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The con is winding down

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Allow me to present to you the evidence that China stole the 2020 election. Please sit down; I don't want you to be injured when you faint.

So: voilà.

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Yes, you're reading that right. Looks like you owe MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell an apology.

Hm? You say you can't figure out what you're supposed to be looking at? Well, that's just because you [mumbles] and you know what, I really have to get going to this dentist's appointment.

Let's change gears for a second.

Imagine that someone handed you an envelope containing a lengthy document written in Portuguese. You have it translated and you learn that it's a written confession from a criminal who is currently siphoning billions of dollars a day from millions of individual checking accounts. What do you do next?

Presumably, you call the local police or the FBI. You present them with the original document and the translation and let them take it from there. What you presumably do *not* do is promise for weeks on end that you have definitive proof that someone is stealing millions of dollars from

bank accounts and that people need to fly to some remote location so that you can unveil that proof over the course of three days.

The gibberish above is one result of the latter process. Lindell, who has claimed for months and months that he had definitive proof that the 2020 presidential election was stolen by China, pledged to release that information at a “cyber symposium” that is underway in South Dakota. According to Lindell, someone captured Internet traffic in the days after the election that shows how votes were shifted away from Donald Trump and to President Biden. Instead of simply presenting this evidence to the public, he withheld it, offering \$5 million to anyone who can prove that the information isn’t legitimate.

Rob Graham, a technologist and author, went to the summit to evaluate what Lindell claims to have. During a “breakout session,” he and others were provided with access to what Lindell’s team claims to have obtained. Graham shared what they were given — a collection of files that consists of 1) a list of computer Internet protocol addresses and 2) gibberish like that above. Well, technically they were given rich-text format files, some of which were inexplicably converted to hexadecimal encoding. Graham, an expert on Internet data, described the provided material as “a bunch of confusing stuff they can’t explain,” and said that those running the symposium pledged to hand over the “real” information Tuesday night or Wednesday. Meanwhile, Lindell’s live stream of the symposium — being watched by hundreds of thousands of people on one streaming feed — presses on, with the CEO mostly riffing on how toxic the media is. Promotions offer viewers codes for discounts at MyPillow, a useful bit of advertising given that Lindell’s conspiracy theories have cost his company placement in a number of retailers’ inventories.

Again, it’s been the case for months that Lindell has said his “cyber experts” saw proof of vote hacking in the captured packets of data. It would, presumably, be very easy for those experts to then stand up and quickly walk through what they found and what it means. But this has never happened. It’s never even been explained what such evidence would *look* like. Instead, Lindell’s relied on lengthy statistical presentations from a guy named Douglas Frank, presentations that are the functional equivalent of a kid reviewing a Jackson Pollock painting: They’re looking at something, to be sure, and picking out patterns and meaning where they can.

Of course, it would also be easy for Lindell’s team to present the raw data in a format that people at the symposium could examine. Graham says they were told it was in a “proprietary BLX/PLX format,” maybe. So the gibberish above might be some kind of encoding, like some sort of compression. But then, you don’t convert that to rich-text format or identify it as an .RTF file. You share the compressed file and say it’s a compressed file. (Converting the text above to a compressed file did not make it accessible, by the way. Nor did converting it to a PDF, a JPEG or a PNG.) If you are trying to prove something, you prove it.

But what if you’re not trying to prove it? What if you’re trying to make some cash and you stumbled onto a big, juicy mark? What if there were a millionaire desperate to prove something, a millionaire who’s not exactly an Internet savant but one willing to hand over loads of cash for data you made up — as some of the data previously released by Lindell pretty obviously was?

For a while, you're skating, cashing checks and sending along reports on occasion. Eventually, though, you get closer and closer to the point at which you need to actually turn over your work.

This is how all cons end. Things stretch and stretch and stretch until: snap. So instead of presenting your data, you encode it and obfuscate it and promise that there's actually something there, but wait, hmm, that is weird, let me see what's happening. Instead you say things like that there was a medical emergency that slowed things down and just ask everyone to stick with you for a moment. It's just buying time — like Trump calling senators on Jan. 6 — hoping that if another hour or so passes, you can somehow regain control.

For a long time, I couldn't figure out why Lindell was stretching things out the way he is. I believe that he's being taken for a ride, though perhaps unintentionally. (I think Douglas Frank believes he's stumbled onto a secret conspiracy, for example, though he obviously hasn't.) But why is *he* letting the fraud keep going? Why's he participating in stretching it out?

Watching the symposium live stream Tuesday morning, I think I figured it out. The start of the event was delayed by technological problems, problems Lindell claimed were a function of his bespoke social media site being "hacked." This was the refrain: He'd done everything right but hackers kept picking apart his site's defenses. He said the same thing when his site first launched and quickly got flooded. He also said Tuesday morning that his plane had trouble landing Monday night, hinting at a conspiracy aimed at silencing him.

In other words, this seems very much like a guy who's primed to believe fairly far-flung excuses for why bad things happen. The kind of guy who, when told that the data will be ready in a month, waits patiently for the month to pass. Maybe he's something more sinister, engaged in an effort to willfully delude America, but observing him over time makes it seem more like he's the mark than the hustler.

On Monday, Cato Institute senior fellow Julian Sanchez offered an insightful chain of thoughts about the overlap between those who believe false claims about the election being stolen and those who reject the coronavirus vaccine as dangerous.

In both cases, Sanchez wrote, the conspiracy theories "have the superficial trappings of real science. Links to journal articles on the one hand, or on the other, impressively hackery looking hex dumps & spreadsheets full of IP addresses" — a reference to Lindell's information.

"[I]n both cases, this evidence is absolutely useless to the target audience," he continued. "They have neither the training nor the context to evaluate the quality or relevance of technical articles in medical journals — or even to understand what the article is claiming in many cases. ... They are, however, being flattered by the INVITATION to assess the evidence for themselves — do your own research, make up your own mind!"

Instead of offering their trust on experts in their fields to explain complicated subjects, the audience is convinced that it needs only to trust itself — though, of course, they're actually simply trusting the hustlers presenting incomplete or misleading information. What the hustlers

offer the audience, Sanchez says, “is the *illusion* of not trusting an authority — unlike all those sheep who trust the *mainstream* authorities.”

Data from YouGov shows that the overlap of those who don’t want to get the vaccine and those who think that Biden is an illegitimate president is nearly complete. About three-quarters of Republicans hold the latter position and 3 in 10 the former, but a quarter both reject the vaccine and Biden’s election.

Many in this group clearly fit the profile Sanchez describes.

It seems pretty clear that Lindell does, too. It seems clear that he was told something about packets and China and data and hex codes and, dang, if that isn’t exactly what he assumed had happened. He did his own research and found a guy who’s offering him something he doesn’t entirely understand, something the mainstream media is desperate to undercut. Lindell found something in which he has complete, unfailing confidence.

And that’s all it takes.