

How Russia-gate Rationalizes Censorship

Special Report: The Russia-gate hysteria has spread beyond simply a strategy for neutralizing Donald Trump or even removing him from office into an excuse for stifling U.S. dissent that challenges the New Cold War, reports Joe Lauria.

By Joe Lauria

At the end of October, I wrote an [article](#) for *Consortiumnews* about the Democratic National Committee and Hillary Clinton's campaign paying for unvetted opposition research that became the basis for much of the disputed story about Russia allegedly interfering in the 2016 presidential election on the orders of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The piece showed that the Democrats' two paid-for sources that have engendered belief in Russia-gate are at best shaky. First was former British spy Christopher Steele's [largely unverified](#) dossier of second- and third-hand opposition research portraying Donald Trump as something of a Russian Manchurian candidate.

And the second was CrowdStrike, an anti-Putin private company, examining the DNC's computer server to dubiously claim discovery of a Russian "hack." In a similar examination of an alleged hack of a Ukrainian artillery app, CrowdStrike also blamed Russia but used faulty data for its report that it was later forced to [rewrite](#). CrowdStrike was hired after the DNC refused to allow the FBI to look at the server.

My piece also described the dangerous consequences of partisan Democratic faith in Russia-gate: a sharp increase in geopolitical tensions between nuclear-armed Russia and the U.S., and a New McCarthyism that is spreading fear – especially in academia, journalism and civil rights organizations – about questioning the enforced orthodoxy of Russia's alleged guilt.

After the article appeared at *Consortiumnews*, I tried to penetrate the mainstream by then publishing a version of the article on the *HuffPost*, which was [rebranded](#) from the *Huffington Post* in April this year by new management. As a contributor to the site since February 2006, I am trusted by *HuffPost* editors to post my stories directly online. However, within 24 hours of publication on Nov. 4, *HuffPost* editors [retracted](#) the article without any explanation.

This behavior breaks with the earlier principles of journalism that the Web site claimed to uphold. For instance, in 2008, Arianna Huffington [told](#) radio host Don Debar that, "We welcome all opinions, except conspiracy theories." She said:

“Facts are sacred. That’s part of our philosophy of journalism.”

But Huffington stepped down as editor in August 2016 and has nothing to do with the site now. It is run by Lydia Polgreen, a former *New York Times* reporter and editor, who evidently has very different ideas. In April, she completely redesigned the site and renamed it *HuffPost*.

Before the management change, I had published several articles on the *Huffington Post* about Russia without controversy. For instance, *The Huffington Post* published my piece on Nov. 5, 2016, that predicted three days *before* the election that if Clinton lost she’d blame Russia. My point was reaffirmed by the campaign-insider book *Shattered*, which revealed that immediately after Clinton’s loss, senior campaign advisers decided to blame Russia for her defeat.

On Dec. 12, 2016, I published another piece, which the *Huffington Post* editors promoted, called, “Blaming Russia To Overturn The Election Goes Into Overdrive.” I argued that “Russia has been blamed in the U.S. for many things and though proof never seems to be supplied, it is widely believed anyway.”

After I posted an updated version of the *Consortiumnews* piece – renamed “On the Origins of Russia-gate” – I was informed 23 hours later by a Facebook friend that the piece had been retracted by *HuffPost* editors. As a reporter for mainstream media for more than a quarter century, I know that a newsroom rule is that before the serious decision is made to retract an article the writer is contacted to be allowed to defend the piece. This never happened. There was no due process. A *HuffPost* editor ignored my email asking why it was taken down.

Support from Independent Media

Like the word “fascism,” “censorship” is an over-used and mis-used accusation, and I usually avoid using it. But without any explanation, I could only conclude that the decision to retract was political, not editorial.

I am non-partisan as I oppose both major parties for failing to represent millions of Americans’ interests. I follow facts where they lead. In this case, the facts led to an understanding that the Jan. 6 FBI/NSA/CIA intelligence “assessment” on alleged Russian election interference, prepared by what then-Director of National Intelligence James Clapper called “hand-picked” analysts, was based substantially on unvetted opposition research and speculation, not serious intelligence work.

