

The Washington Post

The Hunter Biden story is an opportunity for a reckoning

By Editorial Board

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There was something grotesquely familiar about last week's revelations about Hunter Biden's business dealings abroad, both in the story's particulars and in the more general saga of sleazy self-dealing into which it fits. The idea that these latest revelations definitively vindicate or villainize any party except Mr. Biden himself, however, is misplaced.

The Post reported Wednesday on the multimillion-dollar deals the president's son made with a Chinese energy company. The investigation adds new details and confirms old ones about the ways in which Joe Biden's family has profited from trading overseas on his name — something for which the president deserves criticism for tacitly condoning. What it does not do, despite some conservatives' insistence otherwise, is prove that President Biden acted corruptly. This is a reality that an election-year probe by Senate Republicans into improper influence or wrongdoing has already confirmed. The Justice Department, meanwhile, continues its inquiry into Hunter Biden's tax affairs and foreign lobbying.

For now, what's more compelling than the assorted accusations about the Bidens' behavior is this question: Why is confirmation of a story that first surfaced in the fall of 2020 emerging only now? When the New York Post published its blockbuster exclusive on the contents of a laptop said to have been abandoned at a Delaware repair shop by Hunter Biden, mainstream media organizations balked at running with the same narrative. Social media sites displayed even greater caution. Twitter blocked the story altogether, pointing to a policy against hacked materials, and suspended the New York Post's account for sharing it; Facebook downranked the story in the algorithms that govern users' news feeds for fear that it was based on misinformation. Now, The Washington Post and the New York Times have vouched for many of the relevant communications.

This series of events has prompted allegations of a coverup, or at best a double standard in the treatment of conservative and liberal politicians by mainstream media and social media sites. Yet there was reason in this case for reluctance on the part of the publications and the platforms alike. Both had been the unwitting tools of a Russian influence campaign in 2016, and it was only prudent to suspect a similar plot lay behind the mysterious appearance of a computer stuffed with juicy documents and conveniently handed over to President Donald Trump's toxic personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani. Indeed, at the time there was also an *ongoing* disinformation operation from Moscow involving — among other things — doctored recordings supposedly showing Joe Biden improperly pressuring the then-president of Ukraine to aid Hunter Biden's business interests — a fraud promoted by Mr. Giuliani.

This context doesn't necessarily exonerate every action of every publication and platform. It makes obvious sense for newspapers to wait to verify information before turning it into a story; the harder conundrum is what to do with true information that comes from a hack, and harder still is how to treat true information that hasn't been stolen but has been selectively shared to further an agenda. Social media sites face a tougher choice when it comes to whether and how to dampen the spread of a story when they're unsure of its truthfulness or origins. None of these dilemmas have easy answers. The lesson learned from 2016 was evidently to err on the side of setting aside questionable material in the heat of a political campaign. The lesson learned from 2020 may well be that there's also a danger of suppressing accurate and relevant stories.