An Inside Look at How Pro-Russia Trolls Got the SPLC to Censor a Commie

"An Orwellian destruction of meaning and words — so many absurdities; absurdities stacked on absurdities," Alexander Reid Ross told me. Fox News had [just declared him](#) the leader of a nasty smear campaign, aided by the "far-left Southern Poverty Law Center," that aimed to make television personality Tucker Carlson and his guests out to be "fascists." So far, so normal, but it was the specific charge that shocked and awed the communist author who once lived in Russia: "McCarthyism," with [white nationalists' favorite host](#), and those who come on his show [to agree with him](#), the victims.

Ross's ironic sin, which he spoke to me about in an hour-long phone call, was writing a series of articles about a topic he [wrote the book on](#): fascist entryism, or efforts to normalize far-right politics and infiltrate left-wing discourse. In particular, he noted the shared affinity for the Kremlin and its talking points among the fringe right and a subsection of leftists, and he detailed how Russian state media was facilitating a popular, ["anti-establishment" front](#) against the foreign and domestic enemies of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad, platforming right-wing nationalists [alongside](#) those who self-identify as progressive internationalists.

Max Blumenthal is a fixture in this, found almost every week defending Russian foreign policy on platforms such as RT and Sputnik, a track record [detailed in Ross' last article](#). The son of Hillary Clinton confidant Sidney Blumenthal, he [has](#)

[admitted](#) to accepting a free trip to Moscow, where he [attended the same RT anniversary party](#) in 2015 as U.S. General Michael Flynn — Trump's former national security advisor is under investigation, in part, for failing to disclose he was [paid $45,000 for his appearance](#) . In Moscow, Blumenthal spoke on a panel, "[InfoWar: Will there be a winner?](#)" with Charles Bausman, editor of the website Russia Insider and the author of articles such as, "[It's Time to Drop the Jew Taboo](#)."

Blumenthal has also been a repeat guest on Tucker Carlson's Fox News broadcast, where he functions as the network's useful leftist, [defending President Trump](#) from claims he colluded with Russia or benefited from its interventions in the 2016 election. His last appearance [was to defend RT](#) from the charge that it's Kremlin propaganda.

I don't know Blumenthal well, but we have met before: six years ago at a bar in downtown Brooklyn where a single, square artisanal ice cube displaced what ought to have been $6 of gin in my $12 cocktail. It was a birthday party for a mutual friend who I no longer follow on Twitter.

It was with some surprise, then, that I received a call on March 13 from the SPLC's bemused general counsel, Jim Knoepp, regarding a peculiar legal threat Blumenthal had sent to the civil rights organization. That threat named me as a "shadow author" of an article I did not write by a man I did not know on topics we had never discussed.

Blumenthal would repeat this claim in [an interview with Ed Schultz](#), an RT anchor who enjoyed previous stints as a conservative on talk radio and a liberal on MSNBC. "It's very clear," Blumenthal asserted. "This wasn't by one writer. This was by a cabal of people who have been trying to suppress dissent."

It only took $20, Blumenthal added, to pay for the threat of litigation that got the article by Ross pulled by the SPLC,

the civil rights group [apologizing for hurt feelings](#) but not actually conceding any error in fact. [The piece is now hosted elsewhere](#).

"I don't think it was even being read," Ross said when I spoke to him. What was being read were the claims being made about it. The Intercept's Glenn Greenwald, for instance, [alleged that](#) the SPLC had "published an article claiming that anti-war activists in the left were in an alliance, and were basically the same as, neo-Nazis and Holocaust deniers."

This viral mischaracterization was why the SPLC retracted the piece. In its apology, the group said that some of those named in the article had protested that they had been "falsely described… as white supremacists, fascists, and/or anti-Semites." It continued: "Because neither we nor the article's author intended to make any such accusations, we took it down while we re-examined its contents."

Ross, himself a seasoned anti-war activist, hadn't called anyone names, but rather detailed how some who purport to be his comrades had begun echoing, and sharing platforms with, far-right extremists. A [secessionist conference in Moscow](#), for example, saw activists such as Joe Lombardo, of the [United National Antiwar Coalition](#), declaring opposition to the "destructive manifestations of the 'new world order'" [in a statement](#) cosigned by Andrey Kovalenko, leader of the [Eurasian Youth Union](#), a wing of Aleksandr Dugin's "National Bolshevik" movement — basically Russian nationalism fused with German fascism — and [Yana Lantratova](#), head of Putin's Council for Civil Society and Human Rights. A [UNAC write-up](#) of the conference highlighted the presence of "a leading anti-Zionist writer," Israel Shamir, [a Holocaust denier and associate of WikiLeaks](#).

