

# INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY®

## The Disconnected Dots Between Meddling And Collusion

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The words "meddling" and "collusion" are so ambiguous they now appear to mean whatever anyone can imagine. "Mr. Trump just colluded with Russia," the headline of a Washington Post editorial about the meeting of Trump and Putin, nearly bent the language to a breaking point.

**Jonathan Chait** of New York magazine asks his readers to "consider the possibility that the summit is less a negotiation between two heads of state than a meeting between a Russian-intelligence asset and his handler." "It is not difficult to imagine," he imagined, "that Russia quickly had something on Trump" in 1987.

"Suppose," he conjectured, "the dark crevices of the Russia scandal run not just a little deeper but a lot deeper. If that's true, we are in the midst of a scandal unprecedented in American history."

Writing excitedly about imagined scandals and supposed collusion has become a hyperbolic journalistic contest without rules. Anyone can suppose or imagine anything, so long as the keywords "meddling" and "collusion" remain undefined yet overloaded with outrage.

If the Trump campaign is to be accused of being secretly involved with Russian government meddling, it makes no sense to start by searching historical interactions between Trump staffers and Russians unless those Russians were involved in meddling.

To make a connection between meddling and collusion we have to first identify *what meddling* occurred. Only then could anyone demonstrate a meaningful connection between Trump campaign staffers and Russian agents or officials.

The Mueller investigation has accused two groups of Russians of attempting to influence the 2016 election. The first indictments in February accused 13 professional trolls from the Internet Research Agency (IRA) of violating visa, election and financial laws by spending "thousands of U.S. dollars every month" for sponsored ads on Facebook and Instagram to "sow discord."

Since 2014 the trolls placed hundreds of **amateurish**, **bizarre** ads on "a range of issues" using such **fake names** as Born Liberal and LGBT United.

Although a tiny fraction of these ads mentioned candidates (only 13 are identified), the indictment suggests troll ads were "primarily intended to communicate derogatory information about Hillary Clinton, to denigrate other candidates such as Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, and to support Bernie Sanders and then-candidate Donald Trump."

Facebook's VP of ads **Rob Goldman** thinks not: "I have seen all of the Russian ads and I can say very definitively that **swaying the election was \*NOT\* the main goal.**"

In any case, even if anyone could believe these strange and wide-ranging social media ads influenced many U.S. voters, how could the Trump campaign possibly be involved? The indictment, after all, did not accuse either the Russian government or *any American* of involvement.

Russian trolls were a sideshow. The main example of meddling has always been Russian hacking and leaking of emails from the Clinton campaign. Just before Trump's inaugural, on January 6, 2017, the departing Obama intelligence team launched a crucial report that continues to define illicit Russian meddling, confining it almost entirely to the charge that "Russia's intelligence services conducted cyber operations against targets. . . associated with both major US political parties."

But what could such Russian hacking possibly have to do with Trump collusion? The DOJ emphasized there is "no allegation in the indictment that the charged conduct altered the vote count or changed the outcome of the 2016 election," and also no allegation that **any American** was a knowing participant.

On **July 16, 2018**, The New York Times reached back to the seminal "January 2017 assessment of the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, the F.B.I. and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence concluded that Russia interfered in the election." However, when President Trump recently tweeted that "I have GREAT confidence in MY intelligence people," the pointed capitalization of MY suggested he has *less* confidence in *Obama's* intelligence team – the outspoken Trump critics John Brenner, James Clapper and James Comey.

The January 2017 assessment prepared at President Obama's request was called, "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections." Over half the report was a reprint about legal propaganda in 2012: "Kremlin's TV Seeks to Influence Politics, Fuel Discontent in US." Discussion of the 2016 election took only five pages, and began by revealing why Obama's intelligence chiefs thought Putin wanted to "denigrate Secretary Clinton":

"Putin most likely wanted to discredit Secretary Clinton because he has publicly blamed her since 2011 for inciting mass protests against his regime in late 2011 and early 2012, and because he holds a grudge for comments he almost certainly saw as disparaging him. . . Putin publicly pointed to the **Panama Papers** disclosure and the **Olympic doping scandal** as US-directed efforts to defame Russia."

The report complained of Putin's "influence campaign" against Secretary Clinton, which mainly meant Russian TV and radio stations "such as RT and Sputnik . . . made increasingly favorable comments about President-elect Trump as the 2016 US general and primary election campaigns progressed while consistently offering negative coverage of Secretary Clinton."

Aside from grumbling about unfair Russian TV and radio, attention to *illegal* Russian meddling focused almost entirely on "Cyber Incident Attribution." The private "Internet Research Agency of professional trolls" warranted just two hearsay sentences, citing an unnamed journalist.

The core complaint about *governmental* Russian meddling has always been hacking Democrats' emails. The latest Mueller indictment says, "Beginning by at least March 2016, the Conspirators targeted over 300 individuals affiliated with the Clinton Campaign, DCCC, and DNC."

In May the DCCC and DNC belatedly hired a private security company. "Despite these efforts," the indictment notes, a "version of X-Agent (spyware). . . remained on the DNC network until in or around October 2016." And October 7 was when U.S. intelligence services announced they believed Russian intelligence was responsible.

### **Meddling, Or Just Gone 'Phishing'?**

Russian phishing would have failed if (1) President **Obama's F.B.I.** had been quicker **to take cybersecurity seriously**, or (2) the Democrat Party's Internet security had not been so careless. John Podesta was tricked by **a phishing email** from a visible Ukraine location asking him to change his email password — just *click here* on a bitly link to send it to Russian spies.

Phishers also hooked DNC workers. If they had not clicked links on suspicious e-mails, there would have been no hacked emails and therefore no successful cyber-meddling.

Russian intelligence hacking and private trolling are the only significant incidents of Russian election meddling revealed in either the January 2017 Obama intelligence assessment or the Mueller investigations. The Mueller indictments found no American involvement in hacking or trolling and alleged no Russian government involvement in the trolling.

For any journalist, legislator or think tank to reverse those conclusions — by discovering Trump campaign involvement in hacking or trolling — would require finding some connection between the Trump campaign and Russian hackers and trolls.

*That* is the challenge of proving "collusion." And it seems very challenging indeed if not impossible.

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