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## **Bending the Will of the People: Fake News, Russian Propaganda and How it Threatens the Foundations of U.S. Democracy**

David Olliver · Friday, April 21st, 2017

The first word on every pundit's lips these days always seems to be "Russia," or "Russian."

Russian hacking, Russian influence, Russian financing, Russian connections—the list goes on and on. And of course, these Russian-linked phrases dovetail with another newly famous phrase: "fake news."

These days it's hard to know what to believe. With such an endless cascade of information and misinformation spewing out of the media's collective talk-hole 24/7, people are confused, and they are frightened.

And rightly so. Trusted sources don't seem to exist as they once did; the era of Walter Cronkite gravely gathering the family of Americans together by the figurative fireplace to share something with us that we could all believe in are long gone.

We begin to feel as though nothing is true.

But in the face of the breathless and unending reports on various emerging examples of Russian subterfuge, it is vitally important that we understand this: when we talk about fake news in the context of Russian interference with U.S. domestic concerns, what we are talking about is propaganda.

To be precise, these are Russian propaganda attacks—attacks with words, to be sure, but attacks nonetheless.

And if you are under attack, you'd better damn well make a sober and honest assessment of your attacker, his methods and his tendencies—that is, if you want to survive.

It is incumbent upon us to dig deep and really come to grips with what is going on in this new war of words, because it truly is a war, no question. To that end, here's a

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primer on what is happening now in the world of Russian propaganda: what it is, where it comes from, and what they are attempting to accomplish.

## The History of Propaganda

We might think of propaganda as something that was only created recently. But even if it wasn't known by that name, propaganda—the practice of promoting a particular viewpoint by eliciting a calculated emotional response as opposed to a rational one in the hopes of swaying public opinion—has been around as long as we have been recording history.

Propaganda dates back at least to the ancient Greeks and Romans, although the actual term was probably coined as a result of the creation by the 17<sup>th</sup> century Catholic Church of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, under which was formed the College of Propaganda.

But the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the use of propaganda expand exponentially and reach new heights of sophistication, starting with William Randolph Hearst as he almost single-handedly engineered a war with Spain in order to sell more newspapers—and ostensibly to liberate Cuba. It continued to develop during World War One as the governments of Great Britain, Germany and the U.S. employed new propaganda methods to manufacture consent among their respective populaces and attempt to demoralize the enemy.

Russia got in on the act during the same epoch, even going so far as to create the world's largest airplane, the *Maxim Gorky*, which was built explicitly in the service of propaganda. The massive craft was designed to disseminate leaflets and broadcast information via a series of external loudspeakers as it flew low over Russian cities and villages.

But of course most scholars would say that the undisputed king of propaganda, at least in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, would have to be Joseph Goebbels. He was the Nazi Minister of Propaganda from the ascension of the party to power in 1933 until his death in 1945. He was known for not only his persuasiveness, but also his rabid anti-Semitism; indeed, many scholars think he was the architect of much of the Nazi's institutional anti-Semitism, perhaps even more so than Hitler himself.

Goebbels turned the art of propaganda into a science, whipping the German people into line with cagey sophistication, employing both carrot and stick to bend the populace to the will of the Nazi government. He sought to create pride and unite Germans living outside Germany, invoking imagery of a Greater Germany made up of a *herrenvolk*, or master race; he oversaw the creation of anti-Jewish films purporting for instance that Jews sacrifice Christian children for Passover; and his ministry relentlessly whipped up anti-Poland sentiment in the weeks before the Nazis invaded, claiming the Poles had been ethnically cleansing Germans living in Poland.

And his legacy is still with us today. There isn't a government in the world that doesn't implement the principles Goebbels explicated in controlling the minds of the German people, none more so than modern Russia.

