

CHAPTER 8

“Fake News”: The Trojan Horse for Silencing Alternative News and Reestablishing Corporate News Dominance

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. . . the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country. —Hermann Göring¹

Throughout living memory, the US public has been kept in a constant state of panic and fear by politicians and the corporate media who serve as their stenographers. For much of the second half of the 20th century the bogeyman of choice was the Cold War–era Soviet Union. Under the cover of having to keep the communists at bay, the United States perpetrated dozens of atrocities, including colonial and imperial wars of aggression, the assassination of political leaders, violent coups, acts of sabotage, and the suffocation of leftist movements both domestically and abroad. Then, once the Soviet threat had lost most of its fear value, we were instructed to fear and loathe the omnipresence of Islamic terrorism. Once again, the US government was free to commit any atrocity it desired, including the assassination of its own citizens, under the pretext of protecting the “homeland”² from this external, existential threat.

Compared to how long Soviet Russia was purported to represent an existential menace, the diminishing returns of Islamic terrorism as a threat became clear relatively quickly. Before we knew it, America needed a new enemy. A new, preferably already familiar enemy that would

suit the current imperial ambitions and geopolitical strategy of the ruling elites. Enter, stage right, the Russians, with their former Cold War KGB man, President Vladimir Putin. The incessant contemporary corporate news drumbeat of anti-Russian hysteria is matched only by the merciless repetition of the assorted variants of the words “communism” and “terrorism” that preceded it. The Russians, the corporate media would have one believe, are hidden under every rock and within every crevice, ready to inflict malicious harm upon the world’s body politic. On US-focused online political discussion forums, particularly Reddit, levels of paranoia and hysteria may even have exceeded those of the Cold War, with countless accusations against out-of-favor account-holders of being secret “Russian bots” programmed to subvert discourse and sow discord. The unevidenced postulation of a small number of secret “Russian bots” subverting democracy in the world’s most powerful state has been repeated uncritically in corporate news media as well.³

In the United States for the last several years the Russians and Putin have been the focus of intense criticism and unyielding rebuke. The alleged crimes—by which we mean unproven rumors at best and gross distortions of reality at worst—that the Russian government has been accused of include imperialist aspirations, annexing Crimea by force,⁴ downing Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17,⁵ poisoning the Skripals in the United Kingdom,⁶ poisoning Hillary Clinton,⁷ planting spy Maria Butina in the United States,⁸ militarily aiding despotic governments,⁹ promoting Brexit,¹⁰ hacking voting systems in 21 US states,¹¹ and hacking the electrical grids of the state of Vermont and Ontario, Canada.¹² They have even been accused of training whales that have been “harassing” the fishermen of a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally, Norway.¹³

The most scandalous and unforgivable crime the Russians are alleged to have committed, however, involves colluding with Donald Trump to subvert the 2016 US presidential election in Trump's favor—the conspiracy theory known as “Russiagate.” Almost immediately after the 2016 election, rumors, innuendo, and accusations about Russian hacking and collusion proliferated to explain the Democrats' loss.¹⁴ Thus began the narrative the corporate media has been trumpeting incessantly ever since, which they continuously rehash to instill distress and abhorrence in the public mind about our relentless foes, the Russians. The US government, for its part, has brought the heads of social media before congressional committees, publicly excoriating them for permitting this political non-event to happen.¹⁵

As of this writing Russiagate has hit a brick wall, with Robert Mueller's investigation revealing that there was no collusion between the Trump campaign and the Russians to subvert the election.¹⁶ This collusion claim therefore certainly qualifies as an unwarranted conspiracy theory: “a proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of persons—the conspirators—acting in secret.”¹⁷ Yet it is rarely described as such by corporate media, since its main purveyors have been that very same corporate media. Despite Mueller's findings, much of the public remains largely convinced that the Russians, via a purportedly Kremlin-backed troll farm called “the Internet Research Agency” (IRA) located in St. Petersburg, tilted the election to Trump's advantage. In the name of aggressively eliminating a nonexistent Russiagate fake news threat, the social media giants, major tech firms, corporate news media outlets, and the US government through its affiliated organizations have collaborated to aggressively eliminate legitimate and trustworthy, alternative, and independent news media online.¹⁸ The public is naturally being fed the line that this targeted

harassment and persecution is undertaken for the sole purpose of safeguarding freedom and democracy against those who wish to cause us harm. As history has demonstrated, maleficent behavior by those holding power is most easily committed under the guise of protecting the nation against supposed evildoers.