The assessment even made the point that the analysts were not asserting that the alleged Russian interference was a fact. The report contained the disclaimer: “Judgments are not intended to imply that we have proof that shows something to be a fact. Assessments are based on collected information, which is often

incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents.”

Under deadline pressure on Jan. 6, Scott Shane of *The New York Times* instinctively wrote what many readers of the report must have been thinking: “What is missing from the public report is what many Americans most eagerly anticipated: hard evidence to back up the agencies’ claims that the Russian government engineered the election attack. ... Instead, the message from the agencies essentially amounts to ‘trust us.’”

Yet, after the Jan. 6 report was published, leading Democrats asserted falsely that the “assessment” represented the consensus judgment of all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies – not just the views of “hand-picked” analysts from three – and much of the U.S. mainstream media began treating the allegations of Russian “hacking” as flat fact, not as an uncertain conclusion denied by both the Russian government and WikiLeaks, which insists that it did not get the two batches of Democratic emails from Russia.

(There is also dissent inside the broader U.S. intelligence community about whether an alleged “hack” over the Internet was even possible based on the download speeds of one known data extraction, which matched what was possible from direct USB access to a computer, i.e., a download onto a thumb drive presumably by a Democratic insider,)

However, because of the oft-repeated “17 intelligence agencies” canard and the mainstream media’s careless reporting, the public impression has built up that the accusations against Russia are indisputable. If you ask a Russia-gate believer today what their faith is based on, they will invariably point to the Jan. 6 assessment and mock anyone who still expresses any doubt.

For instance, an unnamed former CIA officer told *The Intercept* last month, “You’ve got all these intelligence agencies saying the Russians did the hack. To deny that is like coming out with the theory that the Japanese didn’t bomb Pearl Harbor.”

That the supposedly dissident *Intercept* would use this quote is instructive about how imbalanced the media’s reporting on Russia-gate has been. We have actual film of Japanese planes attacking Pearl Harbor and American ships burning – and we have the eyewitness accounts of thousands of U.S. soldiers and sailors. Yet, on Russia-gate, we only have the opinions of some “hand-picked” intelligence officials who themselves say that they are not claiming that their opinions are fact. No serious editor would allow a self-interested and unnamed source to equate the two in print.

In this groupthink atmosphere, it was probably easy for *HuffPost* editors to hear

some complaints from a few readers and blithely decide to ban my story. However, before it was pulled, 125 people had shared it. Ray McGovern, a former CIA analyst and frequent contributor to *Consortiumnews*, then took up my cause, being the first to write about the *HuffPost* censorship on his [blog](#). McGovern included a link to a .pdf file that I captured of the [censored HuffPost story](#). It has since been republished on numerous [other websites](#).

Journalist Max Blumenthal [tweeted](#) about it. British filmmaker and writer Tariq Ali [posted](#) it on his Facebook page. Ron Paul and Daniel McAdams [interviewed](#) me at length about the censorship on their TV program. *ZeroHedge* wrote a widely shared [piece](#) and someone actually took the time, 27 minutes and 13 seconds to be exact, to read the entire article on YouTube. I began a [petition](#) to *HuffPost's* Polgreen to either explain the retraction or restore the article. It has gained more than 1,900 signatures so far. If a serious fact-check analysis was made of my article, it must exist and can and should be produced.

Watchdogs & Media Defending Censorship

Despite this support from independent media, a senior official at Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, I learned, declined to take up my cause because he believes in the Russia-gate story. I also learned that a senior officer at the American Civil Liberties Union rejected my case because he too believes in Russia-gate. Both of these serious organizations were set up precisely to defend individuals in such situations on principle, not preference.

In terms of their responsibilities for defending journalism and protecting civil liberties, their personal opinions about whether Russia-gate is real or not should be irrelevant. The point is whether journalists should be permitted to show skepticism toward this latest dubiously based groupthink. I fear that – amid the frenzy about Russia and the animosity toward Trump – concerns about careers and funding are driving these decisions, with principles brushed aside.