Ross told me it was the convergence of left and right rhetoric on the war in Syria, especially, that led him to begin investigating the origin and spread of pro-Russia talking

points on opposite poles of the political spectrum. "Something in my stomach churned," he said. The conspiracy theories about first responders and child refugees — the former "terrorists," and the latter "PsyOps" — were "getting so far fetched, and then I realized that's part of the issue." Debunked as fast as a new theory is spawned, these insta-conspiracy theories mirror Moscow's strategy of muddying the waters rather than trying to come up with a logical and internally consistent counter-narrative.

"The networks that are denying it are just making it confusing," Ross observed. "But there's nothing really that confusing here."

Though I did not write Ross' article, a month before I had written an exposé for The Daily Beast on "Redfish", a new "grassroots" media company, led by an [associate of the Voltaire Network](#), a far-right conspiracy website that the company's chief credited with informing her Syria reporting. The company is almost completely staffed by known agents of Moscow's propaganda apparatus.

Blumenthal had [appeared on Redfish](#), interviewed by his friend and Redfish employee, Rania Khalek, and [was unpleased](#) when this platform was revealed to be a "[wholly owned subsidiary of Ruptly](#)," itself a subsidiary of the Kremlin. He has since gone on to help produce [features for RT](#); Khalek has also gone on to openly [work for the Kremlin-backed network](#) and [its affiliates](#). (The Society of Professional Journalists' [Code of Ethics](#) says reporters should, "Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived"; "Refuse gifts," including "free travel"; and, "Disclose unavoidable conflicts.")

Why an unrelated journalist's name might show up in a threat of litigation over someone else's article makes a little more sense if one accepts that Blumenthal is in the business of selling state-sponsored conspiracies to a diminishing audience of cranks. It's also vital, for understanding, to know that

this sort of propagandist is unconcerned with making their counter-narrative coherent or even internally consistent; it often just feels like trolling — like Blumenthal rebutting claims of a left-right-Kremlin axis by turning to Bill Moran, a former editor at Sputnik turned lawyer for the dregs of the reactionary left and right. Indeed, Blumenthal's attorney previously represented "alt-right" e-celebrity Cassandra Fairbanks, the [Bernie Sanders supporter turned "alt-right" Trump voter](#) who Moran worked under at the Russian state outlet (employees there were [instructed to promote "false flag" conspiracies](#) about the Syrian regime's [use of chemical weapons](#)).

The SPLC would not provide me a copy of the legal threat that Moran sent to them, their general counsel instead reading me the parts that, flatteringly, detailed my extravagant role in a conspiracy theory. But I did receive a copy of a separate legal document demanding the preservation of all my "potentially relevant" web history.

Stating as fact that an author is a fraud who outsources their writing to a freelance journalist is defamatory, but that's one of the lesser ironies here. Blumenthal's record of slandering those less fortunate than him speaks for itself, and here I do not mean slander of journalists, who should accept that as the cost of doing journalism. No, it's Blumenthal's record of pushing conspiracy theories about children and rescue workers and others living in the worst war zones the 21st century has yet seen — eagerly picked up by Russian state media; always debunked and unceremoniously discarded — that is the scandal that can't be purged.

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When a UN aid convoy was bombed on its way to what was then rebel-held Aleppo, Blumenthal was quick to suggest the account of the first responders was unreliable. In an [October 2, 2016 piece](#), he implied the White Helmets, a favorite target of

Russian missiles and conspiratorial defamation, were part of a false-flag conspiracy, having "pinned blame squarely on the Syrian and Russian governments. In fact, a White Helmets member was among the first civilians to appear on camera at the scene of the attack, declaring in English that 'the regime helicopters targeted this place with four barrel [bombs].'"

"This account," he added, "remains unconfirmed by both the UN and SARC, and no evidence of barrel bombs has been produced."

The White Helmets are a featured target of 21st Century Wire, an alternative-to-news site founded by an editor of Infowars, the far-right conspiracy website. Their writer, Vanessa Beeley, has frequently accused those who rescue survivors of airstrikes of being an arm of al-Qaeda, staging incidents to spur Western intervention against Assad.