Before delving into the actors and methods behind this recent campaign to censor the alternative and independent press in the United States, it would be beneficial to first dispel the belief that the IRA had any discernable effect on the outcome of the US election. The IRA bought \$100,000 worth of Facebook ads. Of that, \$46,000 was spent before the election, while the remainder was spent after the election.¹⁹ According to Facebook, 25 percent of the ads “were never shown to anyone.”²⁰ And just because they were displayed does not mean they were ever viewed, as Facebook users only read about 10 percent of the content in their newsfeeds.²¹ Russian ads amounted to .0004 percent of total content on Facebook and represented only one of 23,000 Facebook newsfeed posts.²² Over a two-year period, between 2015 and 2017, Facebook logged 33 trillion posts; the IRA generated 80,000 of them.²³ Putting that into further perspective, this means that IRA posts on Facebook amounted to a miniscule “.0000000024 of total Facebook content in that time.”²⁴ Facebook’s total content for those two years was “413 million times more than the 80,000 posts” from the IRA.²⁵ Russian-linked tweets amounted to .74 percent of Twitter’s election-related traffic.²⁶ Twitter has confirmed that 200 accounts were linked with “Russian interference” out of their 328 million accounts.²⁷ Russian Twitter accounts made up at most .02 percent of tweets related to the election.²⁸ Google has reported a total of \$4,700 from “Russian-linked ad spending.”²⁹ To put the amount of money spent by the IRA into perspective, consider the fact that the Trump and Clinton campaigns spent \$81 million on

Facebook ads alone.³⁰ The IRA spent .05 percent as much.³¹ In total, \$6.5 billion was spent on the 2016 elections,³² with \$2.4 billion on the presidential election alone.³³ Facebook's total revenue for 2016 was more than \$27 billion.³⁴

Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of Russian ads had nothing to do with the election and many did not favor one candidate over another.³⁵ A Senate-commissioned study of the ads reported that, of the total content published on social media by the IRA, only 11 percent was election-related, and an even smaller proportion, 7 percent of their Facebook posts and 6 percent of their tweets, mentioned either of the two presidential candidates by name.³⁶ Regarding the IRA's content, Facebook vice president of ads Rob Goldman stated that "swaying the election was *NOT* the main goal."³⁷ The ads were amateurish, inept, and oftentimes absurd in nature.³⁸ Award-winning author, Russian dissident, and longtime critic of Vladimir Putin, Masha Gessen, commented that the posts were "not sophisticated," and that, written in "sub-literate English," they were "truly absurd" and "caricatures of American political propaganda."³⁹ Many experts and researchers concur that the IRA's efforts as well as fake news media overall had little impact on those exposed to it and likely had no effect on the outcome of the election.

It is also important to note that no proof has been provided of Russian government involvement in any fake news electioneering. Even the strongest statements in corporate media merely claim without evidence that the owner of the "troll farm" responsible for most of the Facebook ads is an "ally" of Putin; for instance, the *New York Times* reported that the "Internet Research Agency [is] owned by a businessman, Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, who is a close ally of President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia."⁴⁰ One would hope that if the Russian government had indeed been involved, they would have been able to conduct a more sophisticated and

professional operation, given the implicit respect bestowed upon their intelligence agencies by the US government.

Considering that the Russian-based fake news and disinformation campaign has been roundly debunked insofar as having any notable or measurable effect on the US election, we argue that the fake news hysteria created by those in government and echoed by the corporate news media is being harnessed and used as a pretext for the suppression of dissent and counterhegemonic viewpoints while re-establishing the corporate press's pre-eminence as the sole purveyor and manufacturer of public opinion.⁴¹

The following section will examine the actors involved in these attacks on free speech, as well as their methods of maligning, suppressing, and censoring alternative news online. Next, we will focus on the ways that government-funded organizations, the corporate press, social media giants, and tech firms are working hand in hand to reinvigorate and rebuild public fealty to sources of establishment news and information. To conclude the chapter, we will examine why this effort is being undertaken and who stands to gain and lose by it.

The Censors

[There is] a rapidly growing landscape of censorship of news critical of American corporate and political leaders who are trying to defend themselves from an increasingly angry population. It's a story as old as civilization: a wealthy and powerful elite fending off popular unrest by trying to contain knowledge of how the insiders gain at the others' expense, at home and abroad —Joe Lauria⁴²

One of the first salvos fired against the alternative press was a concerted effort by the *Washington Post* and the website PropOrNot, in the form of an article authored by Craig Timberg, titled “Russian Propaganda Effort Helped Spread ‘Fake News’ during Election, Experts Say.”⁴³ The primary “experts” cited in the article are associated with PropOrNot. However, those purported experts spoke on condition of anonymity and did not provide a methodology for arriving at any of their claims, including the spectacular assertion that Russian disinformation on Facebook was viewed more than 213 million times by an unsuspecting public. *The Washington Post* published and stood by the article despite the glaring shortcomings of PropOrNot’s credibility. PropOrNot had only come into existence a few months prior to the article’s publication, and had demonstrated an amateurish and unprofessional, taunting style of messaging via social media. The most problematic aspect of the article was the promotion of PropOrNot’s McCarthyite blacklist of web-based news outlets that they claim are “routine peddlers of Russian propaganda,” either knowingly spreading Russian propaganda or serving as “useful idiots.”⁴⁴ Included among the news sources blacklisted by PropOrNot are such well-regarded and award-winning alternative news websites as Black Agenda Report, Consortium News, *CounterPunch*, Naked Capitalism, Truthdig, Truthout, and WikiLeaks. Not satisfied with merely creating a blacklist that was widely disseminated and endorsed by the corporate media, PropOrNot has called upon the government to investigate these alternative news websites for espionage, and developed a web browser plugin that flags these websites as Russian propaganda.

