

ON PROVENANCE AND PUTIN: THAT SID BLUMENTHAL STORY

At a campaign appearance yesterday, Donald Trump quoted a judgment that Kurt Eichenwald made in an article last year on the Benghazi investigation.

One important point has been universally acknowledged by the nine previous reports about Benghazi: The attack was almost certainly preventable. Clinton was in charge of the State Department, and it failed to protect U.S. personnel at an American consulate in Libya. If the GOP wants to raise that as a talking point against her, it is legitimate.

The rest of the article was about how politicized the inquiry was. But right there in the middle of his article, Eichenwald included a namby pamby both-sides paragraph – one that could have better nuanced the conclusions of the many Benghazi reports – that said Benghazi was a legitimate issue to raise against Hillary.

Sucks to be Eichenwald, because Trump just used it on his campaign, to thrilled cries from his frothy supporters.

The quote came up on the campaign trail because Sid Blumenthal had forwarded the article – highlighting the description about the politicized questioning he himself had undergone, but ultimately quoting the entire article, including that namby pamby paragraph – to a bunch of undisclosed recipients, including John Podesta, under the subject line “The truth...” Blumenthal surely meant that Eichenwald’s larger point – that the whole investigation was politicized – was the truth, but he did forward the whole thing, including the namby pamby paragraph, under that heading.

The forwarded story got released by Wikileaks as part of its Podesta leaks (emails which Hillary effectively confirmed during the debate by explaining one of the emails that had attracted the most attention).

Now, as it turns out, Sputnik published a story on the email, erroneously attributing the entire judgment, including that attacking Hillary for Benghazi was a legit talking point, to Blumenthal, not Eichenwald. They apparently realized their error and took it down. But not before Eichenwald started wondering how Trump came to be quoting his own namby pamby paragraph on the campaign trail.

In an article asserting that Trump got his talking point from the Sputnik story, Eichenwald has given up not only his namby pamby tone, but moderation. In it, having already suggested the misattribution to Blumenthal was due to "incompetence," he then claims it was also deliberate disinformation. He then states as fact that Trump got this "falsehood" from the Kremlin.

This is not funny. It is terrifying. The Russians engage in a sloppy disinformation effort and, before the day is out, the Republican nominee for president is standing on a stage reciting the manufactured story as truth. How did this happen? Who in the Trump campaign was feeding him falsehoods straight from the Kremlin? (The Trump campaign did not respond to a request for comment).

The Russians have been obtaining American emails and now are presenting complete misrepresentations of them—falsifying them—in hopes of setting off a cascade of events that might change the outcome of the presidential election. The big question, of course, is why are the Russians working so hard to damage Clinton and, in the process, aid Donald Trump? That is a topic for

another time.

Here's an earlier version of the article, in which Eichenwald even more obviously asserts that the Sputnik article is both an error and a deliberate falsification.

Of course, this might be seen as just an opportunity to laugh at the incompetence of the Russian hackers and government press—once they realized their error, *Sputnik* took the article down. But this is not funny at all. The Russians have been obtaining American emails and now are presenting complete misrepresentations of them—falsifying them—in hopes of setting off a cascade of events that might change the outcome of the presidential election. The big question, of course, is why are the Russians working so hard to damage Clinton and, in the process, aid Donald Trump. That is a topic for another time.

There are two interesting details about Eichenwald's story. Nowhere in the piece does he link the actual Wikileaks email, which makes it clear that Blumenthal had, in fact, forwarded that namby pamby paragraph along with everything else. It is clear that the email was just a forwarded Newsweek article, but given that the part Blumenthal highlighted at the top was his own testimony, it is perhaps understandable why someone might make the misattribution.

More interesting still, while Eichenwald links this YouTube of what he says is Trump repeating the Sputnik talking point, he only selectively quotes from it. But it appears (and I admit that this, as with all of Trump's ramblings, is not entirely clear) that Trump introduces the quote this way:

So Blumenthal writes a quote – this just came out a little while ago, I have to tell you this. "One important point has

been ...

It's certainly possible Trump meant, "So Blumenthal writes, I quote," but at least to my ear, he said, "Blumenthal writes a quote." If that's right, then Trump *couldn't* have been working from Sputnik (or he at least wasn't replicating their error), because he would have been properly attributing this judgment as a quote (of Eichenwald). Trump does go on to say "this is Sidney Blumenthal, the only one he was talking to," after insinuating that one reason Hillary set up her email server may have been to continue talking to "Sleazy Sidney" after Obama told her to stop, but nowhere in the clip do I see Trump IDing it as an email from Blumenthal. Perhaps Eichenwald bases this assertion – "He told the assembled crowd that it was an email from Blumenthal" – on some other part of the appearance.

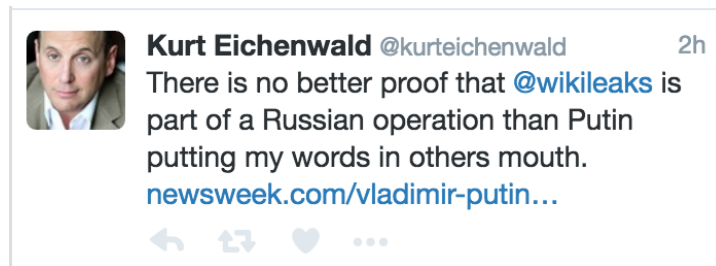
Eichenwald also notes that Trump was "holding a document in his hand." But the document appears to be a transcribed talking point; it's almost certainly not the Sputnik article. So that doesn't tell us anything about provenance.