Consider for example a few items from a 15-point checklist compiled by Russian novelist and commentator Elizaveta Aleksandrova-Zorina outlining the ways Putin uses propaganda, and think about what we know about how Goebbels' Nazi propaganda machine worked in the name of the Fatherland. From **Aleksandrova-Zorina's** analysis of Putin's methodology:

- A black and white division of the world into “ours” and the “alien” other;
- Epithets that imply more than they describe;
- Constant assertions that those supporting Putin not only are numerous but united (results of manipulated and flawed polls are frequently used to support such assertions);
- Playing games with cause and effect, often reversing their true order;
- Confusing the part and the whole by focusing on only one part of something, for instance focusing on liberals within the opposition.

The similarities are eerie.

But the fact that a dictator—and lest we forget, former spy-like Putin would use Nazi-tested propaganda methods to control the populace of his own country should surprise no one. Next we look at how Putin uses different methodology to control the narrative on both the domestic and international front, and how it fits in with fake news.

## Fake news

The latest iteration of propaganda is of course known as “fake news.” This troublesome, now-ubiquitous phrase has slithered its way onto the forefront of the national conversation, morphing in the face of the gaping maw of the 24/7 news hole to mean pretty much whatever the speaker wants it to mean.

For instance, President Trump has a tendency to shout the phrase without further explanation when confronted with facts that contradict his beliefs, as if it were a child's mantra or a talisman to scare away the monster of dissent.

And Democratic Party establishment insiders are no better. They were equally quick to invoke the demon of fake news following their stunning defeat in November. They almost immediately and without a shred of evidence hitched their wagon to the fake news train, claiming “the Russians did it” when questioned about their astounding loss.

The Dem establishment found it much more comforting to believe that their anointed candidate Hillary Clinton, one of the most hated candidates in American history, lost an election despite overwhelming advantages in money, experience, and connections, all due to the planting of fake news stories, Russian hacking of and exposing their internal emails, and other leaks.

Forget about the multitude of shortcomings in the candidate herself, or the way the party poo-bahs undemocratically locked out any dissent from the Bernie Sanders camp that was even remotely critical of their big Wall Street donors, or even the sheer ineptitude of the campaign—no sir, the Russians did it, *ipso facto*.

As **Alexey Kovalev**, a Russian journalist who created a project to fight Russian government propaganda said, “The fight against fake news has itself turned into fake news. It’s a kind of meta-propaganda.”

That isn’t to say that Russian propaganda was a non-factor in the election; it clearly was in the mix. But it should not be lost on astute observers that this sudden interest in what tricks the Russians may or may not be up to has emerged in the wake of what was a decidedly weird election, one that shook the establishment to the core on both sides of the aisle.

And there are people using our justified fear of the Russia connection dishonestly to serve their own agenda.

Understand: this is a problem precisely because the threat of Russian propaganda infiltrating the U.S. political dialogue is so very serious; for these people to cavalierly use something so dire to protect their little fiefdoms is frankly obscene.

We need to be clear about what fake news and propaganda actually are, and try to blow away the smokescreen that obscures a clear view of the enormity of what we’re actually grappling with in terms of Russian propaganda.

One example of this smokescreen is the PropOrNot scandal, in which a shadowy, unvetted group of anonymous “experts” was launched into the national spotlight from the pages of the Washington Post. They claimed that they had uncovered hundreds of U.S. media outlets that were guilty of disseminating Russian propaganda on some 213 million occasions.

The group failed to share its methodology for arriving at that number—or even the names or credentials of anyone who worked there. But they did not hesitate to attempt to smear hundreds of well-respected publications across the political spectrum, left, libertarian and right, lumping in venerated entities like CounterPunch, the Ron Paul Institute, and the Drudge Report with actual Russian propagandists on the Kremlin’s payroll like Russia Today and Sputnik.

It didn’t help the PropOrNot case that their definition of “spreading Russian propaganda” seemed to include pretty much anything that runs counter to the accepted neo-liberal, globalist narrative that dominates the halls of Congress, corporate boardrooms, and the national airwaves.

Nonetheless, the Post gave them a huge bullhorn from which to trumpet their theories, with nary a fact-checker in sight. They were thus allowed to muddy the waters further at an already confusing time.