PropOrNot provided no substantiating evidence as rationale for including any particular websites on their blacklist, yet this libelous behavior was apparently acceptable to the editors at the *Washington Post*, including the executive editor Marty Baron, who tweeted in support of

Timberg's article, while later stating he did not endorse PropOrNot as an organization.⁴⁵

PropOrNot recommends establishment mouthpieces such as the BBC, the *New York Times*, NPR, and the *Wall Street Journal*, but blacklists Russian government-funded news sources RT and Sputnik as sources of Russian propaganda. Say what one will of RT, there are clearly no grounds to consider them less credible than any state-funded news organization, including the British government-funded BBC. Indeed, the BBC's long record of serving as a peddler of biased news in the interests of Western economic and political elites makes them an unlikely candidate for commendation in the fight against spreading propaganda.⁴⁶

Given PropOrNot's unsubtle alignment with the interests of NATO, it would seem their guiding principle in defaming the alternative press is to silence those who question US foreign policy and Western hegemony more generally. Toward that end, it should come as no surprise that one of the other "experts" cited in the *Washington Post* article is Clint Watts. Watts is a former FBI special agent on the Joint Terrorism Task Force and has been heavily involved in US intelligence and the security apparatus.⁴⁷ He provided key "expert" witness testimony to a Senate Intelligence Committee on Russian interference in the 2016 US elections.⁴⁸ He is currently a fellow at the hawkish, conservative think tank Foreign Policy Research Institute,⁴⁹ and has written prolifically to help promote the false Russiagate narrative.⁵⁰

In October 2018, after Facebook conducted a massive purge of pages on its platform, some of which were listed on PropOrNot's blacklist, PropOrNot ominously tweeted, "All of these are cross platform & have websites, but one thing at a time."⁵¹ While not as unsubtle as PropOrNot, tech giant Google has created a blacklist of its own, though theirs is algorithmic. In April 2017, as part of an initiative called Project Owl, Google changed its search algorithm in an

effort to fight fake news and “surface more authoritative content.”⁵² This was justified on a blogpost by Ben Gomes, now head of search at Google, where he argued that the changes were in response to the problem of fake news, “where content on the web has contributed to the spread of blatantly misleading, low quality, offensive or downright false information.”⁵³ He claims that Google intends to “provide people with access to relevant information from the most reliable sources available.”⁵⁴ To help with this effort, Google has contracted more than 10,000 “search quality” raters whose job it is to flag content that, in Gomes’s words, includes “misleading information, unexpected offensive results, hoaxes and unsupported conspiracy theories.”⁵⁵ The work done by these search quality raters is then used, in turn, to improve the Google search algorithm’s ability to more efficiently and automatically demote “such low-quality content and help us to make additional improvements over time.”⁵⁶

Google accounts for 90 percent of searches conducted on the internet. Any changes they make to their algorithm will have drastic consequences regarding information to which the public is privy. The effects of Google’s algorithmic changes make it clear that the sources it considers unauthoritative, unreliable, and misleading are frequently also critical of, and challenge, the status quo. Since their changes were implemented in April 2017, there has been a precipitous decline in traffic for many of the internet’s most respected, popular, and trusted sources of independent and alternative news sources, including Common Dreams, Consortium News, *CounterPunch*, *Democracy Now!*, Global Research, Media Matters for America, MintPress News, Truthout, WikiLeaks, and the World Socialist Web Site.⁵⁷ It is also worth noting that Microsoft’s web browser, Bing, has implemented similar changes to its algorithms.⁵⁸

In May 2019 a number of right-wing alternative news pundits were outright banned from Facebook, under the rationale of controlling “hate speech,” and many on the Left applauded such measures, given the frequently offensive statements coming from the now-banned pundits.⁵⁹ However, such censorship can prove to be a dangerous, slippery slope, and should be resisted by the Left; the giant tech firms’ sudden commitment to selectively persecuting offensive content might simply be an excuse to test the waters for further censorship, beginning by erasing content that most of the public disagrees with in the first place. Those applauding such Orwellian disappearance measures may very well find themselves on the receiving end of them in the future, once regulations are embedded and accepted as the norm.

An internal Google document leaked to the public, titled “The Good Censor,” makes unequivocally clear the tech industry’s new stance on the control of information.⁶⁰ The document acknowledges that Google, Facebook, and Twitter “now control the majority of our online conversations” and that they are all moving “away from unmediated free speech and towards censorship and moderation.”⁶¹ There are a litany of excuses given for this unacceptable move toward censorship, which include the threat of fake news disseminated by “Russian-based entities” and “Russian involvement” during the 2016 election campaign; tech users’ bad behavior, as Google claims that “human beings en masse don’t behave very well”; and the need to “monetize content through its organization,” “increase revenues,” and “protect advertisers from controversial content.”⁶² Google frames free speech as a “utopian” ideal, arguing that it is better for us to be presented with content from authoritative sources, because “rational debate is damaged when authoritative voices and ‘have a go’ commentators receive equal weighting.”⁶³ Google tells us that, in response to the spread of misinformation and fake news, the public is

“turning to [corporate] mainstream media outlets for trustworthy information.” In Google’s implicitly stated estimation, those trustworthy outlets are “*The New Yorker, New York Times, Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal and the Guardian.*”⁶⁴ In the leaked document, Google frames itself as the unsolicited and unelected guardian of the public’s best interests, arguing in essence that the rabble must be protected from its own irrationality and from treacherous foreign actors.

