

Cynical Politicians Turn #FakeNews Into a Rallying Cry for Censorship

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Who knew the republic was so vulnerable that our elections could be monkeywrenched by Russian dirty-tricksters spending their office coffee budget on a motley collection of social media ads that would make the authors of Nigerian prince scam emails wince at their clumsiness?

Or, more likely, cynical politicians are making much ado about Putin and company's low-rent effort to make themselves look relevant in order to justify government interference in political speech. Just consider Sen. Dianne Feinstein's (D-Calif.) threat to Facebook, Google, and Twitter during Senate hearings over the clumsy Russky meddling: "You created these platforms, and now they're being misused. And you have to be the ones who do something about it—or we will."

Feinstein thinks government should exercise more control over speech? Such a shocker—unless you saw her try to smother encryption in 2016, or heard her insist in 2015 that edgy material like *The Anarchist Cookbook* "should be removed from the internet" or her similar effort to ban bomb-making instructions in 1997. And then there was her scheme to narrowly define "journalists" to limit legal protections for people reporting news events, and her vote for the COICA bill that would seize domain names from websites accused of piracy...

Feinstein is hardly alone in these efforts at muzzling unwelcome voices—18 other senators joined her on that COICA vote. Alternet's Max Blumenthal points out that "the liberal Democrats in #TechHearings are most outspoken opponents of press freedom & supporters of media censorship," but the latest stab at regulating online political ads draws support from both sides of the aisle (co-sponsor Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) rivals Feinstein in the degree to which he disdains unfettered speech). So it's business as usual for legislators who apparently see *everything* as justification for a mass purchase of blue pencils.

That few of these censorship efforts get passed into law—and even fewer survive constitutional scrutiny—doesn't mute the message to people on the receiving end, who have been warned that Big Brother is watching. Twitter defensively says that "the number of accounts we could link to Russia and that were Tweeting election-related content was comparatively small—around one one-hundredth of a percent of total Twitter accounts at the time we studied." Nevertheless, the company has banned major Russian media operations from advertising, just in case their rare and ham-handed efforts might change a mind or two. Even before the current kerfuffle—before the

election itself—Twitter "detected and hid just under half (48%) of the Tweets relating to variants of another notable hashtag, #DNCLeak, which concerned the disclosure of leaked emails from the Democratic National Committee," according to the company's Senate testimony. That should earn them a pat on the head from lawmakers, at least.

Facebook has been equally busy suppressing content that might make officialdom mad. Election efforts aside, the social media company's automated tools squelched political journalist James Bovard's attempt to repost a piece about controversial former Attorney General Janet Reno. Bovard bypassed the robo-censors by changing an image and a headline that apparently raised red flags. "This was not the first time Facebook erased an iconic image that the U.S. government would be happy to see vanish," Bovard cautions. "Facebook likely deleted thousands of postings of the 1972 photo of a young Vietnamese girl running naked after a plane dropped napalm on her village." Admittedly, the company is in a bind operating around the world under a variety of legal restrictions; it advises its moderators that "we will not censor content unless a nation has demonstrated the political will to enforce its censorship laws." Members of Congress certainly seem determined to demonstrate such political will here in the U.S., even without overt censorship laws in place.

The end result may or may not be to shield our fragile republic from the dubious products of Russian Internet pranksters, but it holds promise for trimming Americans' ability to discuss subjects that government officials find awkward.

It's not even clear who benefited from the supposedly super-powered Russian tweets. Contrary to early reports that the Russians were in the bag for Trump, the ads are all over the place message-wise. Sometimes written in broken English, the ideologically incoherent grab-bag promoted border-warrior memes, Black Lives Matter messages, anti-Trump rallies, Jesus arm-wrestling Satan on behalf of the Republican hopeful, and a buff, rainbow Bernie. Really. If they had a common purpose, it was to rile people up—the Internet equivalent of lighting a bag of dog crap aflame, setting it on the doorstep, and ringing the bell. And many Americans were silly enough to take the bait. "[T]he reason Russia was able to blend in to Americans' news feeds is that those ugly divisions were there to be exploited," GOP political strategist Patrick Ruffini points out in the *Washington Post*.

It's not like the Russians invented the idea of screwing with other countries' political processes anyway. That's an old and popular game—and one the U.S. has played often. "Indeed, the U.S. has found any number of creative ways to influence foreign politics. There are several ostensibly 'nongovernmental organizations' (NGOs), most notably the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute, that exist supposedly to help educate populations in newly democratic countries about the mechanics and virtues of democracy," Ted Galen Carpenter of the Cato Institute noted earlier this year. "The reality is that they fund and help train political factions that are deemed friendly to the United States, and specifically to Washington's foreign policy." Without even getting into the outright coups sponsored by the U.S. government, American officials inserted money and assistance to affect the outcome in contests from the 1948 Italian general election at least through relatively recent elections in Serbia—maybe 81 interventions in all. Between them, "the U.S. and the USSR/Russia have intervened in one of every nine competitive national level executive elections between 1946 and 2000," according to Carnegie Mellon University's Dov Levin.

That's not to say it's enjoyable to be on the receiving end. But interfering in other countries' elections is hardly an isolated event, and it usually takes place on a much larger and more targeted scale than the recent low-rent Russian effort to make Americans slightly angrier at each other than we already are.

In fact, many of the American lawmakers screaming the loudest now over a few Russian-sponsored social media ads have been in office long enough to have presided over much more serious U.S. fiddling in elections elsewhere. They know what it takes to manipulate political systems and how to push for the outcomes they want in the face of popular opposition. And that's exactly the context in which to understand their calls for regulation of social media and tighter government control of political speech.

Forget Russian meddling in American elections—the greater threat is government messing with our freedom.