

WashPost Is Richly Rewarded for False News About Russia Threat While Public Is Deceived

By Glenn Greenwald

IN THE PAST six weeks, the Washington Post published two blockbuster stories about the Russian threat that went viral: one on how Russia is behind a massive explosion of “fake news,” the other on how it invaded the U.S. electric grid. Both articles were fundamentally false. Each now bears a humiliating editor’s note grudgingly acknowledging that the core claims of the story were fiction: The first note was posted a full two weeks later to the top of the original article; the other was buried the following day at the bottom.

The second story on the electric grid turned out to be far worse than I realized when I wrote about it on Saturday, when it became clear that there was no “penetration of the U.S. electricity grid” as the Post had claimed. In addition to the editor’s note, the Russia-hacked-our-electric-grid story now has a full-scale withdrawal in the form of a separate article admitting that “the incident is not linked to any Russian government effort to target or hack the utility” and there may not even have been malware at all on this laptop.

But while these debacles are embarrassing for the paper, they are also richly rewarding. That’s because journalists — including those at the Post — aggressively hype and promote the original, sensationalistic false stories, ensuring that they go viral, generating massive traffic for the Post (the paper’s executive editor, Marty Baron, recently boasted about how profitable the paper has become).

After spreading the falsehoods far and wide, raising fear levels and manipulating U.S. political discourse in the process (both Russia stories were widely hyped on cable news), journalists who spread the false claims later note the withdrawal or corrections only in the most muted way possible, and often not at all. As a result, only a tiny fraction of people who were exposed to the original false story end up learning of the retractions.

WHETHER THE POST’S false stories here can be distinguished from what is commonly called “Fake News” is, at this point, a semantic [an argument about the meaning of words] dispute, particularly since “Fake News” has no clear definition. Defenders of Fake News as a distinct category typically emphasize intent in order to differentiate it from bad journalism. That’s really just a way of defining Fake News so as to make it definitionally impossible for mainstream media outlets like the Post ever to be guilty of it (much the way terrorism is defined to ensure that the U.S. government and its allies cannot, by definition, ever commit it).

But what was the Post's motive in publishing two false stories about Russia that, very predictably, generated massive attention, traffic, and political impact? Was it ideological and political — namely, devotion to the D.C. agenda of elevating Russia into a grave threat to U.S. security? Was it to please its audience — knowing that its readers, in the wake of Trump's victory, want to be fed stories about Russian treachery? Was it access and source servitude — proving it will serve as a loyal and uncritical repository for any propaganda intelligence officials want disseminated? Was it profit — to generate revenue through sensationalistic click-bait headlines with a reckless disregard to whether its stories are true? In an institution as large as the Post, with numerous reporters and editors participating in these stories, it's impossible to identify any one motive as definitive.

Whatever the motives, the effects of these false stories are exactly the same as those of whatever one regards as Fake News. The false claims travel all over the internet, deceiving huge numbers into believing them. The propagators of the falsehoods receive ample profit from their false, viral “news.” And there is no accountability of the kind that would disincentivize a repeat of the behavior. (That the Post ultimately corrects its false story does not distinguish it from classic Fake News sites, which also sometimes do the same.)

And while it's true that all media outlets make mistakes, and that even the most careful journalism sometimes errs, those facts do not remotely lessen the Post's behavior here. In these cases, they did not make good faith mistakes after engaging in careful journalism. With both stories, they were reckless (at best) from the start, and the glaring deficiencies in the reporting were immediately self-evident (which is why both stories were widely attacked upon publication).

As I noted on Saturday, many journalists reacted to this story the same way they do every story about Russia: They instantly click and re-tweet and share the story without the slightest critical scrutiny. That these claims are constantly based on the whispers of anonymous officials and accompanied by no evidence whatsoever gives those journalists no pause at all; any official claim that Russia and Putin are behind some global evil is instantly treated as Truth. That's a significant reason papers like the Post are incentivized to recklessly publish stories of this kind. They know they will be praised and rewarded no matter the accuracy or reliability because their Cause — the agenda — is the right one.

A VERY COMMON dynamic is driving all of this: media groupthink, greatly exacerbated (as I described on Saturday) by the incentive scheme of Twitter. As the grand media failure of 2002 demonstrated, American journalists are highly susceptible to fueling and leading the parade in demonizing a new Foreign Enemy rather than exerting restraint and skepticism in evaluating the true nature of that threat.