

New York Times stokes anti-Russia campaign to promote Facebook, Twitter censorship

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The *New York Times* has mounted a concerted campaign promoting a crackdown on political expression on social media on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations of Russian government interference in the 2016 US presidential election.

In conjunction with a public statement by Facebook last Wednesday on political advertising allegedly originating in Russia, the *Times* published a sensationalist “investigative” report titled “The Fake Americans Russia Created to Influence the Election,” an op-ed piece indicting Facebook for failing to exercise greater censorship of political content and an editorial Saturday touching on the same themes.

Facebook briefed members of both the Senate and House intelligence committees on its findings on September 6. It said it found \$50,000 in spending on 2,200 “potentially politically related” ads “that might have originated in Russia” over a two-year period beginning in June 2015. It added that this included Facebook accounts and pages “with very weak signals of a connection and not associated with any known organized effort,” including “accounts with US IP addresses but with the language set to Russian.”

The vast majority of the ads, Facebook’s chief security officer Alex Stamos added, “didn’t specifically reference the US presidential election, voting or a particular candidate,” but rather appeared to focus on amplifying “divisive social and political messages.”

The testimony was seized upon by Democratic politicians attempting to promote the theme of Russia meddling in the US elections in support of Trump. Representative Adam Schiff, the senior Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, called the highly ambiguous Facebook findings “deeply disturbing and yet fully consistent with the unclassified assessment of the intelligence committee.”

The *Times* “investigation” was as weak in its substantiation of a Russian government operation to influence the 2016 presidential election as the Facebook report, but far more inflammatory.

It described an “unprecedented foreign intervention in American democracy” and a “cyberarmy of counterfeit

Facebook and Twitter accounts, a legion of Russian-controlled impostors whose operations are still being unraveled.”

It repeated the unproven allegations that Russia was responsible for the hacking and leaking of Democratic emails exposing the party leadership’s attempts to sabotage the presidential campaign of self-described “socialist” Senator Bernie Sanders, while accusing Russian media outlets like RT and Sputnik of having “battered” Hillary Clinton with a “fire hose of stories, true, false and in between.”

The story focuses, however, on the alleged Russian use of Facebook and Twitter, darkly accusing the two companies of failing to prevent themselves from “being turned into engines of deception and propaganda.”

The “evidence” uncovered by the *Times* consisted of linking “suspect” Facebook accounts, since taken down by the company, that posted material linking to a website, DCLeaks.com, that published hacked emails from billionaire financier and Democratic Party donor George Soros, a former NATO commander, and Democratic as well as Republican functionaries. With no substantiation, the newspaper claims that “United States intelligence concluded” that the site was a creation of the Russian military intelligence agency GRU.

The article also accuses Russia of exploiting Twitter, using “hundreds of accounts” for “posting anti-Clinton messages and promoting leaked material.”

It further charges that the alleged Russian campaign employed “automated Twitter bots, which send out tweets according to built-in instruction.”

According to Twitter’s own estimate, there are some 48 million such bots on Twitter, and they accounted for fully 19 percent of all election-related tweets during the 2016 presidential campaign.

The *Times* report acknowledges that it investigated Twitter accounts identified as “Kremlin trolls” to discover that there were real people behind them with no ties to the Russian government. It quoted one of them, Marilyn Justice,

66, from Nova Scotia, who told the newspaper she believed that “Hillary’s a warmonger” and that she was hostile to the anti-Russian bias in the Western media. Another so-called “troll” turned out to be a web producer in Zurich, who expressed sharp disagreement with Western narratives on the Ukraine and Syria.

The existence of such views, the *Times* concluded was “a victory for Russia’s information war—that admirers of the Kremlin spread what American officials consider to be Russian disinformation on election hacking, Syria, Ukraine and more.”

The *Times* followed up its “investigation” with an op-ed piece accusing Facebook of having “contributed to, and profited from, the erosion of democratic norms in the United States” by having allowed the posting of “anti-Hillary ads precisely aimed at Facebook users whose demographic profiles implied a vulnerability to political propaganda.”

It went on to comment: “Unfortunately, the range of potential responses to this problem is limited. The First Amendment grants broad protections to publishers like Facebook.”

The *Times* editorial published Saturday questions whether “any federal agency is focused on” the alleged “problems” uncovered in the newspaper’s report: “foreign intervention through social media to feed partisan anger and suspicion in a polarized nation.”

There is a farcical element to the *Times* exposé. The idea that the spending of \$50,000, vaguely linked to Russia, on Facebook ads over a two-year period undermined US elections in which total spending is estimated at roughly \$7 billion is ludicrous.

Whatever actions may have been taken by the government of Vladimir Putin to promote the international interests of Russia’s ruling oligarchy, Moscow’s alleged Internet activities pale in comparison to the unrelenting campaigns mounted by US government agencies, from the CIA to the Pentagon and the National Endowment for Democracy, to rig foreign elections, engineer regime change operations and militarily destroy entire countries. As the former US assistant secretary of state Victoria Nuland proudly acknowledged, Washington sunk some \$5 billion into promoting pro-Western regime change in Ukraine.

Even more preposterous is the attempt to attribute the sharp social tensions and intense political antagonisms that are ripping apart the seams of American society to Russian propaganda. Both are the product of the crisis of American capitalism, characterized above all by the uninterrupted growth of social inequality.

There is, however, a sinister and deadly serious content to the campaign by the *Times* editorial board, which functions as a reliable conduit for CIA propaganda. It has joined its

long-running campaign around allegations of Russian interference in the US election with the demand for a crackdown on political expression on social media.

The two are inextricably linked. Underlying the *Times* campaign around Moscow’s supposed assault on the “integrity of American democracy” lies the political agenda of powerful factions within the US ruling establishment, which are demanding the continuation and intensification of the drive toward regime change in, and military confrontation with, Russia.

The preparations for war abroad are inevitably accompanied by the growth of censorship and political repression at home. The *Times*’ criticisms of Facebook and Twitter notwithstanding, these corporations, along with Google, are collaborating closely with the US government and its intelligence agencies in the attempt to suppress freedom of speech and thought and censor anti-capitalist and anti-war reporting and opinion.

Under the phony banner of combating “fake news,” Google announced a change in its search algorithms last April that was clearly directed at slashing the readership of anti-war and left-wing websites, with the *World Socialist Web Site* being hit the hardest, losing more than two-thirds of its traffic from Google search results.

Facebook has followed suit, rolling out a similar announcement in June that it was updating its own News Feed algorithm aimed at “deprioritizing” posts viewed as “problematic” promoting “low quality content” “sensationalism” and “misinformation.”

The attempts by these multi-billion-dollar corporations to arrogate to the themselves the power of gatekeepers of the Internet, censoring content that conflicts with the interests of the American ruling oligarchy and its military-intelligence apparatus has aroused broad popular hostility. The WSWS has spearheaded the opposition to these attacks, with 3,500 people from more than 80 different countries signing it petition demanding that Google cease its censorship of the Internet.



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