**“Fake News:” “RussiaGate” as Disinformation in the Age of Social Media**

(Based on a series of 12 lectures presented April-June 2018 by Dr. Oliver Boyd-Barrett\* for the Osher program at California State University, Channel Islands in Camarillo, CA, the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, Russia, and East China Normal University in Shanghai)

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**I**

**Fake News and “RussiaGate”**

Perceptions of Western Mainstream Media

In the spring of 2018 I had the privilege to address faculty, student and public audiences in three institutions – California State University Channel Islands, Higher School of Economics in Moscow and the East China Normal University in Shanghai. The focus of my presentations concerned the concept of “fake news” and “RussiaGate” discourse (2016-2018), with reference to media coverage generally and social media in particular. Not only in the California but also in Moscow and Shanghai I discerned a distinct tendency on the part of many of my listeners to identify positively with the mainstream media of western countries, especially those of the USA and UK (quite easily available in Russia and in China through the use of VPNs) and to contrast them favorably with media of Russia and China. My intention was not to talk about the media of Russia or of China, since they are not within my area of competence. But I did surprise many in my audiences with the view that western mainstream media (and even many western “alternative” media) are not dependably “safe” sources in domains that touch on matters of great sensitivity and importance to the main centers of power, especially those with which we may associate the term “Washington Consensus” and the outlook on world affairs that this represents.

These centers of power include the political, financial, corporate, media, cultural, military, defense, intelligence and even the educational domains. And their interests are closely intertwined with issues of US and western foreign policy. Western media regularly demonstrate an inability or unwillingness to report on foreign policy and foreign interventions in a manner that is transparent, gives equal voice to all major parties, and that is comprehensive in provision of relevant context. Accuracy, too, is often in question, but as good students of propaganda readily understand, it is possible and even advisable to maintain accuracy with respect to the information that is provided even while also misinforming or misleading audiences by means of focusing on some information and perspectives while excluding others that may be equally or even more important.

A Brief History of Fake News

I shall first provide brief historical context to the notion of “fake news\*,” and relate it to older ideas of propaganda and misinformation. I note the particular and ironic twist that President Trump has brought to the debate: a person of highest Establishment status in the USA has denigrated the mainstream media for stories about him that he does not like and that he claims are untrue and/or biased. I note that Trump’s complaints - petulant, impulsive and self-serving as they often seem - have some basis in reality as many so-called “liberal” media have indeed demonstrated bias towards Trump, much as some may believe he may have brought negative coverage upon himself.

“Fake news” is nothing new and it has always been a problem; even the term "fake news" is itself a couple of hundred years' old (Jankowski 2018). The term is synonymous with many others, including "propaganda," disinformation”, "information operations," “perception management,” and “organized persuasive communication.” Macaray (2018) defines ‘fake news” as “where patently false information is intentionally presented in a phony but utterly believable ‘news media’ format in order to sway public opinion”. He illustrates the phenomenon with reference to the 1934 California gubernatorial election contest between Republican incumbent Frank Merriman and Democratic challenger Upton Sinclair. A lesser candidate was Louis B. Mayer, an immigrant from Ukraine, now one of America’s richest men, who had steered MGM to Hollywood dominance. To attack Sinclair’s popular campaign for “Ending Poverty in California”, Mayer hired moviemakers Whitaker and Baker to produce a series of faux newsreels, designed to resemble authentic newsreels and shown in California movie theaters, with which to frighten potential Sinclair voters. One newsreel showed herds of desperate hoboes emerging from box-cars, being interviewed by a faux journalist. Another showed a phony Russian declaring that he would be supporting Sinclair because Sinclair’s system worked so well in Russia.

Another classic example is the work of British spy William Stephenson who was assigned by Winston Churchill to manipulate the US into WW2 (up to 80% of Americans in 1940 opposed joining WW2). After Dunkirk, Churchill sent multi-millionaire Stephenson to the US under a false diplomatic passport. Stephenson’s businesses at that time included Shepperton Studios (movie production), and he had close ties to many leading figures in the news business. He opened a MI6 center in Rockefeller Center. This had two operational arms: British Information Service (BIS) which engaged in soft propaganda for entertainment media, including its own New Jersey radio station, and one of whose operatives, David Ogilvy, also was assistant director to George Gallup – where he skewed survey questions so as to encourage the belief that US support for war was growing faster than it really was. BIS subsidized the Overseas News Agency, a branch of Jewish Telegraph Agency which it used “to feed manufactured stories, often couched within factual material about German atrocities etc.” to the BIS-owned NJ radio station. Newspapers then picked up this news. One such story stated that the British had invented a new super-explosive for filling depth charges. It was printed on the front pages of all leading U.S. newspapers which were known to be regularly monitored by the Germans. Stephenson tried to influence US politics “sending rabble-rousers to spark fighting and riots at meetings of isolationist organizations, and providing funds to pro-interventionist organizations and candidates for political office.” From Canada, he purportedly ran a network of 3,000 agents, counter-intelligence operatives, forgers, burglars, codebreakers and killers. His team outed Alois Westrick, a German lawyer representing American corporate interests in occupied Europe and now living close to NYC where he urged American businesses to support isolationism as a way to win business in Europe after Germany victory. Westrick celebrated the French surrender on June 22, 1940, with US CEOs and promised that GB would also fall. Among many other things, Stephenson and his team forged a map purporting to show Nazi plans to occupy and reorganize South America into 5 vassal states. The map went to Hoover and to FDR, who used it as proof that Hitler planned to conquer the Americas (Simkin 2014).

These are examples of dramatic fabrications. But I shall argue that fabrication is hardly the only dimension of importance in examining the topic of “fake news.” Of equal importance are instances of news coverage that mislead audiences by focusing on only certain issues, topics, themes, sources etc. the exclusion of others that may be more significant for the construction of a thorough understanding of a given issue, where the purpose is to induce a certain point of view, attitude or behavioral change.

The Trump Version of Fake News and “RussiaGate”: Main ‘Portals” and Themes

I shall be talking about the extent to which Trump’s denunciations of what he calls “fake news” have their origin in Trump’s wholesale condemnation of the “RussiaGate” narrative, a significant part of which has to do with charges of collusion between the Russian government or figures close to it, and the 2016 US presidential election that brought Trump to power (although did not earn him the popular vote). These charges play out in three main directions:

1. Alleged Russian interference in the election, in non-transparent ways, through the Internet and social media, including the use of anonymous or falsely identified web-sites and social media pages (“bots”) and anonymous, paid-for social media commentary (“trolls”). These can be monitored, controlled and programmed by Artificial Intelligence.

2. Alleged Russian hacking of the servers and/or individual computers of the DNC and of the Chair of the DNC (John Podesta) and stealing of Hillary Clinton’s private emails, and alleged Russian – in possible collusion with members of the Trump Campaign – delivery of such hacked material to Julian Assange and WikiLeaks.

3. Alleged meetings and contacts between leaders and members of the Trump Campaign and Russian government officials or with Russians thought to have close ties to the Russian government and its President, Vladimir Putin. These allegations embrace claims that Trump was a “Russian asset” – as has been claimed by former Director of Intelligence James Clapper, a former NSA official (Sheth 2017) and by the Steele Dossier (Bensinger et al 2017).

I shall not be looking in any detail at the Special Counsel’s charges against some key Trump Campaign actors such as Michael Flynn, Rick Gates, Rob Goldstone, Constantin Kilimnik, Paul Manafort, Carter Page, or Donald Trump, Jnr., who appear to have entertained a possibly surprising array of contacts with influential Russians (though I will have something to say about George Papadopoulos). These sometimes appear “legalistic” (e.g. possible attempts to obstruct a legal investigation or to “cover up”) rather than matters of real or unusual substance related directly to the 2016 Presidential election or to “fake news.” A Nation writer, Aaron Mate, concluded that after one year of the Mueller investigation - with 5 guilty pleas, 20 indictments and over 100 charges - “what’s been revealed so far does not make a compelling brief for collusion” (Mate, 2018). At least two defendants were charged with offenses that long pre-dated the presidential campaign of 2016. Otherwise, in looking at the three main areas (above) that have formed the basis for charges against either the Trump Campaign or against the Russian government or Russian entities, I shall also focus on some related but important issues or overarching themes. These primarily have to do with:

1. The maneuvers of intelligence agencies of the USA, UK and Russia (with respect, principally, to the role of Christopher Steele and the Steele dossier; to the role of Joseph Mifsud and his relationship to George Papadopoulos; and the connections between western intelligence and companies such as Cambridge Analytica, Palentir Technologies (and their ilk), PSY (of Israel), etc. that involve the exploitation of social media data in conditions where user permission has not been sought or given, and where the sources of messages or their purpose is less than wholly transparent.

2. The culpability of social media and of private corporate interests that manipulate social media in making it possible for Third Parties to compromise the privacy information and profiles of users for the purpose of psychometric micro-targeting of persuasive messages for political, business or other advantage, but on a mass scale.

3. The evolution of “fake news” within a much broader over-arching narrative having to do ultimately with geo-political strategies of greater significance (particularly with respect to imperial struggles for influence in EurAsia), a process that also embraces various other instances of “fake news” – all of them potentially negative about Russia - such as the Skripal saga in Great Britain from March 4 2018; the alleged use of Chemical Weapons in Dhouma, Syria on April 7 2018 (and similar, previous allegations); to the newly revamped allegations of Iran’s nuclear “program” since Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA (the “Iran deal”) on May 7, 2018.

4. Exploitation of the “fake news” phenomenon for the purposes of fear-mongering, greater media regulation and censorship, and marginalization of opposition voices. I shall illustrate this with reference, among many other things, to: opposition in the UK to the official narratives about the poisoning of the Skripals in the UK; opposition to the official narrative about alleged use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Army in Dhouma, Syria; and to various developments that serve to magnify the power of social media giants such as Facebook, Google and Twitter.

The “Steele Dossier” and Intelligence Community Assessment of January 2017

The current popularity of the term “fake news” is due to the charge made by then President-elect Trump against CNN in January 2017 when he criticized the broadcast news channel for its coverage that month of the "Steele Dossier" - which was about to be published (without permission) by the online news site Buzzfeed – on the basis that, according to CNN, FBI Director James Comey had briefed Trump about the Dossier. (There is a possibility that the FBI and CNN communicated with one another about CNN’s disclosure; the likelihood of FBI leaks to the press played a role in Trump’s firing of James Comey on May 9 2017, and the later firing by Attorney General Jeff Sessions of the Deputy Director of the FBI, Andrew McCabe, on March 16 2018). The briefing occurred on January 6th, CNN reported it on January 8th, and Buzzfeed published the dossier on January 10th (see Tracy 2017 and Davis 2018).

The Steele Dossier was a report about alleged Trump connections and possible collusion with Russians, for the purpose of gaining advantage in the 2016 presidential election. The dossier was compiled by Orbis, a private investigation agency founded by a British former MI6 agent Christopher Steele (also an FBI informant, whose company Orbis has links to a Russian oligarch Oleg Deripaska - who worked with Paul Manafort, associate of Trump, in Ukraine) who at one time had worked for MI6 in Moscow (1980s) and in the early 1990s headed up the Russia desk for MI6 in London. His company was contracted to compile the report by another agency, Fusion GPS, which was, in turn, contracted by a firm of attorneys (Perkins Coie) working on behalf of the Democratic National Campaign and Hillary Clinton. The objective, clearly, was to “dig up dirt” about the Republican candidate (Trump). The report included a number of astonishing allegations, among them that Trump was some kind of “Manchurian candidate” who had been identified as a possible candidate for high office by Russian authorities for several years, and appropriately “nurtured” by them. The report identified business and personal relations between Trump and various powerful Russians - the so-called “oligarchs.”

The main allegations (as yet unproven) of the Steele Dossier were as follows (see Ewing 2018, Kessler 2018):

1) Trump had cooperated with Russian authorities for years. Russia “had been feeding Trump and his team valuable intelligence on his opponents,” including Clinton, for “several years” before 2016, and that in exchange, Trump’s team fed the Kremlin intelligence on Russian oligarchs and their families “for at least eight years.”

2) Trump was vulnerable to Russian blackmail on sexual matters.

3) There was a “conspiracy of cooperation” between Trump and Russia, managed by Trump adviser Paul Manafort, with Carter Page serving as intermediary until Manafort’s firing in August 2016, after which point Trump’s lawyer Michael Cohen played an increasingly large role in managing the “Kremlin relationship.”

4) Trump’s team knew and approved of Russian plans to deliver emails that were said to have been hacked by Russian intelligence from the servers and computers of the Democratic National Campaign and its chairman John Podesta to WikiLeaks, and offered the Russians policy concessions in exchange.

5) Trump adviser Carter Page played a key role in the conspiracy. Carter Page had “conceived and promoted” the idea that the DNC emails to WikiLeaks should be leaked during the Democratic convention, “to swing supporters of Bernie Sanders away from Hillary Clinton and across from Trump.”

6) Trump lawyer Michael Cohen played a key role in a conspiracy to cover up and limit damage arising from Manafort’s work for the regime of Viktor Yanukovych in Ukraine (deposed with US assistance in 2013) and in efforts to prevent exposure of the full details of Trump’s relationship with Russia.

Craig Murray, a former British ambassador, judged the Steele report to be ridiculous. Among other things he asked how could a small, private outfit have persuaded senior Russian spies to talk about a 5 year old “Manchurian candidate conspiracy” without the knowledge of Russian or US intelligence? Steele’s contacts seemed dated and Murray has speculated whether this may reflect the putative influence of Sergei Skripal in providing data for the dossier (Murray 2018, Keefer 2017). Former Guardian journalist Luke Harding, who reported for the paper from Moscow for several years, suggests in his book that several Russia spies were actually liquidated as a result of their talking to Steele, but he offers little by way of hard evidence and is a problematic source, given his reportedly pro-MI6 and anti-Putin record (Harding 2017, Sputnik 2017).

The Steele dossier may have been influential in the compilation of the so-called Intelligence Community Assessment, signed off by the Director for National Intelligence, James Clapper, and which was published on January 5th 2017, making some allegations similar to those of the Steele Dossier and raising concern about Russian influence in social media, and Russian hacking (Office of the Director of National Intelligence 2017, Mayer 2018). Although Buzzfeed’s publication of the Steele Dossier occurred a few days later, on January 10th, the Steele dossier or information based on parts of it had been in circulation in security circles even before Steele formally submitted the report in October 2016 (Barrett and Hamburger 2018)

The ICA report (ODNI 2017) concluded that the president of Russia, Vladimir V. Putin, personally “ordered an influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election,” and turned from seeking to “denigrate” Hillary Clinton to developing “a clear preference for President-elect Trump.” It talked of covert Russian operations, including cyberactivities and “trolling,” and accused Russian intelligence agencies of hacking the Democratic National Campaign and accessing electoral boards.

The ICA was lauded by Hillary Clinton and many mainstream media as representing the carefully researched conclusions of the entire, 17-agency US intelligence establishment, although the DNI’s director James Clapper and CIA director John Brennan testified in May that the January 2017 report voiced only the conclusions of a small team likely hand-picked by Clapper, from only three of the agencies (CIA, FBI and NSA). Technically such an “assessment” contains no guarantees of accuracy. A consensus of all 17 agencies would have involved some form of a National Intelligence Estimate (or NIE)(Parry 2017). The hand-picked group of individuals from DNI, FBI, CIA & NSA declared (with the exception of the NSA which was less convinced) “high confidence” that Putin had ordered an influence campaign aimed at the US presidential election. Yet the term “high confidence,” was qualified on p.13 of the report – which did not contain any actual evidence – as a term that “does not imply that the assessment is a fact or a certainty; such judgments might be wrong…Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that show something to be a fact” (ODNI 2017). Given what we know of the agency directors involved, we may speculate that they were appalled by indications copiously shared by Trump throughout the campaign that Trump was inclined towards peaceful relations with Russia, a policy direction seemingly at odds with the course of Washington policy concerning Russia pretty much since the accession of Vladimir Putin to the Russian Presidency in 1999. (For an early critique of the ICA, see Emanuele 2017). The ICA was rejected by the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence (HPSCI) in March 2018 (although Democrats on the committee issued a near-100 word dissenting “minority views” comment) on the grounds that any influence exerted by Russia did not specifically favor Trump. The Senate Intelligence Committee (2018) took the opposite view in its subsequent report in May, its summary report focusing on allegations that Russian hackers had breached the electoral infrastructure in as many 20 states, although no attempt was made to change voter tallies or electorate registration information. The Snowden NSA leaks in 2013 would suggest that this kind of hacking is also well within the capability and possibly the practice of the US itself.

In June 2018, the Office of the Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Justice published its report concerning the conduct of FBI investigations into whether Hillary Clinton had committed any offenses in her handling of classified material during her period as Secretary of State (Office of the Inspector General 2018). FBI Director James Comey publicly announced on July 5, 2016 that although Clinton had been “extremely careless” (a term chosen on reasoned grounds to distinguish the gravity of Clinton’s actions from “gross negligence” which would more likely have been prosecuted), no reasonable prosecutor would charge her with a criminal offense. Yet in letters to Congress on October 28 and November 6, 2016, he partly reversed this position when he announced that the FBI had reopened its investigation in the wake of the discovery of thousands of Clinton emails that possibly contained classified materials on the computer of the husband of one of Clinton’s aides and a vice-chair of Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign, Huma Abedin. The husband was Anthony Weiner, then under investigation for “sexting,” (a charge to which he pleaded guilty in May 2017).

Comey’s public announcements raised questions as to his and/or the FBI’s neutrality with respect to the presidential contest, and as to whether the FBI applied different standards to the Clinton investigation than it did to its still secret investigations into “RussiaGate.” The Justice report did unearth evidence of anti-Trump sentiment among five FBI employees involved in either or both the Clinton and the Trump investigations and, in one case, found evidence of possible willingness to obstruct the course of justice for the purpose of preventing a Trump electoral victory. The report concluded that this “raised a cloud” over the FBI investigation and FBI credibility

The FBI Director’s public statements were neither unconsidered nor senseless; nor does it seem that they were the result of political bias. Comey appeared to have substantial reasons for his decisions to act unilaterally, with little or no direct consultation either with the Attorney General, Loretta Lynch, or with the Department of Justice. But the report concluded that he violated Departmental “practice and protocol,” demonstrated “extraordinary and insubordinate” behavior, made a “serious error of judgment” and engaged in ad hoc decision-making based on personal views.”

There were other concerns. The report encountered considerable evidence of a “cultural attitude” that was permissive of unauthorized contact between FBI employees and media reporters, extending to the receipt of benefits from reporters. This raised “profound concerns.” The wife of the then assistant director (Andrew McCabe) of the FBI’s Washington Field Office had received backing from Hillary Clinton in the race for the Virginia State Senate in 2015. McCabe became Deputy Director of the FBI in February 2016 and was active in the supervision of the Clinton investigations until he recused himself on November 1, 2016. A former Assistant Attorney General who participated in Clinton-investigation communications had sought to obtain employment for his son with the Clinton campaign.