One online publication decidedly took the *HuffPost's* side. Steven Perlberg, a media reporter for *BuzzFeed*, asked the *HuffPost* why they retracted my article. While ignoring me, the editors issued a statement to *BuzzFeed* saying that “Mr. Lauria’s self-published” piece was “later flagged by readers, and after deciding that the post contained multiple factually inaccurate or misleading claims, our editors removed the post per our contributor terms of use.” Those terms include retraction for “any reason,” including, apparently, censorship.

Perlberg [posted](#) the *HuffPost* statement on Twitter. I asked him if he inquired of the editors what those “multiple” errors and “misleading claims” were. I asked him to contact me to get my side of the story. Perlberg totally ignored me. He wrote nothing about the matter. He apparently believed the *HuffPost* and that was

that. In this way, he acquiesced with the censorship.

BuzzFeed, of course, is the sensationalist outlet that irresponsibly published the Steele dossier in full, even though the accusations – not just about Donald Trump but also many other individuals – weren't verified. Then on Nov. 14, *BuzzFeed* reporter Jason Leopold wrote one of the most ludicrous of a long line of fantastic Russia-gate stories, reporting that the Russian foreign ministry had sent money to Russian consulates in the U.S. "to finance the election campaign of 2016." The scoop generated some screaming headlines before it became clear that the money was to pay for Russian citizens in the U.S. to vote in the 2016 Duma election.

That Russia-gate has reached this point, based on faith and not fact, was further illustrated by a Facebook exchange I had with Gary Sick, an academic who served on the Ford and Carter national security staffs. When I pressed Sick for evidence of Russian interference, he eventually replied: "If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck..." When I told him that was a very low-bar for such serious accusations, he angrily cut off debate.

Part of this Russia-gate groupthink stems from the outrage – and even shame – that many Americans feel about Trump's election. They want to find an explanation that doesn't lay the blame on the U.S. citizenry or America's current dysfunctional political/media process. It's much more reassuring, in a way, to blame some foreign adversary while also discrediting Trump's legitimacy as the elected president. That leaves open some hope that his election might somehow be negated.

And, so many important people and organizations seem to be verifying the Russia-gate suspicions that the theory must be true. Which is an important point. When belief in a story becomes faith-based or is driven by an intense self-interest, honest skeptics are pushed aside and trampled. That is the way groupthink works, as we saw in the run-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq when any doubts about Iraq possessing WMD made you a "Saddam apologist."

As the groupthink grows, the true-believers become disdainful of facts that force them to think about what they already believe. They won't waste time making a painstaking examination of the facts or engage in a detailed debate even on something as important and dangerous as a new Cold War with Russia.

This is the most likely explanation for the *HuffPost*'s censorship: a visceral reaction to having their Russia-gate faith challenged.

Why Critical News is Suppressed

But the *HuffPost*'s action is hardly isolated. It is part of a rapidly growing landscape of censorship of news critical of American corporate and political leaders who are trying to defend themselves from an increasingly angry population. It's a story as old as civilization: a wealthy and powerful elite fending off popular unrest by trying to contain knowledge of how the insiders gain at the others' expense, at home and abroad.

A lesson of the 2016 campaign was that growing numbers of Americans are fed up with three decades of neoliberal policies that have fabulously enriched the top tier of Americans and debased a huge majority of the citizenry. The population has likewise grown tired of the elite's senseless wars to expand their own interests, which these insiders try to conflate with the entire country's interests.

America's bipartisan rulers are threatened by popular discontent from both left and right. They were alarmed by the Bernie Sanders insurgency and by Donald Trump's victory, even if Trump is now betraying the discontented masses who voted for him by advancing tax and health insurance plans designed to further crush them and benefit the wealthy.

Trump's false campaign promises will only make the rulers' problem of a restless population worse. Americans are subjected to economic inequality greater than in the first Gilded Age. They are also subjected today to more war than in the first Gilded Age. American rulers today are engaged in multiple conflicts following decades of post-World War II invasions and coups to expand their global interests.

