

Political Journalists Have Themselves To Blame For Sinking Credibility

We regret the error. Again and again and again.

David Harsanyi

“Our record as journalists in covering this Trump story and the Russian story is pretty good,” legendary reporter Carl Bernstein told CNN’s Brian Stelter over the weekend. *Pretty good?* If there’s a major news story over the past 70 years that American media has botched more often because of bias and wishful thinking, I’d love to hear about it.

By David Harsanyi
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This week alone, four big scoops were run by major news organizations — written by top reporters and presumably churned through layers of scrupulous editing — that turned out to be completely wrong: Reuters, Bloomberg, *The Wall Street Journal*, and others reported that the special counsel’s office had subpoenaed Donald Trump’s records from Deutsche Bank. **They weren’t**. ABC reported that Trump had directed Michael Flynn to make contact with Russian officials before the election. **He didn’t** (as far as we know). *The New York Times* ran a story that showed K.T. McFarland had acknowledged collusion. **She didn’t**. Then CNN topped off the week by **falsely reporting** that the Trump campaign had been offered access to hacked Democratic National Committee emails before they were published.

Forget your routine bias, these were four bombshells disseminated to millions of Americans by breathless anchors, pundits, and analysts, all of them feeding frenzied expectations about collusion that have now been internalized as indisputable truths by many. All four pieces, incidentally, are useless without their central faulty claims. Yet there they sit. And these are only four of dozens of

other stories that have fizzled over the year.

If we are to accept the special pleadings of journalists we have to believe these were all honest mistakes. They may be. But a person might then ask, why is it that every one of the dozens of honest mistakes are prejudiced in the very same way? Why hasn’t there been a single major honest mistake that diminishes the Trump-Russia collusion story? Why is there never an honest mistake that indicts Democrats?

Remember only last week we were all supposed to be mightily impressed that *The Washington Post* had sniffed out **some bad acting by Project Veritas**. The incident, we were told, proved beyond a doubt that journalists were meticulous fact-checkers who do their due diligence and could not be manipulated by dishonest sources. If this is true, why do they get the Russia story wrong so often?

Maybe the problem is that too many people are working backwards from a preconception. Maybe newsrooms have too many people who view the world through an identical prism when it comes to the president—which is to say, they believe he stole the election with the help of Russians. And perhaps the president's constant lashing out at the media has provoked newsrooms to treat their professional obligations as a moral crusade rather than a fact-gathering enterprise.

CNN reporters Manu Raju and Jeremy Herb, for instance, contend they had two sources, both of whom must have lied to them about the same date on the same email, who told them Donald Trump Jr. was offered encryption codes to look at hacked DNC emails. CNN **says** that the duo followed “editorial process” in reporting the piece. This brings three lines of questioning to mind.

First: Do news organizations typically run stories about documents that they've never authenticated? If so, what other big stories over the past few years have been run based on unauthenticated documents? Can they point to single story CNN has written about the Obama administration using a similar process? What part of CNN's editorial guidelines deals with this sort of situation?

Second: Why would two independent sources lie about a date on the email to Trump Jr. if they didn't want to mislead the public? And how independent could they really be? How many stories regarding the Russian collusion investigation has CNN run from these very sources?

Three: If sources lie to you, why not burn them? Understandably, there are reasons to avoid exposing a dishonest source. For one, other legitimate whistleblowers might not come forward after seeing a news organization revealed someone because, after all, anyone can make an honest mistake. Reporters also must preserve relationships with people like Adam Sch ... er,

with those in power, because they may help on other stories in the future. And, at the end of the day, you're in contest for information.

But these people have put your reputation – even your job – in danger. Moreover, they have engaged in a serious abuse of the public trust; abuse of power. Who knows how many of these mistakes, spread over numerous outlets, came from the same sources? This seems newsworthy.

And there will always be mistakes. Many journalists admit them, and sometimes they apologize, and sometimes they even correct them quickly and without excuses. They do so when they are caught by others who are skeptical of their reporting. In the meantime, hundreds of pieces relying on anonymous sources that can't be disproven (or proven) are being fed into an agitated political environment.

When honest mistakes are found, the reflex of many political journalists is to portray themselves as sentinels of free speech and democracy. Often they will start contrasting their track record on truth to Donald Trump. Yes, Trump is a fabulist. His tweets **can be destructive**. And maybe one day Robert Mueller will inform us that the administration colluded with Russia. What it has not done to this point, however, is undermine the ability of the press to report stories accurately. Trump hasn't attempted to silence a reporter by accusing them of **breaking anti-espionage laws**. No one has attempted to pass laws **allowing the state to ban reporting or political discourse**. Trump didn't make your activist source lie.

The fact that many political journalists (not all) have a political agenda is not new (social media has made this fact inarguable), but if they become a proxy of operatives who peddle falsehoods, they will soon lose credibility with an even bigger swath of the country. They will have themselves to blame.