

## Consortium News' Record on Russia-gate—How CN Covered the 'Scandal': No. 2—'The Lost Journalistic Standards of Russia-gate'

The Russia-gate hysteria has witnessed a widespread collapse of journalistic standards as major U.S. news outlets ignore rules about how to treat evidence in dispute, wrote Robert Parry on Nov. 20, 2017.

# The Lost Journalistic Standards of Russia-gate

By Robert Parry

*Special to Consortium News*

**A** danger in both journalism and intelligence is to allow an unproven or seriously disputed fact to become part of the accepted narrative where it gets widely repeated and thus misleads policymakers and citizens alike, such as happened during the run-up to war with Iraq and is now recurring amid the frenzy over Russia-gate.

For instance, in a Russia-gate [story](#) on Saturday, *The New York Times* reported as flat fact that a Kremlin intermediary “told a Trump campaign aide, George Papadopoulos, that the Russians had ‘dirt’ on Mr. Trump’s rival, Hillary Clinton, in the form of ‘thousands of emails.’” The *Times* apparently feels that this claim no longer needs attribution even though it apparently comes solely from the 32-year-old

Papadopoulos as part of his plea bargain over lying to the FBI.

Beyond the question of trusting an admitted liar like Papadopoulos, his supposed Kremlin contact, professor Joseph Mifsud, a little-known academic associated with the University of Stirling in Scotland, denied knowing anything about Democratic emails.

In an interview with the U.K. *Daily Telegraph*, Mifsud acknowledged meeting with Papadopoulos but disputed having close ties to the Kremlin and rejected how Papadopoulos recounted their conversations. Specifically, he denied the claim that he mentioned emails containing “dirt” on Clinton.

Even *New York Times* correspondent Scott Shane noted late last month – after the criminal complaint against Papadopoulos was unsealed – that “A crucial detail is still missing: Whether and when Mr. Papadopoulos told senior Trump campaign officials about Russia’s possession of hacked emails. And it appears that the young aide’s quest for a deeper connection with Russian officials, while he aggressively pursued it, led nowhere.”

Shane added, “the court documents describe in detail how Mr. Papadopoulos continued to report to senior campaign officials on his efforts to arrange meetings with Russian officials, ... the documents do not say explicitly whether, and to whom, he passed on his most explosive discovery – that the Russians had what they considered compromising emails on Mr. Trump’s opponent.

“J.D. Gordon, a former Pentagon official who worked for the Trump campaign as a national security adviser [and who dealt

directly with Papadopoulos] said he had known nothing about Mr. Papadopoulos' discovery that Russia had obtained Democratic emails or of his prolonged pursuit of meetings with Russians."

### **Missing Corroboration**

But the journalistic question is somewhat different: why does the *Times* trust the uncorroborated assertion that Mifsud told Papadopoulos about the emails – and trust the claim to such a degree that the newspaper would treat it as flat fact? Absent corroborating evidence, isn't it just as likely (if not more likely) that Papadopoulos is telling the prosecutors what he thinks they want to hear?

If the prosecutors working for Russia-gate independent counsel Robert Mueller had direct evidence that Mifsud did tell Papadopoulos about the emails, you would assume that they would have included the proof in the criminal filing against Papadopoulos, which was made public on Oct. 30.

Further, since Papadopoulos was peppering the Trump campaign with news about his Russian outreach in 2016, you might have expected that he would include something about how helpful the Russians had been in obtaining and publicizing the Democratic emails.

But none of Papadopoulos's many emails to Trump campaign officials about his Russian contacts (as cited by the prosecutors) mentioned the hot news about "dirt" on Clinton or the Russians possessing "thousands of emails." This lack of back-up would normally raise serious doubts about Papadopoulos's claim, but – since Papadopoulos was claiming something that the prosecutors and the *Times* wanted to

believe – reasonable skepticism was swept aside.

What the *Times* seems to have done is to accept a bald assertion by Mueller's prosecutors as sufficient basis for jumping to the conclusion that this disputed claim is undeniably true. But just because Papadopoulos, a confessed liar, and these self-interested prosecutors claim something is true doesn't make it true.

Careful journalists would wonder, as Shane did, why Papadopoulos who in 2016 was boasting of his Russian contacts to make himself appear more valuable to the Trump campaign wouldn't have informed someone about this juicy tidbit of information, that the Russians possessed "thousands of emails" on Clinton.

