

# Intensifying witch hunt over Radio New Zealand's "pro-Kremlin" Ukraine war reports

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Last Thursday the board of the state-owned broadcaster Radio NZ (RNZ) announced a three-person panel had been appointed to review the station's editorial processes after it had published at least 16 stories about the Ukraine war falsely deemed to have had pro-Russian, or "pro-Kremlin," edits.

The panel includes media law expert Willy Akel as chair, Linda Clark, a former journalist and media law expert and Alan Sunderland, the former director of editorial standards at ABC News in Australia.

The board chairman, Jim Mather said the members boast a "long history of editorial and legal expertise." The terms of reference will allow for "rigorous scrutiny" of the broadcaster's "editorial factors and processes" that saw a staff journalist make "inappropriate" changes to Reuters and BBC reports, going back to last year.

The edits in question, far from being "pro-Russian," in fact insert some rare uncomfortable truths in otherwise wall-to-wall barrage of pro-war propaganda which dominates the country's jingoistic media. A McCarthyite frenzy is being whipped up now to intimidate any opposition to the US-NATO war and the Labour-led government's escalating involvement in it.

The staffer, Michael Hall, has been suspended from the station's digital department pending an employment investigation. He is victimised, vilified and regularly smeared as a "rogue reporter," a "Russian sympathiser" and even an "agent." Nobody in the media pack has dared defend him and the E t? trade union, which claims to represent media workers, has remained silent.

Speaking in his own defence, Hall explained that he had been working for RNZ basically from home. "I subbed several stories that way over the past number of years," he told RNZ's "Checkpoint" program. "In fact since I started RNZ and... I have done that for five years and nobody has tapped me on the shoulder and told me that I was doing anything wrong."

The furore began with a Reuters article posted on the RNZ website on June 9, which Hall had edited. He removed wording that glorified the 2014 coup in Ukraine as a "revolution" and inserted these sentences: "The conflict in Ukraine began in 2014 after a pro-Russian elected government was toppled

during Ukraine's violent Maidan colour revolution. Russia annexed Crimea after a referendum, as the new pro-Western government suppressed ethnic Russians in eastern and southern Ukraine, sending in its armed forces to the Donbas."

A previous Reuters article in April had also been corrected by Hall to point out that Russia launched its 2022 invasion "claiming that a US-backed coup in 2014 with the help of neo-Nazis had created a threat to its borders and had ignited a civil war that saw Russian-speaking minorities persecuted."

Amid a swirling atmosphere of anti-Russian mania, with media reports denouncing the situation at RNZ as a "scandal," CEO Paul Thompson came forward to dismiss the Ukraine reports as "pro-Kremlin garbage." He "apologised" to RNZ's audience, the New Zealand public and the "Ukrainian community," labelling the act "inexcusable."

Thomson also briefed Broadcasting Minister Willie Jackson, a prominent figure in the M?ori radio network, who declared it was "unprecedented for RNZ" and he was "comfortable" with Hall being investigated. Thompson, who was recruited from Fairfax in 2013 to "shake up" the public broadcaster, is seizing the opportunity, with Labour's connivance, to make a further lurch to the right.

Far from defending the station's reportage, let alone its editorial independence, board chair Mather declared the focus of the "independent" inquiry would be to restore "public confidence" in the broadcaster. In fact, a predetermined conclusion will now be manufactured to impose far-reaching censorship procedures at RNZ and to serve as a precedent across the entire media landscape.

Significantly, the furore over Hall's editorial changes did not emerge from thin air: it originated in the United States.

The first complaint came via Luppe B. Luppen, a New York-based lawyer and well-connected Democratic Party supporter who has contributed articles to the *Washington Post*, *Vanity Fair* and Yahoo! News. Luppen and former White House correspondent for Yahoo, Hunter Walker, have co-written the forthcoming book *The Truce: Progressives, Centrists, and the Future of the Democratic Party*, based on interviews with key figures in the party.

