

COVID-19 ramps up corporatised 'Western' censorship agenda

By Melissa Harrison. The following article is largely a summary of independent researcher Melissa Harrison's submission to the Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference Through Social Media.

The COVID-19 outbreak has unmasked the narrative managers of the Western propaganda machine. Social media platforms can no longer claim they are benign, apolitical infrastructure. We are witnessing sweeping censorship and demonetisation of COVID-19 content deemed "fake news" by these self-appointed editors of the world. Big Tech is flexing its unsurpassed power to control free thought and silence dissent.

Social media platforms openly collude with governments, intelligence agencies and powerful vested interests. Cleverly, the premise of fighting "fake news" is an effective cover for a far more subtle and insidious motive—the control of public opinion at scale. Behavioural research psychologist Dr Robert Epstein argues that far more dangerous variants of "fake news" are unseen influences. Dr Epstein's research exposes algorithmic manipulation and bias by Google and Facebook, "which are entirely invisible to most people and which are unprecedented in human history. ... These types of influence are nothing like billboards or fake news stories because virtually no one can detect the bias, and when people can't see sources of influence, they mistakenly conclude they are making up their own minds."

Facebook, the world's largest social media network, recently partnered with the Atlantic Council to "monitor for misinformation and foreign interference". Their joint "Digital Forensic Research Lab" combats "emerging threats" and "disinformation campaigns". The Atlantic Council receives funding from the US State Department and military, NATO, various foreign governments, multinational corporations and the military-industrial complex.

Adam Johnson, reporting for media watch group FAIR: "Even if one thinks the Atlantic Council can be trusted—and its murderers' row of spooks, dictators and corporate donors won't influence its objectivity—at the very least readers should know who's helping bankroll groups that get to define what the most influential media platform in the history of the world deems 'fact and fiction'." Facebook's disinformation "culling campaigns" act on advice from cybersecurity firm FireEye, which has a strategic partnership with In-Q-Tel, the CIA's investment arm. Initially, Facebook culled accounts belonging to alleged "coordinated influence operations" from Iran, Russia and Venezuela, but rapidly moved on to purging Western journalists, anti-war activists and independent media accounts, often without warning or explanation.

In response to COVID-19, Facebook announced a network of fact-checkers, who decide what content is flagged "fake news".¹ Facebook's Australian "fact-checking partners" are the AAP—an Australian media organisation majority owned by Murdoch and Fairfax press;² and AFP—an international media group heavily subsidised by the French government³ and involved in "CrossCheck", a fact checking

network supported by the Google News Initiative.⁴

In 2018, Google-owned YouTube announced they would use information sourced from Wikipedia to help viewers verify the trustworthiness of content. This announcement came in spite of numerous revelations of intelligence operatives and corporate actors found to be covertly editing Wikipedia, often with false information. Google has since branched out, committing millions in funding to international "fact-checker" networks.⁵ These include media outlets with dubious allegiances, including the Jeff Bezos-owned *Washington Post*.⁶ Bezos's company Amazon has deep financial ties to the CIA. Journalist Norman Solomon noted the value of this working relationship: "The CIA's zeal to increase its leverage over major American media outlets is longstanding."⁷

In their book *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business*, former Google CEO Eric Schmidt and fellow Google executive Jared Cohen write, "what Lockheed Martin was to the twentieth century, technology and cyber-security companies [like Google] will be to the twenty-first". Eric Schmidt stepped down as Google's CEO to immediately become Chairman of the Pentagon's Defence Innovation Board. In 2016 Schmidt said, "How people get their information, what they believe, what they don't, is, I think, the project for the next decade...."

Last year, it was revealed that a senior Twitter executive with editorial responsibility for the Middle East was also a part-time officer in the British Army's psychological warfare unit (box, p. 8). This was largely ignored by the mainstream press. In response to COVID-19, Twitter announced it would broaden their definition of harmful content, to now include information that "goes directly against guidance from authoritative sources of global and local public health information". Twitter says they need to "protect the conversation" and "keep people safe on Twitter". Twitter is using internal systems and undisclosed "trusted partners" to "proactively monitor content related to COVID-19", using automated technology to "proactively identify rule-breaking content before it's reported".

In 2014, documents leaked by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed an array of highly sophisticated tools used by international governments, designed to manipulate and influence social media at scale. Big Tech's zeal to protect us from "fake news" doesn't apply to State-funded psychological warfare campaigns. Apparently, they're for our own good.

A 2013 Australian Defence Force publication revealed the ADF's use of cyber and psychological warfare.⁸ Disturbingly, as reported by the *Guardian's* Philip Dorling, these "newly declassified ADF papers provide no guidance on how efforts to influence and deceive adversaries will not also mislead the Australian public and media".⁹

The ADF publication acknowledged "Psychological Operations (PSYOPS)": "planned activities directed to

4. <https://firstdraftnews.org/project/crosscheck-together-now/>

5. <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/28/21239792/youtube-fact-check-panels-videos-united-states-misinformation-covid-coronavirus>

6. <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/signatories>

7. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-the-washington-posts_b_4587927

8. https://www.defence.gov.au/FOI/Docs/Disclosures/330_1314_Document.pdf

9. <https://www.smh.com.au/national/military-acknowledges-it-will-use-cyber-warfare-20140507-zr6gm.html>

1. <https://en-gb.facebook.com/business/help/182222309230722>

2. https://web.archive.org/web/20120317002640/http://www.dbcde.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/143054/Australian-Associated-Press.pdf

3. <https://www.afp.com/en/agency/press-releases-newsletter/afps-2019-operating-result-shows-strong-growth-agency-assesses-early-impact-covid-19-pandemic>

adversary, friendly and neutral audiences to influence attitudes and behaviour affecting the achievement of political and military objectives". Influence is directed at shaping the "will" of target audiences: "aimed at all decision makers at any level capable of influencing the situation whether adversary, friendly or uncommitted. This may be achieved by the promotion of identified themes to approved audiences through verbal and non-verbal [messages]. It seeks to predispose, persuade, convince, deter, disrupt, compel or coerce audiences to adopt [or] reinforce a particular course of action..." The ADF's "information operations" may potentially be aimed at Australian citizens, as targeted audiences can include "domestic players such as the general public and government". The ADF describes "narrative" as "a compelling story line capable of explaining events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn", which "need to be convincing at a *local level* through the use of logic, emotions and ethics". (Emphasis added)

In 2019, China-hawk Liberal MP Andrew Hastie said "hybrid and political warfare" was required to fight "authoritarian states that undermine the global order". Hastie was referring to Russia and China, which he implied threatened the "global peace built by the United States and its allies". The US-UK-Anglo Saxon alliance as proclaimed guardians of "global peace" is arguable—as former top Australian public servant and diplomat John Menadue observed: "In 1961, President Eisenhower warned Americans about the power of the military and industrial complex.... That incestuous complex including 'think tanks' has enormous influence in the US but also around the world. The US is scarcely ever at peace. In part that is due to the responsibilities that US Presidents feel have been imposed upon them but it is also driven by the power of vested defence/military interests throughout the US. War is in the American DNA. We have the same problem...."

Hastie writes, "A powerful narrative, [that] supports our own values ... must be constructed. ... [D]emocracies should develop and establish expertise in hybrid and political warfare ... [requiring skills] for the disruption of rival subversive campaigns, and for the conduct of our own—where necessary."

"...[We] must build an array of political warfare instruments. This would include cyber, diplomatic, information,

and *media capabilities*. These are important for *informing domestic publics* about the nature and scale of the challenge, but also for exposing to international publics the activities of authoritarian regimes. These activities include corruption, espionage, *fake news*, and human rights abuses." (Emphasis added.) A Member of Australian Parliament openly advocating for political warfare and narrative management, using "media and cyber capabilities" directed towards "informing" the Australian public. Sounds a lot like propaganda: Australian media as a tool of the State.

The danger of Western propaganda lies in its deep currents of subtlety—we don't believe it's happening to us. Noam Chomsky's and Edward Herman's 1988 *Manufacturing Consent* details the "systematic propaganda" of Western media and the difficulty of seeing it. "In countries where the levers of power are in the hands of a state bureaucracy, the monopolistic control over the media, often supplemented by official censorship, makes it clear that the media serve the ends of a dominant elite. It is much more difficult to see a propaganda system at work where the media are private and formal censorship is absent. This is especially true where the media actively compete, periodically attack and expose corporate and governmental malfeasance, and aggressively portray themselves as spokesmen for free speech and the general community interest. What is not evident (and remains undiscussed in the media) is the limited nature of such critiques, as well as the huge inequality in command of resources, and its effect both on access to a private media system and on its behaviour and performance."

Censorship under the guise of "fighting fake news" and "keeping us safe" is still censorship. The public is expected to surrender their freedom of opinion and personal responsibility to the safekeeping of paternalistic platforms. The unprecedented power of Big Tech, in willing service of the State apparatus, has weaponised narrative management on an industrial scale. Australians are exposed to manipulation by psychological warfare campaigns *conducted by our own government*. The right to a dissenting voice, the right to freely access and publish counter-narrative information is the last defence of citizens against the money, might and authority of powerful institutions and the State. Pandemic or not—this must be defended.

Is British Intelligence in your Twitter feed?

In September 2019 news website Middle East Eye (MEE) revealed that Gordon MacMillan, the Twitter executive with editorial responsibility for the Middle East, Europe and Africa, was also a Captain in the British Army's 77th Brigade, a combined Regular Army and Army Reserve unit specialising, according to its mission statement, in "counter-adversarial information activity" and "collecting, creating and disseminating digital and wider media content in support of designated tasks"—or in layman's terms, propaganda and psychological warfare via the internet. Formed in 2015, the 77th Brigade is named in honour of the 77th Indian Infantry Brigade created by British military intelligence figure Orde Wingate to infiltrate behind Japanese lines in Burma (Myanmar) during World War II and organise locals into irregular warfare units. The modern 77th Brigade, described in an early 2015 *Guardian* exposé as "a special force of Facebook warriors, skilled in psychological operations and use of social media to engage in unconventional

warfare in the information age", does similar things in cyberspace, deploying armies of troll accounts to steer discourse and pit different cliques against each other.

When MacMillan's role was revealed (initially via his own boastful LinkedIn profile), an army spokesman insisted to MEE that "There is no relationship or agreement between 77th Brigade and Twitter, other than using Twitter as one of many social media platforms for engagement and communication". However, neither the army nor Twitter would disclose what MacMillan's military duties are, nor which (or how many) Twitter accounts the 77th uses for its "engagement". Twitter responded with a statement proclaiming itself "an open, neutral and rigorously independent platform"—yet one which "proactively publish[es] datasets on potentially *state-backed foreign information operations* ... in conjunction with *partners in government*, civil society and academia" (emphasis added). State-backed *domestic* information operations are apparently a different story.