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The Anatomy of a Moral Panic: Western Mainstream Media's Russia Scapegoat

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ABSTRACT

Since 2014, there has been a very concerted campaign launched by the neo-liberal Western mainstream mass media against Russia. The format and content suggest that this is an attempt to induce a moral panic among the Western publics. It seems to be intended to create a sense of fear and to switch the logic to a series of emotionally-based reactions to assertion propaganda. Russia has been variously blamed for many different events and trends around the world, such as the “destroying” of Western “democracy”, and democratic values. In many regards, Russia is projected as being an existential threat in both the physical and intangible realms. This paper traces the strategic messages and narratives of the “Russia threat” as it is presented in Western mainstream media. Russia is connoted as a scapegoat for the failings of the neo-liberal democratic political order to maintain its global hegemony; therefore, Russia is viewed as the “menacing” other and a desperate measure to halt this gradual decline and loss of power and influence. This ultimately means that this type of journalism fails in its supposed fourth estate role, by directly aiding the hegemonic political power.

KEYWORDS

moral panic, Western mainstream media, Russia, propaganda, scapegoating, fourth estate

Introduction

Moral panic has been developed as a concept within sociology and came to greater attention after Stanley Cohen's 1972 book on *Folk Devils and Moral Panic*. This detailed the often irrational, but widespread fear that something or someone was a threat to the values, safety and security of society. It is something that is often exploited by politicians and journalists, where public panic can be operationalised as a means of social and political control.

Moral panics tend to have a tendency to serve the interests of the hegemonic political and economic order (Welch, Price, & Yankey, 2002). In this regard, Zollmann (2017, p. 1) notes that "with the ascendance of liberal democracy, propaganda activities have vastly increased. [...] Because of its societal importance for public opinion formation, the news media constitutes an obvious channel for the dissemination of propaganda". The mainstream media tends to be very supportive of the hegemonic global liberal democracy¹ narratives and its intention to retain its power, rather than acting as an independent mechanism to check and balance that centre of power.

A lot of research is from a sociological perspective, involving cases at a tactical or operational level of analysis. The present study intends to look at the issue and practice of moral panic from a strategic overview and through the lens of mass communication in order to understand the political why and how of the current moral panic concerning mainstream news media coverage of the Russian "threat". What is the logic of the Russian "threat", and are there any "cures" suggested in mainstream media coverage?

The first step in the paper is to deal with the issue of identifying the myths that are projected as reality, and separating fiction from fact in mainstream journalism. One of the key brand myths is the concept of the fourth estate, where mass media and journalism serve public interest by challenging political interests. The following section seeks to define and clarify the theoretical motivations and considerations involved in moral panic. In the third section, the mainstream mass media content involving the coverage of Russia is analysed in order to reveal the nature of the "logic" of the reporting in order to understand whether it fits the conceptual criterion to be worthy of being labelled as a moral panic.

Mainstream Journalism and News: Between Myth and Reality

Branding is a standard philosophy and practice in the contemporary business and political environments. It is considered to be an indispensable aspect of organisational activity, depending on the conceptual underpinnings and the execution of the practical approach, it can be the difference between success and failure in attaining organisational goals and objectives. In way of a basic definition of the term and its implications, the following provides an overview:

¹ Liberal democracy here is understood and defined as being those who favour the values found in multiculturalism and globalisation.

Branding is the process by which companies differentiate their products from their competition. In developing a unique identity, which may include a name, packaging and design, a brand is developed. In developing and managing this unique identity, the branding process allows organisations to develop strong emotional and psychological connections with a product, goods or service. This in turn, eases the purchasing decision. Branding affects stakeholder perceptions and the marketing task is to ensure these perceptions are positive (Franklin, Hogan, Langley, Mosdell, & Pill, 2009, p. 33).

