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An explosive New York Post story that sent Trumpworld into a frenzy is riddled with holes and red flags

Sonam Sheth Oct 14, 2020, 11:41 AM



Associated Press/Evan Vucci, AP

Trumpworld flew into a frenzy on Wednesday after the New York Post published a report purporting to show a "smoking-gun email" featuring Hunter Biden communicating with a Ukrainian official about meeting with his father, Joe Biden, when he was vice president.

The Post's story had several red flags that raised doubts about its authenticity. The most glaring questions center on whether the emails described in the story are legitimate, how they were uncovered, and how the Post obtained them.

The Post's report said an unidentified computer-repair-shop owner discovered the emails and other compromising material about Hunter Biden after an unidentified person dropped off a water-damaged laptop last year to be repaired but never picked it up.

Business Insider [identified the repair-shop owner](#) as John Paul Mac Isaac, an avid Trump supporter who couldn't get his facts straight when [reporters later](#)

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The outlet also said it learned of the emails' existence last month through Steve Bannon, the former White House chief strategist, and obtained them through Rudy



Both men have pushed conspiracy theories about the Biden campaign's ties to Ukraine, and Giuliani met last year with a Ukrainian official who was sanctioned in September and accused of acting as a Russian agent.

In all, one expert said, the way the story was published appears to showcase "a standard tactic in disinformation operations."

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Trumpworld flew into a frenzy Wednesday morning after the New York Post published what it described as a "smoking-gun email" showing Hunter Biden communicating with a Ukrainian official about meeting with his father, Joe Biden, when he was vice president.

The Post said that in one email in May 2014, the month after Hunter Biden joined the board of the Ukrainian natural-gas company Burisma Holdings, Vadym Pozharskyi, the third-ranking executive at Burisma, emailed him asking for "advice on how you could use your influence to convey a message" or "signal."

In another email on April 17, 2015, the Post said, Pozharskyi thanked Hunter Biden for "inviting me to DC and giving an opportunity to meet your father and spent some time together," adding, "It's really an honor and pleasure."

President Donald Trump's allies seized on the report as evidence that the Bidens were in bed with the Ukrainian government and that Hunter Biden took advantage of his



"NEWS: Biden lied when he denied speaking to his 'son [Hunter] about his overseas business dealings,'" tweeted Kellyanne Conway, the former White House counselor.

She said in another tweet that Hunter Biden joined the board "shortly after Obama put Joe Biden in charge of US relations with Ukraine." She added that the Post's report showed "Burisma's No. 3 exec, asking Hunter for 'advice on how you could use your INFLUENCE' on the company's behalf."

"Joe Biden is a stone cold corrupt liar," a tweet from the Trump War Room account said. In another tweet, it said that "Joe Biden thinks the American people are suckers."

Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley latched onto the story as well, tweeting: "Joe Biden using his office to benefit a Ukrainian oligarch after he said he didn't. He is going to need to answer questions about this."

But a closer examination of the Post's story raises several red flags.

Are the emails authentic? How were they uncovered? And how did the Post

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The most glaring questions center on whether the emails are authentic, how they were



The report said that in April 2017, an unidentified person dropped off a water-damaged MacBook Pro with the emails and other compromising material about Hunter Biden at an unidentified repair shop in Delaware, the Biden family's home state. The report said the repair shop's owner provided that information, but it did not give details on his identity.

A reverse image search of one of the photos in the story indicated that the shop's owner is a man named John Paul Mac Isaac, whose social-media activity suggests he is an avid Trump supporter. His shop, called [The Mac Shop](#), is at 21a Trolley Square in Wilmington. The Post also did not strip the metadata from photos included in the article, and a software engineer named [Russel Neiss](#) noted that the GPS information embedded in some of the images showed that the repair shop [was in the same area](#).

The owner of the repair shop said that he wasn't sure the laptop belonged to Hunter Biden but that the machine had a sticker from the Beau Biden Foundation, the report said.

The story went on to say the person who dropped off the water-damaged laptop "never paid for the service or retrieved it or a hard drive on which its contents were stored, according to the shop owner, who said he tried repeatedly to contact the client."

The shop's owner then contacted federal authorities about the laptop and the hard drive, the report said. The article also included a photo described as a federal court subpoena showing that the FBI seized the computer and the hard drive in December. It's unclear why the bureau subpoenaed the hardware after the repair shop's owner volunteered information about its existence to authorities.



Thomas Rid, a professor of strategic studies at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies who recently published a book called "Active Measures" that focuses on the history of disinformation, said that the way the purported emails surfaced in the first place was dubious.

"This here is highly suspicious behavior," [Rid tweeted](#) after the Post's story was published. "Especially when viewed in the context of a political campaign. Creative, anonymous, credibility-generating, somewhat plausible. Exactly how a professional would surface disinformation and potentially forgeries."

Rid added that the emails featured in the Post's story were published as images rather than in a file format, which "makes it harder to analyze and verify the files."

"Note that photos, which appear to look genuine, could be there simply to add credibility to forged emails surfaced along with the photos. This would be a standard tactic in disinformation operations," he wrote.



Isaac did not respond to multiple phone calls and text messages seeking comment. But he later confirmed [to several reporters](#) who tracked him down at his shop that he was the source of the story. Isaac also said Trump's impeachment was a "sham" and at one point cited the debunked right-wing conspiracy theory about the slain Democratic staffer Seth Rich.

He also couldn't get his facts straight about the timeline of events outlined in the Post's story for which he was the source. The Daily Beast reported that "throughout the interview, Mac Isaac switched back and forth from saying he reached out to law enforcement after viewing the files in the laptop to saying that it was actually the Federal Bureau of Investigation that contacted him."