Yet, the prosecutors' statement regarding Papadopoulos's guilty plea is strikingly silent on corroborating evidence that could prove that, first, Russia did possess the Democratic emails (which Russian officials deny) and, second, the Trump campaign was at least knowledgeable about this core fact in the support of the theory about the campaign's collusion with the Russians (which President Trump and other campaign officials deny).

Of course, it could be that the prosecutors' "fact" will turn out to be a fact as more evidence emerges, but anyone who has covered court cases or served on a jury knows that prosecutors' criminal complaints and pre-trial statements should be taken with a large grain of salt. Prosecutors often make assertions based on the claim of a single witness whose credibility gets destroyed when subjected to cross-examination.

That is why reporters are usually careful to use words like “alleged” in dealing with prosecutors’ claims that someone is guilty. However, in Russia-gate, all the usual standards of proof and logic have been jettisoned. If something serves the narrative, no matter how dubious, it is embraced by the U.S. mainstream media, which – for the past year – has taken a lead role in the anti-Trump “Resistance.”

## **A History of Bias**

This tendency to succumb to “confirmation bias,” i.e., to believe the worst about some demonized figure, has inflicted grave damage in other recent situations as well.

One example is described in the Senate Intelligence Committee’s 2006 [study](#) of the false intelligence that undergirded the case for invading Iraq in 2003. That inquiry discovered that previously discredited WMD claims kept reemerging in finished U.S. intelligence analyses as part of the case for believing that Iraq was hiding WMD.

In the years before the Iraq invasion, the U.S. government had provided tens of millions of dollars to Iraqi exiles in the Iraqi National Congress, and the INC, in turn, produced a steady stream of “walk-ins” who claimed to be Iraqi government “defectors” with knowledge about Saddam Hussein’s secret WMD programs.

Some U.S. intelligence analysts – though faced with White House pressure to accept this “evidence” – did their jobs honestly and exposed a number of the “defectors” as paid liars, including one, who was identified in the Senate report as “Source Two,” who talked about Iraq supposedly building mobile biological weapons labs.

CIA analysts caught Source Two in contradictions and issued a “fabrication notice” in May 2002, deeming him “a fabricator/provocateur” and asserting that he had “been coached by the Iraqi National Congress prior to his meeting with western intelligence services.”

But the Defense Intelligence Agency never repudiated the specific reports that were based on Source Two’s debriefings. Source Two also continued to be cited in five CIA intelligence assessments and the pivotal National Intelligence Estimate in October 2002, “as corroborating other source reporting about a mobile biological weapons program,” the Senate Intelligence Committee report said.

Thus, Source Two became one of four human sources referred to by Secretary of State Colin Powell in his United Nations speech on Feb. 5, 2003, making the case that Iraq was lying when it insisted that it had ended its WMD programs. (The infamous “Curve Ball” was another of these dishonest sources.)

### **Losing the Thread**

After the U.S. invasion and the failure to find the WMD caches, a CIA analyst who worked on Powell’s speech was asked how a known “fabricator” (Source Two) could have been used for such an important address by a senior U.S. government official. The analyst responded, “we lost the thread of concern as time progressed I don’t think we remembered.”

A CIA supervisor added, “Clearly we had it at one point, we understood, we had concerns about the source, but over time it started getting used again and there really was a loss of

corporate awareness that we had a problem with the source.”

In other words, like today’s Russia-gate hysteria, the Iraq-WMD groupthink had spread so widely across U.S. government agencies and the U.S. mainstream media that standard safeguards against fake evidence were discarded. People in Official Washington, for reasons of careerism and self-interest, saw advantages in running with the Iraq-WMD pack and recognized the dangers of jumping in front of the stampeding herd to raise doubts about Iraq’s WMD.

Back then, the personal risk to salary and status came from questioning the Iraq-WMD groupthink because there was always the possibility that Saddam Hussein indeed was hiding WMD and, if so, you’d be forever branded as a “Saddam apologist”; while there were few if any personal risks to agreeing with all those powerful people that Iraq had WMD, even if that judgment turned out to be disastrously wrong.

Sure, American soldiers and the people of Iraq would pay a terrible price, but your career likely would be safe, a calculation that proved true for people like Fred Hiatt, the editorial-page editor of *The Washington Post* who repeatedly reported Iraq’s WMD as flat fact and today remains the editorial-page editor of *The Washington Post*.

