

Dances of Disinformation: The Partisan Politics of the “Integrity Initiative”

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Is there such a plane of blissful, balanced information, deliberated and debated upon? No. Governments mangle; corporations distort. Interest groups tinker. Wars must be sold; deception must be perpetrated. Inconsistencies must be removed. There will be success, measured in small doses; failure, dispatched in grand servings.

The nature of news, hollow as it is, is to fill the next segment for the next release, a promiscuous delivery, an amoral ejaculate. The notion a complicated world can somehow be compressed into a press release, a brief, an observation, is sinister and defeating.

The believers in an objective, balanced news platform are there. [Grants](#) are forked out for such romantic notions as news with integrity, directed to increase “trust in news”, which is tantamount to putting your trust in an institution which has been placed on the mortician’s table. The Trump era has seen a spike in such funding, but it belies a fundamental misconception about what news is.

Funny, then, that the environment should now be so neatly split: the Russians (always) seen to distort from a central programme, while no one else does. The Kremlin manipulates feeble minds; virtuous powers do not. The most powerful nation on the planet claims to be free of this, the same country that boasts cable news networks and demagoguery on the airwaves that have a distinct allergy against anything resembling balanced reporting, many backed by vast funding mechanisms for political projects overseas. Britain, faded yet still nostalgically imperial, remains pure with the BBC, known as the Beeb, a sort of immaculate conception of news that purportedly survives manipulation. Other deliverers of news through state channels also worship the idol of balance – Australia’s ABC, for one, [asserts](#) that role.

We are left with a distinct, and ongoing polarisation, where Russia, a country relatively less influential than other powers in terms of heft and demography, has become a perceived monster wielding the influence of a behemoth on the course of history. Shades and shadows assume the proportions of flesh and meat. The fact that the largest country on the planet has interests, paranoias and insecurities other countries share is not deemed relevant but a danger. Russia must be deemed the exception, the grand perversion, a modern beast in need of containment.

Terry Thompson of the University of Maryland [supplies](#) readers with a delightfully binary reading, because the forested world of politics is, supposedly, easy to hive off and cultivate. The woods will be ignored, and small, selective gardens nurtured. The United States has been indifferent, even weak, before the Kremlin’s cheek and prodding ways, or so goes this line of thinking. The time for change is nigh, and the freemen and women of the US

imperium must take note. A hoodwinked US will arise, and [learn](#) from those states who have suffered from Moscow's designs!

“After years of anaemic responses to Russian influence efforts, official US government policy now includes taking action to combat disinformation campaigns sponsored by Russia or other countries.”

In this intoxicated atmosphere comes the Scottish based [Integrity Initiative](#), a “partnership of several independent institutions led by the Institute of Statecraft. This international public programme was set up in 2015 to counter disinformation and other forms of malign influence being conducted by states and sub-state actors seeking to interfere in democratic processes and to undermine public confidence in national political institutions.”

This low level clerk depiction is all good, a procedurally dull initiative designed to harden the mettle of debate against those who sneer and seek to discredit certain institutions. Democracy is often the victim of such paper clip fillers and grant seekers. Then comes the nub of the matter: the political thrust of this entire exercise. Where did the Integrity Initiative get its pennies? Moral citizens, perhaps? Bookworms with deep pockets?

That political thrust was revealed, we are told, by a hack. It came from the devil incarnate, those bear like fangs sharpened on the Russian steppes. “It is of course a matter of deep regret,” came a [statement](#) from the group in November, “that Integrity Initiative documents have been stolen and posted online, still more so that, in breach of any defensible practice, Russian state propaganda outlets have published or re-published a large number of names and contact details.” Transparency is a damn bugger, but forced transparency for outfits claiming that no one else practices it is an upending terror.

The revelations were striking on a few fronts. Britain's Labor Party had been a target, with the group's Twitter account used to heap upon its leader, Jeremy Corbyn. But more to the point, it blew the lid off the notion of pristine, exalted partiality. Funding, it transpired, had been obtained, and in abundance, from that most self-interested of bodies, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In effect, monies had been supplied to the Initiative via a government body to attack the opposition, not exactly a very democratic practice.

On December 3 last year, Sir Alan Duncan, in [response](#) to a question from Chris Williamson, the member for Derby North, claimed that the FCO had funded the Institute for Statecraft's Integrity Initiative to the tune of £296,500 in the financial year 2017/8. That amount has ballooned for the current financial year to the tune of £1,196,000. “Such funding furthers our commitment to producing important work to counter disinformation and other malign influence.” Russian practitioners could hardly have said it better themselves.

The technique here remains dog-eared: discredit the hackers as criminal and sidestep the implications of the content revealed.

“We note,” [claimed](#) the initiative, “both the attempts by Russian state propaganda outlets to amplify the volume of this leak; and the suggestion by a major Anonymous-linked Twitter account that the Kremlin subverted the banner of Anonymous to disguise their responsibility for it.”

In December, the group, as did Duncan, [reiterated](#) the notion that it was a “non-partisan programme of The Institute for Statecraft, a non-partisan charity which promotes good governance.” On no occasion had the group “engaged in party political activity and would never take up a party-political stance.” Charming in such insistence, if somewhat disingenuous: any statement with a political target is, by definition, political activity. Not so for the Initiative, which [claims](#) that the FCO’s funding merely reflected “their appreciation of the importance of the threat, and a wish to support civil society programmes seeking to rebuild the ability of democratic societies to resist large scale, malicious disinformation and influence campaigns.”

The very idea of insisting on information that corrects disinformation must, by definition, be politically oriented. It has a target, and objective. The world is wrong, at least according to one version, so right it. We know it, and others do not. The implication is inescapable.

An example of a journalist outed by the hack is illustrative. He fell from Olympus. He thought he was all fair and high, a prince of objectivity. James Ball, somewhat slighted by the exposures stemming from the Integrity Initiative documents, [described](#) the Kremlin’s approach to managing the message in *The Guardian* as follows:

“Russia’s information manipulation strategies are many and varied, and far more sophisticated than simply pushing out pro-Putin messages. It uses a mix of Russian-owned media outlets, most notably RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik, sympathetic talking heads, social media ‘bot’ accounts and state-sponsored hackers to influence western politics and media coverage.”

To deny the existence of such media management strategies would simply be silly. But equally daft is the suggestion that journalism run through the corporate mill in the United States, or through media conglomerates in Europe, identifies some miraculous golden mean of objective fairness. Ditto numerous governments, who have a deep interest in selling a particular story within, and without their jurisdiction. Respective messages are doing a dance, and governments the world over are attempting to influence the course of discussion. They are the self-appointed bulwark against “post-truth”, a nonsense term that has assumed the very thing it seeks to combat.

Ball falls into the trap of heralding the virtues of free speech and media only to then find fault with them. Even he doesn’t entirely these tendencies. Russia, he argues, simulated a “virus that turns its host’s immune system against itself” using an “information strategy... turning free media and free speech against its own society.” And what of it? Surely, models of information parry and thrust can drive the bad out with the good, or is there, underlying these criticisms, the latent suggestion that free society harbours the imbecilic and destructive? As with any wading into these murky waters, the danger is that none of these catalytic engagements seeks free speech, merely a managed deployment of spears analogous to battle. The amoral terrain of the Cold War re-appears, and behind many interlocutors lies the funding of a state.

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