

The “Fake News” Furor and the Threat of Internet Censorship

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In the weeks since the November 8 election, US media reports on the spread of so-called “fake news” during the presidential campaign have increasingly repeated unsubstantiated pre-election claims that the Russian government hacked into Democratic Party email servers to undermine the campaign of Hillary Clinton. There is more than a whiff of McCarthyism in this crusade against “fake news” on social media and the Internet, with online publications critical of US wars of aggression and other criminal activities being branded as Russian propaganda outlets.

A case in point is an article published in the November 24 edition of the *Washington Post* headlined “Russian propaganda effort helped spread ‘fake news’ during election, experts say.” The article includes assertions that Russian “botnets, teams of paid human ‘trolls,’ and networks of web sites and social media accounts” were used to promote sites across the Internet “as they portrayed Clinton as a criminal hiding potentially fatal health problems and preparing to hand control of the nation to a shadowy cabal of global financiers.”

According to the *Post*, the exposure of Russian involvement in the spread of fake election news is based on the work of a team of “independent researchers” and another anonymous group calling itself PropOrNot, which has expertise in “computer science, national security and public policy.” Although no one from the PropOrNot organization is mentioned by name, the *Post* quotes the executive director of this group anonymously. The organization has gone so far as to publish a list of 200 web sites—including WikiLeaks, the ultra-right Drudge Report and the left-liberal Truthout—that are deemed “routine peddlers of Russian propaganda.”

It should be obvious that the *Post* report is itself an example of the state-sponsored pseudo-news that is increasingly dispensed by the corporate-controlled media to promote the geopolitical and military aims of American imperialism. The *New York Times* has published similar articles, including one authored by David E. Sanger and posted on the *Times* web site on November 25 under the headline “US Officials Defend Integrity of Vote, Despite Hacking Fears.”

Sanger, the chief Washington correspondent of the *Times*, is a regular sounding board for the military/intelligence establishment, to which he is closely “plugged in.” He writes that “intelligence officials are still investigating the impact of a broader Russian ‘information warfare’ campaign, in which fake news about Mrs. Clinton, and about United States-Russia relations, appeared intended to influence voters.” He adds, “Many of those false reports

originated from RT News and Sputnik, two state-funded Russian sites.”

The readers of this and virtually all other articles on the topic of Russia’s role in “fake news” will search in vain for a single piece of evidence to substantiate the claims made. Instead, the views and opinions of “experts,” usually unnamed, are cited and treated as indisputable fact—much in the manner of Joe McCarthy and similar witch-hunters.

The editors and writers who produce these articles seem not even to notice that their publications have been caught in one colossal lie after another—from the claims of Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction” used to justify the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 to the more recent flood of government propaganda in support of neo-colonial wars in Libya and Syria and drone killings in a growing number of countries—all justified in the name of “human rights” and the “war on terror.”

There are no institutions anywhere in the world more adept at producing “fake news” than the American corporate-controlled media.

These same media outlets further discredited themselves by overtly slanting their “news” coverage of the election campaign in favor of their preferred candidate, Hillary Clinton, and predicting that she would secure a decisive victory. Blindsided by the support for Trump among disaffected and angry lower-income people and taken unawares by the electoral collapse of the Democrats, the corporate media are responding to the growth of popular distrust by seeking to discredit alternative news sources.

This is not to deny the spread of false information and propaganda masquerading as news on the Internet. Fabricated news stories and hoaxes have been circulating online since the World Wide Web began in the 1990s, but there was a significant increase in “fake” political sites and content during the US elections. Stories that stretched the truth or were entirely made up typically started on mock news web sites and were then amplified by social media sharing. Other false reports originated on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter and spread rapidly with the “like,” “share” and “comment” features of social media.

An analysis published by *Buzzfeed* on November 16 showed that false political news stories in the final three months of the election campaign, such as a report that the Pope had endorsed Trump for president, generated more engagement on Facebook than the combined top stories of nineteen major US news organizations. The *Buzzfeed* study noted the “hyperpartisan right-wing” nature of the top fabricated news items, as well as the spike in the number of visitors to these sites during the final election months.

Another key aspect of online “fake news” has been the growth of its scope internationally. The *Guardian* reported in August, for example, that a group of teenagers and college students from Veles, Macedonia set up dozens of political web site façades to both influence and cash in on the Trump candidacy. The *Guardian* report also pointed out that, although the pro-Trump sham news sites were more popular, both offshore and domestic web sites became very popular and generated income for their publishers whether they were peddling phony “conservative” or “liberal” misinformation.

That being said, the campaign in the corporate media against “fake news” on the Internet, including calls for social media outlets such as Google and Facebook to vet the material that appears on their sites, is a reactionary attack on freedom of the press. It has already elicited positive responses from major Internet sites. Both Google and Facebook have published

statements acknowledging that they are working on systems that will use third-party “fact-checking” of news content published on their services. In the case of Facebook, this initiative—reminiscent of Orwell’s Thought Police—will be reinforced by barring accounts identified as “fake news” sources from using online advertising tools.

Pressure to shut down or muzzle “fake news” sites and social media accounts are emanating from the offices of corporate media organizations concerned about the loss of their influence over the public. Any moves to censor Internet content must be opposed as an attack on democratic rights. The measures being prepared today against “fake news” web sites and social media publishers will be perfected and used tomorrow against the working class and the socialist media—the *World Socialist Web Site*—that articulates and fights for its independent interests.

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