

Cold War Redux: The “Fake Information Age”

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

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

The great tedium of history is that those who refuse to acknowledge its immemorial works tend to see exceptional events everywhere. The next event of terror is singular; the next act of technology inspired hacking is remarkable.

Listening to the crackling consternation of the airwaves this Friday morning, the sense of a dark, sulphuric fog, not unlike the polluted air of London descending upon the UK, is palpable. There is a terror that the UK is escaping the bosom of the European family, a painful process of separation involving a mixture of exhilaration and bile filled disgust.

With equal terror is the sense that the wily and resourceful Russians have gotten the upper hand everywhere, closing in on their opponents in what has been termed, erroneously, a fake information age. They do not do so with tanks, with missiles, and with garrisons so much as what is incongruously called weaponised information.

The UK Defence Secretary, Sir Michael Fallon, goes so far as to call it weaponised misinformation, and flattering the Kremlin with its provenance:

Today we see a country that, in weaponising misinformation, has created what we might now see as the post-truth age. Part of that is the use of cyber-weaponry to disrupt critical infrastructure and disable democratic machinery. [1]

The literature is now being peppered less by clinical analysis than a fear about losing current and coming battles: the Russian menace, as every, must be exaggerated. Budgets must be financed; personnel hired and fed. An example of such fears is found in an Institute of Modern Russia paper by Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss unmistakably entitled *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money*. [2]

A salient point is that the Russian information corps have simply done better than their opponents. If there is a market place of gristle and ideas, Moscow seems to be prizing others out of it – or so it is being assumed by the likes of Fallon. Big boys and girls have become subtler and more sophisticated in manipulating the obvious, in chancing their digital arm. This is not so much the world of the lie as the world of the alternative. The UK, by way of contrast, finds itself lagging in staff and skills in the cyber security department. [3]

In terms of elections, the world of make believe starts becoming an addiction. Before long, Pygmalion’s statue comes alive, and one wants to believe it has fleshy lips and a comely mouth. But for all that, it still remains information, to be either consumed without critique, as much news is, or questioned with indigestible refrain.

The plethora of charged assessments and allegations of Russian meddling, first in the US election, and now the forthcoming French, Dutch and German elections, only points to an

age old practice of wanting a more favourable position in diplomacy. Gone are the days when this was traditionally done by traditional gun boat diplomacy, emissaries, delegations and envoys. The modern hyper-networked world has made reach and scope childishly simple, enabling a deep burrowing into information systems at a fraction of the cost. This is not so much soft power as seductive power.

The mistake is to then assume that one man, a certain President Vladimir Putin, controls this creation, the puppet master in charge of the information warfare machine. This confuses operational matters – the prosaic sort that agencies engage in across the globe – with actual matters of direct influence and causation. In the ideological scrap, proportionality is lost, and equivalence sets in: all Russiades is deemed faking and fakery, the orgasm that never was.

It has been said that the Kremlin, as other governments, have had spectacular moments of disrupting infrastructure. The frontier of the cyber war was already well and truly crossed in the battles with Estonia in 2007 in a dispute over a war memorial. As we only have the words of spooks to go on, always making this a hazardous line of inquiry, subsequent incidents have been noted where broadcast networks have received interest.

British security officials, for instance, claimed last year that the group known as APT28 and Sofacy (Fancy Bears being another name) was thwarted in its efforts against the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Sky. The same group was supposedly linked to the disruptive incidents with the bringing down of French international broadcaster TV5 Monde in April 2015.

There is another line at play here. To take out and control information systems is one thing; to hack a system – the servers of the Democratic National Committee, for instance – and reveal gold dust and candy to be couriered over to such an organisation as WikiLeaks, is another. Individuals like Fallon fail to make the distinction. All is fake in the post-truth world, and Russia refuses to play with clean hands.

Little is done to actually *confront* the information directly. The hacking of the DNC, the Podesta emails and Hillary Clinton's email indiscretions are all grouped under the category of propaganda – weaponised as battalions of facts and realities, the tactic on the part of those caught with their pants down is to accuse your assailant of removing the belt.

The same goes for how one views such media outlets as RT. The constructively minded individual will profit from the discussions of such programs as the financially minded Keiser Report or The Hawks, the latter paying tribute to the passing of mainstream news. There is much worthy crankiness in all of it.

But all subject matter is blurred into a series of forces that trouble critics in the West rather than illuminate. All “weaponised” information, which shape a counter-narrative, is thereby ignored for what it says, dismissed as counterfeit rather than a way of assessing its merits. One does not examine the blade approaching you in a darkened street as a fact to be admired but a threat to be deflected.

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Notes

[1]

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/feb/02/nato-must-do-more-to-counter-russias-cyber-weaponry-says-fallon>

[2] http://www.interpretermag.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Menace_of_Unreality_Final.pdf

[3] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-38850907>

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