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Washington has Engaged in Information Warfare, Including Fake News and Trolling, for Years

The howling in government and the corporate media and among many liberals about an alleged Russian information war, with bots, trolls and fake news being placed in social media to mislead and incite Americans against each other, might lead one think, like Sen John McCain, that we are practically at war with Russia. Yet it's all actually pretty silly. After all, our own government has been playing this game for decades, both abroad, and also right here inside the "Land of the Free and Home of the Brave" and against us American citizens.

I know. I was a victim of such an attack, though initially, I didn't realize what was happening.

Back on August 25, 2005, I published a piece in *In These Times* titled Radioactive Wounds of War about the devastating damage caused by the US military's use of depleted uranium weapons in its brutal assault leveling Fallujah, the Iraqi city of 300,000 people that was destroyed by US marines in 2004 as retribution for the killing of four US contractors by the Iraqi insurgents who at the time controlled the city, and for their humiliating defeat of a smaller Marine assault on the city earlier in the year.

At the time I was and had been a contributing editor at ITT, a publication for which I had written regularly since it was founded back in 1978, and was listed on its masthead as such.

As I recount in an article published in *Counterpunch* on November 19, 2005, titled R.I.P. In These Times, the left-liberal news magazine had been promptly bombarded with letters criticizing my article after it came out. The critiques were not about the main topic of the

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article, which was evidence discovered in medical studies done on returning Iraq veterans from a unit of New York National Guard soldiers, funded by the New York Daily News and reported on by Juan Gonzalez, which had found evidence of exposure to depleted uranium dust that was causing serious health damage in these soldiers, and even birth defects in their young children. Those findings were undeniable. What attracted the critical mail, which would now be called trolling, was my reporting on how much-depleted uranium weapons had been dumped on Iraq by invading and occupying US forces.

Based on my research into reports, mostly by European sources, I had written in that article:

U.S. forces first used DU in the 1991 Gulf War, when some 300 tons of depleted uranium—the waste product of nuclear power plants and weapons facilities—were used in tank shells and shells fired by A-10 jets. A lesser amount was deployed by US and NATO forces during the Balkans conflict. But in the current wars in Afghanistan and, especially, Iraq, DU has become the weapon of choice, with more than 1,000 tons used in Afghanistan and more than 3,000 tons used in Iraq. And while DU was fired mostly in the desert during the Gulf War, in the current war in Iraq, most of DU munitions are exploding in populated urban areas.

The Pentagon has expanded DU beyond tank and A-10 shells, for use in bunker-busting bombs, which can spew out more than half a ton of DU in one explosion, in anti-personnel bomblets, and even in M-16 and pistol shells. The military loves DU for its unique penetration capability—it cuts through steel or concrete like they're butter. In later years, I've done more reporting on the US military's use of depleted uranium, which the Pentagon loves because of its unique ability to penetrate even thick solid steel tank armor and reinforced concrete bunkers with ease, bursting into intense flame on impact and spreading super toxic uranium oxide dust in the aftermath. There is no dispute about the use of these weapons by US forces. But in 2005, the Pentagon was fighting a brutal rear-guard battle to claim the stuff is safe and at the same time that it was not being used in populated urban areas. Both claims were official lies.

Particularly active and voluble in this letter-writing campaign to ITT targeting my article, all of which correspondence was posted on the ITT website, were people like Jack Cohen-Joppe, retired Air Force Col. Roger Helbig, and US Army Col. Rick Thomas.

I could never figure out what Cohen-Joppe's motivation was, or who if anyone is behind him. A self-described opponent of nuclear weapons and especially nuclear power, Cohen-Joppe, from Tucson AZ, has for some reason had what I have described as an "Ahab-like

obsession” with attempting to debunk claims of US depleted-uranium weapons, although such use has been admitted by the Pentagon. Meanwhile, Helbig and Thomas appear to have more sinister connections to the Pentagon. Both show up in troll campaigns whenever articles about depleted uranium weapons appear. They also have had a years-long campaign to smear and discredit one of the main whistleblowers about DU, Dr. Doug Roche, a former Army Captain who conducted a Pentagon study on the safety (lack of safety) of DU weapons, and who also ran a campaign to decontaminate sites in Kuwait where DU weapons had been used, scattering toxic uranium oxide dust. For example, Helbig has claimed Roche was never ranked higher than Lieutenant, and that he never ran a DU study or worked on decontamination after the Gulf War. Yet I was shown documents by Roche showing his recommendation for promotion to Captain, and commending him for his study and his work in Kuwait.

