



Did The U.S. Intelligence Community Fall for an Internet Prank?

Last week, the intelligence community presented President Obama and President-elect Trump with a two-page synopsis that was appended to the intelligence report titled “Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections.” The appended synopsis alleges that Russian agents have compromising information on Trump that could be used to blackmail him. The claims of the report would be damning indeed. There is just one problem: anonymous 4Chan users claim to have created the story out of thin air.



4Chan is a messageboard and imageboard throwback to the subculture of the internet of the early 2000’s. Most users post anonymously and there is no registration to use the site. 4Chan is largely unmoderated and has a variety of boards ranging from the benign to the extreme. There are no real rules for users; the site is an example of a wild-West form of “self-government” to the extent that there is any “government” at all.

The hacktivist group known as Anonymous sprang up from 4Chan and was named for the fact that any user who does not choose to post under a username is shown as Anonymous. Pranks and hacks are par for the course at 4Chan.

While famous for [childish pranks](#) and [lolcat memes](#), 4Chan has also aimed its collective hacktivist cannon at some serious issues, as well. The consequences of finding oneself in the 4Chan crosshairs can be severe. In 2009, a 14-year-old boy in Oklahoma posted a video to YouTube showing a cat being abused. The 4Chan hacktivist community tracked him down by backtracking his YouTube account to his Facebook account, compared pictures to the blurred-out video and figured they had found their man. As [irishtimes.com reported](#):

Photos on Facebook checked out with the blurred background in the video; a little more sleuthwork uncovered Kenny Glenn’s home address, parents’ workplaces, and the contact numbers for the local sheriff, Glenn’s school, and house.

Within two days, the teenager had been charged by the local authorities, and the cat removed to a vet until the case had completed.

The lesson for that young man was simple: The community that thinks highly enough of cats to base a large percentage of their memes on them will burn your world to the ground if you post videos of yourself abusing one of them.

One cardinal — if unspoken — rule of 4Chan is that hypocrisy is to be punished. Severely. Racist radio shock jock Hal Turner found out the hard way. While fomenting his own brand of hatred and white-separatism, Turner was actually a [paid FBI informant](#). His gig with the FBI came to light (and



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presumably, to an end) in 2008 when he was [doxxed](#) by anonymous 4Chan users who also hacked his e-mail and posted his communications to the FBI on the comments section of his website. Those e-mails showed Turner bragging about helping agents “flush out another crazy.”

Sometimes the lines between the childish pranks and the serious hacktivism are so blurred, it’s difficult to tell where one leaves off and the other begins. Such may be the case with the “intelligence” about Trump’s alleged misbehavior while in Russia. The two-page appendix to the report on [Russia’s alleged campaign to influence recent elections in the United States](#) is based on a dossier prepared by “a former British intelligence agent,” according to reports. The [dossier](#) claims that the “Russian regime has been cultivating, supporting and assisting TRUMP for at least 5 years” and that Trump “and his inner circle have accepted a regular flow of intelligence from the Kremlin, including on his Democratic and other political rivals.” If that were not bad enough, the dossier goes on to say:

Former top Russian intelligence officer claims FSB has compromised TRUMP through his activities in Moscow sufficiently to be able to blackmail him. According to several knowledgeable sources, his conduct in Moscow has included perverted sexual acts which have been arranged/ monitored by the FSB.

Without wading too far into the mire, the allegations are essentially that during visits to Moscow, Trump engaged in perverse acts with Russian prostitutes, including an episode where he had them urinate on the bed in the presidential suite of the Ritz Carlton Hotel where President Obama had stayed with First Lady Michelle Obama during his visit to Moscow.

As stated above, this would be damning news indeed, if true. For the president-elect to have been the beneficiary of Russian intelligence on his “political rivals” while at the same time having been the target of a blackmail scheme at the hands of those same Russian agents would be catastrophic to the United States.

As it stands, though, the dossier does not read like the product of “a former British intelligence operative, whose past work US intelligence officials consider credible,” as the supposed author is described in a [report](#) by CNN. Even BuzzFeed — which, like so many media outlets, jumped on the story without bothering to verify anything — later [wrote](#) of the dossier:

The document was prepared for political opponents of Trump by a person who is understood to be a former British intelligence agent. It is not just unconfirmed: It includes some clear errors. The report misspells the name of one company, “Alpha Group,” throughout. It is Alfa Group. The report says the settlement of Barvikha, outside Moscow, is “reserved for the residences of the top leadership and their close associates.” It is not reserved for anyone, and it is also populated by the very wealthy.

