



Shatter the House of Mirrors: A Conference Report on Russian Influence Operations

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Vladimir Putin's Russia is engaged in a well-financed and determined campaign to undermine democratic political and social institutions as well as international alliances, and to remove resistance to Russia's foreign policy objectives. Russia has the motive and the means to do so.

Russia's motives are clear. Putin resents the collapse of the Soviet Union and seeks to restore Russia's lost empire in order to give the Russian government a freer hand at home and abroad. Russia's intervention in the American election was part of a broader effort to undermine confidence in Western democracies and the credibility of Western institutions; weaken trans-Atlantic relationships, including NATO; diminish the international appeal of the United States as well as reduce American power abroad; reassert Russian power; and, ultimately, protect Putin's regime from the threat of people power.

The means at Russia's disposal include: official Russian state-organs, such as its intelligence services, that have a long history of conducting such operations; state controlled media outlets, such as RT and Sputnik which are propaganda arms whose narratives seep into Western media coverage; and Russian-controlled bots and trolls in social media that engineer the trends and popularity of both individuals and narratives. Russia has a long history of employing so-called "active measures" that by 2016 included traditional propaganda and computational propaganda, cybercrimes, as well as weaponized information—in the form of selective release of information to groups like Wikileaks. Finally, there is evidence of Russian support to and ties with the American so-called "Alt-Right," ethno-nationalists, and secessionist movements in California and Texas, among other places—all of which serve to undermine U.S. political cohesion.

Russia's assault on Western democracies, including the United States, exploits features of free and open societies. To fight-back, the United States must take decisive actions:

- **Improve transparency and raise public awareness of the threat.** Too much of the public discussion has focused on possible crimes committed by people around then-candidate Donald Trump. That focus obscures the magnitude of the challenge and the enduring nature of the threat, regardless of what happens in the investigation of the Trump team. Accordingly:
 - Congress must create an independent, bipartisan commission to establish a widely-accepted understanding of Russian actions, means, and objectives in the 2016 election.

- Among the commission's objectives, it must look beyond the 2016 campaign and expose the activities of trolls, bots, and other foreign actors, including those that are still active today, whether in battleground states or in states with active secession movements or vulnerable to exploitation over divisive social issues.
- The news industry must determine whether their current standards and practices allow them to identify when they are the vehicle for a propaganda campaign and expose other outlets that lack those standards.
- Social media platforms must be regulated so that political ads and sponsored content are clearly identified as such and there is transparency about who is paying for that content.
- Public and private resources must be brought to bear to fund the scholars, journalists, and investigators who will educate the American public and policymakers about a threat that has not waned.
- **Prepare the executive branch for a new cold war.** Organizations from the White House to the intelligence community need to be reviewed for their efficacy in meeting the propaganda challenge to the West. The White House must communicate to Congress the need for any new authorizations to meet this threat. It must also request sufficient appropriations for these activities and prosecute these programs vigorously. The administration also must provide the diplomatic leadership required for an international response to the common challenge posed by Russian intervention in the democratic processes of the West.
- **Congress must lead.** In the absence of clear executive branch willingness or readiness to lead on this issue, the U.S. Congress must take the initiative. It can do so by eliminating "dark-money" in American politics; requiring more transparency by corporations operating in the United States; embracing bipartisanship in the defense of American democracy; and reforming the laws governing the activities of foreign agents operating in the United States—to begin by considering legislative changes that would require state-sponsored media outlets, such as RT and Sputnik, to publicly reveal their sources of funding.
- **Invest in the American people.** We must once again consider education a national priority and the cornerstone for an effective defense of democracy. Russia exploited America's media illiteracy, our civic illiteracy, and our historical illiteracy. Programs to increase the public's resistance to influence by foreign powers should be either buttressed, expanded, or created. This is a long-term effort and one we must begin now.

The press and the American public are mistaken if they focus exclusively on the question of whether President Trump or his team colluded with Russia in the 2016 election. The Russian effort is larger than the election of a president. It seeks to sow division within the United States and within the broader community of Western democracies. While crimes need to be prosecuted if they occurred, the public should be sensitized and their attention reoriented to combat the broader Russian effort to weaken our faith in our free institutions, and undermine the political cohesion of the United States.



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2016 IN CONTEXT

Before the phrase “Cold War” referred to an era in history, the term “cold war” referred to confronting an adversary by means short of the use of armed force. Cold war can encompass a wide array of tools and tactics: information operations, including disinformation; influence operations; economic warfare; political subversion; and even sabotage. As U.S. and Soviet nuclear arsenals increased throughout the 1950s, cold war—what the Eisenhower administration called “political warfare”—was the best means to put pressure on the Soviet system without risking general war.

In the second half of the 20th century, across Democratic and Republican administrations, the United States sought to put pressure on the Soviet Union by engaging with its people, believing that exposing the truth and the rot inherent in their system would ultimately change the USSR from within.¹ Soviet strategy shared some similarities with the American approach—it sought to emphasize and exploit America’s flaws, especially the racial divisions that have long threatened the integrity of the American republic. But the Soviets went one step further: they manufactured and spread lies about America’s intentions, programs, and policies. The Soviets even trained foreigners for subversive activities and organized riots, such as the Teacher’s Riots in Japan in 1960 and

an attack on Vice President Richard Nixon’s convoy in Venezuela in 1958.²

In recent years, Russia has waged a new cold war on the United States, though we have only recently come to grips with this reality. As in any war, the Kremlin’s objectives are political. The principal weapon in this conflict is information, and the evidence of Russia’s use of it in Europe and the United States is clear. With the advent of ever-expanding and precise communications technologies capable of manipulating public opinion at the individual level on a mass scale, the tools and tactics of influence developed over the course of the 20th century are now capable of altering perceptions of reality, shaping societies, influencing election outcomes, and undermining states and alliances.

