

MSM, Still Living in Propaganda-ville

Exclusive: The stakes in U.S.-Russia relations could not be higher – possible nuclear conflagration and the end of civilization – but the U.S. mainstream media is still slouching around in “propaganda-ville,” says Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

As much as the U.S. mainstream media wants people to believe that it is the Guardian of Truth, it is actually lost in a wilderness of propaganda and falsehoods, a dangerous land of delusion that is putting the future of humankind at risk as tension escalate with nuclear-armed Russia.

This media problem has grown over recent decades as lucrative careerism has replaced responsible professionalism. Pack journalism has always been a threat to quality reporting but now it has evolved into a self-sustaining media lifestyle in which the old motto, “there’s safety in numbers,” is borne out by the fact that being horrendously wrong, such as on Iraq’s WMD, leads to almost no accountability because so many important colleagues were wrong as well.

Similarly, there has been no accountability after many mainstream journalists and commentators falsely stated as flat-fact that “all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies” concurred that Russia did “meddle” in last November’s U.S. election.

For months, this claim has been the go-to put-down whenever anyone questions the groupthink of Russian venality perverting American democracy. Even the esteemed “Politifact” deemed the assertion “true.” But it was never true.

It was at best a needled distortion of a claim by President Obama’s Director of National Intelligence James Clapper when he issued [a statement](#) last Oct. 7 alleging Russian meddling. Because Clapper was the chief of the U.S. Intelligence Community, his opinion morphed into a claim that it represented the consensus of all 17 intelligence agencies, a dishonest twist that Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton began touting.

However, for people who understand how the U.S. Intelligence Community works, the claim of a 17-agencies consensus has a specific meaning, some form of a National Intelligence Estimate (or NIE) that seeks out judgments and dissents from the various agencies.

But there was no NIE regarding alleged Russian meddling and there apparently wasn’t even a formal assessment from a subset of the agencies at the time of Clapper’s statement. President Obama did not order a publishable assessment until December – after the election – and it was not completed until Jan. 6,

when a report from Clapper's office presented the opinions of analysts from the Central Intelligence Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Security Agency – three agencies (or four if you count the DNI's office), not 17.

Lacking Hard Evidence

The report also contained no hard evidence of a Russian “hack” and amounted to a one-sided circumstantial case at best. However, by then, the U.S. mainstream media had embraced the “all-17-intelligence-agencies” refrain and anyone who disagreed, including President Trump, was treated as delusional. The argument went: “How can anyone question what all 17 intelligence agencies have confirmed as true?”

It wasn't until May 8 when then-former DNI Clapper belatedly set the record straight in sworn congressional testimony in which he explained that there were only three “contributing agencies” from which analysts were “hand-picked.”

The reference to “hand-picked” analysts pricked the ears of some former U.S. intelligence analysts who had suffered through earlier periods of “politicized” intelligence when malleable analysts were chosen to deliver what their political bosses wanted to hear.

On May 23, also in congressional testimony, former CIA Director John Brennan confirmed Clapper's description, saying only four of the 17 U.S. intelligence agencies took part in the assessment.

Brennan said the Jan. 6 report “followed the general model of how you want to do something like this with some notable exceptions. It only involved the FBI, NSA and CIA as well as the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. It wasn't a full inter-agency community assessment that was coordinated among the 17 agencies.”

After this testimony, some of the major news organizations, which had been waving around the “17-intelligence-agencies” meme, subtly changed their phrasing to either depict Russian “meddling” as an established fact no longer requiring attribution or referred to the “unanimous judgment” of the Intelligence Community without citing a specific number.

This “unanimous judgment” formulation was deceptive, too, because it suggested that all 17 agencies were in accord albeit without exactly saying that. For a regular reader of The New York Times or a frequent viewer of CNN, the distinction would almost assuredly not be detected.

For more than a month after the Clapper-Brennan testimonies, there was no formal

correction.

A Belated Correction

Finally, on June 25, the Times' hand was forced when White House correspondent Maggie Haberman reverted to the old formulation, mocking Trump for "still refus[ing] to acknowledge a basic fact agreed upon by 17 American intelligence agencies that he now oversees: Russia orchestrated the attacks, and did it to help get him elected."