Their attack on my ITT article was a success, in large part because of the cowardice and lack of principle of ITT’s editor, Joel Bleifus. As I wrote in my Counterpunch article, Bleifus ran Cohen-Joppe’s letter criticizing my article in a subsequent issue of the magazine without warning me and giving me an opportunity to respond to his fact-free criticism. This despite it being standard policy at ITT for its writers to get a chance to respond to any such published letters in the same issue. When I complained, I was eventually allowed to write a letter of response, but Bleifus cut it and added a note of his own saying he didn’t agree with my response. It was shabby behavior of the worst sort, and also in retrospect a huge embarrassment to Bleifus and In These Times, as more and more evidence has come out of the dreadful multi-generational impact of the US military’s use of DU weapons all over Iraq, including in its cities.

But more important than ITT’s lack of courage and principle was the success of the Pentagon’s fake news and trolling campaign, in this case in defense of its grotesque DU weapons: as a matter of principle I had to tell ITT to take my name off their masthead, and said I would never write for such a crappy publication again. I’m confident enough in the quality of my work to say that this was totally In These Times’ loss, not mine. But it’s also the Pentagon’s victory.

And make no mistake: the Pentagon has long been in the business of producing fake news and of trolling letters to the editor pages as a way of manipulating the news to its own advantage.

Check out these stories:

[Military Plays Up Role of Zarqawi](#)

[Pentagon Paid for Fake 'Al Qaeda' Videos](#)

[Pentagon Pundit Scandal Broke the Law](#)

[Pentagon Contractor Admits to Attacks on Journalists](#)

[Pentagon Ramping Up Public Relations Offensive](#)

[Revealed: US Spy Program that Manipulates Social Media](#)

[US Media Knew Kosovo Kosovo Official Reports Were Propaganda](#)

Of course, official government propaganda — that is the production of what is now called “fake news” and the employment of an army of paid Pentagon “trolls” or “sock puppets” to undermine journalists and their supporters online — has continued.

In fact, back during the heat of the Iraq occupation and the Bush/Cheney administration’s efforts to lay the groundwork for a police state spying system, I heard from someone at CommonDreams.org that that organization, concerned by the number of trolls who were clogging up their comment section after articles they ran, did an investigation of the ISPs of the trolls and discovered that many of them were originating in the Department of Defense. There were plans to write an expose of this activity, but to the best of my knowledge, no such article ever ran.

The most recent egregious effort in that vein was the successful promotion of what appears to have been a Pentagon effort in which the Washington Post obligingly published a screaming page-one headline touting a list of 200 online sites, most of them American, said to be tools of, or “useful idiots” supporting Russian propaganda. The shadowy organization behind that list, called PropOrNot, was allowed to remain anonymous, both in terms of its personnel and its financing, but I was able to determine that at least one participant, whose “analysis” of an article of mine in this publication, reprinted in Counterpunch, was so “appallingly pro-Russian” that it proved Counterpunch itself was a “pro-Russian” publication. The author of the review of my piece, Joel Harding, I discovered after a little research, had been a high-ranking member of the Army’s Stratcom headquarters based at Ft. Detrick outside of Washington, DC. This is where the military’s Cyberspace Command is based — Harding’s area of expertise.

Here’s my expose about the Pentagon’s role in that pathetic effort by the Washington Post to return us to the McCarthy era of blacklists and reputation assassination:

[Is the Pentagon Behind the Washington Post’s McCarthyite Hit on Independent Alternative Journalism?](#)

I have no doubt that Russia engaged in some attempts at using Social Media to sow confusion and conflict in the US during the last election, and during the current divisive

Trump presidency, nor do I doubt that Russia will make similar efforts going forward during the next two election cycles in 2018 and 2020. But it's worth recalling that the US has been doing exactly the same thing. As Clinton CIA Director James Woolsey admitted in an interview on Fox TV recently, the US has regularly interfered in at least 81 countries' elections. Included in those efforts, which also included overthrowing elected governments in places like Guatemala, Iran and Chile, was a major US covert and overt campaign that helped the epically corrupt Russian leader Boris Yeltsin win re-election in 2012.

Americans need to take a deep breath. What is happening currently, with Russia putting out fake news on US social media platforms, is not any different from what the Pentagon, and no doubt other US government organizations are doing and have been doing for decades to corruptly influence public opinion. Much of it, like buying ads, is not even illegal, at least for foreign private entities. It should be illegal for US government departments.

We're living in complicated times, where it's not enough any longer to just watch or read the news put out by once-respected mainstream news sources. We know that they've all become incredibly corrupted by their near monopoly status in most markets, their vulnerability to government pressure, and by reporters' loss of professionalism in the face of increasing job insecurity. Citizens need to become much more critical in their evaluation of news, to turn to multiple sources including non-mainstream and foreign news media, and to understand that in many cases what is being presented as objective news is actually little more than government propaganda.

We have to develop this ability to think and evaluate for ourselves, because it's clear things are only going to get worse.