How Foreign Hackers Influenced the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

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The recent U.S. presidential election was clearly a shocker, with Donald Trump outperforming all odds in order to become the next leader of the nation. In the aftermath, many people (especially on the losing side) cried foul, claiming that the election had been unduly influenced by foreign hackers. The purpose of the present essay is to consider this allegation and the extent to which hackers did in fact affect the outcome of the election. The essay will be organized into three main parts. The first part will consist of an overview of what actually happened. The second part will then proceed to a consideration of what did *not* happen. Finally, the third part will reach the conclusion that although foreign hackers did perhaps influence the election, they were but one influence among many, and that the influence should in no way be construed to mean that the election itself was therefore illegitimate. This essay will primarily rely on news sources, given how recent the events under consideration are.

**What Happened with the Foreign Hackers**

On the basis of the available facts, what is clear is that the e-mails of John Podesta, the chairman of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, were in fact hacked by some agent. Although there is no hard, incontrovertible evidence for the claim, the intelligence community and other security professionals and analysts generally believe with a high degree of confidence that these agents were Russian, possibly or even probably backed by the Kremlin (Gilsinan & Calamur, 2017). There is no doubt about the question that a whole trove of Podesta's e-mails were hacked and made public, and that this was done with an eye toward weakening Clinton’s campaign and strengthening Trump's campaign. In short, it would be impossible by now to sanely argue that the hacks never happened, that Russia had nothing to do with it, or that the basic purpose of the hacks was to hurt Clinton's presidential aspirations.

Moreover, this foreign hacking likely did exert a significant influence on the presidential election cycle. Sharockman (2016), for example, has confirmed that WikiLeaks made the hacked Podesta e-mails public shortly after the video featuring Trump's unsavory comments of fame and women came to light. The only way to interpret this sequence of events is that WikiLeaks, potentially working in collusion with the hackers (who were in all likelihood Russian) and possibly even the Trump campaign itself, was attempting to influence the news cycle and frame the narrative regarding the American presidential election. When news of the Access Hollywood video broke, it was more or less assumed on all sides that Trump was done for; This obviously proved not to the be the case; and at least part of why he was able to bounce back likely had to do with the strategic timing of the Podesta e-mail dump.

These e-mails were especially harmful to Clinton's campaign because they confirmed some of the worst suspicions and stereotypes that many voters had about her. For example, Debbie Wasserman Schultz was the chairwoman of the Democratic National Committee; and the leaked e-mails made it clear that collusion had occurred between Schultz and the Clinton campaign during the Democratic primaries in order to ensure that Clinton and not her rival Bernie Sanders would win the party's presidential nomination. After Schultz submitted her resignation, Donna Brazile took over the post, but it is not clear that she was ethically any better: the leaked e-mails strongly imply that Brazile not only actively favored Clinton over Sanders but that she even leaked debate questions to the Clinton campaign in order to improve their candidate's performance (Detrow, 2016). The e-mails thus confirmed the general public opinion that Clinton is a consummate political insider, and that her rise to power and privilege has been consistently marked by the strong scent of near-scandal, even as she has always managed to technically stay on the right side of the law.

It is also worth remembering, of course, that Clinton was also under investigation for her use of a private e-mail server while serving as secretary of state under President Obama. Clinton apparently deleted an estimated 33,000 e-mails from her server before handing material over for investigation (Levine, 2016). The official explanation for this is that those e-mails were personal in nature and had nothing to do with the case itself. It is possible that this is true. However, one would have to be incredibly naive to assume at face value that there is nothing more to the whole truth than that. The leaked Podesta e-mails tended to remind the American public of why exactly she has often been seen as untrustworthy, and why there probably was more to the story about the deleted e-mails than what had been officially revealed. By turning the spotlight on Clinton's characteristic weaknesses at the same time that Trump's campaign had ultimately been dealt a deathblow, the foreign hacking of the Democratic National Committee probably did influence the election to at least some extent.

**What Did Not Happen with the Foreign Hacking**

From what has been discussed above, the implication should absolutely *not* be drawn that the "election was hacked." This is a very serious technical distinction that has to a large extent fallen by the wayside in the emotionally volatile aftermath of the election. As Harsanyi (2017) has put the matter: "The Russian hacking of Podesta's emails is not an election stolen. It is a blatant attempt at interfering in American politics, and should be condemned by everyone" (para. 8). If Russia or some other stakeholder who is hostile to American interests is attempting to influence American politics, then this is very disconcerting, and it is clearly an issue that must be addressed on its own terms. It would be absurd, however, to suggest that this issue is synonymous with the technical issue of actually hacking an election, which would undermine the legitimacy of the democratic process itself.

