Sunday Times Insight team: Propagandists for Internet censorship and war

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The Insight team at the *Sunday Times* were pioneers in investigative journalism. In 1963, the group's first efforts exposed slum landlord Peter Rachman and gave a new word, Rachmanism, to the English language.

How the mighty are fallen. Last week's Insight report into alleged "Russian meddling" in the British general election of 2017 marked a low point in the collapse of bourgeois journalism into state propaganda.

"Exposed: Russian Twitter bots tried to swing the general election for Jeremy Corbyn" was the newspaper's frontpage headline. Inside, the results of an investigation, "How Russian bots invaded Twitter to fight in Jeremy Corbyn's army," ran across pages eight and nine.

For more than 18 months the *New York Times*, the Democratic Party and powerful sections of the military-intelligence apparatus have alleged Russian "fake news" interference in the 2016 US presidential elections. The aim of this anti-Russia campaign has been twofold: (1) to install, via the methods of palace intrigue and coup, a regime prepared to militarily confront Russia and (2) to justify sweeping Internet censorship and other dictatorial measures on the grounds that the population is being indoctrinated by the Kremlin.

The *Sunday Times* feature published April 29 confirms that a similar campaign has begun in Britain. This version is directed against Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and the millions of people who have registered their opposition—on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs and memes—to the Conservative government of Prime Minister Theresa May's agenda of war and austerity.

The Insight Research Team—George Arbuthnott, Jonathan Calvert, Krystina Shveda, Louis Goddard, Mary O'Connor, Katie Weston, Malik Ouzia, Rebecca Gualandi and Rosie Bradbury—raked over Corbyn's higher than expected vote.

"The causes of the result are still being debated. Was it the galvanisation of the youth vote, did May run a lacklustre campaign or were the polls wrong from the beginning?" they asked.

Not one of these possibilities was investigated. Instead the team aimed their sights on … "Russians in the ranks."

"One question has been largely overlooked, until now. Did Moscow attempt to influence the British general election by using social media in the same way that it tried to boost the fortunes of Donald Trump during the 2016 American elections?"

Insight reported their "ground breaking investigation" with Swansea University academic Oleksandr Talavera had uncovered 6,500 Russian Twitter accounts supporting Corbyn.

Most of the 6,500 accounts, Insight claimed, were bots—automated accounts that retweet posts from other accounts, posting links or comments from external sources. These were "mass-produced to bombard the public with orchestrated political messages," claimed Rupert Murdoch's investigative team, who are certainly experts on the topic.

In fact, such bots are routinely used by media outlets, celebrities, businesses and individuals to boost their social media reach and influence—but the *Times*, it seems, has only just discovered these dastardly bots and their evil ways.

Its real aim is to criminalise any attempt by the public at large to promote views that challenge the financial oligarchy and its state machine.

During the snap poll May launched on April 18, Corbyn's support rose from 25 percent to 40 percent, reducing the Conservative government to minority status and shocking the political establishment.

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According to the Insight team, this could not be explained with reference to objectively rooted socioeconomic processes. Instead, it was attributed to Russian bots whose shady influence is somehow linked to Corbyn's own repeated failure "to strongly condemn Vladimir Putin."

The *Times* investigation cited "key points" during the general election when Russian Twitter accounts "swung into action" with apparently devastating effect.

These key points included May's disastrous campaign launch on May 18, the Manchester bombing on May 22, her repeated refusal to hold a leaders' debate with Corbyn, and the mass rallies Corbyn addressed that were a feature of the campaign. To add insult to injury, "At the times when the bots spread positivity for Labour, they would also spread almost equal amounts of negativity for the Conservatives."

To cite just one example of Insight's shoddy methodology and conclusions: "In early June, 'Lillian Morgan' retweeted a message from the pro-Kremlin broadcaster Russia Today inviting people to watch Corbyn's speech in Reading. The event drew comment in the newspapers because a surprisingly large crowd attended during a workday lunchtime."

All this proves is that the "newspapers" are a million times removed from the mass of the population. The *Times* journalists are shocked by "a surprisingly large crowd" and can only conclude that the population has been "manipulated" by a Kremlin-backed Twitter conspiracy. Such is the police mentality that now dominates the editorial offices of the British press.

Lillian turns out to have been bot @sMzNFVr7wWkTW04 created in Russia. No evidence has been supplied as to Lillian's true identity, so no conclusions can be drawn. The British media does not have a great track record when it comes to outing Russian trolls and bots. Only last month, the owner of an alleged Russian bot account—an English retiree who opposes the bombing of Syria— spoke out publicly to expose the media's anti-Russia witch-hunt. Ian56 successfully faced down a hostile line of questioning from *Sky News* "journalists."

The entire *Times* investigation is based on just 20,000 tweets. As *Wired* magazine pointed out, in the month before the general election, 1.067 million accounts tweeted around 10 million times, using terms such as theresamay, #Conservatives, nicolasturgeon, paulnuttall, ukip, #Labour (to name a few).

Talevera's academic research therefore "investigated" 20,000 out of 10 million tweets, a grand total of 0.2 percent.

The British media campaign over Russian interference is rank hypocrisy. A relative handful of Russian-backed Twitter accounts is child's play compared to the routine and violent political interference of the imperialist powers in countries all over the world. The British ruling class has carried out criminal wars of occupation and illegal regime change across the Middle East and North Africa that have claimed the lives of over a million people since 2003 alone, turning millions more into stateless refugees.

The desperate and crude methods of the *Sunday Times* must serve as a warning. Owned by the billionaire Rupert Mudoch, the *Sunday Times* speaks for powerful sections of the British ruling class. If Corbyn owes his popularity to Kremlin interference, the implications are clear: preparations must be made for his removal.

These moves are not primarily aimed against Corbyn, who is a life-long defender of the Labour bureaucracy and the state, and who uses every possible opportunity to appease his attackers. They are aimed against the working class.

Three years ago, the *Sunday Times* quoted an unnamed serving general threatening mutiny by "fair means or foul" against a Corbyn government. The intervening years have seen an immense deepening of the crisis of British imperialism which has responded, like all the major powers, by stepped-up preparations for war and a build-up of the state.

The *Sunday Times* article begins and ends with calls for sweeping Internet censorship. It cites Matt Hancock, digital and culture secretary in May's government, insisting, "It is absolutely unacceptable for any nation to attempt to interfere in the democratic elections of another country. The social media companies need to act to safeguard our democratic discourse and reveal what they know."

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