

A Good Catch by a Reader, Regarding the Break from the "Pentagon Papers Principle"

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Following the release of [today's article about news organizations junking the "Pentagon Papers Principle,"](#) reader Ben O'Neill made a good observation that should have been in the piece. In the newly-found summary emailed by an Aspen Institute figure in September 2020, "Partnership for a Healthy Digital Public Sphere," the section about "hack-and-dump" exercises asks [emphasis mine]: "What happens when fabricated documents are released alongside genuine (stolen) content? How can social feeds avoid serving as promoters of foreign **or other adversarial entities?**"

First of all, this notion that there may be fabrications mixed in with real content is a suggestion that pops up somewhere in nearly every one of these leak stories, even if all the material proves to be real (old friend Malcolm Nance did the job in 2016 in suggesting the Podesta leaks were "[riddled with forgeries](#)"). More importantly however, that last line is a great example of what former cybersecurity official and [Foundation for Freedom Online](#) head Mike Benz calls the "foreign-domestic switcheroo."

It's the basic rhetorical trick of the censorship age: raise a fuss about a foreign threat, using it as a battering ram

to get everyone from congress to the tech companies to submit to increased regulation and surveillance. Then, slowly, adjust your aim to domestic targets. You can see the subtlety: the original Stanford piece tries to stick to railing against “disinformation” and information from “foreign adversaries,” but the later paper circulated by Aspen slips in, ever so slightly, a new category of dubious source: “foreign or other adversarial entities.”

These rhetorical devices are essential. It would be preposterous to form (as Stanford did) an “[Information Warfare Working Group](#)” if readers knew the “war” being contemplated was against domestic voices. It would likewise seem outrageous to suggest, as Stanford did, that journalists respond to a domestic threat by taking a step as drastic as eliminating intra-title competition, and “forming partnerships with other organizations to pool resources.” But if you start by focusing on Russians and only later mention as an afterthought “other adversarial entities,” you can frame things however you want, from espionage to warfare. As reader O’Neill correctly pointed out, “they are now getting close to being explicit about the fact that their motivation for suppressing news is to fight domestic political adversaries.”

One other small note I left out for space reasons. The “[Information Warfare Working Group](#)” that produced the original paper by Janine Zacharia proposing the end of the “Pentagon Papers Principle” includes such anti-disinformation luminaries as Renee DiResta and Michael McFaul. In that summer of 2019, the working group also put out a paper by Dr. Amy Zegart, titled, “[Spies, Lies, and Algorithms](#).” Her co-author? Michael Morell.

This story *stinks*, folks. There are almost too many angles to count. In any case, thanks to one of this site's many attentive readers for a key observation.