

The U.S. Media Yesterday Suffered Its Most Humiliating Debacle in Ages: Now Refuses All Transparency over What Happened

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In-depth Report: [FAKE INTELLIGENCE](#)

Friday was one of the most embarrassing days for the U.S. media in quite a long time. The humiliation orgy was kicked off by CNN, with MSNBC and CBS close behind, with countless pundits, commentators and operatives joining the party throughout the day. By the end of the day, it was clear that several of the nation's largest and most influential news outlets had spread an explosive but completely false news story to millions of people, while refusing to provide any explanation of how it happened.

The spectacle began on Friday morning at 11:00 am EST, when the Most Trusted Name in News™ spent 12 straight minutes on air flamboyantly hyping an exclusive bombshell report that seemed to prove that WikiLeaks, last September, had secretly offered the Trump campaign, even Donald Trump himself, special access to the DNC emails *before* they were published on the internet. As CNN sees the world, this would prove collusion between the Trump family and WikiLeaks and, more importantly, between Trump and Russia, since the U.S. intelligence community regards WikiLeaks as an “arm of Russian intelligence,” and *therefore*, so does the U.S. media.

This entire revelation was based on [an email](#) which CNN strongly implied it had exclusively obtained and had in its possession. The email was sent by someone named “Michael J. Erickson” – someone nobody had heard of previously and whom CNN could not identify – to Donald Trump, Jr., offering a decryption key and access to DNC emails that WikiLeaks had “uploaded.” The email was a smoking gun, in CNN’s extremely excited mind, because it was dated September 4 – ten days *before* WikiLeaks began promoting access to those emails online – and thus proved that the Trump family was being offered special, unique access to the DNC archive: likely by WikiLeaks and the Kremlin.

It’s impossible to convey with words what a spectacularly devastating scoop CNN believed it had, so it’s necessary to watch it for yourself to see the tone of excitement, breathlessness and gravity the network conveyed as they clearly believed they were delivering a near-fatal blow on the Trump/Russia collusion story:

There was just one small problem with this story: it was fundamentally false, in the most embarrassing way possible. Hours after CNN broadcast its story – and then hyped it over and over and over – the Washington Post [reported](#) that CNN got the key fact of the story wrong.

The email was not dated September 4, as CNN claimed, but rather September 14 – which

means it was sent *after* WikiLeaks had already published access to the DNC emails online. Thus, rather than offering some sort of special access to Trump, “Michael J. Erickson” was simply some random person from the public encouraging the Trump family to look at the *publicly available* DNC emails that WikiLeaks – as everyone by then already knew – had [publicly promoted](#). In other words, the email was the exact opposite of what CNN presented it as being.



How did CNN end up aggressively hyping such a spectacularly false story? They refuse to say. Many hours after their story got exposed as false, the journalist who originally presented it, Congressional reporter Manu Raju, finally posted a [tweet noting the correction](#). CNN’s PR Department [then claimed](#) that “multiple sources” had provided CNN with the false date. And Raju went on CNN, in muted tones, to note the correction, explicitly claiming that “two sources” had each given him the false date on the email, while also making clear that CNN did not even see the email, but only had sources describe its purported contents:

All of this prompts the glaring, obvious, and critical question – one which CNN refuses to address: how did “multiple sources” all misread the date on this document, in exactly the same way, and toward the same end, and then feed this false information to CNN?

It is, of course, completely plausible that one source might innocently misread a date on a document. But how is it remotely plausible that *multiple sources* could all innocently and in good faith misread the date in exactly the same way, all to cause to be disseminated a blockbuster revelation about Trump/Russia/WikiLeaks collusion? This is the critical question that CNN simply refuses to answer. In other words, CNN refuses to provide the most minimal transparency to enable the public to understand what happened here.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER SO MUCH? For so many significant reasons:

To begin with, it’s hard to overstate how fast, far and wide this false story traveled. Democratic Party pundits, operatives and journalists with huge social media platforms predictably jumped on the story immediately, announcing that it proved collusion between Trump and Russia (through WikiLeaks). One tweet from Democratic Congressman Ted Lieu, claiming that this proved evidence of criminal collusion, was re-tweeted thousands and thousands of times in just a few hours (Lieu quietly deleted the tweet after I noted its falsity, and long after it went very viral, without ever telling his followers that the CNN story, and therefore his accusation, had been debunked).

