

Trump-Russia 2.0: Dossier-Tied Firm Pitching Journalists Daily on 'Collusion'

https://www.realclearinvestigations.com/articles/2019/03/11/trump-russia_20_dossier-tied_firm_sending_dc_journalists_daily_collusion_briefings.html

The effort has successfully placed a series of questionable stories alleging secret back channels and meetings between Trump associates and Russian spies, while influencing related investigations and reports from Congress.

The operation's nerve center is a Washington-based nonprofit called The Democracy Integrity Project, or TDIP. Among other activities, it pumps out daily "research" briefings to prominent Washington journalists, as well as congressional staffers, to keep the Russia "collusion" narrative alive.



Glenn R. Simpson, Fusion GPS co-founder now working for an anti-Trump research firm run by Daniel J. Jones, top photo.

AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais

Top Image: Screen grab, YouTube/Rules of War Blog

TDIP is led by Daniel J. Jones, a former FBI investigator, Clinton administration volunteer and top staffer to California Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein. It employs the key opposition-research figures behind the salacious and unverified dossier: Fusion GPS co-founder

Glenn Simpson and ex-British intelligence officer Christopher Steele. Its financial backers include the actor/director Rob Reiner and billionaire activist George Soros.

The project's work has been largely shrouded in mystery. But a months-long examination by RealClearInvestigations, drawn from documents and more than a dozen interviews, found that the organization is running an elaborate media-influence operation that includes driving and shaping daily coverage of the Russia collusion theory, as well as pushing stories about Trump in the national media that attempt to tie the president or his associates to the Kremlin.

The group also feeds information to FBI and congressional investigators, and then tells reporters that authorities are investigating those leads. The tactic adds credibility to TDIP's pitches, luring big media outlets to bite on stories. It mirrors the strategy federal authorities themselves deployed to secure FISA warrants to spy on the Trump campaign: citing published news reports of investigative details their informants had leaked to the media to bolster their wiretap requests.



Christopher Steele, ex-British intelligence officer and Trump-Russia dossier compiler now also working for Jones' operation.

Victoria Jones/PA via AP

Five days a week, TDIP emails a newsletter to influential Democrats and prominent Beltway journalists under the heading "TDIP Research" – which summarizes the latest "collusion" news, and offers "points of interest" to inspire fresh stories regarding President

Trump's alleged ties to Moscow.

Recipients of the TDIP reports include staffers at the New York Times and Washington Post and investigative reporters at BuzzFeed, ProPublica and McClatchy, as well as news producers at CNN and MSNBC, according to a source familiar with the project's email distribution list. Democratic aides on Capitol Hill also subscribe to the newsletter.

The briefings typically run several pages and include an "Executive Summary" and links to court documents and congressional testimony, letters and memos, as well as new articles and videos.

The Steele dossier and impeachment are common themes in the reports, which generally spin news events against Trump, copies of the newsletter obtained by RCI show. A March 13 TDIP bulletin, for instance, highlighted former Trump campaign chairman Paul Manafort's sentencing without informing readers that Special Counsel Robert Mueller closed the case without any collusion accusation against Manafort, who was punished for personal financial crimes.

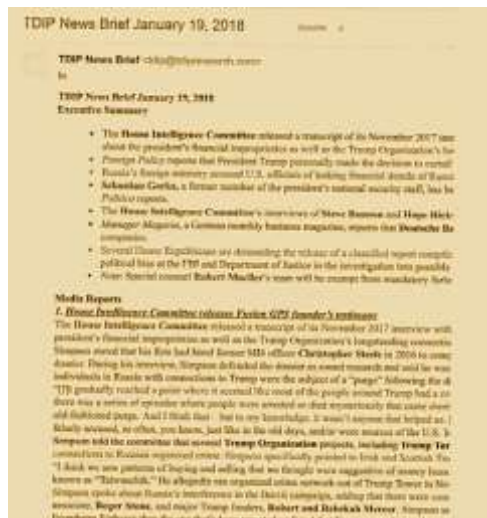
Part of a daily newsletter from The Democracy Integrity Project, or TDIP, blasted out to Beltway journalists and congressional staffers to keep the Russia "collusion" narrative alive (image enhanced for contrast).

