

The unanswered questions in the latest Russian “meddling” allegations

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Last Wednesday, the *New York Times* carried a front-page article claiming the “Russian group that interfered in the 2016 presidential election is at it again, using a network of fake accounts and a website set up to look like a left-wing news site.”

The article set the stage for a series of follow-up news stories, comments and editorials from virtually every publication in the political establishment, all treating the unsubstantiated assertions of US intelligence agencies and social media companies as definitive proof that the Russian government is renewing its efforts to promote left-wing political views as part of an effort to sow political discord and destabilize the United States.

No one stopped to ask the obvious questions: Where is the proof? Who set up the website allegedly operated by the “Russians”?

What, moreover, has become of the breathless allegations, repeated in hundreds of news articles, memoirs and editorials, that Russia “meddled” in the 2016 elections?

In the four years since the US intelligence agencies and major news outlets rolled out their claims that the Russian government conspired with WikiLeaks to steal the election from Hillary Clinton, this narrative has totally fallen apart.

The linchpin of the accusations—that a private research company examined the Democratic Party’s servers and confirmed that the contents of WikiLeaks’ 2016 disclosures were stolen by the Russians—collapsed in congressional testimony when the company made clear it had no real evidence that the data allegedly stolen by Russian hackers was actually transferred from the Democratic Party’s computers and internal network.

“There’s no evidence that they were actually exfiltrated,” CrowdStrike President Shawn Henry told a congressional committee in secret testimony that was only made public in 2020.

The reality is that, for all the ink spilled over Russian “interference” in the elections, there exists clear, unambiguous evidence for only one incident of such “meddling,” and that is by Democratic Party operatives closely tied to the US intelligence agencies.

In October 2017, media reports began to circulate that tens of thousands of Russian twitter bots had suddenly begun to follow Roy Moore in a special election that captured national attention for months. The narrative being promoted was that the Russians were meddling in the Alabama Senate race in favor of Moore. The Moore campaign denied any involvement, and the incident remained unexplained until the following year.

On December 19, 2018, the *New York Times* carried an article with an explanation. A group called New Knowledge, according to an internal report quoted by the *Times*, declared, “We orchestrated an elaborate ‘false flag’ operation that planted the idea that the Moore

campaign was amplified on social media by a Russian botnet.”

The project involved some of the biggest names in technology, as well as high-profile figures in the Democratic Party and the US intelligence agencies. The *Times* report gave a picture of the scale of the operation:

The funding came from Reid Hoffman, the billionaire co-founder of LinkedIn, who has sought to help Democrats catch up with Republicans in their use of online technology.

The money passed through American Engagement Technologies, run by Mikey Dickerson, the founding director of the United States Digital Service, which was created during the Obama administration to try to upgrade the federal government’s use of technology. Sara K. Hudson, a former Justice Department fellow now with Investing in Us, a tech finance company partly funded by Mr. Hoffman, worked on the project.

New Knowledge was intimately connected to the campaign to claim that Russia had promoted left-wing viewpoints on Twitter and Facebook. In 2018, the Senate Intelligence Committee commissioned New Knowledge and Graphika (more on it later) to author a pair of reports on Russian “disinformation.” The New Knowledge report alleged that Russia set up “left-leaning pages” that “criticized mainstream, established Democratic leaders as corporatists or too close to neo-cons, and promoted Green Party and Democratic Socialist themes.”

Hyping the reports, Virginia Senator Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, gasped, “Incredible. These bombshell reports demonstrate just how far Russia went to exploit the fault lines of our society and divide Americans in an attempt to undermine and manipulate our democracy.”

Just two days after the publication of the reports, the *Times* detailed how New Knowledge had deliberately set up exactly the types of “inauthentic” pages attributed to the Kremlin in its report on Russian “meddling.”

And yet, the media continued to peddle the discredited anti-Russia claims as good coin. In February 2019, for instance, NBC News reported that Democratic presidential candidate Tulsi Gabbard, a critic of American imperialist policy, was being backed by the Russians.

NBC reported that “experts who track websites and social media linked to Russia have seen stirrings of a possible campaign of support for Hawaii Democrat Tulsi Gabbard.” The “experts,” in this case,

were none other than New Knowledge.

Which brings us to the present day. Last week, the *New York Times* published a front-page article alleging that “Russian intelligence agencies have used allies and operatives to place articles, including disinformation, into various fringe websites.”

