

MSNBC Sucks

A user's guide to the Peacock farm team

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Rachel Maddow Opening Segment, Barely Holds Back Tears



I'm going to be interviewed on MSNBC today by Mehdi Hasan, the author of a book called *Win Every Argument*. I'm looking forward to it as one would a root canal or rectal.

I accepted the invitation because it would have been wrong to refuse, on the off chance he was planning a good-faith discussion. If you're reading this, things have gone another way.

I last appeared on MSNBC six years ago, [on January 13, 2017](#), to talk with Chris Hayes and of all people Malcolm Nance, about the then-burgeoning Trump-Russia scandal.

The Trump-Russia story was white-hot and still in its infancy. That same day, news leaked from Israel that Americans warned the Mossad not to share information with

the incoming administration, because Russia had “[leverages of pressure](#)” on Trump. Asked by Chris about the scandal generally, I made what I thought was a boring-but-true observation, that we in the media didn’t “have any hard evidence” of a conspiracy, just not a lot to go on. This was the TV equivalent of a shrug.

Nance jumped on this in a way I remember feeling was unexpected and oddly personal. “Matt’s a journalist. I’m an intelligence officer,” he snapped. “There is no such thing as coincidence in my world.” Chris jumped in to note reporters have different standards, and I agreed, saying, “We haven’t seen anything that allows us to say unequivocally that x and y happened last year.”

“Unequivocally” seemed to trigger Nance. With regard to the DNC hack, he said, “That evidence is unequivocal. It’s on the Internet.” As for “these links possibly with the Trump team,” he proclaimed, “You’re probably never going to see the CIA’s report.” Nance went on to answer “no” to a question from Chris about whether leaks “were coming from the intelligence community,” Chris wrapped up with a sensible suggestion that we all not rely on a parade of “leaks and counter-leaks,” and the segment was done.

To this day I get hit probably a hundred times a day with the question, “What happened to you, man?” What happened? That segment happened, but to MSNBC, not me.

That exchange between Nance and me was symbolic of a choice the network faced. They could either keep doing what reporters had done since the beginning of time, confining themselves to saying things they could prove. Or, they could adopt a new approach, in which you can say anything is true or confirmed, so long as a politician or intelligence official told you it was.

We know how that worked out. I was never invited back, nor for a long time was any other traditionally skeptical reporter, while Nance — one of the most careless spewers of provable errors ever to appear on a major American news network — became one of the Peacock’s most familiar faces.

I don't know Malcolm and don't mean to get nasty about this, but: even before that January 2017 broadcast, he had an extraordinary record, one that should have scared away any retraction-averse producer. On August 20th, he went on with Joy Reid and said the Green Party's Jill Stein "has a show on Russia Today." This wasn't true, as Stein quickly pointed out, but MSNBC refused to acknowledge the error. Media watchdog FAIR repeatedly [asked for a correction](#), as did friend Glenn Greenwald [at The Intercept](#), but they refused to budge.

This may not seem a big deal, but at the time it was still weird and something of a pioneering move for a major news organization to just refuse to fix a clear error.

Nance went on to make a lot more, some I would classify as important. A [tweet](#) of his in late 2016 was a major source for the pre-election misconception that the Wikileaks-leaked emails of Clinton campaign chief John Podesta were "riddled with forgeries" and "#blackpropaganda." He would regularly make all sorts of claims without evidence, like that the K.G.B. had "been surveilling Donald Trump since 1977," and that "little" comes from Trump's mouth that isn't "carefully planned to benefit the Russian Republic," and all sorts of other nonsense.

I was quiet until he said Glenn "shows his true colors as an agent of Trump and Moscow," "reports in to his masters in Russia," and is "deep in the Kremlin pocket." This was outrageous. I was shocked MSNBC didn't fire him on the spot. Still, I voiced objections in a measured way I hoped might get through, either to Nance or to someone at the network. "I've been on the air with Malcolm Nance and he seemed like a nice guy," I tweeted, "but this awful practice of calling people traitors and foreign agents based on no evidence has really gotten out of hand."