The above fits with Brown's (2016, pp. 13–14) understanding that branding helps to simplify and distinguish a product or service from all of the other offers in existence and competing for attention and consumption, it reduces confusion through initiating expectations and creating associations among the customer/user base. A brand is a significant step in the road to creating and maintaining an enduring mutually reciprocal political relationship between the messenger and the audience. Newman (2016, p. 92) understands brand, from the point of view of political application, as a mechanism that connects via the policies and issues represented as well as through the personality traits possessed. A series of steps are used by marketers in order to embark on establishing a brand. The first step is to *build awareness* through communication concerning a particular product or service on offer, which is likely to increase engagement and interaction. Step two concerns *positioning* of the product or service, once the consumer is aware of it. This is an attempt to differentiate it from its competition. The third step is about *establishing a brand* after awareness and positioning are implemented. Then automatic associations and assumptions are connected to the brand of a particular product or service (Newman, 2016, p. 112). When a brand is established, when can a particular brand stand out from its competition?

There are three different aspects to be examined when evaluating the strength of brand value. *Differentiation* is used by a communicator to distinguish a product, service or organisation from competing brands, and thereby be able to position itself more ideally to enable better reach and connection with the target audience. A brand's visual identity is a key aspect in helping an audience to better identify the difference and believe in it. *Credibility* of a brand is an icon of trust, with the intention of helping to develop a loyal following. An organisation's credibility is achieved by its ability to live up to its promise(s). *Authenticity* is gained by matching words and deeds.

The current approach to branding is a very pre-meditated exercise in seeking to project the positive aspects and strengths of what is being branded and communicated. The established brand of journalism carries with its connotations and expectations associated with the notion of the fourth estate. Myth-making is managed in an idealised and utopian understanding of journalism as a profession and what its priorities should be mixes idealised ethical concepts and ideal pragmatic practice. McNair (1998, pp. 19–20) defines the function of the fourth estate as being "an independent institutional source of political and cultural power which monitors and scrutinises the actions of the powerful in other spheres". This is tied to classical liberal theory that postulates the press as a defender of public

interests and a watchdog on the workings of government. The term was credited as originally being coined by Edmund Burke in the late 18th century, and subsequently gained ground from the 19th century (Franklin, Hogan, Langley, Mosdell, & Pill, 2009, p. 84). This sets the tone for the idealised notion of journalism's role. One of the popular myths of journalism is its supposed power: "For all of this tumultuous history, we hold fast to a vision of the powerful impact of the press, for good and bad. It is an old story, already a common theme in the 19th century" (Shaya, 2012). However, the presumed power is increasingly being called into question with some saying journalism is merely a public record of events as they unfold (Ibid.). Simultaneously, it is impossible to deny that if journalism affects the audience, though, then it does it not from the calculating viewpoint but following moral sentiments; thus, it is hard to determine the level of premeditation involved.

Obviously, at its most basic function, journalism is the process of uncovering information and disseminating that information via media of mass communication (TV, radio, newspapers and the Internet). It is also conceived as a form of monologic communication (Franklin et al., 2011, p. 124), although this understanding is questionable, due to the fact that it cannot exist without the involvement of the mass audience into the media content. There is also a great deal of myth and symbolic power associated with journalism through it be associated with the nation; the brand of the fourth estate as such relates to the ideal functioning of journalism as a critical social institution. The elements of journalism as defined by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) include: journalism's first obligation is to the truth; its first loyalty is to citizens; its essence is a discipline of verification; its practitioners must maintain an independence from those they cover; it must serve as an independent monitor of power; it must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise; it must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant; it must keep the news comprehensive and in proportion; its practitioners have an obligation to exercise their personal conscience; citizens, too, have rights and responsibilities when it comes to the news. A contradiction of the current news environment has been noted, in the age of the 24-hour news cycle, where the population is constantly bombarded with information. Yet in spite of this, the public remains quite uninformed of events, trends and processes in their environment (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2011). Following this, what is the connection between the ideal of the fourth estate and mass communication?

The act of communication is vital to not only being human, but also for guiding social interaction. As such, it generates a number of dilemmas, such as the morality of the act of communication. This implies the pursuit of ethical practice insofar as doing the "right thing", and an adherence to a certain social duty and moral responsibility (Bivins, 2010, pp. 2–3). Currently, though there is an increase split of perception on how journalism explains its public duty and how the public interprets their actions. Rhetorically, it is still held as being a "sacred" value of journalism, but public belief and trust is on the wane. Why is this seemingly the case? To be understood, this needs to be explained by the contemporary challenges and changes faced by contemporary journalism and journalists, not to mention the public. Often journalism and media are

deemed as being an essential element of a healthy democracy. These arguments, however, are often misleading and definitely missing context to be meaningful. But the “relationship between media and democracy also depends on the existing state of the media and of the market, and indeed on the state of actually existing democracy in each individual context – where context is likely to be state-led because of the prevailing dominance of state legislatures but not state-bound due to globalisation” (Fenton, 2014, p. 31).