People with wealth and power always seem to be nervous about losing both. So plutocrats use the concentrated media they own to suppress news critical of their wars and domestic repression. For example, almost nothing was reported about militarized police forces until the story broke out into the open in the Ferguson protests and much of that discontent has been brushed aside more recently.

Careerist journalists readily acquiesce in this suppression of news to maintain their jobs, their status and their lifestyles. Meanwhile, a growing body of poorly paid freelancers compete for the few remaining decent-paying gigs for which they must report from the viewpoint of the mainstream news organizations and their wealthy owners.

To operate in this media structure, most journalists know to excise out the historical context of America's wars of domination. They know to uncritically accept American officials' bromides about spreading democracy, while hiding the real war aims.

Examples abound: America's role in the Ukraine coup was denied or downplayed; a British parliamentary report exposing American lies that led to the destruction of Libya was suppressed; and most infamously, the media promoted the WMD hoax and the fable of "bringing democracy" to Iraq, leading to the illegal invasion and devastation of that country. A recent example from November is a *60 Minutes* report on the Saudi destruction of Yemen, conspicuously failing to mention America's crucial role in the carnage.

I've pitched numerous news stories critical of U.S. foreign policy to a major American newspaper that were rejected or changed in the editorial process. One example is the declassified Defense Intelligence Agency document of August 2012 that accurately predicted the rise of the Islamic State two years later.

The document, which I confirmed with a Pentagon spokesman, said the U.S. and its Turkish, European and Gulf Arab allies, were supporting the establishment of a Salafist principality in eastern Syria to put pressure on the Syrian government, but the document warned that this Salafist base could turn into an "Islamic State."

But such a story would undermine the U.S. government's "war on terrorism" narrative by revealing that the U.S.-backed strategy actually was risking the expansion of the jihadists' foothold in Syria. The story was twice rejected by my editors and has received attention almost entirely – if not exclusively – on much-smaller independent news Web sites.

Another story I pitched in June 2012, just a year into the Syrian war, about Russia's motives in Syria being guided by a desire to defeat the growing jihadist threat there, was also rejected. Corporate media wanted to keep the myth of Russia's "imperial" aims in Syria alive. I had to publish the article outside the U.S., in a South African daily newspaper.

In September 2015 at the U.N. General Assembly, Russian President Vladimir Putin confirmed my story about Russia's motives in Syria to stop jihadists from taking over. Putin invited the U.S. to join this effort as Moscow was about to launch its military intervention at the invitation of the Syrian government. The Obama administration, still insisting on "regime change" in Syria, refused. And the U.S. corporate media continued promoting the myth that Russia intervened to recapture its "imperial glory."

It was much easier to promote the "imperial" narrative and to ignore Putin's clear explanation to French TV channel TF1, which was not picked up by American media.

"Remember what Libya or Iraq looked like before these countries and their

organizations were destroyed as states by our Western partners' forces?" Putin said. "These states showed no signs of terrorism. They were not a threat for Paris, for the Cote d'Azur, for Belgium, for Russia, or for the United States. Now, they are the source of terrorist threats. Our goal is to prevent the same from happening in Syria."

Why Russia Is Targeted

So, where are independent-minded Western journalists to turn if their stories critical of the U.S. government and corporations are suppressed?

The imperative is to get these stories out – and Russian media has provided an opening for some. This has presented a new problem for the plutocracy. The suppression of critical news in their corporate-owned media is no longer working if it's seeping out in Russian media (and through some dissident Western news sites on the Internet).

The solution has been to brand the content of the Russian television network, RT, as "propaganda" since it presents facts and viewpoints that most Americans have been kept from hearing. But just because these views – many coming from Americans and other Westerners – are not what you commonly hear on the U.S. mainstream media doesn't make them "propaganda" that must be stigmatized and silenced.

As a Russian-government-financed English-language news channel, RT also gives a Russian perspective on the news, the way CNN and *The New York Times* give an American perspective and the BBC a British one. American mainstream journalists, from my experience, arrogantly deny suppressing news and believe they present a universal perspective, rather than a narrow American view of the world.