Soviet Use of Information in the Cold War

Throughout the Cold War, Russia used information and subversion to challenge the solidarity of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the internal cohesion of NATO-member states. In the case of the United States, one favorite staple of Soviet influence operations was exploiting the racial divisions inside the United States and elsewhere, including Africa.

In the early 1980s, a never-before-seen virus was ravaging communities of predominantly

¹ James M. Ludes, “The Russians Read our Cold War Playbook,” War on the Rocks, November 3, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/11/the-russians-read-our-cold-war-playbook/>.

² U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Communist Anti-American Riots, Mob Violence as an instrument of Red Diplomacy, Bogota, Caracas, La Paz, Tokyo, Staff Study of the Subcommittee to Investigate The Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws, August 26, 1960.

gay men and intravenous drug users in the United States. When the HIV/AIDS virus was finally identified, it paved the way for billions of dollars of research into effective treatments. But for the Soviet intelligence community, it was an opportunity to undermine the domestic cohesion and international credibility of the United States.

In 1983, Soviet operatives planted a “fake news” story with a pro-Soviet Indian newspaper alleging that the AIDS virus was developed by the U.S. government as a weapon to target African-Americans and the homosexual community. By 1987, the story had been repeated in the state-controlled Soviet press, as well as in other outlets in over 80 countries and in 30 languages.³ At the height of the AIDS crisis, the story did tremendous damage to U.S. credibility abroad as well as at home. At least one study as late as 2005 found that almost 50 percent of African-Americans believed that HIV was a “man-made virus.”⁴

The disinformation about the origins of the HIV/AIDS virus was not the first Soviet effort to stoke racial tensions. At the height of the civil rights movement, Soviet intelligence first sought to discredit Martin Luther King, Jr., because he preached racial reconciliation. The Soviets favored instead more militant African-American activists who might provoke a full-blown race war in the United States. Towards that end, the Soviets generated a

propaganda campaign to depict King as a collaborator with white oppressors. After his assassination, however, Soviet propaganda targeting the African-American community portrayed King as a martyr and sought to enflame the passions of the community already rioting in American cities.⁵

All of this history is prologue to Russia's current information war against Western democracies.

Russian Foreign Policy Goals and the Gerasimov Doctrine

Russian President Vladimir Putin has called the demise of the Soviet Union the “biggest geostrategic catastrophe of the 20th century.”⁶ His lament is fueled by former Warsaw Pact members and former Soviet Republics seeking, and gaining, admission into NATO, as well as the perceived expansion of Western institutions into traditional Russian spheres of influence⁷ (Georgia and Ukraine, for example) and (from his perspective) the meddling imposition of the values of Western liberalism — free speech,⁸ free conscience,⁹ and free elections.¹⁰ However, rather than just playing a defensive game within the motherland, Putin portrays the West as rotten, perverse, and dangerous, as a means of diminishing the appeal of Western values and institutions at home, while disrupting Western cohesion, diminishing American influence and

³ Fletcher Schoen and Christopher J. Lamb, “Deception, Disinformation, and Strategic Communications: How One Interagency Group Made a Major Difference,” *INSS Strategic Perspectives* No. 11, June 2012, <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratperspective/inss/Strategic-Perspectives-11.pdf>.

⁴ Darryl Fears, “Study: Many Blacks Cite AIDS Conspiracy,” *Washington Post*, January 25, 2005, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A33695-2005Jan24.html?tid=a_inl

⁵ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield*, (New York: Perseus Books, 1999), 237-238.

⁶ “Putin deplores collapse of USSR,” BBC, April 25, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/4480745.stm>.

⁷ Roland Oliphant, “Vladimir Putin blames NATO expansion for rising tension with Europe,” *The Telegraph*, January 11, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/vladimir-putin/12093042/Vladimir-Putin-blames-Nato-expansion-for-rising-tension-with-Europe.html>.

⁸ Konstantin Benyumov, “How Russia's independent media was dismantled piece by piece,” *The Guardian*, May 25, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/25/how-russia-independent-media-was-dismantled-piece-by-piece>.

⁹ U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “RUSSIA: USCIRF Condemns Enactment of Anti-Terrorism Laws,” July 8, 2016, <http://www.uscifr.gov/news-room/press-releases/russia-uscirf-condemns-enactment-anti-terrorism-laws>.

¹⁰ “Russia's Elections Show Putin-Style Democracy in Action,” *Financial Times*, September 10, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/b8a93c78-55f2-11e5-a28b-50226830d644>.

leadership, and, ultimately, reinforcing Russia. The tools employed by Russia are modern, including hacking and cyber-espionage, but, at its core, this is an influence operation of the kind employed during the Cold War.

Remarkably, Russian officials have described their strategy in numerous places. In a 2013 journal article, the Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Federation, General Valery Gerasimov, explained that Russia would not match the U.S. military's technological might but would, instead, use a variety of political and informational tools to achieve strategic effects, including the "use of technologies for influencing state structures and the population with the help of information networks."¹¹

The Russians have demonstrated a keen ability to "shift the flow of information," by flooding networks with too much information or disinformation.¹² This tactic crowds out other decision factors, and controls the choices available to an adversary. They have made extensive use of bot-armies¹³ and paid internet trolls¹⁴ to shape information online—to the point where they can make something trend¹⁵ on their own. And if

something is trending, it gets more coverage. In newsrooms around the country, tweets, Facebook likes, and web-page visits all translate into more coverage.