Social media giants Facebook and Twitter have likewise taken drastic measures to combat the supposed Russian scourge of misinformation. Facebook has partnered with a number of organizations to help purge so-called fake news from its platform. Among them are the Atlantic Council, the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the National Democratic Institute (NDI).⁶⁵ Twitter has also partnered with the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab and the NDI.⁶⁶

The Atlantic Council is, essentially, an arm of NATO.⁶⁷ It is funded by NATO, the US and UK governments, the European Union, major weapons manufacturers, the military, conservative think tanks such as the Charles Koch Institute and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), international banks, Google, Facebook, and Microsoft.⁶⁸ On its board of directors and advisory board sit a great many right-wing or Far-Right establishment characters, including Brent Scowcroft, Michael Chertoff, Condoleezza Rice, Michael Hayden, Madeleine Albright, and Henry Kissinger.⁶⁹ The Atlantic Council has published work by John T. Watts in which he argues that the invention of the printing press brought about centuries of “conflict and disruption,” and that the “invention of the internet” is having much the same effect.⁷⁰ He also suggests that online news organizations

should disable their systems that allow user comments, thereby preventing the public from sharing their views with each other about particular news items.⁷¹

The IRI and NDI are both offshoots of the NED. The NED was created during the Reagan administration with the explicit purpose of spreading US government propaganda and interfering with the affairs of other countries.⁷² On the board of the NED sit Victoria Nuland and Elliott Abrams, both known for their interventionist policies that have wreaked havoc on foreign populations from Ukraine to Nicaragua.⁷³ The board of the IRI includes senators Marco Rubio and Lindsey Graham, virulent supporters of foreign meddling, with the former playing a vanguard role in the attempted coup and propaganda efforts currently directed at Venezuela.⁷⁴ The IRI's former chairman was the now-deceased senator John McCain, who seemingly wanted to bomb half the globe, and who once cheerily sang into a microphone, "It's that old Beach Boys song, 'Bomb Iran? Bomb bomb bomb...'"⁷⁵ The NDI's current chairperson is Madeleine Albright, who, as secretary of state under president Bill Clinton, was questioned by CBS journalist Lesley Stahl about the deaths of 500,000 Iraqi children caused by US sanctions, and notoriously responded, "we think the price is worth it."⁷⁶

Facebook's third-party fact-checkers include Check Your Fact and PolitiFact, and it previously partnered with the now-defunct and unabashedly neoconservative publication the *Weekly Standard*.⁷⁷ Check Your Fact is wholly owned by the Daily Caller, a right-wing news organization cofounded by Fox News host Tucker Carlson.⁷⁸ The Daily Caller has regularly published false news, offensive content, and propaganda.⁷⁹ Facebook censored an article by ThinkProgress after the *Weekly Standard* declared it to be fake news.⁸⁰ The ThinkProgress article was widely defended as accurate, leading to the speculation that it was censored simply because

of the *Weekly Standard*'s political orientation.⁸¹ Like the Daily Caller, the *Weekly Standard* had been known to publish falsehoods.⁸² For instance, the *Weekly Standard* was instrumental in selling the Bush regime's lie that Saddam Hussein was connected to Al Qaeda, helping to pave the way for war with Iraq.⁸³ And PolitiFact has been known to maintain the position that particular partisan claims are true, long after major news outlets have declared them to be false.⁸⁴

As an internal measure for combating fake news, Facebook has been hiring tens of thousands of employees as fact-checkers. These zealous censors now number more than 30,000 and make up the largest contingent of Facebook employees.⁸⁵ According to Monika Bickert, head of global policy management at Facebook, they include "former intelligence and law-enforcement officials and prosecutors who worked in the area of counterterrorism."⁸⁶ As put by Samidh Chakrabarti, product manager of civic engagement at Facebook, "We basically have some of the best intelligence analysts from around the world."⁸⁷ Those at the helm of Facebook are a veritable who's who in the revolving door between government and corporations. The head of Facebook security, Nathaniel Gleicher, was formerly Obama's National Security Council director for cybersecurity policy.⁸⁸ Additionally, Gleicher is a senior associate at the hawkish think tank the Center for Strategic and International Studies.⁸⁹ Facebook recently hired Jennifer Newstead as their general counsel.⁹⁰ Newstead was a co-author of the USA PATRIOT Act and has defended unilateral US sanctions against Iran under the Trump administration.⁹¹ Joel Kaplan, Facebook's vice president of global public policy, served as the White House deputy chief of staff for policy under George W. Bush.⁹² Kaplan has argued the Daily Caller and Breitbart should be promoted on Facebook the same way as other major news outlets.⁹³ Facebook's vice president

of global affairs and communications is former British deputy prime minister Nick Clegg, a proponent of neoliberal politics and austerity measures.⁹⁴

