Backlash Against Russian 'Fake News' Is Shutting Down Debate for Real

By Robin Andersen
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A few days before the Halloween hearings held by the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism, where powerful tech companies would provide testimony about their roles disseminating "fake news" during the 2016 election, Twitter announced it would no longer accept advertising from the Russian government-sponsored broadcast channel Russia Today (RT), or the state-owned Sputnik.

In a **Twitter PublicPolicy** blog post (10/26/17), the company said it would "off-board advertising from all accounts" owned by **RT** and **Sputnik**. The decision was based on its own assessment of the 2016 US election "and the US intelligence community's conclusion that both **RT** and **Sputnik** attempted to interfere with the election on behalf of the Russian government." As substantiation, **Twitter** merely provided a link to the January 6, 2017, intelligence report (ODNI).

BuzzFeed (11/1/17) reported that **Twitter** based its decision on the intelligence report that called **RT** "the Kremlin's principal international propaganda outlet," also providing a link to the report without a word about its documentation or quality. Most reporting did the same, including the **New York Times** (10/26/17), which said **Twitter**'s decision "was informed by specific findings of the United States intelligence community, made public in January."

A lonely voice critical of the **Twitter** ban was the Electronic Frontier Foundation (10/27/17), which warned the action was a threat to free expression, both in the US and globally.

The key findings from the US intelligence report on the Russia hack, decoded

Updated by Zack Beauchamp | @zackbeauchamp | zack@vox.com | Jan 6, 2017, 6:21pm EST

At the time the report was published, **Vox** ([1/6/17](#)) repeated many of the "intelligence" assertions, including the Kremlin propaganda charge. **Vox** told readers that "**RT** is way more important than we think," saying the report contained "striking observations" about **RT**'s reach, message and proximity to the Russian government. For example, staff at **RT**'s bureaus are not just close, but "very, very close to the Kremlin." One network head was from Russia's "diplomatic service," and "London's **RT**bureau is managed by the daughter" of a former Mikhail Gorbachev speechwriter.

It appeared that neither **Vox** nor those who penned the "intelligence report" remembered that under Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, glasnost (meaning openness) and a liberal press flourished in the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's face appeared on the cover of **Time** magazine ([1/1/90](#)) when it declared him the Man of the Decade, and later that year ([6/4/90](#)) the magazine quoted him as saying, "I detest lies."

Taking a closer look at the seven pages of claims against **RT** (a full one-third of the total intelligence report on Russian interference) that led to **Twitter**'s decision, some journalists might have concluded that **RT** provided substantive news to the American public in 2012, and later during the election. They might also have noticed that the report makes shoddy, misleading arguments, embarrassing mistakes (such as confusing European and US date notations), unsubstantiated claims, and lacked any grounding in the foundations of journalism in a democracy. As Robert Parry (**Truthdig**, [7/31/17](#)) pointed out, US government accusations against **RT**

> have related more to it covering topics that may make the establishment look bad—such as the Occupy Wall Street protests, fracking for natural gas, and the opinions of third-party presidential candidates—than publishing false stories.

The US intelligence officials apparently do not like **RT** reporting about the abuses of the American Security apparatus. They complain that **RT**'s reports often characterize the United

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States as a "surveillance state" and allege widespread infringements of civil liberties, police brutality and drone use (**RT**, 10/24/12, 10/28/12, 11/1–10/12).

RT is also condemned for reporting on Occupy Wall Street: It "created a **Facebook** app to connect Occupy Wall Street protesters via social media. In addition, **RT** featured its own hosts in Occupy rallies." Airing material far outside acceptable discourse in mainstream commercial media, **RT** also "focused on criticism of the US economic system, US currency policy, alleged Wall Street greed and the US national debt."

Repeated are familiar charges that Russians bolstered Donald Trump's campaign and diminished Hillary Clinton's. Claims that **RT** harmed Clinton point to broadcasts that include debates with third-party candidates like Jill Stein. Indeed, Ed Herman (7/8/17/) argued that no case was made by the ODNI report and that **RT**'s content was rather the "ongoing expression of opinion and news judgments."

This intelligence report may go down as one of the shoddiest pieces of media criticism ever penned, and also the least scrutinized. (FAIR's Adam Johnson was one of the few to take a close look at it—1/10/17.)