Paul Sperry/RCInvestigations

A Feb. 12 briefing led with an NBC News exclusive report on the findings of the Senate Intelligence Committee's two-year Russia probe. But it misstated what the news was — that both Democrats and Republicans agreed with the conclusion that there was "no factual evidence of collusion" between the Trump campaign and Russia — claiming instead that Democrats "rejected" the conclusion.

"What's significant about them is they're totally one-sided," said a veteran reporter with a major newspaper who is plugged into the national security beat in Washington and insisted on anonymity. "It's really just another way of adding fuel to the fire of the whole Russia collusion thing."

Jones' project doesn't just spin the news. Its more ambitious goal is to make news by essentially continuing the Clinton-funded investigation into alleged Trump/Russia ties that began in 2016, and then sharing findings with news outlets, congressional investigators and federal agents.



Jones has hired Fusion GPS, the same Washington firm co-founded by former journalist-turned-opposition-researcher Simpson that was paid more than \$1 million by lawyers for the Hillary Clinton campaign to collect information damaging to Trump during the 2016 election.

Jones is also paying Steele, another anti-Trump partisan, to continue to dig up dirt on the president. Fusion GPS paid the former British intelligence officer \$168,000 to produce a series of anonymously sourced memos for Clinton accusing the Trump campaign of hatching an espionage plot with the Kremlin to hack Clinton campaign emails

and steal the election. The memos also claimed that the Kremlin held compromising material on Trump, including video of him carousing with prostitutes in Moscow. Three years of multiple federal investigations have failed to verify the accusations, which were nonetheless used by the FBI to obtain a secret court-approved wiretap on Trump campaign adviser Carter Page.

In a letter last year, Republican Sen. Chuck Grassley, then chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, suggested that the anti-Trump trio was responsible for spreading “inaccurate” information about the Russia investigation and the Trump campaign. “Mr. Jones stated he planned to push the information he obtained from Fusion and Steele to policymakers on Capitol Hill, the press and the FBI,” Grassley wrote Democratic Sen. Chris Coons, referring to an FBI interview with Jones.

Simpson and Steele have a history of feeding the FBI and Congress unsubstantiated allegations and rumors, sending investigators down rabbit holes. They have also planted several anti-Trump stories in the media that have proved unverifiable, unfounded, or just plain false.



Cleta Mitchell, who says a McClatchy article about her, the NRA and Russia was a "complete fabrication" pushed by Glenn Simpson of Fusion GPS.

AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais

These include a McClatchy newspapers story asserting that "NRA attorney Cleta Mitchell" warned during the 2016 campaign that Russians had infiltrated the NRA and were using it to launder illegal donations to Trump. Mitchell called the article a "complete fabrication," noting that she hadn't worked for the NRA in a decade and had no contact with it in 2016. She claims Simpson personally shopped the bogus story to McClatchy. Her allegation was bolstered by senior Justice Department official Bruce Ohr, who revealed in recently released closed-door congressional testimony that Simpson fed him the same rumor after the election and asked him to pass it on to his colleagues at the FBI.

Simpson also appears to have been the source behind another discredited McClatchy story about Trump attorney Michael Cohen traveling to Prague during the campaign to hatch a plot with Kremlin officials to hack Clinton campaign emails.

This account first appeared in the Steele dossier. But after Cohen offered his passport to disprove it, a new twist emerged: allegations that Special Counsel Robert Mueller had evidence that Cohen's phone pinged a cell tower near Prague at the time. After McClatchy bit on the sketchy tip — which was the lead item in TDIP's Jan. 2, 2019 newsletter to the Washington press corps — Mueller's office took the highly unusual step of issuing a statement warning other reporters off the story, an important detail TDIP ignored.