Similarly, Official Washington’s judgment now is that there is no real downside to joining the Resistance to Trump, who is widely viewed as a buffoon, unfit to be President of the United States. So, any means to remove him are seen by many Important People as justified – and the Russian allegations seem to be the weightiest rationale for his impeachment or forced resignation.

Professionally, it is much riskier to insist on unbiased standards of evidence regarding Trump and Russia. You'll just stir up a lot of angry questions about why are you "defending Trump." You'll be called a "Trump enabler" and/or a "Kremlin stooge."

However, basing decisions on dubious information carries its own dangers for the nation and the world. Not only do the targets end up with legitimate grievances about being railroaded – and not only does this prejudicial treatment undermine faith in the fairness of democratic institutions – but falsehoods can become the basis for wider policies that can unleash wars and devastation.

We saw the horrific outcome of the Iraq War, but the risks of hostilities with nuclear-armed Russia are far graver; indeed, billions of people could die and human civilization end. With stakes so high, *The New York Times* and Mueller's prosecutors owe the public better than treating questionable accusations as flat fact.

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s.**

---

## A Look Back at Clapper's Jan. 2017 'Assessment' on Russia-gate

On the 2nd anniversary of the "assessment" blaming Russia for interfering in the 2016 election there is still no evidence other than showing the media "colluded" with the spooks, says Ray McGovern.



**By Ray McGovern**

*Special to Consortium News*



The banner headline atop page one of *The New York Times* print edition two years ago today, on January 7, 2017, set the tone for two years of Dick Cheney-like chicanery: “Putin Led Scheme to Aid Trump, Report Says.”

Under a media drumbeat of anti-Russian hysteria, credulous Americans were led to believe that Donald Trump owed his election victory to the president of Russia, whose “influence campaign” according to the *Times* quoting the intelligence report, helped “President-elect Trump’s election chances when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton.”

Hard evidence supporting the media and political rhetoric has been as elusive as proof of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq in 2002-2003. This time, though, an alarming increase in the possibility of war with nuclear-armed Russia has ensued – whether by design, hubris, or rank stupidity. The possible consequences for the world are even more dire than 16 years of war and destruction in the Middle East.

### **If It Walks Like a Canard...**

The CIA-friendly *New York Times* two years ago led the media quacking in a campaign that wobbled like a duck, *canard* in French.

A glance at the title of the Intelligence Community Assessment (ICA) (which was not endorsed by the whole community) – “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in

Recent US Elections” – would suffice to show that the widely respected and independently-minded State Department intelligence bureau should have been included. State intelligence had demurred on several points made in the Oct. 2002 Estimate on Iraq, and even insisted on including a footnote of dissent. James Clapper, then director of national intelligence who put together the ICA, knew that all too well. So he evidently thought it would be better not to involve troublesome dissenters, or even inform them what was afoot.

Similarly, the Defense Intelligence Agency should have been included, particularly since it has considerable expertise on the G.R.U., the Russian military intelligence agency, which has been blamed for Russian hacking of the DNC emails. But DIA, too, has an independent streak and, in fact, is capable of reaching judgments Clapper would reject as anathema. Just one year before Clapper decided to do the rump “Intelligence Community Assessment,” DIA had formally blessed the following heterodox idea in its “December 2015 National Security Strategy”:

“The Kremlin is convinced the United States is laying the groundwork for regime change in Russia, a conviction further reinforced by the events in Ukraine. Moscow views the United States as the critical driver behind the crisis in Ukraine and believes that the overthrow of former Ukrainian President Yanukovich is the latest move in a long-established pattern of U.S.-orchestrated regime change efforts.”

Any further questions as to why the Defense Intelligence

Agency was kept away from the ICA drafting table?

## **Handpicked Analysts**

With help from the *Times* and other mainstream media, Clapper, mostly by his silence, was able to foster the charade that the ICA was actually a bonafide product of the entire intelligence community for as long as he could get away with it. After four months it came time to fess up that the ICA had not been prepared, as Secretary Clinton and the media kept claiming, by “all 17 intelligence agencies.”

In fact, Clapper went one better, proudly asserting – with striking naiveté – that the ICA writers were “handpicked analysts” from only the FBI, CIA, and NSA. He may have thought that this would enhance the ICA’s credibility. It is a no-brainer, however, that when you want handpicked answers, you better handpick the analysts. And so he did.