Ironically, **RT**'s own own reporting of the "intelligence" marshaled against it is a masterful illustration of decoding skills no longer very evident in the US commercial media. **RT's** January 7 broadcast with Kevin Owen spent almost 15 minutes on the US report, concluding that the "final assessment neither implies that there's any evidence," nor proves that there are any facts.

RT's Fracking Programming

Complaints about **RT's** coverage of fracking were given a prominent position in the ODNI report: "**RT** runs anti-fracking programming, highlighting environmental issues and the impacts on public health," it stated. It went on to claim:

> This is likely reflective of the Russian government's concern about the impact of fracking and US natural gas production on the global energy market and the potential challenges to Gazprom's profitability.

Vox repeated intelligence claims about the alleged motivations for **RT**'s fracking coverage, but failed to say that stories contained health and environmental impacts of fracking.

Screengrab from RT featured in the ODNI report.

Those in Congress representing the interest of the extractive industries have seized on this charge, equating anti-fracking coverage with "divisive messages" such as hate speech. The **Washington Times** (9/26/17) reported on a congressional probe into Russian "fracking-related social media ads." The committee rallied against

> divisive social and political messages conveyed through social media [that] have negatively affected certain energy sectors, which can depress research and development in the fossil-fuel sector and the expanding potential for natural gas.

Under pressure to block "fake news," **Twitter** banned **RT** ads, and Google announced that it would "de-rank" stories from **RT** (and **Sputnik** as well), placing them lower in search results. But while **RT** is sponsored by the Russian government, it is still a legitimate international news agency, as are the UK's **BBC News at Ten**, Qatar-owned **Al Jazeera**, and **20 Heures**, produced by **France 2**'s broadcasting service. It offers critical, alternative perspectives unavailable on other channels. It is also clearly labeled, not hidden like a bot or a fabricated **Facebook** page, allowing the public knowledge of its origination and perspective.

RT's reporting bears striking similarities to alternative and independent media content, and that is why letting the charges against **RT** stand unexamined is so dangerous. The actions being taken by tech giants to battle fake news are currently having devastating effects on alternative media and freedom of speech, while leaving the worst hate speech and junk news spinning across the internet by right-wing trolls.

'Professional' vs 'Junk' News

The way fake news is being defined in this battle is an attack on alternative journalism itself. **CNN** reported (10/26/17) on a study by Oxford University's Internet Institute on "'Junk News' and 2016 Election," finding that only 20 percent of sampled tweets contained links to

"professional" news. (Together with "professional political news," they comprise 30 percent of tweets.) The anchor says, "You mean real news, like **CNN**," to a nod of approval. Much of the rest of **Twitter** content is lumped together as ill-defined "junk," shown on a graph as "polarizing or conspiratorial: Inclu. Wikileaks and Russia"; no mention is made of the racist, hateful or misogynist content of white supremacist trolls.

Such classifications emerge from naïve technology researchers seemingly unaware that junk news and propaganda are deeply embedded within professional news brands: Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, global warming is not anthropogenic and tax cuts for the rich will benefit the middle class. (Media critic Edward Herman penned a long history of the **New York Times**' fake news about Russia, and before that the Soviet Union, that dates back as as the 1917 revolution itself—**Dissident Voice**, 7/8/17.)

Yet in the battle against fake news, much of the best, most accurate independent reporting is disappearing from **Google** searches. The **World Socialist Web Site** (8/2/17) reported that **Google**'s new search protocol is restricting access to leading independent, left-wing, progressive, anti-war and democratic rights websites. The estimated declines in traffic generated by **Google** searches for news sites are striking:

- **WSWS.org** fell by 67 percent.
- **AlterNet.org** fell by 63 percent.
- **ConsortiumNews.com** fell by 47 percent.
- **SocialistWorker.org** fell by 47 percent.
- **MediaMatters.org** fell by 42 percent.
- **CommonDreams.org** fell by 37 percent.
- **DemocracyNow.org** fell by 36 percent.
- **Truth-out.org** fell by 25 percent.
- **CounterPunch.org** fell by 21 percent.
- **TheIntercept.com** fell by 19 percent.

Truthdig noted back on July 31 that

> **Google**'s strategy is to downgrade search results for targeted websites based on a supposed desire to limit reader access to "low-quality" information, but the targets reportedly include some of the highest-quality alternative news sites on the internet.