Blumenthal's work on the topic has revealed nothing that couldn't have been found, earlier, in her archives; a year before his first piece on the White Helmets, Beeley told Sputnik that the "Soros-sponsored" group "demonizes the Assad government and encourages direct foreign intervention." Much is made of the fact that a volunteer rescue organization filling the void left by a state only operates in areas where there is no state; where there is no state, there are extremists, ergo those who dig out children from bombed buildings are extremists too.

That these rescue workers have been the target of a concerted propaganda campaign is not news; that discrediting them serves the interests of those bombing them is not either; and that those who volunteer for the White Helmets, and survive, risk arrest and torture, like Abdulhadi Kamel — Amnesty International notes he was forced to record a "confession" that aired on Russian media claiming he was an actor paid by Turkey, Europe and Saudi Arabia — is not in dispute. Words have consequences, and they are weaponized in areas of conflict, but some who purport to do journalism, not

propaganda, are blithely unconcerned about the impact of the false things they have claimed, never bothering to correct them.

Contra notions of a false flag, for example, the United Nations soon confirmed that the aid convoy to Aleppo was, as that volunteer said in English, [hit by barrel bombs](#) dropped from a Syrian regime helicopter. The attack, according to the UN, was "meticulously planned" and "ruthlessly carried out." There was no equivocation, but Blumenthal neither updated his piece nor acknowledged the finding elsewhere. Why bother? By that point, weeks later, no one remembers any details — it's the broader narrative that sticks.

Blumenthal is prolific when it comes to inverting victims and perpetrators of war crimes. In January 2017, for example, he was quick to blame the contamination of Damascus' water supply on anti-regime militants in the Wadi Barada valley — and to attack the mainstream media for not saying that. "The Guardian," [he complained](#), "can't bring itself to name Al Qaeda in Syria, waits til the last line to mention it poisoned Damascus water supply with diesel."

A UN report on the incident did not mince words, and Blumenthal was proven wrong again. "Syria's air force deliberately bombed water sources in December [2016], a war crime that cut off water 5.5 million people in and around the capital Damascus," the UN found, [as Reuters reported](#).

Blumenthal never got around to correcting the record.

History would soon repeat, again. When the Syrian regime once again used the nerve agent sarin against a civilian population, Blumenthal once again turned his sights to the Guardian, mocking the "pro-rebel" correspondent who had reported on the chemical weapon massacre from the site itself, Khan Sheikhun.

In a [July 7, 2017 article](#) for his self-funded Grayzone

Project, Blumenthal and his associate Benjamin Norton likewise cast doubt on the guilt of the only party known to have possessed and used sarin in the Syrian conflict. "More than 30 people were killed in that attack under circumstances that were shrouded in mystery," they wrote, [citing](#) a [report](#) from Sy Hersh that claimed sarin wasn't used at all.

A week earlier, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons had [already confirmed](#) "that people were exposed to sarin, a chemical weapon." A subsequent report from UN investigators [squarely blamed the regime](#).

There is no mystery around what happened next: nothing.

Blumenthal also attacks children in Syria with the zeal of an Infowars reporter going after survivors of a school shooting.

"Bana Alabed [and] the White Helmets build on a grand tradition of pro-war psy-ops," Blumenthal [has written](#), referring to an 8-year-old girl who once lived in the besieged, eastern half of Aleppo (his colleague, Rania Khalek, once even [doubted](#) [that](#)). Bana's mother, Fatemah, created a Twitter account for her daughter to publicize their plight — and that child has since joined a long line of children who survived atrocities only to have their experience, and even their existence, [called into question](#). Blumenthal's friend and collaborator, RT's Dan Cohen, has also [taken the fight to besieged teenagers](#) in Eastern Ghouta.

Blumenthal refuses to cast the plight of children outside the narrative that the U.S. is itching for regime change in Damascus, after seven years of allegedly trying. The implicit premise is that there is a dearth of victims in Syria, so P.R. firms [must create them](#). To bolster this claim, Blumenthal has [promoted the work](#) of Caitlin Johnstone, an Australian astrologer who advocates a left-right, anti-establishment alliance "[against the deep state](#)" with the likes of Mike Cernovich, a "[pick-up artist](#)" turned [contributor to Infowars](#)

(he was also [no fan of the SPLC](#) article).