Other shadowy organizations that are working to censor content online include the German Marshall Fund. Jamie Fly is a senior fellow and director of the Future of Geopolitics and Asia programs at the German Marshall Fund.⁹⁵ He was the executive director of the aggressively interventionist, now defunct, Foreign Policy Initiative (FPI), whose board of directors included Bill Kristol and Robert Kagan, former founders of the Project for a New American Century.⁹⁶ Fly left the FPI to work as an advisor to US Senator Marco Rubio.⁹⁷ He has been an ardent supporter of censorship on social media platforms, appearing often in the media to express such views.⁹⁸ As he stated to Jeb Sprague, visiting faculty at the University of California, Santa Barbara, “we are just starting to push back. Just this last week Facebook began starting to take down sites. So this is just the beginning.”⁹⁹

The Alliance for Securing Democracy (ASD) is a project of the German Marshall Fund, which itself receives funding from the US government and NATO.¹⁰⁰ The ASD has been a chief instigator of anti-Russian sentiment. The ASD receives additional funding from Pierre Omidyar, the founder of eBay.¹⁰¹ Omidyar funds a number of groups and media organizations that work to influence politics and massage public perception globally, including the stoking of anti-Russian sentiment.¹⁰² The Intercept, an ostensibly anti-war, progressive publication, is primarily funded by Omidyar. Despite claims of editorial freedom and independence, the Intercept may not be the independent news outlet it purports to be, given its intimate connections to pro-war, right-wing organizations, journalistic slant, and delayed publication of a key document provided by whistleblower Edward Snowden.¹⁰³ Omidyar is one of the funders of the International Fact-

Checking Network, the organization that certifies Facebook's fact-checkers such as Check Your Fact and PolitiFact.¹⁰⁴ On the "team" at ASD is Jamie Fly, as well as Laura Rosenberger, who worked for the State Department and the White House's National Security Council.¹⁰⁵ ASD's advisory council includes Michael Chertoff, Bill Kristol, John Podesta, and Michael Morell, as well as former intelligence officers and State Department officials.¹⁰⁶ ASD is responsible for creating the Hamilton 68 Dashboard, for which Omidyar provided funding.¹⁰⁷ The Hamilton 68 Dashboard, currently offline and awaiting the "new and improved" 2.0 version, is a tool that serves to make the public aware of social media accounts and websites that purportedly peddle Russian disinformation.¹⁰⁸ Its lack of usefulness and accuracy has led to disavowal of the service by some of those behind it, as well as calls of "bullshit" by some commentators.¹⁰⁹ New Knowledge is linked to the Hamilton 68 Dashboard by way of Jonathon Morgan, who is the CEO of New Knowledge as well as a co-creator of Hamilton 68.¹¹⁰ Morgan was responsible for creating an army of fake Russian bots to help elect Democratic candidate Doug Jones in Alabama's 2017 Senate race.¹¹¹

Finally, there is FireEye, a cybersecurity firm that has received funds from In-Q-Tel, an investment arm of the CIA, and through its leadership has ties to military partners and weapons manufacturers such as Lockheed Martin, Mandiant, and Aegis Research Corporation.¹¹² Its CEO, Kevin Mandia, has testified to Congress about the alleged Russian disinformation campaign during the 2016 presidential election.¹¹³ FireEye published a report on the topic shortly thereafter.¹¹⁴ Christopher Porter, their chief intelligence strategist, is also a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council.¹¹⁵

So how has all this fake news and election interference hype played out in practice on the social media and tech giants' platforms? They have been engaging in a brazen, wholesale process of censorship via deplatforming and de-ranking of dissident, counterhegemonic, and alternative media voices, from the libertarian Right to the anarchist Left. This has often been conducted under the amorphous and nebulous accusation of “coordinated inauthentic behavior,” or sometimes with no rationale given at all, with no follow-up provided to those individuals and groups who have been disappeared.¹¹⁶ The following is just a sampling of censorship activity carried out by the tech and social media giants:

- On October 11, 2018, more than 800 accounts were deplatformed on Facebook and Twitter. Included in this purge were Anti-Media, Cop Block, Counter Current News, Filming Cops, the Free Thought Project, Police the Police, and RT America correspondent Rachel Blevins. Twitter simultaneously suspended many of the accounts of these pages and their editors. The combined following of the pages purged was in the tens of millions. The focus of the content in these purged accounts was opposition to police brutality and war, with criticism of US domestic and foreign policy.¹¹⁷
- On October 1, 2018, Twitter banned the posting of hacked materials to its site.¹¹⁸ This includes materials brought to public attention by whistleblowers.
- Instagram, a subsidiary of Facebook, suspended the accounts of several Iranian government officials, including the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.¹¹⁹

