

Rather Than Exposing Propaganda, The Washington Post Shows How It's Done

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As the Hillary Clinton campaign slogged toward victory in the long primary campaign against Sen. Bernie Sanders, word came from WikiLeaks that it had scored a [trove of hacked emails](#) to and from the Democratic National Committee. Among other things, they proved that DNC chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz and Clinton campaign chair John Podesta, along with their organizations, had been working hand-in-glove to skew the primaries in Clinton's favor.

The day before the party's convention opened in Philadelphia on July 24, Wasserman-Schultz had to resign her post or face a floor revolt. Sanders delegates were so angry at what they were learning from WikiLeaks about the sabotage of their candidate that [hundreds walked out](#) on the second day of the convention, tossing away their delegate credentials over the security fence and vowing never to support Clinton.

In short order, the DNC and the Obama administration-led intelligence establishment began claiming, with no hard evidence, that the source of WikiLeaks' explosive emails was "the Russians." While denied by WikiLeaks, it was a charge that Clinton made ad nauseum on the campaign trail and in her three televised debates with Trump, using it as an all-purpose excuse for tough questions about her [self-dealing as secretary of State](#), her lucrative off-the-record speeches to Wall Street bankers, or the DNC's thumb on the scale in the primaries.

Mainstream news organizations were quick to adopt this "Russia did it" trope, which despite the lack of proof has only grown more widely accepted since Trump's stunning election-night victory.

Business

Russian propaganda effort helped spread 'fake news' during election, experts say



The Washington Post ([11/24/16](#)) says that 200 websites on a list produced by a shadowy group are “routine peddlers of Russian propaganda”—but editors later insist that they didn’t print the list themselves.

Then the Washington Post([11/24/16](#)) took things a giant step further, publishing an explosive exposé claiming that, as its headline put it, “Russian Propaganda Effort Helped Spread ‘Fake News’ During Election, Experts Say.”

The Post’s story was based on a long list of online news sites purported to be either working directly for Moscow or else “useful idiots” unwittingly spreading Russian propaganda. Incredibly, the list included respected sites like Polk Award-winner Robert Parry’s [Consortium News](#), former LA journalist Robert Sheer’s [Truthdig](#), the news aggregator site [Truth-Out.org](#) and the highly regarded financial news site [Naked Capitalism](#).

The aim of the conspiracy that involved these and scores of other sites was reportedly to boost Trump’s chances of winning the the presidency, while simultaneously undermining American support for democracy and creating “the appearance of international tensions” and “fear of looming hostilities with nuclear-armed Russia.”

Post technology reporter Craig Timberg reported that a “nonpartisan” team of “experts” calling themselves PropOrNot used “sophisticated” but unexplained analytical tools and methodologies to identify “more than 200 websites as routine peddlers of Russian propaganda during the election season, with combined audiences of at least 15 million Americans.”

Timberg added, “On Facebook, PropOrNot estimates that stories planted or promoted by the disinformation campaign were viewed more than 213 million times.”

These numbers, not verified by PropOrNot, sound wildly exaggerated. After all, there are only 250 million adult Americans, probably less than half of whom use Facebook. Meanwhile,

some of the sites on that list of propaganda peddlers would be pleased to have daily hits reach five figures.



Washington Post's Craig Timberg: Russian propaganda was aimed at "sowing distrust in US democracy and its leaders."

Many of the stories circulated by these sites, Timberg charged, were "fake," containing just enough truth to seem credible. He explained how Russia's

increasingly sophisticated propaganda machinery—including thousands of botnets, teams of paid human "trolls," and networks of websites and social-media accounts—were echoed and amplified by right-wing sites across the internet as they portrayed Clinton as a criminal hiding potentially fatal health problems and preparing to hand control of the nation to a shadowy cabal of global financiers.

Never mind that reputable US journalists left and right needed no Russian guidance to suspect Clinton's private email setup was [illegal](#), or that her health might be [cause for concern](#). Or that a candidate who had received millions of dollars for speeches delivered in secret to top global bankers would be willing to give them a lead role in setting economic policy (as [President Obama did](#) on assuming office in 2008.)

And certainly Clinton herself, with her campaign calls for establishment of a US-enforced no-fly zone over Syria and for more US troops and offensive armaments along Russia's borders, was doing quite well without Russian help ramping up voters' fears of a new Cold War or worse.

The PropOrNot approach conflates these well-grounded concerns with spurious stories of the [sex-trafficking pizza parlor](#) ilk to form a single disinformation juggernaut. As the organization's "executive director" told the Post:

The way that this propaganda apparatus supported Trump was equivalent to some massive amount of a media buy.... It was like Russia was running a super PAC for Trump's campaign.... It worked.

“Executive director” here is in quotes because, in a staggering lapse of journalistic ethics and standards, the Post allowed PropOrNot’s entire staff to remain anonymous. Nor did Post editors require Timberg to afford any of the sites PropOrNot maligned as Russian propaganda tools a chance to respond—a basic requirement of responsible journalism.

