

UK Parliament “fake news” report demands sweeping internet censorship

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After nearly 18 months of sittings and questioning witnesses, parliament’s Department of Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee (DCMS) has finally released an interim report on “fake news.”

“Evidence” has been selected and manipulated to justify the committee’s demand to ramp-up the UK ruling elite’s anti-Russia campaign.

On the pretext of combating fake news from Russia, the report calls for immediate steps to crack down on the democratic rights of individuals and political organisations, censor social media and close down alternative media sources that expose the plans of the imperialist powers.

A related purpose of the report is to use allegations of Russian political interference to halt or reverse the Brexit vote.

The select committee investigation was launched in January 2017, tasked with investigating “fake news” and centring on accusations of “foreign interference” in the June 2016 referendum on UK membership of the European Union and the June 2017 general election. It was formed in tandem with the Democratic Party’s campaign against the victory of Donald Trump in the US presidential election which has also centred on allegations of Russian interference.

The DCMS summary states, “There are many potential threats to our democracy and our values,” including ‘fake news,’ created for profit or other gain, disseminated through state-sponsored programmes, or spread through the deliberate distortion of facts, by groups with a particular agenda, including the desire to affect political elections.”

“Such has been the impact of this agenda, the focus of our inquiry moved from understanding the phenomenon of ‘fake news,’ distributed largely through social media, to issues concerning the very future of democracy. Arguably, more invasive than obviously false information is the relentless targeting of hyper-partisan views, which play to the fears and prejudices of people, in order to influence their voting plans and their behaviour.”

The DCMS identifies Russia as the puppet master able to influence the thoughts and very actions of millions of people

all over the world:

“In particular, we heard evidence of Russian state-sponsored attempts to influence elections in the US and the UK through social media, of the efforts of private companies to do the same, and of law-breaking by certain Leave campaign groups in the UK’s EU Referendum in their use of social media.”

The DCMS calls on the term “fake news” to be discarded by the government as there is “no clear idea of what it means, or agreed definition.” Instead, the government should put forward “an agreed definition of the words ‘misinformation’ and ‘disinformation,’” that “can be used as the basis of regulation and enforcement.”

Why the DMCS, consisting of five Conservatives, five Labourites and a Scottish National Party representative would feel it necessary to discard the term “fake news” is clear. These are representatives of a right-wing political and corporate set-up that is universally despised. This same parliament voted to take Britain to war in Iraq based on lies that Saddam Hussein possessed “weapons of mass destruction.” The most infamous “fake news” document of the 21st century, the “dodgy dossier,” was used in 2003 to justify the US/UK led invasion that resulted in over a million deaths.

Russia or “Russian” is mentioned 134 times in the report, an average of 1.5 mentions per page. It states that, “The evidence led us to the role of Russia specifically, in supporting organisations that create and disseminate disinformation, false and hyper-partisan content, with the purpose of undermining public confidence and of destabilising democratic states. This activity we are describing as ‘disinformation’ and it is an active threat.”

When it comes to quantifying the “active threat,” the DCMS offers nothing of substance. It castigates Facebook who “told us that the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA) had bought only three adverts for \$0.97 in the days before the Brexit vote.” It adds, “According to evidence that Facebook submitted to Congress, and later released publicly, Russian anti-immigrant adverts were

placed in October 2015 targeting the UK, as well as Germany and France. These amounted to 5,514.85 roubles (around £66).”

Asked by the DMCS to provide details on all political advertising paid for by Russian agencies targeting UK Facebook users from October 2015 to date, Facebook replied in June this year, “Looking further back over the activity of the IRA accounts from as early as January 2015 (including the period of over a year before the start of the regulated referendum period), the total spend on impressions delivered to the UK is approximately \$463.”

In order words, the “meddling” in British politics since 2015 by Russia consists of paying \$463 in Facebook adverts!

This didn’t suit the objectives of the DCMC, who describe Facebook’s response as “obfuscation.”

After stating it has received “disturbing evidence,” of hacking, disinformation and voter suppression in elections since 2010, it notes that some of this remains unpublished.

The report seeks to link the Leave campaign with Russian interference, stating in bolded text that businessman and UK Independence Party funder “Arron Banks is believed to have donated £8.4 million to the Leave campaign, the largest political donation in British politics, but it is unclear from where he obtained that amount of money.”

Banks is estimated to be worth anything up to £250 million. Without revealing any of it, the report states, “we have evidence of... Banks’ discussions with Russian Embassy contacts, including the Russian Ambassador, over potential gold and diamond deals, and the passing of confidential information by... Banks.”

The DCMS campaign was given the imprimatur of the mouthpiece of the Remain campaign and leading voice demanding an anti-Russian agenda, the *Guardian*. It hailed the “plucky little committee,” editorialising that its report has “the potential to reshape the political landscape,” as it “deals with issues demanding essential action. For this is subject-matter on which neutrality is not an option.”

Citing “Russian dirty tricks and destabilisation, Facebook’s consistent refusals to acknowledge its practical, moral or legal responsibilities, and the reckless audacity and contempt with which groups like SCL Elections, Cambridge Analytica, Global Science Research and Aggregate IQ—as well as the Vote Leave and Leave.EU campaigns—defied the regulatory authorities and the whole idea of the rule of law in politics,” it complains, “It is not impossible that this superior ruthlessness, audacity and defiance enabled the leave side to win the 2016 referendum...”

This must be combated by a huge assault on democratic rights, with the DCMS stating, “In this rapidly changing digital world, our existing legal framework is no longer fit

for purpose.”

In a measure aimed at censoring web sites that oppose official lies, it states that government should “initiate a working group of experts to create a credible annotation of standards, so that people can see, at a glance, the level of verification of a site.”

A “new category of tech company” should be developed, “which is not necessarily either a ‘platform’ or ‘publisher.’” These companies should have a “clear legal liability” to “act against harmful and illegal content.”

This would be the basis for a dragnet to delete masses of social media content.

The liability should “include both content that has been referred to them for takedown by their users, and other content that should have been easy for the tech companies to identify for themselves. In these cases, failure to act on behalf of the tech companies could leave them open to legal proceedings launched either by a public regulator, and/or by individuals or organisations who have suffered as a result of this content being freely disseminated on a social media platform.”

It recommends, “Paid-for political advertising data on social media platforms, particularly in relation to political adverts,” should identify their “source, explaining who uploaded it, who sponsored it, and its country of origin.”

A ban on micro-targeted political advertising to similar audiences and “a minimum limit for the number of voters sent individual political messages should be agreed, at a national level. ”

The author also recommends:

Claims by Cambridge Analytica whistleblower used for new electoral investigation into Brexit [03 April 2018]



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