Let us be clear here. Literally, to "hack an election" would mean to actually go into the hardware and software that control voter tallies and change the numbers in such a way that they no longer reflect the actual results but rather the hackers' own personal preferences. If this was the actual case, it would be a full-fledged crisis for any democratic society. Fortunately, however, it is virtually impossible to hack an American presidential election, even at the strictly logistical level. As Kopan (2016) has reported: "The American election system is decentralized by design, with state, county and local governments all managing voting. Even though many precincts use voting machines, none are connected to the Internet, nor are they connected to each other" (para. 5). How could a hacker possibly get into a machine that is not even hooked up to the Internet? The simple answer is that he can't. The American voting process is set up in such a way that it does not even meet the necessary conditions for being hackable, so to speak.

The conclusion could thus be drawn that when people speak of the election having been hacked, they are at best making use of a kind of dangerous slang. They are suggesting that the election was not literally hacked but rather figuratively hacked, in that it was influenced by undue events. It is worth noting, though, that "figuratively hacked" is not actually a common concept, which suggests that these people are simply making things up as they go. The most obvious explanation is that the victory of Trump proved to be rather traumatic for many liberals and Clinton supporters. Thus, there must be some kind of explanation as to why he did not "really" win fair and square. In this sense, allegations of election hacking are on par with irrational attacks on the Electoral College itself: both must be seen less as statements bout objective reality than as emotional coping mechanisms utilized by people who can't handle the fact that Trump actually won.

It is now worth turning to the notion that collusion between Trump and Vladimir Putin was behind the foreign hacking of the DNC. Apart from any evidence on the matter, this perception has been strongly fed by the genuinely bizarre fact that Trump has apparently been unwilling to say one bad thing about Putin—a point that is accentuated by the fact that he clearly doesn't hold back when it comes to just about anyone else. This naturally leads to speculations about why exactly Trump is so particularly chummy with this one man. One possible explanation is that there is in actual alliance of mutual interests between Trump and Putin; and another is that Trump is some important way compromised by Putin. Given that the hackers were most likely Russian, and given that Trump never says a bad thing about Putin, it is easy enough to see how one could arrive at the conclusion that there existed (and may continue to exist) actual collusion between Trump and Putin. This perception is reinforced by intermittent news of associates of Trump meeting with Russian agents.

However, it is worth noting that these reports may be somewhat misleading, especially considering their lack of context. Trump and his social circle are fabulously rich and have interests scattered across the globe—a fact that was already well-known when people decided to vote for him in the first place. As of the present time, there would seem to be no evidence that links Trump's presidential campaign to the Kremlin itself in a direct way. Moreover, it is quite unlikely that even the foreign hackers fully expected Trump to win the election (2017). It is easy to already forget that almost no sane person could have imagined him emerging victorious. What is much more likely is that the foreign hackers, possibly backed by the Kremlin, wanted to hurt Clinton's public image, so that she would be weakened upon rising to the presidency. If the hacking did in fact influence the election, then it is very plausible that this would be a case of a plan that went too well for its own good.

**Considered Conclusion**

Given everything that has been written above, the considered conclusion that can now be drawn is that while foreign hackers surely did influence the recent American presidential election, it would be an absurd and dangerous abuse of language to assert that the election itself was technically hacked. What is clear, is that the leak of the Podesta e-mails hurt Clinton's campaign, both because they confirmed the suspicions many Americans already had of her and because it affected the news cycle at a crucial moment in a way that was favorable to Trump. However, it is not clear how this is not just a matter of *politics as usual.* The fact is that the leaked e-mails were not fabricated or false. Rather, they simply consisted of actual information that the voting public was not supposed to see. It is difficult to see how this is any different than any of the other myriad scandals that regularly afflict campaigning politicians.

The best way to prepare for the next election would likely be to simply just pick better candidates. It is true that the foreign hacking may have significantly hurt Clinton; however, this was only possible in the first place because she was such a weak candidate. Likewise, if one is worried about collusion between the American president and foreign interests, then one should probably not vote for a man who refuses to release his tax returns and has business interests that are so vast and varied that they are enough to make the average analyst dizzy. With two presidential candidates who were both this deeply flawed at the ethical level, it is difficult to see how the American people could have really won, either way. Foreign hacking of e-mails would clearly not be a problem if the next candidates for the American presidency were actually honorable people who did not have so many skeletons in their closets, and who would have relatively little to fear from having their actual campaign communications exposed to the eyes of the American public.

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