The hacking of HBO and the "Russian meddling" campaign

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The recent leak of confidential HBO files by hackers calling themselves "Mr. Smith" has underscored the contrived and unsubstantiated character of the official narrative of alleged Russian hacking of the US elections.

The online publication of troves of HBO material by hackers demanding a multi-million-dollar ransom undercuts the claims of US intelligence agencies, transmitted uncritically by the media, that it was the Russian government, under the personal direction of President Vladimir Putin, that hacked into the computers of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Hillary Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta and funneled politically damaging information to WikiLeaks for publication last summer.

Both the Russian government and WikiLeaks have repeatedly denied that Russia had any connection to the leak of Democratic emails, and neither the US government nor the media has, in the course of more than a year of anti-Russian agitation, produced any serious factual evidence to support their claims.

But endless reports by newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, citing unnamed intelligence and government sources and cyber theft "experts" linked to the CIA, FBI and other state agencies, have claimed that the hacking of the Democrats had to be the work of Russian intelligence agencies, in part because only the Russians are sufficiently sophisticated and diabolical to carry out such an operation.

The massive hack of HBO, however, is but the latest case demonstrating the proliferation of hacker groups all over the world that employ advanced technology and methodology to successfully attack giant corporations, which use the most expensive and sophisticated techniques to protect their data—far more extensive than the primitive methods used by the Democratic Party and the Clinton campaign.

HBO publicly disclosed the hack on July 31, following a data dump that included several upcoming TV episodes from the series "Ballers," "Insecure" and "Room 104," as well as a script for an upcoming episode of "Game of Thrones." The hackers released more HBO files on Monday and demanded a ransom worth some $6 million under threat of posting more material.

The second dump included five more "Game of Thrones" scripts, including one for an upcoming episode, and a month's worth of emails from the network's vice president for film programming. It also included financial balance sheets, a report on legal claims against the network and letters of job offers for several top executives.

The hackers sent HBO chief executive Richard Plepler a video letter that said, "We successfully breached into your huge network … HBO was one of our difficult targets to deal with but we succeeded (it took about six months)."

Commenting on the spread of highly sophisticated hackers, Jim McGreggor, principal analyst at Tirias Research, told *TechNewsWorld*, "No company is off limits today. But the bigger and more prominent you are, the bigger target you become for a wide variety of hackers."

The HBO hack is the second successful cyberattack on a major media company in the past eight months. Last December, a group known as the Dark Overlord stole several files from Larson Studios, including the entire fifth season of Netflix's "Orange is the New Black." The hackers posted the stolen episodes in April, prior to the season's scheduled June 9 release.

In October of 2014, hackers calling themselves the

Guardians of Peace stole more than 100 terabytes of confidential documents from Sony Pictures, including embarrassing emails between top executives. They posted many of the documents online, sparking a major scandal for the company.

Without providing any supporting evidence, the FBI and the Obama administration claimed the hackers were tied to the North Korean government, which was allegedly retaliating for a soon-to-be released Sony-backed film, *The Interview*, a puerile and reactionary "comedy" about a CIA assassination plot against North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

The US government used the hack of Sony, which had produced the 2012 pro-CIA, pro-torture film about the assassination of Osama bin Laden, *Zero Dark Thirty*, to mount a provocation against North Korea. The *World Socialist Web Site* at the time documented the collaboration of the State Department and CIA-linked individuals with the producers of *The Interview.*

The 2014 frame-up of North Korea proved to be a dress rehearsal for the full-blast, ongoing campaign against Russia, which has been spearheaded by the Democratic Party in alliance with the CIA, and made the focus of the Democrats' opposition to the Trump administration, denounced for being "soft" on Moscow and Putin.

The intelligence report released in January by the FBI, CIA and NSA concluding that Putin directly oversaw the hacking of the Democrats in order to tip the election in favor of its chosen candidate, Donald Trump, contained no factual evidence, only unsupported conclusions. And in keeping with the entire campaign against Russian "hacking," it was silent on the actual content of what was leaked by those who hacked into the DNC and Podesta emails: true information about the DNC's efforts to sabotage the presidential campaign of Senator Bernie Sanders and the transcripts of Clinton's sycophantic speeches to Wall Street bankers, including Goldman Sachs.

As for the argument that only a highly sophisticated state agency could have successfully penetrated the Democratic Party's computers, this is belied by the acknowledged fact that Podesta's emails were obtained by means of a phishing scam, one of the most primitive methods for hacking into computers, used widely by amateur hackers, not foreign intelligence agencies.