Chris Zappone, writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in June 2016, traced the tactic back to 2007, "when pro-Kremlin bloggers successfully overwhelmed news of an opposition rally in 2007 in Russia simply by crowding out posts supporting the event with coverage of a smaller pro-Kremlin march." Zappone documented similar Russian tactics during Russia's parliamentary election of 2011 and during the Scottish independence referendum of 2014.¹⁶

Russian Activities in Europe and the United States

There is a substantial and still-growing body of evidence about Russian influence and other intelligence activities in contemporary Europe and the United States. Russia has cultivated personal and financial ties with individuals and political parties across Europe.¹⁷ In France, the National Front, the

¹¹ Mark Galeotti, "The 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Russian Non-Linear War," In *Moscow's Shadow*, July 6, 2014, <https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/The-Gerasimov-Doctrine-And-Russian-Non-Linear-War/>.

¹² See Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It," RAND Corporation, 2016, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE198/RAND_PE198.pdf.

¹³ Craig Timberg, "Russian propaganda effort helped spread 'fake news' during election, experts say," *Washington Post*, November 24, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/russian-propaganda-effort-helped-spread-fake-news-during-election-experts-say/2016/11/24/793903b6-8a40-4ca9-b712-716af66098fe_story.html?utm_term=.13eae667af97.

¹⁴ Adrian Chen, "The Agency," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html?_r=0.

¹⁵ Emilio Ferrara, Onur Varol, Clayton Davis, Filippo Menczer, and Alessandro Flammini, "The Rise of Social Bots," *Communications of the ACM*, (July 2016): Vol. 59 No. 7, pgs. 96-104, <https://cacm.acm.org/magazines/2016/7/204021-the-rise-of-social-bots/fulltext>.

¹⁶ Chris Zappone, "Donald Trump-Vladimir Putin: Russia's information war meets the U.S. election," *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 15, 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/us-election/trumpputin-russias-information-war-meets-the-us-election-20160609-gpf4sm.html>.

¹⁷ See Alina Polyakova, Marlene Laruelle, Stefan Meister, and Neil Barnett, *The Kremlin's Trojan Horses*, (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2016) available at <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/The-Kremlins-Trojan-Horses-web-0228-third-edition.pdf>. See also Casey Michel, "The Rise of the 'Traditionalist International': How the American Right Learned to Love Moscow in the Era of Trump," *Right Wing Watch*, March 2017, <http://www.rightwingwatch.org/report/the-rise-of-the-traditionalist-international-how-the-american-right-learned-to-love-moscow-in-the-era-of-trump/>.

party of Marine Le Pen who was runner-up in the country's recent presidential election, has a history of accepting loans from Russian banks.¹⁸ In Ukraine, Russia employs a full suite of offensive information capabilities.¹⁹ Illiberal political parties and leaders across Europe, including Viktor Orban in Hungary, have adopted pro-Russia policies while accepting support from Moscow.²⁰

The U.S. intelligence community has concluded that Russia intervened in the U.S. presidential election of 2016. Through the hacking of political parties and the emails of key political figures, as well as the selective release of such materials, Russia influenced the outcome of the election, even if it did not alter ballots.²¹

The Vanguard of the Revolution: Bots and Trolls

Russia has developed a sophisticated capability to influence the American political process, from traditional, English-language media outlets such as RT—available in hotels around Washington, DC—and Sputnik, to the next phase of information operations: armies of bots and trolls.

In fact, the Kremlin's propaganda apparatus appears to have been deployed prior to the

U.S. election. Adrian Chen, a journalist who documented the work of Russia's paid troll army in a 2015 *New York Times Magazine* story,²² continued to follow those trolls. In December 2015—nearly a year before the election—he described a phenomenon that surprised him. In the course of his reporting, Chen had made a “list of Russian trolls.” He explained their intriguing behavior: “I check on [them] once in a while, still. And a lot of them have turned into conservative accounts, like fake conservatives. I don't know what's going on, but they're all tweeting about Donald Trump and stuff.”²³

Researchers at the University of Southern California estimated that 400,000 bots operated Twitter accounts between mid-September and mid-October 2016 and produced 20 percent of the political content on that social media platform. Seventy-five percent of those bots were pro-Trump.²⁴ On September 6, 2017, Facebook confirmed publicly that between June 2015 and May 2017, it had sold 3,000 ads for \$100,000 to accounts and pages operated from Russia. Some of those accounts were traced back to the same Russian troll farm Chen had documented in his earlier reporting for *The New York Times Magazine*. Notably, the bulk of the paid content was about issues that divide the American population, such as guns,

¹⁸ Gabriel Gatehouse, “Marine Le Pen: Who's funding France's far right?” BBC, April 3, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39478066>.

¹⁹ Keir Giles, “The Next Phase of Russian Information Warfare,” NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, no date, https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=7&ved=0ahUKEwiG4r-l-DVAhUL_4MKHSDoDIgQFghKMAY&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.stratcomcoe.org%2Fdownload%2Ffile%2Ffid%2F5134&usq=AFQjCNFBpiCCKnnQIC0jKXBxd89z7LLG3Q.

²⁰ Paul Hockenno, “Vladimir Putin's Little Helper,” *New Republic*, April 19, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/132778/vladimir-putins-little-helper>.

²¹ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections,” January 6, 2017, https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf.

²² Adrian Chen, “The Agency,” *The New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html?_r=0.

²³ Natasha Bertrand, “It looks like Russia hired internet trolls to pose as pro-Trump Americans,” *Business Insider*, July 27, 2016, <https://amp.businessinsider.com/russia-internet-trolls-and-donald-trump-2016-7>.