In other words, it's not actually clear where Trump got this from, or whether Trump's staffers had at least corrected Sputnik's error. It may well be! But Eichenwald hasn't made that case.

Apparently this frothy Trump supporter tweeted out the claim, just as Trump stated it, though he has since deleted it. (h/t Emma Jones) The supporter, who joined Twitter in February 2016, could well be a Russian troll (but one that long precedes this particular leak campaign), but he certainly models as an Infowars loving Hillary hater who overreads anything implicating her, something America has in ready supply without Putin's help.

There's one other part of this that I find notable, aside from the claim that Sputnik made this error out of both incompetence and deliberate disinformation. A big part of this

narrative is that Wikileaks is doing Russia's bidding rather than – a more logical explanation – attacking Hillary, with whom Julian Assange has had a 6-year adversarial relationship.



Wikileaks may well be working with Russia and/or the effect of sharing a mutual interest in weakening Hillary may amount to the same.

But this is actually a case where Russia did not do what has been alleged they might. That is, Wikileaks released what is an email no one contests, a not very controversial one at all. While Wikileaks has made misleading claims about what it has released at times, this is not one of them.

One thing clearly did not happen though. Even assuming Russia is responsible for the Podesta email leak, Russia did not “falsify” the original email to say what Eichenwald is so convinced Russia wanted to claim, that Blumenthal himself had endorsed Eichenwald's namby pamby judgment that Benghazi is a fair talking point to use against Hillary. That claim only came after Sputnik tried to make it a bigger issue (but then realized its error, according to Eichenwald).

If Russia were doing what Eichenwald claimed – and they might in the future!! – then they would have doctored the email on the front end, not when republishing it in a state outlet.

Update: Unsurprisingly, Glenn Greenwald rips this (especially Eichenwald's inflammatory tweets about the story) apart. More interesting, WaPo also dings Eichenwald for overclaiming what this incident reveals.

Update, November 1: There's a very strange coda

to this story. The guy who, until this event, worked at Sputnik and was responsible for the mistake, Bill Moran, wrote up this story from his viewpoint. Here's how he made the mistake.

On Columbus Day, I made an embarrassing mistake. I noticed a series of viral tweets attributing words to Sidney Blumenthal on the Benghazi scandal. The original WikiLeaks document, to which the original article linked, was lengthy – 75 pages. I reviewed the document in a hurry, but I did not read all of them.

[snip]

I was moving too fast and I made a mistake – a mistake that I remain embarrassed about making. I stepped outside to smoke a cigarette after scheduling our social media accounts, stopped halfway through, thought “why hasn’t anybody else picked this up?” gave the document a second review, realized my error, and proceeded to delete the story.

The story was up from 3:23PM EDT to 3:42PM EDT and received 1,061 views before being removed – I’d like to apologize to weekend readers for making that mistake no matter how honest an error it was.

What happened next is weirder. Eichenwald made a series of contacts with the guy, basically trying to persuade him not to tell the real story publicly, including by suggesting he could help him get a job at New Republic and then by threatening him.

Then, as Paste describes, they had a long conversation that Moran, at first, wasn’t going to release. In it, Eichenwald waggles around American spooks.

In Moran’s notes on the call, he quotes Eichenwald as repeating that the

"intelligence community" was monitoring both *Sputnik* and a separate Twitter account, which he holds responsible for the blowback (as opposed to his own story). He went on to say that everyone at *Sputnik* had an intelligence file on them, and asked if Moran had made any foreign phone calls that might have raised eyebrows. He went on to imply that Moran might have issues getting a re-entry visa into America if he ever traveled abroad, and then offered to help Moran "find a real job" to extricate him from the situation. He went on to say that both *Sputnik* and *Russia Today* have been targeted by the intelligence community, and will soon be subject to sanctions that aim at shutting them down for good.

Which Eichenwald does again in a follow-up email (at which point Eichenwald seemed to be going nuts, because he didn't realize that Moran included Newsweek's own lawyer on the exchange and instead assumed it was Moran's lawyer).

Next, he reverts to the threatening language—the "bad cop" persona—telling Moran that he could tie him to the Russians themselves: "Now, there is one alternative here," Eichenwald writes. "I can write: 'William Moran, the writer for *Sputnik*, said he based his article not on directives from the Russian government but on an anonymous tweet that used a clip of the image of the document. He said he accepted the anonymous tweeters' description that this was from Blumenthal, and did so because he was rushed. However, as the government official with knowledge of the intelligence inquiry said, the original altered document that was tweeted onto the internet came from a location that has been identified as being connected to the Russian

disinformation campaigns, and only the news outlet owned by the Russian government published an article based on it."

In other words, perhaps in an attempt to salvage his reputation, or perhaps in truth, Eichenwald was dragging the intelligence community into this.