

The Slimy Business of Russia-gate

As the U.S. government doles out tens of millions of dollars to “combat Russian propaganda,” one result is a slew of new “studies” by “scholars” and “researchers” auditioning for the loot, reports Robert Parry.

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Global Research, September 29, 2017

[Consortiumnews](#) 28 September 2017

Region: [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Media Disinformation](#)

In-depth Report: [FAKE INTELLIGENCE, U.S. Elections](#)

The “Field of Dreams” slogan for America’s NGOs should be: “If you pay for it, we will come.” And right now, tens of millions of dollars are flowing to non-governmental organizations if they will buttress the thesis of Russian “meddling” in the U.S. democratic process no matter how sloppy the “research” or how absurd the “findings.”

And, if you think the pillars of the U.S. mainstream media – The Washington Post, The New York Times, CNN and others – will apply some quality controls, you haven’t been paying attention for the past year or so. The MSM is just as unethical as the NGOs are.

So, we are now in a phase of Russia-gate in which NGO “scholars” produce deeply biased reports and their nonsense is treated as front-page news and items for serious discussion across the MSM.

Yet, there’s even an implicit confession about how pathetic some of this “scholarship” is in the hazy phrasing that gets applied to the “findings,” although the weasel words will slip past most unsuspecting Americans and will be dropped for more definitive language when the narrative is summarized in the next day’s newspaper or in a cable-news “crawl.”

For example, a Times [front-page story](#) on Thursday reported that “a network of Twitter accounts suspected of links to Russia seized on both sides of the [NFL players kneeling during the National Anthem] issue with hashtags, such as #boycottnfl, #standforouranthem and #takeaknee.”

The story, which fits neatly into the current U.S. propaganda meme that the Russian government somehow is undermining American democracy by stirring up dissent inside the U.S., quickly spread to other news outlets and became the latest “proof” of a Russian “war” against America.

However, before we empty the nuclear silos and exterminate life on the planet, we might take a second to look at the Times phrasing: “a network of Twitter accounts suspected of links to Russia.”

The vague wording doesn’t even say the Russian government was involved but rather presents an unsupported claim that some Twitter accounts are “suspected” of being part of some “network” and that this “network” may have some ill-defined connection – or “links” – to “Russia,” a country of 144 million people.

‘Six Degrees from Kevin Bacon’

It’s like the old game of “six degrees of separation” from Kevin Bacon. Yes, perhaps we are all “linked” to Kevin Bacon somehow but that doesn’t prove that we know Kevin Bacon or are part of a Kevin Bacon “network” that is executing a grand conspiracy to sow discontent by taking opposite sides of issues and then tweeting.

Yet that is the underlying absurdity of the Times article by Daisuke Wakabayashi and Scott Shane. Still, as silly as the article may be that doesn’t mean it’s not dangerous. The Times’ high-profile treatment of these gauzy allegations represents a grave danger to the world by fueling a growing hysteria inside the United States about being “at war” with nuclear-armed Russia. At some point, someone might begin to take this alarmist rhetoric seriously.

Yes, I understand that lots of people hate President Trump and see Russia-gate as the golden ticket to his impeachment. But that doesn’t justify making serious allegations with next to no proof, especially when the outcome could be thermonuclear war.

However, with all those millions of dollars sloshing around the NGO world and Western academia – all looking for some “study” to fund that makes Russia look bad – you are sure to get plenty of takers. And, we should now expect that new “findings” like these will fill in for the so-far evidence-free suspicions about Russia and Trump colluding to steal the presidency from Hillary Clinton.

If you read more deeply into the Times story, you get a taste of where Russia-gate is headed next and a clue as to who is behind it:

“Since last month, researchers at the Alliance for Securing Democracy, a bipartisan initiative of the German Marshall Fund, a public policy research group in Washington, have been publicly tracking 600 Twitter accounts — human users and suspected bots alike — they have linked to Russian influence operations. Those were the accounts pushing the opposing messages on the N.F.L. and the national anthem.

“Of 80 news stories promoted last week by those accounts, more than 25 percent ‘had a primary theme of anti-Americanism,’ the researchers found. About 15 percent were critical of Hillary Clinton, falsely accusing her of funding left-wing antifa — short for anti-fascist — protesters, tying her to the lethal terrorist attack in Benghazi, Libya, in 2012 and discussing her daughter Chelsea’s use of Twitter. Eleven percent focused on wiretapping in the federal investigation into Paul Manafort, President Trump’s former campaign chairman, with most of them treated the news as a vindication for President Trump’s earlier wiretapping claims.”

