

Washington Post Disgracefully Promotes a McCarthyite Blacklist from a New, Hidden, and Very Shady Group

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Global Research, November 27, 2016

[The Intercept](#) 26 November 2016

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [Police State](#) & [Civil Rights](#)

The Washington Post has promoted the claims of a new, shadowy organization that smears dozens of U.S. news sites that are critical of U.S. foreign policy as being “routine peddlers of Russian propaganda.” The [article](#) by reporter Craig Timberg – headlined “Russian propaganda effort helped spread ‘fake news’ during election, experts say” – cites a report by a new, anonymous [website calling itself “PropOrNot,”](#) which claims that millions of Americans have been deceived this year in a massive Russian “misinformation campaign.”

The group’s list of Russian disinformation outlets includes WikiLeaks and the Drudge Report, as well as Clinton-critical left-wing websites such as Truthout, Black Agenda Report, Truthdig and Naked Capitalism, as well as libertarian venues such as Antiwar.com and the Ron Paul Institute.

This Post report was one of the most widely circulated political news articles on social media over the last 48 hours, with dozens, perhaps hundreds, of U.S. journalists and pundits with large platforms hailing it as [an earth-shattering exposé](#). It was the most-read piece on the entire Post website after it was published on Friday.

Yet the article is rife with obviously reckless and unproven allegations, and fundamentally shaped by shoddy, slothful journalistic tactics. It was not surprising to learn that, as BuzzFeed’s Sheera Frenkel [noted](#), “a lot of reporters passed on this story.” Its huge flaws are self-evident. But the Post gleefully ran with it and then promoted it aggressively, led by its Executive Editor Marty Baron:

Russian propaganda effort helped spread fake news during election, say independent researchers <https://t.co/3ETVXWw16Q>

— Marty Baron (@PostBaron) [25 November 2016](#)

In casting the group behind this website as “experts,” the Post described PropOrNot simply as “a nonpartisan collection of researchers with foreign policy, military and technology backgrounds.” Not one individual at the organization is named. The executive director is quoted, but only on the condition of anonymity, which the Post said it was providing the group “to avoid being targeted by Russia’s legions of skilled hackers.”

In other words, the individuals behind this newly created group are publicly branding journalists and news outlets as tools of Russian propaganda – even [calling on the FBI to](#)

[investigate them for espionage](#) - while cowardly hiding their own identities. The group promoted by the Post thus embodies the toxic essence of Joseph McCarthy but without the courage to attach their names to their blacklist. Echoing the Wisconsin Senator, the group refers to its lengthy collection of sites spouting Russian propaganda as “The List.”



The credentials of this supposed group of experts are impossible to verify, as none is provided either by the Post or by the group itself. The Intercept contacted PropOrNot and asked numerous questions about its team, but received only this reply: “We’re getting a lot of requests for comment and can get back to you today =) [smiley face emoticon].” The group added: “We’re over 30 people, organized into teams, and we cannot confirm or deny anyone’s involvement.”

Thus far, they have provided no additional information beyond that. As Fortune’s Matthew Ingram [wrote in criticizing the Post article](#), PropOrNot’s Twitter account “[has only existed since](#) August of this year. And an article announcing the launch of the group on its website is dated last month.” WHOIS information for the domain name is not available, as the website uses private registration.

More troubling still, PropOrNot listed numerous organizations on its website as “allied” with it, yet many of these claimed “allies” told The Intercept, and complained on social media, they have nothing to do with the group and had never even heard of it before the Post published its story.

Just want to note I hadn’t heard of Propornot before the WP piece and never gave permission to them to call Bellingcat “allies” <https://t.co/jQKnWzjrBR>

— Eliot Higgins (@EliotHiggins) [25 November 2016](#)

This WashPost story gets more and more embarrassing by the minute: <https://t.co/yIAtrqtOrF>

— Glenn Greenwald (@ggreenwald) [25 November 2016](#)

I can confirm. I’ve no idea what this website is nor who runs it. Not sure how that makes us “allies.” Looks like just a blogroll <https://t.co/BfKo5j4Lvo>

— James Miller (@Millermena) [25 November 2016](#)

At some point last night, after multiple groups listed as “allies” objected, the group quietly

changed the title of its “allied” list to “Related Projects.” When The Intercept asked PropOrNot about this clear inconsistency via email, the group responded concisely: “We have no institutional affiliations with any organization.”

In his article, the Post’s Timberg did not include a link to PropOrNot’s [website](#). If readers had the opportunity to visit the site, it would have become instantly apparent that this group of ostensible experts far more resembles amateur peddlers of primitive, shallow propagandistic clichés than serious, substantive analysis and expertise; that it has a blatant, demonstrable bias in promoting NATO’s narrative about the world; and that it is engaging in extremely dubious McCarthyite tactics about a wide range of critics and dissenters.