Michael Cohen, Donald Trump's former lawyer, with his attorney Lanny Davis, right. TDIP has pushed a discredited story that Cohen visited Prague to plot with the Kremlin.

AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite

Although the Cohen-in-Prague story appears to be fiction, TDIP keeps pushing it through its bulletins. Neither Simpson nor the two McClatchy reporters who wrote about it responded to requests seeking comment.

Jones has a long history himself of promoting conspiracy theories. He has personally placed anti-Trump news stories with media outlets after feeding related tips to the FBI.

For instance, he was a key source behind the now widely disputed story that Trump and the Russians were secretly communicating through a “back channel” system they allegedly set up between a Trump Tower server and Alfa-Bank, one of Russia's largest banks, which operates branches in New York, according to published reports. The foundation for the rumor was first laid by the Steele dossier, which claimed the bank, which it misspelled “Alpha,” had “illicit” ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Shortly thereafter, in the heat of the 2016 campaign, an attorney for the Clinton campaign law firm that commissioned the dossier research, Perkins Coie, passed the rumor about the server to the FBI, as well as to several media outlets.

“Computer scientists have apparently uncovered a covert server linking the Trump Organization to a Russian-based bank,” Hillary Clinton tweeted at the time.

The allegation received wide coverage in the press — until, that is, the New York Times reported that the FBI had checked it out and found it to be false. Alfa-Bank executives are now suing Simpson, who hired Steele, for libel.

Undaunted, Jones hired a larger team of computer scientists after the election to analyze web traffic between the Alfa-Bank and Trump Organization servers. And in a March 2017 meeting, he shared his expert team's findings with his former colleagues at the FBI. That same month, agents visited the offices of the Pennsylvania company that housed the Trump server. But their second investigation proved to be another dead end. It turned out that the sinister communications Jones claimed were flowing between the Trump server and Alfa-Bank were innocuous marketing emails. In other words, spam.



Daniel Jones has been in contact with investigators for Senate Intelligence Committee Vice Chairman Mark Warner, above. “Jones has been chumming out his own share of garbage stories,” said a GOP staffer.

AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana

Jones has also communicated with investigators for Sen. Mark Warner, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, hoping to spread more Trump-Russia conspiracy theories.

In a series of recently leaked March 2017 texts to a lawyer communicating with Warner, Jones boasted that he had planted several anti-Trump news articles, including a Reuters story about Russians allegedly investing more than \$100 million in Trump properties in Florida. He took credit for another article published by McClatchy alleging that the FBI was investigating whether Russians had used social media bots to spread stories by Breitbart News and other conservative outlets.

“Our team helped with this,” Jones wrote in one text that linked to the Reuters piece. He also texted a link to the McClatchy article. Other text messages revealed that Jones was in close contact with Sen. Warner himself and acted as the point of contact for Steele with Warner and his staff.

“Jones has been chumming out his own share of garbage stories,” a senior Republican legislative assistant said.



Ex-Trump campaign official Michael Caputo, left, blames Jones' "smear campaign" for \$125,000 in legal bills. At right, his attorney Dennis C. Vacco.

AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite

A former Trump campaign adviser blames Jones' “smear campaign” for his being targeted for investigation by congressional committees and racking up some \$125,000 in lawyer's bills.

“Dan has been raising and spending millions to confirm the unconfirmable — and of course, to keep all his old intel colleagues up-to-speed on what Fusion GPS and British and Russian spies have found,” former Trump aide Michael Caputo said. “Got to keep that Russia story in the news.”

Jones did not return phone calls or messages sent to his company’s email address seeking comment. But supporters, including U.S. Sens. Ron Wyden and the late John McCain, said they have known him to be thoughtful, careful and detail-oriented. Those views appear to be based on his less political work. His defenders often describe him as a human-rights advocate because of his years-long investigation into claims of post-9/11 CIA “torture” of terrorist detainees, and the 6,700-page report he wrote of his findings (still classified) as a staff analyst for the Senate Intelligence Committee. The report is said to fault both the Bush and Obama administrations for aiding the CIA in covering up human-rights abuses.

