

New York Times' narrative of Russian hacking: War propaganda in the guise of news

By Joseph Kishore
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On Wednesday, the *New York Times* published a banner article, covering five columns on its front page and four inside pages, purporting to be a definitive account of Russian government intervention in the US elections through the hacking of Democratic Party emails.

“Hacking the Democrats: How Russia Honed Its Cyberpower and Trained it on an American Election,” by Eric Lipton, David Sanger and Scott Shane, is pure propaganda. It is full of unsubstantiated assertions, innuendo and unfounded conclusions, all of which serve one essential purpose: to pollute public opinion and create conditions for military aggression against Russia.

As intended, the *Times* article set the tone for a wave of war-mongering commentary in the American media. Lipton was interviewed on the cable news channels and the Public Broadcasting System’s evening news program. Democratic Senator Ben Cardin declared on MSNBC that the US had been “attacked by Russia.” He called for an independent commission, citing the bipartisan panel set up after 9/11.

CNN commentator Jack Tapper referred to Russia as the “enemy” and openly wondered, in the course of interviewing former CIA and NSA Director Michael Hayden, whether President-elect Trump was “siding with the enemy.” NBC News reported Wednesday evening that “top intelligence officials” have concluded that Russian President Vladimir Putin was personally involved in directing the hacking operation. No facts, of course, were presented to back up the claim.

As “news,” the article by Lipton, Sanger and Shane does not conform to the most elementary standards of journalism. It is based entirely on unnamed or clearly partisan sources. By the article’s own account, the authors consulted “dozens of players targeted in the attack, intelligence officials who investigated it and Obama administration officials who deliberated over the best response”—in other words, the Democratic Party officials and US intelligence agents who originated the story of Russian hacking. There is no attempt to present opposing opinions or challenges to statements in the article that are clearly absurd.

The unsubstantiated assertions are generally couched in the passive voice. There is, for example, the claim that one group supposedly involved in the hacking “may or may not be associated with the FSB, the main successor to the Soviet-era KGB, but it is widely believed to be a Russian government operation.” Another group, according to the authors, is “believed to be directed by the GRU, Russia’s military intelligence agency.”

Believed by whom, and on what basis? The article does not say. Nevertheless, the conclusion proclaimed in the headline is asserted without qualification: the Russian government was responsible for what amounts to an act of war, and definite actions must be taken in response.

The *Times*’ “evidence” of Russian hacking

The claim that there is incontrovertible evidence of Russian state direction of the hacking of Democratic Party emails during the US presidential election is a fiction, but one the *Times* hopes will, if endlessly repeated, be established in popular consciousness as a fact.

The basic timeline, according to the *Times* account, is as follows: Sometime in September 2015, an FBI agent contacted the Democratic National Committee to inform it that at least one of its computers had been compromised by “a cyberespionage team linked to the Russian government.” Despite the explosive character of such a charge, the FBI agent inexplicably spoke only to a low-level, sub-contracted tech person, made no effort to contact DNC leaders, and did not even visit DNC headquarters, only a half-mile away from the FBI office that was monitoring the alleged hacking.

Nothing was done for several months. Then, in April of 2016, the DNC tech person found evidence that an unauthorized individual had gained access to DNC email servers. The DNC responded by hiring CrowdStrike, a cybersecurity firm run by former top FBI officials, to investigate. CrowdStrike immediately declared that Russia was behind two separate hacking groups. It called the groups Cozy Bear and Fancy Bear and claimed they were the same as two groups supposedly linked to the Russian government—APT 28 and APT 29. These groups, according to CrowdStrike, had gained access to DNC emails and the emails of Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta.

In mid-June, an individual calling himself Guccifer 2.0 announced that it was he who had hacked the DNC emails, and that he had given them to WikiLeaks, which would be publishing them.

The supposed facts the *Times* cites to justify the conclusion that Russia was behind all of this are highly circumstantial and clearly contradictory. Cited as evidence of Russian state involvement is the assertion that “The Russian hacking groups tended to be active during working hours in the Moscow time zone.”