Why is no one interested in the identities of the handpicked analysts and the hand-pickers? After all, we have the names of the chief analysts/managers responsible for the fraudulent NIE of October 2002 that greased the skids for the war on Iraq. Listed in the NIE itself are the principal analyst Robert D. Walpole and his chief assistants Paul Pillar, Lawrence K. Gershwin and Maj. Gen. John R. Landry.

## **The Overlooked Disclaimer**

Buried in an inside page of the *Times* on Jan. 7, 2017 was a cautionary paragraph in an analysis by reporter Scott Shane. It seems he had read the ICA all the way through, and had taken due note of the derriere-protecting caveats included in the strangely cobbled together report. Shane had to wade

through nine pages of drivel about “Russia’s Propaganda Efforts” to reach Annex B with its curious disclaimer:

“Assessments are based on collected information, which is often incomplete or fragmentary, as well as logic, argumentation, and precedents. ... High confidence in a judgment does not imply that the assessment is a fact or a certainty; such judgments might be wrong.”

Small wonder, then, that Shane noted: “What is missing from the public report is what many Americans most eagerly anticipated: hard evidence to back up the agencies’ claims that the Russian government engineered the election attack. That is a significant omission...”

Since then, Shane has evidently realized what side his bread is buttered on and has joined the ranks of Russia-gate aficionados. Decades ago, he did some good reporting on such issues, so it was sad to see him decide to blend in with the likes of David Sanger and promote the NYT official Russia-gate narrative. An embarrassing feature, “The Plot to Subvert an Election: Unraveling the Russia Story So Far,” that Shane wrote with NYT colleague Mark Mazzetti in September, is full of gaping holes, picked apart in two pieces by **Consortium News**.

### **Shades of WMD**

Sanger is one of the intelligence community’s favorite go-to journalists. He was second only to the disgraced Judith Miller in promoting the canard of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq before the U.S. invasion in March 2003. For example, in a July 29, 2002 article, “U.S. Exploring

Baghdad Strike As Iraq Option,” co-written by Sanger and Thom Shanker, the existence of WMD in Iraq was stated as flat fact no fewer than seven times.

The Sanger/Shanker article appeared just a week after then-CIA Director George Tenet confided to his British counterpart that President George W. Bush had decided “to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy.” At that critical juncture, Clapper was in charge of the analysis of satellite imagery and hid the fact that the number of confirmed WMD sites in Iraq was zero.

Despite that fact and that his “assessment” has never been proven, Clapper continues to receive praise.

During a “briefing” I attended at the Carnegie Endowment in Washington several weeks ago, Clapper displayed master circular reasoning, saying in effect, that the assessment had to be correct because that’s what he and other intelligence directors told President Barack Obama and President-elect Donald Trump.

I got a chance to question him at the event. His disingenuous answers brought a painful flashback to one of the most shameful episodes in the annals of U.S. intelligence analysis.

**Ray McGovern:** My name is Ray McGovern. Thanks for this book; it’s very interesting [Ray holds up his copy of Clapper’s memoir]. I’m part of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity. I’d like to refer to the Russia problem, but first there’s an analogy that I see here. You were in charge of

imagery analysis before Iraq.

**James Clapper:** Yes.

**RM:** You confess [in the book] to having been shocked that no weapons of mass destruction were found. And then, to your credit, you admit, as you say here [quotes from the book], “the blame is due to intelligence officers, including me, who were so eager to help [the administration make war on Iraq] that we found what wasn’t really there.”

Now fast forward to two years ago. Your superiors were hell bent on finding ways to blame Trump’s victory on the Russians. Do you think that your efforts were guilty of the same sin here? Do you think that you found a lot of things that weren’t really there? Because that’s what our conclusion is, especially from the technical end. There was no hacking of the DNC; it was leaked, and you know that because you talked to NSA.

**JC:** Well, I have talked with NSA a lot, and I also know what we briefed to then-President Elect Trump on the 6th of January. And in my mind, uh, I spent a lot of time in the SIGINT [signals intelligence] business, the forensic evidence was overwhelming about what the Russians had done. There’s absolutely no doubt in my mind whatsoever. The Intelligence Community Assessment that we rendered that day, that was asked, tasked to us by President Obama – and uh – in early December, made no call whatsoever on whether, to what extent the Russians influenced the outcome of the election. Uh, the administration, uh, the team then, the President-Elect’s team, wanted to say that – that we said that the Russian interference had no impact

whatsoever on the election. And I attempted, we all did, to try to correct that misapprehension as they were writing a press release before we left the room.