The Neocons, Again!

So, let’s stop and unpack this Times’ reporting. First, this Alliance for Securing Democracy is not some neutral truth-seeking organization but a neoconservative-dominated outfit that includes on [its advisory board](#) such neocon luminaries as Mike Chertoff, Bill Kristol and former Freedom House president David Kramer along with other anti-Russia hardliners such as former deputy CIA director Michael Morell and former House Intelligence Committee Chairman Mike Rogers.

How many of these guys, do you think, were assuring us that Iraq was hiding WMDs back in

2003?

This group clearly has an ax to grind, a record of deception, and plenty of patrons in the Military-Industrial Complex who stand to make billions of dollars from the New Cold War.

The neocons also have been [targeting Russia for regime change](#) for years because they see Russian President Vladimir Putin as the chief obstacle to their goal of helping Israel achieve its desire for “regime change” in Syria and a chance to bomb-bomb-bomb Iran. Russia-gate has served the neocons well as a very convenient way to pull Democrats, liberals and even progressives into the neocon agenda because Russia-gate is sold as a powerful weapon for the anti-Trump Resistance.

The Times article also might have mentioned that Twitter has 974 million accounts. So, this alarm over 600 accounts is a bit disproportionate for a front-page story in the Times, don’t you think?

And, there’s the definitional problem of what constitutes “anti-Americanism” in a news article. And what does it mean to be “linked to Russian influence operations”? Does that include Americans who may not march in lockstep to the one-sided State Department narratives on the crises in Ukraine and Syria? Any deviation from Official Washington’s groupthink makes you a “Moscow stooge.”

And, is it a crime to be “critical” of Hillary Clinton or to note that the U.S. mainstream media was dismissive of Trump’s claims about being wiretapped only for us to find out later that [the FBI apparently was wiretapping](#) his campaign manager?

However, such questions aren’t going to be asked amid what has become a massive Russia-gate groupthink, dominating not just Official Washington, but across much of America’s political landscape and throughout the European Union.

Why the Bias?

Beyond the obvious political motivations for this bias, we also have had the introduction of vast sums of money pouring in from the U.S. government, NATO and European institutions to [support the business](#) of “combating Russian propaganda.”



President Obama in the Oval Office.

For example, last December, President Obama signed into law a \$160 million funding mechanism entitled the “Combating Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation Act.” But that amounts to only a drop in the bucket considering already existing Western propaganda

projects targeting Russia.

So, a scramble is on to develop seemingly academic models to “prove” what Western authorities want proven: that Russia is at fault for pretty much every bad thing that happens in the world, particularly the alienation of many working-class people from the Washington-Brussels elites.

The truth cannot be that establishment policies have led to massive income inequality and left the working class struggling to survive and thus are to blame for ugly political manifestations – from Trump to Brexit to the surprising support for Germany’s far-right AfD party. No, it must be Russia! Russia! Russia! And there’s a lot of money on the bed to prove that point.

There’s also the fact that the major Western news media is deeply invested in bashing Russia as well as in the related contempt for Trump and his followers. Those twin prejudices have annihilated all professional standards that would normally be applied to news judgments regarding these flawed “studies.”

On Thursday, The Washington Post ran its own banner-headlined [story](#) drawn from the same loose accusations made by that neocon-led Alliance for Securing Democracy, but instead the Post sourced the claims to Sen. James Lankford, R-Oklahoma. The headline read: “Russian trolls are stoking NFL controversy, senator says.”

The “evidence” cited by Lankford’s office was one “Twitter account calling itself Boston Antifa that gives its geolocation as Vladivostok, Russia,” the Post reported.

By Thursday, Twitter had suspended the Boston Antifa account, so I couldn’t send it a question, but earlier this month, Dan Glaun, a reporter for Masslive.com, [reported that the people](#) behind Boston Antifa were “a pair of anti-leftist pranksters from Oregon who started Boston Antifa as a parody of actual anti-fascist groups.”

In an email to me on Thursday, Glaun cited [an interview](#) that the Boston Antifa pranksters had done with right-wing radio talk show host Gavin McInnes last April.

