

The New York Times and the murder that wasn't

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On Tuesday, the right-wing Ukrainian regime reported that Arkady Babchenko, a Russian journalist living in Kiev and a vocal critic of the Kremlin, had been shot dead in his apartment building. Kiev immediately pointed the finger at Moscow, with Ukrainian Prime Minister Volodymyr Hroysman declaring that “the Russian totalitarian machine” was responsible for the journalist’s murder.

Within minutes, the news flashed across the globe, becoming a lead story in major news outlets in Europe and the United States, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian* and the BBC. The Mighty Wurlitzer of American propaganda began belching vast amounts of hot air.

In every report, the announcement of the murder was accompanied with the conclusion that the Russian government was behind it: that is, the US media outlets announced a murder mystery and its solution simultaneously.

The *New York Times*’ star reporter, Andrew Higgins, declared, “The killing of the journalist, Arkady Babchenko, a former war correspondent who stirred fury among Russian nationalists with his sharply critical coverage, is the latest in a series of attacks, many of them fatal, on outspoken foes of President Vladimir V. Putin, both inside Russia and beyond.”

Higgins, who in 2014 was forced to retract a story featuring falsified photographs of Russian troops entering Ukrainian territory, placed the murder in a long list of alleged crimes by the Putin regime, including the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal earlier this year, and the downing of flight MH17 over Ukraine in 2014.

In their coverage, the *Times* and other major newspapers relied on a script they have used repeatedly: A prominent critic of the Kremlin dies or is

injured abroad, and Moscow is immediately blamed. Any effort by Russia to deny these claims, or even to challenge the accusations, are treated as more evidence of a malevolent Kremlin plot.

But at the height of the international furor over the murder, the unexpected took place: the corpse of Babchenko made a dramatic reappearance at a press conference called by the Ukrainian police, and the journalist announced that he had dramatically faked his own death.

Looking back on the story, it would not have taken more than a careful examination of the photo of Babchenko’s corpse released by Kiev—which showed the journalist slumped over in a puddle of a liquid resembling ketchup—to know that something was amiss.

But the American press responded to the resurrection of Babchenko by trying to find another way to incriminate the Kremlin. Typical was the editorial published by the *New York Times* Thursday, headlined, “Whatever It Was, We Didn’t Do It.”

“After news came from Kiev on Tuesday that a Russian journalist critical of Vladimir Putin had been shot dead, it did not take long for the Kremlin’s denial machinery to shift into high gear,” the *Times* wrote, complaining that the Kremlin had the audacity to deny that it was complicit in a murder that never took place.

In other words, the *Times* sought to shift the story to the Kremlin’s “denial machine,” instead of what the incident has exposed about the lies peddled by the *Times*. What really stands exposed is the propaganda machine operated by James Bennet, the editorial page editor of the *Times*, who manipulates the news in the service of the intelligence agencies to promote war abroad and political repression at home. For Bennet, when one lie is exposed, the time has come to reply with an even bigger lie.

Every editorial published in the online edition of the *New York Times* includes a note that the editorial section “is separate from the newsroom and the Op-Ed section.” Nothing could be further from the truth: In fact, they are generally indistinguishable. The *Times* routinely places stories on its news page that consist entirely of unsubstantiated claims and speculation, which then becomes the basis for the editorials promoting war and domestic repression.

For more than a year and a half, the US media has been engaged in a campaign against what they call “fake news” allegedly spread by Russia and its sympathizers. In the name of this campaign, the major media outlets, leading politicians, and the US intelligence agencies have justified the imposition of the most sweeping regime of internet censorship in US history, deleting thousands of social media accounts, silencing oppositional viewpoints, and burying left-wing news sites in search results.

But the fraud of Arkady Babchenko’s murder has shown who the real purveyors of “fake news” are: not the oppositional news sites targeted for censorship, but the newsrooms of the mainstream press in New York, Washington and London.



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