However, as a private citizen, understanding the magnitude of what the Russians did and the number of citizens in our country they reached and the different mechanisms that, by which they reached them, to me it stretches credulity to think they didn't have a profound impact on election on the outcome of the election.

**RM:** That's what the *New York Times* says. But let me say this: we have two former Technical Directors from NSA in our movement here, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity; we also have forensics, okay?

Now the President himself, your President, President Obama said two days before he left town: The conclusions of the intelligence community – this is ten days after you briefed him – with respect to how WikiLeaks got the DNC emails are “inconclusive” *end quote*. Now why would he say that if you had said it was conclusive?

**JC:** I can't explain what he said or why. But I can tell you we're, we're pretty sure we know, or knew at the time, how WikiLeaks got those emails. I'm not going to go into the technical details about why we believe that.

**RM:** We are too [pretty sure we know]; and it was a leak onto a thumb drive – gotten to Julian Assange – really simple. If you knew it, and the NSA has that information, you have a duty, you have a duty to confess to that, as well as to [Iraq].

**JC:** Confess to what?

**RM:** Confess to the fact that you've been distorting the evidence.

**JC:** I don't confess to that.

**RM:** The Intelligence Community Assessment was without evidence.

**JC:** I do not confess to that. I simply do not agree with your conclusions.

**William J. Burns** (Carnegie President): Hey, Ray, I appreciate your question. I didn't want this to look like Jim Acosta in the White House grabbing microphones away. Thank you for the questioning though. Yes ma'am [Burns recognizes the next questioner].

The above exchange can be seen starting at 28:45 in this [video](#).

### **Not Worth His Salt**

Having supervised intelligence analysis, including chairing National Intelligence Estimates, for three-quarters of my 27-year career at CIA, my antennae are fine-tuned for canards. And so, at Carnegie, when Clapper focused on the rump analysis masquerading as an "Intelligence Community Assessment," the scent of the duck came back strongly.

Intelligence analysts worth their salt give very close scrutiny to sources, their possible agendas, and their records for truthfulness. Clapper flunks on his own record, including his performance before the Iraq war – not to mention his giving sworn testimony to Congress that he had



to admit was “clearly erroneous,” when documents released by Edward Snowden proved him a perjurer. At Carnegie, the questioner who followed me brought that up and asked, “How on earth did you keep your job, Sir?”

The next questioner, a former manager of State Department intelligence, posed another salient question: Why, he asked, was State Department intelligence excluded from the “Intelligence Community Assessment”?

Among the dubious reasons Clapper gave was the claim, “We only had a month, and so it wasn’t treated as a full-up National Intelligence Estimate where all 16 members of the intelligence community would pass judgment on it.” Clapper then tried to spread the blame around (“That was a deliberate decision that we made and that I agreed with”), but as director of national intelligence the decision was his.

Given the questioner’s experience in the State Department’s intelligence, he was painfully aware of how quickly a “full-up NIE” can be prepared. He knew all too well that the October 2002 NIE, “Iraq’s Continuing Programs for Weapons of Mass Destruction,” was ginned up in less than a month, when Cheney and Bush wanted to get Congress to vote for war on Iraq. (As head of imagery analysis, Clapper signed off on that meretricious estimate, even though he knew no WMD sites had been confirmed in Iraq.)

### **It’s in the Russians’ DNA**

The criteria Clapper used to handpick his own assistants are not hard to divine. An Air Force general in the mold of Curtis LeMay, Clapper knows all about “the Russians.” And he

does not like them, not one bit. During an interview with NBC on May 28, 2017, Clapper referred to “the historical practices of the Russians, who typically, are almost genetically driven to co-opt, penetrate, gain favor, whatever, which is a typical Russian technique.” And just before I questioned him at Carnegie, he muttered, “It’s in their DNA.”

Even those who may accept Clapper’s bizarre views about Russian genetics still lack credible proof that (as the ICA concludes “with high confidence”) Russia’s main military intelligence unit, the G.R.U., created a “persona” called Guccifer 2.0 to release the emails of the Democratic National Committee. When those disclosures received what was seen as insufficient attention, the G.R.U. “relayed material it acquired from the D.N.C. and senior Democratic officials to WikiLeaks,” the assessment said.