²⁴ Alessandro Bessi and Emilio Ferrara, “Social bots distort the 2016 U.S. Presidential election online discussion,” *First Monday* (November 2016): v. 21, no 11, <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/7090/5653>. See also, Nanette Byrnes, “How the Bot-y Politic Influenced this Election,” *MIT Technology Review*, November 8, 2016, https://www.technologyreview.com/s/602817/how-the-bot-y-politic-influenced-this-election/?utm_campaign=internal&utm_medium=homepage&utm_source=cover-story&set=602820.

race, LGBTQ rights, and immigration, rather than any individual candidate.²⁵ Russia's focus on divisive issues has not waned and Kremlin influence networks on social media continue to spread divisive themes inside the United States.²⁶

June 2017 Pell Center Political Warfare Conference

At the end of June 2017, 36 researchers, technologists, scholars, journalists, and policy experts from North America, Europe, and Australia convened at the Pell Center for International Relations and Public Policy at Salve Regina University in Newport, Rhode Island, for two days of off-the-record deliberation about the use of information as a weapon by Russia, by China, and by terrorist organizations. Information plays a central role in conflict in the 21st century, and every major player seeks to use information to its own advantage.

To encourage frank dialogue, the conference was conducted under the Chatham House Rule, meaning that content could be used but the source could not be identified. The following pages document recommendations that emerged from those proceedings, specifically with regards to Russia.²⁷

²⁵ Alex Stamos, "An Update on Information Operations on Facebook," September 6, 2017, <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/09/information-operations-update/>.

²⁶ See Hamilton 68: Tracking Russian Influence Operations on Twitter, <http://dashboard.securingdemocracy.org/>, accessed on September 20, 2017.

²⁷ While the workshop deliberated about Chinese and terrorist use of information and influence, this report focuses on Russia because its use of information currently poses a unique threat to the United States and other Western democracies. Russian efforts have found resonance in some segments of the population and key communicators that terrorists and Chinese efforts simply have not, to date.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Improve Transparency and Public Awareness of the Threat

A. Form an Independent Commission to Establish a Widely Accepted Understanding of Russian Actions, Means, and Objectives

The public discussion of Russian interference in the American election of 2016 has focused, largely, on whether Donald Trump or individuals associated with him and his campaign actively colluded with Russia. The investigation initiated by former FBI Director James Comey began as a counterintelligence investigation to determine how Russia was operating with the intent of foreclosing any such means in the future. Subsequently, the investigation, now under the leadership of Special Counsel Robert Mueller, appears to have turned to possible criminal wrongdoing. The intelligence committees of the House and Senate, as well as the Senate Judiciary Committee are all engaged in parallel investigations.

Yet the challenges each investigation faces are considerable. The Comey investigation was short-circuited when President Donald Trump fired the then-FBI director. Subsequent revelations that the president may have sought to influence the investigation led to the appointment of Robert Mueller as Special Counsel. The Mueller investigation, under the Special Counsel statute, will report to Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein any decisions to pursue or decline prosecutions. Rosenstein, in turn, will decide what, if any, details to make public about the results

of Mueller's investigation. In other words, anything short of criminal wrongdoing may never be known by the American public as a result of the Mueller investigation.²⁸

The investigations in the House and Senate, in contrast, should produce public reports. The credibility of the House investigation, however, has been horribly marred by the collaboration between Representative Devin Nunes and the White House to spread disinformation to muddy the public's understanding of the issues.²⁹ The Senate investigation has proceeded in a more balanced, bipartisan manner. But the Senate effort has been plagued by too few investigatory staff members.³⁰ Both the House and Senate investigations risk being marred by partisanship.

National unity and national security require a common, accepted understanding of the threat to American democracy posed by modern influence operations and the events of the 2016 presidential election. The people of the United States need to have a shared understanding of the facts so that they can design an appropriate response to the threat. Americans also need confidence in the integrity of their electoral systems and their constitutional form of government.

An independent commission to investigate Russian influence operations against the United States is necessary to lay bare in public the extent, nature, objectives, and means of Russian operations, and to make the public more resistant to other influence campaigns in the future.³¹

²⁸ 28 CFR 600.8 and 600.9 <https://www.law.cornell.edu/cfr/text/28/600.8>.

²⁹ Katie Bo Williams, "Devin Nunes, Trump and the Russia probe: A timeline," *The Hill*, April 1, 2017, <http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/326793-devin-nunes-trump-and-the-russia-probe-a-timeline>.

³⁰ Manu Raju, Jim Sciutto, Tom LoBianco, "Senate Russia investigation to add 2 more staffers after pace criticized," CNN, April 24, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/24/politics/senate-intelligence-committee-russia-investigation/index.html>.

³¹ Ezra Klein, "Evelyn Farkas was the Pentagon's top Russia expert. Now she wants Trump independently investigated," *Vox*, February 16, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/conversations/2017/2/16/14630856/evelyn-farkas-trump-russia-flynn>.

B. Shine a Light on Activities of Trolls and Bots in Battleground States and Beyond

Something happened in Michigan in November of 2016 that demands additional research and investigation. Preliminary data depicts a flood of false information and junk news that is far out-of-line with similarly studied elections in Germany, France, and the United Kingdom. In the first 11 days of November 2016, 34% of tweets in Michigan were “junk,” that’s about three to six times more than comparable samples from other elections in other countries. For every one piece of professionally produced news circulating in Michigan that week, there were two other stories not from professional, reputable outlets. Michigan was a surprise win for Donald Trump by only 11,612 votes or 0.3% of the total.³²

Truth, of course, is not a universally recognized virtue in political campaigns, and it is far from certain whether foreign-controlled bots played a role in influencing the conversations in key battleground states. But something happened that requires further investigation and public awareness so that American laws can either be modified to cope with this new reality or the public can be prepared to understand the current information-environment.