- Days before the Spanish general election, Facebook-owned WhatsApp shut down the channel of Podemos, one of Spain's leftist political parties. The channel had 50,000 members.¹²⁰
- Iranian government-funded TV news channels Press TV and Spanish-language HispanTV were disabled without warning on Google platforms, including YouTube and Gmail.¹²¹
- Following a day of tweets urging global support for her son and in defense of free speech, Julian Assange's mother had her Twitter account suspended. Twitter provided no explanation to Christine Assange for its actions.¹²²
- Twitter suspended the accounts of the Venezuelan Consulate in Vancouver, Canada, the Venezuelan Ministry of Popular Power for Women, the Ministry of Popular Power for Education, and the Ministry of Popular Power for Petroleum, as well as the accounts of Venezuelan media outlets *El Correo del Orinoco*, *Diario Vea*, and ViVe Televisión. Meanwhile, Twitter verified the account of Juan Guaidó, self-anointed president of Venezuela and leader of a US-organized and -funded coup.¹²³
- Twice in 2018, Facebook shut down the page of respected Venezuelan news outlet teleSUR English.¹²⁴ Each time, its account was only reinstated after public outcry.
- On August 9, 2018, Venezuelanalysis, an independent, reader-supported news website endorsed by figures such as Noam Chomsky and John Pilger, had its account removed by Facebook. The account was restored after public outcry.¹²⁵
- Thousands of accounts in support of Nicolás Maduro, the democratically elected president of Venezuela, have been banned by Twitter.¹²⁶

- On February 15, 2019, Facebook deplatformed the pages for BackThen, In the Now, Soapbox, and Waste-Ed, all produced by Maffick Media. This was done after CNN ran a report on Maffick Media that was instigated by the Alliance for Securing Democracy.¹²⁷
- Facebook, in coordination with the Israeli and US governments, has shut down the accounts of prominent Palestinian political parties, activists, and news organizations.¹²⁸
- YouTube, a Google subsidiary, has been censoring content it deems “controversial,” including work produced by Abby Martin, a respected and prolific journalist and presenter.¹²⁹
- Facebook removed ads placed on its platform by US presidential hopeful Elizabeth Warren that called for the break-up of big tech companies.¹³⁰
- On the same day that Julian Assange was arrested, Facebook removed the page of Rafael Correa, the former president of Ecuador. In 2012, Correa had granted Assange asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in London.¹³¹
- Facebook, Twitter, and Google have removed hundreds of accounts, pages, and channels based upon information provided to them by FireEye. Many of the accounts were left-wing and held views critical of the United States and its Middle Eastern allies.¹³²

Many accounts and pages have often been banned simultaneously by different giant tech platforms—for example, the profiles, shows, and channels of Alex Jones. In August 2018 Jones was removed from Facebook, Apple, Spotify, and YouTube within the same week.¹³³ This has led to speculation that the social media giants are working in concert with one another.

A recent operation by the name of “NewsGuard” has emerged that resembles PropOrNot in its intentions and aims, though with more sophisticated, subtle, and potentially nefarious tactics. NewsGuard bills itself as a company that can solve the woes of the social media giants and the unsuspecting public by alerting us to fake news and misinformation. They have gone as far as embedding themselves in academic conferences, promoting their services as a tool for critical media literacy educators.¹³⁴ Their product is a web browser plugin that alerts the reader, via a color-coded rating system, as to the veracity and trustworthiness of online news sources. A green icon is a trustworthy site, whereas a red icon is untrustworthy.¹³⁵ They are striving for their app to be integrated into social media platforms, and to run by default on all computers and phones, whether public or private, in the United States and Europe.¹³⁶ The app is already standard on the Microsoft Edge phone browser, and Microsoft has agreed to include the app on future products, such as, potentially, the Windows 10 operating system.¹³⁷ Hawaii is using NewsGuard in all its public libraries across the state.¹³⁸

But who are the people behind NewsGuard? Some of the very same characters who have already been mentioned in this chapter, of course. On the advisory board for NewsGuard sit Michael Hayden, Tom Ridge, and Richard Stengel.¹³⁹ Michael Hayden is the former director of the National Security Agency, and during his tenure he vigorously defended the agency’s illegal spying on Americans.¹⁴⁰ He is also former head of the CIA, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and a principal at the Chertoff Group,¹⁴¹ the security firm run by Michael Chertoff, the former US secretary of homeland security and coauthor of the USA PATRIOT Act.¹⁴² Both Chertoff and Hayden sit on the board of the Atlantic Council.¹⁴³ Tom Ridge, the first secretary of homeland security, is famous for his color-coded terror alert system which helped keep

Americans in a compliant state of fear.¹⁴⁴ It's not surprising that NewsGuard uses a similar color-coded system. Richard Stengel is former editor of *Time* magazine, under secretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs under Obama, and currently a distinguished fellow with the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab.¹⁴⁵ Stengel declared his support for propaganda in a public forum hosted by the Council on Foreign Relations, stating nonchalantly, "My old job at the State Department was what people used to joke [call] the chief propagandist job. I'm not against propaganda, every country does it and they have to do it to their own population and I don't necessarily think it's that awful."¹⁴⁶ Finally, there is the co-CEO of NewsGuard, Louis Gordon Crovitz. Crovitz has edited and contributed to books for such neoconservative think tanks as the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation.¹⁴⁷ As a journalist, Crovitz has an appalling record of spreading misinformation and falsehoods.¹⁴⁸ These include "fantastically false claims about the origins of the internet,"¹⁴⁹ and a "misleading and error-filled column about NSA surveillance."¹⁵⁰

