling at each other over being the Kremlin’s favoured choice while also building arguments over leaked documents. It serves to distract from the obvious ailing and disaffection in an electorate disgusted and disenchanted at their political representatives.

Russia baiting, at some level, serves the purpose of pre-empting votes and altering elections

which may have very little to do with *actual* Russian influence. Even when such influence yields information that is hard to impeach, the fact that it issued from the actions of a foreign source, as it did in the 2016 US elections, is a sore point. Be it the NHS or Hillary Clinton's true political colours, electors were not entitled to know. The issue of evidence remains less relevant than the acceptance by parties that this is happening. The result is magnification and paranoia, and a very bargain price method of making policy.

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