The recent revelation from Facebook about ads on its platform with ties to Russia provided the public with the first detailed look from industry about influence operations on social media.³³ However, Facebook has refused to release to the public the content of those ads. The public needs more information. If citizens are to know how to spot bogus content in social media, then they should see specific examples, such as the ads Facebook has identified. Researchers and other scholars may also provide other insights from the content of these ads.

C. News Media Needs to Determine Whether Their Current Standards and Practices Allow Them to Identify When They are the Vehicle for a Propaganda Campaign

Social media was not the only vector in the Russian influence campaign that sought to impact Americans’ attitudes and behaviors during the 2016 election. The traditional news media, whether print, broadcast, cable, or internet-based became infected as well, whether directly or through a focus on news stories that had become popular on social media largely as a result of bot-based and other auto re-tweets. Even the most professional news organizations can be taken in by a deceptive source or fabricated story and there is an inherently difficult challenge in determining how to handle deliberately misleading facts or false news stories when their very presence has become the story itself. Likewise, there are professional and ethical challenges to consider with regards to publishing or covering particular materials and stories. For example, foreign intelligence services use online aggregators of “leaked” documents such as Wikileaks—whether wittingly or unwittingly—to propagate fabricated or altered documents to lend legitimacy to “fake news” and disinformation. By falling prey to these disinformation efforts legitimate news outlets become mouthpieces for this disinformation that lends further legitimacy to the disinformation. In a perfect world, news organizations would spot and expose such efforts in order to forewarn the public before they cause damage. Unfortunately well-crafted disinformation campaigns may escape the limited scrutiny that happens in a fast-moving news cycle. Thus, while not ideal and difficult to execute, professional news organizations may have to consider not covering such document dumps and other stories where there is a strong

³² 2016 Michigan Presidential Election Results, *Politico*, updated December 13, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/2016-election/results/map/president/michigan/>.

³³ See Alex Stamos, “An Update on Information Operations on Facebook,” September 6, 2017, <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/09/information-operations-update/>.

likelihood, even if not an absolute indicator, that such a dump or story is deliberate disinformation. While individual news organizations may choose to act in this way it will be important for the profession as a whole to adopt new norms that balance “breaking news” and “initial reports” with the reality that so much of this might be tainted by deliberate disinformation.

To some degree success will mean adhering to many of the rules already in practice, especially with regards to off-the-record/anonymous sourcing. Indeed, it is not just the adoption of “fake news,” but simple mistakes and errors that can often damage an outlet’s credibility. The more reliant an organization is on single, unnamed, or anonymous sources, the greater risk there is of blowback if a story is proven not factual. Anonymous sources are, as one *New York Times* editor noted in a discussion of that newspaper’s policy on anonymous sources, potential “journalistic I.E.D.s,” that can explode and damage the credibility of the news outlet.³⁴ While it remains incredibly difficult for journalists to work without confidential sources, most outlets and reporters have learned to balance these risks through policies that require senior editors knowing who the unnamed sources are and to signing off on their use as well as corroboration of the facts provided by those sources through other means. Arguably, this can slow down the process and can prove problematic in an age where journalism and getting the story first can be critical to an outlet’s profitability. That said, mistakes can also impact the bottom line. Outlets such as *The New York Times* learned firsthand through the Judith Miller scandal that sometimes a powerful narrative coming from ostensibly credible sources may simply be disinformation or half-truths masquerading as objective fact.³⁵ Indeed, with Soviet-style disinformation programs in full-swing, the Miller story is instructive as outlets will need

to maintain a level of oversight, editorial vigilance, and skepticism—even of seemingly credible sources—to ensure that the DNA of disinformation campaigns does not infect larger narratives.

This could, perhaps, require the sharing of information about journalistic sources and methods that, while done informally between reporters at times, has never been institutionalized as it could provide competitive advantages to other outlets. Still, without some sort of de-confliction, news organizations could be unwittingly played by unscrupulous sources or just by failing to recognize that a narrative or key piece of information has been fabricated. An easier, though less satisfying approach might be for major broadcast and print outlets to confidentially share lessons learned to help others learn from situations where an organization was duped or played by a false story line. For starters, the major broadcast and cable networks, as well as the print and internet-based professional news organizations should gather for a post-mortem of their coverage of the 2016 campaign with an eye towards how they were steered by Russian attempts to drive the news cycle. While of course there would be public interest in seeing the results of these conversations, the important piece would be for writers, editors, and producers to gain better situational awareness so that they prove more adept at identifying deliberate disinformation campaigns when they occur again.

In the financial sector, companies like Moody’s enable clients to manage risk and increase their confidence in financial decisions through robust analysis and a well-respected ratings system to measure financial risk and stability of products. A Moody’s-like program could help analyze and rate the full range of traditional broadcast, cable, and print-media that could help the public to identify those outlets that adhere to the highest standards

³⁴ Margaret Sullivan, “Tightening the Screws on Anonymous Sources,” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2016, <https://publiceditor.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/03/15/new-york-times-anonymous-sources-policy-public-editor/>.

³⁵ Don van Natta, Jr., Adam Liptak, and Clifford J. Levy, “The Miller Case: A Notebook, a Cause, a Jail Cell and a Deal,” *The New York Times*, October 16, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/16/us/the-miller-case-a-notebook-a-cause-a-jail-cell-and-a-deal.html>.

of professional practice and might also be used to help rate the factual basis for a story. A similar system might work for the internet as well, though given the fluidity of that platform some crowd-sourced systems might prove more useful, but would have to go well beyond sites such as Snopes. Indeed, this already works to some degree—though not without problems—in the commercial space (Yelp, TripAdvisor) as well as on Reddit. Similarly, a Voluntary Online Reputational Score (VORS) combined with crowdsourcing could be used to help traditional media outlets determine the type of attention that should be given to reports coming off the media. This could help to filter the type of artificial emphasis that some “fake news” is given simply by its prevalence on the internet.