All told, the PropOrNot debacle was an especially clumsy attempt to control the narrative—a damaging one, to be sure, but clumsy in the end, not terribly sophisticated, and relatively easy to rectify after the fact.

When it comes to actual Russian propaganda, we aren’t so lucky.

## Russian Propaganda

Here's the thing about Russian propaganda: they are very, very good at what they do. The Russian book of dirty tricks has surely only expanded and been brought to new depths of depravity under ex-KGB honcho Vladimir Putin. The people implementing the dirty tricks in play these days are not afraid to stoop to levels of dishonesty and incitement that are truly disturbing.

Say what you will about the mystery clown car of supposed experts working at PropOrNot, timorous and fearful to even show their faces or put their names on their work: any damage they might have done a few months ago was largely damage to people's and publications' reputations.

Not so when it comes to the Russians. They are bold, fearless, and unafraid to say anything no matter how sick or potentially damaging it may be, if they think it will serve their agenda. That's why we need to make it crystal clear what we mean when we reference actual Russian propaganda: lives are at stake.

For an idea of the framework in which the Russian propagandists are working, here are a few brief examples of known propaganda actions they have perpetrated on their own people at home and in territories they control.

- **Fake Crucifixion in Donetsk Oblast** - After Ukrainian forces retook a strategic area during the Crimean fighting was at its peak in 2014, Russian propagandists aired a horrific fake story about Ukrainian troops crucifying a young boy there.
- **Other crucifixion stories** - Seeming to like the sound of that, subsequent propaganda from Russian sources claimed that in another incident the Ukrainian troops crucified a Russian fighter along with a naked girl, and slaughtered 30 people in eastern Ukraine.
- **Russia claims Ukraine burned pro-Russian riot police alive** - Not satisfied with the Christ-like images of young children being nailed up, the Russians next planted a story claiming that two Russians were burned alive after refusing to recognize the current Ukrainian government.

The list goes on and on, far too long to cite all the examples here of these widely debunked stories, stories that have Putin's fingerprints all over them. But suffice to say, even this brief list should surely illustrate the type of dangerous game Putin and his allies are playing here: these are stories sure to incite some people to hatred, perhaps even to violence.

And it is of the utmost importance to keep in mind just who we are dealing with here. Consider a recent story from the [BBC on the European Court of Human Rights'](#) ruling on what has been termed the Beslan Massacre. In 2004 when Putin was attempting to put down the Chechen uprising, a group of about 1000 hostages was taken at a school in Beslan in the North Caucasus region of Russia, also known as North Ossetia.

Russian forces eventually overwhelmed them and crushed the uprising, but in the process 330 innocents were killed, including 186 children.

What the European Court has found is that Russia did nothing or at the very least did far too little to protect the lives of the hostages, and that they were negligent in the way they conducted the operation.

What's more, the court has found that the Russians knew the attack was imminent, but did nothing to prevent it, nor to protect the civilians there.

Regardless of what kind of happy face the Russian propaganda artists try to paint on their dear leader for foreign consumption, no matter how reasonable they try to make him sound, these are clearly the acts of a monster.

And as the Russian propaganda machine rolls on into the internet age, reaching a younger and younger domestic audience for a fraction of the costs of broadcasting, you can be certain that the same types of tricks are being played on foreign audiences, especially in the U.S.

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These are dangerous times. We have reached a precarious pass when it comes to not only the survival of democracy, but also the survival of the very truth itself as objective, knowable, and universal. And the Russian propaganda machine is hard at work 24 hours a day to continue throwing sand in the eyes of the world.

But there is hope. The first step toward fighting an enemy is understanding him. Perhaps armed with this knowledge we will be better equipped to face the Russian propaganda threat with a clear head and open eyes.

Indeed, there is real danger here, as we have seen.

But wouldn't you rather know the wolf is tracking you, rather than continuing blithely down the forest path unaware?

Knowing his ways, we can put him on notice: we are watching you.

And we will not be fooled.

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