But these targets of slanderous conspiracy theories are safely foreign and distant. And unlike American bloggers, dead Syrians don't have lawyers.

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When I spoke to Ross, he was somewhat befuddled — he, the anti-fascist author of a censored article on the threat of far-right entryism, was the one guilty of modern-day McCarthyism. This, by virtue of the fact he detailed the media platforms that right-wing, authoritarian state generously provides to [outright fascists](#) and some on the left who [share their positions](#) on the world outside of the U.S.

In its [report on the controversy](#), Fox News only added to the confusion. "A source close to Blumenthal mocked the [SPLC] article, pointing out that it attempts to portray an appearance on [Tucker] Carlson's show as a negative, despite the fact that it's among the most popular cable programs in the country."

It's a "'disgusting, backhanded McCarthyite smear' against Fox News," the source stated, according to the report.

"I've been called a neoconservative, McCarthyist liberal enemy of Fox News — we're talking about Fox News here, which has relentlessly attacked left-wing journalists," Ross told me. "Fox News bleating about McCarthyists from the left is the height of absurdity."

As for the Fox News regulars who have piled on, from the left, Ross notes the bitter irony. "They've been content just to label me — to namecall, to use their platforms and influences to silence me," he said. "It doesn't seem very journalistic."

He thinks there needs to be a conversation, and that there needs to be accountability, noting those who want neither were

also, "from June 2016 to the elections, constantly calling any attempts to talk about Russia '[McCarthyism](#)' or the '[new red scare](#)' or the '[new cold war](#).'"

These were some of the same people who miscast Ross' piece and were uncritical at best when it was removed. Like Greenwald, for instance, the journalist best known for publishing NSA documents leaked by Edward Snowden. A Pulitzer Prize winner, what he says still carries weight on the left, and what he suggested was that the SPLC article engaged in a vulgar conflation; that it said "anti-war activists in the left" were "basically the same" as Nazis on the right. But this was the danger that Ross was illuminating — the conflation of those who are supportive of Russian and Syrian government war efforts with the anti-war left. And rather than say leftists and fascists were the same, he detailed when and where a few who claim those labels say the same thing.

When a white supremacist killed a left-wing protester in Charlottesville, North Carolina, Greenwald composed [a principled defense of free speech](#). But when an anti-fascist communist has his journalism purged after conspiratorial legal threats from an alt-right champion's lawyer, no principled defense of speech [can be found](#) but a meek suggestion that there must have been something to it.

On another occasion, when a college pro-Palestine group chose to not to invite Rania Khalek to speak at their event, Greenwald, Blumenthal and Noam Chomsky alike all signed an open letter proclaiming it a threat to discourse. "It runs contrary to the possibility of people learning from one another, changing their minds, and educating one another," [the letter stated](#).

No one purged her work, [even when it was flawed](#).

Where, then, is the defense of unpopular speech — and on the left, Ross' position is a dissenting one — in the face of an

organization buckling to the pressure of online mobs and the threat of pending litigation? "I find that the people behind these lawsuits are truly so odious and repugnant, that creates its own motivation for me," Greenwald [once said](#) of civil rights activists seeking to hold a neo-Nazi responsible for inciting violence; he was motivated to provide the defendant counsel, to which all are entitled and which lawyers of principle have long provided, however unsavory the client. But where's the defense, on principle, of civil speech, published by civil rights organization, that its harshest critics are fully entitled to counter on platforms that are readily available to them?

Where's the left, in general? Missing in action, perhaps, because the subject is unsettling: these fascists are not your friends, but some of your friends may have partied with them. But even those don't buy the thesis, yet — that the Russian government pursues its interests abroad; those interests are pursued with the help of the media properties it owns; the left should be wary of those who say those interests are its own — should absolutely reject attempts to shut down the conversation with appeals to the state.

Consider also that the right, historically, has been the perpetrator of McCarthyism, not its victim. Misuse of the term to silence left-wing dissent, however, has a long tradition: Murray Bookchin, a socialist writer, called it "[McCarthyism in reverse](#)" — and it was used then [as now](#) by reactionary elements looking to silence their critics to the left. In practice, "McCarthyism" today means "shut the fuck up," and it is being used by those who invoke its specter to deplatform and censor others.