This tweet is from a member of Congress today. It was RT'd more than 7,000 times (and counting), and liked more than 15,000 times. It's based on a completely false claim, from a debunked CNN story. This happens over and over. This seems damaging. And still no retraction. <https://t.co/fixSRKUxxx>

— Glenn Greenwald (@ggreenwald) [December 8, 2017](#)

Brookings’ Benjamin Wittes, whose star has risen as he has promoted himself as a friend of former FBI Director Jim Comey, not only promoted the CNN story in the morning, but did so with the word “Boom” – which he uses to signal that a major blow has been delivered to

Trump on the Russia story – along with a gif of a cannon being detonated:

boom <https://t.co/9RPPItRq8k> pic.twitter.com/eyYHkOMEPI

— Benjamin Wittes (@benjaminwittes) [December 8, 2017](#)

Incredibly, to this very moment – almost 24 hours after CNN’s story was debunked – Wittes has never noted to his more than 200,000 followers that the story he so excitedly promoted turned out to be utterly false, even though [he returned to Twitter long after the story was debunked](#) to tweet about other matters. He just left his false and inflammatory claims uncorrected.

Talking Points Memo’s Josh Marshall believed the story was so significant that he used an image of an atomic bomb detonating at the [top of his article](#) discussing its implications, an article he tweeted to his roughly 250,000 followers. Only at night was an editor’s note finally added noting that the whole thing was false.



It’s hard to quantify exactly how many people were deceived – filled with false news and propaganda – by the CNN story. But thanks to Democratic-loyal journalists and operatives who decree every Trump/Russia claim to be true without seeing any evidence, it’s certainly safe to say that many hundreds of thousands of people, almost certainly millions, were exposed to these false claims.

Surely anyone who has any minimal concerns about journalistic accuracy – which would presumably include all the people who have spent the last year lamenting Fake News, propaganda, Twitter bots and the like – would demand an accounting as to how a major U.S. media outlet ended up filling so many people’s brains with totally false news. That alone should prompt demands from CNN for an explanation about what happened here. No Russian Facebook ad or Twitter bot could possibly have anywhere near the impact as this CNN story had when it comes to deceiving people with blatantly inaccurate information.

Second, the “multiple sources” who fed CNN this false information did not confine themselves to that network. They were apparently very busy eagerly spreading the false information to as many media outlets as they could find. In the middle of the day, CBS News claimed that it had independently “confirmed” CNN’s story about the email, and [published its own breathless article](#) discussing the grave implications of this discovered collusion.

Most embarrassing of all was what MSNBC did. You just have to watch this report from its “intelligence and national security correspondent” Ken Dilanian to believe it. Like CBS, Dilanian also claimed that he independently “confirmed” the false CNN report from “two sources with direct knowledge of this.” Dilanian, whose career in the U.S. media continues to flourish the more [he is exposed](#) as someone who [faithfully parrots what the CIA tells him to say](#) (since that is one of the most coveted and valued attributes in US journalism), spent three minutes mixing evidence-free CIA claims as fact with totally false assertions about what his multiple “sources with direct knowledge” told him about all this. Please watch this – again, not just the content but the tenor and tone of how they “report” – as it is Baghdad-Bob-level embarrassing:

Think about what this means. It means that at least two – and possibly more – sources, which these media outlets all assessed as credible in terms of having access to sensitive information, all fed the same false information to multiple news outlets at the same time. For multiple reasons, the probability is very high that these sources were Democratic members of the House Intelligence Committee (or their high-level staff members), which is the committee that obtained access to Trump Jr.’s emails, although it’s certainly possible that it’s someone else. We won’t know until these news outlets deign to report this crucial information to the public: which “multiple sources” acted jointly to disseminate incredibly inflammatory, false information to the nation’s largest news outlets?