The viewpoints of Iranians, Palestinians, Russians, North Koreans and others are never fully reported in the Western media although the supposed mission of journalism is to help citizens understand a frighteningly complex world from multiple points of view. It's impossible to do so without those voices included. Routinely or systematically shutting them out also dehumanizes people in those countries, making it easier to gain popular support to go to war against them.

Russia is scapegoated by charging that RT or *Sputnik* are sowing divisions in the U.S. by focusing on issues like homelessness, racism, or out-of-control militarized police forces, as if these divisive issues didn't already exist. The U.S. mainstream media also seems to forget that the U.S. government has engaged in at least 70 years of interference in other countries' elections, foreign invasions, coups, planting stories in foreign media and cyber-warfare.

Now, these American transgressions are projected onto Moscow. There's also a

measure of self-reverence in this for “successful” people with a stake in an establishment that underpins the elite, demonstrating how wonderfully democratic they are compared to those ogres in Russia.

The overriding point about the “Russian propaganda” complaint is that when America’s democratic institutions, including the press and the electoral process, are crumbling under the weight of corruption that the American elites have created or maintained, someone else needs to be blamed. Russia is both an old and a new scapegoat.

The Jan. 6 intelligence assessment on alleged Russian election meddling is a good example of how this works. A third of its content is an attack on RT for “undermining American democracy” by reporting on Occupy Wall Street, the protest over the Dakota pipeline and, of all things, holding a “third party candidate debates.”

According to the Jan. 6 assessment, RT’s offenses include reporting that “the US two-party system does not represent the views of at least one-third of the population and is a ‘sham.’” RT also “highlights criticism of alleged US shortcomings in democracy and civil liberties.” In other words, reporting on newsworthy events and allowing third-party candidates to express their opinions undermine democracy.

The report also says all this amounts to “a Kremlin-directed campaign to undermine faith in the US Government and fuel political protest,” but it should be noted those protests by dissatisfied Americans are against privileges of the wealthy and the well-connected, a status quo that the intelligence agencies routinely protect.

There are also deeper reasons why Russia is being targeted. The Russia-gate story fits neatly into a geopolitical strategy that long predates the 2016 election. Since Wall Street and the U.S. government lost the dominant position in Russia that existed under the pliable President Boris Yeltsin, the strategy has been to put pressure on getting rid of Putin to restore a U.S. friendly leader in Moscow. There is substance to Russia’s concerns about American designs for “regime change” in the Kremlin.

Moscow sees an aggressive America expanding NATO and putting 30,000 NATO troops on its borders; trying to overthrow a secular ally in Syria with terrorists who threaten Russia itself; backing a coup in Ukraine as a possible prelude to moves against Russia; and using American NGOs to foment unrest inside Russia before they were forced to register as foreign agents. Russia wants Americans to see this perspective.

Accelerated Censorship in the Private Sector

The Constitution prohibits government from prior-restraint, or censorship, though such tactics were imposed, largely unchallenged, during the two world wars. American newspapers voluntarily agreed to censor themselves in the Second World War before the government dictated it.

In the Korean War, General Douglas MacArthur said he didn't "desire to reestablish wartime censorship" and instead asked the press for self-censorship. He largely got it until the papers began reporting American battlefield losses. On July 25, 1950, "the army ordered that reporters were not allowed to publish 'unwarranted' criticism of command decisions, and that the army would be 'the sole judge and jury' on what 'unwarranted' criticism entailed," according to a Yale University study on military censorship.

After excellent on-the-ground reporting from Vietnam brought the war home to America, the military reacted by instituting, initially in the first Gulf War, serious control of the press by "embedding" reporters from private media companies which accepted the arrangement, much as World War II newspapers censored themselves.

It is important to realize that the First Amendment does not apply to private companies, including the media. It is not illegal for them to practice censorship. I never made a First Amendment argument against the *HuffPost*, for instance. However, under pressure from Washington, even in peacetime, media companies can do the government's dirty work to censor or limit free speech for the government.