One of the global trends observed has been the incremental concentration worldwide of mass media ownership into fewer and fewer hands. As such, the trend of concentration of mass media outlets into fewer hands has a potentially negative effect on level of transparency and accountability in a political system. Baker (2007, pp. 6–37) argues strongly for maintaining diversity and plurality with regards to the media ownership. The three main reasons given are: 1) to maintain a more democratic distribution of communicative power; 2) democratic safeguards – by preventing a monopoly of communicative power to mask abuses of political power; and 3) the availability of evidence should never be the sole determinant of the content of investigations, which refers to the use and abuse of information dominance, and the subjectively selective use of information. When mass media concentration does occur, then the results can be stark.

Schisms in wider society are also being mirrored in the mass media and journalism. The schism of the contemporary media and information environment is symptomatic of the wider splits and fractures in global politics and society that is formed along value and norm-based projected realities. In turn, this negatively influences the professional standards of journalism, and manifests in a number of tangible ways within media content and behaviour. One of these aspects is found in the ethics of activism, where journalists as activists are likely to continue to proliferate. The crucial question is raised, when are journalists agenda-driven activists, and when are they investigative journalists with a valid cause? In turn, this leads to the next ethical question of interpretation and opinion. “The era of news objectivity as ‘just the facts’ is dead and gone. Interpretative journalism grows” (Ward, 2014, p. 51). This necessitates understanding the separation and implications of commentary, opinion, analysis, and facts.

What is mentioned above has caused moments for reflection on the future of journalism in the academic community. It has been pointed out that traditionally journalism was studied from the point of view of a technological, government, corporate or educational perspective. But what is really needed is to look at it from the point of view of journalists, because there is no journalism without journalists (Mosco, 2009). There has been a long history of future predictions on “crises”, trends, and developments in the mass media, and as some academics have pointed out, these are often wrong (Curran, 2010). Among the warnings of the gradual death of professional journalism (McChesney, 2003, pp. 3–10), some academics argue that journalism is not heading for extinction, but rather evolution (McNair, 1998). Namely that the dominant model of journalism that existed in the 20th century, which concerned a trained professional communicating objective and validated content to the audience, is undergoing change.

This fits with the views of other academics that speak of a decline and renewal in news media with the emergence of “neo-journalism”, which speaks of journalism adapting to the changing environment as “non-professionals” begin to take over and are assisted by progress in mobile communication technologies and newly created news media outlets carrying the content produced (Giles, 2010). The changes that are taking place within contemporary journalism are sometimes referred to as being a “crisis” (McChesney, 2003; Young, 2010), where a crisis is understood as being an extra-ordinary situation that is potentially harmful. This in turn often causes moments to pause and ponder ethical (Ward, 2005) and normative (Schudson, 2001) issues as an underlying cause, but also a possible cure (Woodstock, 2002). At times, there is a tendency to look back to perceived “golden” periods in history as a guiding force to overcome the “crisis”, and thus prevent any transformation.

But these transformations do not really account for why the changes are currently occurring. Journalist and author Andrew Fowler attributes the “decline in journalism” to the following reasons: 1) mainstream media disconnect (in terms of quality/relevance of information product and declining public confidence); 2) the loss of money and power by news media; 3) failing business models; 4) acting as echo chambers for powerful interests (Tapp, 2015). Academic Howard Tumber (2001, p. 95) explained that journalism was coming under “attack” from two distinct sources/areas: 1) pressure from owners and media conglomerates, which has exacerbated traditional problems with professional news output; and 2) new forms of political and government communication with the public. In meeting these challenges, different media outlets have attempted different solutions to overcoming the challenges and obstacles, which some observers describe as a “splintering” of the fourth estate from a model that was viewed as being homogenous (Rusbridger, 2010). Given the reasons for the decline of journalism as we know it, how does this impact upon the quality of contemporary journalism? Contemporary journalism is much less critical of the “official” state line that is encapsulated within the practice of news management (Esser & Spanier, 2005), and is prone to exaggeration for economic gain and publicity. One avenue that can achieve both goals simultaneously is through the creation of a moral panic.

