

US media demands stepped-up domestic spying over Russian “meddling”

New York Times: Back to the good days before Edward Snowden!

Andre Damon
20 December 2018

The publication this week by the Senate Intelligence Committee of a pair of reports alleging a Russian “disinformation” campaign to manipulate US politics has prompted a torrent of demands for technology companies to collaborate ever more directly with the US intelligence agencies to censor and spy on domestic political opposition.

Leading the charge were the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, the two semi-official newspapers of the Democratic Party and military/intelligence apparatus, who together published nearly a dozen breathless news reports, editorials, and op-eds about the Russian menace.

Common to all these statements is the declaration that the United States is engaged in an “information war” with Russia, which must be combated by any means necessary, including mass surveillance.

Writing in the *New York Times*, columnist Kara Swisher declares, “The tech giants have been holding back.” The government must force them, she writes, to “behave less like bystanders” in what will be a never-ending “high-stakes information war.”

The supposed hesitancy of technology companies to hand over lists of accounts to the intelligence agencies, she writes, “has its origins in the souring of the industry’s relationship with government agencies in 2013 in the wake of Edward Snowden’s revelations about incursions into tech platforms by the NSA surveillance program Prism.”

Swisher adds, “That moment deeply damaged what had once been a more cooperative back and forth between government and tech over issues of national

security.”

In 2013, former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden revealed that the NSA and other intelligence services were operating in flagrant violation of the Constitution by spying on the communications of all Americans. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper was shown to have lied to the American people and perjured himself to Congress in having denied the existence of a mass warrantless surveillance program.

Swisher is inciting the government, in other words, to commit a crime by expanding its efforts to illegally vacuum up private communications, and for American technology companies to aid and abet this crime voluntarily.

Under the direction of Vice President Dick Cheney, the Bush administration used the 9/11 terror attacks to set up a secret, illegal, warrantless surveillance program, which was subsequently expanded under the Obama administration. The motto of the NSA was “Collect it All,” “Process it All,” “Exploit it All,” and “Know it All.”

But Snowden’s revelations put the intelligence agencies on the back foot. Suddenly, they had to defend and justify their actions, and even President Obama put on a frown and pretended to be shocked at the actions of his own government, vowing to “reform” the NSA surveillance program.

Commenting on a speech given by Obama in January 2014 in response to the Snowden revelations, the *Times* wrote:

In the days after Edward Snowden revealed that the United States government was collecting vast amounts of Americans' data—phone records and other personal information—in the name of national security, President Obama defended the data sweep and said the American people should feel comfortable with its collection. On Friday, after seven months of increasingly uncomfortable revelations and growing public outcry, Mr. Obama gave a speech that was in large part an admission that he had been wrong.

In other words, the intelligence agencies got caught sneaking in the back door, and now they are trying the front door. Not content to secretly carry out mass surveillance, they are demanding to do it publicly, in the name of countering the supposed Russian threat to democracy.

But the present campaign goes far beyond the Prism program revealed by Snowden. Instead of merely collecting information on the activities of the American population, the propagandists for political censorship are demanding that the technology giants work to actively shape political viewpoints, or even shut down social media altogether.

In this “information war” Swisher writes, “purveyors of propaganda used these powerful platforms exactly as they were designed to be used. It should not surprise us that what happened was entirely avoidable and pretty much in plain sight of those who ran the platforms.”

Swisher clearly argues that the government should suppress “propaganda.” But if disseminating “propaganda” is “exactly as they [Facebook and Twitter] were designed to be used,” should not the social media networks be shut down?

Seemingly unable to contain herself, she repeats the exact same weaselly form of argumentation, this time inciting an even more sweeping crime.

Swisher writes, “changes to make them [technology companies] less susceptible to such flagrant abuse may prove impossible, given how the United States thinks about free speech.”

She proceeds to quote one of the recently released reports, which states, “It is precisely our commitment to democratic principles that puts us at an asymmetric

disadvantage against an adversary who enthusiastically engages in censorship, manipulation, and suppression internally.”

She concludes, “These systems are so easily taken advantage of precisely because they represent our values.”

Though unstated, the implication is clear. It is American democratic “values” that are the problem. The Constitution puts the United States at an “asymmetric disadvantage” against countries who engage “in censorship” and “suppression internally.”

Should not, therefore, the First Amendment be junked, just like the NSA tried to scrap the Fourth Amendment?

In each of these statements, Swisher is like the mobster who sweetly ponders, “That’s a very nice constitution you have there, it would be a shame if anything were to happen to it.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact