



Max Blumenthal Exposes Secret UK-funded Program Aimed at Undermining Russia

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Taylor Hudak (TH): Hi, everyone, and welcome back to another episode of The Source. I'm your host Taylor Hudak. A shocking new investigation published in the Grayzone titled "Reuters, BBC and Bellingcat participated in covert UK Foreign Office funded programs to weaken Russia leak docs reveal", is an article which exposes Reuters and the BBC's involvement in covert UK, FCO (or Foreign and Commonwealth Office programs) to affect attitudinal change and weaken the Russian state's influence. But why are media companies working alongside the intelligence community and state actors? And why did social media suppress and censor this article?

Joining me to discuss all of that and his latest article in The Grayzone is journalist Max Blumenthal. Max, thanks for coming on.

Max Blumenthal (MB): Thanks for bringing me on.

TH: Absolutely. So this latest piece that you had in the Grayzone went viral on social media, not just because of the content that was in the article, but also because of the censorship that you experienced. But before we do get into that and we eventually will, of course, can you just explain the significance of these revelations?

MB: Well, yeah, obviously, these revelations were significant enough to merit a completely unique warning label that I'd never seen before on Twitter, that these materials may have been obtained through hacking. It's kind of like reefer madness for neocons, it is like they thought that that warning label would scare off the kids when in fact it attracted them and caused the piece to go viral, as we'll discuss. But the revelations contained in the article, which were which relied on materials that were publicly available through a hacking collective called Anonymous, they're all called Anonymous, are absolutely explosive. They show, well there are hundreds of documents. And as a journalist, if you're seeking to synthesize and analyze these documents, you could go in a number of directions. But what I found most striking about these latest revelations, and there have been previous leaks before that we've covered at the Grayzone, was that they showed the BBC and Reuters, Reuters being the largest news organization in the world, as essentially British intelligence contractors, helping the British

Foreign Office infiltrate and undermine Russian media. Trained Russian journalists inside the U.K. on British Foreign Office funded trips to create influence networks inside Russia and to propagandize the Russian speaking public in Russia's near abroad, in the Baltics, Central Asia, Eastern Europe. The BBC even proposed to the British Foreign Office to go into the Donbas region, which is a conflict area where Russian backed separatists have been fighting this NATO backed, US backed force of the Ukrainian military for years. Thousands of Ukrainians have died. The war should have ended long ago. It was basically imposed on the Russian speaking population in that area. And the BBC's proposing to go in and use its Know-How and resources to bolster pro NATO media in the area and to essentially establish a new information weapon and thereby escalate the conflict. This is beyond irresponsible. It's all conducted secretly. I produced document after document showing contracts between Thomson Reuters Foundation, which is the charitable arm of Reuters and the British Foreign Office that are marked classified or secret because they want to keep these secret memos from the BBC or Reuters demanding secrecy. So these are covert programs that are being conducted with British taxpayer money in violation of the stated trust principles that appear on the Thomson Reuters website and the BBC mission, which is on its own website, where they pledge editorial independence and integrity. They're essentially lying to the public. And then beyond that, you have smaller media organizations which are being used and weaponized by the British Foreign Office, including Bellingcat, this supposedly independent investigative, supposedly open source site, which are being either backed covertly by the British Foreign Office or used to even sway elections in pivotal central and Eastern European states. So these are explosive revelations. What they show is that the British state, which is sort of a front line proxy for the U.S. empire, is doing everything it accuses Russia of and then some.

TH: Yeah, that's the great irony here. And I was just going to ask you your perspective on a quote from former British MP Chris Williamson, who said, quote, "These revelations show that when MPs were railing about Russia, British agents were using the BBC and Reuters to deploy precisely the same tactics that politicians and media commentators were accusing Russia of using". End, quote. Can you explain further on how there's some hypocrisy here?

MB: Enormous amounts of hypocrisy, I mean, Chris Williamson was one of the few members of parliament to actually challenge the Russia hysteria that descended on the UK during the very strange Skripal poisoning incident.