To see how frivolous and even childish this group of anonymous cowards is – which the Post venerated into serious experts in order to peddle their story – just sample a couple of the recent tweets from this group:

Awww, wook at all the angwy Putinists, trying to change the subject – they’re so vewwy angwy!! It’s cute We don’t censor; just highlight.

— PropOrNot ID Service (@propornot) [26 November 2016](#)

Fascists. Straight up muthafuckin’ fascists. That’s what we’re up against. Unwittingly or not, they work for Russia. <https://t.co/LBp2y19PTv>

— PropOrNot ID Service (@propornot) [22 November 2016](#)

As for their refusal to identify themselves even as they smear hundreds of American journalists as loyal to the Kremlin or “useful idiots” for it, this is their mature response:

We’ll consider revealing our names when Russia reveals the names of those running its propaganda operations in the West

— PropOrNot ID Service (@propornot) [25 November 2016](#)

The Washington Post should be very proud: it staked a major part of its news story on the unverified, untestable assertions of *this* laughable organization.

One of the core functions of PropOrNot appears to be its compilation of a lengthy blacklist of news and political websites which it smears as peddlers of “Russian propaganda.” Included on this blacklist of supposed propaganda outlets are prominent independent left-wing news sites such as Truthout, Naked Capitalism, Black Agenda Report, Consortium News and Truthdig.

Also included are popular libertarian hubs such as Zero Hedge, Antiwar.com and the Ron Paul Institute, along with the hugely influential right-wing website the Drudge Report and the publishing site WikiLeaks. Far-right, virulently anti-Muslim blogs such as Bare Naked Islam are likewise dubbed Kremlin mouthpieces. Basically, everyone who isn't comfortably within the centrist Hillary-Clinton/Jeb-Bush spectrum is guilty. On its Twitter account, the group announced a new "plugin" that automatically alerts the user that a visited website has been designated by the group to be a Russian propaganda outlet.

We'll consider revealing our names when Russia reveals the names of those running its propaganda operations in the West

— PropOrNot ID Service (@propornot) [25 November 2016](#)

TO HYPE ITS OWN STORY, the Post article uncritically highlights PropOrNot's flamboyant claim that stories planted or promoted by Russia's "disinformation campaign" were viewed more than 213 million times. Yet no methodology is provided for any of this: how a website is determined to merit blacklist designation or how this reach was calculated. As Ingram wrote: "How is that audience measured? We don't know. Stories promoted by this network were shared 213 million times, it says. How do we know this? That's unclear." Presumably, this massive number was created by including on its lists highly popular sites such as WikiLeaks, as well The Drudge Report, the third-most popular political news website on the internet. Yet this frightening, Cold War-esque "213 million" number for Russian "planted" news story views was uncritically echoed by numerous high-profile media figures, such as New York Times deputy Washington editor [Jonathan Weisman](#) and professor [Jared Yates Sexton](#) — although the number is misleading at best.

Some of the websites on PropOrNot's blacklist do indeed publish Russian propaganda — namely Sputnik News and Russia Today, which are funded by the Russian government. But many of the aforementioned blacklisted sites are independent, completely legitimate news sources which often receive funding through donations or foundations and which have been reporting and analyzing news for many years.

 The group commits outright defamation by slandering obviously legitimate news sites as propaganda tools of the Kremlin.

One of the most egregious examples is the group's inclusion of Naked Capitalism, the widely respected left-wing site run by Wall Street critic Yves Smith. That site was named by Time Magazine as [one of the best 25 Best Financial Blogs](#) in 2011 and by [Wired Magazine as a crucial site to follow for finance](#), and Smith has been [featured as a guest](#) on programs [such as PBS' Bill Moyers Show](#). Yet this cowardly group of anonymous smear artists, promoted by the Washington Post, has now placed them on a blacklist of Russian disinformation.

The group eschews alternative media outlets like these and instead recommends that readers rely solely on establishment-friendly publications like NPR, the BBC, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, BuzzFeed and VICE. That is because [a big part of the group's definition](#) for "Russian propaganda outlet" is criticizing U.S. foreign policy.

PropOrNot does not articulate its criteria in detail, merely describing its metrics as “behavioral” and “motivation-agnostic.” That is to say, even if a news source is not technically a Russian propaganda outlet and is not even trying to help the Kremlin, it is still guilty of being a “useful idiot” if it publishes material that might in some way be convenient or helpful for the Russian government. In other words, the website conflates criticism of Western governments and their actions and policies with Russian propaganda. News sites that do not uncritically echo a pro-NATO perspective are accused of being mouthpieces for the Kremlin, even if only unwitting ones.