In what surely has to be one of the weakest excuses ever offered for granting anonymity while making defamatory statements about others, Timberg wrote that this was to protect PropOrNot’s members from “being targeted by Russia’s legions of skilled hackers.”

Efforts by FAIR to elicit comment from Timberg or his superiors, national editor Cameron Barr and editor Marty Baron, were unsuccessful. They referred questions to Post VP for communications and events Kris Coratti, who would only email this justification for not giving the sites on the blacklist a chance to respond: “The Post did not name any of the sites on PropOrNot’s list of organizations.”

Editor’s Note: The Washington Post on Nov. 24 published a story on the work of four sets of researchers who have examined what they say are Russian propaganda efforts to undermine American democracy and interests. One of them was PropOrNot, a group that insists on public anonymity, which issued a report identifying more than 200 websites that, in its view, wittingly or unwittingly published or echoed Russian propaganda. A number of those sites have objected to being included on PropOrNot’s list, and some of the sites, as well as others not on the list, have publicly challenged the group’s methodology and conclusions. The Post, which did not name any of the sites, does not itself vouch for the validity of PropOrNot’s findings regarding any individual media outlet, nor did the article purport to do so. Since publication of The Post’s story, PropOrNot has removed some sites from its list.

The Washington Post’s [editor’s note](#).

Almost two weeks after its article ran, the Post ran a [sort of correction](#) in the form of an editorial comment in italics pasted on top of the online edition of Timberg’s November 24 piece (where only those looking for the by then old original story would find it). In that note, the editors say that the paper

did not name any of the sites [on PropOrNot’s blacklist], does not itself vouch for the validity of PropOrNot’s findings regarding any individual media outlet, nor did the article purport to do so. Since publication of the Post’s story, PropOrNot has removed some of those sites from its list.

Of course, the damage was already done, as the original article achieved widespread circulation via the Post’s wire service; it would be up to all those news organizations that bought and ran the story, or reported their own versions of it, to make any correction.

Meanwhile, the facile dodge of “we didn’t name the sites” ignores the reality that the Post had prominently showcased PropOrNot and let its name vouch for the heretofore unknown group’s credibility. The paper didn’t have to run the list; anyone with a smartphone could do a Google search, find PropOrNot’s website as the first listing, go to the homepage and find a link button headed “The List.”

And apparently plenty of readers did that. While thanks to the Post’s grant of anonymity, PropOrNot’s hidden principals remained safe from inquiring reporters and Russian hackers alike, editors of sites named on its McCarthyite hit list quickly found themselves deluged with venomous calls and emails. As Jeffrey St. Clair, a co-founder and editor of CounterPunch.org, another site listed prominently as a propaganda tool, recalls, “The

morning after the Post published its article, I found 1,000 emails in my inbox, mostly hate mail and death threats.”

Timberg tried to lend his credulous article a sheen of credibility by including a second source of other “independent analysts” also making claims of an epic Russian propaganda conspiracy, but this was a study by the [Foreign Policy Research Institute](#) (FPRI), a hoary relic of the ’50s [still mired in McCarthyite thinking](#) and run by Russophobe veterans of the Reagan and Bush administrations. At least FPRI’s funding, leadership and the study’s authors were identified, but no one could mistake them or the organization for being “independent.”

In any event, the Post’s story was really all about PropOrNot’s list and, in contrast to FPRI, the organization remains fully opaque. What is PropOrNot trying to hide? One possibility: The Pentagon. The Defense Department is, after all, spending billions of dollars a year on information warfare, and has, under Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, been promoting the idea of Russia as an existential threat to the US.

One indication of some level of Pentagon involvement is the curious role of Joel Harding, whose own blog [identifies](#) him as a retired longtime military intelligence officer specializing in “information operations, strategic communication and cyberwarfare”—in other words, psychological warfare and propaganda. Harding, who denied (via an email conversation with me) any connection to the 30 or 40 “volunteers” alleged to be working at PropOrNot, is nonetheless the only named “analyst” whose work is cited as a rationale for listing any of the sites on PropOrNot’s list. (The other sites just feature links to the sites themselves.)

One of the sites Harding “[analyzed](#)” for PropOrNot and labeled as a major purveyor of Russian propaganda was an obscure site called YourNewsWire.com, which features some news about the US and Russia, as well as conspiracy theories about vaccine links to autism and proof of an afterlife.

To Inform is to Influence

IO, SC, PD, what's in a name?