And soon after that incident, there were leaks for very similar to the ones we're discussing of documents from a secretive program within the Foreign Office called the "Counter Disinformation and Media Development Program" that showed that the British Foreign Office was funding a military intelligence unit that was fronted by a think tank operating out of a fake location in Scotland. Think tank was called the Institute for Statecraft. The Military Intelligence Troll Farm was called the Integrity Initiative, and these documents exposed a vast, multi, multi-million pound operation that was aiming to propagandize the British public and the whole of the European public in support of gigantic escalation with Russia to the

point of war. And it cast very serious doubts on the official narrative of the Skripal poisoning with so many other incidents, because you had these military intelligence officers operating behind the cover of this think tank talking about how they were aiming to make the British public and opinion makers and policy makers see the big picture about Russia being a major national security threat. They established clusters of journalists all across Europe of influencers, people whose names were familiar, like Bill Browder, Peter Pomerantsev and Applebaum, The Washington Post columnist, Ed Lucas. All these figures that we associate with this kind of anti Russia echo chamber were organized and networked here. They were taking out politicians who were seen as too dovish toward Russia. In Spain, a defense official was sabotaged through this network and it all exploded. And Williamson was one of the only members of parliament to bring it up in parliament and to demand answers. How much is this program, this counter disinformation office costing the British taxpayer? What is it doing? What is its mission? And he was stonewalled on national security grounds. They said, well, this program is too important to us and if we reveal details, Russia will attack us. So you can't know. And ultimately, Williamson got attacked. He was targeted in the fake anti Semitism scandal. He was targeted as a Russian asset. He was driven out of labor. And so I called on him to comment on these latest documents, which reinforce the need for a public inquiry and show that the British state is deceiving the British citizenry and taking them towards the brink of, if not a hot war or some series of proxy wars, then certainly a Cold War that won't benefit them in any way. And Williamson's no longer in parliament to ask the tough questions about it.

TH: One of the things that struck me about this article and about these documents is the language that is used. A lot of the language seems pretty positive. To quote one of the phrases that's used. They want to help Russian journalists, quote, "produce a balanced, fact based journalism and ethical journalism and to build on UK media standards and ethics." For somebody who's not too familiar with how the national security state works and the military industrial complex works, this seems like a positive thing. But what's really going on here?

MB: Right. I mean, that was perceptive to pick up on the language they use. It sounds like something that we should welcome. They call for media pluralism. This is something we celebrate in the West, in the supposedly democratic west. We want media pluralism. But when RT or Sputnik come in, in the name of media pluralism and established radio stations or television affiliates in cities across the United States, they get labeled foreign agents and they get shut down because that's the kind of pluralism the United States doesn't want. But it doesn't go both ways. It only goes one way. So the West is trying to establish or the British. Foreign Office, which presides over the MI6, I should mention, the foreign intelligence wing of the British intelligence services, is trying to establish media pluralism in Russia's near abroad and inside Russia to basically counter the messaging that supports Russian national interests and what the West sees as the Kremlin's narrative. And therefore, it's paying supposedly independent outlets, helping them craft their message, providing them with help on Google searches to game Google searches. They explicitly state this, and the documents

also state that they aim to weaken Russia's influence in the media. I mean, that's also openly stated. But there's also the conflation, which is a Western exceptionalist notion of better journalistic ethics with a pro NATO editorial line. And so Thomson Reuters Foundation puts out a bid with the British Foreign Office for training Russian journalists, it says we've done like 10 British Foreign Office training trips for Russian journalists in the past, and we promised to produce an attitudinal change in these journalists. And that means and of course, they don't state it explicitly, but it's pretty implicit, a more positive perspective on the UK and an affinity for the West and an aspiration to be a part of it. And I know lots of Russian journalists who went through the experience of the 90s and told me that they aimed to be CNN. That was their dream. They wanted to be just like CNN and just like the United States. And so many Russians wanted to basically import the model of the United States into the former USSR. And what they got was the nightmare of US neoliberalism, three to five million excess deaths as people were thrown off their pensions. And the CNN model was essentially discredited when CNN started propagandizing for the destruction of Yugoslavia and all these wars that felt targeted at Russia, South Ossetia and Georgia. So they're trying to bring that back with these programs and maintain an influence network, an opposition influence network inside Russia. And that also entails, in the name of media pluralism, covert backing for network outlets like Meduza. Anyone who is familiar with Russian media that produces content in the English language knows Meduza. It's one of the most popular outlets for Russian opposition supporters, people who support Alexei Navalny. And they are named in these documents as receiving logistical, if not financial support, through a British intelligence contractor called the Zinc Network. So they're not independent. We can also take note of the document that calls for establishing a network of Russian YouTube influencers, helping them receive covert payments to go around Russian regulations and focusing on issues like corruption. Who's the most popular Russian YouTube influencer, Alexei Navalny. And I don't know if he was one of these influencers, but it really raises the question.