In a November 17, 2018 article for Yahoo! News, Luppen lent support to Washington's vicious persecution of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange "for allegations of sexual violence against women [a transparent frame-up] and his role in publishing hacked material from the Democratic National Committee, passed along by criminals who the U.S. intelligence community has concluded were agents of the Kremlin."

Assange has repeatedly denied the allegation of collusion with Russia, for which there is no evidence. He is now facing extradition to the US and the threat of life imprisonment for WikiLeaks' publication of evidence of war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

On June 9, Luppen tweeted a link to the June 9 RNZ/Reuters story and accused Reuters of publishing "utterly false, Russian propaganda history of 2014." He later tweeted that a Reuters representative had "reached out" to him to explain that the changes had been made by RNZ.

The New Zealand publication *Spinoff*, in a hostile rebuke to RNZ, declared: "It took a Twitter user in New York City to detect this indefensible editorial breach." But neither *Spinoff* nor the rest of the NZ media has investigated Luppen's political connections or his motivations for objecting to statements about the 2014 Ukraine coup in a New Zealand publication.

It took no time for a political pile-on to erupt. Claiming "this incident will not be isolated," Winston Peters, leader of the populist NZ First party and former deputy prime minister, unveiled an on-line petition demanding a Royal Commission of inquiry into "media bias and manipulation." Also demanding a broader investigation, leader of the far-right ACT, David Seymour claimed additional RNZ articles about Israel-Palestine and Xinjiang in China had been edited.

Several media outlets wheeled out security analyst Paul Buchanan, who declared that he had been warning for years that New Zealand was being "flooded by foreign disinformation and misinformation" and that Russia was "very, very good at spreading disinformation." Buchanan, regularly presented as an eminently suitable "independent" expert, is a former US intelligence officer who boasts having worked in Washington's filthy operations in Cuba and Latin America.

Meanwhile, the purging of RNZ stories has begun with over 350 previous reports having been "audited" and 26 "corrected." Thompson has promised that thousands more would be checked "with a fine-tooth comb."

Some articles already subjected to "correction" include several on Israel's killing of Palestinians, and another on the Netanyahu government's expansion of settlements on the West Bank. Hall's relatively minor edits—now removed—had emphasised the Israeli government's far-right program and its defiance of international law.

A December 9, 2022 article on Mexico's granting of asylum to Peru's ex-president Castillo also appears among the

offending articles. A note explains that RNZ has removed Hall's entirely correct statement that "some are calling [Castillo's removal from office] a constitutional coup."

Articles dealing with the war drive against China are also being censored. In an article published on March 16, headlined "South Korea's president seeks closer Tokyo ties after latest North Korea missile launch," Hall had added that "the US is stocking up [Taiwan] on weapons" in anticipation of conflict with China. This accurate observation has now been deleted.

The expansion of media influence by far-right lobby groups, including the Ukrainian "community," is being signalled. Invited to comment on the RNZ "scandal," Israel Institute of NZ co-director David Cumin said edits "sympathetic towards authoritarian regimes," including Russia, China, North Korea, Cuba and the Middle East, gave "legitimacy to terror." Cumin claimed some edits were "blatantly anti-Israel" and "distorted the realities on the ground in the Middle East."

Needless to say, no Palestinian spokesperson was given an opportunity to respond. The *New Zealand Herald*, which reported Cumin's remarks, dishonestly presented the Israel Institute as an "independent think tank," only later removing the reference. The *Herald* has a long record of accommodating to pro-Zionist bullying. In 2003 the paper sacked award-winning cartoonist Malcolm Evans over his cartoons critical of Israel's repression of the Palestinians.

The manufactured RNZ furore presages a return to the reactionary atmosphere and methods of the 1950's anti-communist witch-hunts in the US; pre-determined investigations, show trials, forced "confessions," victimisations and sackings. A re-writing of history is underway to position the media mouthpieces, which serve as propagandists for the ruling elite, to condition the population for a vast escalation of imperialist wars abroad and class war at home.



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