

Letter From the Editors: Jan. 1-15, 2017

Ring in the New Year With 'Fake News'

The incoming US executive team took a swing at the reputation of the American press during their first press conference of the year, which took place Jan. 11. First, vice-president-elect Mike Pence used the phrase "[fake news](#)" to describe a recently published report on alleged ties between Donald Trump and Russian President Putin. Later in the conference, Trump himself interrupted a CNN journalist's question by saying he didn't want to speak to media outlets that publish "fake news."

The same week, another American institution – the intelligence community – had its reputation impugned, this time by Russian commentators. The Russian press had a field day with a controversial joint [report by the NSA, FBI and CIA](#) that claimed the Russian government had influenced the US presidential election (including by hacking the Democratic National Committee's e-mail servers). Political analyst Vladimir Bruter, writing in Izvestia, identified [five "fake premises"](#) that underlie the report's conclusions (for example, that Russia has a media presence in the US significant enough to sway domestic politics).

However, Bruter did his profession a disservice by overstating the case: "[T]he NSA, the largest US intelligence service, essentially disagreed with the report's contention that 'Putin and the Russian government aspired to help president-elect Trump's election chances when possible by discrediting [former] secretary [of state] Clinton and public-ly contrasting her unfavorably to him.'" If we look at the [actual report](#), it reads: "All three agencies agree with this judgment. CIA and FBI have high confidence in this judgment; NSA has moderate confidence."

A more subtle distortion can be found in Izvestia's coverage of the press conference mentioned above. [Reporters Tatyana Baikova and Aleksei Zabrodin](#) summarized as follows Trump's response to a question about whether he believed the hacking allegations: "[T]he president-elect said that Russia could have been behind the attacks on Democratic Party servers." According to The New York Times transcript of the conference, Trump's response was more assured: "I think it was Russia."

Is this discrepancy a mere nuance of meaning, or a sign that the Russian press is trying to make Trump look like a Russophile? Or at least not a Russophobe, like Barack Obama and his outgoing administration? Speaking of which – the latest outrage perpetrated by the latter (as reported in Vedomosti) is that it has [expelled 35 Russian diplomats](#) from US soil, in response to the evidence presented in the aforementioned intelligence report. However, the Vedomosti article emphasizes, Putin is not stooping to the level of a symmetric response, so as to leave the door open for friendly relations with incoming president Trump.

Apparently, Putin is not the only one who wants to make nice with the American billionaire-turned-politician. Arina Tsukanova reports in the SCF Online Journal that [Ukrainian President Pyotr Poroshenko](#) is paying a public relations firm called the BGR Group \$50,000 a month to "strengthen US-Ukraine relations and encourage private US businesses to invest in Ukraine."

If we want to put a positive spin on that, we could call it "soft power." What about the more objective arena of military power? Matthew Bodner reports that [Russia has now scaled back its naval forces](#) in the Syrian theater, shipping off a battlegroup led by the Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier. However, this big move was likely a symbolic gesture, Bodner argues: With ceasefire negotiations in the works, "Putin needed a gesture of good faith that would not severely compromise his military options in Syria."

Do stories like this represent the new face of news in a "post-truth" world? Well, hang on tight, Digest readers – the year is just beginning.

Laurence Bogoslaw,
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