

Ten Ways to Call Something “Russian Disinformation” Without Evidence

The principles of American Newspeak, vol. 1

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How do you call something “Russian disinformation” when you don’t have evidence it is? Let’s count the ways.

*We don’t know a whole lot about how the New York Post story about **Hunter Biden** got into print. There are some reasons to think the material is genuine (including its cache of graphic photos and some apparent limited confirmation from people on the email chains), but in terms of sourcing, anything is possible. This material could have been hacked by any number of actors, and shopped for millions (as Time has [reported](#)), and all sorts of insidious characters – including notorious Russian partisans like Andrei Derkach – could have been behind it.*

None of these details are known, however, which hasn’t stopped media companies from saying otherwise. Most major outlets began denouncing the story as foreign propaganda right away and haven’t stopped. A quick list of the creative methods seen lately of saying, “We don’t know, but we know!”:

1. **Our spooks say it looks like the work of their spooks.** A group of 50 “former senior intelligence officials” wrote [a letter](#) as soon as the *Post* story came out. Their most-quoted line was that the *Post* story has “all the classic hallmarks of a Russian information operation.” Note they said information operation, not disinformation operation — humorously, even people with records of lying to congress [like James Clapper and John Brennan](#) have been more careful with language than members of the news media. Emphasizing that they didn’t know if the emails “are genuine,” these ex-heads of agencies like the CIA added “our experience makes us deeply suspicious that the Russian government played a significant role in this case,” noting that it appeared to be an operation “consistent with Russian objectives.” [Politico](#), the [Boston Globe](#), the [Washington Post](#), the [Daily Beast](#), and many other outlets ran the spook testimonial.
2. **It was prophesied.** The *Washington Post* [needed four reporters](#) — Shane Harris, Ellen Nakashima, Greg Miller, and Josh Dawsey — to tell us that “four former officials familiar with the matter” spoke of a long-ago report that the would-be source of the *Post* emails, Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani, had been “interacting with people tied to Russian intelligence” in Ukraine. As such, any information he “brought back” from there “should be considered contaminated by Russia.” Therefore, by the transitive property of whatever, the *New York Post* story should be dismissed as part of an “influence” operation.
3. **Authorities are investigating if it *might* be Russian disinformation.** [“The](#)

[FBI is probing a possible disinformation campaign](#),” announced *USA Today*, citing the omnipresent “person familiar with the matter.” Officially, of course, Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe [said](#) “Hunter Biden’s laptop is not part of some Russian disinformation campaign,” to which FBI spokesperson Jill C. Tyson officially said the bureau had “[nothing to add at this time](#).” Many of the outlets who covered this sequence of events described the F.B.I. statement as “[carefully worded](#),” inviting us to read in things left unsaid. Thomas Rid in the *Post* went so far as to say Tyson was “hinting that actionable intelligence might yet be developed,” which is technically true but also technically meaningless.

Another neat trick was to discuss the *Post* story and in the same sentence refer to a present-tense description of an apparently confirmed operation to discredit Joe Biden. [CNN’s construction](#) was like this: “The FBI is investigating whether the recently published emails that purport to detail the business dealings of Joe Biden’s son in Ukraine and China are connected to an ongoing Russian disinformation effort targeting the former vice president’s campaign.”

That “ongoing Russian disinformation effort” is a story again [sourced](#), as so many stories of the last four years have been, to assessments of intelligence officials. Thus the essence of these new headlines comes down to, “Intelligence officials are checking to see if the new story can be connected to prior claims of intelligence officials.”

4. **Even if it isn’t a Russian influence operation, we should act like it is.** Johns Hopkins “Professor of Strategic Studies” Thomas Rid came up with the most elegant construction in a [Washington Post editorial](#), stating bluntly: “We must treat the Hunter Biden leaks as if they were a foreign intelligence operation — even if they probably aren’t.” Err on the side of caution, as it were. As the bosses in *Casino* put it, [why take a chance?](#)
5. **The Biden campaign says it’s Russian disinformation (even though they can’t say for sure it’s disinformation at all).** The press has elicited from the Biden campaign a few limited, often contradictory comments about what is and isn’t true in the *New York Post* story. For instance, the campaign’s chief communications officer Andrew Bates said about allegations Joe Biden met with Burisma executive Vadym Pozharski, “We have reviewed Joe Biden’s official schedules from the time and no meeting, as alleged by the *New York Post*, ever took place.” In the [same article](#), reporters noted, “Biden’s campaign would not rule out the possibility that the former VP had some kind of informal interaction with Pozharskyi.” So no meeting took place (although we’re not saying no meeting took place).