AlterNet (9/25/17) told its readers, "We are getting slammed by **Google's** new algorithm intended to fight 'fake news,'" referring to **Google** as an "inaccessible behemoth, with a complete lack of transparency." Executive editor Don Hazen wrote, "It appears that **Google** has pushed popular, high-traffic progressive websites to the margins and embraced corporate media."
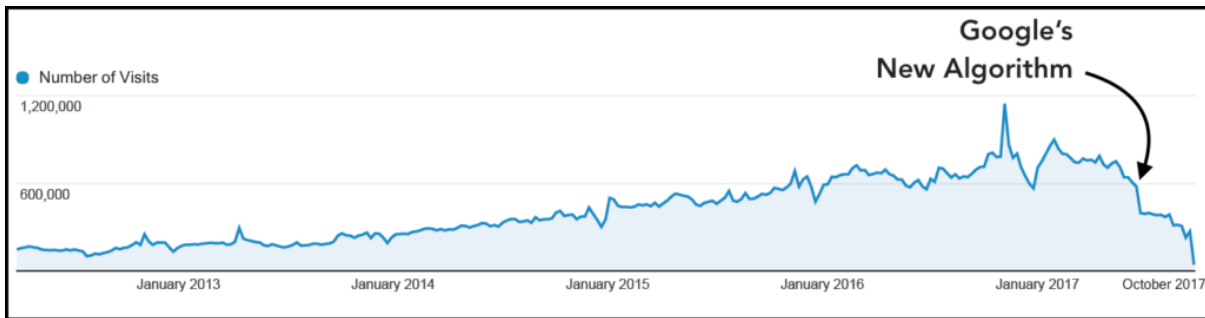
AlterNet's graph of its website's traffic after Google instituted its new algorithm.

As we enter a brave new world where artificial intelligence is deployed in calculations and algorithms purportedly targeting fake news, the winners are establishment and commercial media. This may be the reason for so little discussion, other than a few laudatory features praising the new technology. The **New York Times** (5/1/17) gushed about researchers harnessing digital technology to fact-checking programs in a hunt for fake news as "a positive way of moving artificial intelligence forward while improving the political debate." Tech giants, we are told, are partnering with computer scientists and start-ups to develop sophisticated algorithms computing "reams of online data to quickly — and automatically — spot fake news faster than traditional fact-checking groups can."

The lack of transparency about the design of algorithms now extends to other players with open censorship in mind. A group of anonymous "researchers" on the website PropOrNot have created what Robert Parry of **Consortium News**(11/27/16) refers to as a blacklist. **Consortium News** was included among some 200 Internet sites spreading what PropOrNot deems "Russian propaganda." Parry noted that the **Washington Post** (11/24/17) validated the authors of PropOrNot as sophisticated experts who "tracked" the Russian propaganda operation. The **Post**'s Craig Timberg described the nameless players of PropOrNot simply as "a nonpartisan collection of researchers with foreign policy, military and technology backgrounds."

FAIR (11/24/16) shows that despite respected media critics taking the report to task, the **Post**'s spurious claims were cemented as conventional wisdom across much of the media. Jeffrey St. Clair, a co-founder and editor of **CounterPunch.org**, another independent news site that made the list, told FAIR (12/8/16), "The morning after the **Post** published its article, I found 1,000 emails in my inbox, mostly hate mail and death threats."

By contrast, commercial digital technologies continue to augment the reach of alt-right views. Recently **ProPublica** (8/19/17) surveyed the most visited websites of extremist groups identified by either the SPLC or the Anti-Defamation League. Researchers found that

> more than half of them—39 out of 69—made money from ads, donations or other revenue streams facilitated by technology companies. At least 10 tech companies played a role directly or indirectly in supporting these sites.

The Islamaphobic **Jihad Watch** is an example of one the numerous sites that "monetize their extremist views through relationships with technology companies."

And **AlterNet** ([11/8/17](#)) reported that "**Google** is continuing to allow the monetization of fake news via its advertising network AdSense," and boosted numerous fake news stories after the Sutherland Springs, Texas, church massacre.