When this falsehood was called to the Times' attention, it had little choice but to append a correction to the article, noting that the intelligence "assessment was made by four intelligence agencies – the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Security Agency. The assessment was not approved by all 17 organizations in the American intelligence community."

The Associated Press ran a similar "clarification" applied to some of its fallacious reporting repeating the "17-intelligence-agencies" meme.

So, you might have thought that the mainstream media was finally adjusting its reporting to conform to reality. But that would mean that one of the pillars of the Russia-gate "scandal" had crumbled, the certainty that Russia and Vladimir Putin did "meddle" in the election.

The story would have to go back to square one and the major news organizations would have to begin reporting on whether or not there ever was solid evidence to support what had become a "certainty" – and there appeared to be no stomach for such soul-searching. Since pretty much all the important media figures had made the same error, it would be much easier to simply move on as if nothing had changed.

That would mean that skepticism would still be unwelcome and curious leads would not be followed. For instance, there was a head-turning reference in an otherwise typical Washington Post take-out on June 25 accusing Russia of committing "the crime of the century."

A reference, stuck deep inside the five-page opus, said, "Some of the most critical technical intelligence on Russia came from another country, officials said. Because of the source of the material, the NSA was reluctant to view it with high confidence."

Though the Post did not identify the country, this reference suggests that more than one key element of the case for Russian culpability was based not on direct investigations by the U.S. intelligence agencies, but on the work of external

organizations.

Earlier, the Democratic National Committee denied the FBI access to its supposedly hacked computers, forcing the investigators to rely on a DNC contractor called CrowdStrike, which has a checkered record of getting this sort of analytics right and whose chief technology officer, Dmitri Alperovitch, is an anti-Putin Russian émigré with ties to the anti-Russian think tank, Atlantic Council.

Relying on Outsiders

You might be wondering why something as important as this “crime of the century,” which has pushed the world closer to nuclear annihilation, is dependent on dubious entities outside the U.S. government with possible conflicts of interest.

If the U.S. government really took this issue seriously, which it should, why didn't the FBI seize the DNC's computers and insist that impartial government experts lead the investigation? And why – given the extraordinary expertise of the NSA in computer hacking – is “some of the most critical technical intelligence on Russia [coming] from another country,” one that doesn't inspire the NSA's confidence?

But such pesky questions are not likely to be asked or answered by a mainstream U.S. media that displays deep-seated bias toward both Putin and Trump.

Mostly, major news outlets continue to brush aside the clarifications and return to various formulations that continue to embrace the “17-intelligence-agencies” canard, albeit in slightly different forms, such as references to the collective Intelligence Community without the specific number. Anyone who questions this established conventional wisdom is still crazy and out of step.

For instance, James Holmes of *Esquire* was stunned on Thursday when Trump at a news conference in Poland reminded the traveling press corps about the inaccurate reporting regarding the 17 intelligence agencies and said he still wasn't entirely sure about Russia's guilt.

“In public, he's still casting doubt on the intelligence community's finding that Russia interfered in the 2016 election nearly nine months after the fact,” Holmes sputtered before describing Trump's comment as a “rant.”

So, if you thought that a chastened mainstream media might stop in the wake of the “17-intelligence-agencies” falsehood and rethink the whole Russia-gate business, you would have been sadly mistaken.

But the problem is not just the question of whether Russia hacked into Democratic emails and slipped them to WikiLeaks for publication (something that both Russia and WikiLeaks deny). Perhaps the larger danger is how the major U.S. news outlets have adopted a consistently propagandistic approach toward everything relating to Russia.

Hating Putin

This pattern traces back to the earliest days of Vladimir Putin's presidency in 2000 when he began to rein in the U.S.-prescribed "shock therapy," which had sold off Russia's assets to well-connected insiders, making billions of dollars for the West-favored "oligarchs," even as the process threw millions of average Russian into poverty.