In the past few weeks, we've seen an acceleration of attempts by corporations to inhibit Russian media in the U.S. Both Google and Facebook, which dominate the Web with more than 50 percent of ad revenue, were at first resistant to government pressure to censor "Russian propaganda." But they are coming around.

Eric Schmidt, executive chairman of Alphabet, Google's parent company, said on Nov. 18 that Google would "derank" articles from RT and Sputnik in the Google searches, making the stories harder for readers to find. The billionaire Schmidt claimed Russian information can be "repetitive, exploitative, false, [or] likely to have been weaponized," he said. That is how factual news critical of U.S. corporate and political leadership is seen, as a weapon.

"My own view is that these patterns can be detected, and that they can be taken down or deprioritized," Schmidt said.

Though Google would effectively be hiding news produced by RT and *Sputnik*, Schmidt is sensitive to the charge of censorship, even though there's nothing

legally to stop him.

“We don’t want to ban the sites. That’s not how we operate,” Schmidt said cynically. “I am strongly not in favor of censorship. I am very strongly in favor of ranking. It’s what we do.”

But the “deranking” isn’t only aimed at Russian sites; Google algorithms also are taking aim at independent news sites that don’t follow the mainstream herd – and thus are accused of spreading Russian or other “propaganda” if they question the dominant Western narratives on, say, the Ukraine crisis or the war in Syria. A number of alternative websites have begun reporting a sharp fall-off of traffic directed to their sites from Google’s search engines.

Responding to a deadline from Congress to act, Facebook on Nov. 22 announced that it would inform users if they have been “targeted” by Russian “propaganda.” Facebook’s help center will tell users if they liked or shared ads allegedly from the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency, which supposedly bought \$100,000 in ads over a two-year period, with more than half these ads coming after the 2016 U.S. election and many not related to politics.

(The \$100,000 sum over two years compares to Facebook’s \$27 billion in annual revenue. Plus, Facebook only says it “believes” or it’s “likely” that the ads came from that firm, whose links to the Kremlin also have yet to be proved.)

Facebook described the move as “part of our ongoing effort to protect our platforms and the people who use them from bad actors who try to undermine our democracy.” Congress wants more from Facebook, so it will not be surprising if users will eventually be told when they’ve liked or shared an RT report in the future.

While the government can’t openly shut down a news site, the Federal Communications Commission’s upcoming vote on whether to deregulate the Internet by ending net neutrality will free private Internet companies in the U.S. to further marginalize Russian and dissident websites by slowing them down and thus discouraging readers from viewing them.

Likewise, as the U.S. government doesn’t want to be openly seen shutting down RT operations, it is working around the edges to accomplish that.

After the Department of Justice forced, under threat of arrest, RT to register its employees as foreign agents under the *Foreign Agents Registration Act*, State Department spokeswoman Heather Nuaert said last Tuesday that “FARA does not police the content of information disseminated, does not limit the publication of information or advocacy materials, and does not restrict an organization’s ability to operate.” She’d earlier said that registering would not “impact or

affect the ability of them to report news and information. We just have them register. It's as simple as that."

Then on Wednesday the Congressional press office stripped RT correspondents of their Capitol Hill press passes, citing the FARA registration. "The rules of the Galleries state clearly that news credentials may not be issued to any applicant employed 'by any foreign government or representative thereof.' Upon its registration as a foreign agent under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), RT Network became ineligible to hold news credentials," read the letter to RT.

Even so, Russia-gate faithful ignore these aggressive moves and issue calls for even harsher action. After forcing RT to register, Keir Giles, a Chatham House senior consulting fellow, acted as though it never happened. He said in a Council on Foreign Relations Cyber Brief on Nov. 27: "Although the Trump administration seems unlikely to pursue action against Russian information operations, there are steps the U.S. Congress and other governments should consider."