D. Social Media Platforms Must be Regulated so that Political Ads and Sponsored Content are Clearly Identified as such

In October 2014, Federal Election Commissioner Ann M. Ravel criticized her colleagues on the FEC for turning a

blind eye to the internet’s growing force in the political arena. The Commission’s paramount concern may have been not to inhibit a technology that was well-suited for mass-communication by individual citizens. But the Commission failed to take into account clear indicators that the internet would become a major source of political advertising....³⁶

Two years later, the Trump campaign is reported to have spent \$90 million on digital

advertising, while the Clinton campaign spent at least \$55 million.³⁷

Federal election law already applies to broadcast political advertising and, on paper, prohibits any foreign spending, directly or indirectly, in an American election. Still, as the Facebook report makes clear,³⁸ foreign entities were able to buy ads with political content during the 2016 election cycle on issues that were divisive in the electorate.

It is past time to update federal election law and rules, balancing American traditions and freedom of speech with the need for a well-regulated and transparent political process.

E. Fund a Cohort of Scholars, Journalists, and other Investigators to Resurrect the History of “Active Measures” so that the Public Understands What’s Being Done to Them, and Policy Makers Know How to Respond

In a democracy such as ours, there is no substitute for free scholarship to educate and inform free minds. In 1959, Dr. Lev Dobriansky of Georgetown University, endorsed legislation to increase federal funding for Russian studies in the face of political tactics that would seem very familiar to contemporary audiences. The logic behind increasing funding for Russian studies in the Cold War was simple. To combat then-Soviet tactics, policy makers needed a community of scholars well-versed in them and able to recognize them for what they are: the ancient tactics of authoritarian regimes.³⁹ In addition, increased funding for Russian studies would help citizens understand the threat and the tactics employed against a free society.

³⁶ Ann M. Ravel, “Statement of Reasons of Vice Chair Ann M. Ravel,” Federal Elections Commission, October 24, 2014, [eqs.fec.gov/eqsdocsMUR/14044363872.pdf](https://www.fec.gov/eqsdocsMUR/14044363872.pdf).

³⁷ Darren Samuelsohn, “Facebook: Russian-linked accounts brought \$150,000 in ads during 2016 race,” *Politico*, September 6, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/06/facebook-ads-russia-linked-accounts-242401>.

³⁸ Alex Stamos, “An Update on Information Operations on Facebook,” September 6, 2017, <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/09/information-operations-update/>.

³⁹ U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee To Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the United States, Hearings on the Freedom Commission and Freedom Academy, June 17-19, 1959, 160.

At minimum, today, the United States needs to amplify the work done by contemporary scholars of Russian active measures. Their work needs to be funded, their insights shared in print and in social media, and their recommendations and warnings need to be heard in Congress, in the press, and across American society.

The threat of Russian intervention in American elections has not abated. Former FBI Director James Comey warned in Congressional testimony that the Russians would be back in 2018 and 2020. In fact, the Russians never left. Evidence of their intervention in American political life grows every day. From the ties between the Alt-Right and Russia⁴⁰ to the support Russia has given the CalExit movement,⁴¹ the public must be exposed to these efforts and policy makers must be held to account for their response to them. These are threats to the integrity of the American republic. Historians, social scientists, journalists, and other experts have a unique role to play in identifying this danger, putting it in meaningful context, and focusing the public's attention on it.

Whether the funding is public or private, scholars, journalists, and other investigators should be mobilized to meet this threat.

2. Prepare the Executive Branch for a New Cold War

Organizations from the White House to the intelligence community need to be reviewed for their efficacy in meeting the propaganda challenge to the West. The White House must communicate to Congress any need

for new authorizations to meet this threat. It must also request sufficient appropriations for these activities and prosecute these programs vigorously. The administration must also provide the diplomatic leadership required for an effective international response to the common challenge posed by Russian intervention in the democratic processes of the West.

There is no doubt that both the State Department and the Intelligence Community must have the ability to both identify and to call-out fake news, disinformation campaigns and the types of “active measures” that the East German Stasi used to call their “favorite pastime.”⁴² The AIDS disinformation campaign led by the Soviets and East Germans and designed to blame the United States for the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s, had a deleterious impact on the U.S. image amongst African nations in particular. It took the creation of an interagency task force—an Active Measures Working Group (AMWG) made up of personnel from State, CIA, ACDA, USIA, DOD, and DOJ to begin to counter the Soviet disinformation effort. The AMWG during the Reagan years not only monitored and assessed Soviet disinformation campaigns but also spoke to press about their findings, even contacting directly newspaper editors who were running the Soviet sponsored stories.⁴³ This group also enabled U.S. government (USG) officials to confront Soviet officials directly and publicly. Remarkably, there is still no government-wide task force designed to counter Russian and other disinformation campaigns targeting the United States and the creation of one may be a pre-requisite to any USG efforts to deal

⁴⁰ Casey Michel, “America’s neo-Nazis don’t look to Germany for inspiration. They look to Russia,” *The Washington Post*, August 22, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/08/22/americas-neo-nazis-dont-look-to-germany-for-inspiration-they-look-to-russia/?utm_term=.a81035c414af.

⁴¹ See John Myers, “California secession organizers say they’ve opened an embassy—in Moscow,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 20, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/politics/essential/la-pol-ca-essential-politics-updates-calexit-organizers-say-they-ve-opened-1482187671-htmlstory.html>. See also, Mansur Mirovalev, “Moscow Welcomes the (would-be) sovereign nations of California and Texas,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-russia-separatists-snap-story.html>.