Even as it pushes the collusion theories, TDIP partnered with a cybersecurity firm, New Knowledge, funded by LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman, which used social media strategies employed by Russians to influence the 2016 campaign to defeat GOP candidates for Congress during last year’s midterm elections.



Reid Hoffman, LinkedIn co-founder, who funded New Knowledge, a cybersecurity firm implicated in election meddling. It also worked with The Democracy Integrity Project.

AP Photo/Noah Berger

New Knowledge publicly stated it was tracking Russian social-media disinformation networks during the 2018 campaign. In fact, it was secretly involved in its own disinformation campaign to influence the outcome of the 2017 Alabama Senate special election. New Knowledge operatives created thousands of fake Russian Twitter accounts programmed to follow GOP candidate Roy Moore to make it appear he was backed by Moscow.

The scheme worked: a number of media stories reported Moore was being supported by Russians. Only, it was a high-tech frame-up. Most elections experts have concluded this fake Russian disinformation campaign did not affect the outcome of the race, which Moore lost largely because of allegations of sexual misconduct.

Hoffman maintains he didn't know what his money was being used for. In 2016, the Silicon Valley billionaire gave the Hillary Victory Fund more than \$500,000, FEC records show.

After media reports exposed the false-flag operation several weeks later, a website set up by TDIP and New Knowledge during the 2018 campaign was taken down. Screenshots of the site – www.Disinfo2018.com – clearly show their relationship, however. The top of the “About Us” page stated, “Midterms Disinformation Dashboard: New Knowledge & TDIP.” About halfway down, the page elaborated: “New Knowledge and The Democracy Integrity Project have created a dashboard containing up-to-the-hour summary statistics from these [supposedly Russian Facebook and Twitter] accounts, so that citizens can be aware of the foreign propaganda efforts aimed at American voters as we approach our midterm elections in November.”

Around the same time, a TDIP daily e-bulletin sang the praises of its partner New Knowledge, noting it had prior experience studying Russian influence operations and linking to a flattering piece about one of its founders.



New Knowledge research director Renee DiResta testifying last year before a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on foreign influence operations. She worked with Daniel Jones on a report positing that “Russian influence networks” have conspired with “domestic right-wing disinformation networks,” including Fox News and others, to suppress Democrat voter turnout.

AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta

Jones had personally promoted New Knowledge on his Twitter account. He also worked with the outfit's director of research, Renee DiResta -- an active Democrat who gave the maximum individual donation amount to Clinton's 2016 campaign and whose bio says she advised the Obama administration on “hate speech” and “right-wing extremism” and that she has served as a “technical adviser” to Warner, who helped the Senate's investigation into the 2016 election. (In spite of her bias, DiResta actively polices social media content and “flags” accounts, as well as followers and messages, she suspects are tied to fake Russian “bots” for Facebook and Twitter, which in turn opt to ban the accounts based on her information, according to testimony she gave last year to Warner's committee.)

Jones previously enlisted DiResta, who did not respond to interview requests, along with other cyber experts to examine the Alfa-Bank/Trump Tower data, a project that was coordinated with Democrats on the Senate intelligence panel. Jones used to work for the Democratic side of the committee.

DiResta and New Knowledge also collaborated with Jones on a report on Russian disinformation that was released by the committee in December. The report claimed that a Russian social-media plot allegedly to help elect Trump in 2016 was worse than thought, and it warned that the political trolling never stopped — and may have even influenced Senate voting on the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh.

The report even posited that “Russian influence networks” have conspired with “domestic right-wing disinformation networks,” allegedly including Fox News, Breitbart News, The Hill and the Daily Caller, to suppress Democrat voter turnout to help Trump and the GOP candidates he endorses.