I commented on this development on RT America. It would also have been good to have the State Department's Nuaert answer for this discrepancy about the claim that forced FARA registrations would not affect news gathering when it already has. My criticism of RT is that they should be interviewing U.S. decision-makers to hold them accountable, rather than mostly guests outside the power structure. Tse decision-makers could be called out on air if they refuse to appear.

Growing McCarthyite Attacks

Western rulers' wariness about popular unrest also can be seen in the extraordinary and scurrilous attack on the Canadian website globalresearch.ca. The attack started with a chilling study by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization into the relatively obscure website, followed by a vicious hit piece on Nov. 18 by the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's largest newspaper. The headline was: "How a Canadian website is being used to amplify the Kremlin's view of the world."

"What once appeared to be a relatively harmless online refuge for conspiracy theorists is now seen by NATO's information warfare specialists as a link in a concerted effort to undermine the credibility of mainstream Western media – as well as the North American and European public's trust in government and public institutions," the *Globe and Mail* reported. "Global Research is viewed by NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence – or StratCom – as playing a key accelerant role in helping popularize articles with little basis in fact that also happen to fit the narratives being pushed by the Kremlin, in particular,

and the Assad regime.”

I’ve not agreed with everything I’ve read on the site. But it is a useful clearinghouse for alternative media. Numerous *Consortiumnews* articles are republished there, including a handful of mine. But the site’s typical sharing and reposting on the Internet is seen by NATO as a plot to undermine the Free World.

Drawing from the NATO report, *The Globe and Mail*’s denunciation of this website continued: “It uses that reach to push not only its own opinion pieces, but ‘news’ reports from little-known websites that regularly carry dubious or false information. At times, the site’s regular variety of international-affairs stories is replaced with a flurry of items that bolster dubious reportage with a series of opinion pieces, promoted on social media and retweeted and shared by active bots.”

The newspaper continued, “‘That way, they increase the Google ranking of the story and create the illusion of multi-source verification,’ said Donara Barojan, who does digital forensic research for [StratCom]. But she said she did not yet have proof that Global Research is connected to any government.”

This sort of smear is nothing more than a blatant attack on free speech by the most powerful military alliance in the world, based on the unfounded conviction that Russia is a fundamental force for evil and that anyone who has contacts with Russia or shares even a part of its multilateral world view is suspect.

High-profile individuals are now also in the crosshairs of the neo-McCarthyite witchhunt. On Nov. 25 *The Washington Post* ran a nasty hit piece on Washington Capitals’ hockey player Alex Ovechkin, one of the most revered sports figures in the Washington area, simply because he, like 86 percent of other Russians, supports his president.

“Alex Ovechkin is one of Putin’s biggest fans. The question is, why?” ran the headline. The story insidiously implied that Ovechkin was a dupe of his own president, being used to set up a media campaign to support Putin, who is under fierce and relentless attack in the United States where Ovechkin plays professional ice hockey.

“He has given an unwavering endorsement to a man who U.S. intelligence agencies say sanctioned Russian meddling in last year’s presidential election,” write the Post reporters, once again showing their gullibility to U.S. intelligence agencies that have provided no proof for their assertions (and even admit that they are not asserting their opinion as fact).

Less prominent figures are targeted too. John Kiriakou, a former CIA agent who

blew the whistle on torture and was jailed for it, was kicked off a panel in Europe on Nov. 10 by a Bernie Sanders supporter who refused to appear with Kiriakou because he co-hosts a show on *Radio Sputnik*.

Then last week, Reporters Without Borders, an organization supposedly devoted to press freedom, tried to kick journalist Vanessa Beeley off a panel in Geneva to prevent her from presenting evidence that the White Helmets, a group that sells itself as a rescue organization inside rebel-controlled territory in Syria, has ties to Al Qaeda. The Swiss Press Club, which hosted the event, resisted the pressure and let Beeley speak.

Russia-gate's Hurdles

Much of this spreading global hysteria and intensifying censorship traces back to Russia-gate. Yet, it remains remarkable that the corporate media has failed so far to prove any significant Russian interference in the U.S. election at all. Nor have the intelligence agencies, Congressional investigations and special prosecutor Robert Mueller. His criminal charges so far have been for financial crimes and lying to federal authorities on topics unrelated to any "collusion" between the Trump campaign and Russians to "hack" Democratic emails.