Moral Panic

“Moral panic” was developed as a sub-discipline within the field of sociology, it has come to have a very profound effect upon the language and culture of debate through the practice of journalists and politicians (Garland, 2008, p. 9). The idea of a moral panic is that it is a mechanism of creating change through manipulating perception and opinion. Its origin as “a concept” was first used by Cohen (1972) to describe orchestrated and mass mediated public campaigns aimed at generating fear of visibly identified “folk devils” (Franklin et al., 2011, p. 152). This is not to say that a moral panic is necessarily something that is tangible, but rather the promise of a risk or threat. Moral panics are intended to serve as a means to enable a change in law, policy or current practices, which is justified as being necessary to “protect” the public and

the common good (Franklin et al., 2011, p. 152; Krinsky, 2013, pp. 1–2). There is an observable process when a moral panic is manufactured:

- an individual, a group or something is identified as being a threat to safety (the “enemy”), values or interests;
- that threat is simplified and distilled to an easily understandable form in the mass media. Distortion of reality allows for symbolisation and “prediction”;
- a construction and exaggeration of public concern primary and secondary definers of panic, much emphasis on what may or could happen;
- elevation of public panic and an accompanying demand to do “something”;
- government or legal authorities have a freer hand to implement policy to address the “threat”;
- panic results in some form of tangible or intangible social or political change and then goes into “remission” (Franklin et al., 2011, pp. 152–153).

The above aspects of the process of creating a moral panic illustrate the role of concern, generating hostility, forming consensus, fomenting disproportionality, and creating volatility (Krinsky, 2013, p. 7). Marsh and Melville (2011) argue that the central idea of a moral panic is based upon the presence of a disproportionate reaction to a particular behaviour or event. From a sociological perspective, Critcher (2008), argues that the analysis of moral panic requires the connections to the themes of discourse, risk, and moral regulation. Critcher goes on to suggest that moral panics should be conceptualised as being forms of discourse as the discursive formations dictate “who has the right to speak, on what terms and to which ends” (Critcher, 2008, p. 1139). The result of joining Critcher’s three elements is “redefining moral panics as extreme forms of risks discourses as integral to the process of moral regulation” (Critcher, 2008, p. 1140). Garland (2008, p. 9) notes that we live “in an age of exaggeration, where the mass media regularly converge on a single anxiety-creating issue and exploit it for all its worth, the utility of negating, deflationary riposte is perfectly apparent”.

Moral panics also need to be visualised by the target audience in order to create a sense of fear in that group, which are quite often used as a distraction by the dominant hegemony during periods of socio-economic hardship. “In sum, social interventions that ignore the roots of violence while creating coercive forms of control and scapegoating unpopular people are the legacies of a moral panic, becoming embedded in the social order long after the initial wave of public anxiety has subsided” (Welch et al., 2002, p. 23). It is a matter of creating a “folk devil” in order to justify a “cure”:

Crucially, the theory [of moral panic] has, over the years, drawn attention to the importance of empowering folk devils so that they or their representatives can challenge the cycle of sanctions and social control. Pressure groups, lobbies, self-help and interest groups have sprung up across the country and effectively positioned themselves as authoritative sources of comment and criticism. They now contribute to the shape of public debate, playing a major role in contesting what they perceive as dangerous stereotypes and popular misconceptions (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995, p. 572).

The above text relates to the positive role of moral panics in being able to contest the power of the hegemonic status quo. However, this can be reverse engineered too. Instead of being a tool to contest the hegemonic power, it can also be a tool of the hegemonic power to crush any possible challenge to its position and consolidate specific political interests by using the moral panic (Burns & Crawford, 1999). This is done by invoking dangerous stereotypes and popular misconceptions in order to enforce and bolster sanctions and social control. The hegemonic power also places itself as the monopoly of commentary, and therefore to control the shape of the public debate by the creation of a threatening “folk devil” as a means of political and social control. This can often take place during some form of socio-economic crisis and public discontent with the system. Critcher (2009) equates the role of moral panic with the desire to compel moral regulation. However, moral panic may also be used as a catalyst for other tasks, such as political regulation. This is to be understood as creating an environment of fear and caution, in which the inhabitants are compliant to the will and the needs of the hegemonic political power.