Twitter still has a white supremacy problem. **The Root** ([11/9/17](#)) reported that **Twitter** gave its coveted "verified" status, denoted by a blue checkmark, to Jason Kessler, the organizer of the white supremacist Charlottesville rally that resulted in the murder of Heather Heyer and the brutal beating of DeAndre Harris at the hand of white supremacists. A blue checkmark from **Twitter** verifies the users' tweets and profiles, and they are [more likely to appear in searches](#), allowing messages to be spread faster and reach more people. By verifying Kessler's account, **Twitter** is directly enabling white supremacy.

The Fundamental Problem

The expanding universe of lies, propaganda and fake news proliferating across the internet is a consequence of the monetized technologies that drive profits for the powerful tech industry. **Facebook**, **Twitter** and **YouTube** are not neutral platforms. They are deliberately designed to actively harvest human attention and sell it to advertisers, an immensely profitable enterprise. As a consequence, digital technologies blur the lines between paid ads, boosted posts and organic content on platforms such as **Facebook**, where ads and newsfeeds alike go viral. This is a design choice that came about because in-feed placement increased the engagement on the ads, and thus **Facebook**'s revenue. The business model is built into the technology. Writing in **Politico** ([11/1/17](#)), Renee Diresta and Tristan Harris note:

> The self-serve ease and affordability of **Facebook**'s ads tool, and the fact that the platform can turn content viral quickly, is why advertisers and manipulators alike love it.

Twitter is a high-speed tool for breaking news, and for citizen journalists who need to reach the public and share information. On the other hand, refusing to alter its commercial design, the platform has failed to acknowledge and police the anonymous, automated army of bots.

This leads to hashtags spreading vile anti-immigrant content, racism and misogyny as quickly as news and information.

Disentangling the hot-button, attention-grabbing stories that go viral from the advertising that supports that content would lower profit margins. Instead, companies are devising artificial intelligence and algorithms that purportedly detect fake news. In doing so, they are leading the charge to eliminate independent and alternative views under the guise of Kremlin propaganda, which started last January with charges against **RT** in the ODNI report.

Google

Google plans to 'de-rank' Russia Today and Sputnik to combat misinformation

Alphabet chief executive Eric Schmidt says Google and other tech companies must act against state-run Russian news agencies to stop spread of falsehoods
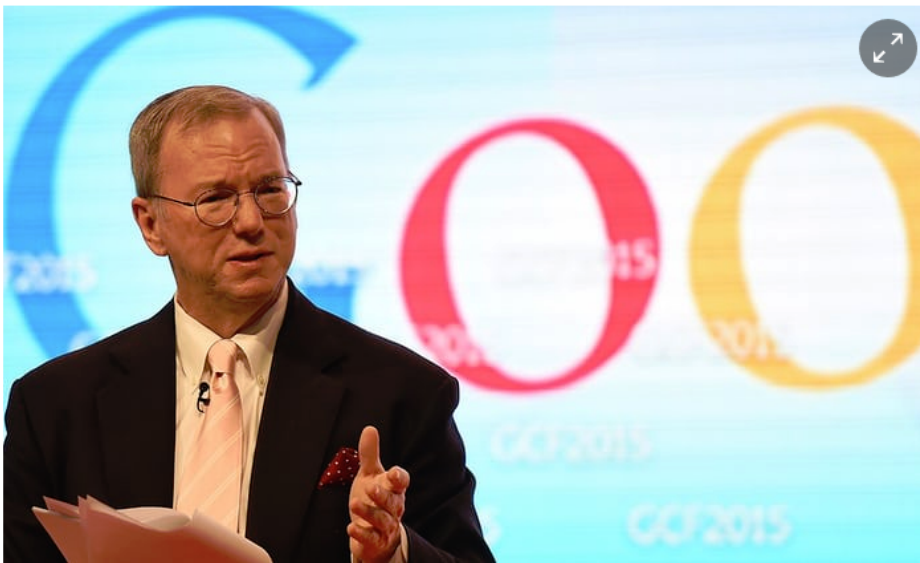
Guardian (11/21/17)

Even in the face of **Google**'s testimony at the Halloween Hearings that the company's own internal review found that **RT** broke none of **Google**'s rules or protocols, the **Guardian** (11/21/17) reported that **Google** searches would employ algorithms to de-rank the "state-run Russian news agencies, including **Russia Today** and **Sputnik**, which are accused of spreading propaganda by US intelligence agencies." The **Guardian** went on to confuse **RT** with twitter trolls:

> At least 80 times, news sites, including the **Telegraph**, **Metro** and **BuzzFeed,** embedded or quoted tweets known to have been written by a notorious state-backed "troll army" based in St Petersburg.