⁴² Thomas Boghardt, “Operation INFEKTION: Soviet Bloc Intelligence and its AIDS Disinformation Campaign,” *Studies in Intelligence*, (December 2009): vol. 53, no. 4, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol53no4/pdf/U-%20Boghardt-AIDS-Made%20in%20the%20USA-17Dec.pdf>.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

with the problem. Likewise, there should be a single, senior White House official, a Special Assistant to the President, leading the coordination of any USG efforts.

The current administration is not likely to take such robust action to counter Russian disinformation efforts and it is more than likely Congressional direction would be met with tepid execution. The White House, however, may be more receptive to efforts that increase the U.S. Department of Defense's capacity to conduct and counter information operations. If so, then significant strides could be taken to improve not just DOD operational and analytical capabilities but NATO's as well. Indeed, while Chinese information operations capabilities could prove immensely challenging in the event of security challenges in the Pacific, there is no doubt that NATO and NATO nations are already engaged in a non-armed conflict with Russia—a conflict taking place over the airwaves and on the internet. Estonia and Latvia were the first NATO nations to be victims of this conflict and they responded by bolstering their defenses against Russian cyber and information warfare capabilities. In the wake of massive Russian cyber-attacks in 2007, the Estonian government lobbied for and in 2008 established the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (COE). Since then, NATO has made progressively stronger statements about how cyber-attacks might trigger an Article 5 response by the alliance.⁴⁴ Similarly, Latvia established the Strategic Communications COE in 2014 as a response to influence and information attacks directed from Moscow. Now, NATO needs to consider when a massive disinformation campaign—especially one that disrupts the political system of a member nation—might be considered an attack that results in an Article 5 response by the alliance. This is not to say that a disinformation campaign disrupting a national election would be met with artillery fire and airstrikes, but it would be a political

acknowledgement that the Alliance considers that even a non-armed attack against one would be considered an attack against all and that collective defensive measures *would* be taken and that offensive measures *could* be taken.⁴⁵

3. Congress Must Lead

To defend American democracy, specific actions are recommended to improve transparency:

- Eliminate the role of so-called “dark money” in American politics. The Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United* introduced unlimited corporate money into American politics. The challenge of dark money is that it can't be traced. In that environment, money could be from a wealthy American or from a foreign government.
- Require more transparency by corporations operating in the United States. As the European Union is making incorporation laws more transparent, the United States is emerging as the last legitimate haven for shell corporations. As in the case of dark money, if officials do not know who benefits from a company's activities, it also doesn't know who may be behind that company's generous political contributions.
- Congressional leaders must speak with one voice when it comes to protecting America's free institutions. There is no Democratic or Republican solution to these challenges—these threats undermine the American system and weaken American leadership globally. Congress has a vital role to play in communicating the reality of this threat to the American public and thereby setting the stage for an effective response. If leaders from both the Democratic and Republican parties speak with one voice on this issue, they will take the politics out

⁴⁴ “Massive cyber-attack could trigger NATO response: Stoltenberg,” Reuters, June 15, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyber-nato-idUSKCN0Z12NE>.

⁴⁵ North Atlantic Treaty, April 4, 1949, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/us-treaties/bevans/m-ust000004-0828.pdf>.

of it and improve the nation's resistance to foreign manipulation.

- Congress can increase transparency on the roles and activities of foreign media operating in the United States by requiring these organizations to reveal their sources of funding. Congress is already considering several measures such as the Foreign Agents Modernization and Enforcement Act, a bipartisan proposal from Senators Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH) and Todd Young (R-IN) would require foreign-controlled media companies, such as “RT America” to reveal their sources of funding.⁴⁶ In addition, the Close the Foreign Lobbying Loophole Act proposed by Senators Claire McCaskill (D-MO) and Chuck Schumer (D-NY) would help clarify who needs to register as a foreign agent.⁴⁷ Whether or not foreign controlled media operations are considered foreign agents under the law is less important than ensuring that they are required to publicly reveal their funding sources.⁴⁸
- Finally, Congress should consider specific programs that will allow the Executive Branch and American allies to counter Russian propaganda around the world. These efforts should focus on helping the public to understand they are targets of foreign propaganda as well as assisting them in efforts to identify deliberately misleading or false information. Congress included \$250 million for counterpropaganda activities in the sanctions legislation signed into law by President Donald Trump in August 2017. Congress should fund similar counter-propaganda programs domestically, especially to educate the

public on the pervasiveness of foreign disinformation and how to identify it. In the 1940s, the U.S. government tried to educate the American public to similar risks through a variety of means, including public service films.⁴⁹ Today, such a public awareness campaign might include not just educating the millions of military and civilian federal employees but also private-public partnerships and cooperatives with universities and colleges that could serve to better educate the public on how to identify particular propaganda efforts targeted at them.

4. Invest in the American People: Short and Long Term Educational Imperatives in Media Literacy, Civic and Historical Literacy

All the diplomacy, defense, intelligence and digital analysis won't matter one bit if we don't properly educate our society as to what they are facing out there in the world. Propaganda and disinformation campaigns are designed to influence human attitudes and behaviors and thus, we must educate and inoculate citizens or they will remain susceptible to the disease. As Amanda Marcotte of *Slate* so adeptly put in in December 2016, “The big problem isn't that the Russian hackers tried to influence the election—it's more that we let them.”⁵⁰

As good propagandists know, the problem with influencing people is that you have to first make sure they actually see the message and then they must understand what the message says. Finally they must understand that the message actually applies to them. Only then can a message have power to change

⁴⁶ Mieke Eoyang, Evelyn Farkas, Ben Freeman, and Gary Ashcroft, “The Last Straw: Responding to Russia's Anti-Western Aggression,” *The Third Way*, June 14, 2017, <http://www.thirdway.org/report/the-last-straw-responding-to-russias-anti-western-aggression>.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ For a discussion of the argument against requiring foreign agent designation, see Matt Armstrong, “Don't Do It: Why the Foreign Agent Designation is Welcomed by RT and Sputnik,” September 21, 2017, https://mountainrunner.us/2017/09/a_bridge_too_fara/.