A possible reading of the confluence in early 2017 of the Intelligence Community Assessment (representing the views of the Director of National Intelligence, and the Directors of the CIA, FBI and NSA), publication of the Steele Dossier (well known by this time to the FBI, and paid for by the Democratic Campaign), and sharpening media criticism of the announcements during the campaign of FBI Director James Comey as these may have impacted (unfavorably) the Clinton campaign, was that the security establishment of the USA, with the strong backing of “liberal media,” reacting to their own surprise with the outcome of the election, were now doing all they could to discredit or to “contain” Trump, largely through the manufacture of the “RussiaGate” narrative.

“RussiaGate” as Fake News because it misrepresents the notion of “election meddling”

In January 2017 Trump derided the CNN reporting of the soon-to-be-published Steele dossier as "Fake News!" - But of course CNN was merely doing its job in its advance reporting of the publication of such significant allegations – damaging as they clearly were to the President. Whether CNN really did its job in *critiquing* the Steele Dossier and the Intelligence Community Assessment is quite another matter (see Dowling 2017).

I argue that the ensuing saga of "RussiaGate" which still rages to the present time, is itself an example of "fake news." Why? Because much of it is based on allegations which have yet to be proven, some of which are manifestly false (as I shall show), and yet which are often assumed by media to be dependable. Secondly, it is misleading. The attention that this discourse gives to "RussiaGate" suggests that the phenomenon is much more significant, unusual, and important than it really is. For example:

(1) Actual instances of Russian "collusion" and "meddling" are relatively insignificant when assessed in comparison with western-based subversion of social media by political, intelligence and commercial agencies - of which Cambridge Analytica and its parent company SCL were among the most notorious, not least because of their close association with leading figures in the Trump Campaign and, through SCL, to the intelligence, defense establishments and fossil fuel industries of both the USA and the UK. In other words, exploitation of social media data, generally without the consent of users, for the purposes of highly tailored, covert electoral propaganda has been a routine practice for the USA and some of its close allies for many years and leaves any comparable Russian efforts in the dust (Ahmed 2017, Cadwalladr 2018, Rosenberg, Confessore and Cadwalladr 2018, Dyer 2018).

(2) "RussiaGate" discourse would suggest that if one were to be really concerned about the health of democracy in the USA, one would begin with worrying about the Russians. In point of fact, I shall argue, the Russians should appear very low down on the list of preoccupations.

(3) There are many weighty challenges to the integrity of the democratic process in the USA, none of which has anything to do with Russians. Challenges include the vulnerability of voting machines to hacking –this has been demonstrated many times, and concerns related to this vulnerability has inspired many anguished articles and editorials even in the New York Times (e.g. see Zetter 2018). In the run-up to the 2018 mid-term elections, for example, millions of Americans will vote on old, hack-prone digital machines that produce no paper trail. Without a paper record, it's nearly impossible to audit the final vote tally. A *Washington Post* story in 2018 reported that 95 percent of digital security experts surveyed by The Cybersecurity 202 said that state election systems are not sufficiently protected against cyberthreats. Several experts said that state voter registration databases are particularly vulnerable and make an appealing target for attackers who want to sow confusion and undermine confidence in the voting process. “The ‘back end’ systems, used by states and counties for voter registration and counting ballots, are equally critical to election security, and these systems are often connected, directly or indirectly, to the Internet” (Hawkins 2018). The reality is that states are understaffed, underfunded, and too heavily reliant on election-system vendors securing their own systems. State balloting systems are diverse and decentralized, administered by some 3,000 counties, making it difficult for malicious actors to uniformly attack voting infrastructure on a vast scale, but there are plenty of incentives for more targeted attacks at critically important local levels (ibid).

(4) There are multiple efforts to "suppress" voting (especially by people of color): these include the striking of citizens off voting lists either because they have committed felonies or, even more outrageously, because they have names that are similar to people who have committed felonies (Palast 2017). There are many other ways in which voting is suppressed that include: reductions in the available hours of voting, refusing to allow extra time in the event of long queues of people still wanting to vote, failing to supply functioning voting machines, increasing the documents needed to establish I.D. etc. (Gumbel 2017). A Supreme Court decision in June 2018 allows for states to purge voter rolls of those who have not voted and who have not responded to requests for confirmation of address (Sherman 2018). Very recently evidence (from whistleblower Christopher Wylie) has surfaced that Cambridge Analytica, answering to senior advisor and right-wing alternative journalist Steven Bannon, helped engage in social media propaganda designed to depress the Black vote in critical “rust-belt” constituencies that might otherwise have fallen to Hillary Clinton (O’Sullivan and Griffin 2018).

(5) Of great concern is the "Citizens United" legislation passed under the administration of President Barak Obama that has virtually opened up the US political process to unlimited, anonymous "big money" from any part of the globe, often channeled through PACS or SuperPACS that are not directly linked to political parties but serve partisan goals (Biersack 2018). For the mid-term 2018 elections, overall, “dark money” groups have funded about a third of the TV ads airing in the House races and almost half of those in Senate races. Put in other terms, two out of every three ads came from an outside spending group. More than $260 million has been spent on nearly 400,000 TV ads between January 1, 2017 and May 3, 2018, on races for House, Senate and governor, according to a report by the Wesleyan Media Project and the Center for Responsive Politics. Typically, the groups are run as 501(c)(4) social welfare organizations and are not supposed to be political in nature. They also do not have to disclose their donors. They spend heavily during the long run-up to an election but only have to report their advertisements to the FEC 30 days before a primary or 60 days before the general election. And they can mention candidates and issues, running support or opposition ads. (Ambroz 2018).

(6) All this is in addition to traditional sources of lobbying from overseas interests, among them Israel, Saudi Arabia and UAE whose foreign policies are highly questionable from the standpoint of world peace yet which are known to have tried to exert influence on US elections. Pro-Israel lobbying accounted for over $4 million in 2016 (Sultan 2017).

(7) There is the problem of the gerrymandering of congressional constituencies so as to produce highly predictable electoral outcomes. The outcome of 94 percent of House races is a foregone conclusion. In 408 of the 435 House elections, one party is favored to win with chances that exceed 90 percent. The Republicans have better than a 90 percent chance of winning in 231 races and the Democrats have a better than 90 percent chance of winning in 177. It is profoundly problematic that Congress can have an approval rating of 12.9% (RCP average) yet have so many noncompetitive House races (Taylor 2014).

(8) There is low voting turnout of many sections of the electorate particularly among those of color and the poor. Only 60% of African Americans voted in the 2016 election, compared with 65% of whites (CNN 2016).

(9) The overblown fuss about Russian “meddling” in US elections farcically ignores the substantial history of US “meddling” in the elections of other countries. "RussiaGate" discourse is rarely given adequate historical context by mainstream media, so distracts attention from the substantial history of US "meddling" in other countries' elections (which I don't have the space to go into here), sometimes egregiously through invasion and occupation (as in Iraq 2003, when the pretexts for invasion was totally fabricated, and these fabrications were lapped up uncritically by mainstream media)(See Blum 2005; Privy Counsellors 2016). Dov Levin of Carnegie Mellon studied instances of foreign election meddling between 1945 and 2000 and concluded that the US responsible for 69% of the cases (Shane 2018).

In addition, there is a strong right-wing tilt of US “meddling in the elections” of other countries, and such interventions do not *only* involve unfortunate “Third World” countries such as Iran (where the CIA and MI6 deposed democratically elected prime minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953 ), Indonesia (where western intelligence contributed to the end of the Sukarno regime at the cost of a million lives in 1967) and Chile (where the CIA deposed Salvador Allende’s government in 1973) but were rampant in “allied” “First World” countries including France, Germany, Greece, Italy and Spain and, also in the UK and Australia. There is an extensive literature on all these events: Blum (2004) provides a useful summary; for instances involving a one hundred or more years of western meddling in Islamic nations or manipulation of Islamic groups, see Curtis 2012; Davidson 2016). In Greece, Blum reports that the government was virtually run by the CIA up to and during rule by the Military Junta from 1967 to 1974 (Blum 2004). Consider the (disputed) case of the conspiracy between MI5, the CIA and leading figures in the British press to unseat Labour Party prime minister Harold Wilson in the 1960s, first with a view to a military coup d’etat that would have made Lord Mountbatten - cousin of the Queen and the last viceroy of India - head of the government and, when this did not gain sufficient support, by means a sex scandal involving Wilson’s secretary Marcia Williams, later Lady Falkender, perhaps culminating in Wilson’s 1976 resignation (Moran 2013). There was a similar conspiracy (by Australian intelligence, MI6 and the CIA) to overthrow Australian Prime Minister Geoff Whitlam in 1975. As Pilger notes Whitlam “Whitlam ended his nation’s colonial servility. He abolished royal patronage, moved Australia towards the Non-Aligned Movement, supported “zones of peace” and opposed nuclear weapons testing.” He also wanted to reduce the role of the CIA and its use of Australia as a global center for CIA espionage. The CIA had infiltrated the Australian political and trade union elite and referred to the governor-general of Australia, Sir John Kerr, as “our man Kerr”.

“On 11 November – the day Whitlam was to inform parliament about the secret CIA presence in Australia – he was summoned by Kerr. Invoking archaic vice-regal “reserve powers”, Kerr sacked the democratically elected prime minister. The “Whitlam problem” was solved, and Australian politics never recovered, nor the nation its true independence” (Pilger 2014).

This “right-wing” tilt of “election meddling” continues to this day as the analysis of Cambridge Analytica (Ahmed 2017) confirms.

“RussiaGate” as the Playground for Intelligence Agencies

There are substantial indications that the discourse of "RussiaGate" and involvement in "Fake News' production has involved many intelligence agencies. It has also invited partisan coverage among media supporters of the Democratic Party (and of the pro-war military-industrial-surveillance establishment which in recent decades the Democratic Party has typically embraced – see Parry 2016) who like to pretend that "RussiaGate" is solely about Trump's "collusion" with the Russian government or Russian "oligarchs" with a view to interference in the 2016 presidential election in Trump's favor. They forget, among many other things, that the "Steele Dossier" was contracted by the DNC (Helderman, Hamburger, Uhrmacher and Muyskens, 2018). An important topic within the "RussiaGate" discourse is the alleged hacking by Russian intelligence of Clinton/DNC/Podesta emails in 2016, and Democrats including Hillary Clinton often assert that the Russian government then made these emails available to Julian Assange (which is also the view of the Steele Dossier and the ICA)(Ferguson, McGregor and Stevens 2017). What this point of view often marginalizes is evidence suggesting that the emails in question may have been leaked - not hacked - by a discontented insider, and that the leaked emails were provided to Julian Assange through this route. There has been some speculation that this insider might have been Seth Rich, a DNC employee who was gunned down on his way home on July 10, 2017 (Whitney 2017). This happened twelve days before Wikileaks’ publication of the DNC emails, but after publication by DCLeaks in June and July. According to Wikipedia, cybersecurity research firm ThreatConnect claims that the DCLeaks project is a Russian front likely linked to Russian persona Guccifer 2.0 and the GRU-linked hacker group Fancy Bear. But former British ambassador, Craig Murray, even claims to have personal knowledge of who the leaker was and to have participated in the transfer of the leaked material to Assange (Murray 2017, Whitney 2017). There are one or two other similar claims which, if true, marginalize all allegations as to Russian (Guccifer, Fancy Bear etc) involvement, although it is possible that the emails were both hacked by Russian intelligence *and* also leaked by an insider. But if the materials were leaked and passed on to Wikileaks there was no apparent motivation for the Russians to hack the same materials and also provide them to Wikileaks.

**II**

**“Bots” and “Trolls”**

Introduction and Summary

In this lecture I shall first revisit the charges made, among others, by the Intelligence Community Assessment of January 2017 (ODNI 2017), and by Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s indictments of March 2018, to the effect that the Internet Research Agency, among other Russian actors, was guilty of meddling in the 2016 US presidential election, principally by taking out advertisements – anonymously - on social media whose purpose was to “sow discord,” organize and promote rallies, establish large numbers of “Bots” (social media Pages and web-sites which were not transparently identified as being associated with their Russian origins or patrons and whose purpose was to sway opinion in ways that would have influenced the election), the feed of “troll” commentary on third party social media pages or web-sites and travel to the USA under false pretenses to collect intelligence for the interventions (U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia 2018).

I shall argue, first of all, that the evidence that these activities were designed to favor Trump is not strong, and has actually been rejected by the (GOP-dominated) House Intelligence Committee (HPSCI 2018); secondly that the amount of money that was available to the Internet Research Agency for such activities ($1.25 million a month) was modest (Bloomberg News 2018); and thirdly, that the amount of money spent on social media advertising ($100,000 in the case of advertising on Facebook between June 2015 and May 2017, spent by 470 fake accounts on a total of 3,000 ads, and possibly an additional $50,000 on additional $50,000 for 2,200 ads from sources that "might have originated in Russia,") was miniscule (total digital advertising expenditure in the 2016 election cycle was $1.4 billion [Associated Press 2018]); fourthly, that the impact of any such advertising would have likely been very slight. The IRA perhaps contributed towards a “bubble” tendency wherein existing predispositions are confirmed – recent research indicates the majority of social media users who followed the Russian ads and other messages were already following pro-Trump right-wing sites such as Breitbart News and Fox (Benkler, Faris, Roberts, and Zuckerman). However, one study found that people who use Facebook for news were more likely to view both pro- and counter-attitudinal news in each wave, and that counter-attitudinal news exposure increased over time, which resulted in depolarization (Beam, Hutchens and Hmielowski, 2017). Relatively few “events” (rallies) were organized or promoted by the Internet Research Agency. It is unlikely that more than a very small number of these - not more eight and probably only three - actually occurred, and even then it is unlikely that they attracted large numbers (Moon of Alabama, 2018). Such small scale impact suggests not a political motivation, which would have required far greater investment, but a click-bait operation of some kind, or an experiment.

Lastly, but importantly, we have to put our awareness of these kinds of social media influence in the much broader context of the much more important influence of directly propagandistic legacy media, both US and international that might be said to have had an impact on the US elections. These would include Fox News, for example, or MSNBC, or, of course, RT. RT is even mentioned in the ICA assessment as an alien influence (RT in the USA has since been required to register as a foreign agent) but it is a public, transparent source, much of its international reporting meets standards similar to those of other international broadcasters, and comporting to a long established tradition of overseas foreign broadcasts that fall into the category of “soft power” and that are disseminated by almost every major nation. “Though legacy media do harness digital distribution channels to spread content, come election time they remain the most active and influential sources of information” (Cunningham 2018).

We must also take account of the extraordinary vulnerability of social media to fraud - including corporate, political and criminal activity, often involving bots, and trolls, false or anonymous identities and that range across campaigns to bolster the popularity of stars, products and political positions (Holm, 2014). Here I return to the curious but highly significant case of Cambridge Analytica (in the process of liquidation at the time of writing, even as it was in the process of being reborn by a similar cast of players under the name of Emerdata [Murdock 2018]) – founded by Trump adviser Steve Bannon, with money from Board directors and billionaires Robert Mercer and his daughters - all friends to President Trump – and very close to its parent British company SCL (Cadwalladr 2018; Ahmed 2017). Consideration of Cambridge Analytica invites a review of companies similar to it that trade in big data and microtargeting and more traditional public relations companies such as Bell Pottinger, or Hill and Knowlton that have received political and military payments to construct often fraudulent war propaganda.

When we are talking about Cambridge Analytica and SCL we are talking about:

(1) Allegations of fraudulent persuasion whose sponsors and origins are unknown to their targets

(2) Exploitation of massive amounts of personal social media data for which permission was not given, for the purposes of electoral propaganda – e.g. to influence the outcome of Congressional races in 2014, the “Brexit” vote in Britain in 2016 and of the 2016 US presidential election (although CA and SCL deny this). That the company reportedly used a self-destruct email server to erase its digital history may indicate a broader strategy of obfuscation.

(3) Subversion of social media - albeit measures of collusion with social media corporations themselves, since their business models are about advertising and the building and sale of mass audiences using methods that allow for highly precise targeting.

(4) Election manipulation on a global scale. A television documentary in March found evidence of bribery, slander, and honey traps (Channel 4 News, 2018).

(5) Involvement of the “security establishment” (Ahmed 2017). The Analytica story, although it exploded in March to April 2018 had been well known since 2016, inviting the question “why now?”

(6) There is a Russian connection via Alexandr Kogan, a Cambridge University psychologist who also had links to the University of Saint Petersburg and was reported to have worked on Russian government funded research projects concerning Internet use (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018). In addition it has been reported that SCL has also pitched in Moscow to Lukoil, but again the relevance seems fairly marginal. SCL had previously worked with the oil and gas industry to fight off public concerns about fracking (Dyer 2018) and Lukoil may have had a similar interest.

(6) Kogan’s data combined Facebook user data with personality features his company collected from user answers to personality quizzes, and were collected via Facebook’s then-permissive “Graph API” – the interface through which third parties interact with Facebook’s platform (Hindman 2018).

All these scandals have increased pressure for greater regulation and self-regulation of social media but they have also opened the door to greater censorship of social media (e.g. both through physical censors, of which there are now several tens of thousands employed by the social media corporations; and through algorithms) and a greater tendency on the part of social media to act as gatekeepers of “acceptable” information, in the process boosting the perceived legitimacy of established mainstream media at the considerable expense of alternative but legitimate media sites (Gourarie 2018; Johnstone 2018; Washington Post 2018). Justification for this was conveniently supplied in late 2016 by what has since been exposed as a propaganda ploy under the label “ProporNot” – an entity that was granted anonymity by the Washington Post (Timberg 2016) and whose principal purpose, according to research by George Eliason (2018), was to smear any website critical of the “RussiaGate” narrative. Eliason’s exposure implicated a long chain of neo-liberal propagandists starting with Michael Weiss - National Security Analyst for CNN, and editor in chief of The Interpreter, which is a product of the pro-NATO propaganda agency the Atlantic Council, and closely associated both with Ukrainian Intelligence and the US Broadcasting Board of Governors – VoA, RFE/RL etc. The fabricated charges of ProporNot have been exploited to justify measures that suppress genuine political dissent.

Alleged Russian “election meddling” is unimpressive

The stated extent of Russian meddling is actually much less dramatic or impressive as is generally claimed by US sources when one looks in detail at: numbers of web-sites; number, reach and content of advertisements; number of political events arranged and of people who actually attended them. Much of this activity continued *beyond* the election (Associated Press 2018).