There may well be more indictments from Mueller, even perhaps a complaint about Trump committing obstruction of justice because he said on TV that he fired Comey, in part, because of the "Russia thing." But Trump's clumsy reaction to the "scandal," which he calls "fake news" and a "witch hunt," still is not proof that Putin and the Russians interfered in the U.S. election to achieve the unlikely outcome of Trump's victory.

The Russia-gate faithful assured us to wait for the indictment of retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, briefly Trump's national security adviser. But again there was nothing about pre-election "collusion," only charges that Flynn had lied to the FBI or omitted details about two conversations with the Russian ambassador regarding policy matters during the presidential transition, i.e., *after* the election.

And, one of those conversations related to trying unsuccessfully to comply with an Israeli request to get Russia to block a United Nations resolution censuring Israel's settlements on Palestinian land.

As journalist Yasha Levine tweeted: "So the country that influenced US policy through Michael Flynn is Israel, not Russia. But Flynn did try to influence Russia, not the other way around. Ha-ha. This is the smoking gun? What a farce."

There remain a number of key hurdles to prove the Russia-gate story. First, convincing evidence is needed that the Russian government indeed did "hack" the

Democratic emails, both those of the DNC and Clinton's campaign chairman John Podesta – and gave them to WikiLeaks. And, further that somehow the Trump campaign was involved in aiding and abetting this operation, i.e., collusion.

There's also the question of how significant the release of those emails was anyway. They did provide evidence that the DNC tilted the primary campaign in favor of Clinton over Sanders; they exposed the contents of Clinton's paid speeches to Wall Street, which she was trying to hide from the voters; and they revealed some pay-to-play features of the Clinton Foundation and its foreign donations.

But – even if the Russians were involved in providing that information to the American people – those issues were not considered decisive in the campaign. Clinton principally pinned her loss on FBI Director James Comey for closing and then reopening the investigation into her improper use of a private email server while Secretary of State. She also spread the blame to Russia (repeating the canard about “seventeen [U.S. intelligence] agencies, all in agreement”), Bernie Sanders, the inept DNC and other factors.

As for the vaguer concerns about some Russian group “probably” buying \$100,000 in ads, mostly after Americans had voted, as a factor in swaying a \$6 billion election, is too silly to contemplate. That *RT* and *Sputnik* ran pieces critical of Hillary Clinton was their right, and they were hardly alone. *RT* and *Sputnik*'s reach in the U.S. is minuscule compared to *Fox News*, which slammed Clinton throughout the campaign, or for that matter, *MSNBC*, *CNN* and other mainstream news outlets, which often expressed open disdain for Republican Donald Trump but also gave extensive coverage to issues such as the security concerns about Clinton's private email server.

Another vague Russia-gate suspicion stemming largely from Steele's opposition research is that somehow Russia is bribing or blackmailing Trump because Trump has done some past business with Russians. But there are evidentiary and logical problems with these theories, since some lucrative deals fell through (and presumably wouldn't have if Trump was being paid off) – and no one, including the Russians, foresaw Trump's highly improbable election as U.S. President years earlier.

Some have questioned how Trump could have supported detente with Russia without being beholden to Moscow in some way. But Jeffery Sommers, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin, wrote a convincing essay explaining adviser Steve Bannon's influence on Trump's thinking about Russia and the need for cooperation between the two powers to solve international problems.

Without convincing evidence, I remain a Russia-gate skeptic. I am not defending

Russia. Russia can defend itself. However, amid the growing censorship and this dangerous new McCarthyism, I am trying to defend America – from itself.

Joe Lauria is a veteran foreign-affairs journalist. He has written for the Boston Globe, the Sunday Times of London and the Wall Street Journal among other newspapers. He is the author of *How I Lost By Hillary Clinton* published by OR Books in June 2017. He can be reached at joelauria@gmail.com and followed on Twitter at @unjoe.