Mainstream media continually equate **RT** with such troll armies, while downplaying the role of alt-right hate groups in the promulgation of fake news. Also outside of the Russiagate purview is the degree to which fake news content was amplified on the Internet by the Trump campaign and his supporters. **The Nation** (11/16/17) pointed out that as Russiagate reaches panic levels, freedom of speech is under fire:

> Congress, led by Democrats, is also eyeing [**RT**], along with any other information source that could be deemed "Russian-linked." At recent congressional hearings on how Russia allegedly used its platforms to influence the 2016 campaign, lawmakers denounced **Facebook**, **Twitter** and **Google** for failing to thwart…"a deliberate and multifaceted manipulation of the American people by agents of a hostile foreign power."

In response, **Twitter** has

> informed lawmakers that its new criteria for identifying a Russian-linked account now includes merely having a user name with Cyrillic characters or tweeting frequently in the Russian language.

The latest escalation of Russiagate is an open attack on whistleblowers and independent media. On November 27, the House Intelligence Committee issued a subpoena demanding that satirist and journalist Randy Credico provide testimony to the committee. In an earlier letter, Adam Schiff, the ranking Democrat on the Committee, demanded Credico's "voluntary" cooperation with the panel's "bipartisan investigation into Russian active measures directed at the 2016 US election." Credico declined Schiff's invitation and the sweeping demand for

> the preservation and production of all documents, records, electronically-stored information, recordings, data and tangible things, including but not limited to graphs, charts, photographs, images and other documents, regardless of form other than those widely available (e.g. newspaper articles) related to the committee's investigation, your interview and any ancillary matters.

Credico, who compared the action to the witchhunts of the McCarthy era, told **Consortium News** ([11/28/17](#)) that the committee probably wants access to the Pacifica Radioprogram, "my 14-part series on Assange, 'Julian Assange: Countdown to Freedom,' which includes WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, his mom, and some of the most significant US government intelligence agency whistle blowers in modern history."

With the spotlight on a "hostile foreign power," tech companies are allowed to leave intact the commercial digital technologies that spin the [weaponized hate of white supremacists](#) and misinformation across the internet.

On November 13, **RT** was forced to register as a "foreign agent," under a 1938 law enacted to counter Nazi propaganda. As **The Nation** [(11/16/17)](#) points out, the Justice Department demand was unusual:

> Although hundreds of foreign entities are registered under FARA, international media outlets are almost entirely exempt, and none have registered in over a decade.

The Washington director for PEN America, Gabe Rottman, expressed concern that the DoJ action could lead to "retaliation against US-supported outlets such as **Voice of America** or public broadcasters like the **BBC**."

As predicted, by November 19, the Russian Justice Ministry put nine US government-funded news agencies on notice that they would probably be designated "foreign agents." The **Voice of America** (VOA), **Radio Free Europe**/**Radio Liberty** and seven separate regional outlets active in Russia could be affected under the new legislation designed specifically as retaliation for US actions against **RT**. (**VOA** reported its Russian counterpart's blacklisting as a matter of fact—"Russia's **RT** Registers as Foreign Agent in US," 11/13/17—though when the tables were turned, the term was suddenly discovered to require scare quotes: "9 US-Funded News Outlets Could Be Forced to Register as 'Foreign Agents,'" 11/19/17.)

In a prophetic and equally ironic comparison, media critic Edward Herman (7/8/17) noted back in July, "All the logic and proofs of a Russian 'influence campaign' could be applied with at least equal force to US media and **Radio Free Europe**'s treatment of any Russian election." And, he added, "Of course the US intervention in the 1996 Russian election was overt, direct and went far beyond any 'influence campaign.'"

The consequences of allowing unsubstantiated accusations against **RT** to stand unchallenged are helping distort the debate about fake news. In doing so, they allow open calls for censorship and algorithms that close down critical and independent views. This, together with the many other serious and numerous challenges to freedom of expression at the moment, should worry those who value life in an open society, and freedom of speech across the globe.

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