There is a strong possibility that IRA was a click bait operation. There is still a lack of clarity as to the real nature of the Internet Research Agency and its ownership. Details of the agency were covered in western mainstream media well before the election, so secrecy seems not to have been its strong hand. The owner, Yevgeniy Viktorivich Prigozhin, was described by the Mueller investigation as a Russian restaurateur and caterer widely known as "Putin's chef" for hosting his state dinners with foreign dignitaries. Two of his companies, Concord Catering and Concord Management and Consulting, are alleged to have had Russian government contracts. Elsewhere Prigozhin has been described as a hamburger magnate who established this “troll” outfit to promote to contest the claims of rival operators. While often said by western media to be close to Putin, even to have been "Putin's chef" for hosting his state dinners with foreign dignitaries (Bloomberg 2018).

By November 2016, Facebook claims to have discovered that Russian operatives had aggressively pushed DNC leaks and propaganda on Facebook (Hartmann 2018). In September 2017, Facebook disclosed that beginning in June 2015, Russians had paid Facebook $100,000 to run 3,000 “divisive” ads (Associated Press 2018). When contrasted to what we know of corporate, advertising and other political expenditure on social media this is a very small amount of money, and the number of advertisements is very modest compared to the hundreds of thousands of tailored ads that were routinely run through Cambridge Analytica in support for the Trump Campaign or, before then, for campaigns such as the one it ran for John Bolton’s Super PAC (Lewis 2018).

Allegations about Russian BOTs often emerge from the (propaganda agency) Hamilton 68, funded by the German Marshall Fund, and which tracks a secret set of bots and then produces claims that the bots have been steering public narratives online. Even one of the co-founders of Hamilton 68, Clint Watts, called the use of this narrative “overdone”. The 600 Twitter counts monitored, he conceded, were not necessarily bots, and probably not even Russian; some were “legitimately passionate people” (Ditz, 2018). Another source, Robhat Labs, claimed to identify bots that disseminated political propaganda, but critics argue has sometimes classified real human social media accounts as bots (Smiley 2017).

Several companies specialize in discovering bots in order to find out if people “influencers” are buying fake followers. Some bots use the personal information of real people without their knowledge. There is money in “influencing” where this is a matter of covertly promoting produces and services. “Influencers” mainly get paid according to the numbers of followers they can claim. People with 2 million or more followers can charge $40,000 per post. Fake “followers” often come from other countries. One source has claimed that an average of 16.4% of the followers on Instagram were fraudulent. Bots are known for large numbers of generic emoji-laden comments. In short, the “bot” phenomenon is infinitely larger than and overshadows the question of Russian influence on the 2016 presidential election (Maheshwari, S. 2018).

In February 2018, Nicholas Confessore and Gabriel Dance of the New York Times found evidence of millions of accounts impersonating real people, promoting commercial products and celebrities, attacking political candidates, and “sowing discord”. The sowing of “social discord” is one of the charges made against the IRA, but it is meaningless without evidence as to actual intent, scale of reach, the possibility of defining and measuring “discord,” and without reference to ALL actors on social media who may ALSO intend “discord” (Confessore and Dance 2018).

In the past social media companies often failed to vigorously enforce their own policies against impersonation, allowing a global black market in social identities to thrive on their platforms. Some accounts were pranks, some sold fake followers, many were deployed in information warfare campaigns. Twitter allowed parody accounts and pseudonyms and only prohibited impersonation when its portrayal was “misleading or deceptive.” The company did not proactively review accounts for impersonation. Many real accounts were copied and turned into automated “bots” and sold by companies like Devumi (Devumi denies this). Close to 5,500 imposter accounts sold by Devumi were restricted or suspended. Neither Facebook nor Twitter required proof of identify to open a new account but both required it when users reported on imposters. (Confessore N., Dance G., Harris R., & Hansen, M. 2018). All this is likely changing in the wake of more recent acceptance and undertaking by social media of stricter regulatory measures.

The activities of the Internet Research Agency had hardly been secret, but were subject to reporting in public media since 2015. Most notably, the agency was identified as a source of pro-Russian propaganda during the Ukraine crisis by John Sipher (former CIA station chief)(Sipher 2017). We should note, in particular, the following:

-The operation had a monthly budget of $1.25m for its entire global operations (of which the US was only a part)(Bloomberg News 2018).

-The IRA was not terribly secret: much of what appears in the Mueller indictment in February 2018 was revealed by the *Russian* media outlet RBC in 2017 (Chen, 2018).

-The Mueller indictment has not yet mentioned Russian Intelligence involvement, only the apparent owner, Mr. Prigozhin, the hot dog vendor who started IRA as a troll farm to counter negative reviews of his hamburgers (Levintova, H. 2017).

-Several people listed in the Mueller indictment had not worked for IRA since 2014 (Taylor 2018).

-Most IRA activity (in general) appears to have focused on making Putin looking good (Graff 2018)

-The majority (56%) of the Facebook ads paid for by the IRA had nothing to do with the election. 25% of the ads were never shown to any user (Feldman 2017).

-Vice-President of Facebook Ads, Rob Goldman, has claimed that most of the Russian ad spending occurred *after* the election (Marketwatch 2018). The majority of the ads did not even reference the election and got little traction.

- Facebook said in Congressional testimony that the posts from IRA pages represented a tiny fraction of the overall content on Facebook - about four-thousandths of one percent (0.004%) of content in News Feed, or approximately 1 out of 23,000 pieces of content (Byers, 2017).

-Only a proportion of the ads or the posts received significant attention. Facebook estimated that roughly 126 million people were exposed to material made by the IRA between January 2015 and August 2017. But there is no information as to how many saw, digested or even thought about them (Feldman 2017). Twitter found 3,814 accounts believed to be made by the Russian troll group, and sent emails to 677,775 users who had inadvertently followed or interacted with content made by the trolls. Russian bots retweeted Trump almost 500,000 times in the final weeks of the 2016 election—10 times more than they retweeted Hillary Clinton (Glaser 2018).

-Ads encouraged Blacks not to vote (depressed turnout hurt Clinton in “rust-belt” states of Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania) and in some instances supported third party candidates (such as Jill Stein of the Green Party)(Morris, 2018). But Black voters were already targeted by voter-reduction tactics across America including disfranchisement of felons, the false data-matching of voter rolls with lists of felons, insufficient voter machines, inflexibility in polling hours, suspension of previous day voting opportunities etc. Not to mention a recently disclosed Cambridge Analytica involvement in voter suppression campaigns (O’Sullivan and Griffin, 2018).

-If Clinton had run a better campaign this might not have happened. She did not give enough attention to these States and what attention she did give came too late (Brownstein 2016).

-Since Facebook’s algorithm is structured to show a user material that the user already agrees with, the impact of these Russian ads would have been very limited (Griffith 2017).

-There is no evidence of anyone being “enflamed” as a result of whatever the IRA may or may not have done. One of the Russian Facebook groups, Black Matters, had an event page for a protest in New York City the weekend *after* the election, which it promoted with an ad. More than 16,700 people signed up to attend on the event page, while 33,000 more listed themselves as interested (Glaser 2018).

-The Russians are alleged to have sought “discord” – but the discord indisputably was already there. Max Fisher and Amanda Taub in the New York Times in April argued that the notion that any Russian effort could match the power of existing partisan polarization and “the human attraction to fake and untrustworthy news” is fanciful. The false information and political ads that the Russians are accused of spreading could ring true only to those already predisposed to suspect the worst (Fisher and Taub 2018).

-The people most likely to consume fake news were already hyper-partisan, and false news was only a small fraction of their media consumption (Taub and Fisher 2018).

-Russian efforts are indicators – not drivers – of how widely Americans have polarized. And in large measure the polarization is racial (ibid).

-For many of the rallies that the IRA is said to have organized, few people showed up or none at all. Three of the total of 8 rallies occurred after the election; the first two may never have taken place, and the fourth (flash mobs in Florida) got minimal response or was undocumented. Nobody forced anyone to go to any of these rallies (Devoe 2018)

-Compare the whole fuss about IRA and rallies with the enormous effort by the Trump Campaign. to encourage attendance at *his* rallies (Sullivan and Johnson 2016).

-Many of the IRA ads were clickbait - perhaps all of them (Real News Network 2018). Facebook executive Rob Goldman said that swaying the election was not the main goal. Most of the groups behind the problematic pages had clear financial motives and were not likely to have been connected to a foreign government (Mate 2018).

-Some of the ads, according to one commentator, were simply absurd and could not possibly have had any predictive outcome (Madrigal 2018).

-Giraldi queries whether, apart from money laundering aspects and possible visa fraud, any of the so-called IRA activity was actually illegal – esp. if the people behind it all were NOT agents of the Russian government (Giraldi 2018).

-Claims of Russian interference in French and German elections have been disavowed by social media authorities, following investigations (Associated Press 2017; Schwirtz 2017). As for claims of Russian interference in the British Brexit of 2017, Facebook found only 3 ads, bought for less than a dollar (Burgess 2017).

CIA Meddling

The Russians did not invent trolls. CIA troll activities have been public since at least 2011. In the Guardian on March 17 2011, Nick Fielding and Ian Cobain revealed a US spy operation that manipulated social media. A Californian corporation (Ntrepid) was awarded a US CentCom contract to develop an “online personal management service,” part of “Operation Earnet Voice” designed to allow one US serviceman or woman to control up to 10 separate identities based all over the world. The journalists noted that critics of the program would likely “complain that it will allow the US military to create a false consensus in online conversations, crowd out unwelcome opinions and smother commentaries or reports that do not correspond with its own objectives.”

The program would create online identities – known as “sock puppets”. The CentCom contract stipulated that false identities should not be capable of being discovered by sophisticated adversaries. A CentCom spokesperson said the purpose was “to counter violent extremist and enemy propaganda outside the US. None of the interventions would be in English, nor would US-based web sites such as Facebook or Twitter be targeted. Each controller would have one virtual private server located in the US and others appearing to be outside the US to give the impression that the fake personas are real people located in different parts of the world (Fielding and Cobain 2011).

Examination of RussiaGate as fake news and looking at other recent instances of fake news that are related in some way to RussiaGate (the Skripals, Dhouma, the Iran nuclear “threat”) invites us to consider the question of whether, even if the basic strategies of propaganda remain fairly constant (e.g. demonization, simplification, symbolization by means of deceit, incentivization or coercion) the tactics are growing far more sophisticated in the digital and social media age.

All about Cambridge Analytica

Cambridge Analytica (now liquidated, along with its parent company Strategic Communications Laboratories, SCL) is currently the target of many inquiries. Study of Cambridge Analytica is essential in making sense of “RussiaGate” as “fake news” because (1) it demonstrates, by comparison, how pathetic Russian efforts to “meddle” in the US election actually were (if indeed they *were*), while (2) revealing the considerable extent to which elections throughout the world are subject to sophisticated and intelligence-linked psychological targeting and other operations that exploit the weaknesses of social and legacy media, almost always (3) at the service of conservative, neoliberal or “radical right” interests and that (4) expose the inadequate self-regulation of social media whose business models depended precisely on the data weaknesses of their networks being exploited for profit, so that application developers will be incentivized to deal through them (Joseph 2018).

Facebook suspended the Facebook accounts of Cambridge Analytica and its contractor Alexandr Kogan in 2018. These were prohibited from buying ads or running the Facebook pages of their clients. Facebook claimed that the companies failed to delete data that they had insisted they had destroyed in 2015 and which Cambridge Analytica had acquired from Kogan (Shieber 2018). 270,000 users downloaded Kogan’s application, yielding access by means of friends’ networks to what were first thought to be 50 million accounts of which 30 million were usable. Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg later said that 87 million accounts (principally US) were involved in the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and even that two billion Facebook accounts around the world had been contaminated as a result of a feature – now removed - that let users enter phone numbers or email addresses into Facebook’s search tool to find other people and that allowed malicious actors to scrape public profile information (Frier 2018).

At the time that Kogan sold his software to Cambridge Analytica (which matched personality data with Facebook profile information as the basis for distinctive individual targeting of persuasive message) there was a Facebook loophole (now closed) that allowed developers of Facebook applications not only to see the data of people who downloaded their applications, but also that of their friends as well (Stahl 2018). Cambridge Analytica claims that it never used the data for Trump’s election campaign, and the GOP seems largely to support that claim (although Cambridge Analytica did use such data for micro-targeting and psychographics in other Republican campaigns including one for John Bolton’s SuperPac)(Lee, Timberg and Dawsey 2018).

Whistleblower Christopher Wylie has described Analytica as an “arsenal of weapons in a culture war” (Rosenberg, Confessore and Cadwalladr 2018). Propaganda expert Jonathan Albright has called it a “weaponized AI Propaganda Machine” (Anderson and Horvath 2018). The outbreak of stories concerning Analytica early in 2018 and which culminated in liquidation of the firm (and that of its parent) was surprising because the story (reported in the Guardian by Carole Cadwalladr at least as early as February 2017) is not new. There is, therefore, something odd about the timing of this recent outbreak, perhaps related to the House Permanent Intelligence Committee (HPIC) 2018 decision to close their investigation into “RussiaGate” and the HPIC’s dismissive attitude to the Intelligence Community Assessment of January 2017 (calling for an inquiry into that assessment).

The parent company is Strategic Communications Laboratories – whose regular clients included the U.K. Ministry of Defense and US. Department of Defense – and whose divisions included SCL Elections, which gave birth to Analytica. SCL’s expertise is “psyops” - seeking to change people’s minds not through persuasion but through “informational dominance,” including rumor, disinformation and fake news. It regards Information Operations as the fifth dimension of the battle-space of modern military strategy, after land, sea, air and space. By 2017 SCL had deployed its techniques in 200 elections around the world, mostly in undeveloped democracies (Ahmed 2018).

Ahmed (2018) describes SCL as a “former UK Ministry of Defense contractor which retains close ties to the British FCO and other elements of the UK political and financial establishment.” The British Foreign Office executive agency, Wilton Park, in 2017 invited SCL Group to “speak about how the use of data in the 2016 Presidential election could be applied in the British government’s diplomatic and foreign policy agenda.”

SCL Elections’ CEO Mark Turnbull had a history of psyops on behalf of the USA and UK in Iraq and Afghanistan. While working for PR firm Bell Pottinger he oversaw a $540m US Department of Defense contract for “information ops and psyops.” This included the creation and distribution of fake Al Qaeda videos in Iraq (including “beheading” videos). He also worked for Aegis Defense Services. A former SCL website boasted of an “extensive worldwide track record and enquiries (that) can be directed through any British High Commission or Embassy.” SCL was long classified by the Ministry of Defense as a “List X: contractor” – i.e. one that worked on contracts requiring it to hold classified information at their own premises or other specific sites (Ahmed 2018).

The major personalities behind SCL and their links were identified by Liam O’Hare (2018) from whose account for @ballacaledonia the following information is drawn. Head of SCL was Nigel Oakes, an old Etonian with links to the British royal family and was once rumored to be an MI5 spy. In 1992, Oakes has described his work as using the “same techniques as Aristotle and Hitler. … We appeal to people on an emotional level to get them to agree on a functional level.” The President of SCL was Sir Geoffrey Pattie, a former Conservative MP and the Defense Minister in Margaret Thatcher’s government. SCL’s links to the Conservative party extended to the company’s chairman and venture capitalist Julian Wheatland. Wheatland also chaired the Oxfordshire Conservatives Association. SCL benefitted from funding by Jonathan Marland, a former Conservative Party Treasurer, trade envoy under David Cameron, and close friend of Tory election strategist Lynton Crosby. Property tycoon and Conservative party donor Vincent Tchenguiz was the single largest SCL shareholder for a decade. Another director, Gavin McNicoll, founded the counter-terrorism Eden Intelligence firm which ran a G8 Plus meeting on Financial Intelligence Cooperation at the behest of the British government. Previous board members included Sir James Allen Mitchell, former Prime Minister of the one-time British colony St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Mitchell served as privy counselor to the Queen’s advisory board since 1985. Another SCL director was Rear Admiral John Tolhurst, a former assistant director of naval warfare in the Ministry of Defence an *aide de camp* to the Queen. The Queen’s third cousin, Lord Ivar Mountbatten, was also on SCL’s advisory board but it was unclear if he still held that role by the beginning of 2018.

These examples barely scraped the surface of the ties between the UK defense establishment and Strategic Communication Laboratories. SCL emerged from murky alliances between venture capitalists and former British military and intelligence officers who were also closely tied to the higher echelons of the Conservative party. The key characters in election meddling were not Russian, Ahmed (2018) concluded: they are British, Eton educated, headquartered in the city of London and had close ties to Her Majesty’s government.

SCL had been contracted by the Ministry of Defense for Target Audience Analysis shortly before the 2016 presidential elections, specifically for fiscal year 2014/2015. According to Liam O’Hare SCL boasted that it had conducted “behavioral change programs” in over 60 countries and its clients had included the British Ministry of Defense, the US State Department and NATO. In May 2015, SCL Defense, another subsidiary, received $1 million (CAD) to support NATO operations in Eastern Europe targeting Russia. The company delivered a three-month course in Riga which taught “advanced counter-propaganda techniques designed to help member states assess and counter Russia’s propaganda in Eastern Europe” (O’Hare 2018). The NATO website said the “revolutionary” training would “help Ukrainians better defend themselves against the Russian threat”. Such activities firmly tied SCL to “regime change” and “color revolution” tactics that have been evolving, particularly in western hands, at least since the time of the break-up of Yugoslavia (ibid).

The SCL website boasted links to the current regime in Kiev and was proud of its attempts to help Ukraine’s “radical nationalist” regime’s conflict with the Donbass people. SCL admitted conspiring with the “radical nationalist” regime in Kiev and with the British Ministry of Defense as part of a campaign of information warfare designed to incite sedition in the Donetsk People’s Republic and prepare a violent takeover of Donetsk (Garrie, 2018). SCL’s history of promoting radical nationalism in Ukraine appears to date back to the so-called “Orange Revolution” in 2004.

Cambridge Analytica has been described as a shell within SCL, whose cast of characters included (among those very close to Donald Trump): Steve Bannon, Andrew Breitbart (who died in 2012 but whose Breitbart News was chaired by Steve Bannon), and the billionaire father and daughter team of Robert and Rebekah Mercer. Those involved in devising the Analytica business model included Christopher Wylie, Michael Kosinski and Alexandre Kogan (Bump 2018). CEO Alexander Nix proved an unwitting source of damaging information against the company, following a covert Channel 4 television investigation in 2018 which filmed Nix talking about Analytica operations to journalists posing as potential clients (Channel 4 2018). Wikileaks founder Julian Assange became involved when Analytica reportedly suggested working with him to help in the process of publication of hacked (or leaked) DNC emails (Assange declined)(Prokop 2018).