George Soros has donated at least \$1 million to The Democracy Integrity Project.
Olivier Hoslet/Pool Photo via AP, File

Upon its release, Warner billed the report as a “bombshell.” It was widely covered by CNN and other major media. A former colleague of Simpson’s said that Jones “brokered the New Knowledge work” with the Senate Intelligence Committee.

“Dan Jones does more than just send out these briefs,” said the well-placed source. “He’s working with the FBI and [the] Senate Intelligence [Committee].”

The Democracy Integrity Project can be traced back at least to December 2016, when Simpson and Jones made trips to California to raise money for their joint anti-Trump project. “They started soliciting donors and assembling their team for a post-election operation in December 2016,” said a former Simpson colleague who requested anonymity.

Jones incorporated TDIP just 11 days after Trump took office in January 2017, and registered it as a 501(c)(4) nonprofit several months later. It enjoys that tax-exempt status because the group claimed in its mission statement to the IRS to be “non-partisan” and concerned only with protecting the integrity of elections from interference from foreign adversaries like Russia.

By filing under that tax-exempt status, the organization does not have to publicly disclose its donors. Its latest IRS filing shows reported income of more than \$9 million and assets of more than \$1.6 million.



Rob Reiner, co-star of 1970s TV sitcom "All in the Family" and director of acclaimed 1984 rock mockumentary "This Is Spinal Tap," is now a supporter of The Democracy Integrity Project and calls for President Trump's impeachment.

AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

In addition to Soros, who has donated at least \$1 million, liberal Hollywood activist Reiner also backs the project, according to the former Simpson colleague with direct knowledge of discussions with Reiner. In 2017, Reiner started the Committee to Investigate Russia with James Clapper and several other former Obama officials. Reiner has called for Trump’s impeachment, arguing repeatedly that the president has committed “treason against the United States.”

Reiner’s office declined a request to discuss the extent of his financial contributions to the project. “Sorry, Rob is not available,” his executive assistant, Tricia Owen, told RCI.

A New York-based nonprofit linked to the family of billionaire Democratic activist Tom Steyer has donated \$2.1 million to TDIP, [according to the Daily Caller](#). Steyer, who has hired Fusion GPS to conduct investigations in the past, has also demanded Trump's ouster over Russia.

Soros and the Steyer-tied benefactor accounted for roughly a third of TDIP's total 2017 revenues.

And social media titans including the founders of Facebook, Twitter and Google are indirectly funding the project through donations funneled through a Silicon Valley foundation, [the Daily Caller also reported](#). Advance Democracy Inc., a sister organization founded by Jones sharing the same Northern Virginia address as TDIP, received at least \$500,000 from the foundation last year.

In tax filings, Jones lists a McLean, Va., address for TDIP, but a visit to the location reveals the office is occupied by a small independent accounting firm that says it merely handles TDIP's books. Jones also keeps an office near FBI headquarters in Washington.

The 43-year-old Jones is an enigmatic figure who shies away from TV appearances and plays a largely behind-the-scenes role shaping investigations and influencing Washington politics.

After teaching and recruiting for Clinton's AmeriCorps program from 1998 to 2001, he worked for the FBI for four years as an analyst providing "strategic guidance and tactical support to complex international investigations," according to a December 2015 email sent to Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta by former Democratic Sen. Tom Daschle.

In 2007, Jones joined the Democratic staff of the Senate Intelligence Committee, where he served as a senior analyst and "led many of the committee's investigations," he boasted in a 2018 Washington Post op-ed he wrote with former Democratic Sen. Jay Rockefeller.

While on the Senate intelligence panel, Jones worked directly for Sen. Feinstein, who chaired the committee at the time and is still a member. Jones and Feinstein apparently developed a close bond over the nine years he worked there. In a rare honor, Feinstein took to the Senate floor to praise her aide the day before he stepped down from the committee in December 2015, citing his "indefatigable work."



Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley confers with the top Democrat on the panel, Sen. Dianne Feinstein. She clashed with Grassley over her leak of Glenn Simpson's testimony. As a result of that leak, testimony by future witnesses such as Christopher Steele may be forever tainted, GOP staffers say.

AP Photo/Manuel Balce Ceneta

Now the top Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee, Feinstein last year unilaterally released a 300-page transcript of the closed-door testimony of Jones' partner, Simpson of Fusion GPS, over the objections of then-chairman Grassley, who accused Feinstein of violating committee precedent and trying to undermine the panel's investigation of the dossier. Thanks to Feinstein's leak, which

is something Simpson requested, the testimony offered by future witnesses such as Steele may be forever tainted, Republican staffers say.

TDIP sent out a briefing at the time that was quick to note that in his testimony, “Simpson defended the dossier as sound research.”

Feinstein did not notify Grassley before giving the transcript to the media; the chairman was blindsided. In an indication that she coordinated the leak with Simpson, Feinstein redacted the names of all Fusion GPS employees mentioned in the transcript, even though such information is not classified and can be found online. She also did not disclose to her Republican counterparts on the committee that a former top staffer of hers — Jones — was working with Simpson at the time.

Though Jones is reported to have begun his opposition research project after Trump took office, Senate Judiciary Committee investigators suspect he may also have been involved in the Clinton campaign’s 2016 efforts to create the dossier and push its allegations to the FBI and media. The FBI used the unverified political document as a basis for securing secret wiretaps on Trump campaign figures.

Records show Jones founded a private investigative firm, Penn Quarter Group, in April 2016 – the same month the Clinton campaign hired Fusion. Throughout the 2016 campaign, Jones worked for Democratic lobbyist Daschle, who endorsed Clinton and was close to Podesta. The Senate Judiciary Committee has asked Jones for all communications he and his organizations have had with federal officials at the FBI and the departments of Justice and State from March 2016 to January 2017. Jones was also being eyed as a witness by House investigators before Democrats recently took control of the House.



Dafna H. Rand, a former aide to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Obama recruited for TDIP’s board.

Screen grab, YouTube/Center for a New American Security

In early 2017, as he launched TDIP to continue investigating Trump, Jones recruited a former Senate Intelligence Committee colleague, Dafna H. Rand, to serve on his board, according to incorporation papers. A Democrat, Rand had also worked as a top aide to former Secretary Clinton at the State Department. Before that, she served in the White House as a national security adviser to President Obama.

Rand is now vice president of Mercy Corps, a humanitarian relief organization that assists Syrian, Yemeni and other Muslim refugees, and lobbies against Trump’s recent restrictions on immigration from those countries. Rand did not respond to requests for an interview.

Another TDIP board member, Adam Kaufmann, is a former New York prosecutor who has worked with Fusion GPS. Also a Democrat, Kaufmann was recently quoted in the New York Times alleging that Trump’s financial dealings were criminal.

While Kaufmann did not respond to requests for comment, RealClearInvestigations has learned that he worked on the same FIFA corruption case as dossier author Steele, who in 2010 provided information to the FBI that led to the indictment of officials for the world soccer governing body.

FBI veterans say it is strange for an ex-FBI employee such as Jones to privately run a parallel counterintelligence investigation on any subject, least of all on the president.

“It’s not common that a former FBI analyst and congressional investigator would be doing a private, parallel investigation, but he’s apparently an enterprising guy,” said former FBI agent and lawyer Mark Wauck, who suspects Jones is motivated by partisanship.

Longtime observers of the Washington political scene are curious how Jones has for years been able to escape serious scrutiny while running a political influence operation that works closely with national media, federal law enforcement and congressional investigators. With access to a multimillion-dollar war chest, they say he could continue to push the anti-Trump Russia collusion narrative long past the Mueller report or even the 2020 presidential election.

Caputo, the former Trump aide, wants an investigation of Jones: “I want to know who Dan Jones is talking to across the investigations – from the FBI to the Southern District of New York to the [Special Counsel’s Office] to the Department of Justice, to Congress.”

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