Drone News Has Dried Up

People do need to understand how challenging the current environment is for everyone. I was talking yesterday to a friend about how the background information is becoming more and more difficult to access. Even alternative news sites have a cycle of sorts related to what information they focus on. Drone information in particular has been under attack for some time.

When I started the Upstate Drone Action Website in 2011, there was virtually no news about drones anywhere. I created an aggregator using a Google aggregator I had created, that searched widely for Drone news. It started turning up mostly reports on US drone strikes in English language news outlets in Pakistan and other international sources including the international versions of the New York Times and CNN. But even so, I initially found only a few hits a month. I was trying to triangulate various sources on the same strike at the time so I posted them all.

By 2014 and 2015 the same news aggregator was turning out so many reports, still majority international, I had started organizing them so that I could collect all the posts on a particular event. It also turned up links to all kinds to US reports reflecting on Drone strikes as well as discussions of drone warfare in progressive blogs. After a while, I couldn't keep up any more. There were hundreds of hits each month.

Suddenly, in 2015 and 2016, all the real news disappeared from the feed created by my tool. Increasingly, the reports were dominated by discussions of domestic drone uses and domestic legal issues, mostly referring to little low flying drones used to snoop or capture footage of ongoing events. The conversation turned to 'delivery drones' something I think is an absolutely stupid and unworkable idea; cowboys shooting down drones over their property. Drones for rescue and

research. Well, you get the picture. There were exceptions but they became fewer and farther between.

As the peak for drone news collapsed, a site that regularly published my work rejected a major research piece on military drones and the ways in which drone news was distorted and covered up in mainstream sources. The main editor wrote me thank you for the piece, but the person actually posting articles chose to ignore it. Drones didn't interest him or her.

Currently I rarely, if ever, see an article focused on a drone strike in Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Somalia or any of the other countries where drone strikes have significantly increased since the beginning of this year. Today my aggregator turned up several articles claiming that Chinese, Iranian and Russian drones are getting in the way of US business as usual. But, my feed no longer reports any US drone strikes despite the fact that they have significantly increased since Trump came into office. If you look at it, you would think that military drones, targeted killing and spying are on an asymptotic approach to zero. You would never dream that military drone strikes have doubled under President Trump.

I shared this information at a meeting earlier today, along with an article from the World Socialist Web Site, Google's new search protocol is restricting access to 13 leading socialist, progressive and anti-war web sites. The article talks about progressive websites but in fact many libertarian and right leaning websites have been targeted by Google as well. The 'Fake News' targets are decided by a committee with representatives of the New York Times, The Washington Post, Google and others of a similar ilk. They are identified as channeling 'Russian propaganda', but what they actually do is offer a forum for a broad based discussion of the U.S. political sphere, along with U.S. domestic and foreign policy. In another article, New Google algorithm restricts

access to left-wing, progressive web sites, WSWS asserts:

> *In the three months since Google implemented the changes to its search engine, fewer people have accessed left-wing and anti-war news sites. Based on information available on Alexa analytics, other sites that have experienced sharp drops in ranking include WikiLeaks, Alternet, Counterpunch, Global Research, Consortium News and Truthout. Even prominent democratic rights groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union and Amnesty International appear to have been hit.*

Not everyone at the meeting was prepared to believe the information I presented and many don't particularly favor the World Socialist Organization as an authoritative source, but they do hold some of the other sites on the 'Fake News' list in very high esteem. That's an important point. These sites are not all coming from the same political perspective but they all provide a platform for open discussion and deep reporting of events covered in a very narrow manner by the mainstream media.