Nance's response was "Ok, you've convinced me. You need to be blocked. #Bye." He remained a regular guest on the network, which didn't cool on booking him [until](#) the Russia story fell apart with the release of the Mueller report the next year.

The Nance situation was symbolic of what happened at the network from the beginning of Trump's term, really beginning in early 2017. It went from being a place where you had to be at least in the ballpark of demonstrably true to being a place

where the factual standard was, “Whatever dogshit drops out of the mouth of any hack or spook.”

Moreover the network didn't just re-report this stuff, it became the favored launching pad for all the most blatant blue-Anon disinformation, like California congressman Adam Schiff saying he had “[more than circumstantial](#)” evidence of collusion, or former Obama defense official Evelyn Farkas suggesting the Trump administration would try to destroy evidence if they “[found out how we knew what we knew about the Trump staff's dealing with Russians](#).” Farkas later testified under oath that she “[didn't know anything](#)” about collusion.

You'll read about this (and see it, in an extraordinary video mashup our own Matt Orfalea prepared for a larger story series coming out in the next weeks), but we found MSNBC mentioned Hamilton 68, the infamous “dashboard” of accounts supposedly linked to “Russian influence activities” outed as a fraud in the Twitter Files, over *100 times* in a period between the summer of 2017 and November of 2019.

One of those instances came in a typical MSNBC broadcast from that time, on January 19, 2018. It featured a quartet of security-state goblins — former Bush official Nicolle Wallace, Langley-sniffing Ken Dilanian, former U.S. Attorney Joyce Vance, and ex-CIA official Evan McMullin — gang-botching a story about the #ReleaseTheMemo hashtag:

Dilanian talks about Hamilton 68



Note how many things they get wrong in this segment. Vance says there's nothing to accusations of FISA abuse later proven [by Justice Inspector General Michael Horowitz](#) ("A lot of hullabaloo about nothing at the end of the day"). The CIA's McMullin touts the Steele Dossier ("Much of it has been validated"). Dilanian rushes at the end to squeeze in the Hamilton hoax ("This release...is the top hashtag among Russian bots and trolls, according to Hamilton 68").

It's extremely rare that a journalist who's actually trying to avoid mistakes makes even one factual mistake as big as falling for the Hamilton hoax or the Steele Dossier, or dismissing the Nunes memo. These people managed all three at once. If I'd made even one error of that magnitude early in my career, I wouldn't have had a career. This kind of thing was basically constant for years, when MSNBC was the staging ground for many lunatic conspiracy theories involving Trump, Russia, and their delicacy item, the Dossier.

As I was leaving the set of my last appearance on *All In* six years ago, Rachel was getting ready to go on and re-frame how the network did news. My shrugging take was that if journalists didn't have confirmation, they couldn't report. Rachel argued the opposite, that official silence meant you could assume things:

I mean, had the FBI looked into what was in that dossier and found that it was all patently false, they could tell us that now, right? I mean, the dossier has now been publicly released. If the FBI looked into it and they found it was all trash, there's no reason they can't tell us that now. They're not telling us that now. They're not saying that. They're not saying anything.

As we later found out, among other things via Jeff Gerth's gigantic [piece in the Columbia Journalism Review](#), the FBI said nothing about many stories it knew to be wrong, including the influential *New York Times* exposé, "[Trump Campaign Aides Had Repeated Contacts With Russian Intelligence](#)." The possibility that officials can lie to us in this way — leaking, asking that attribution be limited to uncheckable “sources familiar with the matter,” then saying nothing as stories start taking water — is exactly why we don't stick our necks out for such people.

From that period in early 2017 through the crushing release of the Mueller report — forcing Rachel to cut a trout-fishing vacation in Tennessee short to stammer out, eyes welling with emotion, “This is the start of something, not the end of something” — I do not believe even one person expressing skepticism of the Trump-Russia story came on the channel. That streak ended with poor Chris's post-Mueller bumper-cast with Michael Isikoff and David Corn, on March 25, 2019.

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