"At one point, Mac Isaac claimed that he was emailing someone from the FBI about the laptop," The Daily Beast said. "At another point he claimed a special agent from the Baltimore office had contacted him after he alerted the FBI to the device's existence. At another point, he said the FBI reached out to him for 'help accessing his drive.'"

Rudy Giuliani and Steve Bannon resurface

Notably, the Post's report said, the repair shop's owner made a copy of the hard drive and turned it over to Robert Costello, a defense attorney who represents former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani, before giving the computer and the hard drive to the feds.



copy of the hard drive, Giuliani [met with a Ukrainian national named Anghel Derkach](#) to discuss efforts to obtain damaging information on Joe Biden before the 2020 election. At the time, the House of Representatives was also conducting an impeachment inquiry into Trump centered on his efforts to strongarm the Ukrainian government into launching politically motivated investigations targeting the Bidens. The US Treasury last month [sanctioned Derkach](#), saying he acted as a Russian agent and spread disinformation related to the election. [Politico reported](#) that Derkach had been circulating misleading and deceptively edited material targeting Joe Biden for nearly a year.

Late last month, the Post's story said, Steve Bannon told the outlet about the existence of the hard drive. Bannon, the former White House chief strategist who previously served as the Trump campaign's CEO and the head of the far-right website Breitbart News, was [arrested and charged over the summer with fraud](#) in connection with an online fundraising campaign.

The Post said Giuliani gave it a copy of the drive on Sunday, nearly a year after his lawyer was said to have been given a copy of it.

But The Wall Street Journal's Kevin Poulsen [noted on Twitter](#) that instead of publishing emails from the copy of the hard drive the Post said it's had since Sunday, it published PDFs of the emails that were compiled "by a third-party, Giuliani or someone else, over a year ago." The metadata that Poulsen tweeted indicated that the PDF of the May 2014 email was created on October 10, 2019, and that the PDF of the April 2015 email was produced on September 28, 2019.

Giuliani on Wednesday morning how long he'd had a copy of the hard drive, Giuliani



Lyin' Joe and we can talk."

The content of the emails

Then there are the emails themselves.

In the alleged April 2015 email, Pozharskyi thanked Hunter Biden for inviting him to Washington, DC, to meet with Joe Biden. But there's no evidence Pozharskyi actually met the former vice president.

The Post then laid out an apparently explosive timeline: Less than eight months after Pozharskyi thanked Hunter Biden for the introduction, Joe Biden pressed the Ukrainian government to oust the prosecutor-general Viktor Shokin by "threatening to withhold a \$1 billion US loan guarantee during a December 2015 trip" to Kyiv.

"I looked at them and said: I'm leaving in six hours. If the prosecutor is not fired, you're not getting the money," Joe Biden [said in a speech](#) to the Council on Foreign Relations in 2018. "Well, son of a bitch. He got fired."



The Post highlighted that when he was fired, Shokin had said that he had "specific plans" to investigate Burisma that "included interrogations and other crime-investigation procedures into all members of the executive board, including Hunter Biden."

The implication — which Trump, Giuliani, and their allies in the right-wing media have repeatedly floated — is that Joe Biden had Shokin fired to stymie a criminal investigation into Burisma Holdings, whose board Hunter Biden was on at the time.

However, [as Business Insider reported last year](#), there's a significant issue with that theory.

Government officials and Ukrainian anticorruption advocates said Shokin had hampered the investigation into Burisma long before Joe Biden even stepped into the picture, [The Wall Street Journal reported](#).

In other words, Biden was doing the opposite of what Trump and Giuliani have implied: He was trying to oust a prosecutor who was slow-walking the investigation into Burisma, rather than actively targeting the company.

Western diplomats have also said Shokin effectively shut down one such investigation into Burisma's founder in the UK by refusing to cooperate with authorities. [And Bloomberg reported](#) that the Burisma investigation was largely dormant when Biden called for Shokin to be fired.



[released last month](#) by two Republican Senate chairmen about the details of Hunter Biden's work in Ukraine.

Regardless, the conservative media and political sphere touted the Post's story on Wednesday as incontrovertible evidence that the president was right when he accused Biden of catering to corrupt Ukrainian interests to protect his son.

The Biden campaign said in a statement that it "reviewed Joe Biden's official schedules from the time and no meeting, as alleged by the New York Post, ever took place."

The campaign's statement continued: "The New York Post never asked the Biden campaign about the critical elements of this story. They certainly never raised that Rudy Giuliani — whose discredited conspiracy theories and alliance with figures connected to Russian intelligence have been widely reported — claimed to have such materials."

The story gained little traction among more reputable sources, and Facebook said shortly after the article was published that it would [slow its spread](#) on the platform until third-party fact-checkers could verify its authenticity.



"While I will intentionally not link to the New York Post, I want be clear that this story is eligible to be fact checked by Facebook's third-party fact checking partners," [tweeted Andy Stone](#), a Facebook representative. "In the meantime, we are reducing its distribution on our platform."

[Twitter followed suit](#) and said it would limit the spread of the story on its platform by blocking users from linking to the Post's report, citing company rules against posting hacked material.

J.K. Trotter contributed reporting.

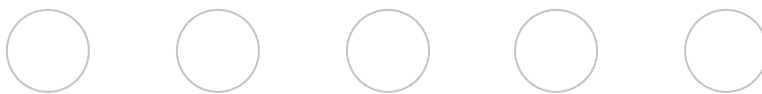
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