As with the other censorious initiatives profiled in this chapter, NewsGuard doesn't seem as concerned with eliminating fake news as it does with discrediting news sources that are critical of Western political and economic elites. For example, NewsGuard gives WikiLeaks a red rating, in part, they claim, because the organization does not correct their errors. Yet the rationale is plainly nonsensical, given the fact that WikiLeaks has never published anything false or incorrect.¹⁵¹ NewsGuard's summary for their red rating of WikiLeaks runs as follows: "A publisher of confidential documents, often acquired from leakers and hackers. WikiLeaks published hacked emails, traced to the Kremlin, that hurt Democrats ahead of the 2016 presidential election."¹⁵² They also give red rating to the Russian outlet RT and the excellent

alternative news website MintPress News. However, they give Fox News and Voice of America, the former a largely discredited organization and the latter an explicit outlet of US propaganda, green ratings. The Daily Caller and the now defunct *Weekly Standard* both also receive green ratings.

The gushing support given to NewsGuard by the corporate media is indicative of their support for this type of soft censorship, and contributes to the suspicion that initiatives like NewsGuard are specifically designed to protect and promote corporate media interests.¹⁵³

Another product by NewsGuard, BrandGuard, seems similarly ominous for producers of alternative news and dissenting content.¹⁵⁴ Companies can sign up for BrandGuard to prevent their advertisements from appearing on any of the sites that NewsGuard has flagged as red.

While many alternative news organizations rely on direct reader and listener support rather than advertising, outlets that depend to any degree on advertising dollars may find important sources of revenue suddenly choked off in the wake of initiatives like BrandGuard, putting their organizations at risk.

Propping Up the Manufacturers of Consent

Censorship, deplatforming, and de-ranking counterhegemonic content and alternative news, while simultaneously promoting more “authoritative” (i.e., corporate news) content, has so far proven insufficient for the tech and social media giants. They wish to financially and ideologically reestablish the corporate press’s dominance as the manufacturers of public opinion

and consent, and as the gatekeepers of information to which the public has access, in addition to recapturing advertising profits by limiting audience access to alternative media sources.

The Google News Initiative is a partnership between Google, the *Financial Times*, Gannett, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, Stanford University, the Poynter Institute, and many other organizations.¹⁵⁵ This 300-million-dollar project aims to “stem” the tide of what these companies regard as fake news, disinformation, and misinformation and to promote “trustworthy” and “authoritative” content—essentially, themselves.¹⁵⁶ Another goal is to facilitate payment to corporate news sources that charge for content, thereby increasing their audiences and revenues.¹⁵⁷ Report for America (RFA) and Google News Lab are working in conjunction to hire more than one thousand journalists all over the United States.¹⁵⁸ The costs for employing these journalists will be shared: RFA will cover 50 percent, while newsrooms and local donors will pay 25 percent each.¹⁵⁹ Google happens to be RFA’s largest donor, making them the de facto paymaster behind this venture.¹⁶⁰ A look at the advisory board of the RFA will reveal the presence of individuals who currently hold, or previously held, positions with the Charles Koch Institute, Fox News, CBS News, ABC News, the *Wall Street Journal*, NPR, Twitter, and the *New York Times*.¹⁶¹

Not wanting to be outdone by Google, Facebook has set aside \$90 million to produce “trustworthy” and “informative” news programming in collaboration with corporate news giants Fox News, CNN, ABC News, and Univision.¹⁶² These shows, which stream on Facebook’s new “Watch” feature, includes hosts such as Anderson Cooper of CNN, Fox’s Shepard Smith, and Jorge Ramos of Univision.¹⁶³ Of these, Facebook is giving preferential treatment to Fox News, which is the only network to have a show featured on “Watch” every day of the week.¹⁶⁴

Apparently, Facebook thinks Fox News is so trustworthy that they should be featured front and center. Tellingly, advertising revenue will be shared by participating partners.¹⁶⁵

Why the Move to Reestablish Discourse Control?

While the internet has brought about a revolution in people's ability to educate themselves and others, the resulting democratic phenomenon has shaken existing establishments to their core. Google, Facebook and their Chinese equivalents, who are socially, logistically and financially integrated with existing elites, have moved to re-establish discourse control. This is not simply a corrective action. Undetectable mass social influence powered by artificial intelligence is an existential threat to humanity. —Julian Assange¹⁶⁶

Polls show that trust in corporate media and government are at all-time lows. The corporate press has lost much of its credibility and revenues in the 21st century.¹⁶⁷ Newspapers and TV broadcasters are seeing a massive decline in readership and viewers, while people of all age groups, particularly the young, increasingly turn to the internet for news.¹⁶⁸ A 2018 Gallup poll found that only 28 percent of Americans feel that corporate mainstream media work to support democracy, while the majority, 84 percent, believe news media is “critical” or “very important” to democracy.¹⁶⁹ The Pew Research Center has found that only 18 percent of Americans have “a lot” of trust in the corporate media, while 74 percent perceive them as biased.¹⁷⁰ A Harvard-Harris poll found that 65 percent of Americans believe the corporate media is generally untrustworthy.¹⁷¹ The Edelman Trust Barometer has found that overall public trust in US institutions has fallen more precipitously than in any of the 28 countries surveyed, as disaggregating for trust among the “informed public” puts the United States at the bottom of

their list.¹⁷² Pew has found that the US public's trust in government is near an all-time low, at only 17 percent.¹⁷³ The public is unambiguously tired of endless wars and has frequently demonstrated its desire to put a halt to catastrophic foreign interventions.¹⁷⁴