#RUSSIAFAIL · #RUSSIALIES · COUNTERPROPAGANDA · INFORMATION
WARFARE · PROPAGANDA · RUSSIA

Russia Useful Idiots Proliferate Russian Propaganda

September 2, 2016 · Joel Harding

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ 7 Votes

Even before reading the article, I knew I had stumbled onto something special. A completely biased pro-Russian, alternative reality story.



counterpunch
Tells the Facts, Names the Names

Joel Harding's blog ([9/2/16](#)), on the basis of which PropOrNot listed CounterPunch as a purveyor of Russian propaganda. It was later removed from the list.

The other was a remarkably shoddy September 2 [analysis](#) of an article in CounterPunch, in which Harding mocked one of the contributors whose self-identification as a socialist contradicted, in Harding's view, CounterPunch's claim to be the "voice of the authentic American left" — without mentioning or perhaps noticing that the author's bio also mentioned he was a Canadian. When CounterPunch editor Joshua Frank wrote to PropOrNot to complain about his site's being labeled as Russian propaganda (he attached a [story](#) he had written criticizing Russia's role in Syria), PropOrNot said they would remove CounterPunch from their list.

What makes him appear to be more closely allied with or part of PropOrNot's anonymous team than he admits, however, is a bylined [article](#) that appeared on his own site on November 18, six days *before* PropOrNot's public debut in the Washington Post. Under the prescient headline "Russian Propaganda Sites: Is It Propaganda or Not?," Harding offered a preview of the as yet unannounced PropOrNot.com's "List," itself dated November 9. This preview list contained 178 names, a bit shorter than the final list's 200.

While claiming no connection to PropOrNot, Harding said via email, without elaborating, that "some of its people may have been students of mine." Harding said during this email conversation that he was on his way to the commissary at the US Army's Ft. Belvoir, a suburban DC base that's home to [INSCOM](#), the Army's "information operations" command, and [ARCYBER](#), its cyber command post.

Could PropOrNot possibly be linked to a US military psychological warfare program? Hard to say, harder to prove. But it's a question worth exploring.



The New Yorker's Adrian Chen ([12/1/16](#)) notes that PropOrNot's criteria for "Russian propaganda" would encompass "nearly every news outlet in the world."

Adrian Chen, a staff writer at the New Yorker ([12/1/16](#)), offered interesting insight into the genesis of Timberg's Washington Post article. He said he had received an anonymous email from "The PropOrNot team" in late October saying that as a "newly-formed independent team of computer scientists, statisticians, national security professionals, journalists and political activists, dedicated to identifying propaganda—particularly Russian propaganda targeting a US audience," they had developed a list of 200 such news sites. They said that they had brought it to the attention of Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), who had recommended they contact Chen.

Chen said he was wary of dealing with an unidentified group, and so claimed he was "too busy." They asked if he would connect them with "folks at the NYTimes, WaPo, WSJ and anyone else who you think would be interested." He passed.

The Post's Timberg, however, took the bait, and after his piece appeared, the Post promoted it aggressively. Between the Washington Post's wire service and AP, it spread virally to many other newsrooms and papers across the country, running as the lead story on November 25 in the [Philadelphia Inquirer](#) and prominently, too, at [USA Today](#), and getting mentions on [CBS](#), [PBS](#), [ABC](#) and other news programs.

Meanwhile, however, alternative media were quick to fight back. The Intercept ([11/26/16](#)) ran a blistering accusation of the Post that accused the paper of promoting an organization that "embodies the toxic essence of Joseph McCarthy, but without the courage to attach individual names to the blacklist."

Matt Taibi, in [Rolling Stone](#), condemned Timberg's "astonishingly lazy report," adding, of the Post's use of a shadowy group to malign 200 news sites without a single identified spokesperson, "Most high school papers wouldn't touch sources like these."

By November 30, PropOrNot, saying it had been challenged by many journalists, but still remaining anonymous, issued a press release announcing that it was "reviewing" its methodology. The group said that it would stop listing news sites that were open about who they were and that were running actual news. They also said they would stop using techies to evaluate whether news sites were propaganda organs or not.

The Post, however, despite its "editor's note" preface, is still standing by a tawdry story reminiscent of Red Channels in the 1950s. So is Timberg, who on [November 30](#) enthusiastically cited his earlier piece in reporting on a House/Senate conference working on the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act, that approves \$160 million to "identify propaganda and counter its effects."

Timberg wrote that the measure, originally produced last spring, had earlier focussed upon propaganda in foreign countries, but he says, enthusiastically linking to his own article of six days earlier: "The context shifted in recent months as independent experts [those PropOrNot guys!] warned that Russia was carrying out an intensive propaganda campaign during the US election season."

That should make the folks behind PropOrNot happy. On their own site, while claiming they aren't trying to censor anybody, they [call on the FBI and DOJ](#) to open "formal investigations by the US government, because...we strongly suspect that some of the individuals involved have violated the Espionage Act, the Foreign Agent Registration Act and other related laws."

The irony is that in purporting to expose Russian propaganda manipulation of the media, the Washington Post has provided a graphic demonstration of how the whole propaganda thing works.

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