At Carnegie, Clapper cited “forensics.” But forensics from where? To his embarrassment, then-FBI Director James Comey, for reasons best known to him, chose not to do forensics on the “Russian hack” of the DNC computers, preferring to rely on a computer outfit of tawdry reputation hired by the DNC. Moreover, there is zero indication that the drafters of the ICA had any reliable forensics to work with.

In contrast, Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity, working with independent forensic investigators, examined metadata from a July 5, 2016 DNC intrusion that was alleged to be a “hack.” However, the metadata showed a transfer speed far exceeding the capacity of the Internet at the time. Actually, all the speed turned out to be precisely what a thumb drive could accommodate, indicating that what was involved was a copy onto an external storage device and not a hack – by Russia or anyone else.

WikiLeaks had obtained the DNC emails earlier. On June 12, 2016 Julian Assange announced he had “emails relating to Hillary Clinton.” NSA appears to lack any evidence that those emails – the embarrassing ones showing that the DNC cards were stacked against Bernie Sanders – were hacked.

Since NSA’s dragnet coverage scoops up everything on the Internet, NSA or its partners can, and do trace all hacks. In the absence of evidence that the DNC was hacked, all available factual evidence indicates that earlier in the spring of 2016, an external storage device like a thumb drive was used in copying the DNC emails given to WikiLeaks.

Additional investigation has proved Guccifer 2.0 to be an out-and-out fabrication – and a faulty basis for indictments.

## **A Gaping Gap**

Clapper and the directors of the CIA, FBI, and NSA briefed President Obama on the ICA on Jan. 5, 2017, the day before they briefed President-elect Trump. At Carnegie, I asked Clapper to explain why President Obama still had serious doubts. On Jan. 18, 2017, at his final press conference, Obama saw fit to use lawyerly language to cover his own derriere, saying: “The conclusions of the intelligence community with respect to the Russian hacking were not conclusive as to whether WikiLeaks was witting or not in being the conduit through which we heard about the DNC e-mails that were leaked.”

So we end up with “inconclusive conclusions” on that admittedly crucial point. In other words, U.S. intelligence does not know how the DNC emails got to WikiLeaks. In the absence of any evidence from NSA (or from its foreign partners) of an Internet hack of the DNC emails the claim

that “the Russians gave the DNC emails to WikiLeaks” rests on thin gruel. After all, these agencies collect everything that goes over the Internet.

Clapper answered: “I cannot explain what he [Obama] said or why. But I can tell you we’re, we’re pretty sure we know, or knew at the time, how WikiLeaks got those emails.”

Really?

**Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. During his 27-year CIA career he supervised intelligence analysis as Chief of Soviet Foreign Policy Branch, as editor/briefer of the *President’s Daily Brief*, as a member of the Production Review Staff, and as chair of National Intelligence Estimates. In retirement he co-founded Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).**

(Clarification: After a reader’s comment, this article was amended to show that the *Times* was quoting from the ICA and that the Shane article, which the author said was buried inside, was not the same as the paper’s front page story.)

---

## Has the NYT Gone Collectively Mad?

**Special Report:** Crossing a line from recklessness into madness, The New York Times published a front-page opus suggesting that Russia was behind social media criticism of Hillary Clinton, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

For those of us who have taught journalism or worked as editors, a sign that an article is the product of sloppy or dishonest journalism is that a key point will be declared as flat fact when it is unproven or a point in serious dispute

– and it then becomes the foundation for other claims, building a story like a high-rise constructed on sand.

This use of speculation as fact is something to guard against particularly in the work of inexperienced or opinionated reporters. But what happens when this sort of unprofessional work tops page one of The New York Times one day as a major “investigative” article and reemerges the next day in even more strident form as a major Times editorial? Are we dealing then with an inept journalist who got carried away with his thesis or are we facing institutional corruption or even a collective madness driven by ideological fervor?

What is stunning about the lede story in last Friday’s print edition of The New York Times is that it offers no real evidence to support its provocative claim that – as the headline states – “To Sway Vote, Russia Used Army of Fake Americans” or its subhead: “Flooding Twitter and Facebook, Impostors Helped Fuel Anger in Polarized U.S.”

In the old days, this wildly speculative article, which spills over three pages, would have earned an F in a J-school class or gotten a rookie reporter a stern rebuke from a senior editor. But now such unprofessionalism is highlighted by The New York Times, which boasts that it is the standard-setter of American journalism, the nation’s “newspaper of record.”