As the internet has grown in reach and dominance over other media forms, so has its potential as a source of diverse and democratic communication, allowing for many voices to express a multitude of opinions, concerns, and grievances. In many ways, it has become our new digital public sphere or square; however imperfect some might find it to be, it at least provides a voice to the hitherto voiceless. Through their engagement with each other on the internet, and with alternative sources of information, the public has become increasingly aware of the ways the corporate media and politicians commit acts of omission, obfuscate, distort, mislead, and sometimes tell outright lies about happenings in the world. The corporate media has at times been forced to admit its mistakes and misinformation after the alternative news media has published detailed factual accounts of events.¹⁷⁵

The public has used the internet and social media as a tool to organize themselves and act against a number of oppressive and destructive forces in the United States and around the world. 2018, for instance, witnessed a decades-high number of labor strikes in the United States, led mostly by teachers who work under deplorable conditions.¹⁷⁶ As of this writing, the Yellow Vest protests continue to rage in France. The power of the internet and of social media has been crucial to these recent movements, and the lesson has not been lost on those in the halls of power. The US Army War College has written, "The implications of social media and the rapid spread of information (and disinformation) in a highly digital city can be profound. . . Here in the United States, the release of videos showing killings by police has led to significant protests and

political movements.”¹⁷⁷ The Department of Homeland Security is currently working to compile a database of “social media influencers” that can track global news sources and social media, in real-time, and translate from more than one hundred languages, the online activities of those they might perceive as a threat.¹⁷⁸ Those in power believe that we shouldn’t be privy to police killings and other state crimes and misdeeds. These should instead be hushed, they feel, and, as much as possible, kept out of view. This is the exact same logic behind the censoring of alternative media sources that are critical of state and corporate actors.

In the minds of economic and political elites, the problem with alternative, independent, and certain foreign news sources is that they cover, *inter alia*, issues such as class struggle, inequality, racism, environmental degradation and collapse, democratic and civil liberties shortcomings, brutality and murder committed by state actors both domestically and abroad, illegal wars, war crimes, illegal surveillance, and corporate and political malfeasance in all its forms. In sum, alternative media exposes and lays bare for all to see the bankruptcy and perversions of the capitalist system and those who foist it upon us. This is not merely objectionable to those in power, it is unacceptable to them. Alternative news media serve to discredit and make illegitimate the very foundations upon which establishment authority rests alongside that authority’s methods for accumulating and maintaining vast wealth. Perhaps the most threatening developments for them are any signs that capitalism is falling out of favor with the public. Polls show that Americans, especially young adults, are increasingly disillusioned with capitalism and are turning to alternatives.¹⁷⁹ The government, corporations, and the corporate media—or we can just call them “ruling elites”—have lost their monopoly control over

the narrative and they desperately want it back by whatever undemocratic means they may find at their disposal. They are working zealously to eliminate any resistance to their rule.

Historically, the economic and political elite have used methods both overt and insidiously covert to clutch onto their position of power, and the present moment is no exception to this trend. As this chapter has demonstrated, the government and organizations funded by it, the tech and social media giants, and the corporate news conglomerates are working diligently to extinguish alternative and independent news, as well as certain international news sources' presence online. Concomitant with this are several other disturbing and related trends. The corporate media and politicians have attempted to discredit legitimate social movements such as Black Lives Matter, the Yellow Vest movement, and even progressive politicians like Tulsi Gabbard and Jill Stein as being associated in some way with Russians.¹⁸⁰ Network neutrality in the United States has been eliminated, a victory for telecommunications firms who wish to entirely privatize the internet. Meanwhile, the European Parliament has recently passed the Directive on Copyright in the Digital Single Market, which many prominent scholars, advocacy organizations, and human rights experts are saying will lead to widespread censorship.¹⁸¹

Journalists are facing increasing threats to their lives and livelihoods, and are being scapegoated and characterized as the enemy of the people for doing their jobs. Whistleblowers, instead of being celebrated for revealing the sinister machinations of our governments, are being unjustly jailed or forced into exile—consider the unwarranted charges levied against, and imprisonment of, Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange for exposing US war crimes,¹⁸² as well as Edward Snowden's forced exile for revealing the extent of surveillance being carried out illegally by the US government.¹⁸³ Worldwide we are seeing a move toward authoritarianism and

tyranny in the forms of neoliberal fascism, proto-fascism, and violent white nationalism. This constitutes a concerted and full-frontal assault against freedom of expression and our ability to resist oppression and express our dissatisfaction with the currently existing state of affairs. These retrograde and reactionary politics and forces must be confronted and defeated. Our freedom and whatever shreds of democracy still remain depend upon it.

The authors would like to acknowledge that this chapter would not have been possible without the groundbreaking journalism and research conducted by the alternative news media organizations and media watchdog groups cited herein. We encourage you to donate to them so that they may continue their excellent work.

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