

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW-AND NOW COLUMBIA SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM-HAVE A RUSSIAN INTELLIGENCE PROBLEM

On Tuesday, Columbia Journalism Review quietly staged the Zoom conference intended to address the many problems with Jeff Gerth's series on "Russiagate" [sic], which I wrote about in a long series. After they rescheduled the original date because of an illness, they did not alert those who had previously signed up, meaning a number of people missed it. Nor did they record the event. It had the feel of a formality designed to *claim* they had listened, without actually doing so.

Nothing demonstrates the inadequacy of the event so well as the fact that no one – not moderator and Berkeley School of Journalism Dean Geeta Anand, not Columbia Journalism School Dean Jelani Cobb, and not CJR Editor Kyle Pope – addressed the fact that Jeff Gerth had cited an unreliable Russian intelligence product as part of his attack on Hillary Clinton without informing readers he had done so.

I described that he had done so in this post, but I'm going to try to simplify this still further in hopes Columbia will understand how inexcusable this is – how badly this violates every tenet of ethical journalism.

As part of his description of Hillary's response to being victimized in a hack-and-leak campaign, Gerth described that Clinton approved a plan to vilify Trump by making Russian interference itself a scandal.

The disclosures, while not helpful to Clinton, energized the promotion of the

Russia narrative to the media by her aides and Fusion investigators. On July 24, Robby Mook, Hillary's campaign manager, told CNN and ABC that Trump himself had "changed the platform" to become "more pro-Russian" and that the hack and dump "was done by the Russians for the purpose of helping Donald Trump," according to unnamed "experts."

Still, the campaign's effort "did not succeed," campaign spokeswoman Jennifer Palmieri would write in the *Washington Post* the next year. So, on July 26, the campaign allegedly upped the ante. Behind the scenes, **Clinton was said to have approved a "proposal from one of her foreign-policy advisers to vilify Donald Trump by stirring up a scandal claiming interference by Russian security services,"** according to notes, **declassified in 2020, of a briefing CIA director John Brennan gave President Obama a few days later.** [my emphasis]

The claim is a central part of Gerth's narrative, which adopts many of the theories John Durham floated in his two failed prosecutions, suggesting that the press' concerns about Trump and Russia stemmed exclusively from efforts – the dossier and the Alfa Bank anomaly – generated by Hillary, and not by Carter Page's weird behavior in Moscow, Paul Manafort's ties to oligarchs with ties to Russia, or all the lies Trump's people told in 2017 about their own ties to Russia.

The claim is a central part of Jeff Gerth's narrative, and it is based on a Russian intelligence product of uncertain reliability.

These are the notes of Brennan's briefing to Obama. Here, though not in an earlier part of this section, Gerth quotes directly from the notes (though Gerth cuts the words "alleged approval").

• Cite alleged approval by Hillary Clinton of a proposal
from one of her foreign policy advisors to vilify
Donald Trump by stirring up a scandal claiming interference
by the Russian security services

⑥

This is the letter John Ratcliffe wrote to Lindsey Graham about the briefing before he declassified the notes themselves. The letter quotes the notes and unlike Gerth, he does not cut the words, "alleged approval," so there can be no doubt that that's what Ratcliffe was addressing. Ratcliffe's letter **explicitly says** that the Intelligence Community "does not know the accuracy of the allegation" or whether it was "exaggeration or fabrication."

▪ In late July 2016, U.S. intelligence agencies obtained insight into Russian intelligence analysis alleging that U.S. Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton had approved a campaign plan to stir up a scandal against U.S. Presidential candidate Donald Trump by tying him to Putin and the Russians' hacking of the Democratic National Committee. The IC does not know the accuracy

of this allegation or the extent to which the Russian intelligence analysis may reflect exaggeration or fabrication.

- *According to his handwritten notes, former Central Intelligence Agency Director Brennan subsequently briefed President Obama and other senior national security officials on the intelligence, including the “alleged approval by Hillary Clinton on July 26, 2016 of a proposal from one of her foreign policy advisors to vilify Donald Trump by stirring up a scandal claiming interference by Russian security services.”*

It's bad enough that Gerth takes out the use of "alleged" included in the notes itself and in Ratcliffe's description of the report.

But it is inexcusable that Gerth does not tell readers this claim comes from a Russian intelligence report, one that even *John Ratcliffe* warned might not be reliable, might even be a fabrication! Gerth describes that "Clinton was said" to have formulated this plan, without telling readers that Russian spooks were

the ones who said it. He simply adopts the accusation made by Russian spies without notice he had done so.

Before writing this up, I asked Kyle Pope about this twice, first in my general list of questions, then in a specific follow-up.

Finally, you did not answer this question.

Do you believe your treatment of the John Brennan briefing should have revealed the briefing was based on a Russian intelligence document? Do you believe you should have noted the John Ratcliffe warning that, "The IC does not know the accuracy of this allegation or the extent to which the Russian intelligence analysis may reflect exaggeration or fabrication"? Is there a reason you're certain the date was July 26 when it's not clear whether it says 26 or 28?

Is it your view that CJR owes its readers *neither* notice that it is relying on a Russian intelligence report for its interpretations about Hillary Clinton's motives *nor* reveal that the IC would not vouch for the accuracy of that report?

I got no answer. Since Tuesday's event, I've since asked for comment from Dean Cobb, who provided no response, as well as Dean Anand (whose assistant said she may get back to me later).

Jeff Gerth, and through him, CJR, and through CJR, the Columbia Journalism School apparently believe it is sound journalism, in a piece that demands greater transparency from others commenting on sloppy reporting about Russia's campaign to interfere in the 2016 election, to quote from a description of a Russian intelligence report that *may have been part of*

that campaign to interfere in the 2016 election, without disclosing that he was doing so.

There are unretracted clear errors throughout Gerth's piece that also went unremarked in Tuesday's event; rather than explaining why those errors remain uncorrected in a piece complaining about the errors of others, Gerth twice claimed his was a, "very factual chronological story" with no pushback. When I asked about them before doing my piece, Pope dismissed those errors as merely a matter of opinion.

But about this undisclosed use of a Russian intelligence product that could be a fabrication, there is no dispute. It's right there in the warning Ratcliffe gave before he released the notes. "The IC does not know the accuracy of this allegation or the extent to which the Russian intelligence analysis may reflect exaggeration or fabrication." But that didn't stop Gerth from using it. He used it anyway, with no disclosure about who made this allegation or the IC warning about its uncertain reliability.

And Columbia University's journalism establishment stubbornly stands by that non-disclosure.

Links

CJR's Error at Word 18

The Blind Spots of CJR's "Russiagate" [sic] Narrative

Jeff Gerth's Undisclosed Dissemination of Russian Intelligence Product

Jeff Gerth Declares No There, Where He Never Checked

"Wink:" Where Jeff Gerth's "No There, There" in the Russian Investigation Went

Columbia Journalism Review—and Now Columbia School of Journalism—Have a Russian Intelligence

Problem

Dear Jeff Gerth: Peter Strzok Is Not a Media Critic

My own disclosure statement

An attempted reconstruction of the articles Gerth includes in his inquiry

A list of the questions I sent to CJR