Contemporary Mainstream News Coverage of Russia: The Ultimate Moral Panic?

To make sense of something it is necessary to be able to identify and scrutinise the individual components. There are a number of different tools for the analysis and sense making of examples of text. One of the tools is through *Content Analysis*, which involves the quantification of different elements in text. It seeks frequencies of certain words in certain genres, and can track these over times in order to identify change. *Argumentation Analysis* focuses upon the structure of argumentation used, which is linked to the wider approach of rhetoric. *Narrative Analysis* involves seeking to explain a “common-sense” understanding of how the world works through a study of the components that make up a narrative. *Discourse Analysis* has a purpose to study issues related to power and how they are linguistically constructed in order to understand actions (Boréus & Bergström, 2017, pp. 7–8).

The tool chosen for the analysis of the text in this paper after considering the above-mentioned alternatives is *Qualitative analysis of ideas and ideological content* – an approach that focuses upon intentional action. In this regard, ideologies are understood and analysed as consisting of ideas that guide the actions and interactions that constitute a society with its institutions, social relations, and power relations. The aim is to identify, interpret, describe, and classify the ideological content in thought and language (Boréus & Bergström, 2017, p. 7). The texts for analysis in this paper have been collected over a long period (some four years since the *Euromaidan* events in Ukraine) and have been manually narrowed down to some 40 pieces of work. This includes mainstream media articles, media monitoring articles, and policy papers by think tanks.

Information and knowledge production are key components, which influence the nature of public debates through managing public opinion and perception of events and processes in the physical environment. One of the key components in shaping the information environment are media outlets and journalists, which can be associated with the mythical brand of being a fourth estate. However, some former members of this group

are much more critical of their role. Former BBC news producer Kenneth Payne went as far as to characterise contemporary media as “indisputably an instrument of war”. This is because military (and political) conflicts are heavily dependent upon carrying domestic and international public opinion (Payne, 2005, p. 81), which is very evident in the quality of media reporting of the current tensions, real and imagined, between Russia and the West. The environment has been captured well in a satirical blog – *A Media Primer on the Art of Writing Russian Scare Stories*. Ten new “rules” of journalism were suggested: 1) there is no need to apply the standards of journalism, such as credible and verifiable sources; 2) truth and credibility are not necessary; 3) make any claim, not matter how outlandish; 4) add submarines to the story to give it more “Soviet-era” creepiness; 5) play on peoples’ fears; 6) use the word Kremlin as much as possible in the story; 7) use Russian military aircraft in the story, and make sure the context is left out; 8) minimise or withhold certain facts from the story; 9) be very selective on what you report, least there be confusion on who the good and bad guys are; 10) create your very own reality (Slane, 2015).

Although the main focus of the paper is from events in 2014, such as those on Crimea, which were taken as a low point in relations between Russia and the West, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that relations were already in the process of plummeting before this milestone. From 2014, there has been a plethora of material published by think tanks and other organisations that promote the idea of a political, cultural and/or Russian military threat, which is often used as a pretext and justification for the act of “self-defence” through increasing the defence budget and enacting extraordinary measures (Darczewska, 2014; Berzins, 2014; Lucas, 2015; Shirreff & Olex-Szczytowski, 2016). The period of see-saw warm and cool relations has seen periodic and recurring bouts of optimism followed by despair. President George W. Bush famously saw something he liked in President Putin’s eyes in 2001. Then in 2008, the world was apparently shocked by the outbreak of the Russia-Georgia War. Although, the signs were already there, and the likely direction of those relations was to worsen between the West and Russia given their very different political and policy trajectories (Sakwa, 2008). There was an attempt to “hit the reset button” in 2009. What are the headlines and media content telling the public about the current Russia “threat”?