So behind all of the florid and pretty rhetoric about democracy is something that is much more sordid, certainly covert, surreptitious, clandestine. And if you or I engaged in these kind of arrangements, we would be on the front page of The New York Times. If the Russian foreign ministry told acTVism Munich that they would supply them with help on getting better Google searches, payments, cover payments, tips on editorial stories, how to craft stories. They're basically coaching you behind the scenes. And you were going out and presenting yourself as an independent outlet in Germany and this was exposed. You'd be toast. If that happened to the Grayzone, we'd be prosecuted. But this is something that's considered completely normal for these outlets to do. I haven't even mentioned what Bellingcat got involved in here. But this all suggests why Twitter put this label on the article to scare people off, because the revelations are so damning of the whole of Western media, particularly as it relates to its European participation.

TH: Absolutely. And we will, of course, get into the media's role in all of this, which I believe is particularly shocking. But before that, why don't we take a brief break?

And when we return, we will continue with our discussion on the scandalous revelations within the British media, as well as the social media reaction to this article. But before that, check out this commercial.

COMMERCIAL BREAK

Welcome back to The Source, I'm your host, Taylor Hudak. OK, Max, so I do want to continue our conversation about the media's role in all of this, because I find that to be particularly shocking. Specifically, we have the BBC, Reuters and Bellingcat who have been working alongside the U.K. government and the intelligence community in this operation. What are your thoughts on that?

MB: Well, Bellingcat has always asserted its complete independence, even as it mysteriously obtained the passport information and customs details of the two Russian citizens who entered Salisbury, England, and were the prime suspect in the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter. They say that their open source, Bellingcat, has become famous for open source journalism. But how did they obtain this information? And they've also been able to use similar techniques, if you can even call them techniques to point the finger at Russia's FSB intelligence services for the alleged poisoning of Alexei Navalny.

So I've always had questions about this organization. It's well known that they're funded substantially by the National Endowment for Democracy, which is a US government entity that supports media and supposed civil society organizations around the world in the name of producing regime change in countries where the US seeks to topple the government. It's the regime change machine which was spawned out of Ronald Reagan's CIA to do what the CIA used to do covertly in the open, according to one of its founders, Allen Weinstein. So that's all well known. But the relationship between Bellingcat in the Foreign Office appears to be much more intimate than we knew and potentially more intimate than with the CIA, which is always the subject of rumors. Like Eliot Higgins, the founder of Bellingcat, was recently profiled by Luke Harding and others highly suspect, journalistically dubious characters in The Guardian and the headline was something like People Say We Work for the CIA. Like, that's some kind of you know, it's like, let's take that lie off the table by snarky it away. But here we have in these documents buried in a single paragraph in a proposal put forward by the Zinc network, which is a strategic communications firm that contracts with British intelligence and the British Foreign Office and has been involved in lots and lots of scandals, propagandizing the British public, targeting British Muslims with deradicalization propaganda. And they had engaged in a program with Bellingcat called "The Open Information Partnership". Also involved in that program was the fake think tank I mentioned before, "The Institute for Statecraft" front for the Military Intelligence Troll Farm, the

"Integrity Initiative". And in this little paragraph, they note that North Moldova had elections in 2019 that were seen as an emergency by the British Foreign Office and I guess by NATO as a whole. North Moldova, sorry, North Macedonia, not Moldova, North Macedonia was going to pretty much decide whether it was going to join NATO and the EU. And the Zinc Network mentions rushing trainers from Bellingcat and the digital forensics research lab of the Atlantic Council, which is the unofficial think tank of NATO in Washington, out to North Macedonia to train a network of pro NATO journalists, to basically meddle in North Macedonia's election in support of NATO. And this was all funded by the British Foreign Office in this shadowy program that I mentioned.

