Sexual assault accusations used to oust leader at Tor Project

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Jacob Appelbaum, a computer security specialist who has until recently been a core member of the Tor Project, was forced to step down from the project following a series of sexual misconduct accusations.

In a June 6 statement, Appelbaum said, “In the past few days, a calculated and targeted attack has been launched to spread vicious and spurious allegations against me. Given the way these accusations have been handled, I had little choice but to resign from my position as an advocate at the Tor Project… I want to be clear: the accusations of criminal sexual misconduct against me are entirely false.”

Tor is an acronym for “The Onion Router,” and is a network and tool for anonymizing one’s internet traffic. It has routinely been the target of attacks by the FBI and NSA. Slides leaked by NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013 reveal frustration on the part of US intelligence agencies, with one partially redacted slide reading, “Tor Stinks… We will never be able to de-anonymize all Tor users all the time.”

Appelbaum, who previously worked with WikiLeaks, has regularly spoken against state surveillance and censorship. After WikiLeaks published the Iraq War Logs in 2010, Applebaum was detained at the airport in Seattle for several hours and denied access to a lawyer.

Appelbaum has also had contact with Snowden and accepted an award from Transparency International on Snowden’s behalf, giving a speech with notes Snowden gave him personally. He was the spokesperson and public face of the Tor Project up until his ouster.

The rape allegations themselves are extremely dubious. What can best be described as a character assassination site was published shortly before the accusations became public. It is filled with stories detailing the abuses suffered by his alleged victims and pictures of Appelbaum looking vaguely sinister. Of the stories published, only a few constitute sexual assault, let alone rape. The rest are anecdotes or opinions portraying him as brutish, abusive and manipulative.

Half of the stories end by editorializing about how Appelbaum has great power and is a bully, due either to his own malicious personality or to his semi-celebrity status in the hacker community. These stories invariably end by pleading for action against him or by hailing the present smear campaign.

Those leveling charges are silent on the fact that Applebaum has been systematically spied on by the most powerful state in the world and legally advised against returning to the US. Appelbaum is made out to be a powerful figure himself and the truly powerful are left uncriticized.

Death threats have been brought against Appelbaum via a twitter account by the name of “VictimsOfJake.” This name was changed from the more incendiary, “TimeToDieJake.” The account has an image that is clearly taken from jacobappelbaum.net and several figures within Tor have expressed suspicion that the same person who manages the site owns the account. One recent tweet accuses Appelbaum of bowing to North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un.

Jill Bähring, one of the victims listed on the site, later denied the story that was posted in her name. Bähring gave a different version of events and declared that, far from assault, Appelbaum did nothing illegal or offensive. She went on to question the motives behind his accusers: “Reading this highly distorted version of my experience, which is being used as one of the ‘bulletproof examples’ of Jacob’s alleged misbehavior, I can’t help but wonder.

“Wonder about all the stories that have been published the last days. Wonder not only about mob justice on twitter, caused by rumors and speculation,

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but also about the accounts repeated by those who call themselves journalists. Wonder about how many other stories have been willingly misinterpreted. Wonder about the witnesses in all these stories, who coincidentally always seem to consist of the same set of people. Wonder about their motive to speak on my behalf without my consent."

Meanwhile, a group of 11 women who had previously worked with Appelbaum wrote a letter testifying to his character and at odds with the depiction of his accusers. The letter appeals to reason and due process.

The Tor Project has recently conducted a two-month internal investigation into the matter and concluded that the allegations are true. However, the circumstances of the investigation are extremely suspicious. The internal investigation did not question Appelbaum himself, nor has it resulted in any legal charges against him.

As of December 2015, the new executive director of Tor Project is Shari Steele, a lawyer who has a long history working with the Electronic Frontier Foundation. Her husband is currently a vice president at Amazon and previously worked for the Chief Information Officer at the Pentagon and the US Army Personnel Information Systems Command.

Since the investigation began, it is not just Appelbaum who has been replaced, but the entire Tor Project board of directors. Additionally, the project has moved its headquarters across the US, from Cambridge, Massachusetts to Seattle, Washington. Several others in the orbit of the project have left in the wake of Appelbaum's ousting.

One such contributor, David Robinson, wrote on his blog: "I have no confidence in Tor's will or ability to ensure professionalism among its personnel or to execute an effective communications policy. As a Tor volunteer and contributor, I feel at risk not only from the Seattle Police Department, but now also from Tor Project members who are targeting a growing list of individuals for shunning and character assassination with no apparent push-back from management—indeed, with management's collusion."

Marie Gutbub, a journalist, and prior to these events, an advocate for the Tor Project, wrote: "I am strongly wondering if this was really about protecting women. Here's what I noticed: I am a woman, and I estimate that more than half of the Tor core people know I was dating him, or at least close to him. If Tor believed there was victims, why did no one ask if I had bad experiences with Jake?

"As a woman I have never felt as unsafe at Tor as now. Tor purged Jake, the horrible predator, and Tor is now a safe space? Who is supposed to buy this? Before this happened, the discourse was: the hacker/freedom community is dominated by straight, male-identified people among which we can find a certain number of predators, or at least of men who don't always behave respectfully around women. This meant: there is a general problem. Now the discourse is: we have purged Jake, thanks to those who started this campaign we are safe now–seriously?"

These allegations come in a definite context. The Snowden revelations showed that US intelligence agencies had been trying to surveil Tor users for some time. It is not at all unlikely that they would try to infiltrate the organization.

Recently-leaked internal Tor IRC logs reveal that an ex-CIA officer who worked with the agency for eight years and held Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information clearance was briefly employed at the Tor Project in late 2014, though there was a falling out when it was discovered that he used to be CIA. It is currently unknown what his role was, although according to Cryptome he joined Tor the day after Operation Onymous, a drug raid targeting markets on the Tor network, ended.

Another document leaked at the same time purports to lay out plans for a "campaign to destroy Jake" by exploiting "the rise of the 'micro-aggression/trigger/safe space/victim' American subculture." The authenticity of this document has not been confirmed.

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