A lot of speculation, assertion and assumption exists in the mainstream media’s reporting of the Russia “threat”, which was noticeably increased in “quality” and quantity during the 2016 US Presidential Elections, and their aftermath. An opinion article compared and asserted what the Russians allegedly did was every bit as bad as the Japanese sneak attack on the Pearl Harbour base on 7 December 1941, as “an act of war nonetheless, a sneak attack using 21st century methods”. Then the author finished her article with the assumption that “Russia must indeed be laughing” (Tumulty, 2018). This ending is designed as a means to invoke a little extra public outrage at the thought of not only being “attacked” and ridiculed as well. As another block in the liberal media’s echo chamber when Friedman chimes in with the promise that our democracy is in danger: “President Trump is either totally compromised by the Russians or is a towering fool, or both, but either way, he has shown himself unwilling or unable to defend America against a Russian campaign to divide and undermine our democracy” (Friedman, 2018). The echo chamber was reinforced by the words of Robinson:

There it is, in black and white: Trump was elected with the active help of Russian President Vladimir Putin. While Putin is not named as a co-conspirator, the man behind the scheme – an oligarch named Yevgeniy Prigozhin – is a long-time crony known in Russia as “Putin’s chef”. The idea that he would meddle in a U.S. election without orders from Putin is ludicrous” (Robinson, 2018).

Once more, the main message is one of an impending threat that has the potential to undermine the values and norms of the American system and way of life.

One article from the LA Times sought to create a story detailing a long history of the Soviet Union and now Russia as seeking to “sow discord” in the United States. The logic of the story is that there were numerous attempts that sought to do this historically, but they invariably failed. However, Russia has apparently discovered their “silver bullet” with social media:

Russian operatives couldn’t have asked for better tools than Facebook and Twitter to spark conflict and deepen divisions within Americans, experts say. Never before could they fan propaganda with such ease and speed and needle the people most vulnerable to misinformation with such precision.

The typical style of format of narrative is used, where words that denote uncertainty are used, such as “appears” or “allegedly” (Pierson, 2018). Hillary Clinton’s former press secretary, Brian Fallon, chimed in with more alarming assumptions and assertions. “It seems like the creative instincts and the sophistication exceeds a lot of the US political operatives who do this for a living” (Parker, A., Wagner, J., 2018). There is an effort to make the Russians and Putin seem like an unstoppable and highly sophisticated force that is bent on undermining US democracy by subverting the system. Yet little tangible proof is offered to support the highly alarmist claims. Through the use of assertion propaganda, these stories offer a number of different suggested “remedies”, which include applying further punitive sanctions against Russia and/or removing Trump as President. There is also a significant and notable conflation between the measure of activity and measure of effect. Even assuming the dubious allegations of activity are correct, it does not mean that they necessarily automatically achieve the stated effect. A number of discernible buzzwords are often repeated to reinforce the idea of the moral panic by emphasizing some key ideas/threats, such as “Russian playbook”, “Russian aggression”, “running a sophisticated campaign”, “undermining democracy”, “Russia collusion”, “hacking election”, and “destroying US democracy”. Robert Parry characterised mainstream US media as being “unctuous” and “unprofessional” in their coverage of the issue; not only did they uncritically go with the story, they also attacked those who did not in order to create a groupthink bandwagon effect (Parry, 2017a). However, there is an ever-growing narrative of evidence and opinion that seeks to debunk what has come to be known as *Russia-Gate* – the alleged collusion of Russia in electing Donald Trump as President of the United States.

There are a number of sources and people that are pushing back against the moral panic of the Russia threat narrative through deconstructing its logic, argumentation,

and evidence. One of those sources appeared in a mainstream media outlet, *The Guardian*, where the author begins with “Pundits and Democrats ascribe to a handful of bargain-basement Russian trolls all manner of ability – including orchestrating a coup d’etat”. As part of the deconstruction, Frank mentions that the advertising budget for the 2016 US Presidential Election was US\$9.8 billion and the alleged Russian Facebook trolls spent US\$100,000, which supposedly was the most effective in “hacking” the election (Frank, 2018). Frank openly states that he believes that the reporting on the issue has been consciously and deliberately exaggerated, which is one of the markers for identifying a moral panic.