Just last week, the Washington Post decided – to great applause (including [mine](#)) – to [expose a source](#) to whom they had promised anonymity and off-the-record protections because they discovered that she was purposely feeding them false information as part of a scheme by Project Veritas to discredit the Post. It’s a well established principle of journalism – one that is rarely followed when it comes to powerful people in DC – that journalists should expose, rather than protect and conceal, sources who purposely feed them false information to be disseminated to the public.

The Post made the right call to report off-the-record comments given they were offered with fraudulent intent. This should be done far more often to actually powerful-in-DC people who spread lies while hiding behind anonymity <https://t.co/EFLEl4eaq8> pic.twitter.com/v6yJjvheT1

— Glenn Greenwald (@ggreenwald) [November 27, 2017](#)

Is that what happened here? Did these “multiple sources” who fed not just CNN but also MSNBC and CBS completely false information do so deliberately and in bad faith? Until these news outlets provide an accounting of what happened – what one might call “minimal journalistic transparency” – it’s impossible to say for certain. But right now, it’s very difficult to imagine a scenario where multiple sources all fed the wrong date to multiple media outlets innocently and in good faith.

If this were, in fact, a deliberate attempt to cause a false and highly inflammatory story to be reported, then these media outlets have an obligation to expose who the culprits are – just as the Washington Post did last week to the woman making false claims about Roy Moore (it was much easier in that case because the source they exposed was a nobody-in-DC, rather than someone on whom they rely for a steady stream of stories, the way CNN and MSNBC rely on Democratic members of the Intelligence Committee). By contrast, if this were just an innocent mistake, then these media outlets should explain how such an implausible sequence of events could possibly have happened.

Thus far, these media corporations are doing the opposite of what journalists ought to do: rather than informing the public about what happened and providing minimal transparency and accountability for themselves and the high-level officials who caused this to happen, they are hiding behind meaningless, obfuscating statements crafted by PR executives and lawyers.

How can journalists and news outlets so flamboyantly act offended when they’re attacked as

being “Fake News” when *this* is the conduct behind which they hide when they get caught disseminating incredibly consequential false stories?

The more serious you think the Trump/Russia story is, the more dangerous you think it is when Trump attacks the U.S. media as “Fake News,” the *more* you should be disturbed by what happened here, the more transparency and accountability you should be demanding. If you’re someone who thinks Trump’s attacks on the media are dangerous, then you should be first in line objecting when they act recklessly and demand transparency and accountability from them. It is debacles like this – and the subsequent corporate efforts to obfuscate – that have made the U.S. media so disliked and that fuel and empower Trump’s attacks on them.

Third, this type of recklessness and falsity is now a clear and highly disturbing trend – one could say a constant – when it comes to reporting on Trump, Russia and WikiLeaks. I have spent a good part of the last year [documenting the extraordinarily numerous, consequential and reckless stories](#) that have been published – and then [corrected, rescinded and retracted](#) – by major media outlets when it comes to this story.

All media outlets, of course, will make mistakes. The Intercept certainly has made our share, as have all outlets. And it’s particularly natural, inevitable, for mistakes to be made on a highly complicated, opaque story like the question of the relationship between Trump and the Russians, and questions relating to how WikiLeaks obtained DNC and Podesta emails. That is all to be expected.

But what one should expect with journalistic “mistakes” is that they sometimes go in one direction, and other times go in the other direction. That’s exactly what has *not* happened here. Virtually every false story published goes only in one direction: to be as inflammatory and damaging as possible on the Trump/Russia story and about Russia particularly. At some point, once “mistakes” all start going in the same direction, toward advancing the same agenda, they cease looking like mistakes.

No matter your views on those political controversies, no matter how much you hate Trump or regard Russia as a grave villain and threat to our cherished democracy and freedoms, it has to be acknowledged that when the U.S. media is spewing constant false news about all of this, that, *too*, is a grave threat to our democracy and cherished freedom.

So numerous are the false stories about Russia and Trump over the last year that I literally cannot list them all. Just consider the ones from the *last week alone*, as enumerated by the New York Times yesterday in [its news report](#) on CNN’s embarrassment:

It was also yet another prominent reporting error at a time when news organizations are confronting a skeptical public, and a president who delights in attacking the media as “fake news.”