The method of psycho-profiling devised by Wylie, Kogan and others is said to have had an impact on the Leave campaign for Brexit in the UK in 2016 (Cadwalladr 2018). Analytica was being sued among other things for illegal work it is alleged to have undertaken about that campaign. Special Counsel Robert Mueller was also looking into links between Analytica and the Trump campaign, probably extending to discussions between Robert Smith, Michael Flynn and Analytica, among other things about DNC emails. Christopher Wylie (Canadian) contended that the idea for Analytica was basically one that he developed while a student working on his PhD in London to do with fashion forecasting. He was recruited by SCL and introduced to Steve Bannon. Bannon liked his ideas: for Bannon, Wylie has explained, politics was downstream from culture – to change politics, you changed the culture. Mercer had put up $1.5 million for a pilot project in the gubernatorial race in Virginia in Nov. 2013 and later invested $12m in Analytica (Cadwalladr 2018).

Michael Kosinski and David Stillwell (psychology professors at Cambridge University’s Psychometrics Center) developed a methodology for integrating lFacebook and Twitter “Likes” with OCEAN scores (based on measures of openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism) and data such as TV preferences, airline travel, shopping habits, church attendance, books bought and magazine subscriptions (Grassegger and Krogerus 2017). On the basis of this approach clients could target individual voters with emotionally charged content. The basic model was to invite Facebook users to undertake a personality test and in return users were invited to allow the researchers access to the users’ profiles (40% consented). At that time (and up until 2015) this also allowed the researchers to access the accounts of the friends of those who had consented. Kosinski and Stillwell reported that they had received a lot of interest in this from intelligence agencies, and that there even existed third party companies who funded such research on behalf of intelligence agencies. Kosinski claimed that using personality targeting, Facebook posts could attract up to 63% more clicks and 1,400 more conversations. This kind of propaganda tracked what people did rather than what they said. Cambridge Analytica might very well have have contracted with Kosinski and Stillwell if the latter had asked for less money. Instead, another Cambridge psychologist, Alexsandr Kogan, offered to build an application for harvesting Facebook data that would achieve a comparable outcome for less money. Kogan’s company, Global Science Research (GSR), provided the data to Analytica in 2014 in return for $7m (Cadwalladr 2018). Kogan’s quiz offered to Facebook users was designed to yield personality data and was called thisisyourdigitallife. Kogan had told Facebook it was for academic purposes. The ultimate purpose was to match personality and Facebook profile data to voter rolls. Facebook maintained early in 2018 that Analytica still had at least some of the Kogan data. Analytica has variously claimed it did not have the data, or that the data was destroyed two years previously.

Alexsandr Kogan had also worked as associate professor for St. Petersburg University, where his work was related to research funding from the Russian government to analyze “stress, health and psychological wellbeing in social networks” (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018). The revelation of Kogan’s St Petersburg connection emerged just as relations between Moscow and the West plumbed new lows in the midst of the Skripal scandal. Kogan, a U.S. citizen, was born in the former-Soviet republic of Moldova but moved to the United States as a child. Cambridge University claimed that Kogan had correctly sought the permission of the head of the psychology department to do work with St Petersburg. “It was understood that this work and any associated grants would be in a private capacity, separate to his work at the university,” it said in a statement (Pinchuk and Busvine 2018). Aleksandr Kogan advised a team at St Petersburg State University that was exploring whether psychopathy, narcissism and machiavellianism - dubbed the ‘dark triad’ by psychologists - were linked to abusive online behavior, said Yanina Ledovaya, senior lecturer at the university’s department of psychology (ibid).

Analytica also made a pitch to Lukoil, who wanted to explore links between U.S. voters and consumption. The Analytica work would have been shared with its CEO who was a former Soviet Oil Minister, Vagit Alekperov. The actual Analytica pitch focused on election disruption techniques. Analytica never actually did the work but they had briefed Lukoil on the idea of linking Facebook data, micro-targeting, and data and election manipulation (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison 2018).

Analytica was an important source of data for the Trump campaign, via Brad Parscale, the campaign’s digital director – hired by Jared Kushner and slated to lead Trump’s re-election campaign in 2020. (After the demise of Cambridge Analtica in 2018, AP disclosed that four former Analytica employees were working for a company called Data Propria, in whose parent company (Cloud Commerce), Parscale had a substantial ownership interest. Data Propria had a role in 2018 polling-related work for the Republican National Campaign and there was speculation concerning 2020 [Horvitz 2018[). Analytica only took on GOP clients and the “Leave” campaign. For the Trump campaign, Analytica had 13 people working under Pascal. The campaign’s fee to Analytica was $5.9m, of which $5m went towards buying TV ads. But Analytica’s head of digital managed an advertising budget of $12m on behalf of Pascale’s firm Giles and Pascale – a small slice of the $94m Giles-Pascale was paid in total to purchase the campaign’s ads (Illing 2018).

Analytica may have been paying Michael Flynn. Flynn had talked with Peter Smith (a pro-Trump GOP operative) about how to acquire Hillary Clinton’s private server’s 30,000 deleted emails. Flynn was coordinating with Smith’s group (Prokop 2017). A WSJ reporter (Steve Harris) has inquired whether Analytica’s campaign assistance to Trump helped guide Russia’s voter targeting scheme. Campaign executive director Michael Glassner has said that the Republican National Committee was the Trump campaign’s primary source of voter data. Pascale says Analytica provided only analysis, not raw data (Illing 2018). Pascale also claims that the campaign did NOT use psychographic targeting. What *did* Analytica provide then? It provided a daily tracker of voting, “persuasion online media buying,” identified which potential voters in the RNC files were most likely to be persuadable (undecided but swinging towards Trump), created a visualization tool that showed in each state which areas were most persuadable, and what those voters cared about (a heat map of the country to pinpoint where Trump should visit to maximize his impact on potentially persuadable voters)(Lapowsky 2017). Other sources show that Analytica conducted hundreds of thousands of voter surveys for the Trump Campaign to better understand the Trump voter. RNC and the Trump campaign ran 175,000 variations of the same ad on Facebook on the day of the 3rd presidential debate on Oct. 2016 (ibid).

How effective was Analytica?

Samuel Woolley, head of Computational Propaganda Project at Oxford Internet Institute, has found that a “disproportionate amount of pro-Trump messaging was spread via automated bots and anti-Hillary propaganda. Trump’s bots outnumbered Clinton’s by 5 to 1.” Wooley has claimed that 1000 or more bots can potentially change the algorithm of a sites. Bots can react instantly to trending topics, producing targeted posts, images, even YouTube videos, can capture what people are thinking at a particular moment and serve it back to them, over and over again (Illing 2018). But we don’t know that any Analytica data ever got to the Russians, and we don’t know how useful Analytica was to Trump campaign.

Martin Moore (head of Center for the Study of Media, Communication and Power at King’s College) told the Guardian’s Carol Cadwalladr (2018) that Trump’s campaign was “using 40-50,000 variants of ads every day that were continuously measuring responses and then adopting and evolving based on that response.” Analytica was able to use this real-time information to determine which messages were resonating and where, and then to shape Trump’s travel schedule around it.

Alexander Nix claimed to have used psychographics to help raise Ted Cruz to second-most threatening contender in the primaries (Timmons 2018). Facebook was aware of this but took no action, other than a letter. John Bolton’s (Trump’s national security adviser appointed in 2018) SuperPAC, according to NYT’s had been an earlier customer of Analytica in Aug 2014, when the company was hired to develop psychological profiles of voters, using data harvested from tens of millions of Facebook profiles, according to former Analytica employees and company documents. Bolton’s PAC spent $1.2m for survey research over 2 years. The service included behavioral micro-targeting with psychographic messaging. The Bolton campaign wanted to make people more militaristic in their worldview. The PAC also supported Thom Tillis, GOP senator from N. Carolina. SCL wanted to use voter contact lists available to Bolton’s campaign to direct people “toward the Facebook application.” Later, Analytica wrote up talking points for Bolton (O’Sullivan and Griffin 2018).

Analytica also played a role in the 2014 mid-term elections (polling, focus groups, message development for SuperPacs)(Rosenberg, Confessore and Cadwallar 2018). Alexander Nix, speaking in the Channel 4 expose, talked of how in Kenya Analytica had sought to raise support for President Kenyatta’s Jubilee party, conducting surveys of hopes (jobs) and fears (tribal violence) and employing divisive propaganda, disinformation, whose influence spread from surveys to legacy media (Channel 4, 2018). In Nigeria, ahead of the 2015 elections, a Nigerian billionaire paid Analytica $2m to hack into the medical records of General Muhummadu Buhari, then candidate of the All Progressives Congress. President Johanthan did not necessarily know. Israeli cybersecurity contractors were involved – they provided the hacked materials and Analytica did the job of finding incriminating materials. Analytica didn’t seem concerned about the security of its own employees in Lagos (Kazeem 2018).

Factors that mitigate against the presumption that Analytica, whether or not it acted within the law, wielded the huge influence of which it boasted to clients:

- Methodological issues having to do with the limitations of social psychology and tests of significance.

- Limitations of multi-variable analysis, in which some variables have only a very loose connection to actual political issues or candidates.

- Issues of human self-reflection and the tendency by positivists to underestimate intelligence and learning.

- Research suggests a great diversity in the information environment of most people.

- The operation of processes of selective exposure, attention and retention.

- How to compare this kind of influence with that of powerful legacy media (e.g. TV and Fox) and with classic lobbying? The latter would include the influence of fixers such as Tom Barrack (Kirkpatrick 2018), Elliot Broidy (Waldman 2018) George Nader (Aleem 2018) and their relationship to Donald Trump, Jared Kushner and Steve Bannon. Mueller is investigating this. Nader is a Lebanese businessman and go-between for the Abu Dhabi crown prince. Broidy is a Jewish-American businessman with vast UAE and Israeli interests and close to Netanyahu. This may relate to Saudi/UAE pressure in 2017 on Qatar, and to money flows from multiple countries to Washington

Issues of Legality

Inquiries by David Carroll, a media professor at N.Y.’s Parsons School of Design indicated that Analytica was connecting only 200 data points, not the 5,000 that are sometimes cited, and that the U.K. was where the data was likely processed. Analytica appeared not to have obtained explicit, prior consent as required by the U.K. Data Protection Act, esp. in the area of political opinions. In the UK it is illegal for personal data to be sold to a third party without consent. Also there is a prohibition on employment of foreigners (who were mostly British or Canadians in this case) for US political campaigns (Helmore 2018). In addition, Channel 4 revelations of Analytica/SCL strategies refer to the use of front companies; employment of former spies; discrediting campaigns and entrapment of opposition politicians in honey-traps or bribes.

Trump/Analytica was not the First

Before Trump there was Obama. Statements by Obama’s director of integration and media for his 2012 campaign, Carol Davidsen, indicate that Facebook had found out about the Obama campaign’s massive data-mining operation but allowed them to continue. This involved 1 million supporters of Obama who gave the campaign permission to look at their Facebook friend lists. The campaign “sucked up the whole social graph” and Facebook allowed this to happen because the company was “on Obama’s side” (Investor’s Business Daily, 2018). Then there was i360 Themis: Palast claims that this company, an operation he linked to the Koch brothers, pioneered the art of dynamic psychometric manipulation and tracked 1800 behaviors including credit card purchase, cable TV choices etc. Its competitor was DataTrust founded by Karl Role and funded by Paul Singer. There were other companies like it that seem also to have entered the business of database matching of names to purge voter rolls in Florida and elsewhere. “RapLeaf” in 2010 was collecting and reselling data it had gathered from 3rd party Facebook applications to marketing firms and political consultants. Facebook cut off RapLeaf’s data access (Palast, 2018)..

What are some of the implications for social media?

Facebook’s $40bn ad business (accounting for 98% of its revenue [Statista 2018]) is built on user willingness to volunteer personal information. Considering that Facebook has two billion users, this data is unrivalled. In the past and until recently Facebook has encouraged broad or “big data” collection since it is in its interest to motivate developers to build applications on top of its platform. API is a feature that allows programs to interface with Facebook. “Permissiveness is a feature, as they say, not a bug” (Roose 2018). Even after 2015 Facebook continued to allow some companies, including four giant Chinese companies, special access to data and, in some cases, data about users’ friends (Laforgia and Dance, 2018; Seetharaman 2018)

Writing for Associated Press Barbara Ortutay (2018) claimed that Facebook will provide a user with all the data it has about that user, which is used to decide which ads to show and determine which posts to emphasize. But few users bother to read Facebook’s privacy policy. Additionally, Facebook offers a complex set of controls that let users limit how their information is used. Users can turn off ad targeting and see just generic ads instead. In the ad settings they would need to uncheck all their interests, interactions with companies and websites. Facebook puts users in target categories based on their activity. It will even keep typing that a user has started and then deleted. Increasingly, Facebook tries to match what it knows about a user with offline data, purchased from data brokers or gathered in other ways. It can infer things about a user that the user had no intention of sharing. These types of data collection are not necessarily explicit in privacy policies or settings. Advertisers don’t get the raw data: they tell Facebook what kind of people they want their ads to reach, and then Facebook makes the matches and shows the data. Applications also collect a lot of data about users.

Facebook has promised to introduce important new changes (Kharpal 2018). It will now clearly label political ads. The social network now requires anyone who wants to run ads related to political campaigns, civil rights, immigration, guns, economy, and other issues, to prove they are in the United States by handing over the last four digits of their social security number together with a picture of a government-issued ID. Facebook has said it plans to hire up to 4,000 more people to review and verify political ads. Their role will likely include navigating the nuance of what is and isn't political.

It may be argued that social media are culpable for the extent to which their networks have been abused for propaganda and related purposes. Social media have contributed in no small measure to the relative decline of traditional media models, including the advertising models that once underwrote the legacy news media (Auletta, 2018). In this way, too, social media are partly responsible for the “post-truth” era. Yet social media are often also seen by politicians as potential saviors: either as self-regulators or as co-regulators. That is to say, they are increasingly seen as indispensible contributors to political efforts to (1) boost the autonomy of social media users as information consumers; (2) enhance the transparency, dependability and legality of social media content, and (3) foreground strongly credible sources.

The European Union has sought to impose more “self-censorship” by Google and Facebook, requiring the companies to create programs, - answerable to nobody, critics argue - to trawl and delete content (EU 2018). By 2018, Facebook employed well in excess of 10,000 censors working to this purpose in centers in Berlin, Barcelona and elsewhere. Between Jan-June 2017, according to Facebook, some 75% of 300,000 deleted accounts were taken out before their first tweet. Once aware of a piece of “terrorist” content, Facebook removes 83% of subsequently uploaded copies within one hour of upload (Ike 2018). The EU wants to see stronger measures undertaken regarding terrorism, incitement, child sexual abuse, counterfeit products and copyright infringement.

Scandals such as “RussiaGate” and “Cambridge Analytica,” while negative, on the face of it, for the social media companies, seem also to be strengthening public perceptions of their relative power and importance and feed them even more power, influence and control over the public’s information environment) than they previously enjoyed, sometimes for partisan ends. For example:

(i) Mexican government agreements with social media giants such as Facebook, Google and Twitter in advance of the upcoming July elections in Mexico that would award these media great scope to influence the behavior of electors through manipulation of information about polling dates, sending out reminders to vote, disclosure of times of voting, providing information about routes to polling stations, and the release of news about the progress of elections. The Mexican electoral authority INE will provide Facebook with real-time data on election night and provide physical space in INE where Facebook can perform election-related activities. Facebook will conduct a forum for journalists on how elections are organized and held in Mexico. The companies’ abilities to use algorithms to censor search results and reduce the impact of posts is ripe for electoral manipulation (Gonzalez and Lobo 2018).

(ii) Early in 2018, Facebook announced plans to reduce “political” posts from newsfeeds (Isaac 2018).

(iii) A particularly worrying instance of political censorship was illustrated by the Facebook decision in May 2018 to shut down the Arizona Educators Rank and File Committee pages, whose purpose was to provide a forum for teachers in Arizona and other states to communicate and oppose the betrayal of their struggles by the unions (White 2018).

(iv) Facebook and Google decided in Spring 2018 to stop “domain fronting”, an anti-censorship application that makes traffic look like traffic from others web-sites so as to hide behind or within other web-sites with a view to avoiding censors (Spring 2018).

(v) Since at least summer 2017, social media have adopted algorithms that are biased against alternative news sites and that favor mainstream, middle-of-the-road web-sites to the disadvantage of those that are associated with more left-wing or more right-wing positions. This has nothing to do with the quality of information and everything to do with control over the expression of opinion. Many alternative sites (e.g. the World Socialist Website) have experienced a sharp fall-off in the numbers of visitors directed to their daily news stories from other sites. In many cases this negatively impacts the business models that underwrite such sites (Damon and Niemuth 2017). By 2018 many notable independent news websites had shut down as a result of the new censorship, those that remained were being censored like never before, with social media traffic from Facebook and Twitter completely cut off in some cases (Webb 2018).

(vi) Systems of supposed “verification” that are run by social media in collaboration with established mainstream media are problematic. For example Facebook, Google and Twitter participate in #Verified2018, a project that brings together major national and international media outlets to unilaterally dictate what is to be deemed “verified” information, seeking to present oppositional sources as “fake news.” The campaign is spearheaded by Animal Politics, a supposedly independent news site that is actually funded by the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Foundation and enjoys close ties to US intelligence (Gonzalez and Lobo, 2018). A special survey by MintPress in August 2017 reported a Google algorithm targeting “fake news” that had quashed traffic to many independent news and advocacy sites, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, Democracy Now, and WikiLeaks. These were experiencing massive drops in flows of news to their sites as a result of searches. The World Socialist Website reported a 67 percent decrease in Google returns; MintPress experienced a decrease of 76 percent in Google search returns (Webb 2017)(average traffic to its page fell from 70,000 unique visitors in January 2018 to 4,000 and even zero by June). In other cases traffic had fallen to close to zero. Antimedia, with over 2 million likes and follows, saw traffic drop from 300,000 to 12,000 page views per view in the space of a year. Some pages promoting natural-health news along with political news saw their pages deleted without warning by Facebook. Collectively Conscious, with over 900,000 likes and follows, was deleted without warning after Facebook said the page “violated its terms of use agreement” but did not state which terms had been violated. Nikola Tesla, Earth We Are One, and similar pages were likewise suddenly deleted without explanation. Some pages have been flagged as “fake news” by Facebook “fact checking” partner organizations, like the Associated Press and Snopes, sometimes on inaccurate grounds, and pages that share such stories are punished by Facebook for helping disseminate “false news.” The Mind Unleashed – with 8.8 million likes and follows - was warned and threatened for such an “offense” (Webb 2018).

(vii) Facebook’s partnership with Atlantic Council (a pro-NATO propaganda agency posing as “think tank”): Facebook announced in May 2018 it was partnering with the Atlantic Council to “monitor for misinformation and foreign interference.” The details of the plan were vague, but Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab said that the goal was to design tools “to bring us closer together” instead of “driving us further apart.” FAIR responded: “Much like “counter-espionage” is another name for espionage, “counter-propaganda” efforts are just propaganda efforts. How exactly will the Atlantic Council define “misinformation” and “disinformation,” and what “foreign interference” will merit the highest priority? (Johnson, 2018).