A number of key witnesses have also cast doubt upon the assertions of Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential Election. One such occasion occurred when House Intelligence Committee Chairman Devin Nunes (R-Calif) stated in an interview that he was “up to speed on everything I have up to this morning. No evidence of collusion.” He went further to suggest that there were members of the US intelligence community and the FBI that are leaking information in order to compromise the Trump presidency (Savransky, 2017). Michael Morell, the former Acting Director of the CIA, an endorser of Hillary Clinton who referred to Trump as a dupe of Russia backtracked. He stated: “On the question of the Trump campaign conspiring with the Russians here, there is smoke, but there is no fire, at all” (Dilanian, 2017). Some media outlets published scepticism of the Russian propaganda narrative too, such as when the shadowy front group PropOrNot² accused hundreds of journalists and outlets that did not take the official mainstream political and media narrative as “spreading Russian propaganda.” The headline of the *New Yorker* spoke openly of the doubt being expressed – *The Propaganda About Russian Propaganda* (Chen, 2016). PropOrNot attempted to shape the information and knowledge environment by not only perpetuating the official Russia moral panic, but also attempted to silence any form of public dissent or divergence through character assassination. As George Orwell noted back in 1945 in *The Freedom of the Press*, “at any given moment there is an orthodoxy, a body of ideas which it is assumed that all right-thinking people will accept without question [...] Anyone who challenges the prevailing orthodoxy finds himself silenced with surprising effectiveness”.

There has been a growing sense of dissatisfaction that the mass media and journalism have become “an extension” of the official government narrative and other interest groups, rather than a voice of objective reason and public interest, the author linking the *Russia-Gate* narrative to the fake news phenomena (Hannan, 2018). Renowned investigative journalist, Robert Parry, noted the use of character assassination against those people and outlets (through labelling them as “Russian moles”) that challenged the “orthodoxy” of the Russia threat moral panic. He also noted a logic that he described as being often missing in the alleged Russian “hack” of the presidential election. In particular, he pointed to discrepancies in applying logic and evidence, such as the relatively minor and insignificant sums of money allegedly being used to run their “sophisticated” influence campaign (Parry, 2017b). Even people that are normally highly critical of Putin and the Russian government, such as Masha

² <http://www.propornot.com/p/home.html>

Gessen, characterising the *Russia-Gate* saga as destructive politics making use of a conspiracy theory approach (Glasser, 2017). This criticism has not stopped the attempt to broaden the scope of the moral panic in the United States by mainstream political and media actors, which was witnessed in the aftermath of the Florida School shooting when there were assertions that a “Russian ‘bot’ army pounced” in an effort to “sow discord” in American society through divisive debates (Frenkel & Wakabayashi, 2018). Once more, the mainstream media accepts the orthodoxy without question, and takes the assertions as reality uncritically at face value and thereby betraying the theoretical foundations of good journalism. However, the United States has not been the only country to drive a moral panic using Russia as the folklore devil.

Another country that has extensively used the Russia “threat” as the basis of a moral panic is the United Kingdom. Some stories are timed for significant times of the year, such as the Christmas-New Year period, which is associated with festive family activities. A story that emerged at this time was an alarmist one that featured the Royal Navy needing to be sent in order to intercept and escort Russian naval ships. On the surface, the story implies that the Russian Navy violated British territorial waters, except for one small tract – “Royal Navy frigate HMS Westminster was sent to monitor four Russian vessels over the weekend as they passed close to British waters” (Miller, 2018). In other words, there was no real crisis or breach of international law, rather a constructed moral panic. The threatening “predictions” of leading members of the British government have also been quoted without any additional analysis or critique on numerous occasions, such as former Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson’s assertion that Russia is “full of dirty tricks”, and has the ability to disrupt UK politics with hacking. This led to discussions on how to defend against these hypothetical attacks (Wintour & Slawson, 2017). This news coincidentally appeared at a time when there was a debate as to whether to adopt secure on-line voting as an option. More recently, the former Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson warned that “Russia could cause thousands and thousands and thousands of deaths in Britain with an attack which would cripple the UK’s infrastructure and energy supply” (Farmer, 2018). As with the previous cases, there was no supporting evidence to back the assertions, and the announcement came at a time when the defence budget was being reviewed. One of the more bizarre cases was the assertion that Russia hacked BREXIT, which actually came well after the vote and only emerged at the time of the US presidential elections in November 2017 (Burgess, 2017; Galeotti, 2017; Smith, 2017). The same style of rhetoric, reasoning and logic used in the US presidential election was used in BREXIT too, in an apparent attempt to link the two events together in a global super-conspiracy theory in spite of the obvious discrepancies, such as the chronological disjunction of the two events.