So once again, we have Bellingcat caught out there working hand in glove with the Western National Security State to advance the imperatives of the empire. And presenting itself as this independent, plucky little outlet of brilliant journalists who deserve every award available. This should be absolutely scandalous, and as I mentioned before, if acTVism Munich or The Grayzone were involved in something similar, if the Chinese foreign ministry said, hey, we need you to go help our boy out in the Georgia state election because he's pro China and we got caught doing that, we would be prosecuted. But Bellingcat is celebrated for this. In fact, this is totally denied. And it again speaks to why this (Twitter) label was applied (to the Grayzone) and the label backfired because of the viral phenomenon you mentioned and Bellingcat trended. I looked up Bellingcat and it was trending. There were seven thousand mentions. It was all focused on this material. Their independent brand was being shredded just by regular common people on Twitter and also Bellingcat-CIA was trending. So the attempt to suppress this article, to protect these supposedly independent outlets that have been cultivated for years with millions of dollars of support completely backfired.

TH: Now, can you explain what that [Twitter] warning was, why you had that warning on the [Twitter] post? This was hacked material, of course, or leaked material. But the point is, is that you were able to verify that these are authentic documents, correct?

MB: Yeah, well, we verified that in the past. We reported on documents relating to Syria showing how many of these same contractors, including Zinc [Network], but also the ARC network that helped create the White Helmets, were basically running a propaganda operation around Syria, claiming responsibility for hundreds of articles, advancing regime change in Syria in premier media organizations. And the British Foreign Office declared that they had experienced a hack and that those documents that we reported on were essentially authentic. So I felt really confident going into reporting on this. But before I did report it, I reached out to Reuters. I mean, reaching out to Bellingcat, it's like reaching out to social predators who stalk you and are like waiting outside your window with binoculars. These are not people that are going to give you an intellectually honest response. So what's the point of going to them? They're attacking us all the time, accusing us of doing everything that they do and falsely and the BBC had even recently smeared me in the same way because of my factual reporting on the White Helmets. So I thought Reuters would be the most likely to confirm these documents and to offer some kind of boilerplate corporate response, which they proceeded to

do in really admirably rapid fashion. So these documents were absolutely real. And I assume they were obtained through some kind of phishing operation, which is pretty easy to do. It doesn't mean like you need some really sophisticated state hacking network to do. It could have been any freelancer doing it. It could have also been a leak from a pissed off Foreign Office employee. We don't know.

But this [Twitter] label went up. About 12 or 24 hours after the article was published. So when the article was published, somebody freaked out and went to Twitter. And Twitter's response shows how Twitter has basically become an arm of American empire. It's not like everyone says, oh, I'm sick of this hellsite. It's not a hellsite. It is a US regime media site now. It's been fully co-opted. And that label said these materials may have been obtained through hacking. So if you just tweet the link out, this is the hilarious part, you can tweet the link out, and you know it automatically creates a Twitter card for you at the image that we put in. But if you put in your own image or your own video or GIF, then beneath that image it will say these materials may have been obtained through hacking. So people were putting out like pictures of Alvin and the Chipmunks having sex and like SpongeBob smoking weed and it [continued] to say these materials may have been obtained through hacking and just pure comedy potential for zoomers and millennials and gamers and whoever gets off on this stuff. So our site practically crashed from the amount of traffic we had. We've never had this much traffic. And somehow mainstream media managed to avoid reporting on any of these revelations because it's about them. It's about them merging with the US and British intelligence services. And so they're not going to scrutinize themselves.