(viii) Social media perform significant work for the security establishment and this poisons their capacity for independence and transparency. For example:

(i) Amazon, Microsoft and Google are competing to secure a multi-billion-dollar Department of Defense contract to build and oversee the US military’s Cloud computing infrastructure, which will be used to control every aspect of the Pentagon’s global operations (Morrow, 2018).

(ii) In 2017 Google won a share of the contract for the Defense Department’s Maven program, which uses artificial intelligence to interpret video images and could be used to improve the targeting of drone strikes. (In response to protests from the company’s own employees, this program was scaled back to avoid involvement in lethal activity)(Shane and Wakabayashi, 2018).

(iii) In 2014 a $600 million computing cloud developed by Amazon Web Services for the Central Intelligence Agency began servicing all 17 agencies that make up the intelligence community (Konkel, 2014).

(iv) The CIA publishes press releases on all the social media ventures it sponsors, via its technology investment arm In-Q-Tel. Google has partnered with the CIA since 2004 when the company bought Keyhole, a mapping technology business that eventually became Google Earth. In 2010, Google and In-Q-Tel made a joint investment on a company called Recorded Future, whose goal is a "temporal analytics engine" that scours the web and creates curves that predict where events may head (Edwards 2018).

(v) WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has described Facebook as the "most appalling spy machine" ever invented. Users are creating the "world's most comprehensive database" for U.S. Intelligence. Facebook, Google, Yahoo interface for U.S. Intelligence (Brian 2011).

**III**

**“Spooks” and “Hacks:” Fake News and Intelligence**

There has always been a close relationship between instances of “fake news” and the operations of intelligence services and propagandists working on behalf of State power. Much of this falls into the category of deflected-source-propaganda (Jowett and O’Donnell 2014). I have previously referenced some examples and will add new ones:

(1) the work of William Stephenson, a British spy who was charged by Churchill to get America into the war, following Dunkirk and whose massive MI6 operation incorporated a news agency and a New Jersey-based radio station that would air misinformation fed to it from other operatives (Simkin 2014);

(2) Edward Bernays, in conjunction with the White House under Eisenhower and the CIA (under Dulles) jointly orchestrated the overthrow of democratically elected Jacobo Arbenz in 1953 and in whose “deflecting-awareness-of-the-source” propaganda set up a Central America news agency that carried false news about the Arbenz regime that in turn was picked up and distributed by Western media (Tye 2002; Chapman 2009).

(3) Story of the Sandanistas, who controlled the government of Nicaragua in the run-up to whose 1990 election the CIA placed false stories in German newspapers about how Sandanista leaders had Swiss bank accounts (for more such stories, see Davies 2009).

(4) The Syrian Observatory of Human Rights in Syria (SOAR) and White Helmets which are funded by many Western governments (UK Foreign Office, USAID, Holland, Germany), yet often the source of news and propaganda that is picked up and used uncritically by western mainstream media (Cartalucci, 2013; Blumenthal 2016).

(5) The White Helmets were started and largely trained in Turkey, founded in 2013 by British ex-military officer James Le Mesurier, in the business of establishing “stabilization” programs in conflict zones, with seed funding from Japan, the UK and USA (Beeley 2017; Hayward 2017; Webb 2017). They are intended in part to help rebuild communities after conflict but could also be seen as mechanisms for the infiltration of post-conflict communities by sponsoring western nations. Le Mesurier has conceded that “it is unrealistic to expect the SCD members, the majority of whom come from majority Sunni communities, to remain neutral on a personal level. A perpetual problem with these programs is the failure to be inclusive, as seen in failed demobilization efforts in Libya” (Speakman, 2015)

(6) The role of Bellingcat.com in feeding questionable social media-based claims to influence media framing against the Assad regime in the 2013 Chemical Weapons controversy, and to influence media framing against Russia in the 2014 MH17 controversy (Boyd-Barrett 2018; Boyd-Barrett 2017).

Principal sightings of intelligence activity in the Trump-era of fake news include:

I have already examined the first two of the following instances in some detail. I shall expand further on the third (the Skripal affair) and fourth (the hacking/leaking controversies that surround publication of the DNC emails in 2016).

(1) The Steele Dossier

This is linked to Christopher Steele, his company Orbis, hired through Fusion and by a legal firm operating for the DNC and Hillary Clinton. Primarily alleging Trump campaign collusion with persons associated with the Russian Government and Russian meddling on behalf of the Trump Campaign during the 2016 election. His report was published or leaked by Buzzfeed in January 2017 (Bensinger, Elder & Schoofs 2017).

(2) The ICA Assessment.

Steele appears to have been an influential source for the *ICA assessment*. Notice that this assessment was from a selected team put together by the Directors of National Intelligence (Clapper), CIA (Brennan), FBI (Comey), and Rogers (NSA) – the NSA did not sign up to “high confidence ” - and is hedged with all kinds of qualifications (including a disavowal that anything it says can necessarily be proven). This link suggests an anti-Trump and pro-Clinton alliance in the intelligence and law enforcement community consolidated by their joint opposition to any kind of rapprochement with Russia (ODNI 2017).

(3) The Skripal Case

Steele is linked to the *Skripal case* (the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal on March 4 in Salisbury, the UK). in Why? Because Skripal, working for Russian military intelligence (GRU), was recruited as a double-agent to MI6 in the early 1990s by Pablo Miller, then based in Estonia, at the time that Steele was working undercover for MI6 in Moscow (1980s)(Mendick, Dixon, Sawer & Heighton 2018). Steele, when he was recalled home to take over the Russia desk in London from 2006 to 2009, would certainly have received Skripal’s reports up until the time that Skripal was arrested in Russia in 2004 (but released as part of a spy-swap in 2010)(O’Neill 2018). Miller worked for Steele and Steele’s company Orbis until quite recently and a security consultant (Mozarev) claims that Skripal may also have been working for Orbis - even though he was may also have been still active for MI6 and yet paying regular visits at the same time to the Russian embassy in London (Price 2018).

It is not possible at the time of writing to dismiss Russia as a potential culprit for the attempted assassination of Skripal and his daughter, but equally it has not been possible to assert such a claim in a way that is evidence-based beyond reasonable doubt. Theoretically, the job of the press is to stay open to reasonable doubt and to be skeptical of “authoritative” claims. In this case (not uncharacteristically) the mainstream press generally (with some exceptions) manifestly failed.

The main things to note here are:

(i) Identification of the nerve agent novichok (A-234) – said to be a much more potent Russian version of the British-American VX - was disclosed by Porton Down’s Gary Aitkenhead, chief executive of the government’s Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL) on April 2 (Morris and Crerar 2018) – but he could not determine the source of this particular sample, whether from Russia or anywhere else. Instead of identifying the agent simply novichok he referred to it as being of a *novichock-type.* When the OPCW confirmed Porton Down’s finding without specifying the identity of the substance a few weeks later, they were confirming a very imprecise description (Vaska 2018).

This was several days *after* Prime Minister Theresa May and British foreign secretary Boris Johnson in the period March 12-14 had claimed that the nerve agent thought to have been applied was novichok and that it was “overwhelmingly likely” that Russian president Vladimir Putin had personally ordered the attack, and several days after the UK and US and many other countries had taken action against Russia, beginning with Britain’s announcement of the expulsion of 23 Russian diplomats on March 14, followed by similar expulsions over the next two weeks from over 20 countries (Birnbaum, M. 2018). Boris Johnson spoke in the House of Commons as early as March 6 and was already implicating Russia at that date. Sushi (2018) notes that the Salisbury hospital that treated the victims went into lockdown at 11:00 on the morning of March 5th. As this likely represents the first awareness of the Skripal poisoning being from some source other than Fentanyl, then March 6 left insufficient time for Porton Down to have prepared the blood samples necessary for identification of the metabolites (structure of a poisoning substance after it has passed through a human body) of a substance supposedly not well known in September 2015. Yet by the following day, March 7, the police announced the Skripals had been “poisoned by a nerve agent in a targeted murder attempt” (ibid).

The OPCW team arrived on March 21 and their report did not appear for another few weeks, on April 12. OPCW found that the nerve agent was a highly pure sample, making it difficult therefore to pinpoint a trace of the production origin, suggesting that it was made in a highly competent laboratory that would unlikely be military grade as the British had insisted and unlikely to have been applied to a door handle (Sushi 2018) and that to have been correctly identified as A-234 by Boris Johnson as early as March 12, would have a considerable degree of advance research and knowledge available not to Russia but to Britain. According to this source, the earliest the OPCW team might have conducted environmental sampling would have been March 21. The eagerness to blame Russia may suggest that the entire incident was an opportunistic attempt to smear Russia and recklessly exacerbate the gathering escalation of hostile western rhetoric against Russia, or that the poisoning was seized upon amateurishly for this purpose, before relevant evidence became available.

(ii) UK claims that the A-234 organophosphate compound Novichok can only have come from Russia are clearly false – the president of the Czech Republic reported that his country had produced, tested and destroyed a small quantity as recently as 2017 (AP 2018). In late 2016, Iranian scientists succeeded in synthesising a number of novichoks, in full cooperation with the OPCW and immediately reported the results to the OPCW so they could be added to the chemical weapons database (Murray 2018). Murray further notes some states like Israel and North Korea, have not ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention, nor joined the OPCW, nor destroyed chemical weapons stocks, whereas Russia had cooperated in the OPCW destruction of all its chemical weapons stocks, completed in 2017, which included regular OPCW inspection of all the sites alleged to have been in the original “novichok” program. In any case, as we have seen, Porton Down’s Chief Scientist said that he could not establish where the poison had originated. He did not deny that Britain had novichocks, merely that there was no possible way in which such a nerve agent could ever have been taken out of Porton Down (Morris and Crear 2018). Yet it seems highly likely that the USA and UK would have researched novichoks. Indeed, the US was party to the decontamination from 1999 of the chemical weapon facility at which novichoks have been said (by Vil Mirzayanov, head of Soviet technical counterintelligence) to have been manufactured in Uzbekistan (Miller, 1999). Mirzayanov has noted an apparent understanding between the US and Russia, presumably extended throughout the membership of the OPCW, to keep the existence of novichoks relatively secret and outside the “Annex of Chemicals” of the Chemical Weapons Convention (Knip, 2018). Knip’s evaluation of the novichok evidence led him to conclude that “there are strong indications that the West has secretly started to synthesize the substances soon after discovery.”

(iii) To be more precise, UK claims that only Russia could have “weaponized” novichocks are equally false. Perhaps the major inside source that has made this claim, Vil Mirzayanov, first revealed the existence of novichoks in 1992 – his story was received skeptically by some scientists. After facing charges - later dropped – he defected to the USA in 1996. Mirzayanov published relevant formulae in his 2008 self-published book *State Secrets: An Insider's Chronicle of the Russian Chemical Weapons* *Program*. Knip cites credible sources that suggest that his formulae are correct, although his assertions as to their being undetectable and incurable have been confounded by the Skripal case. Mirzayanov’s credibility has been contaminated, since he led a US-sponsored attempt to establish an independent Tatarstan, a republic of the Russian Federation whose capital is Kazan, in the 2000s. On October 26, 2008, he was elected to the Presidium of the Milli Mejlis of the Tartar People and “prime minister” of the “government in exile.”

While Mirzayanov has alleged that only Russia had developed novichocks, this was contested by Vladimir Uglev, a Soviet-era scientist involved in the development of nerve agents 1972-1988, who does not rule out the possility that novichoks were developed by Britain or Germany. Whether or not it had succeeded in weaponizing novichoks, Russia claimed to have suspended the program and acceded to the Chemical Weapons Convention in 1997. It is from Uglev that it was revealed that novichok had been used in the case of a Mafiosi-style killing – the poisoning of banker Ivan Kivelidi and his assistant by an associate of Kivelidi, in 1995. Leonid Rink, who had headed the Soviet novichock program, confessed that he had supplied the toxin through intermediaries (Serhan and Mahanta 2018).

(iv) UK claims that Russia was the only country that could have had a motive to attempt the assassination of the Skripals were patently false. In fact, on the face of it, Russia had very little motive: why would it wish to draw unwelcome international attention to itself at such a delicate time in Western-Russian relations, just prior to its hosting of the World Cup in Saint Petersburg; why would it wish to disrupt the convention by which spies who have been released in spy-exchanges are left alone – an understanding that provides an important sense of security for all sides concerned in such arrangements? And if Russia wanted to punish Skripal for his past actions, notwithstanding that he had once languished in a Russian prison and could have been dealt with then, why did it wait for eight years to do so? On the other hand, British intelligence may well have had a motive, perhaps relating to Skripal’s capability, it has been speculated, of exposing UK and US intelligence collaboration in the fabrications of the Steele report. Additionally, as a double agent who was likely responsible for the deaths of many Soviet/Russian spies when he worked for MI6, Skripal would likely have made many enemies with sufficient motive to try to kill him, especially if these enemies had stumbled on a way of accessing any of the novichok samples sold by Leonid Rink to Mafiosi in 1995/6.

(v) Novichoks were not included in the UN’s Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) list of nerve agents until very recently. Their inclusion had been discussed, but US representatives, following pressure from Hillary Clinton’s State Department, discouraged such talk. Knip (2018) cites Wikileaks publications of US cables following publication of Mirzayanov’s 2009 book, the US embassy in the Hague was instructed to avoid any substantive discussion about the book and to “discourage that discussion and report all cases in which the book is discussed anyway.” The motive, Knip suggests, was to protect the Chemical Weapons Convention; that is to say, that it was perceived to be better to have an incomplete convention rather than none at all, a view that seems to imply that powerful signatories to the Convention had no intention of stalling the development of novichocks.

(vi) The likelihood that Skripal was a victim of Porton Down (whose history has included secret mass experiments on British citizens [Keys 2015]) or British intelligence seem higher than that he was attacked by Russia: Skripal may have contributed to the Steele dossier, and he may have revealed this to the Russians who in turn could be feeding false information through Skripal to the British. Skripal may have been prepared to expose the Steele Dossier as a fabrication born of collusion between US and British intelligence agencies, with a view either to discrediting Trump on behalf of the US security establishment or to providing a pretext for ratcheting up the hostile rhetoric against Russia in preparation for destabilization or war.

(vii) British government claims that applied or weaponized novichoks can only be military grade are also incorrect; among many sources is a leading British toxicologist, Alaistair Hay, at Leeds University, and a US scientist, Cornell University professor of organic chemistry David Collum who has claimed that his graduate students could easily create Novichocks in the university laboratory (Skwarkbox 2018). Had the novichoks truly been military-grade and of the much-vaunted potency claimed of them it is very curious that only three people were affected and that they all survived.

 (viii) The behavior of the British government for weeks after the incident demonstrated a lack of interest in truth and an incapacity/unwillingness to establish the truth:

Examples include the “door handle” narrative – the period during which the British government proposed that the poison had likely been applied to the door handle to the Skripals’ home, even though there was no guarantee that some third party might not have placed their hand on the handle. Such a risky application would seem a curious decision for the deployment of a nerve agent into which millions of dollars of R&D had been invested and whose composition would then be exposed to the world, so as to undermine its future usefulness.

The fact that no other first responders (except possibly one – police detective sergeant Nick Baily, who was the third party injured and the first to recover), helpers or investigators were contaminated and that all three of the victims (Sergei and Yulia Skripal, and Nick Bailey – who is suspected by some commentators to have been Sergei Skripal’s “minder”) have recovered, raises numerous considerations, including the following:

* That the poison was never A-234 in the first instance and that hospital and security services were lying or confused from the outset (for the first day they considered the opioid fentanyl a most likely cause, until advised by the security services to consider a nerve agent as possibility), or that A-234 was inserted into samples later on. Hospital staff say that an opioid was first suspected. That a nerve agent might be involved was not considered until medical personnel were advised through the security establishment. Up to this time, neither first responders nor medical personnel appeared to use appropriate protective suits or to engage in the normal decontamination measures that accompany such use, such as a washdown (Sushi, 2018). Despite some press reports to the contrary no other members of the public were impacted (although a number did seek medical reassurance that they have not been harmed).
* that the sample used against the Skripals contained some kind of “inhibitor” agent, perhaps NATO-produced BZ. OPCW’s Swiss Spiez lab reportedly told Russian foreign secretary Lavrov that one of the samples, likely a control sent them to analyze, contained BZ and A-234, to delay onset of the poison or simply to incapacitate for a period of time)(Agence France Presse 2018). In another strange twist, the OPCW chairman publicly claimed that a relatively large quantity of the poison had been released – enough to wipe out a community – only to find himself contradicted by his own organization the following day;
* that the poison was from a deteriorating and therefore less potent sample from among those originally possessed by top Soviet scientist (once in charge of Russia’s Novichock program) Leonid Rink, and who is known to have who sold several samples to Mafiosi figures – notably Artur Talanov, and Ryabov- of which one was used in 1995 to kill a prominent banker, Ivan Kivelidi and his chauffeur. Kivelidi was the leader of the Russian Entrepreneurs’ Round Table, an organization engaged in a conflict with a powerful group of directors of state-owned enterprises.

The cloistering of the Skripals from the press and from relatives, the refusal of a visa to a close relative (cousin) of Yulia Skripal’s, the apparent lack of communication between Skripal and his mother, the refusal of the British government to provide ample and open information to the Russian government concerning the welfare of a Russian citizen (Yulia Skripal)(Janjevic, 2018) and the alleged slapping of D- Notice on the British press to stop reporting on at least certain aspects of the saga (especially relating to Pablo Miller), all indicate what may be extreme embarrassment and duplicity at the most senior levels of the British State (Durden 2018). In late May, a brief video interview with Yulia Skripal was publicly released. It appeared staged - possibly even coerced. It was filmed in an unknown location in which she talked about the pain of her experience, her wish to return to Russia eventually, and her decline of an offer of help from Russia (a statement that she actually signed on camera)(Withers 2018).

(ix) Western media have constructed a narrative about Russian government predisposition to assassination but on insufficient grounds. The killing by poison of former spy Litvinenko in London in 2006 is often cited in this respect as though Russian government (even Putin) responsibility had been established beyond reasonable doubt. This is patently not the case. There was a public inquiry (not a court case as such) that blamed the Russian government, even implicated Vladimir Putin (BBC 2016). The process and conclusions of this inquiry have attracted considerable criticism, and not only from Russia (Mercouris, 2017). Further discourses about assassination in relation to Russia conveniently ignore a long history of assassination-as-tool in the hands of Western intelligence agencies (MacAskill 2017), and fail to notice the staggering illegality and immorality of drone programs that routinely target victims for murder (alleged “terrorists”) in numerous different “sovereign” countries on the basis only of “signature” data (i.e. no specific, individualized proof) and frequently killing numerous innocent citizens (with the possibility that many more innocents have been killed by drone than actual “terrorists”)(Zenko 2016).

