



Federal Authorities Are Using ‘Disinformation’ as a Pretext To Silence Foreign Policy Dissent

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June 22, 2021 should go down as a dark day in the history of the First Amendment. On that date, the U.S. Justice Department seized control of dozens of Iranian websites. According to a Justice Department press release, the federal authorities seized 33 websites operated by the Iranian Islamic Radio and Television Union (IRTVU), which is "linked" to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. In October 2020, the Office of Foreign Assets Control designated IRTVU as a Specially Designated National (SDN). SDNs are prohibited from obtaining services, including website and domain services, in the United States without a license. The Justice Department charged that such entities "disguised as news organizations or media outlets, targeted the United States with disinformation campaigns and malign influence operations."

Such a vague and subjective justification should send chills down the spine of every American who values the First Amendment. "Disinformation" is fast becoming an all-purpose rationale (pretext?) for trying to silence dissenting voices, especially on foreign policy issues. Indeed, it was the reasoning that government officials, the so-called mainstream media, and the powerful social media platforms used to smother debate about whether the covid pandemic may have occurred because of a leak at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Seizing websites, though, is a much more blatant method of suppressing unorthodox views. Moreover, the Iranian episode is not the first time that the federal government has employed such alarming tactics. In November 2020, it took control of 27 domain names, allegedly because of affiliations with Iran. As with the latest incident, the Justice Department stated that those sites "purported to be genuine news outlets," but were simply agents of Iranian regime propaganda.

America has entered very dangerous territory if the federal government gets to determine what constitutes "genuine news outlets." It should be noted that the Justice Department's leading rationale for prosecuting Julian Assange is that he is not a "real" or "genuine" journalist. If we

allow government apparatchiks to proceed farther down that road, the freedoms of speech and press are in great jeopardy.

Iranian-linked websites have not been the only targets of Washington's harassment and repression. There has been a growing number of cases in which government agencies have "requested" that media platforms bar specific posts or even entire accounts that supposedly spread disinformation. Such requests from powerful government officials are inherently coercive. Moreover, in the areas of foreign policy and national security, the "requests" frequently border on outright orders.

One early menacing development took place in October 2017 with the FBI's first step toward intervening against dissenting views on social media. FBI leaders created a new Foreign Influence Task Force (FTIF) in the bureau's Counterintelligence Division. Next, the FBI defined any effort by states designated by the Department of Defense as major adversaries (Russia, China, and North Korea, as well as Iran) to influence American public opinion as a threat to US national security. In February 2020, the FBI defined that threat in more specific terms and indicated that the agency would act against any online media outlet that it determined fell within its ambit.

Even before that escalation, the agency had "encouraged" Facebook, Instagram, and Google to remove or restrict ads on the *American Herald Tribune* (AHT), an online journal that published critical opinion articles on U.S. policy toward Iran and the Middle East. Facebook promptly deleted AHT's page, and Instagram went even further, eliminating the publication's entire account. The FBI's allegation that AHT was a "foreign" (implying Iranian or Russian) propaganda operation was quite disputable. Not only was the editor a Canadian, Anthony Hall, Professor Emeritus at University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada, but most writers contributing articles were Americans or other Westerners.

Worse, the agency's overall rationale for suppressing targeted outlets was more than a little chilling. At a conference on election security on February 24, 2020, David K. Porter, Assistant Section Chief of the Foreign Influence Task Force, defined "malign foreign influence activity" as "actions by a foreign power to influence US policy, distort political sentiment and public discourse." That was not exactly a precise, substantive definition. Porter further described such unlawful foreign propaganda as measures "designed to undermine public confidence in the credibility of free and independent news media." Agents of influence who practice that technique, he said, seek to "push consumers to alternative news sources," where "it's much easier to introduce false narratives" and thus "sow doubt and confusion about the true narratives by exploiting the media landscape to introduce conflicting story lines."

To say that such an attitude reflected bias in favor of conventional (and more likely to be pro-government, or at least less negative) sources and outlets would be an understatement. It suggested a disturbing official hostility toward any alternative media that questioned government motives or performance, especially in the arena of foreign affairs.

There was a similar troubling undertone in a February 2020 classified briefing that the intelligence agencies presented to Congress. The *New York Times* noted the assertion in that

briefing that the Russian government was making "more creative use of Facebook and other social media. Rather than impersonating Americans as they did in 2016, Russian operatives are working to get Americans to repeat disinformation, the officials said." There was an unsubtle innuendo that Americans whose arguments in social media posts regarding a particular issue parallel those Moscow had adopted were being willing or unwilling agents of Russian propaganda. It's a position that maligned the judgment or loyalty (or both) of such Americans.

Official expressions of neo-McCarthyism have a distinctly menacing quality about them, but it is even worse when the federal government uses its power to shut down media sites that it dislikes. We're already witnessing the process move from websites that indisputably have connections to a foreign government, to those that the authorities merely allege to have such links, to the prospect of a similar crackdown on outlets whose views are similar to those of a foreign government. Powerful law enforcement and intelligence agencies are now waging war on entities that dare oppose Washington's current foreign policy. In so doing, they also are waging war on the First Amendment.

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