

Grayzone questions US intelligence claim of “Russian influence campaign” run by PeaceData

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Last Thursday, the independent investigative news organization *Grayzone* published an article raising questions about the website PeaceData, which was identified by a US intelligence consulting firm in early September as a “small, recently created network” for Russian misinformation.

The *Grayzone* article provides important details about the PeaceData operation. It calls government claims about the website—which have been dutifully repeated by corporate news media after an initial article published by the *New York Times*—“a series of smear campaigns relying on false innuendo to suggest that independent left-wing American media outlets are connected to Russia.”

On September 3, the *World Socialist Web Site* published an article titled “The New York Times slanders left-wing opposition to Biden as ‘Russian propaganda,’” which characterized a front-page article in the *Times* about PeaceData as a McCarthyite-style anti-Russian witch-hunt aimed at influencing the November elections.

The *Times* article said that PeaceData was a Moscow-backed news site conducting an “influence operation” that was “first detected by American intelligence agencies, including the National Security Agency.”

The *Times* report said Facebook and Twitter had terminated accounts associated with PeaceData and acted swiftly to stop a “fake network” and block a Kremlin-backed Internet Research Agency (IRA) effort to “use fringe websites, spread conspiracy theories and sow division in the United States.”

As the WSWs explained, the *Times*’ repeated references to the use of “allies and operatives to place articles, including disinformation, into various fringe websites” was backed up by the claim that PeaceData had published commentary that was notably left-wing in character and critical of both US foreign policy and the Democratic Biden-Harris 2020 presidential ticket.

On top of this, the *Times* said that freelance American journalists had been duped into writing for the alleged Russia-backed website by offering to pay them \$75 per piece, and that articles from left-wing and socialist websites, including the WSWs, had been republished on the PeaceData site since it

was launched in October 2019.

The problem with all of this is that the shadowy PeaceData had a miniscule social media presence. The network had just five Twitter accounts, 13 Facebook accounts, two pages and 14,000 followers. The claim that such an “information laundering” operation could influence the US elections was absurd. There was something else driving the Graphika report on which the *Times*’ front-page article was based.

The private intelligence firm Graphika, which operates as a contractor for the Pentagon, published a 38-page report on PeaceData that coincided with both the shutdown of the website’s social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter and the *Times* front-page report.

As the WSWs explained, fearful of any criticism from the left, US intelligence was attempting to label all opposition to the Democrats as part of a “Russian meddling” operation aimed at helping Donald Trump win a second term.

The subsequent fate of the suspicious PeaceData website, which was abruptly shut down, indicates that the mission of providing US intelligence with “evidence” of “home-grown” left-wing disinformation campaigns linked to Russian intelligence had been accomplished, and the site was no longer needed.

An announcement was posted on the front page of the website, which says: “Today we decided to shut down PeaceData. We gave voice to the voiceless people and we want to thank our readers and contributors for their support. Some corrupt forces (FBI, NSA, Facebook, CNN, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and many others) attacked us in an attempt to silence free speech. Today we’re standing in their way. Whose free speech will they try to silence tomorrow? Stand up for your rights. Stand up for your freedom! Ruse up against the 1 percent.”

The article last week by *Grayzone* Assistant Editor Ben Norton explains that PeaceData was “completely unknown before it was identified by the FBI as the heart of a supposed Russian disinformation scheme.” The website “had next to no following, with 197 likes on Facebook, and negligible web traffic.”

Norton says that the Pentagon contractor Graphika's lengthy report on PeaceData "offered absolutely no proof that Moscow was behind it." The idea that PeaceData was interfering in the 2020 US elections as a "Kremlin operation to help Donald Trump win" is contradicted by the fact "a mere 5 percent of PeaceData's total articles were about the US election, representing just around 35 posts."

Norton provides important information about the freelance American journalists who were supposedly duped into writing for PeaceData for \$75 per article. He wrote that the most high-profile independent contributor to PeaceData "happens to be an actor for hire who strongly supports Joe Biden, has admitted to severe mental illness, and has previously collaborated with the FBI."

Subsequent to its original article, the *Times* published a follow-up report that included an interview with a 50-year-old actor named Colin Munro Wood, who said PeaceData had contacted him and asked him to write for the website. As part of the story, the *Times* included communications with Wood.

Reviewing Wood's publicly available social media accounts, Norton writes that the would-be PeaceData writer describes himself as a patriotic Democrat. Wood posted on Facebook on September 4, "Understand, none of this is about me, but about truth, and governmental institutions destroying our world, in Russia, China, and America. I LOVE America, for what it is supposed to be, and for those who make America great!"

Later the same day, Wood posted, "If you hate truth, you might be a Trumpian!" Wood also took credit for what he called the "Russian IRA" shutting down the PeaceData website, and posted "Glad to be of help, #FBI."

Norton writes: "Colin Munro Wood is the polar opposite of the anti-imperialist leftist that PeaceData was supposedly trying to recruit. So, if this alleged Russian operation was trying to hurt Biden and the Democratic Party, why would it solicit the services of writer who is a moderate Democrat who publicly campaigns for Biden? The narrative makes little sense."

The *Grayzone* story also reviews the background and activity of two other publicly named freelance writers—Jack Delaney and Charles Davis—who were supposedly duped by PeaceData into producing content for the site. In both cases, the political views espoused by these individuals were explicitly anti-Russian and hostile to the Putin regime.

He writes of Davis that he "carved a niche for himself as a professional imperial attack dog, dedicating his life to obsessively smearing anti-war leftists in conspiratorial error-filled hatchet jobs, while pushing regime-change propaganda against Syria and Venezuela in opposition mouthpieces funded by the US government and European Union."

Norton goes on to write that "the possibility must be considered that private contractors for US intelligence agencies borrowed the same tactics they employed during the scandalous 2018 Alabama Senate false flag operation, creating the PeaceData network themselves and falsely posing as Russians

in order to smear authentic American independent media outlets as Kremlin-linked disinformation operations, to build the case for ultimately censoring them, and to justify their own paychecks."

The 2018 Alabama false flag operation was a disinformation campaign claiming that Russian propaganda and internet trolls were attempting to help the right-wing Republican former state Supreme Court judge Roy Moore win an open US Senate seat. Moore was defeated by Democrat Doug Jones by less than 21,000 votes in a special election.

Norton reports that one of the same individuals, Renée DiResta, who was involved in the "Russian bots" false flag operation against Moore was interviewed by the *Washington Post* after the PeaceData story became public. DiResta was interviewed as someone who "tracked the strategy" of alleged Russian "disinformation operatives" like PeaceData, and studied how they recruited "unwitting locals."

Norton writes that DiResta "boasts on her website that she advised the US State Department and Congress, and she is closely linked to the Democratic foreign policy establishment in Washington. DiResta is a member of the US government-linked Council on Foreign Relations and currently serves as a national security fellow at the neoconservative think tank the Truman National Security Project."

The entire PeaceData episode is a warning to the working class. The US intelligence state is working with the Democratic Party and the corporate news media to perfect McCarthyite methods of labeling left-wing and socialist political organizations and publishers as part of a Russian interference campaign. A primary target of this effort is the WSWS, which is gaining a growing audience within the American and international working class for its program of socialist internationalism.

As the WSWS explained in September: "The greatest absurdity is the suggestion that America would be a Garden of Eden if it were not for the Russian serpent. This is under conditions of mass protests in the streets against police killings, homicidal right-wing violence against demonstrators, a death toll from the coronavirus pandemic approaching 200,000, and nearly 30 million people thrown out of work—a massive and unprecedented social, political and economic crisis."



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