With its bad grammar, poor spelling, and lousy format, the dossier reads much more like what the anonymous 4Chan user claims: a prank that wound up being wildly successful beyond anything its perpetrators could have hoped.

On Tuesday, Anonymous (ID BQGw8RDt) [posted](#) to 4Chan under the heading “When you never verify anything because you’re FAKE NEWS.” He wrote:

Let’s recap what happened:

>/pol/acks mailed fanfiction to anti-trump pundit rick wilson about trump making people p[***] on a bed obama slept in

>he thought it was real and gave it to the cia



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>the central intelligence agency of the united states of america put this in their official classified intelligence report on russian involvement in the election
>donald trump and obama have both read this /pol/acks fanfiction
>the cia has concluded that the russians plan to blackmail trump with this story we made up just let that sink in
what we have become

So, 4Chan users claim to have set this whole thing in motion to play a prank on [Rick Wilson](#), who fell for it because it was too good to be true and fed into his unreasonable hatred and distrust of Trump. According to this version of events, Wilson then passed the “intelligence” along to the CIA and the agency also fell for it. In fact, the intelligence community fell for it so hard that, as CNN [reported](#):

The classified briefings last week were presented by four of the senior-most US intelligence chiefs — Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, FBI Director James Comey, CIA Director John Brennan, and NSA Director Admiral Mike Rogers.

One reason the nation’s intelligence chiefs took the extraordinary step of including the synopsis in the briefing documents was to make the President-elect aware that such allegations involving him are circulating among intelligence agencies, senior members of Congress and other government officials in Washington, multiple sources tell CNN.

These senior intelligence officials also included the synopsis to demonstrate that Russia had compiled information potentially harmful to both political parties, but only released information damaging to Hillary Clinton and Democrats. This synopsis was not an official part of the report from the intelligence community case about Russian hacks, but some officials said it augmented the evidence that Moscow intended to harm Clinton’s candidacy and help Trump’s, several officials with knowledge of the briefings tell CNN.

Trump’s lawyer, Michael Cohen, told MIC the story is “fake news” and said, “Somebody is having a lot of fun at your expense.” he added: “It’s so ridiculous on so many levels. Clearly the person who created this did so from their imagination or did so hoping the liberal media would run with this fake story for whatever rationale they might have.”

Frankly, 4Chan’s claim that users on the messageboard created this story out of thin air is much more likely than the “official” version of the story, which reads a little too much like a John Grisham novel. And there is evidence in the timeline that lends real credibility to the 4Chan version, as well. As a post on [pastebin](#) explains:

The remarkable thing? It’s all fake. And not only fake; it’s a prank perpetuated by 4chan, on Rick Wilson himself. A post on 4chan on october 26 stated “mfw managed to convince CTR and certain (((journalists))) on Twitter there’ll be an October surprise on Trump this Friday” along with a picture of a smug face with a hash name.

<http://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/94704894/#94705224>

on november 1, a person without a picture but is assumed to be the same person posted “So they took what I told Rick Wilson and added a Russian spy angle to it. They still believe it. Guys, they’re truly f[***]ing desperate - there’s no remaining Trump scandal that’s credible.”

<https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/95568919/#95571329>

on january 10, moments after the story broke and began to gain traction on social media, a person with the same smug grin face, and the same hash title for the picture, stated “I didn’t think they’d



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take it so far." <http://boards.4chan.org/pol/thread/106514445#p106520376>

It appears that the intelligence community was so eager to bolster its claims that Russia was behind a plot to keep Clinton out of the White House and put Trump in it, that the directors of the ODNI, FBI, CIA, and NSA fell for a 4Chan prank. What's next? Will national security decisions soon be based on intelligence gathered from articles published by *The Onion*?

Update (Jan. 12, 2017): *This is a developing story. Since this article was published, President-elect Trump has denied that he was briefed by intelligence officials on the dossier, as The New American and others reported.*



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