

Influencing Foreigners Is What Intelligence Agencies Do. Spreading Disinformation and Confusion

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Region: [USA](#)

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The Rand Corporation [defines America's influence operations as...](#) “the coordinated, integrated, and synchronized application of national diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and other capabilities in peacetime, crisis, conflict, and post-conflict to foster attitudes, behaviors, or decisions by foreign target audiences that further US interests and objectives. In this view, influence operations accent communications to affect attitudes and behaviors but also can include the employment of military capabilities, economic development, and other real-world capabilities that also can play a role in reinforcing these communications.”

In a world where communications and social networks are global and accessible to many ordinary people, influence operations are the bread-and-butter of many intelligence agencies as a means of waging low intensity warfare against adversaries. During the past week there have been two accounts of how influencing foreign audiences has worked in practice, one relating to Russia and one to Great Britain.

The Russian story is part of the continuing saga of Russiagate. On Monday, the Senate Intelligence Committee [released two reports](#) on Russian operations before during and after the 2016 election to influence targeted groups, to include African-Americans, evangelical Christians and Second Amendment supporters to confuse voters about what the candidates stood for. Russia Internet Research Agency, headed by Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, alleged to be a friend of President Vladimir Putin, reportedly coordinated the effort.

The New York Times, slanted in [its coverage of the story](#), claiming that Moscow was “weaponizing” social media and that it was intended to support the candidacy of Donald Trump who “had a Russian blind spot and an army of supporters willing to believe convenient lies and half-truths.” They also dubbed it “a singular act of aggression that ushered in an era of extended conflict.” Of course, one might note that in 2016 the Times itself had a blind spot regarding Hillary Clinton compounded by a bias against Trump and his “deplorable” supporters, while one must also point out that Russian intentions are unknowable unless one were a fly on the wall inside the Kremlin when the US election was under discussion, so one might conclude that the newspaper is itself spreading something like disinformation.

It is undoubtedly true that Russia had a vital national interest in opposing Clinton, whose malevolent intentions towards Moscow were well known. It is also undoubtedly true that there was a campaign of manipulation of social networks by the Kremlin and its proxies to influence readers and also to assess the development of the two major party campaigns. But it also should be observed that the claim that it was seeking to suppress Democratic voters is not really borne out given the other much more conservative demographics that

were also targeted. Indeed, involvement by Russia did not alter the outcome of the election and may have had virtually no impact whatsoever, so the claims by the Times that the world is seeing a new form of warfare is clearly exaggerated to reflect that paper's editorial stance.

The fact that the Times is trying to make the news rather than reporting it is clearly indicted by its sheer speculation that "The Internet Research Agency appears to have [largely sat out the 2018 midterm elections](#), but it is likely already trying to influence the 2020 presidential election, in ways social media companies may not yet understand or be prepared for. And Russia is just the beginning. Other countries, including Iran and China, have already [demonstrated advanced capabilities](#) for cyberwarfare, including influence operations waged over social media platforms." It is certainly convenient to have all one's enemies collectivized in two sentences, but the Times manages that quite neatly.

The [second story](#), much less reported in the US media, relates to how the British intelligence services have been running their own disinformation operations against Russia, also using social networks and the internet. The British government has been financing a program that was given the name Integrity Initiative. It has been tasked with creating and disseminating disinformation relating to Russia in order to influence the people, armed forces and governments of a number of countries that Moscow constitutes a major threat to the west and its institutions.

Former British intelligence officer and established Russo-phobe Christopher Nigel Donnelly (CND) is the co-director of [The Institute for Statecraft](#) and founder of its offshoot [Integrity Initiative](#). The Initiative ironically claims to "Defend Democracy Against Disinformation." According to leaked documents, the Initiative [plants disinformation](#) that includes allegations about the "Russian threat" to world peace using what are referred to as [journalists 'clusters'](#) in place both in Europe and the United States.

Even though the Institute and Initiative pretend to be independent Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), they are both actually supported financially by the British government, NATO and what are reported to be other state donors, possibly including the United States.

The Integrity Initiative aside, the United States has also long been involved in influence operations, sometimes also referred to as perception management. Even before 9/11 and after the breakup of the Soviet Union the State Department, Pentagon and National Security Agency were all active on the internet in opposing various adversaries, to include terrorist groups. The CIA has been spreading disinformation using paid journalists and arranging foreign elections since 1947. Sometimes US federal government agencies are operating openly, but more often they are using covert mechanisms and cover stories to conceal their identities. America's internet warriors are adept at spreading misinformation aimed at target audiences worldwide.

The fact is that spreading disinformation and confusion are what governments and intelligence services do to protect what they consider to be vital interests. It is naïve for the US Senate and America's leading newspapers to maintain that intelligence probing and other forms of interference from Russia or China or Iran or even "friend" Israel occur in a vacuum. Everyone intrudes and spreads lies and everyone will continue to do it because it is easy to understand and cheap to run. In the end, however, its effectiveness is limited. In

2016 the election result was determined by a lack of trust on the part of the American people for what the establishment politicians have been offering, not because of interference from Moscow.

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