

Quit Worrying about the Russians in Our Borderless World

Is American society so fragile that a few “divisive” ads, news stories, commentaries, and even lies — *perhaps* emanating from Russia — threaten to plunge it into darkness? The establishment’s narrative on “Russian election meddling” would have you believe that. On its face, the alarm is so ridiculous that I doubt any of the fearmongers really believe their own words. They attempt to provoke public hysteria for political, geopolitical, and financial gain.

While we the people are not deemed worthy of being shown the evidence that “Russia” — which I take to mean Vladimir Putin — was behind the so-called meddling, even if we grant it just for the sake of argument, what does it amount to? Where’s the existential threat to America that justifies the fevered rhetoric that is a staple of cable news? There is none. All I can say is, if that’s the worst the Russians can do, I wouldn’t lose any sleep over them.

Even if we ignore the fact that the material in question amounted to a few drops in the vast ocean of information that Americans encounter every day, the establishment’s narrative and proposals are outrageous. Let’s state the obvious: we live in an increasingly borderless world — and that’s a good thing (no matter what the demagogue and ignoramus Donald Trump says). Information — and, yes, misinformation — flow more easily and cheaply than ever, making access nearly universal. It can’t be controlled. That’s a good thing. It does not justify panic.

To grow up is to cultivate methods of separating the wheat from the chaff in what we see and hear. Early on we learn at least to discount — if not disbelieve — the claims we hear in television commercials because we understand the role interest plays in describing goods and services. We also learn (one hopes) to treat the claims of politicians, the traditional targets of American ridicule, the same way.

There is no substitute for this sort of skepticism, which is a sign of maturity. A government effort to protect us from misinformation in the name of preserving “our democratic institutions” would be a contradiction, not to mention a “cure” worse than the alleged disease. The best protection against one-sided, erroneous, even dishonest speech is competition.

Most people understand this but in too narrow a way. In every election season we are deluged with questionable, false, and even crazy claims. This didn’t start with the internet. It’s as old as politics. In fact, most campaigns today are more civil than in the past, when candidates’ alleged extramarital affairs and illegitimate children could be fair game. We have all heard of — or looked at — fringe websites that traffic in political stories even the

National Enquirer might reject. But a call to shut down those sites would be rejected by most people — unless the sites were suspected of being Russian.

Why should that make a difference? If a story is true, who cares who tells it? And if it is exaggerated or false, can't people be trusted to exercise the same skepticism they are expected to exercise when the source is American? Knowing the source doesn't indicate if the story is true. (The *New York Times* said Iraq had WMD and that 17 intelligence agencies verified that Russia hacked the DNC.) Virtually all the material *supposedly* posted by Russians was authentic. (Much of it was redundant. Which bright Russian schemer thought it worthwhile to tell the people of Ferguson, Missouri, about police and racial issues there?) Were voters better or worse off because that material was made available? Was the American political system imperiled by RT's coverage of third-party candidates? Fans of democracy who worship the "informed voter" can't seriously say they were worse off.

Whether or not "the Russians" did what they are accused of doing, we need to be skeptical about what we see and hear, and we need to demand evidence rather than take the government's word on faith. That also goes for what we get from established news outlets, which have a financial interest in marginalizing alternative media.

In other words we need to be adults.

What we don't need is government regulation, a blunt instrument that would produce horrendous consequences, intended and unintended. One suspects that the social-media moguls have belatedly jumped on the anti-Russian bandwagon because some members of Congress have read them the riot act: get on board or else. But if who really thinks that scapegoating Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and burdening them — us! — with regulations, would protect Americans from political untruths and exaggerations? A false sense of security is worse than no sense of security at all.

I see more than a little irony in the fact that those who would use the state to shield us from "Russian influence" also urge us to trust the "intelligence community" — in the absence of any evidence — when it (more precisely, a group of handpicked analysts) says Russia is working night and day to destroy America.