Last Saturday, ABC News [suspended a star reporter](#), Brian Ross, after an inaccurate report that Donald Trump had instructed Michael T. Flynn, the former national security adviser, to contact Russian officials during the presidential race.

The report fueled theories about coordination between the Trump campaign and a foreign power, and stocks dropped after the news. In fact, Mr. Trump’s instruction to Mr. Flynn came after he was president-elect.

Several news outlets, including Bloomberg and The Wall Street Journal, also inaccurately reported this week that Deutsche Bank had received a subpoena from the special counsel, Robert S. Mueller III, for President Trump's financial records.

The president and his circle have not been shy about pointing out the errors.

That's just the last week alone. Let's just remind ourselves of [how many times](#) major media outlets have made humiliating, breathtaking errors on the Trump/Russia story, always in the same direction, toward the same political goals. Here is just a sample of incredibly inflammatory claims that traveled all over the internet before having to be corrected, walk-backed, or retracted – often long after the initial false claims spread, and where the corrections receive only a tiny fraction of the attention with which the initial false stories are lavished:

- Russia hacked into the U.S. electric grid to deprive Americans of heat during winter ([Wash Post](#))
- An anonymous group (PropOrNot) documented how major U.S. political sites are Kremlin agents ([Wash Post](#))
- WikiLeaks has a long, documented relationship with Putin ([Guardian](#))
- A secret server between Trump and a Russian bank has been discovered ([Slate](#))
- RT hacked C-SPAN and caused disruption in its broadcast ([Fortune](#))
- Crowdstrike finds Russians hacked into a Ukrainian artillery app ([Crowdstrike](#))
- Russians attempted to hack elections systems in 21 states ([multiple news outlets, echoing Homeland Security](#))
- Links have been found between Trump ally Anthony Scaramucci and a Russian investment fund under investigation ([CNN](#))

That really is just a small sample. So continually awful and misleading has this reporting been that even Vladimir Putin's most devoted critics – such as Russian expatriate [Masha Gessen](#), [oppositional Russian journalists](#), and [anti-Kremlin liberal activists in Moscow](#) – are constantly warning that the U.S. media's unhinged, ignorant, paranoid reporting on Russia is harming their cause in all sorts of ways, in the process destroying the credibility of the U.S. media in the eyes of Putin's opposition (who – unlike Americans who have been fed a steady news and entertainment propaganda diet for decades about Russia – actually understand the realities of that country).



U.S. media outlets are very good at demanding respect. They love to imply, if not outright state, that being patriotic and a good American means that one must reject efforts to discredit them and their reporting because that's how one defends press freedom.

But journalists also have the responsibility not just to demand respect and credibility but to earn it. That means that there shouldn't be such a long list of abject humiliations, in which completely false stories are published to plaudits, traffic and other rewards, only to fall apart upon minimal scrutiny. It certainly means that all of these "errors" shouldn't be pointing in the same direction, pushing the same political outcome or journalistic conclusion.

But what it means most of all is that when media outlets are responsible for such grave and consequential errors as the spectacle we witnessed yesterday, they have to take responsibility for it by offering transparency and accountability. In this case, that can't mean hiding behind PR and lawyer silence and waiting for this to just all blow away.

At minimum, these networks – CNN, MSNBC and CBS – have to either identify who purposely fed them this blatantly false information, or explain how it's possible that “multiple sources” all got the same information wrong in innocence and good faith. Until they do that, their cries and protests the next time they're attacked as “Fake News” should fall on deaf ears, since the real author of those attacks – the reason those attacks resonate – is themselves and their own conduct.

(*Update*: hours after this article was published on Saturday – a full day-and-a-half after his original tweets promoting the false CNN story with [a “boom” and a cannon](#) – Benjamin Wittes [finally got around](#) to noting that the CNN story [he hyped](#) has “serious problems”; needless to say, that acknowledgment received a fraction of re-tweets from his followers as his original tweets hyping the story attracted).

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