Guccifer 2.0, the *Times* writes, was really a Russian agent. The proof? While he claimed to be Romanian, a writer for tech site Motherboard contacted him in Romanian, using Google Translate to ask him questions. The responses, “according to a couple of native speakers,” demonstrated that “Guccifer 2.0 had apparently been using Google Translate as well—and was clearly not the Romanian he claimed to be.”

Moreover, Microsoft Word documents posted by Guccifer 2.0 had metadata showing that they were edited by someone calling himself “Felix Edmundovich—an obvious nom de guerre honoring the founder of the Soviet secret police, Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky.” Also, “Bad links in the texts were marked by warnings in Russian, generated by what was clearly a Russian-language version of Word.”

CrowdStrike cites these and similar facts, indicative of the work of amateurs, to justify its assertion that the Russian government was

directing the hacks, even as it asserts that the hacking was so sophisticated that it could be carried out only by a state actor.

As the *Intercept* writer Sam Biddle wrote yesterday: “Compare that description to CrowdStrike’s claim it was able to finger APT 28 and 29, described... as digital spies par excellence, because they were so incredibly sloppy. Would a group whose ‘tradecraft is superb’ with ‘operational security second to none’ really leave behind the name of a Soviet spy chief imprinted on a document it sent to American journalists? Would these groups really be dumb enough to leave cyrillic [sic] comments on these documents? Would these groups that ‘constantly [go] back into the environment to change out their implants, modify persistent methods, move to new Command & Control channels’ get caught because they precisely didn’t make sure not to use IP addresses they’d been associated with before? It’s very hard to buy the argument that the Democrats were hacked by one of the most sophisticated, diabolical foreign intelligence services in history, and that we know this because they screwed up over and over again.”

Most of the information contained in the *Times* article is based on the findings of CrowdStrike, which the newspaper identifies only as “a cybersecurity firm retained by the DNC.” In fact, CrowdStrike is hardly a neutral source. Its president, Shawn Henry, and its senior vice president of legal affairs, Steven Chabinsky, are both former top officials in the FBI.

CrowdStrike’s chief technology officer, Dmitri Alperovitch, is a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, a leading think tank closely connected to the US state. In September, the Council published a major report, *The Future of the Army*, which urges the US military to prepare for “major and deadly” wars between “great powers” and denounces “Russia’s resurgence.” Alperovitch is cited throughout the *Times* article as an unbiased and neutral source on Russia’s involvement in the hacking.

An argument for media censorship

Beyond fabricating “proof” of Russian hacking, a central purpose of the *Times* article is to establish an argument for media censorship. Even supposing Russia was involved, what came out of the hacking? The American people had access to information to which they were entitled: namely, information about the underhanded and anti-democratic operations of the DNC and the close connections between Clinton and Wall Street. Among the most important documents to come out of the leaks were the transcripts of speeches by Clinton to Goldman Sachs and other banks, which Clinton refused to release throughout the campaign.

The *Times* seeks to dismiss the explosive character of these revelations and present DNC officials as victims of a horrible smear campaign. The newspaper notes in passing that “Some of the messages made clear that some DNC officials favored Mrs. Clinton over her progressive challenger, Mr. Sanders.” However, the *Times* assures its readers, “this was no shock,” since Sanders was an outsider and Clinton “one of the party’s stars for decades.”

The exposure of the fact that the DNC, supposedly neutral throughout the Democratic Party primaries, was conspiring to benefit Clinton is certainly important information that the American people should know. Indeed, it exposes the DNC as doing precisely what the *Times* accuses Russia of doing: manipulating the elections.

For the *Times*, however, these facts damaged the Clinton campaign and therefore should have been kept secret. The newspaper complains that Sanders delegates were “infuriated,” Debbie Wasserman Schultz, a close ally of Clinton, was forced to resign as chair of the DNC, and congressional races throughout the country were tainted with “accusations of scandal.”

In the only passage of the article that refers to anyone opposed to its narrative of the hacking, the *Times* cites the comment by WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange denouncing those who have attacked WikiLeaks for working with the Russian government to manipulate the elections.

“This is false,” Assange says. “As the disclosing party, we know that this was not the intent. Publishers publishing newsworthy information during an election is part of a free election.”

