

Russia-gate Jumps the Shark

Exclusive: Russia-gate has jumped the shark with laughable new claims about a tiny number of “Russia-linked” social media ads, but the U.S. mainstream media is determined to keep a straight face, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

A key distinction between propaganda and journalism is that manipulative propaganda relies on exaggeration and deceit while honest journalism provides context and perspective. But what happens when the major news outlets of the world’s superpower become simply conveyor belts for warmongering propaganda?

That is a question that the American people now face as The New York Times, The Washington Post, CNN and virtually the entire mainstream media hype ridiculously minor allegations about Russia’s “meddling” in American politics into front-page hysteria.

For instance, on Tuesday, the major news outlets were filled with the latest lurid chapter of Russia-gate, how Google, the Internet’s dominant search engine, had detected suspected “Russia-linked” accounts that bought several thousand dollars worth of ads.

The Washington Post ran this item as front-page news entitled “Google finds links to Russian disinformation in its services,” with the excited lede paragraph declaring: “Russian operatives bought ads across several of Google’s services without the company’s knowledge, the latest evidence that their campaign to influence U.S. voters was as sprawling as it was sophisticated in deploying the technology industry’s most powerful tools.”

Wow! That sounds serious. However, if you read deeply enough into the story, you discover that the facts are a wee bit less dramatic. The Post tells us:

“Google’s internal investigation found \$4,700 of search ads and display ads that the company believes are Russian-connected, and found \$53,000 of ads with political content that were purchased from Russian Internet providers, building addresses or with Russian currency, people familiar with the investigation said.

...

“One Russian-linked account spent \$7,000 on ads to promote a documentary called ‘You’ve Been Trumped,’ a film about Donald Trump’s efforts to build a golf course in Scotland along an environmentally sensitive coastline, these people said. Another spent \$30,000 on ads questioning whether President Obama needed to resign. Another bought ads to promote political merchandise for Obama.”

A journalist – rather than a propagandist – would immediately follow these figures with some context, i.e., that Google's net digital ad sales revenue is about \$70 billion annually. In other words, these tiny ad buys – with some alleged connection to Russia, a nation of 144 million people and not all Vladimir Putin's "operatives" – are infinitesimal when put into any rational perspective.

A Dangerous Hysteria

But rationality is not what the Post and other U.S. mainstream news outlets are engaged in here. They are acting as propagandists determined to whip up a dangerous hysteria about being at "war" with nuclear-armed Russia and to delegitimize Trump's election last year.

It doesn't seem to matter that the facts don't fit the desired narrative. First of all, none of this content, detected by Google, is "disinformation" as the Post claims, unless you consider a critical documentary about Trump's Scottish golf course to be "disinformation," or for that matter criticism and/or support for President Obama.

And, by the way, how does any of this material reveal a Russian plot to put Trump in the White House and to ensure Hillary Clinton's defeat, which was the original Russia-gate narrative? Now, we're being told that any Internet ads bought by Russians or maybe even by Americans living in Russia are part of some nefarious Kremlin plot even if the content is an anti-Trump documentary or some ads for or against President Obama, but nothing attacking Hillary Clinton.

This surely does not seem like evidence of a "sophisticated" campaign to influence U.S. politics, as the Post tells us; it is either an indication of a totally incoherent campaign or no campaign at all, just some random ads taken out by people in Russia possibly to increase clicks on a Web site or to sell some merchandise or to express their own opinions.

And, if you think that this latest Post story is an anomaly – that maybe some editor was having a bad day and just forgot to include the requisite perspective and balance – you'd be wrong.

The same journalistic failures have appeared in similar articles about Facebook and Twitter, which like Google didn't detect any Russian operation until put under intense pressure by influential members of Congress and then "found" a tiny number of "Russia-linked" accounts.

At Facebook, after two searches found nothing – and after a personal visit from Sen. Mark Warner, D-Virginia, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee and a key legislator on the high-tech industry – the social media company turned

up \$100,000 in “Russia-linked” ads spread out over three years (compared to its annual revenue of \$27 billion). Facebook also reported that only 44 percent of the ads appeared *before* the 2016 election.

Facing similar pressures from key members of Congress, Twitter identified 201 “Russia-linked” accounts (out of Twitter’s 328 million monthly users).

Tiny Pebbles

However, rather than include the comparative numbers which would show how nutty Russia-gate has become, the U.S. mainstream media systematically avoids any reference to how tiny the “Russia-linked” pebbles are when compared to the size of the very large lake into which they were allegedly tossed.

The mainstream Russia-gate narrative also keeps running up against other inconveniently contrary facts that then have to be explained away by the “responsible media.” For instance, The New York Times discovered that one of the “Russia-linked” Facebook groups was devoted to photos of “adorable puppies.” That left the “newspaper of record” musing about how nefarious the Russians must be to cloak their sinister operations behind puppies. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “The Mystery of the Russia-gate Puppies.”]

The alternative explanation, of course, is unthinkable at least within the confines of “acceptable thought”; the alternative being that there might be no sinister Kremlin campaign to poison American politics or to install Trump in the White House, that what we are witnessing is a mainstream stampede similar to what preceded the Iraq War in 2003.

In the run-up to that disastrous invasion, every tidbit of suspicion about Saddam Hussein hiding WMD was trumpeted loudly across the front pages of The New York Times, The Washington Post and other major U.S. news outlets. The handful of dissenters who questioned the groupthink were ignored or dismissed as “Saddam apologists”; most were essentially banned from the public square.

Another similarity is that in both cases the U.S. government was injecting large sums of money that helped finance the pro-war propaganda. In the Iraq case, Congress funded the Iraqi National Congress, which helped generate false WMD claims that were then accepted credulously by the U.S. mainstream media.

In the Russia-gate case, Congress has authorized tens of millions of dollars to combat alleged Russian “propaganda and disinformation,” a sum that is creating a feeding frenzy among “scholars” and other “experts” to produce reports that support the anti-Russia narrative. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “The Slimy Business of Russia-gate.”]

Of course, the big difference between Iraq in 2003 and Russia in 2017 is that as catastrophic as the Iraq invasion was, it pales against the potential for thermo-nuclear war that could lie at the end of this latest hysteria.

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](#)).
