

One week in the media's McCarthyite witch-hunt against Russia

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In the week since Facebook announced it would collaborate with a congressional committee investigating Russian “meddling,” the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have whipped themselves into a McCarthyite frenzy.

“When it comes to Russia these days—as with the Vietcong in the 1960s or Iraq in 2002-03—you can pretty much write whatever you want. All journalistic standards are gone.” This is the damning pronouncement on the reporting of the *Washington Post* contained in an article published Monday by award-winning investigative journalist Robert Parry, who helped expose the Iran-Contra scandal in the 1980s.

In the effort to demonize Russia in order to legitimize war abroad and political repression at home, the *Times* and *Post* have this week published a series of lurid and totally unsubstantiated reports blaming the Russian government for everything from the electoral defeat of Democrat Hillary Clinton in the 2016 US election, to the electoral success of the far-right AfD in Germany, to protests against police violence in the United States.

In true McCarthyite fashion, all political opposition to the policies of the American financial elite, anywhere in the world, is being presented as the work of Russian agents seeking to subvert the benevolent actions of the United States.

As Parry points out, this narrative is being relentlessly and shamelessly peddled even as PBS is airing Ken Burns’ documentary on the Vietnam War, which, whatever its creators’ intentions, extensively documents that the US government, working with a coterie of subservient and uncritical journalists, systematically lied to the population about almost every detail of that disastrous conflict.

As with the lies of that era, which were justified on

the grounds that anyone who questioned the narrative of the US government was a communist agent, so, now, all political opposition, including opposition to war, is being branded as the work of Russian agents, “trolls” and “bots.”

Last Thursday, Facebook said that it would turn over details of some 3,000 fake accounts that it said were “likely operated out of Russia” to a congressional committee investigating alleged Russian interference in the 2016 election.

Previously, the company had said it had no evidence that Russia had used its systems to interfere in the election. It reversed its position following pressure from leading Democrats, including Senator Mark Warner, the ranking Democrat on the Intelligence Committee, who personally flew out to Facebook’s headquarters, where he was told, according to the *Washington Post*, “that Facebook had found no accounts that used advertising.”

In the period after Warner’s visit, Facebook publicly acknowledged the existence of the accounts Warner had pressured it to find. But its announcement Thursday that it would turn the accounts over to Warner’s committee unleashed a torrent of hysterical propaganda in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.

In addition to a series of breathless front-page articles in the two newspapers, its editorial writers abandoned any semblance of restraint in characterizing Russia’s alleged role in the 2016 election.

Among the most ominous was a column prominently featured in Sunday’s *New York Times*, penned by Nina Jankowicz, a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center’s Kennan Institute, which warned that “Russian disinformation” is finding “fertile ground” because the population is growing increasingly skeptical of the

government and has access to news via the Internet.

Jankowicz writes, “According to the Pew Research Center, only 20 percent of Americans trust their government. The same low percentage has ‘a lot’ of trust in the national news media.” This loss of trust in the government “has coincided with the rise of... the adrenaline-driven Internet news cycle.”

Referring to the American population as though it were a South Vietnamese hamlet ripe for “pacification,” Jankowicz writes, “The fight starts in people’s minds, and the molding of them,” urging that the fight against Russia should begin in “K-12 curriculums” and continue by means of ideological training programs by employers.

Russia, she claims “has very deftly exploited America’s weaknesses.”

On Monday, the *Washington Post* ran a front-page report, with three bylines and based on interviews with “more than a dozen people involved in the government’s investigation,” to chronicle the way in which Facebook conducted an “internal self-examination” and “worked backwards” to find Russian interference that it previously claimed was non-existent.

Throughout the piece, the government’s account is taken entirely at face value. Its goal is to present as fact a series of allegations contrived by Facebook to satisfy the demands of powerful lawmakers and intelligence agencies demanding that the company produce evidence of Russian “meddling” – as though it were a journey of self-discovery by the corporation and its CEO, Mark Zuckerberg.

Neither Facebook, nor the US intelligence agencies, nor the newspaper pushing this lurid account have produced a shred of evidence to back up their claims, aside from a few screenshots of allegedly suspicious Facebook accounts published by the *New York Times* earlier this month.

These allegations grew even more hysterical Tuesday, with an editorial published in the *Washington Post* entitled “The Kremlin creeps into Germany,” which accused the Kremlin of playing a role in the electoral success of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in this past weekend’s election.

The *Post* claimed that the AfD “was buoyed by social-media campaigns of the kind Russia has used elsewhere—faceless bots that multiply messages over

and over. Once again, the Kremlin’s quest to disrupt democracy, divide the West and erode the rules-based liberal international order may have found a toehold.” These sweeping statements were based solely on the claim that the party’s last-minute allegations of voter fraud were “driven by anonymous troll accounts and boosted by a Russian-language botnet.”

But the most bizarre and perhaps most significant allegation came in a *Washington Post* article, also posted under three bylines, that alleged that Russia sought to promote groups opposing police violence, including “African American rights groups.”

The piece explicitly drew parallels to the allegations by the FBI and other intelligence agencies that the civil rights movement of the 1960s expressed not legitimate social grievances, but the activities of communist spies and agitators. “Much like the online ads discovered by Facebook,” writes the *Post*, “messages spread by Soviet-era operatives were meant to look as though they were written by bona fide political activists in the United States, thereby disguising the involvement of an adversarial foreign power.”

The *Post*’s equation of opposition to police violence with Russian infiltration takes another step toward making explicit the underlying premise of the campaign surrounding alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 election: that the growth of social opposition that manifested itself in mass support for the candidacy of Bernie Sanders was the result of Russian infiltration, and is to be put down by censorship and state repression.

The repressive undercurrent of the campaign against “fake news” has already been put into practice by Google, which has slashed traffic to left-wing web sites by over 50 percent since April, especially targeting the *World Socialist Web Site*, which has seen its Google search traffic fall by nearly 75 percent over that time.

The McCarthyite witch-hunt being whipped up by the *Times* and the *Post* can serve only to legitimize and extend this censorship.



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