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How Alleged Russian Hacker Teamed Up With Florida GOP Operative

Political consultant Aaron Nevins received documents from hacker 'Guccifer 2.0' and posted some on his blog

By Alexandra Berzon and Rob Barry

Updated May 25, 2017 11:33 p.m. ET

The hacking spree that upended the presidential election wasn't limited to Democratic National Committee memos and Clinton-aide emails posted on websites. The hacker also privately sent Democratic voter-turnout analyses to a Republican political operative in Florida named Aaron Nevins.

Learning that hacker "Guccifer 2.0" had tapped into a Democratic committee that helps House candidates, Mr. Nevins wrote to the hacker to say: "Feel free to send any Florida based information."

Ten days later, Mr. Nevins received 2.5 gigabytes of Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee documents, some of which he posted on a blog called HelloFLA.com that he ran using a pseudonym.

Soon after, the hacker sent a link to the blog article to Roger Stone, a longtime informal adviser to then-candidate Donald Trump, along with Mr. Nevins' analysis of the hacked data.

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Mr. Nevins confirmed his exchanges after The Wall Street Journal identified him first as the operator of the HelloFLA blog and then as the recipient of the stolen DCCC data. The Journal also reviewed copies of exchanges between

the hacker and Mr. Nevins. That the obscure blog had received hacked Democratic documents was previously known, but not the extent of the trove or the blogger's identity.

"I just threw an arrow in the dark," Mr. Nevins said in an interview, adding he set up a Dropbox account so whoever was using the Guccifer 2.0 name could send large amounts of material. Later, going through what the hacker sent as someone who "actually knows what some of these documents mean," the GOP consultant said he "realized it was a lot more than even Guccifer knew that he had."

The episode shows how the hacker's activities extended to exposing Democrats' get-out-the vote strategies in swing states and informing a Trump ally of hacked data during the national campaign.



Roger Stone, a longtime informal adviser to President Donald Trump PHOTO: JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES

U.S. officials believe Guccifer 2.0 is linked to Russian military intelligence. Guccifer 2.0 denies that. The

moniker appeared in hacks last year and isn't the same as a Romanian hacker who earlier used the "Guccifer" name.

A Federal Bureau of Investigation counterintelligence inquiry and congressional committees are looking into alleged Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election. The Kremlin denies any election meddling, including any link to Guccifer 2.0. Mr. Stone has come under scrutiny in the counterintelligence inquiry, people familiar with the matter said.

In an interview, Mr. Stone denied any involvement with the Russians related to elections and said he hadn't been contacted by the FBI. He confirmed that Guccifer 2.0 sent him a link to the HelloFLA blog article last year but said he didn't share any hacked material from it with anyone. On his own website, Mr. Stone has posted screenshots of text messages he exchanged with Guccifer 2.0 last summer.

DCCC documents sent to Mr. Nevins analyzed specific Florida districts, showing how many people were dependable Democratic voters, how many were likely Democratic voters but needed a nudge, how many were frequent voters but not committed, and how many were core Republican voters—the kind of data strategists use in planning ad buys and other tactics.

The Journal reviewed these documents as well as Democratic voter analyses also sent to Mr. Nevins about congressional districts in Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.

The DCCC last summer confirmed a cyberintrusion but hasn't been specific about what was taken. Asked for comment, DCCC Communications Director Meredith Kelly said federal law enforcement, the intelligence community and members of both parties agree Russia intervened in the presidential and House contests, a reason for "a bipartisan, independent commission to investigate."

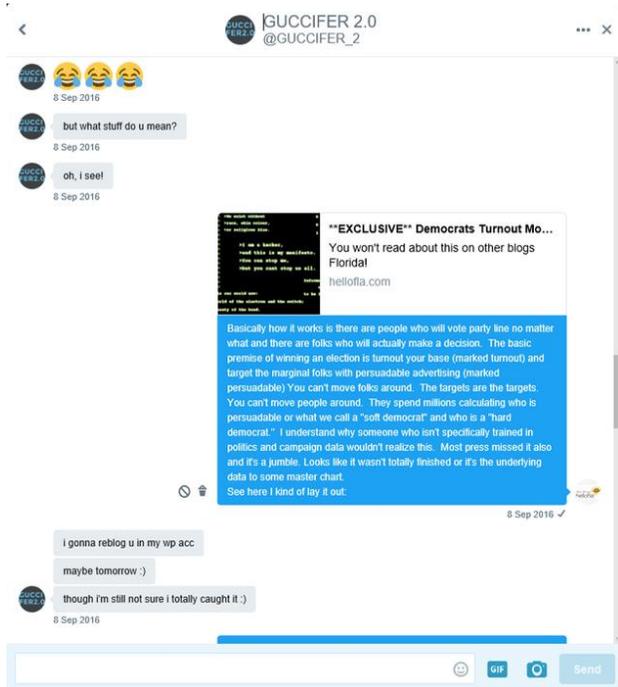
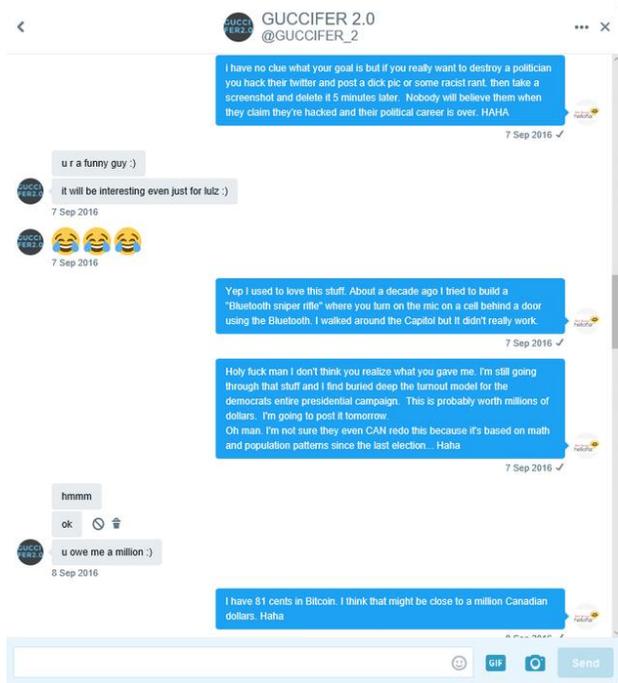
Besides posting some of the hacked material on his blog, Mr. Nevins said he passed some on to Florida journalists. He said he didn't use any in his consulting business, which includes running grass-roots-style campaigns for corporations and wealthy landowners seeking to influence local politics.

