

Oz ABC 'Media Watch' Should Watch Itself!

by Binoy Kampmark via justin - Counterpunch *Wednesday, Nov 15 2017, 9:39pm*
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Idiot Voters and Trolling the Internet: Russia, Social Media Giants and US Elections

The program usually pokes fun, riddles and irks a fourth estate that has long given up the chase for verity. Media Watch, after years of weather beaten but reliable service, remains Australia's only real source of genuine critical comment about journalistic practice and its poorer practices. Over the years, it has exposed fictions, unearthed myths and lampooned incompetence.



Paul Barry

Not, however, on this occasion. The November 13 program seemed to swallow the gruel on Russian interference in the US elections of 2016 with an un-ironic, unflinching insistence. Political figures from Congress and testimony from the Senate Judiciary Committee. And, most of all, the US voter was made to look the fool.

Paul Barry, the host, explained that "Russians were spreading dirt on Hillary Clinton, using stolen Democratic Party emails, which Russian intelligence offered to the Trump campaign in 2016." [1] Nothing is mentioned about any internal Democratic grievance, or dimension, that would have also fed this, not to mention the compromising accuracy of those emails.

What this program persistently emphasises is "dirt" – more appropriately gold dust, be it to elector or Trump supporter – that placed Clinton in a poor light. Barry runs segments featuring a concerned Representative Adam Schiff, who claims to "now know as a result of the guilty plea by Trump campaign foreign policy advisor, George Papadopoulos, that the Russians approached the Trump campaign as early as April of 2016, to inform them that they were in possession of dirt on Hillary Clinton in the form of thousands of stolen emails."

It soon becomes clear that Barry, and, in fact, the individuals he cites, consider the means of obtaining such material more significant than what it discloses. Why, after all, bother about the awe inspiring deficiencies of the Democratic campaign, with its tarnished leader?

It then follows that what was also used in the US election was a grand binge of misinformation, which the US voter, scented ignoramus, is supposedly incapable of discerning. "In the two months up to polling day," Barry advances, "Russian Twitter accounts put out 1.4 million tweets that were viewed 288 million times." What influence, albeit unmeasured and ungauged!

Facebook, claims the grave Barry, also featured, with the company admitting "to the Senate that

between 2015 and 2017 one single Russian troll factory put out 80,000 Facebook posts that reached 126 million Americans.”

Barry does, at the very least, note the minute portion of Russian sponsored ads on Facebook – some 0.004 percent, though he goes on to claim, without any verifiable basis, that this was enough to stitch the election, given that “Trump won the presidency by a handful of votes.”

The sampling from Media Watch gives the impression that many in the US would not have had issues with the burqa, with “invaders”, or against police brutality were it not for those industrious Russians based at the Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg busily attempting to woo, convince and deceive.

The interference issue is one matter that continues to rage, a story that features the to and fro typical of the Trumpland studio, fully equipped with pyrotechnic details. Denials follow probes; probes, in turn, are followed by denials.

Anyone outside the US watching this would be revelling in smug awareness that what has been good for a certain goose has been terribly dissatisfying for the particular gander, given US global interference in a myriad of elections for decades.

That feeling would have been evident with the remarks made by Senator Richard Burr, chair of the Senate Intelligence Committee: “I’ll say it again: agents of a hostile foreign power reached into the United States using our own social media platforms and conducted an information operation intended to divide our society.” The genius of Silicon Valley turned against the United States to exploit pre-existing divisions – a calamitous state of affairs for the light-on-the-hill advocates.

The other point is also important: interference in the US elections has been habitual, a historical tic, a commonplace matter for outside powers keen to influence local opinion. Britain was particularly keen in swaying US public opinion during both World Wars, backing candidates favouring an intervention posture.

Earlier this year, then White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus pointed the finger at an ambitious China and niggling North Korea. “China has, North Korea has and they have consistently [interfered] over many, many years.”[2]

Why, then, inflate the Russian bear, giving it prodigiously extensive claws, and a grope of influence more significant than Harvey Weinstein? The point is simple: a Trump victory in November 2016 remains unbelievable, a cosh to the head, a mugging in broad daylight. The narcotised state that is current US politics, a Clinton defeat, and the inversion of the capital’s ceremonial rituals, has made it incumbent on members on Congress to find a culprit.

The moral tones in Monday’s Media Watch delivery seemed misplaced and, if taken to the next level, sinister. Social media platforms, the suggestion goes, should be tasked with policing information placed on its own networks with comb-like assiduity. The advertising police need to be charged. As Louisiana Senator John Kennedy told representatives of Facebook, Google and Twitter pointedly, “I think you do enormous good, but your power sometimes scares me.”[3]

Colin Stretch, Vice President and general counsel for Facebook, is quoted by Media Watch only to be scolded: “It pains us as a company. It pains me personally to see that we were, that our platform was abused in this way.”

Facebook, goes the claim by Barry, should have seen that its platforms were being misused, notably “when the Internet Research Agency was paying for those posts.” But Stretch, rightly, considered the inquisition on who was buying ads problematic – by Kennedy’s own observation, the company had 5 million advertisers. “Of course the answer is no,” conceded Stretch to the question on whether the company had an eye out for those opportunistic foreign agents or purchasers of political ads.

The unmistakable inference here is not merely that the US consumer of news (dare one say reader?) is an unmitigated fool best kept away from social media accounts, or, more appropriately, drip fed vetted material. It is, seemingly, a pitch for control, restraint and policing for those consumers in a land where freedom of speech is both creed and dogma. Leave it to those establishment patricians and censors who know best. The move towards patriotic proofing the social media giants is underway.

Notes.

[1] <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s4763916.htm>

[2] <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/north-korea-china-interfered-u-s-election-priebus-article-1.3312905>

[3] <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/10/senator-kennedy-grills-facebook-lawyer-senate-intelligence-committee-hearing>

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<https://tinyurl.com/yd4cyq2d>

Jungle Drum Prose/Poetry. <http://jungledrum.lingama.net/news/story-2997.html>