The campaign continues to not take a concrete position about the veracity of the emails, but allows people like “senior Biden advisor” and former Assistant Secretary of State Michael Carpenter to say things like, “This is a Russian disinformation operation... I’m very comfortable saying that.”

The natural follow-up question there should have been, “If it’s disinformation, are you saying the emails aren’t real?” But we haven’t seen many questions of that sort, probably because no one wants to be the member of the White House pool six months from now wearing the scars of interactions like this:

I asked Joe Biden: What is your response to the NYPost story about your son, sir?

He called it a “smear campaign” and then went after me. “I know you’d ask it. I have no response, it’s another smear campaign, right up your alley, those are the questions you always ask.”
pic.twitter.com/Eo6VD4TqxD

— Bo Erickson CBS (@BoKnowsNews) [October 17, 2020](#)

- 6. Accuse anyone who asks questions about the story of being in league with Russia.** Reporters who merely retweeted the story or even just defended its right to not be censored, like Maggie Haberman of the *New York Times* or Marc Caputo from *Politico*, were instantly blasted as accomplices to foreign disinformation plots. As a result, many backed away from asking even basic questions about the piece (including to question seeming inconsistencies in the *Post* report). The poor fellow who asked Biden about the story on the tarmac in the above clip, Bo Erickson of CBS, got raked over the coals by the most aggressive *Heathers* in the giant high school that is America, fellow media members.

Remember that the press consistently cheered as brave defenders of truth professional gesticulators [like CNN's Jim Acosta](#) when they hit Trump with “tough” questions, but Erickson was reamed by colleagues for his mild query of Biden.

Matthew Dowd of ABC [snapped](#), “Lordy, you ask someone about an article that has already been proven false and having Russia propaganda as its basis? I would suggest taking a look in the mirror.” Ben Rhodes, former Obama Deputy National Security Adviser and MSNBC contributor — a member of the growing spook-to-on-air-personality club — made the accusation more explicit:

Maybe because Bo is acting as the far end of a Russian disinformation operation. <https://t.co/oGUP0in3R0>

— Ben Rhodes (@brhodes) [October 17, 2020](#)

- 7. Adam Schiff says it is!** For the last four years, whenever the Democratic Party has sought to make unsupportable claims, it’s usually combined anonymous leaks to legacy outlets like the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* with public statements by a party spokesperson willing to say things on record without evidence. That person has often been California congressman Adam Schiff. Sometimes hinting that he’s seen intelligence he can’t speak of publicly, Schiff has repeatedly made statements that later proved false. In March of 2017, he told Chuck Todd, “[I can’t get into the particulars, but there is more than circumstantial evidence now](#)” that the Trump campaign colluded with the Russian government to interfere with the 2016 election. He would continue making statements like this for nearly two years, until information was declassified showing that Schiff early on had been [told in secret testimony](#), by

people like the aforementioned Clapper, “I never saw any direct empirical evidence that the Trump campaign or someone in it was plotting/conspiring with the Russians to meddle with the election.”

In January of 2018, Schiff [dismissed claims](#) of FBI malfeasance in obtaining secret surveillance authority on Trump aide Carter Page: “FBI and DOJ officials did not ‘abuse’ the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) process, omit material information, or subvert this vital tool to spy on the Trump campaign.” He was later proved [incorrect](#) on all of these points by a report by Justice Inspector General Michael Horowitz.

As Glenn Greenwald [pointed out](#), Schiff “fabricates accusations... the way that other people change underwear.”