(4) Alleged “Hacking” of DNC/Clinton/Clinton Foundation/John Podesta emails by Russian spies.

Special Counsel Robert Mueller issued indictments early in 2018 against those Russians and Russian institutions that he believes were guilty of attempts to meddle with the US presidential election by means of bots and trolls (Special Counsel’s Office, 2018). He had not issued an indictment at this stage against the supposed perpetrators of the alleged hacking of DNC emails, even though the ICA and Steele dossiers indicated culpability of Russian intelligence. Mueller’s indictments identified 13 Russian nationals and three Russian companies on conspiracy charges. Some also being accused of identity theft. The charges related to a Russian propaganda effort designed to interfere with the 2016 campaign. The companies involved were the Internet Research Agency, often described as a “Russian troll farm,” and two other companies that helped finance it. The Russian nationals indicted included 12 of the agency’s employees and its alleged financier, Yevgeny Prigozhin. These indictments were never thought likely to be tested in any actual court of law although in May 2017 Mueller’s team appeared somewhat taken by surprise when Prigozhin showed himself ready to defend his companies against the charges (Brown 2018).

The background to this saga began well before the 2016 election, and results from the scandal of Clinton’s use of a private server while she was head of the State Department from 2009 to 2014 (Zurcher 2016). Clinton and her colleagues were condemned in July 2016 by FBI Director James Comey (FBI 2018), who investigated the matter, as “extremely careless in their handling of very sensitive, highly classified information,” extending to the alleged deletion by Clinton of emails that were “personal,” and the court-enforced publication of those that were State Department business. Wikileaks published most of the latter as a result of FoI requests, but also published the leaked/hacked emails in July 2016. Julian Assange always has denied that Wikileaks received the emails from Russia. The important takeaway point is that Clinton’s opponents believed that there was incriminating material to be found amongst as-yet unpublished emails from her period as Secretary of State, or that related to the controversial Clinton Foundation, or that related to the conduct of the Democratic National Campaign from the start of the 2016 presidential election (Hicks 2016). Some points to note:

(i) Ritter (2016, 2017,2018), quoting anonymous Dutch intelligence and press sources, wrote that Dutch intelligence actually watched Russian hackers attack a US State Department office with malware (APT29) in October 2014. Identities of the hackers were said to have included private citizens and some linked to Russian intelligence. Dutch sources seem certain that with the knowledge of Russian SVR intelligence, the DNC was hacked for some 10 months using APT 29, from an office inside Moscow State University. Russian intelligence knew that the US knew (traces may have been left deliberately) and, from November 2014, concluded that its role in managing APT29 was no longer a deniable secret, so withdrew. The information that had been collected was never “weaponized.” Its intention may have been to send a message to the USA of Russian capability. The Dutch notified the FBI and NSA. A new APT29 team was discovered in mid-2015, and its targets included the DNC, but this had nothing to do with the hacking of the DNC emails later published on Wikileaks and was not linked to the Russian intelligence agency FSB as CrowdStrike claimed.

The FBI informed the DNC of the 2015 hack. The DNC took no action until April 2016 and, rather than allow the FBI to examine its servers or computers, called in a private cyber security research agency CrowdStrike to investigate. CrowdStrike’s co-founder and CTO was Dmitri Alperovitch a nonresident senior fellow on the pro-NATO and anti-Russian think-tank, Atlantic Council. By this time the APT29 hackers were gone and new hacking entity appeared, APT28 or Fancy Bear. CrowdStrike monitored APT28, allowing it to access and exfiltrate documents that would later prove politically embarrassing. Then CrowdStrike and the DNC went public, and attributed Fancy Bear to Russian military intelligence GRU. But (ibid) Ritter argues that CrowdStrike had no hard evidence of Russian involvement when it spoke to the press on the matter in June 2016. An IP address in the malware previously cited as evidence of Russian involvement was a false trail. By the time of the CrowdStrike investigation any hacker could have accessed the APT28 toolset (since it had “gone wild”). We have to wonder whether “tracks” were deliberately inserted into evidence to make it look as though Russia was the culpable agent even though the perpetrator was actually somebody else (most likely US intelligence). In the wake of the Snowden revelations of 2013 of NSA surveillance techniques we know that US intelligence has the capability to plant such false tracks (Macaskill and Dance 2013).

Then “Guccifer 2.0” emerged. The original Guccifer was a Romanian hacker who claimed to have hacked the private emails of Hillary Clinton and who was subsequently imprisoned in the US). Guccifer 2.0 dismissed claims of Russian attribution and claimed that he alone was responsible for the DNC server hack. As proof, he published a series of documents sourced, apparently, to the DNC server. Some of these were copied using a template that embedded a Cyrillic text into the published documents’ metadata, including the name of the founder of the KGB, Felix Dzerzhinsky. The ICA report of January 2017 concluded that Guccifer 2.0 was a Russian agent. US intelligence has since claimed that Guccifer 2 neglected to switch on his VPN cover on one occasion, exposing his real location as Moscow, not Romania (Price and Sheth 2018). This seems to have been a very unprofessional mistake, if so. As with so many Western allegations of malfeasance against Russia, it is curious how often Russia appears to leave behind such obviously incriminating evidence.

 (ii) Metadata released by Guccifer 2 indicated transfer speeds consistent with an internal source at DNC copying the files (see below), rather than external exfiltration (Lawrence 2017; Various, 2017). While US intelligence (ODNI 2017) claimed that methods and IP addresses identified throughout the case of the alleged DNC hacks were “consistent with” Russian state hackers – Ritter (2017) argues that they were also “consistent with” almost every other hacker. Several sources (notably Craig Murray, VIPS and Kim DotCmm –see below) argue against the hacking theories, alleging instead that there were no hackings but that there *were* insider leaks. Wikileaks has denied that the material came from Russia (McCarthy 2017) and, although Assange may have been hostile to Clinton (Mackey 2017), Wikileaks has maintained a good reputation for protecting sources. The notion that Assange may have impugned this reputation may be due to an incorrect CNN story that Donald Trump and his son Donald Trump Jr. had received an email providing a web address and decryption key allowing them to access hacked documents from WikiLeaks before such documents were publicly available (Darcy 2017), and to earlier stories of correspondence between Assange and Donald Trump, Junior, in which Wikileaks’ questions to Trump appear pro-Trump and anti-Clinton (Tracy 2017).

So, was it a hack? At least 4 sources say it wasn’t, of which at least the first two are significant:

* Craig Murray, former British ambassador and friend of Julian Assange. Murray said he retrieved the package from a source during a clandestine meeting in a wooded area near American University, in northwest D.C. He said the individual he met with was not the original person who obtained the information, but an intermediary (Shaw, 2016).
* Members of a Vet organization - Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS) - who believe they have shown that the speed of the downloads could only have been achieved by means of a direct memory stick. For some people this implicated Seth Rich, a DNC staffer (and murder victim). The chief researchers active on the DNC case for VIPS were four: William Binney, formerly the NSA’s technical director for world geopolitical and military analysis and designer of many agency programs now in use; Kirk Wiebe, formerly a senior analyst at the NSA’s SIGINT Automation Research Center; Edward Loomis, formerly technical director in the NSA’s Office of Signal Processing; and Ray McGovern, an intelligence analyst for nearly three decades and formerly chief of the CIA’s Soviet Foreign Policy Branch. Also, they argue that the NSA’s known programs are fully capable of capturing all electronic transfers of data and of determining whether or not hacking has occurred. VIPS data undermines the credibility of Guccifer 2 and assigns him to irrelevancy. VIPS research shows that whoever entered the DNC system did so from the Eastern USA, and that the alleged “Russian” traces, were actually inserted after posting. However, there is disagreement as to these interpretations within the VIPS community (Lawrence 2017; Various, 2017). At least two members of the VIPS team believes that the “Russian did it” meme was a deliberate diversion instigated by the DNC, possibly with the aid of the CIA and its “Marble” tools, to avert public attention from the evidence of Clinton favoritism and her buddy relationships to Wall Street that would be disclosed in the DNC emails once these were published by Wikileaks. Assange gave notice on June 12 2016 that he was about to do so (there were published on July 22). The DNC had sufficient time to concoct a defense in the form of CrowdStrike’s claim on June 14 to have found Russian malware, and Guccifer 2’s claim on June 15 to have been responsible for the “hack.” An independent investigator, TheForensicator later showed that the document uploaded by Guccifer 2 came not from Russia but from the USA (McGovern 2018).
* Kim Dotcom, a German-Finnish Internet entrepreneur who lives in New Zealand, and was a teen hacker offering encrypted services site known as megaupload.com (now closed). He claimed he could get Clinton’s deleted emails. Dotcom claims that Seth Rich provided the material to Wikileaks. Dotcom made several related comments and tweets hinting at upcoming email releases prior to Wikileaks dumps (Syrmopoulos 2018).
* John Mark Dougan, a former West Palm Beach County cop who also ran several dissident and whistleblower websites, has claimed he was contacted by Seth Rich in February of 2016, that he received a thumb drive containing the DNC emails from Rich and delivered these indirectly to Assange (Goodman 2018).

(iii) Perhaps more significant than any of this, from the perspective of a concern for the integrity of the US electoral system, is what was *in* the emails namely, evidence (some Sanders’ supporters might argue) that the DNC “rigged” the primaries to favor Clinton over Bernie Sanders and that Clinton received large sums from Wall Street audiences for speeches whose texts were not publicly available and that were at variance with her campaign (Berman 2017; Klein 2017).

(iv)Much of the substance of alleged collusion between Trump Campaign advisers and Russians had to do with getting access to the materials that Wikileaks eventually published before they were published. This very much is the case with respect to George Papadopoulos (a junior foreign policy advisor to the Trump campaign) and Maltese Professor Joseph Mifsud who told Papadopoulos that he could get him access to hacked emails from Russia. Mifsud, who ran a school for diplomacy in London, now closed, was originally assumed to have been a Russian spy but may have been as closely related to western as to Russian intelligence (Vos 2018; Vos 2018b).

Other figures implicated in the lust for emails included Trump friend Roger Stone, and Green Party Jill Stein (implicated by allegations only, the substance of which she strongly denies). Stein’s major “crime” may have been to talk to mainstream Russian government funded news broadcaster RT. Several people seem to have been aware of the upcoming Wikileaks dump before it happened: the CEO of Cambridge Analytica (who actually asked Wikileaks if Analytica could help sort out the emails); Joseph Mifsud (Russian or US intelligence) and his disclosure to George Papadopoulos; Roger Stone (Trump friend and advisor); Roger Smith (Trump friend and advisor). In other words, whatever the involvement of Russian intelligence (and there may well have been *no* such involvement whatsoever) there are plenty of indications that senior Republicans and institutions connected to the GOP were salivating at the thought of acquiring the hacked/leaked emails for the purposes of making political capital out of them. Would they have been prepared to take illegal steps to secure access to such material?

Papadopoulos

Mueller-related prosecutors have alleged that a man – now known to be Mifsud – told Papadopoulos in late April 2016 – about two months before leaked emails began appearing online - that the Kremlin had “dirt” on Hillary Clinton, Trump’s rival, and was secretly sitting on “thousands of emails” covertly hacked from the Democratic party. Papdaopoulos passed this on to the Australian ambassador Alexander Downer.

“Downer is closely tied with The Clinton Foundation via his role in securing $25 million in aid from his country to help the Clinton Foundation fight AIDS. He is also a member of the advisory board of London-based Hakluyt & Co, an opposition research and intelligence firm set up in 1995 by three former UK intelligence officials and described as “a retirement home for ex-MI6 [British foreign intelligence] officers, but it now also recruits from the worlds of management consultancy and banking (Vos 2018b)”

Downer informed Australian intelligence of his conversation with Papadopoulos and Australian Intelligence, after two months, informed the FBI. This started an investigation in July 2016. (The FBI met with Steele in October – Steele had shared some of his findings with an FBI agent three months earlier, which would have been in July). Mifsud appeared to have high level Russian connections, particularly to Ivan Timofeev, program director of the academic Valdai Discussion Club. Mifsud has even been directly called an agent for SVR.

But Mifsud’s alleged links to Russian intelligence are summarily debunked by his close working relationship with Claire Smith, a major figure in the upper echelons of British intelligence (according to an investigative report by Elizabeth Vos, 2018b). WikiLeaks Editor-in-Chief Julian Assange likewise noted the connection between Mifsud and Smith in a Twitter thread, additionally pointing out his connections with Saudi intelligence: “[Mifsud] and Claire Smith of the UK Joint Intelligence Committee and eight-year member of the UK Security Vetting panel both trained Italian security services at the Link University in Rome and appear to both be present in this [photo]” (Vos 2018b).

That Claire Smith was training military and law enforcement officials alongside Mifsud in 2012 during her tenure as a member of the UK Cabinet Office Security Vetting Appeals Panel, which oversees the vetting process for UK intelligence placement, strongly suggests that Mifsud has been incorrectly characterized as a Russian intelligence asset. It is extremely unlikely that Claire Smith’s role in vetting UK intelligence personnel would lead to her accidentally working with a Russian agent. A particularly compelling factor indicating that Mifsud’s working relationship with Claire Smith suggests his direct connection with UK intelligence is Smith’s membership of the UK’s Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), a supervisory body overseeing all UK intelligence agencies. The JIC is part of the Cabinet Office and reports directly to the Prime Minister. The Committee also sets the collection and analysis priorities for all of the agencies it supervises. Claire Smith also served as a member of the UK’s Cabinet Office (Vos 2018b). .

Cambridge Analytica

In mid-May 2016, Cambridge Analytica began discussions with Trump’s team about work for the campaign. On June 12, 2016, WikiLeaks’ Julian Assange had publicly claimed to have “upcoming leaks in relation to Hillary Clinton,” which he specified were “emails” (Prokop 2018). Nix says that it was after he saw this report, in “early June,” that he reached out to Assange to ask if he could get an advance look at those emails. He says that Assange turned him down (ibid).

At some point that same month, Cambridge board member Rebekah Mercer talked with an associate about whether they should try to somehow obtain Hillary Clinton’s deleted emails, a source told Ballhaus (ibid). (Clinton deleted about 33,000 emails, about half of the total on her server, rather than turn them over to the government because she said they were personal rather than work-related.) Ballhaus’s source claimed Mercer decided not to go through with this.

Roger Stone

The Mueller investigation raised questions as to whether Stone—who served as Trump’s lobbyist in Washington in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and had been encouraging him to run for president for over a decade—had kept secret any interactions that might be of interest to congressional investigators examining Russia’s election interference.

Stone exchanged private Twitter messages in August and September of 2016 with the user known as Guccifer 2.0. Guccifer claimed in a posting on the Wordpress site to have “penetrated Hillary Clinton’s and other Democrats’ mail servers,” but the self-described hacker was later characterized by U.S. officials as a front for Russian military intelligence. Others (Vos 2018b) suspect that Guccifer was a decoy set up by Western intelligence to discredit Wikileaks with a Russia-Wikileaks collusion fable. Stone only published that exchange after it was revealed by The Smoking Gun, a website that publishes mugshots and other public documents (Riddle 2017). Stone has subsequently admitted that he met with A Russian offering dirt on Hillary Clinton during the 2016 campaign: the individual was Henry Greenberg, a Russian restaurateur, who is alleged to have asked Stone for $2 million in exchange for dirt on Clinton (and who claimed in 2015 to have been an FBI informer for 17 years). Stone claims he shot down Greenberg’s request (Preza, 2018).

Peter Smith

Months after Lake Forest businessman Peter W. Smith’s suicide in a Minnesota hotel, both the U.S. Senate and House intelligence committees examined his self-described efforts to contact Russian hackers and secure access to thousands of Hillary Clinton’s deleted emails.

An attorney for the Republican donor and operative’s estate said that he killed himself May 14 2017 in a hotel near the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., about 10 days after revealing to a *Wall Street Journal* reporter his efforts to find Clinton’s emails (Skiba 2017).

The Journal stories said that on Labor Day weekend in 2016 Smith assembled a team to acquire emails that the team theorized might have been stolen from the private server Clinton had used while secretary of state. Smith’s focus was the more than 30,000 emails Clinton said she deleted because they related to personal matters. A huge cache of other Clinton emails were made public. Tait wrote that Smith was convinced that Clinton’s private server had been hacked, almost certainly by Russians and likely multiple other hackers too. He said Smith wanted his help to validate whether the emails were genuine and if they were, wanted to ensure they became public before the election (Borger 2017).

(v) Just as charges of Russian “election meddling” pale into insignificance when compared to the infinitely broader history of US meddling in the elections of other nations, so charges of Russian “hacking” pale into insignificance when considered against the global reach and sophistication of NSA surveillance as demonstrated in the Edward Snowden leaks from 2013 onwards. Among these revelations, as an article in Intercept has explained, is that NSA can infect computers with “implants” that allow NSA to siphon out data from foreign Internet and phone networks. In some cases the NSA has masqueraded as a fake Facebook server using the social media site as a launching pad to infect a target’s computer and exfiltrate files from a hard drive (Gallagher and Greenwald 2014; Couts 2014). An automated system – Turbine (operational since 2010) – is designed to allow the implant networks to scale to large size. One implant plug-in codenamed UNITDRAKE can enable the NSA to gain total control of an infected computer. Other implants can record conversations, snap photos, record browsing histories, collect log-in details and passwords, log key-strokes. They have the power to modify content of data packets that are passing between computers (ibid.) Hannan notes “the NSA’s ability to follow hacking to its exact source is a matter of public record. Yet there is still no opposition to hysteria about “Russian” hacking. But Russiagate is useful because it normalizes far-reaching censorship” (Hannan 2018).

The list of the CIA’s cyber-tools that WikiLeaks began to release in March 2017 and labeled Vault 7, included one called Marble that is capable of obfuscating the origin of documents in false-flag operations and leaving markings that point to whatever the CIA wants to point to. (The tool can also “de-obfuscate” what it has obfuscated.)(Lawrence 2017). It is not known whether this tool was deployed in the Guccifer case, but it is there for such a use (Goldman 20918).