And just another point I wanted to make. Is that anyone who's followed Reuters, but particularly the BBC over these past four or five years, and it's really about the BBC, they know the BBC not only did not cover in a critical way the powerful forces that were plotting against Jeremy Corbyn, that have been plotting to starve the British public of their own patrimony, to basically not report on how people are losing these social programs that created a middle class in the U.K. They have not been reporting on the British foreign policy in Yemen, assisting one of THE worst humanitarian crises in the world, assisting Saudi Arabia in what amounts to basically a genocidal assault, and it's pretty clear why BBC doesn't cross those lines because they don't want to bite the hand that feeds them. Here we see them not only receiving funding from their traditional sources like a public broadcaster, but actually bidding to participate in covert information warfare operations, targeting states where US and British intelligence seek regime change. I think this should help the public understand why their media no longer serves them and serves the interest of sociopathic, soft handed super predators sitting in air conditioned offices in Langley and London.

TH: Exactly. This entire scandal only serves the powerful and the elite. This is not to the benefit of the people and the people who are consuming the news.

But before we do close out here, I wanted to ask you once again about the media here, because that's a big part of this story of course. Can these media organizations like the BBC,

Reuters, Bellingcat, can they even call themselves media or news organizations after being involved so closely with governments and intelligence?

MB: Well, they can call themselves media organizations, but they can't call themselves independent. And in my piece, I pointed to a scandal, a very minor scandal that erupted in the UK in 2020. In January when some documents from the 60s and 70s were declassified through formal channels relating to a covert program that the MI6 ran in Latin America. And it was an anti Soviet media program that Reuters was presiding over, and they were being secretly paid through the British Foreign Office in the MI6 and the public didn't know about it. So these documents come out. A Reuters spokesperson is interviewed. He says we would never do this today. This is something we used to do in the past during the Cold War. But those days are over. We do not accept government money. And we refer you to our trust principles which state our editorial independence and integrity.

And what these documents show is that he lied, that Reuters is doing exactly the same thing in exactly the same way, covertly without the public's consent, and that it is boasting in private in these bids that it places to the British Foreign Office of having conducted many, many British Foreign Office programs. So they can certainly call themselves media organizations, but they've shredded their trust principles and all of that their mission statements. And it really speaks to the larger issue of what the media is in the West. If you live in what's considered a dictatorship, then, you know, I've spent a considerable amount of time in Egypt and, you know, you talk to people there and they know they're being propagandized. They know that the state isn't necessarily telling the truth and they know which media channels they [state] controls. In the West people have been raised to believe that our media outlets are indeed independent and that they're acting in our interest. And this is what makes people in the West actually more propagandized and less skeptical. And at this point, right now, after Russiagate, we see the media merging with the intelligence services in a way we have never seen before because they've lost confidence in their own populations and are resorting to a level of unprecedented coercion to cultivate public support for these foreign regime change operations that no one would support if they [public] actually knew the details. So the media is basically involved in an information war. And the number one target is not necessarily people in Russia to get them to rise up against Putin. The target is us. Ultimately, what this article speaks to is the importance and the essential existence of organizations like acTVism Munich. It's why I started The Grayzone. It's why we're doing what we're doing, because we are giving people an outlet from this information war and allowing them to educate themselves and to think critically and to apply some rational skepticism to this tidal wave of propaganda coming out of ostensibly independent media outlets, which are actually a marionette for the intelligence services and the military.

TH: Exactly. Very interesting, always insightful. Max Blumenthal, thank you again for your time and thank you for speaking with me today and to everybody at The Grayzone for the fantastic journalism that you guys are involved in.

MB: Thanks for having me on, Taylor, and thanks for doing what you do.

TH: Of course. Thank you.

And I want to thank you all for tuning in to this episode of The Source. If you like this video, make sure you hit that like button and also make sure you subscribe to our channel and hit the bell so you are notified each time we upload a new video.

Now, I'm sure many of you are aware that independent media is under attack right now. And so your donations and your support for us is what allows us to continue with our independent news journalism and analysis. I'm your host, Taylor Hudak. I want to thank you guys for watching and I'll see you in my next video.

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