

Elon Musk, right-wing figures push misinformation about Pelosi attack

Twitter's new owner sowed doubt about law enforcement's account as suggestions of a 'false flag' flooded social media sites

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Elon Musk and a wide range of right-wing personalities cobbled together misreporting, innuendo and outright falsehoods to amplify misinformation about last week's violent assault on Paul Pelosi to their millions of online followers.

A forum devoted to former White House adviser Stephen K. Bannon's right-wing radio show alerted its 78,000 subscribers to "very strange new details on Paul Pelosi attack." Roger Stone, a longtime political consigliere to former president Donald Trump, took to the fast-growing messaging app Telegram to call the assault on House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's husband an "alleged attack," telling his followers that a "stench" surrounded mainstream reporting about the Friday break-in that left Pelosi, 82, hospitalized with a skull fracture and other serious injuries. The skepticism didn't stay in right-wing echo chambers but seeped also into the feeds of popular online personalities, including Musk, Twitter's new owner.

"There is a tiny possibility there might be more to this story than meets the eye," he wrote Sunday morning, pointing his 112 million followers to a sensationalist account of the episode published by a site known for spreading right-wing misinformation before deleting the tweet several hours later.

The rush to sow doubt about the assault on Pelosi's husband illustrates how aggressively influential figures on the right are seeking to dissuade the public from believing facts about the violence, seizing on the event to promote conspiracy theories and provoke distrust. The House speaker has long been a bugbear for the right, which has intensified its rhetorical blitz on her in recent years — even as extreme threats against members of Congress have increased.

These merchants of misinformation, said Carl Cameron, a former longtime Fox News political correspondent, deceive their massive audiences using rumors and lies about everything from the integrity of elections to the details of a police report.

"They are creating a dystopia wherein lying and physical violence become part of our politics," he said.

Dinesh D'Souza, whose recent film "2000 Mules" burnished his right-wing bona fides by pushing Trump's debunked claims of widespread voter fraud, aired falsehoods and innuendo in a viral Twitter thread suggesting the attack on Paul Pelosi was a form of intentional misrepresentation sometimes referred to as a "false flag."

The basis for his skepticism seemed to be mistaken reporting by a Fox affiliate, which later appended a correction to its article, that the alleged assailant was in underwear at the time of his arrest. In fact, the suspect, identified by law enforcement as David DePape, 42, demanded to know, "Where is Nancy?" according to a person briefed on the case — a call echoing the exclamations of pro-Trump protesters who breached the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021 — before her husband was bludgeoned with a hammer.

Authorities said they were scrutinizing writings DePape appears to have authored that intersperse delusional ideas about fairies and the occult with Holocaust denialism and screeds against Black people and transgender people.

D'Souza did not accept those details. Nor did many of his 2.5 million Twitter followers, according to their replies, which included calls of "amen."

"The Left is going crazy because not only are we not BUYING the wacky, implausible Paul Pelosi story but we are even LAUGHING over how ridiculous it is," he wrote early Sunday morning. "What this means is that we are no longer intimidated by their fake pieties. Their control over us has finally been broken."

The story shared in the Telegram channel for Bannon's "War Room" show is from an outlet called "The Republic Brief" that promises "old school journalism you can count on." It repeated some of the same uncorroborated details about the encounter, including that the suspect was found in his underwear. It ominously pronounced, "It appears we are not getting the real story." Musk, who calls himself "Chief Twit," also appeared unconvinced by the official story forming in the days after the attack. In response to a tweet from Hillary Clinton condemning the attack and claiming it resulted from "hate and deranged conspiracy theories" spread by Republican politicians, he pointed instead to a story in the Santa Monica Observer claiming without evidence that Paul Pelosi was drunk at the time of the assault and "in a dispute with a male prostitute." Musk, who later deleted the tweet, did not respond to an email seeking comment.

The website of the Santa Monica Observer, described by fact-checkers as a low-credibility source favoring the extreme right, was offline Sunday morning. But an archived version of the story promised to explain "what really happened early Friday morning in San Francisco." It unspooled a lurid tale about nudists and a tryst gone terribly wrong. It also speculated about Pelosi's medical condition and the security at the home he shares with the House speaker in San Francisco's tony Pacific Heights neighborhood. And it featured tweets reposted by Sebastian Gorka, a former White House adviser to Trump who attended a 2017 inaugural ball wearing the insignia of a Hungarian nationalist group historically linked to the Nazis.

Gorka did not respond to a request for comment. An email sent to an address for the Santa Monica Observer yielded no response.

The editorial board of the Los Angeles Times has called the site “notorious for publishing false news,” highlighting its fantastical claim, in 2016, that Clinton had died and been replaced by a body double.

Similarly deluded claims filled social media over the weekend in response to the attack on Pelosi.

Scores of tweets included claims that the attack was a false flag, including some responding directly to messages from the House speaker. “@SpeakerPelosi Accountability is coming,” one user warned. “Tired of your Lies and False flags. Your Treasonous.” Another wrote, “I don’t know why the Paul Pelosi story falling apart is such a surprise. False flag attacks are a common tool of the left.”

Many focused on next month’s high-stakes midterm elections, which will decide control of Congress. “This was way too coincidental,” wrote a user whose bio included the “#MAGA” rallying cry. “A week before a big election, to make Pelosi out to be a figure of needing sympathy, after being a lying, nasty, aggressive, vindictive, bullying b---- for decades. She doesn’t get a pass.”

Twitter did not respond to a request for comment.

Elected officials and other popular figures on the right also heaped mockery on Pelosi’s husband even as he remains hospitalized for his injuries.

Wendy Rogers, a Republican state senator in Arizona who has set fundraising records in her state while aligning herself with right-wing extremists, shared a spurious Amazon listing for a “Paul Pelosi Fake Attack Novelty Item Headpiece.”

Garrett Ziegler, a former Trump White House aide, directed his more than 125,000 followers on Telegram to a meme sexualizing the assault.

Larry Elder, a conservative radio host who mounted a failed bid for governor of California in the recall election last year, reacted to the assault by ridiculing Pelosi for a charge earlier this year of driving under the influence. “First, he’s busted for DUI, and then gets attacked in his home,” the commentator wrote on Twitter. “Hammered twice in six months.”

Several Republican leaders sidestepped questions about the role of misinformation in fueling political violence.

When asked Sunday on CNN’s “State of the Union” whether Republicans should “do more to reject conspiracy theories and dangerous rhetoric,” Sen. Rick Scott (Fla.), who chairs the Senate GOP’s campaign arm, said it was important to “condemn the violence” and to convince people preparing to vote that the upcoming midterm elections would be “free and fair.”

Molly Hennessy-Fiske contributed to this report.