**IV**

**“RussiaGate” and the Russian “Threat”**

EurAsia as Central to Global Dominance

In this final lecture I shall relate the discourse of RussiaGate to the perceived or manufactured Russian “threat.” Full understanding of “RussiaGate” can only be achieved by appeal to a much longer history of relations between the US and Russia and of Russia with other competing imperial powers. Western hostility to Russia has nearly always been refracted in Russian eyes, not in a matching intensity of hostility, but in a curious hybrid of hurt outrage and continuing admiration for what educated Russians perhaps mistakenly regard as a civilization that is more advanced than theirs. The Western threat to Russia was evident in Western interventions against Russia by the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, Western invasions or covert actions against the Soviet Union in support of “White Russians” during and for some time following World War One, and Hitler’s invasion of Russia during World War Two in 1941. Later stages of this history include:

Anti-Soviet maneuverings by the Intelligence communities after World War 2, including US election meddling against sympathetic Communist parties in France, Greece, Italy, in particular, and maneuvers against Socialist parties in Britain and Australia, among others (Blum 2004);

The hysterically anti-Soviet and anti-Communist McCarthy era in the USA 1950-54;

Anti-Soviet maneuverings, persisting with varying levels of intensity, throughout the (first) Cold War, 1947-91;

Direct confrontations as in Cuba, which precipitated the Cuban “missile crisis,” nearly erupting in nuclear war in 1962; and less direct but equally or even more devastating confrontations as in Angola during the civil war from 1975, Vietnam 1955-75, and Afghanistan 1979-1989;

The opposition of neo-conservatives (such as Leo Strauss, Bill Kristol, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz) from the Reagan years onwards to policies of détente, and their establishment of parallel intelligence structures that could more easily be politicized than the CIA or NSA to supply pretexts for war (Heilbrunn 2008);

Western facilitation of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and support for the first President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin (1991-1998)(McFaul 2005).

The West’s role in the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1989-2008)(Herman and Peterson 2007).

In his recent book *In the Shadows of the American Century*, McCoy reminds us that for over one hundred years EurAsia has been identified by geo-political strategists as the key to global dominance for would-be imperial powers. These include the works of Halford Mackinder (1904), Elihu Root (1900), Georege Kennan (founder of containment theory, 1940s) and Zbigniew Brezenzinski (1990s). A significant feature of the US style of imperialism that McCoy identified in his analysis of US policing of the Philippines during the first half of the twentieth century is its heavy reliance on the co-option and nurture of local power (including measures of regime-change when necessary), penetration and manipulation of (especially) opposition movements, and the spread of military bases and covert operations in addition to military force (McCoy 2009). The limits of this approach are tested by nuclear weapons: as became evident in the case of the Soviet Union after World War Two, the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 and China from 1964. The proliferation of nuclear weapons has been tolerated by the US when this has occurred among its allies (including the U.K., France and Israel, extending more recently to India and Pakistan), but detested when it has involved opponents (most notably, North Korea) and exploited as leverage for regime change in the case of opponent states that could be charged with possessing nuclear weapon “programs” even on the flimsiest evidence (Iraq 2003, Libya 2011) or where there is actually no evidence at all (Iran).

From the point of view of consolidating world hegemony, globalization and the discipline of the World Trade Organization was a huge strategic blunder of US neo-liberalism, welcome as it may have been from other points of view, facilitating as it did the rapid ascent of China as a Communist-driven system of industrial capitalism that has sorely undermined the prospects of US global economic hegemony. In turn it has fostered a US neo-conservative retreat to nationalistic, militaristic solutions for the preservation of US hegemony. While the longer-term likelihood of success is dubious at best, this is advantageous in the short-term, because it props up the incubus of the military-industrial-intelligence apparatus. This requires an economy of permanent war for its survival. It does not matter that its wars are won or lost – indeed, a strategic state of military “loss” is actually beneficial for such an economy, so long as it does not undermine image and morale. It further justifies policies of domestic repression and militarism that serve to ensure the continued flow of tax-payer dollars to the incubus. It facilitates policies of internal exploitation (wage suppression and theft, voter suppression, elimination of social benefits, market concentration, undermining or cooption of trades unions, removal of workplace protections etc.) which serve to siphon the wealth of the masses to the elites.

By the 2000s China had emerged as a far greater objective threat to US interests, long-term, than Russia in this matter of competition for Central Asia. This was due, not least, to the amazingly rapid development of China’s One Belt One Road policy, to say nothing of its long, slow encroachment of diplomatic and trading influence throughout Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. Chinese power is potentially clipped by greater Western control over Moscow. But when the West pushes hard against Russia, Russia inclines towards China and this reduces the long-term likelihood that Western (US) hegemony can survive. Yet neoconservative policy has erred in this direction since the fall of Yeltsin, perhaps inspired by its over-optimistic belief in regime-change / color revolution strategies that have served Western interests so often in the past. Arguably this approach invests excessive confidence in the influence of the Moscow intelligentsia and those oligarchs who do not submit to the Kremlin’s requirement that they support its political machine of managed democracy. Perhaps unwittingly, the rise of Trump and his pro-Russian sentiments (regardless of their cause) constituted a threat to this (failing) strategy and, left to his own devices, Trump might have inserted a wedge between Moscow and Beijing that in turn might have weakened both powers relative to the USA. In any case this has not stopped the USA from a concerted drive to link the Indian and Pacific Oceans and so encircle China with pro-American, anti-Chinese alliance systems, an area covering about 50% of the Earth’s surface and incorporating more than half of the global population (Klare 2018), a measure which China will resist in whatever way it can.

Both Democrats and Republicans, since the fall of the Soviet Union (which the US helped orchestrate and whose transition to capitalism – catastrophic for most Russians – was guided in some measure by Western financiers, advisers and ideologues), have consistently pushed for greater influence over Moscow by means of gradual regime change operations in the countries of the Former Soviet Union, with a likely view to the ultimate collapse of the Putin regime and the opening up of Russian wealth to unfettered western capitalism. Trump’s approach, by contrast, was to buddy up with Putin and the oligarchs, take as much as he could for himself and “screw the rest”.

At a less elevated but significant level of consideration in the battle for Central Asian wealth is the role of Russia as a significant global supplies of fossil fuel energy. Ahmed (2018) quotes US Army’s Command and General Staff College Press of the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, prepared by US Army’s Culture, Regional Expertise and Language Management Office. The document makes it clear that the basic US goal is to dominate Central Asian oil and gas resources and acknowledges that the “driving force is Russian militarism.” While Russia has significant leverage in this domain (often encouraging western energy companies to seek partnership with Russian) Russia also has significant vulnerabilities. For example, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline was the first major pipeline from the Caspian to by-pass Russian territory; the Trans-Afghan online project (TAPI) being built after more than 20 years of meddling. The West has established its interests in Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikstan which together have fabulous oil, natural gas, uranium, gold, hydroelectricity – these are all being absorbed into the US-dominated market economy. The core of Russia’s response is its leadership role in building alternative coalitions to US dominated political and economic system – the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS, and the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU)(ibid). Ahmed identifies an important link between Russia energy wealth and its weapons. He writes that the Kremlin is “using its nuke arsenal as a strategic reserve to protect its smaller conventional force while relying on unconventional and asymmetric methods to secure national interests. Without physical buffers Western expansion towards Moscow eliminates Moscow’s ability to “trade space for time

Is Russia a Threat to the West?

Is Russia a threat to the West? Hardly – in terms of its economy, population, military expenditure – clearly itis not. Russia’s military expenditure actually declined 20% in 2017 to $61 billion and was forecast to fall further (Kottasová 2018). The US expenditure of $610 billion, accounted for 35% of global military expenditure ($1.7 trillion)(Cebul 2018). Russia was fourth largest spender, after Saudi Arabia. Russia aims to restrict overall military expenditure to less than 3% of national GDP, less than the USA’s current (2016) 3.3% and a lot less than Saudi Arabia’s 10% (Brennan 2018).

Russia’s population at 160 million is barely half of the US’ 300 million and a small fraction that of China’s 1.4 billion. Most of Russia is uninhabited: 22 people per sq. mile. Its economy is insufficiently diversified. It depended on oil and gas for 8-14% of GDP in the period 2000-2016. This industry is in turn heavily dependent on complex networks of pipelines that require enormous investment and difficult political negotiations with multiple countries (whose attitudes towards Russia are volatile) in order to provide its products safely to key customers throughout Europe and Asia (Global Economy 2018). Yeltsin’s immense theft on behalf of cronies and in response to Western financial interests in the 1990s destroyed the great gains of the USSR and plunged most of the country’s people into deep poverty from which they began to recover under Putin (Tennison, 2018)

The 1979 invasion of Afghanistan (in response to a request for help from the Kabul government at the time) by the Soviet Union notwithstanding, the successor state of the Russian Federation has not demonstrated strong aggression internationally, other than an invasion of Georgia in 2008 to protect its alliance with the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia’s interventions in Ukraine (2014) and Syria (2015) were acts of defense (to protect warm-water ports of Sevastopol, and Tortus). The USA, by contrast, has 40 warm water bases on its own territory and 31 naval bases across the world (McCoy 2018).

In Ukraine, the transfer of Crimea to Russia occurred only after referenda that approved the secession of Crimea from Ukraine, and the request to Russia that Russia re-absorb Crimea. Crimea has a majority Russian-speaking and Russophile population, many of its principal cities are heavily populated by Russian military personnel and their families, and many independent surveys continue to show that the secession from Ukraine is still approved by the majority of people in Crimea. In the Donbass of Eastern Ukraine, Russia remained detached in the sense that it did not respond to requests that it absorb the Donbass, knowing that in the Donbass there was much less interest in joining Russia than had been the case in Crimea. There have been strong demands in the Donbass for greater autonomy within the political structure of Ukraine, a form of de-centralization called for by the international Minsk agreements to which Russia is a signatory, and yet are still resolutely opposed by Kiev under pressure from its “radical nationalists” (fascists). One source of opposition to Russia in Crimea – the Muslim Tartars – is not particularly happy with either Russia or Ukraine (see Boyd-Barrett 2017 for an extensive discussion of the Ukraine crisis).

In Syria Russia has played an immensely positive role. Until Russian intervention the US appeared not to be effectively engaged against the forces of ISIS. The USA bears significant culpability for the rapid emergence of ISIS from 2004, dating back at least to the decision of the George W. Bush administration and its occupying force to dissolve the Baa’thist administration and Iraqi army in 2003 (Thompson 2015). But this came on top of a much longer and more complex history of US-UK-French exploitation of fundamentalist Islamic, Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi government-supported and financed Wahhabi movements (Benjamin 2016) to combat nationalist, communist and socialist opposition to imperial interest [Curtis 2018, Davidson 2016)(see also Bennis 2016, Cockburn 2015). US combat against ISIS in Syria was desultory in contrast to its energy in Iraq. The USA had installed the puppet government of Iraq following its invasion and occupation from 2003. But in Syria the larger goal that dates back long before the supposed outbreak of civil war in 2011, was regime change to topple the Baa’thist (socialist and secular) regime of Bashar Al-Assad (Gowans 2017). This goal has been pursued through many proxy forces from Europe, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar and supposedly “moderate” anti-Assad (i.e. anti-socialist and anti-secular) Jihadists, relatively few of them native to Syria, and many affiliated directly or indirectly with Al Qaeda or Al-Qaeda off-spring such as Al Nusra. Serious roll-back of ISIS began only with the arrival of Russia. In addition, Russian diplomacy helped defuse US and West European efforts to exploit (false) allegations that Assad had deployed chemical weapons against Jihadists in East Ghouta in 2013 as a pretext for direct western invasion (Boyd-Barrett 2015). Russia has continued to play an immensely valuable role in the stabilization of Syria, the maintenance in power of Assad (who has continued to win, legitimately, competitive presidential elections throughout the civil war) and the return of very large populations to their homes following the defeat of ISIS forces in cities such as Aleppo.

Russia’s answer to NATO – the Collective Security Treaty Organization – has not gained traction. Yet NATO - principally representing the interests of the USA which provides most of its funds, and the European Union - has shown considerable aggressive intent against Russia by absorbing countries of the former Soviet Union and of the former Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe into NATO and/or the European Union. The eastwards NATO pressure arrived at the borders of the Russian federation with the US-supported *coup d’etat* against an elected regime in Ukraine in 2013. The eastwards march of the EU/NATO violates the western assurances given the last Soviet president, Mikhail Gorbachev, and as testified by numerous documents compiled by the National Security Archive (2017):

“U.S. Secretary of State James Baker’s famous “not one inch eastward” assurance about NATO expansion in his meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev on February 9, 1990, was part of a cascade of assurances about Soviet security given by Western leaders to Gorbachev and other Soviet officials throughout the process of German unification in 1990 and on into 1991, according to declassified U.S., Soviet, German, British and French documents posted today by the National Security Archive at George Washington University (http://nsarchive.gwu.edu).

“The documents show that multiple national leaders were considering and rejecting Central and Eastern European membership in NATO as of early 1990 and through 1991, that discussions of NATO in the context of German unification negotiations in 1990 were not at all narrowly limited to the status of East German territory, and that subsequent Soviet and Russian complaints about being misled about NATO expansion were founded in written contemporaneous memcons and telcons at the highest levels.

“The documents reinforce former CIA Director Robert Gates’s criticism of “pressing ahead with expansion of NATO eastward [in the 1990s], when Gorbachev and others were led to believe that wouldn’t happen.”[1] The key phrase, buttressed by the documents, is “led to believe.”

“President George H.W. Bush had assured Gorbachev during the Malta summit in December 1989 that the U.S. would not take advantage (“I have not jumped up and down on the Berlin Wall”) of the revolutions in Eastern Europe to harm Soviet interests; but neither Bush nor Gorbachev at that point (or for that matter, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl) expected so soon the collapse of East Germany or the speed of German unification.”

“The first concrete assurances by Western leaders on NATO began on January 31, 1990, when West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher opened the bidding with a major public speech at Tutzing, in Bavaria, on German unification. The U.S. Embassy in Bonn (see Document 1) informed Washington that Genscher made clear “that the changes in Eastern Europe and the German unification process must not lead to an ‘impairment of Soviet security interests.’ Therefore, NATO should rule out an ‘expansion of its territory towards the east, i.e. moving it closer to the Soviet borders.’” The Bonn cable also noted Genscher’s proposal to leave the East German territory out of NATO military structures even in a unified Germany in NATO”.

One should further recall that the configuration of the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence in Communist eastern Europe was conceded by US President Roosevelt and UK Prime Minister Winston Churchill at the Yalta Agreements of 1944 (Latin Library nd).

Russia’s relationship with China has deepened, but China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) runs through Russia’s historical area of influence and seems in opposition to Russia’s proposed Eurasian Economic Unit (EEU). Russia is a major source of fuel for China. The EEU now currently seems to be wrapped within BRI - an indication of weakness (Dragneva and Wolczuk 2017). Russia may also be looking to China for investment in Russia and its contiguous zones. Russia and China, particularly acting in unison, may be threats to any (illegal) assertion of US dominance over the planet. But they are not threats to the USA as such.

Notwithstanding all considerations of Russia’s weakness relative to the West in all but nuclear considerations, NATO continues to act in preparation for war. In June 2018, for example, defense ministers of all NATO member states decided to take all necessary steps over the next two years to be able mobilize a total of 90 military, naval and air force combat units at short notice and at any time (Link 2018).

The Nuclear Question

But Putin is not Yeltsin, and the West was underprepared for Putin even though Putin was Yeltsin’s choice as successor. In terms of Russia’s ability to sustain and to modernize a nuclear threat, however, the answer is yes, Russia *is* an obstacle to Western regional aspirations, perhaps much more than the West appears to appreciate. Nuclear war remains a very real threat to the planet, probably the second most likely cause of the disappearance of the human species after climate change. Whereas climate change is unlikely to have fatal consequences for the planet *as a whole* before the current century is complete, nuclear war can break out at any time. Escalation of hostile rhetoric between nuclear powers enhances the likelihood that such weapons will be used, whether accidentally – there have been several “near misses,” subject to intense analysis among nuclear weapon experts both in the USA and Russia – or the result of strategic deployment. The continuing threat of nuclear weapons has been underlined by Daniel Ellsberg in his recent book *The Doomsday Machine* (Ellsberg 2017). Once a believer and influential promoter of nuclear weapons as a means of deterrence, Ellsberg now says he was a collaborator in an “insane plan” for “retaliatory genocide.” Ellsberg discovered many plausible scenarios in which officers might feel authorized to launch a nuclear attack in the absence of presidential orders. Safeguards were easy to circumvent.

Ellsberg writes of nuclear destruction:

“Here’s the scenario: the fallout would remain mostly limited to the northern hemisphere but the smoke and soot generated by fierce firestorms in hundreds of burning cities would be lofted into the stratosphere, where it would not rain out and would remain for a decade or more, enveloping the globe in smoke and blocking out sunlight, lowering temperatures to the level of the last Ice Age, and killing all harvests worldwide, causing near-universal starvation within a year or two” (Ellsberg, 2018).

The numbers of nuclear missiles have declined, but both the USA and Russia have worked on enhancing their lethality: the destructive power of US warheads is now much greater than it was (Kristensen, McKinzie & Postol 2017), while the Russia claims to have reduced the size of warheads, created warheads that can be carried by underwater drones, and has hypersonic nuclear missiles that can penetrate any missile defense system (Carroll 2018). Vladimir Putin has for many years maintained that Russia now has the capability to overcome any US missile defense (“Star Wars”) system – not so difficult, after all, considering that some critics of US missile defense policy such as MIT’s Ted Postol have long maintained that the system does not work in any case (Tsuruoko 2018; Beckhusen 2013). It can easily be overcome by the firing of numerous decoys. Tests have often been designed to replicate conditions most favorable for interceptors to work, rather than to demonstrate the extent of the likelihood that in real-world conditions they can work at all. Until recently, in any case, mismatching sophistication of early warning systems (that favor the US because they are satellite rather than land-based) enhance the possibility of error and of poor judgment given the reduced time of warning available to the Russians.

Given the numbers and power of the missiles at their disposal, it is very likely that a conflict between the USA and Russia would indeed lead to the end of the world so far as human beings are concerned. A more limited conflict between, say, India and Pakistan (entirely thinkable, given the mismatch of populations between the two countries, Pakistan’s greater sense of threat, and the gathering conflicts over water that will be exacerbated by climate change) may not wipe out the human species but would certainly wipe out a good proportion of it. The notion that armies can deploy lower-power nuclear weapons in more “surgical” fashion is the height of foolishness since the dispatch of any such weapon may well provoke a response that “ups the ante.”

In 1972 the George W. Bush administration unilaterally withdrew from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. There may have been valid reasons why this treaty needed overhaul, but unilateral withdrawal signaled a staggering arrogance and disdain for Russia, and conformed to the “Bush Doctrine” as outlined in the National Security Strategy of the United States in 2002, of US dominance over any actual or potential threat to its power. The message this conveyed to Russia was that it needed to upgrade its nuclear weapons. Both Russia and the USA have developed relatively low-power nuke warheads deliverable from air or sea. Putin in 2018 has unveiled as already mentioned, several new strategic weapons designed to nullify any missile defense shield the United States has deployed, is currently deploying, or will seek to deploy in the next 10 to 15 years.