While blacklisting left-wing and libertarian journalists, PropOrNot also denies being McCarthyite. Yet it simultaneously calls for the U.S. government to use the FBI and DOJ to carry out “formal investigations” of these accused websites, “because the kind of folks who make propaganda for brutal authoritarian oligarchies are often involved in a wide range of bad business.” The shadowy group even goes so far as to claim that people involved in the blacklisted websites may “have violated the Espionage Act, the Foreign Agent Registration Act, and other related laws.”

In sum: they’re not McCarthyite; perish the thought. They just want multiple U.S. media outlets investigated by the FBI for espionage on behalf of Russia.

WHO EXACTLY IS BEHIND PROPORNOT, where it gets its funding and whether or not it is tied to any governments is a complete mystery. The Intercept also sent inquiries to the Post’s Craig Timberg asking these questions, and asking whether he thinks it is fair to label left-wing news sites like Truthout “Russian propaganda outlets.” Timberg replied: “I’m sorry, I can’t comment about stories I’ve written for the Post.”

As is so often the case, journalists – who constantly demand transparency from everyone else – refuse to provide even the most basic levels for themselves. When subjected to scrutiny, they reflexively adopt the language of the most secrecy-happy national security agencies: *we do not comment on what we do.*

Timberg’s piece on the supposed ubiquity of Russian propaganda is misleading in several other ways. The other primary “expert” upon which the article relies is Clint Watts, a fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, a pro-Western think tank whose board of advisors includes neoconservative figures like infamous orientalist scholar Bernard Lewis and [pro-imperialist](#) Robert D. Kaplan, the latter of whom served on the U.S. government’s Defense Policy Board.

What the Post does not mention in its report is that [Watts](#), one of the specialists it relies on for its claims, previously worked as an FBI special agent on a Joint Terrorism Task Force and as the executive officer of the U.S. Military Academy’s Combating Terrorism Center. As Fortune’s Ingram wrote of the group, it is “a conservative think tank funded and staffed by proponents of the Cold War between the U.S. and Russia.”

PropOrNot is by no means a neutral observer. It actively calls on Congress and the White House to work “with our European allies to disconnect Russia from the SWIFT financial transaction system, effective immediately and lasting for at least one year, as an appropriate response to Russian manipulation of the election.”

In other words, this blacklisting group of anonymous cowards – putative experts in the

pages of The Washington Post – are actively pushing for Western governments to take punitive measures against the Russian government, and are speaking and smearing from an extreme ideological framework that the Post concealed from its readers.

EVEN MORE DISTURBING than the Post’s shoddy journalism in this instance is the broader trend in which any wild conspiracy theory or McCarthyite attack is now permitted in U.S. discourse as long as it involves Russia and Putin – just as was true in the 1950s when stories of how the Russians were poisoning the U.S. water supply or infiltrating American institutions were commonplace. Any anti-Russia story was – and is – instantly vested with credibility, while anyone questioning its veracity or evidentiary basis is subject to attacks on their loyalties or, at best, vilified as “useful idiots.”

Two of the most discredited reports from the election season illustrate the point: a Slate article claiming that a private server had been located linking the Trump Organization and a Russian bank ([which, like the current Post story, had been shopped around and rejected by multiple media outlets](#)), and a [completely deranged rant by Newsweek’s Kurt Eichenwald claiming that Putin](#) had ordered emails in the WikiLeaks release to be doctored – both of which were uncritically shared and tweeted by hundreds of journalists to tens of thousands of people, if not more.

The Post itself – now posing as warriors against “fake news” – [published an article](#) in September that treated with great seriousness the claim that Hillary Clinton collapsed on 9/11 Day because she was poisoned by Putin. And that’s to say nothing of the [paper’s disgraceful history](#) of convincing Americans that Saddam was building non-existent nuclear weapons and had cultivated a vibrant alliance with Al Qaeda. As is so often the case, those who mostly loudly warn of “fake news” from others are themselves the most aggressive disseminators of it.

Indeed, what happened here is the essence of fake news. The Post story served the agendas of many factions: those who want to believe Putin stole the election from Hillary Clinton; those who want to believe that the internet and social media are a grave menace that needs to be controlled, in contrast to the objective truth which reliable old media outlets once issued; those who want a resurrection of the Cold War. So those who saw tweets and Facebook posts promoting this Post story instantly clicked and shared and promoted the story without an iota of critical thought or examination of whether the claims were true, because they wanted the claims to be true. That behavior included countless journalists.

So the story spread in a flash, like wildfire. Tens of thousands of people, perhaps hundreds of thousands or even millions, consumed it, believing that it was true because of how many journalists and experts told them it was. Virtually none of the people who told them this spent a minute of time or ounce of energy determining if it was true. It pleased them to believe it was, knowing it advanced their interests, and so they endorsed it. That is the essence of how fake news functions, and it is the ultimate irony that this Post story ended up illustrating and spreading far more fake news than it exposed.

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