The moral panic of the Russia threat is much more widely and globally spread, from the Dutch Referendum on a trade deal with Ukraine and elections (Lagerman, 2017), to “looming” invasions of Ukraine (Baldor, 2014), the French Election (Daniels, 2017), the German elections (even though German intelligence found no evidence) (Knight, 2017), the Mexican elections (Garcia & Torres, 2018), and even that Putin gave orders to attack US troops in Syria (Peters, 2018). All of these stories shared the trademark approaches to communicating the moral panic in-line with the US

presidential model, with the various alleged risks to societal norms and values, the buzzwords used, different “remedies” offered depending on the objective (usually revealed by the specific timing and circumstance of the Russia “menace”). As noted by Glenn Greenwald, “every empire needs a scary external threat, led by a singular menacing villain, to justify its massive military expenditures, consolidation of authoritarian powers, and endless wars” (Greenwald, 2018).

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper a question was posed: What is the logic of the Russian “threat”, and are there any “cures” suggested in mainstream media coverage? Before, this is answered in full, the bits of the complex puzzle need to be brought together in order to make sense of the bigger picture. Firstly, is the role of journalism and the mass media. This institution has managed to create a branded myth around itself as being a fourth estate, an institution that checks and balances the political power in the name of public interest. However, there are concerns and evidence that journalism’s role has become co-opted by economic and political interests. This is precisely because of the assumed power to influence perception and shape public opinion. The mainstream mass media are indelibly tied to the interests of the hegemonic system of liberal democracy acting in the capacity as their information gatekeeper and watchdog.

Currently, that system of liberal democracy is experiencing a multi-levelled crisis in terms of public trust and legitimacy owing to what has been labelled as being the populist challenge. This has been seen in the US elections when Trump beat his rival and the anticipated winner (by mainstream politics and mass media) Hillary Clinton, when the favoured liberal contender was beaten by someone that rhetorically stood against the liberal system. There were also similar challenges found in BREXIT, the French and German elections. Another problem of contemporary politics is found in the competition for increasingly scarcer governmental financial resources. As a result, a common communication strategy seems to have been developed using a “cookie cutter” approach in order to attain these political and economic objectives. After some years of not being the global folklore devil, Russia has been re-elevated to this status, which may be in part through the ability of the moral panic communicators to link the supervillain brand of the Soviet Union from the Cold War to the Russian Federation. Thereby, the brand has some pre-existing level of recognition and status to the target audiences.

Rather than taking the strategy of a longer term and somewhat unpredictable path of either reforming the system of a reasoned and rational form of communication, a shorter-term approach of using emotionally based messaging that intends to induce fear in the target audience. When fear is induced, the logic works differently insofar as there is less critical reflection on the quality of the logic and evidence being presented. Therefore, inducing a moral panic can adequately meet the organisational objectives. Traditionally, moral panics have been associated as a means of ethical or social regulation and control within society. This study presents an indicative case where moral panic is used to regulate and control politics and economics in a given society

or system in order to fend off challenges to their continued hegemony and in order to justify policy that may otherwise be difficult to pass.

Franklin et al. (2011) identified the progression of a moral panic, which can be easily applied to this case. Firstly, a threat is identified, in this case Russia and Putin. Secondly, the threat is distilled to an easily understandable form by the mass media, which can be seen in the uniform rhetoric and lexicon used globally, e.g. a “sophisticated campaign” or “undermining democracy”. Thirdly comes the construction and exaggeration phase, whereby Russia is elevated to the status as a global threat and mega folklore devil. The next phase is to create a demand to do something; one such example is the demand by some sections of US society to impeach Trump for “Russian collusion”. This creates the context whereby the actor(s) responsible for the moral panic have a freer hand at policy, such as deploying troops to Central and Eastern Europe. There is an evident effort to try and defend the viability of the moral panic from attack and deconstruction, by targeting those individuals and organisations that openly challenge the legitimacy and credibility of it, which is done by including them as being willing assistants to the “attack” on society and its values.

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