Of course, no one ever brings up Schiff’s record of wrongness. He gets a clean slate each time, and is rarely asked to substantiate anything he says, as was the case in this exchange last week with Wolf Blitzer, when he used the word “Kremlin” [14 times in one segment](#):

SCHIFF: The origins of this whole smear are **from the Kremlin**, and the president is only too happy to **have Kremlin help** and try to amplify it.

BLITZER: It’s not like Rudy Giuliani is peddling this information in a vacuum, Congressman. Take a look at this picture of the president in the Oval Office holding up a copy of the New York Post touting this conspiracy theory. It’s made its way all the way to the commander in chief with a big smile on his face.

SCHIFF: Yes. Well, look, I think we know who the driving force behind this smear has been all along and it’s been the president **and the Kremlin**.

8. **This reminds us of that other time!** One of the first reactions by press was to note how the release of the Burisma emails [reminded them of 2016](#), when “Russian hackers and WikiLeaks injected stolen emails from the Hillary Clinton campaign into the closing weeks of the presidential race.” The *New York Times* went so far as to say it had spoken with “U.S. intelligence analysts” who “contacted several people with knowledge of the Burisma hack,” claiming they’d heard “chatter” that stolen Burisma emails would be released as part of an “October surprise.”

These people, the *Times* wrote, expressed concern that the Burisma material “would be leaked alongside forged materials... a slight twist on Russia’s 2016 playbook when they siphoned leaked D.N.C. emails through fake personas on Twitter and WikiLeaks.”

Politico, meanwhile, said the *Post* story “drew immediate comparisons to 2016, when Russian hackers dumped troves of emails from Democrats onto the internet — producing few damaging revelations but fueling accusations of corruption by Trump.” (Actually a lot of the accusations of corruption came from supporters of Bernie Sanders, but who’s counting?).

9. **Just say it!** One of the beautiful things about the post-evidence era in media is that pundits can simply say things willy-nilly, provided it's the right thing. David Corn and *Mother Jones*, who this time four years ago were publishing some of the first pebbles from the towering Matterhorn of bullshit that was the Steele dossier, ran a headline proclaiming, "[Giuliani and the New York Post are pushing Russian disinformation.](#)" Trudy Rubin of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* [declared](#) the *Post* story "reads as if it came straight from Russian propaganda playbook 101." Ken Dilanian of NBC employed a creative double-negative, [noting](#) that Ratcliffe's statement "didn't say the FBI has ruled out the possibility of foreign involvement." My favorite, however, was probably former lead impeachment counsel Daniel Goldman, who noted that while the laptop might not be foreign disinformation, it was "part" of foreign disinformation, which feels like the Twitter version of a Magritte painting:

Someone needs to explain to [@DonaldJTrumpJr](#) how Russian disinformation works, since he clearly did not learn his lesson from the June 2016 TT meeting.

The laptop itself is not disinformation. But it is part of a Russian disinformation campaign that has been going on for years. <https://t.co/HFOLKuoBx8>

— Daniel Goldman (@danielsgoldman) [October 24, 2020](#)

10. **Everyone quote everyone else!** Donald Trump has taken a lot of grief — deservedly — for his "[a lot of people are saying](#)" method of backing up public statements. The response to the *New York Post* story has been the same kind of informational merry-go-round. Each of the above methods has often been backed up by others on the list, using A=A=A style rhetorical constructions. The "[50 former senior intelligence officials](#)" letter cited "media reports" that "say that the FBI has now opened an investigation into Russian involvement." They cited the *USA Today* story that cited the "person familiar with the matter" in making that claim, adding that, "according to the *Washington Post*, citing four sources, U.S. intelligence agencies warned the White House last year that Giuliani was the target of an influence operation."

The *Washington Post* in the person of professor Rid then turned around and [cited](#) the 50 former intelligence officials, while David Corn [cited Rid](#) in warning the whole story was "highly suspicious behavior," especially against the "backdrop of 2016," and so on.

In other words, this is a story about media commentators citing intelligence sources who in turn are citing media commentators citing intelligence sources.

Of course it's possible there's a foreign element to the *Post* expose. But there's nothing concrete to go on there, which has forced the press to levitate the claims through such propaganda spin-cycles. It's amazing how quickly these machines get built now...

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