In this case, it allows reporter Scott Shane to introduce his thesis by citing some Internet accounts that apparently used fake identities, but he ties none of them to the Russian government. Acting like he has minimal familiarity with the Internet – yes, a lot of people do use fake identities – Shane builds his case on the assumption that accounts that cited references to purloined Democratic emails must be somehow from an agent or a bot connected to the Kremlin.

For instance, Shane cites the fake identity of “Melvin Redick,” who suggested on June 8, 2016, that people visit DCLeaks which, a few days earlier, had posted some emails from prominent Americans, which Shane states as fact – not allegation – were “stolen ... by Russian hackers.”

Shane then adds, also as flat fact, that “The site’s phony promoters were in the vanguard of a cyberarmy of counterfeit Facebook and Twitter accounts, a legion of Russian-controlled impostors whose operations are still being unraveled.”

### **The Times’ Version**

In other words, Shane tells us, “The Russian information attack on the election did not stop with the hacking and leaking of Democratic emails or the fire hose of stories, true, false and in between, that battered Mrs. Clinton on Russian outlets like RT and Sputnik. Far less splashy, and far more difficult to trace,

was Russia's experimentation on Facebook and Twitter, the American companies that essentially invented the tools of social media and, in this case, did not stop them from being turned into engines of deception and propaganda."

Besides the obvious point that very few Americans watch RT and/or Sputnik and that Shane offers no details about the alleged falsity of those "fire hose of stories," let's examine how his accusations are backed up:

"An investigation by The New York Times, and new research from the cybersecurity firm FireEye, reveals some of the mechanisms by which suspected Russian operators used Twitter and Facebook to spread anti-Clinton messages and promote the hacked material they had leaked. On Wednesday, Facebook officials disclosed that they had shut down several hundred accounts that they believe were created by a Russian company linked to the Kremlin and used to buy \$100,000 in ads pushing divisive issues during and after the American election campaign. On Twitter, as on Facebook, Russian fingerprints are on hundreds or thousands of fake accounts that regularly posted anti-Clinton messages."

Note the weasel words: "suspected"; "believe"; "linked"; "fingerprints." When you see such equivocation, it means that these folks – both the Times and FireEye – don't have hard evidence; they are speculating.

And it's worth noting that the supposed "army of fake Americans" may amount to hundreds out of Facebook's two billion or so monthly users and the \$100,000 in ads compare to the company's annual ad revenue of around \$27 billion. (I'd do the math but my calculator doesn't compute such tiny percentages.)

So, this "army" is really not an "army" and we don't even know that it is "Russian." But some readers might say that surely we know that the Kremlin did mastermind the hacking of Democratic emails!

That claim is supported by the Jan. 6 "intelligence community assessment" that was the work of what President Obama's Director of National Intelligence James Clapper called "hand-picked" analysts from three agencies – the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation. But, as any intelligence expert will tell you, if you hand-pick the analysts, you are hand-picking the conclusions.

### **Agreeing with Putin**

But some still might protest that the Jan. 6 report surely presented convincing evidence of this serious charge about Russian President Vladimir Putin personally intervening in the U.S. election to help put Donald Trump in the White House. Well, as it turns out, not so much, and if you don't believe me, we can call to the witness stand none other than New York Times reporter Scott

Shane.

Shane wrote at the time: "What is missing from the [the Jan. 6] public report is what many Americans most eagerly anticipated: hard evidence to back up the agencies' claims that the Russian government engineered the election attack. ... Instead, the message from the agencies essentially amounts to 'trust us.'"

So, even Scott Shane, the author of last Friday's opus, recognized the lack of "hard evidence" to prove that the Russian government was behind the release of the Democratic emails, a claim that both Putin and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, who published a trove of the emails, have denied. While it is surely possible that Putin and Assange are lying or don't know the facts, you might think that their denials would be relevant to this lengthy investigative article, which also could have benefited from some mention of Shane's own skepticism of last January, but, hey, you don't want inconvenient details to mess up a cool narrative.

Yet, if you struggle all the way to the end of last Friday's article, you do find out how flimsy the Times' case actually is. How, for instance, do we know that "Melvin Redick" is a Russian impostor posing as an American? The proof, according to Shane, is that "His posts were never personal, just news articles reflecting a pro-Russian worldview."

As it turns out, the Times now operates with what must be called a neo-McCarthyistic approach for identifying people as Kremlin stooges, i.e., anyone who doubts the truthfulness of the State Department's narratives on Syria, Ukraine and other international topics.