In 2007, Russia leaked details about the RS-28 “Sarmat” heavy missile, a direct descendant of the R-36 heavy ballistic missile (Ritter 2018). The R-36’s large throw-weight (almost 20,000 pounds) allowed it to carry either a single extremely large warhead of 20 megatons or 10 independently targetable warheads of 500 to 750 kilotons. The START I Treaty saw the number of R-36 missiles deployed reduced from 308 to 154, and the entire R-36 arsenal was scheduled to be eliminated under the terms of the START II Treaty. US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty in 2002, however, resulted in Russia withdrawing from the START II Treaty in response and maintaining its fleet of R-36 missiles. Russia then embarked on an expensive service life extension program to keep the R-36 operationally viable through 2020.

Ritter identifies the strategic advantages:

“The “Sarmat” retains its throw-weight while reducing its overall weight by nearly 50 percent by using advanced composite materials for the missile airframe and employing a new type of liquid-fuel propulsion system—the PDY-99 “pulse detonation” engine—that hyper-accelerates the RS-28 into orbit, reducing the infrared signature of the launch as well as the time available to American early-warning satellites to detect such a launch. The RS-28 is designed to either be armed with 10 750-kiloton independently targeted maneuvering warheads, each of which can destroy an American ICBM silo or launch control facility, or between 16 and 24 new hypersonic glide vehicles, each tipped with a 150-kiloton nuclear warhead, and likewise capable of taking out any hardened site on American soil. Either configuration provides Russia with the means to avoid launch detection, evade all missile defense systems, and destroy America’s land-based intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) nuclear force. In short, with the RS-28, Russia possesses a genuine first-strike capability that nullifies one third of America’s nuclear triad (Ritter 2018)”

From the Obama Administration, Donald Trump inherited a plan to refurbish the U.S. nuclear force at an estimated cost of $1 trillion over three decades, and which would include the development of submarine-based cruise and ballistic missiles. Trump’s “America First” National Security Strategy of December 2017 and Nuclear Posture Review of February 2018 threatens to push the total cost to $2 trillion. These measures also reduce the threshold for nuclear engagement so that the USA could use nuclear weapons in response to non-nuclear attacks, even cyberattacks on civilian populations or infrastructure (Wittner 2018)

The Unending Stream of Western Anti-Russian Propaganda

By the year 2000 it became clear that in the eyes of Washington, “communism” was never the main “problem” with the Soviet Union. Had it been, then the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transition to capitalism would have sufficed to ensure a much more harmonious relationship between the former superpowers. But the transition to capitalism, particularly once this was harnessed in the hands of a pragmatic, nationalist but strongly capitalist leadership, was not enough for Western interests. A much older question then began to resurface: had the Cold War been a titanic struggle between two different philosophies, Communism and Capitalism (as most of those who participated in that struggle so ardently believed) or was it really about which of the two great powers could acquire the most efficient access to the wealth of the so-called “Third World?,” as CIA whistleblower John Stockwell argued in 1987 (Stockwell, 1987). As a system capitalism must always eventually wage war on itself, since its guiding principle is the unregulated struggle to maximize and concentrate wealth in the fewest hands.

Anti-Russian propaganda in Western media since the collapse of the Soviet Union has been unceasing – especially evident in Hollywood, where Russian villains passed from dour, boozy spies to violent, often hyper-nationalistic criminals dealing in black market nuclear weapons and prostitution (Boyd-Barrett, Herrera and Bauman, 2011). Adding oil to the nurture of such pre-dispositioning chauvinistic propaganda, were the real-life political challenges to rapprochement, sharpened by the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, War on Terror mythologizing of American exceptionalism from 2001, the ignominy of the West’s invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, persistent Western fabrication of the non-existent Iranian nuclear “threat,” failure of Western color revolutions in Ukraine 2004 and Georgia 2008, then dramatically escalating from the Western supported *coup d’etat* against an elected democratic regime in Ukraine in 2013, Russia’s agreement to incorporate Crimea, and its support for the calls of the peoples of the Eastern Donbas for greater autonomy *within* a more federal Ukraine. An important example of “atrocity propaganda” for the purposes of stoking further conflict was Western and Ukrainian manufacture of the “Russia shot down the civilian airliner MH17” narrative, with little regard to previous, comparable Western and - possibly accidental - Western downing of airlines over conflict zones (as in the case of the US shooting down over the Persian Gulf of Iran Air Flight 655 *en route* from Tehran to Dubai in 1988). Western judgment, unassisted by US surveillance data which remained suspiciously elusive, and as presented by the Dutch Investigation Team in 2015, 2016 and 2018 are deeply problematic (Boyd-Barrett 2018, 2017). Among other things, the investigation:

(1) incorporates to an unusual degree the social media findings of a supposedly private investigative agency, Bellingcat.com, that has since evolved into an outlet for the propaganda agency Atlantic Council;

(2) with the aid of substantial western media insistence but little logic, has presumed that Russia is the culprit and therefore debarred Russia from being a principal member of the investigative team;

(3) with the aid of substantial western media insistence but little logic, has regarded Ukraine as victim and included the Kiev regime as a principal member of the investigative team, even though there has always been substantial reason (e.g. Ukrainian ownership of many Russian-made BUK missile-launchers, parked in the Donbass) to regard the Kiev regime as a leading suspect, with stronger motive than Russia – since demonization of Russia could only assist its cause;

(4) played down Ukrainian culpability in continuing to permit the passage of civilian airliners over contested territories in which numerous BUKs were stationed and over which many military aircraft had already been shot down;

(5) has worked closely in collaboration with Ukrainian intelligence in Kiev;

(6) permits member nations of the investigation to veto publication of evidence.

Equally relevant in this context was Russia’s adept diplomacy in 2013 when it salvaged Western embarrassment resulting from its failure of US and UK governments to secure popular support for a Western invasion of Syria on the false pretext that the Baa’thist and socialist regime of Bashar al-Assad had used chemical weapons against jihadist rebels in East Ghouta that year (the East Ghouta incident is described at length in Boyd-Barrett 2015). As a compromise measure, Russia successfully proposed that the OPCW should organize the collection and destruction of all of the Syrian regime’s stocks of chemical weapons. Russia’s subsequent military intervention provided an effective counter-thrust to the gains of ISIS, exposing US lack of seriousness and its duplicitous western support for al Qaeda linked jihadist groups. In the meantime, the issue of chemical weapons – their removal from Assad’s stockpiles notwithstanding (OPCW claims a success rate of detection of well over 90%) – has continued to be resurrected on a regular basis even as evidence has grown of the use of chemical weapons by western supported jihadist groups for the purposes of staging false flag incidents that can then be used as leverage to boost western support for the “rebels.”

In the case of the chemical weapons (chlorine and sarin were alleged) attack reported to have taken place in Dhouma early in April 2018, subsequent evidence suggests there may have been no attack at all, but possibly a conventional Syrian air force attack as Syria regained territory occupied by ISIS. As on many previous occasions of such allegations that have later been debunked or the evidence found seriously wanting, the US and its allies, and western mainstream media, leaped to the conclusion that the Syrian Army, answerable to the Assad regime in Damascus, was responsible.

An OPCW report on the alleged use of chemical weapons in Ltamenah on March 24 and 25, 2018 concluded that both sarin and chlorine were likely used. Culpability was not assigned (OPCW 2018). An OPCW report on the alleged use of chemical weapons at Saraqib (Idlib province) on February 4 2018 concluded that chlorine was “likely” to have been used, based on the discovery of two cylinders that previously contained chlorine (OPCW 2018b). Culpability was not assigned. The results of the OPCW investigation of alleged chemical weapons use at Dhouma in April were still awaited at the time of writing. The findings of such international investigations, as we have seen, can be politicized (since the United Nations is very much a political creature, vulnerable to the machinations of the strongest powers and in particular the USA which is directly implicated in many of the most controversial war atrocities).

That Syrian government forces had used chemical weapons in Dhouma, in April, was unlikely, on the face of it, for the following reasons:

(i) The Syrian Army well understands the “sensitivity” of Western nations to the use of chemical weapons and the likelihood that evidence or assertions of such use could lead to disproportionate retaliation.

(ii) Additionally, the Syrian Army in 2014 rendered up all its chemical weapons under the supervision of UN’s OPCW (OPCW 2016) as has Syria’s most powerful external sponsor, Russia (OPCW 2017).

(iii) There is much evidence to show that chemical weapons are in the hands of and have been used by Jihadist groups in opposition to the Damascus regime and that Jihadist groups have previously staged false flag operations with a view to invoking Western intervention on the false pretext that the Syrian Army has used chemical weapons (Strack 2017; Mackie 2017; Doornbos and Moussa 2016).

(iv) The Syrian army was close to final expulsion of ISIS forces from Dhouma. It was winning the war and had neither reason nor other motivation for the use of chemical weapons, especially as this was territory they were about to recover. Jihadist groups had substantial motivation to claim that the Syrian Army had used such weapons (as this might buy Western intervention) and may have staged the evidence (video footage of children being treated) to support their claim.

(v) As has often been the case in these circumstances Western governments and Western media, instead of presenting evidence from their own extensive surveillance systems – unrivalled in sophistication – have resorted to social media photographs and videos, in this instance attributable to the White Helmets and other such groups closely associated with Jihadist forces in opposition to the Syrian Army and therefore lacking credibility.

(vi) When a veteran Middle East journalist, Robert Fisk (at least 30 years’ reporting experience in the Middle East, now reporting for the Independent) finally went to Dhouma within days of the incident he could find nobody in the area in which chemical weapons were said to have been dropped by the Syrian Airforce who could testify to such use, not even among doctors who had treated the supposed victims. A more likely account was provided by one of the doctors namely, that as a result of Syrian Airforce bombs a whirlwind of dust had blown into one or two buildings causing respiratory problems for the inhabitants. These were successfully attended to and without the need for special protective suits that are required in the event of chemical weapon attacks. While doctors were attending to respiratory ailments a White Helmet representative shouted “chemical attack” and took video footage of its alleged victims (Fisk 2018). This version was subsequently confirmed by an international news operation from Texas, One America News and its reporter Pearson Sharp (Syrmopoulos 2018). Even the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights is reported to have denied that a chemical attack had happened (Moonofalabama 2018).

(vii) Claims that the OPCW were prohibited by the Syrian Army from entering Dhouma were later discredited when evidence emerged that another UN agency (United Nations Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS) responsible for the safety of OPCW members had prohibited the visit because UNDSS personnel were subjected to gunfire while doing a reconnaissance of the site (Webb 2018).

(viii) Just as a subsequent US “retaliation” against Syrian army positions in 2017 in the wake of allegations of chemical weapons use in Khan Sheikhoun, so too US “retaliation” for the Dhouma allegations, western mainstream media expressed next to no outrage and little interest in the facts, despite the emergence of evidence indicating that the original allegations were, at best, questionable and, at worst, entirely false.

(ix) Writers for the Atlantic Council have argued unconvincingly that Assad needs chemical weapons because they are cheap substitutes for conventional combat operations, are effective and compensate for Damascus’ lack of precision weapons (O’Brien and Stein 2018). Deconstructing each of these premises, Cartalucci (2018) finds them completely false. Syria’s own air force, with the support of Russia and Iran provide the precision weapons that Syria has needed in the battlefield. From February 10 to February 16, 2016, for example Syria averaged 74 airstrikes per day – versus the 4 chemical weapons incidents in 5 years that are cited by O’Brien and Stein or the roughly 34 incidents the UN Commission of Inquiry has estimated (attributing all of these, almost certainly erroneously, to Syria). An overwhelming proportion of Syrian conflict has been conventional. And casualties of any kind of chemic weapon attacks (whether by Syria or by rebels) represent a small proportion of total casualties (perhaps 2,000 out of 120,000 civilian deaths since 2011[Almukhtar 2018]). In three out of the four cases claimed by the Atlantic Council, three yielded no significant advantage to Syria and in two cases failed to dislodge militants.

Western press coverage of the U.N. Commission of Inquiry of Syria 2018 report on the siege of Ghouta from 2013 cast blame for atrocities and war crimes on “both” sides (there were in fact multiple “sides” including the anti-democratic, anti-secular, non-Syrian, jihadist movements of Jaish al-Islam, Faylaq al-Rahman , Ahrar al-Shan and Hay’at Tahrir al-Shan not to mention all the powers that supported such movements, including but not limited to the US and its allies - UK, France, Saudi Arabia and the UAE), emphasized Syrian government culpability and downplayed that of the rebels (see, for example, Nebehay for Reuters 2018). Yet the U.N. report had noted, for example, that between February and April 2018, the period of the liberation of Ghouta, “besieged armed groups and terrorist organisations also relentlessly launched indiscriminate attacks against neighboring Damascus city and nearby areas, amounting to war crimes which killed and maimed hundreds of Syrian civilians. As they gradually ceded territory to pro-Government forces, the frequency and gravity of their attacks correspondingly increased” (United National Human Rights Council, UNHRC 2018).

The New York Times ignored the main report and focused instead on items that its sources claimed had been edited *out* (Gladstone and Haberman 2018). Allegedly omitted paragraphs made reference to the occasional use of Iranian-*made* artillery shells - dragging Iran, convenient demon - into the picture yet acknowledging that the missiles (comparable to others that have been used by all sides in the conflict) were fired by the Syrians. They claimed that the shells fired were filled with a chlorine-*like* substance (a weasel qualification that permits of almost any interpretation), giving victims just a *few minutes* to escape (in other words, not instantaneous, helping to explain the relatively low numbers of killed, particularly when compared to the much larger numbers of victims killed by U.S. conventional and “precision” bombing in Raqqa, 2017 during its four-month liberation). The deleted materials also made assertions about the April 7 incident in Dhouma, naturally implicating the Syrians, in advance of the OPCW report, in which symptoms were repeatedly said to be “consistent with” chlorine or other chemical agents (another weasel term open to wide interpretation).

There was relatively little acknowledgement in the U.N. report or press coverage of it of the ferocity and cruelty of ISIS, or outrage at the complete illegality of the ISIS siege of Ghouta from 2013, nor voice given to the terrible violence endured by a large civilian population over five years, nor to the valiant work of predominantly Syrian and Russian forces in setting up humanitarian corridors and other measures that allowed tens of thousands of civilians to escape despite ISIS resistance (leaving behind a population of concentrated ISIS forces). Nor was there reference to the persistent complaints of U.S. war crimes committed against civilians in the otherwise much-vaunted “liberation” of Raqqa from June to October 2017, not least the charges of Amnesty International in its report of June 2018 which found that the US-led Coalition fired vast number of imprecise explosive weapons in populated civilian areas, that even the precision bombs took a horrendous toll on civilians and that hundreds of civilians were killed before ‘Islamic State’ fighters were allowed to leave. Amnesty noted that the citizens of Raqqa, occupied by ISIS for four years, had been subject to brutal and illegal treatment by the occupiers during that period (Amnesty International 2018).

Conclusion

I have in passing considered the influence of the “Atlanticists” in Russia and their ties to the West, noting that in Moscow a significant proportion of the intelligentsia are pro-Western and rather critical of the Putin regime and the closely “managed democracy” that he represents. This puts Russia at a disadvantage: if its intelligentsia lacks a critical appreciation of Western and in particular NATO power and propaganda, this may further excite regime-change maneuvers by Western powers.

I have talked about the competitive struggle for influence over EurAsia by the USA, Western Europe, Russia and China. This has considerable implications for the potential emergence of a solid BRICS alliance and for China’s One Belt, One Road initiative and the Chinese-sponsored Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. I do not believe there will be a substantial BRICS block: at present this group of countries is split between Western and Eastern orientations, the nations concerned have very different national interests and represent different stages of economic development. They are also separated by language and culture. Additionally I have considered the role of Russia as an independent source of energy and energy wealth, with implications for opportunities for Western oil and gas companies in EurAsia, the supply of energy to Europe and China, and the influence of Russia as ally in the Middle East to Syria and Iran. It is in EurAsia that we see the sharpening tensions between two great power-blocs: the USA, in wobbly alliance with the European Union, and China in cautious alliance with Russia. US competitive rhetoric has focused primarily on Russia for almost twenty years in a mounting crescendo of angst, even as the trade wars ushered in by Trump in 2018 mainly have to do with China.

I have examined the recent events in Dhouma as yet one further likely example of “fake news,” a relatively small and perhaps insignificant example in the overall scheme of things, but one that occurred alongside several other examples that lend themselves to Russia-baiting (including the re-ignition of claims that Iran constitutes a “nuclear” threat, deserving of sanctions; claims that Russia was responsible for the assassination attempt on Sergei and Julia Skripal and therefore deserving of sanctions, or worse; continuing claims that Russia was the aggressor nation in the Ukraine conflict). All these examples operate, among other things, to heighten or escalate a rhetoric of hostility towards Russia by the US and its largest allies (including Britain, France, Saudi Arabia and Israel). This hostility is very dangerous in itself because of its threat of nuclear Armageddon.

The rhetoric is further enflamed by a series of obfuscations, exaggerations and outright lies and deceptions concerning the alleged role of Russia in subverting US democracy by means of actions that allegedly favored the chances of Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election. These allegations mostly have to do with claims of Russian interference in voter perceptions and beliefs as a result of activities through social media and the use of “bots,” “trolls” and deceptive advertising; claims that Russian intelligence services hacked the emails of Hillary Clinton, the Democratic National Campaign and its chairman, John Podesta and handed these to Wikileaks where they were published; and that senior Russian politicians and business figures had colluded with members of the Trump Campaign team to favor Trump’s chances over those of Clinton. Very little if any of this is proven beyond doubt and much of it may be based on lies and fabrications. Much of it points to deep levels of insecurity about the role of corporatized social media such as Facebook, Google and Twitter who likely failed to protect the interests of their users to the standard that users imagined and to which they were entitled. Notwithstanding egregious shortcomings on the part of social media, the political reaction to RussiaGate has been such as to feed the self-importance of their executives, grant them ever more over-weaning, undemocratic and unaccountable power in determining what contents their users should be able to access, which sources of information should be privileged and fore-fronted, and which should be marginalized or excluded altogether – in other words, the power to shape and construct the information environment on which users depend to make sense of their world. This has occurred at precisely the same time as the US FCC has abandoned its previous commitment to “net neutrality,” ushering in an era of information control in which the strongest information monopolies can select, emphasize, increase or decrease accessibility to information (by means of price, quality or speed of delivery mechanisms) at whim.

The broader question still, is about “fake news” and its contribution to a “post-truth era,” and I conclude that this issue can only be dealt with satisfactorily by means of a frank assessment of the limitations of those public media that must operate within the constraints of deeply unequal power structures, whether in the domains of political or corporate power, and by means of an assessment of how this situation, in turn, relates to phenomena of imperialism and neo-imperialism and the manifold ways in which mainstream media (legacy and online) are active players in the construction of the information environments that underwrite ideological justifications for such phenomena.

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