But the U.S. mainstream media's contempt for Putin reached new heights after he helped President Obama head off neoconservative (and liberal interventionist) demands for a full-scale U.S. military assault on Syria in August 2013 and helped bring Iran into a restrictive nuclear agreement when the neocons wanted to bomb-bomb-bomb Iran.

The neocons delivered their payback to Putin in early 2014 by supporting a violent coup in Ukraine, overthrowing elected President Viktor Yanukovich and installing a fiercely anti-Russian regime. The U.S. operation was spearheaded by neocon National Endowment for Democracy President Carl Gershman and neocon Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, with enthusiastic support from neocon Sen. John McCain.

Nuland was heard in an intercepted pre-coup phone call with U.S. Ambassador Geoffrey Pyatt discussing who should become the new leaders and pondering how to "glue" or "midwife this thing."

Despite the clear evidence of U.S. interference in Ukrainian politics, the U.S. government and the mainstream media embraced the coup and accused Putin of "aggression" when ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine, called the Donbas, resisted the coup regime.

When ethnic Russians and other citizens in Crimea voted overwhelmingly in a referendum to reject the coup regime and rejoin Russia – a move protected by some of the 20,000 Russian troops inside Crimea as part of a basing agreement – that became a Russian "invasion." But it was the most peculiar "invasion," since there were no images of tanks crashing across borders or amphibious landing craft on Crimean beaches, because no such "invasion" had occurred.

However, in virtually every instance, the U.S. mainstream media insisted on the most extreme anti-Russian propaganda line and accused people who questioned this

Official Narrative of disseminating Russian “propaganda” – or being a “Moscow stooge” or acting as a “useful fool.” There was no tolerance for skepticism about whatever the State Department or the Washington think tanks were saying.

Trump Meets Putin

So, as Trump prepares for his first meeting with Putin at the G-20 summit in Hamburg, Germany, the U.S. mainstream media has been in a frenzy, linking up its groupthinks about the Ukraine “invasion” with its groupthinks about Russia “hacking” the election.

In a July 3 editorial, The Washington Post declared, “Mr. Trump simply cannot fail to admonish Mr. Putin for Russia’s attempts to meddle in the 2016 presidential election. He must make clear the United States will not tolerate it, period. Naturally, this is a difficult issue for Mr. Trump, who reaped the benefit of Russia’s intervention and now faces a special counsel’s investigation, but nonetheless, in his first session with Mr. Putin, the president must not hesitate to be blunt. ...

“On Ukraine, Mr. Trump must also display determination. Russia fomented an armed uprising and seized Crimea in violation of international norms, and it continues to instigate violence in the Donbas. Mr. Trump ought to make it unmistakably clear to Mr. Putin that the United States will not retreat from the sanctions imposed over Ukraine until the conditions of peace agreements are met.”

Along the same lines, even while suggesting the value of some collaboration with Russia toward ending the war in Syria, Post columnist David Ignatius wrote in a July 5 column, “Russian-American cooperation on Syria faces a huge obstacle right now. It would legitimize a Russian regime that invaded Ukraine and meddled in U.S. and European elections, in addition to its intervention in Syria.”

Note the smug certainty of Ignatius and the Post editors. There is no doubt that Russia “invaded” Ukraine; “seized” Crimea; “meddled” in U.S. and European elections. Yet all these groupthinks should be subjected to skepticism, not simply treated as undeniable truths.

But seeing only one side to a story is where the U.S. mainstream media is at this point in history. Yes, it is possible that Russia was responsible for the Democratic hacks and did funnel the material to WikiLeaks, but evidence has so far been lacking. And, instead of presenting both sides fairly, the major media acts as if only one side deserves any respect and dissenting views must be ridiculed and condemned.

In this perverted process, collectively approved versions of complex situations congeal into conventional wisdom, which simply cannot be significantly

reconsidered regardless of future revelations.

As offensive as this rejection of true truth-seeking may be, it also represents an extraordinary danger when mixed with the existential risk of nuclear conflagration.

With the stakes this high, the demand for hard evidence – and the avoidance of soft-minded groupthink – should go without question. Journalists and commentators should hold themselves to professional precision, not slide into sloppy careerism, lost in “propaganda-ville.”

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America’s Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).