Mr. Nevins said the HelloFLA blog, which focuses on Tallahassee political gossip, gets at best 100 readers a day, and he runs it as a hobby.

In hopes of a scoop, he said, he reached out to Guccifer 2.0 on Aug. 12 after seeing a

Twitter direct message exchanges between Florida political consultant Aaron Nevins and hacker Guccifer 2.0 last September

Nevins texts are in blue at the right and Guccifer 2.0 texts are on the left.



newspaper article about a hack of the DCCC. The hacker using the Guccifer 2.0 name had invited journalists to send questions via Twitter direct messages, which Mr. Nevins did.

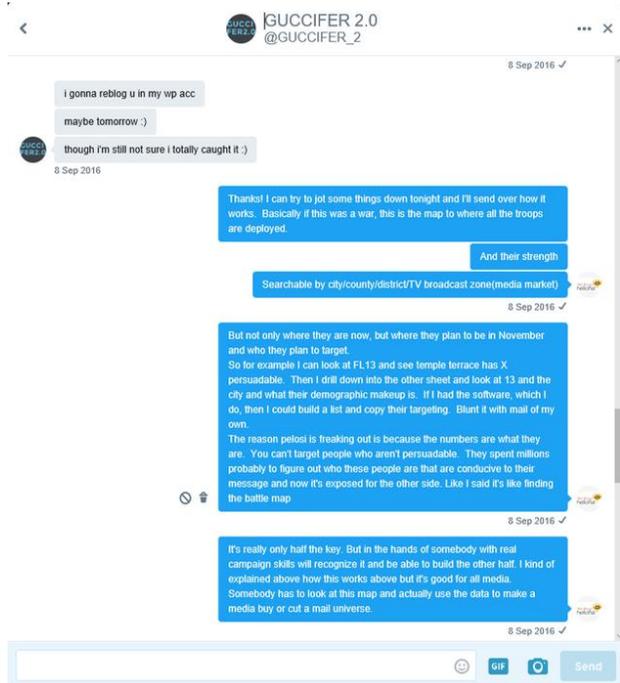
Seeing that some of what Guccifer 2.0 had was months old, Mr. Nevins advised the hacker that releasing fresher documents would have a lot more impact.

More impressed after studying the voter-turnout models, Mr. Nevins told the hacker, “Basically if this was a war, this is the map to where all the troops are deployed.”

At another point, he told the hacker, “This is probably worth millions of dollars.”

“Hmmm,” Guccifer 2.0 responded. “ok u owe me a million :)”

Democrats, Mr. Nevins wrote, “spent millions probably to figure out who these people are that are conducive to their message and now it’s exposed for the other side.”



Mr. Stone, to whom Guccifer sent that analysis along with the link to the blog article with DCCC data, wrote to the hacker that the file was “pretty standard,” screenshots of Mr. Stone’s messages show.

It is impossible to know whether the hack affected the outcome of any elections.

“I did adjust some voting targets based on some data I saw from the leaks,” said Anthony Bustamante, a campaign consultant to Republican congressional candidate Brian Mast. Mr. Bustamante said the Democratic voter analyses led

him to amp up some of his TV ad buys and reduce some mailed material ahead of the November election. Mr. Mast won a House seat, previously Democrat-held, in Florida’s 18th district near Palm Beach.

After publication, a spokesman for Mr. Mast said Mr. Bustamante stopped working for the Mast campaign on June 30, 2016, before the release of the hacked data, and said he hadn’t made ad buys for the campaign. Asked about that, Mr. Bustamante said he continued to advise the campaign informally after June.

Representatives of the Florida Republican Party and the National Republican Congressional Committee didn’t respond to requests for comment.

Mr. Nevins said he hasn’t been contacted by any investigators about last year’s political hacking.

He isn’t convinced the Russians were behind it, Mr. Nevins said, but even if they were, it doesn’t matter to him because the agenda of the hackers seemed to match his own.

“If your interests align,” he said, “never shut any doors in politics.”

—Shane Harris and Christopher S. Stewart contributed to this article.

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