In any case, James Swarts, a long time stalwart in the local antiwar movement, went home to test the hypothesis that Google is not carrying stories on military drone activity and not reporting hits on blacklisted sites. Here is his report:

> *In reference to the issue of information blackout or drone action since The Drump took office I found a quick Internet search turned up many articles, but most of them are already very dated. However, some may be worth checking out such as the following:*
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> - *https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/drone-war/data/get-the-data-a-list-of-us-air-and-drone-strikes-afghanistan-2017*
> - *https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/drone-war/data/yemen-reported-us-covert-actions-2017*
> - *http://www.defenseone.com/news/2017/03/the-d-brief-marc*

h-03-2017/135869/

- *http://www.reprieve.org/drones/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwwqXMBRCDARIsAD-AQ2ggRvAEFv0c29rzRpKMPV-0xTN1vz8jKID-ULNPqumriLgwNxMegz4aAhvqEALw_wcB (Mostly an Ad for donations but some background)*
- *http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2017/03/09/is_the_u_s_responsible_for_more_civilian_casualties_since_trump_took_office.html*
- *http://www.newsweek.com/trumps-war-civilian-deaths-syria-577353*
- *http://www.activistpost.com/2017/03/u-s-drone-strikes-gone-432-since-trump-took-office.html*

> *Unfortunately, as was brought out at the meeting, it appears Google is limiting hits and you have to use several search engines to find any current reports [at all]. Obviously this is a concern to be further investigated.*

If you would like to make a comparison with regard to the availability of Drone News, here is the page of hits, mostly from my Google aggregator for the first quarter of 2014, and the one from the second quarter of 2013.

In Google tweaks search results to squash fake news, published by C|net news (owned by CBS) on April 25, Google's plan to excise 'Fake News' from their results is explained as follows:

> *Google announced Tuesday that it's changing how its search engine works to "surface more high quality content from the web." The search engine giant said that about 0.25 percent of its results had "offensive or clearly misleading content," and it set out to fix that by changing how results are ranked and introducing reporting tools for users.*
>
> *Over the last month, after Google updated its search quality guidelines, it used testers to weed out low-quality content, which included fake news, offensive results and bogus conspiracy theories. The search giant collected the data from*

> *the evaluators and is applying it to the ranking algorithm to push fake news further down in search results.*

Unfortunately, my experience with drone news tells us that this practice is not entirely new in Google. A practice already in place regarding certain subjects has merely been broadened and systematized. I would, in fact, think it likely that the removal of Drone news from Google output was a test. Did anyone complain? Was there a public outcry? No. So, it was safe to create a back story and put the big censorship program in place. 1984 has come and gone. The Imperial Seal is in place.

What really is frightening is that many of the tools we take for granted for maintaining our websites and enhancing them are controlled by Google. Google can and will take your site down if it is deemed threat. So far, this has been a response to malware (like viruses), but they can do it for whatever reason they choose. Once it is blocked by your browser only Google can clear it to be displayed again. Google has a web administrator site that offers tools to check your site for problems, and also output data to assess how many hits your site is getting, and how they are distributed in a variety of contextual matrices.

Many of the sites on the 'Fake News' list use a Google plug-in to power the search engine that is engaged when you put a topic, author or title into the little search window at the top of the Home Page. Google tools are used by the most popular SEO (Search Engine Optimization) tools for bloggers because they are advising you on how to get your blog a good listing with Google. These tools make you do some work, but, if Google won't list your site anyway, then why bother. Google provides the engine for mapping plug-ins, email plug-ins and all kinds of services that you can get for free for you website or blog. Google handles all of our email in many cases.

What if they decide to begin censoring email? Will they tell you in advance? Google list serves won't post emails to the account of the sender (if they have a gmail address). They didn't announce this, so many of us thought we'd been kicked off our list. When I looked it up, I found no way to complain.

We have been struggling to keep network neutrality alive so those of us who just want to discuss the issues on our own terms can continue to do so without technical interference. Now the mainstream news is using the most powerful Internet management company/s (Facebook is doing this too) to block the free flow of information. So far, you and I can still go to our favorite source of information and discussion to see what people are talking about, but new people are shut out. No one will get the information on a equal footing with the mainstream stories when the search for information on a given topic is limited to a few US based corporate outlets. This is very bad news and it needs to be shared widely.