New York Times publishes new “revelations” on North Korea

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20 January 2015

The *New York Times* on Monday published a new piece of propaganda provided by the US military-intelligence apparatus. The lengthy, front-page article was bylined David E. Sanger and Martin Fackler, but the headline testifies to the actual authorship: “NSA Breached North Korean Networks Before Sony Attack, Officials Say.”

At more than 2,000 words, the “officials” had a lot to say. This attribution is repeated throughout the article, with none of the officials actually named or quoted on the record.

Paragraph one cites “American officials;” paragraph two, “former United States and foreign officials;” paragraph three, “officials;” paragraph four, “officials and experts.” Paragraph six cites both unnamed “Obama aides” and “one senior American military official.”

This is not journalism, but stenography. Sanger, the main Washington correspondent for the *Times*, takes dictation from the US government and the result appears on the front page of the most important US daily newspaper, driving the coverage of the television networks and the bulk of the daily press and exerting influence on American public opinion. (NBC News, for example, reported the *Times* article Monday night as unquestioned fact).

The article ends where actual, critical reporting would begin. Who are these unnamed officials? Why should they be believed? What independent, objective evidence supports their claims? What are their motives in supplying the information alleged in the *Times* account? What US government policies do they seek to promote? What policies, either of the US government or foreign governments, do they seek to block?

The article does not pose these questions, let alone answer them, because the *Times* functions as a government-sanctioned purveyor of what the US military-intelligence apparatus wants to inject into the daily newsfeed.

There is no reason to believe any of the major facts asserted in the Sanger-Fackler opus. They are not verified independently, but simply represent assertions of the unnamed high US officials who spoke with the *Times*. Among these unsupported assertions:

* North Korea’s intelligence service, the Reconnaissance General Bureau, operates a secret hacking unit, called Bureau 121, with a large outpost in China.

* The US government has placed malware on computer networks used by this hacking unit, enabling it to learn about a North Korean attack on the Sony Pictures computer network as it was happening.

* The US government operates “beacons” that allow it to map the computer networks of targeted countries, including North Korea, Iran and China, for potential cyber attack.

* US intelligence agencies saw the initial “spear-phishing” attacks on Sony, but “couldn’t really understand the severity” of the effort to penetrate and take over the company’s network.

These “facts” are not only unproven, they raise new questions. If the US government was watching the North Korean attack on Sony, why didn’t it notify the company or help it fight off the attack? Was the Seth Rogen film, *The Interview*, a deliberate effort to “light up” North Korean networks and strengthen US surveillance? (Rogen has said he made the film in consultation with US intelligence operatives.)

Critical scrutiny suggests two motives for the *Times* report. In the face of mounting skepticism from professional IT security consultants about US government claims that it has evidence of North Korean

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responsibility for the hacking attack on Sony Pictures, the article asserts that the US government was certain because it had itself hacked into the North Korean cyberwarfare unit.

In addition, US officials want to direct attention to China's role as the principal connector of North Korea to the Internet, and to send a public warning to China that the US possesses technical assets that can be used to take down targets in China if Beijing does not cooperate sufficiently with the anti-North Korea campaign.

It is, of course, quite possible that the NSA has hacked into North Korean systems. The US spy agency targets every communication in every country, as whistleblower Edward Snowden has revealed in some detail.

There is an obvious double standard here: while Snowden is vilified and persecuted by the US government for telling the truth about illegal US spying, the *Times* report "exposes" a top-secret operation only when it is asked to do so by the CIA and NSA.

The remainder of the article is based on Fackler's interviews about the North Korean cyberwarfare effort with two supposed defectors, Jang Sae-yul, who left the country in 2007, and Kim Heung-kwang, who apparently defected even earlier, although no date is given.

There are two observations to be made here. First, the two men clearly work under the protection of South Korean and American intelligence agencies and would be made available for interviews with the *Times* only if it served the interests of these agencies. Second, neither man could have any knowledge of the hacking attack on Sony, which took place seven years after Jang fled the North.

The report on supposed US hacking of North Korea is only the latest instance of the *Times* being used to disseminate dubious information that appears coordinated with a major US foreign policy initiative, going back to the notorious reports of Judith Miller in 2002, which provided "evidence" of Saddam Hussein's program to build a nuclear bomb, helping to support the Bush administration's campaign for the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

In September 2013, the *Times* spearheaded a media campaign in support of planned US air strikes on the Assad regime in Syria with a lengthy report supposedly proving that only Assad's forces could have fired a nerve gas shell against Syrian rebels in the suburbs of Damascus (see: New York Times on Syria: All the propaganda fit to print). A subsequent investigation by Seymour Hersh found convincing evidence that the rebels had staged the attack themselves to provide a pretext for US intervention.

Last April, the *Times* was compelled to backpedal from a report highlighting photos that supposedly proved Russian troops were operating in eastern Ukraine, where pro-Russian militia had rebelled against the government installed in Kiev by an ultra-right coup backed by the US and Germany (see: New York Times tries to whitewash publication of faked Ukraine photos).

A genuine journalist like Seymour Hersh makes extensive use of confidential sources. But unlike the *Times*, Hersh quotes government officials giving evidence against their own government, sources who must be protected against retaliation.

The *Times* quotes government officials who are tasked with getting the official story into the press, and are kept anonymous to keep the public in the dark about the transmission belt from Langley and Ft. Meade to 42nd Street in New York City.

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