⁴⁹ See U.S. Department of Defense, “Don't be a sucker,” 1947, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23X14HS4gLk>.

⁵⁰ Amanda Marcotte, “The big problem isn't that Russian hackers tried to influence our election—it's more that we let them,” *Salon*, December 13, 2016, <http://www.salon.com/2016/12/13/the-big-problem-isnt-that-russia-tried-to-influence-our-election-its-more-that-we-let-them/>.

attitudes or behaviors. If you can stop an influence operation at any of these points then it is less likely to have an impact.

The key to stopping this process is, quite simply, education. It is not just a matter of teaching students how to think critically but requiring students to be well schooled in the art of media literacy. Programs such as those run by the Center for News Literacy at Stony Brook University, the Media Education Lab at the University of Rhode Island, and the Stanford Graduate School of Education's History Education Group have already taken on the herculean task of media literacy education, faculty training, and curriculum development.⁵¹ Fake news and disinformation in the United States are not new phenomena. Unregulated advertising in the late 19th Century and the Yellow Journalism of the early 20th Century are but some of the examples of how Americans were duped by domestic provocateurs in an analog era. The dawn of the internet, however, has understandably made it easier for both domestic or foreign propaganda and disinformation operations to disguise and spread their messages and indeed to allow a degree of collaboration between them. While some of these efforts have been ongoing for over a decade, the deficiencies in media literacy became clear during both the run-up to and during the 2016 presidential election cycle. In a report released in November of 2016, the Stanford History Education Group at Stanford's Graduate School of Education noted a "dismaying inability by students to reason about information they see on the internet," to include differentiating between advertisements and news articles as well as "identifying where the information came from."⁵²

One particular challenge is that by the time students get to college it is often too late to break them of the habits and pre-conceived notions they have about what constitutes valid sources of information. Stony Brook University has focused its efforts on educating U.S. and international students at the middle school and junior high school level while Stanford has argued for greater education at the elementary school level.⁵³ Education will require a concerted effort at the K-12 level in order to introduce and reinforce key concepts that will allow students to avoid falling prey to disinformation and "fake news." There is no doubt that state school boards as well as public and private universities will have to enhance not just their educational programs but training for educators as well. Likewise, research institutions, perhaps in partnership with Silicon Valley, can push out ready-made blocks of instruction and entertaining but educational games in order to help internalize media literacy amongst the population. Specifically, programs will need to help provide people with the ability to distinguish ads from content and tell the difference between real and fake websites. Equally important will be reinforcing the need to cross-check information, to include inculcating the importance of actually clicking links in stories and reading past the headlines. On a more holistic level, our students and citizens need to be more conscious about being critical of what they read to include understanding, at least at a basic level the difference between balance, bias, and "truth."

This is not an easy task and while there are organizations such as the National Association for Media Literacy Education⁵⁴ and the programs cited above, there is need

⁵¹ For information on the Stony Brook University Center for News Literacy, please visit <http://www.centerfornewsliteracy.org/>. For the Stanford History Education Group, visit http://sheg.stanford.edu/home_page. For information about the Media Education Lab at the University of Rhode Island, visit <http://mediaeducationlab.com>.

⁵² Brooke Donald, "Stanford researchers find students have trouble judging the credibility of information online," Stanford University, November 22, 2016, <https://ed.stanford.edu/news/stanford-researchers-find-students-have-trouble-judging-credibility-information-online>.

⁵³ The Center for Media Literacy at Stony Brook University offers a massive open online course (MOOC) on media literacy. For more information, see "Making Sense of the News," <https://www.coursera.org/learn/news-literacy>.

⁵⁴ For information on the National Association for Media Literacy Education, please visit <https://namle.net/about/>.

for a more concerted effort on a national level that brings together educators, the media, and the private sector—especially those from the digital and tech sector—to work on the common cause of media literacy and critical thinking. This is one place where the federal government might be of assistance if only in helping with seed funding to establish or promote university consortiums or centers of excellence that could provide an umbrella for information sharing, curriculum development and the establishment of working groups, seminars, as well as in-person or virtual collaborative spaces. In essence, the nation needs an effort similar to the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) programs so ubiquitous today. The effort should include both universities, the federal government, and non-profit organizations to promote civic education, historical and media literacy, as well as critical thinking skills—the four-part antidote to a potentially existential threat to our nation’s future.

Such an effort would require the major university academic alliances—such as the Big 10 Academic Alliance—to push collaboration within their universities. Likewise, the regional accreditation organizations could work with the U.S.

Department of Education on setting criteria by which colleges and universities are judged on their ability to provide media literacy training as part of the core curriculum. Similarly, Congress must work with the U.S. Department of Education to address the politically sensitive issue of national standards for K-12 media literacy education. In the end, however, it is less important that there are uniform standards and more important that our students get at least some form of basic media literacy whether formal or informal, through school or through activities outside the classroom. The challenge is no less than that recognized by President Eisenhower when he signed the National Defense Education Act in September 1958 to help bolster what was seen as a poor American effort in terms of math, science, and foreign language education. Indeed, Eisenhower believed that these were the skills critical to keeping pace with our national security threats in the age of “Sputnik.” Ironically, the threat remains Sputnik—though this time the news organization and not the satellite—but the premise remains the same: we must bolster our educational system to ensure our citizens are able to understand the world and its dangers.

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