



Media Falsely Reports Florida Shooter Had Ties to White Nationalists

The mainstream media has falsely reported that the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting suspect Nikolas Cruz was a member of a white nationalist militia. Cruz's connections to any white nationalist group have been unverified, but the damage has already been done as rumors of this alleged affiliation continue to prevail.



Republic of Florida leader Jordan Jereb allegedly told the Anti-Defamation League that Cruz was a member of his white nationalist militia and participated in paramilitary drills. The AP tweeted last Thursday: "Leader of white nationalist group has confirmed suspect in Florida school shooting was a member of his organization." Minutes later, however, the AP sent a second tweet, in which the headline was changed to read, "Leader of a white nationalist militia says" that Cruz was a member. That tweet was accompanied by a story in which a law-enforcement official stated he was unaware of any ties between Cruz and the white nationalist group.

Unfortunately, the second story did not have the viewership of the first story. According to Fox News, the first tweet was retweeted more than 40,000 times and [liked by more than 50,000 users](#), while [the clarification](#) was only retweeted 8,000 times and liked by less than 7,000 users.

Other major news outlets reported the same information, producing a swift wave of misinformation.

Politico notes that law-enforcement agencies have found no evidence to support the claim that Cruz was connected to white nationalists. Such connections may have been perpetuated by Internet trolls.

It allegedly began when an anonymous 4chan user made a joke on Instagram suggesting he knew Cruz. An ABC News reporter contacted the user, presenting what one 4chan user called a "prime trolling opportunity." A third user instructed the first, "You have to take advantage of this."

Politico reports that the exchange between the 4chan user and the reporter ended after the user sent the reporter a racist cartoon, prompting the reporter to block the user. But *Politico* contends that the exchange prompted the trolls to take initiative to disseminate disinformation about Cruz. Eventually, they "settled on a narrative that included Jereb and ROF." Politico continues: "In posts to a neo-Nazi Web forum called The Right Stuff, a user called 'Jordan Fash' said the idea originated in a group chat on Discord, an app for gamers that is popular with white nationalists and the alt-right." ("Fash" is



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common Internet shorthand for “fascist.”)

According to Jordan Fash, an ABC News reporter reached out to one of the group’s members on Instagram. The group passed around the reporter’s number and told her Cruz was associated with Jereb. Group members communicated with at least two ABC News reporters in a coordinated effort.

Jereb later stated that his identification of Cruz was a “misunderstanding,” and that he was the subject of a prank.

According to Joan Donovan, a researcher who tracks online misinformation campaigns for Data & Society, the hoax was a type of “source hacking,” a tactic in which fringe groups feed false information to sources, who in turn feed that information to reporters, allowing it to reach thousands of readers before it is ultimately debunked.

“It’s a very effective way of getting duped,” Donovan said.

Of course, reporters would not easily get duped if they followed protocols for vetting information before reporting it as fact. The mainstream media’s willingness to report that Cruz was connected to white nationalists without obtaining all of the facts is a prime example of the “Fake News” phenomenon that President Trump turned into a talking point.

“It’s fair to ask whether AP and other media outlets unskeptically reported what they did because they wanted to believe it,” said Tom Blumer of the Media Research Center.

After all, the Left is already using the Parkland shooting as a catalyst to call for stricter gun control and in some extreme cases, a repeal of the Second Amendment. If the shooter could somehow be a white nationalist, the Left would have all the ammunition it needed to blame Trump, guns, and white privilege.

Despite numerous retractions from a variety of websites and news organizations, most of which blamed the AP for its misleading headline, the rumor that Cruz has ties to white nationalists remains prevalent.

“That the false air of certainty over Cruz’s ties remained prevalent for so long is largely due to how the AP buried contrary information deep in one of its subsequent longer dispatches while deleting any reference to it without recognizing its erroneous original reporting in another,” Blumer wrote.

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