### **Unreliable Source**

In the article's last section, Shane acknowledges as much in citing one of his experts, "Andrew Weisburd, an Illinois online researcher who has written frequently about Russian influence on social media." Shane quotes Weisburd as admitting how hard it is to differentiate Americans who just might oppose Hillary Clinton because they didn't think she'd make a good president from supposed Russian operatives: "Trying to disaggregate the two was difficult, to put it mildly."

According to Shane, "Mr. Weisburd said he had labeled some Twitter accounts 'Kremlin trolls' based simply on their pro-Russia tweets and with no proof of Russian government ties. The Times contacted several such users, who insisted that they had come by their anti-American, pro-Russian views honestly, without payment or instructions from Moscow."

One of Weisburd's "Kremlin trolls" turned out to be 66-year-old Marilyn Justice

who lives in Nova Scotia and who somehow reached the conclusion that “Hillary’s a warmonger.” During the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, she reached another conclusion: that U.S. commentators were exhibiting a snide anti-Russia bias perhaps because they indeed were exhibiting a snide anti-Russia bias.

Shane tracked down another “Kremlin troll,” 48-year-old Marcel Sardo, a web producer in Zurich, Switzerland, who dares to dispute the West’s groupthink that Russia was responsible for shooting down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over Ukraine on July 17, 2014, and the State Department’s claims that the Syrian government used sarin gas in a Damascus suburb on Aug. 21, 2013.

Presumably, if you don’t toe the line on those dubious U.S. government narratives, you are part of the Kremlin’s propaganda machine. (In both cases, there actually are serious reasons to doubt the Western groupthinks which again lack real evidence.)

But Shane accuses Sardo and his fellow-travelers of spreading “what American officials consider to be Russian disinformation on election hacking, Syria, Ukraine and more.” In other words, if you examine the evidence on MH-17 or the Syrian sarin case and conclude that the U.S. government’s claims are dubious if not downright false, you are somehow disloyal and making Russian officials “gleeful at their success,” as Shane puts it.

But what kind of a traitor are you if you quote Shane’s initial judgment after reading the Jan. 6 report on alleged Russian election meddling? What are you if you agree with his factual observation that the report lacked anything approaching “hard evidence”? That’s a point that also dovetails with what Vladimir Putin has been saying – that “IP addresses can be simply made up. ... This is no proof”?

So is Scott Shane a “Kremlin troll,” too? Should the Times immediately fire him as a disloyal foreign agent? What if Putin says that 2 plus 2 equals 4 and your child is taught the same thing in elementary school, what does that say about public school teachers?

Out of such gibberish come the evils of McCarthyism and the death of the Enlightenment. Instead of encouraging a questioning citizenry, the new American paradigm is to silence debate and ridicule anyone who steps out of line.

You might have thought people would have learned something from the disastrous groupthink about Iraqi WMD, a canard that the Times and most of the U.S. mainstream media eagerly promoted.

But if you’re feeling generous and thinking that the Times’ editors must have been chastened by their Iraq-WMD fiasco but perhaps had a bad day last week and



somehow allowed an egregious piece of journalism to lead their front page, your kind-heartedness would be shattered on Saturday when the Times' editorial board penned a [laudatory reprise](#) of Scott Shane's big scoop.

Stripping away even the few caveats that the article had included, the Times' editors informed us that "a startling investigation by Scott Shane of The New York Times, and new research by the cybersecurity firm FireEye, now reveal, the Kremlin's stealth intrusion into the election was far broader and more complex, involving a cyberarmy of bloggers posing as Americans and spreading propaganda and disinformation to an American electorate on Facebook, Twitter and other platforms. ...

"Now that the scheming is clear, Facebook and Twitter say they are reviewing the 2016 race and studying how to defend against such meddling in the future. ... Facing the Russian challenge will involve complicated issues dealing with secret foreign efforts to undermine American free speech."

But what is the real threat to "American free speech"? Is it the possibility that Russia – in a very mild imitation of what the U.S. government does all over the world – used some Web sites clandestinely to get out its side of various stories, an accusation against Russia that still lacks any real evidence?

Or is the bigger threat that the nearly year-long Russia-gate hysteria will be used to clamp down on Americans who dare question fact-lite or fact-free Official Narratives handed down by the State Department and The New York Times?

**Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, *America's Stolen Narrative*, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).**

---