

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

# Why BuzzFeed News Published the Dossier

By Ben Smith

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Since BuzzFeed News published a 35-page dossier of unverified allegations about ties between President Donald J. Trump and Russia, I've heard a chorus of criticism from journalists who say we abdicated our role as gatekeeper, and a chorus of thanks from readers who want to be trusted to judge dubious documents.

BuzzFeed News decided to publish the dossier, with appropriate context and caveats, for two related reasons, and only after we had spent weeks with reporters in the United States and Europe trying to confirm or disprove specific claims.

First, the documents were in wide circulation among top intelligence and elected officials and news organizations. They were being fought over — and acted on — at the highest levels of power. But the rest of the country was getting only the occasional glimpse of those battles, never the source documents themselves.

"The only party to this whole affair that didn't know about it, it seems, was the public," as the newspaper editor Seth Lipsky wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*.

Second, the dossier's contents spilled into view last week when CNN broke the news that both President Obama and Mr. Trump had received an intelligence briefing that included a synopsis of the document, whose allegations CNN summarized as "compromising personal and financial information about Mr. Trump."

We at BuzzFeed News had, of course, considered that someone else would post the dossier, and planned in that case to follow by adding what we knew on it. We hadn't anticipated what actually happened: a bombshell report that described the document, while the document itself remained secret.

That halfway position ran contrary to how we think of our compact with our audience: You trust us to give you the full story; we trust you to reckon with a messy, sometimes uncertain reality. And with other news organizations already trumpeting the dossier's central allegation — that the Trump campaign maintained secret ties to the Russian leadership — our decision to publish it in full rapidly advanced the story.

The public soon learned the tale of the former spy who compiled the dossier and his earnest efforts to publicize it; of the F.B.I.'s knowledge of it before the election; and of Senator John McCain's also passing it to the F.B.I. in December. BuzzFeed News reported that foreign intelligence agencies are investigating its allegations. Whether reporters from Washington to Budapest succeed in verifying its claims or otherwise does not diminish the compelling public interest in the story — or the presumptive right of the public, and not just a Beltway elite, to see the document.

The incoming administration dismissed CNN and BuzzFeed News's report as "fake news," a term now used by partisans and cynics to discredit reporting they don't like. We should have seen that coming. BuzzFeed News's reporting helped popularize the term to describe a new breed of fraudsters. But the dossier is a real document that has been influencing senior officials, lawmakers, intelligence agencies and, potentially, the new commander in chief. Nobody should fall for this attempt to turn the press on itself by making a reasonable debate about transparency into a media civil war.

News organizations should instead consider this reality: Our audience inhabits a complex, polluted information environment; our role is to help them navigate it — not to pretend it doesn't exist. The need to show our work and earn trust has never been more important, since once reliable official sources are peddling "alternative facts" — as the White House press secretary did Saturday.

If I were to design a media ecosystem from scratch, it wouldn't be this one. And I certainly did not anticipate this environment in the utopian, early days of digital journalism 15 years ago. The web was supposed to allow powerful media organizations to build trust and connections to their audience by sharing their knowledge and sources. The audience could hold power to account. At its best, that kind of transparency has been powerful.

Today, we can see a dystopian path clearly, too. Every Facebook user encounters a profusion of sources and claims. If the presidential campaign did nothing else, it gave Americans reason to read carefully, exercise judgment and view with skepticism what they heard — even from the most powerful man in the nation.

There is an instinct, easy to understand, to turn away from this chaos. Some legacy media organizations have reacted to the new challenges by retreating to traditional reporting procedures of ostentatious, and sometimes false, balance and voice-of-God authority. Their theory is that the media can confront power by engaging in a theater of traditional journalism and proving their purity and incorruptibility — in short, hew to the same rules that got them steamrolled in 2016.

This retreat is dangerous. Instead, we need to develop new rules that adhere to the core values of honesty and respect for our audience. That means debunking falsehoods, and being transparent with readers about our process of reporting. Sometimes, it means publishing unverified information in a transparent way that informs our users of its provenance, its impact and why we trust or

distrust it.

Of course, there are lines to be drawn, and we draw them every day. BuzzFeed News receives false tips that lead to dead ends we do not publish. But the Trump dossier was legitimate news: a document that was already influencing decision makers at the very highest levels. In a democracy, the justification for shielding the public from something like that must be overwhelming. The instinct to suppress news of this significance is precisely the wrong one for journalism in 2017.