

New York Times exploits Parkland tragedy to escalate anti-Russian campaign

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Less than four days after the Parkland school shooting, the *New York Times* has found a way to turn a national tragedy that claimed the lives of 17 high school students into an opportunity to escalate its unrelenting campaign of anti-Russian propaganda, involving the continuous bombardment of the public with reactionary lies and warmongering.

Against the backdrop of a major escalation of military tensions between the two countries, the *Times* seized upon the Justice Department indictment of Russian nationals over the weekend to claim that Russia is at “war” with the United States. Now, the *Times* has widened this claim into an argument that Russia somehow bears responsibility for social divisions over the latest mass shooting in America.

Its lead headline Tuesday morning blared: “SHOTS ARE FIRED, AND BOTS SWARM TO SOCIAL DIVIDES - Florida School Shooting Draws an Army Ready to Spread Discord”

According to the *Times*, Russian “bots,” or automated social media accounts, sought “to widen the divide” on issues of gun control and mental illness, in order to “make compromise even more difficult.” Russia sought to exploit “the issue of mental illness in the gun control debate,” and “propagated the notion that Nikolas Cruz, the suspected gunman” was “mentally ill.”

The absurd claim that Russia is responsible for the existence of social divisions in America is belied by the shooting itself, which is a testament to the fact that American society is riven by antagonisms that express themselves, in the absence of a progressive outlet, in outpourings of mass violence.

The aim of this campaign is to target anyone who would criticize the underlying social causes of the shooting—the violence of American society, the nonexistence of mental health services, or even the social psychology that gives rise to mass shootings—as a “Russian agent” seeking to “sow divisions” in American society.

Times lead is based entirely on a “dashboard” called Hamilton 68 created by the German Marshall Fund’s Alliance for Securing Democracy, whose lead spokesman is Clint Watts, the former US intelligence agent and censorship advocate who declared in November that social media companies must “silence” sources of “rebellion.”

Without naming any of the accounts it follows, Hamilton 68 claims to track content tweeted by “Russian bots and trolls.” But most of the trends leading the dashboard are news stories, many posted by *Russia Today* and *Sputnik News*, that are identical with the trending topics followed by any other news agency. Thus, Hamilton 68 provides an instant *New York Times* headline generator: Any major news story can be presented as the result of “Russian bots.”

The *New York Times* is making its claims about “Russian meddling” with what is known in the law as “unclean hands.” That is, the *Times* practices the very actions of which it accuses others.

Here is not the place to deal with the long and bloody history of American destabilization campaigns and their horrific consequences in Latin America and the Middle East, or to review the fact that many American journalists serving abroad had dual functions—as reporters and as agents.

But it is worth noting that, particularly in recent decades, and under the auspices of Editorial Page editor James Bennet, there has been a remarkable integration of the *Times* with the major operations of the US intelligence agencies.

This is particularly true with regard to Russia, in regard to which the *Times* acts as an instrument of US foreign policy misinformation, practicing exactly what it accuses the Kremlin of.

Take, for example, the so-called political “dissident” Aleksei Navalny. This proponent of extreme nationalism

and xenophobia, with deep ties to Russia's fascistic right, and extensive connections to US intelligence agencies, has been championed by the *Times* as the voice of social dissent in Russia. Despite his miniscule support within Russia, Navalny's activities generate front-page headlines in the *Times*, which has mentioned him in over 400 separate articles.

Another example is the *Times*' promotion of the "feminist" rock band Pussy Riot, which makes a habit of getting themselves arrested by taking their clothes off in Russian Orthodox churches, and whose fate the *Times* holds up as a horrific example of Russian oppression. The very name "Pussy Riot," which in typical usage is not even translated into Russian, expresses the fact that this operation aims to influence American, and not Russian, public opinion.

In 2014, the *Times* met with members of Pussy Riot at their editorial offices, and have since extensively promoted the group, having mentioned it in over 400 articles. The term "anti-Putin opposition" is mentioned in another 600 articles.

The logic of the *Times*' campaign was expressed most clearly by its columnist Thomas Friedman, the personification of the pundit as state intelligence mouthpiece whose career was aptly summed up in a biography titled *Imperial Messenger*. In a column published on February 18 ("Whatever Trump is Hiding is Hurting All of US Now"), Friedman declares a "code red" threat to the integrity of American democracy.

"At a time when the special prosecutor Robert Mueller—leveraging several years of intelligence gathering by the F.B.I., C.I.A. and N.S.A.—has brought indictments against 13 Russian nationals and three Russian groups—all linked in some way to the Kremlin—for interfering with the 2016 U.S. elections," Friedman writes, "America needs a president who will lead our nation's defense against this attack on the integrity of our electoral democracy."

This "defense," according to Friedman, would include "bring[ing] together our intelligence and military experts to mount an effective offense against Putin—the best defense of all." In other words, war.

The task of all war propaganda is to divert internal social tensions outwards, and the *Times*' campaign is no different. Its aim is to take the anger that millions of people feel at a society riven by social inequality, mass alienation, police violence, and endless war, and pin it on some shady foreign adversary.

The *New York Times*' claims of Russian "meddling" in

the Parkland shooting set the tone for even more hysterical coverage in the broadcast evening news. NBC News cited Jonathan Morgan, another collaborator on the Hamilton 68 project, who declared that Russia is "really interested in sowing discord amongst Americans. That way we're not focused on putting a unified front out to foreign adversaries."

The goal of the ruling class and its media accomplices is to put on "a unified front" through the suppression of social opposition within the United States. Along these Lines, NBC added, "Researchers tell us it's not just Russia deploying these attacks on social media," adding "many small independent groups are trying to divide Americans and create chaos."

Who are these "small independent groups" seeking to "create chaos"? By this, they no doubt mean any news or political organization that dares question the official line that everything is fine in America, and that argues that the horrendous levels of violence that pervade American society are somehow related to social inequality and the wars supported and justified by the entire US political establishment.

It is worth noting that these claims were made on the same day that Fox News ran a story alleging that Michael Moore, the director of *Bowling for Columbine*, a film that related the 1999 Columbine High School massacre to US wars abroad, had attended an anti-Trump demonstration allegedly set up by Russia.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has repeatedly warned, the targets of this campaign are left-wing, antiwar and progressive web sites, political organizations, and news outlets, and, by extension, the freedom of the press and freedom of expression of the entire American public. In the name of providing a "unified front" to "foreign adversaries," the conditions are being created for the criminalization and banning of political dissent.



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