And, by the way, there are [apps that let you manipulate](#) your geolocation data on Twitter. Or, you can choose to believe that the highly professional Russian intelligence agencies didn’t notice that they were telegraphing their location as Vladivostok.

Mindless Russia Bashing

Another example of this mindless Russia bashing appeared just below the Post’s story on Lankford’s remarks. The Post [sidebar](#) cited a “study” from researchers at Oxford University’s Project on Computational Propaganda asserting that “junk news” on Twitter “flowed more heavily in a dozen [U.S.] battleground states than in the nation overall in the days immediately before and after the 2016 presidential election, suggesting that a coordinated effort targeted the most pivotal voters.” Cue the spooky Boris and Natasha music!

Of course, any Americans living in “battleground states” could tell you that they are inundated with all kinds of election-related “junk,” including negative TV advertising, nasty radio messages, alarmist emails and annoying robo-calls at dinner time. That’s why they’re called “battleground states,” Sherlock.

But what's particularly offensive about this "study" is that it implies that the powers-that-be must do more to eliminate what these "experts" deem "propaganda" and "junk news." If you read deeper into the story, you discover that the researchers applied a very subjective definition of what constitutes "junk news," i.e., information that the researchers don't like even if it is truthful and newsworthy.

The Post article by [Craig Timberg, who apparently is using Russia-gate](#) to work himself off the business pages and onto the national staff, states that

"The researchers defined junk news as 'propaganda and ideologically extreme, hyperpartisan, or conspiratorial political news and information.'

"The researchers also categorized reports from Russia and ones from WikiLeaks - which published embarrassing posts about Democrat Hillary Clinton based on a hack of her campaign chairman's emails - as 'polarizing political content' for the purpose of the analysis."

So, this "study" lumped together "junk news" with accurate and newsworthy information, i.e., WikiLeaks' disclosure of genuine emails that contained such valid news as the contents of Clinton's speeches to Wall Street banks (which she was trying to hide from voters) as well as evidence of the unethical tactics used by the Democratic National Committee to sabotage Sen. Bernie Sanders's campaign.

Also dumped into the researchers' bin of vile "disinformation" were "reports from Russia," as if everything that comes out of Russia is, ipso facto, "junk news."

And, what, pray tell, is "conspiratorial political news"? I would argue that the past year of evidence-lite allegations about "Russian meddling" in the U.S. election accompanied by unsupported suspicions about "collusion" with the Trump campaign would constitute "conspiratorial political news." Indeed, I would say that this Oxford "research" constitutes "conspiratorial political news" and that Timberg's article qualifies as "junk news."

Predictable Outcome

Given the built-in ideological bias of this "research," it probably won't surprise you that the report's author, Philip N. Howard, concludes that "junk news originates from three main sources that the Oxford group has been tracking: Russian operatives, Trump supporters and activists part of the alt-right," according to the Post.



The Washington Post building in downtown Washington, D.C. (Photo credit: Washington

Post)

I suppose that since part of the “methodology” was to define “reports from Russia” as “junk news,” the appearance of “Russian operatives” shouldn’t be much of a surprise, but the whole process reeks of political bias.

Further skewing the results, the report separated out information from “professional news organizations [and] political parties” from “some ‘junk news’ source,” according to the Post. In other words, the “researchers” believe that “professional news organizations” are inherently reliable and that outside-the-mainstream news is “junk” – despite the MSM’s long record of getting major stories wrong.

The real “junk” is this sort of academic or NGO research that starts with a conclusion and packs a “study” in such a way as to guarantee the preordained conclusion. Or as the old saying goes, “garbage in, garbage out.”

Yet, it’s also clear that if you generate “research” that feeds the hungry beast of Russia-gate, you will find eager patrons doling out dollars and a very receptive audience in the mainstream media.

In a place like Washington, there are scores if not hundreds of reports generated every day and only a tiny fraction get the attention of the Times, Post, CNN, etc., let alone result in published articles. But “studies” that reinforce today’s anti-Russia narrative are sure winners.

So, if you’re setting up a new NGO or you’re an obscure academic angling for a lucrative government grant as well as some flattering coverage in the MSM, the smart play is to join the new gold rush in decrying “Russian propaganda.”

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, [America’s Stolen Narrative](#), either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

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