Unreliable sources: A look at the worst media moments this week

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Across the mainstream media, some reporting and commentary on the major storylines of the week — from the controversial memo by Rep. Devin Nunes to President Donald Trump's first State of the Union address — was rife with mischaracterizations or flat-out falsehoods. Meanwhile, some conspiracy theories bubbled through the cracks. Here's a look at some of the more unreliable, cringe-worthy takes and media mistakes from this week.

Rick Santorum, citing questionable report, claims "there are Dreamers who are not Dreamers"

In a panel on CNN Tuesday, two-time presidential candidate and CNN contributor Rick Santorum made an effort to amplify Trump's aggressive immigration plan. Santorum mentioned a study that he indicated shows that undocumented immigrants in Arizona are more likely to commit crimes than other segments of the population.

"There's an Arizona study that just came out … in this case, they broke out undocumented or illegal immigrants from the rest of the immigrant population, from 1985 to 2017. And what it found is that undocumented immigrants commit crimes more than U.S. residents, 142% more crimes," Santorum said. "They commit more violent crimes. They're almost twice as likely to commit, I think it was murder. I mean, the bottom line is..."

CNN commentator Van Jones interrupted Santorum to say that the study was "an outlier."

"It's not an outlier!" Santorum shot back.

The study Santorum is referring to, released by the Crime Prevention Research Center, examines data from the Arizona Department of Corrections and claims that undocumented immigrants in Arizona from age 15-35 committed crimes at higher rates than the rest of the state's population, and that they were more likely to be convicted for serious crimes. It jumps to a number of conclusions, including using length of prison time to infer severity of the crime committed. It has been well-documented that racial disparities exist among the lengths of sentences, and Hispanic offenders are more likely to be incarcerated than "similarly situated" white offenders.

Even if taken at face value, the study Santorum refers to does remain an extreme outlier. Most studies, including one from the libertarian Cato Institute, have found that undocumented immigrants are less likely to commit crimes than other groups.

There's the question of the study's political motivations. It specifically focuses on looking at the ages at which an undocumented immigrant would be considered a "Dreamer," which refers to the group of young people who had been the recipients of the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals protections rescinded by the Trump administration. The study's author, John Lott, made regular inferences to the ongoing immigration debate throughout the study. At one point, Lott concludes that DACA is ineffective, despite the fact that the study looks only at Arizona data.

Lott himself has a checkered past as a reliable researcher. He grew to prominence as a gun rights advocate whose research has purported to show, among other things, that more guns make for less crime. That research, which was embraced by the National Rifle Association and by conservatives, caused an uproar and came under heavy scrutiny, and was ultimately repudiated by the National Research Council.

Nevertheless, Lott's study on undocumented immigrants has been embraced by conservatives like Santorum, and by Trump administration officials like Attorney General Jeff Sessions. The report has also been covered uncritically in conservative media, and has even been noted in mainstream outlets like the *Washington Post*.

In a column posted on Thursday, CNN political commentator Chris Cillizza suggested that the real issue with the GOP House Intel memo, which Trump approved for release Friday, is not really about partisanship at all.

"The divide here then is less Republican vs. Democrats — although there's some of that! — than it is those who are suspicious of the activities of the FBI and broader Justice Department and those who are more trusting in those law enforcement officials," Cillizza wrote.

The point left out of this argument is the explicitly partisan reason why Republicans rallied for the memo's release, which was to undermine the FBI and its ongoing investigation into Trump.

Trump and many Republicans have explicitly signaled their intention to discredit the FBI. The president on Tuesday night signaled that he would release the memo, even before he had reviewed it, and CNN reported Thursday that Trump told friends that he believed releasing the memo would "make it easier for him to argue the Russia investigations are prejudiced against him."

Meanwhile, Republicans who claim to be concerned about transparency at the FBI have shown hesitance to release the Democratic House Intel memo that counters Nunes' memo. The House Intel Committee voted Monday to release the Nunes' memo, but not the Democratic memo.

Nunes' memo, in which some glaring omissions were immediately apparent, landed with a thud. It did, however, confirm a December *New York Times* report that information coming from former Trump campaign staffer George Papadopoulos prompted the FBI investigation into Trump's ties to Russia — not information included in the unverified dossier on Trump authored by former British spy Christopher Steele.

It was notable, too, that the first excerpts from the memo were shared with right-wing media outlets like Fox News and the *Washington Examiner*.

In the last line of his column, Cillizza suggested that the fight over the memo "isn't the same old D vs. R fight." But ... it is.

Facebook amplifies conspiracy theories on GOP retreat train crash

A girl looks at Facebook on her computer in Palo Alto, California. Paul Sakuma/AP

On Wednesday, an Amtrak train carrying Republican lawmakers to a West Virginia retreat crashed into a garbage truck, killing the truck's driver and injuring two others.

In the immediate aftermath of the crash, Facebook's Trending section amplified a number of conspiracy theories that suggested the crash was no accident.

Top 3 "People Are Saying" posts in Facebook's Trending News section for the Amtrak crash are all absolutely bonkers conspiracy theories.

I follow zero of these people and replicated in Incognito.

It is bananas they have not fixed this problem yet.

Facebook has announced a number of steps aiming to crack down on the amount of conspiracy theories and fake news appearing on the social network. Since November 2016, the social media giant has said it is attempting to tackle this issue, and has taken a number of steps, with varying degrees of success. The platform's attempt to flag disputed news stories was abandoned in December, and the company has instead chosen to surface fact checks of certain disputed articles alongside them.

On Monday, Facebook co-founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced that more updates would be coming to the platform to "show more high quality, trusted news" and surface local news stories to people in certain geographic areas. The company's plan for identifying "high-quality" news — which, according to *BuzzFeed*, appeared to be a two-question survey — have left some observers with more concerns.

The company has also said that it hopes to increase the "value" of people's time spent on the platform by further prioritizing personal connections. So on Wednesday, when the conspiracy theories appeared at the top of a section of the network intended to highlight personal conversations, it proved that Facebook still has plenty to do to fight fake news. A Facebook spokesperson told the *Daily Beast* that it would "work to fix the product."