Specifically, it identified a website called peacedata.org and its associated social media accounts as being a front group for the “Kremlin-backed Internet Research Agency.”

The *Times* story was based largely on a report by Graphika, which, along with New Knowledge, was commissioned by the Senate Intelligence Committee to report on Russian meddling in the 2016 election.

The lead author of the Graphika report cited last week by the *Times* was Ben Nimmo, a former propagandist (the official term was “press officer”) for NATO and a current fellow at the Atlantic Council, a CIA/State Department front organization.

The report claimed that peacedata.org “amplified” leading left-wing websites, including the *World Socialist Web Site*, Mint Press News, Common Dreams, the Intercept, and the Grey Zone.

It linked to an article from the WSWS (“Vindictive court rulings prove British state wants Assange dead”) and noted that “the operation had a clear preference for groups that identified with socialism” and “opposed the mainstream Democratic Party, as represented by Biden and Harris.”

The *Times* report continued: “[T]he decision to espouse progressive positions and attack both center-left and right-wing politicians indicates an attempt to woo more left-wing audiences for future influence operations.”

New reports have claimed that in addition to republishing articles (in the WSWS’s case, without permission), peacedata.org solicited paid contributions from freelance writers.

Unusually for “research” related to the intelligence agencies’ anti-Russia narrative, the Graphika report actually goes into extensive detail about the way peacedata.org operated, including theories that its editors were, in fact, fake personas, whose photos were created through artificial intelligence. It presents a plausible narrative that peacedata.org was, in fact, a fake site.

But what the report does not even attempt to do is prove that the site was operated by the Internet Research Agency or any other organization connected with the Russian state. It is simply asserted, allegedly based on claims by the FBI (which have not been made publicly), Twitter and Facebook.

In keeping with their role as mouthpieces for the intelligence agencies, neither the *Times* nor the *Guardian*, NBC News nor any other mainstream news outlet that has reported on the findings has questioned the veracity of the claims that peacedata.org was a front for the Russian government.

The only concrete, demonstrable evidence of supposed “Russian meddling” in US politics is the operation in the 2017 special election for the US Senate seat for Alabama, cited above, which was actually a false flag operation conducted by New Knowledge, the peer of Graphika in producing the Senate Intelligence Committee’s reports.

Which begs the question: Was peacedata.org set up in an operation similar to the one run by New Knowledge, with the aim of discrediting left-wing political opposition as the Biden-Harris campaign moves ever further to the right?

We do not know. Neither we nor the other left-wing sites we contacted have any knowledge of this organization. Over the weekend, peacedata.org shut down, and its website now carries only a

news story in Russian, a strange piece of evidence for the Kremlin’s top foreign propaganda team to leave behind.

The actual story behind peacedata.org may never be made public. But it is clear the intelligence agencies’ unsubstantiated allegations of Russian meddling are being used to discredit mounting opposition to capitalism and to establish a preemptive justification for intensifying the campaign to censor the internet.

While the claims of New Knowledge, CrowdStrike and the like have been exposed and debunked, these allegations have done real damage. In response, Google initiated a system known as “project owl” to blacklist and demote websites based on their political views, predominantly affecting left-wing sites, while Facebook and Twitter have removed accounts with millions of followers on the grounds that they were “inauthentic.”

Reddit, meanwhile, has instituted blacklists on many of its most popular forums, barring hundreds of thousands of Reddit users from sharing or reading *World Socialist Web Site* articles. These latest unsubstantiated allegations will only accelerate the calls for internet censorship.

Ultimately, the media’s claims about Russian meddling are aimed at promoting an essentially conspiratorial narrative: That social discontent in the United States is the result not of domestic social conditions but of the work of “outside agitators.” But amid the greatest social, economic and political crisis in a century, such allegations lack the slightest credibility.

Even if Vladimir Putin set up not one but 100 left-wing websites or if he had bought not \$100,000 worth of ads but \$100 million worth, how would that compare to the effect on social consciousness that nearly 200,000 people have been allowed to die in the COVID-19 pandemic, and that just three individuals control as much wealth as the bottom half of the American population?

This type of reporting aims only to create a McCarthyite pretext to attack and delegitimize oppositional publications, while intensifying the military standoff between two countries armed with the world’s biggest nuclear arsenals. Millions understand that it is not the Russians who are “at it again,” but the *New York Times*.



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