This is precisely what infuriates the *Times*. Documents that it no doubt had and was suppressing—such as Clinton’s speeches to Wall Street banks—were published, giving the American people access to information that cut across the newspaper’s agenda.

For the *Times*, exercising the elementary responsibility of serious journalism to expose official secrets and crimes is the equivalent of Russian espionage. The newspaper bemoans the fact that “every major publication, including The Times, published multiple stories citing the DNC and Podesta emails posted by WikiLeaks, becoming a de facto instrument of Russian intelligence.

“Mr. Putin, a student of martial arts, had turned two institutions at the core of American democracy—political campaigns and independent media—to his own ends.”

The *New York Times* itself is not in any genuine sense a journalistic source. It is a propaganda organ for the state. It regularly passes its articles by state intelligence agencies for approval before publication. If anyone possessing information exposing government secrets and lies presented this information to the *Times*, the immediate reaction of the publishers would be to turn the whistleblower over to the state.

Propaganda for war

During the election campaign, the response of the Democratic Party, backed by US intelligence agencies, to the email leaks was to launch a ferocious public campaign denouncing WikiLeaks as an arm of the Russian government. The aim, as the *World Socialist Web Site* pointed out at the time, was two-fold: to distract public attention from the content of the emails by attacking the “messenger,” and create the political framework for aggression against Russia in the event of a Clinton victory.

This strategy is now being pursued after the elections, though under the unexpected conditions of a Trump victory. With extraordinary recklessness, pundits, columnists, government officials and intelligence agents are using the language of war.

The *Times* article criticizes what it considers an insufficiently aggressive response to the alleged Russian hacking. “The White House’s reluctance to respond forcefully meant the Russians have not paid a heavy price for their actions,” it writes. It warns ominously of “the next target” of cyberattacks. The former acting director of the CIA, Michael Morell, a prominent backer of Hillary Clinton’s election campaign, declared last week that the hacking of the election “is the political equivalent of 9/11,” the implication being that if 9/11 required a “war on terror,” the hacking of Democratic emails requires a war on Russia.

These charges are being made by a government that is responsible for invading and overthrowing elected governments, interfering in elections, and otherwise meddling in the affairs of state of virtually every country in the world. It was only two years ago that the revelations from whistleblower Edward Snowden (likewise denounced as a Russian agent by the *Times*) exposed the fact, among many others, that the US National Security Agency had wiretapped the communications of world leaders, including ostensible allies such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

In one of the few critical commentaries on the hacking scandal, former CIA officer John Kiriakou, prosecuted and jailed by the Obama administration for disclosing classified information related to CIA torture, noted that the CIA’s first covert action program after its creation in 1947 was to manipulate the 1948 Italian elections, including by financing anti-communist parties and publishing forged documents aimed at discrediting the Communist Party.

The list of covert actions undertaken by the CIA to subvert democratic processes includes the overthrow of Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh in 1953; the overthrow of Guatemalan President Jacobo

Arbenz in 1954; the assassination of Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba in 1961; the military coup and mass slaughter in Indonesia in 1965; the overthrow and assassination of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973; the decades-long campaign to assassinate Fidel Castro in Cuba; and innumerable other actions throughout Latin America, the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

The charges of hacking in the elections are being used to mobilize support for aggression against a bigger target: Russia.

The basic problem the *Times* and the American media are seeking to overcome is the absence of any significant popular support for war, let alone war with the country possessing the second largest nuclear arsenal in the world. Popular opposition is to be countered through a McCarthyite-style campaign of lies, with all opposition branded tantamount to treason.

At the same time, the *Times* is intervening in an escalating conflict within the state over the foreign policy of the incoming Trump administration, with those factions of the military-intelligence apparatus that supported Clinton determined to prevent any retreat from the aggressive line that has been developed against Russia.

The Trump administration represents a real danger for the working class. It is packed with military generals, billionaires and Wall Street executives. But this is not what upsets the Democratic Party and the *New York Times*. Rather, the conflict within the ruling class is over what country to target next in the unending wars of American imperialism. The *Times* is seeking to shape opposition to Trump into the mold of anti-Russian hysteria.

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