text messages between
former FBI officials capture
reactions to stories on
Russia investigation

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(CNN) — Two former FBI officials who have come under fire for exchanging text messages critical of President Donald Trump have come under greater scrutiny this week, as additional texts capture their immediate reactions to a stream of news articles that poured in during the early months of the Trump presidency about the FBI's investigation into Russian interference in the 2016.

Lawmakers received five months' worth of recovered messages between former FBI special agent Peter Strzok and FBI lawyer Lisa Page in early August, but North Carolina Republican Rep. Mark Meadows released specific extracts this week, indicating in a letter to the Justice Department that they "suggest a coordinated effort on the part of the FBI and DOJ to release information in the public domain potentially harmful to President Donald Trump's administration."

That issue is part of an ongoing inquiry currently being reviewed by the Justice Department's internal watchdog as witnesses continue to be interviewed by the inspector general's office about how FBI officials conducted the Russia investigation.

While that investigation remains ongoing and additional messages could surface, CNN's
communication with the former head of the FBI's press office, Michael Kortan, is a consistent theme throughout their interactions. And at times, they were consulted as subject matter experts by the press office to help facilitate accurate reporting -- according to source familiar with their interactions -- a regular occurrence as journalists fact-check stories before publication.

"It will make your head spin to realize how many stories we played a personal role in," Page wrote to Strzok on December 19, 2016. "Sheesh, this has been quite a year," she added, forwarding a link to The New York Times' Most Read Stories of 2016.

The reference to playing a "role" in the stories, while open to interpretation, did not mean contributing to the underlying reporting, but rather their professional roles meant they were privy to certain information that only a small group of people knew at the time, according to a source familiar with the exchange.

In another text, the two appear to discuss CNN's January 2017 reporting that Trump was briefed on the dossier compiled by ex-British intelligence operative Christopher Steele.

"Sitting with Bill watching CNN. A TON more out," Strzok texted Page on January 10, 2017. "Hey let me know when you can talk. We're discussing whether, now that this is out, we use it as a pretext to go interview some people."

It is not clear what was meant by "pretext," but in counterintelligence investigations it is common practice to approach someone for questioning without divulging the true reason for the interview, which might be highly classified. Something of interest publicly reported in the media might serve as an effective way for an FBI agent to question someone while protecting any sensitive sources and methods, explained Josh Campbell, a CNN analyst and former FBI supervisory special agent.

A straightforward explanation of their intent, however, is rarely offered explicitly via text, and, as a result, these cryptic lines result in a Rorschach-like test of their meaning in a week where the credibility of Page and Strzok has again been put to the test.

The previous sets of texts show Strzok and Page mocking politicians on both sides of the aisle, but their unyielding contempt for Trump has been repeatedly cited as evidence by the President and his allies that special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation was irreparably tainted from the beginning because Strzok and Page both briefly worked or his team.
CNN politics

Work-issued phone with Page. He was tired from the FBI in August. Page was also on Mueller's team for a brief stint before returning to the FBI, and she resigned from the bureau in May.

Representatives for Page and Strzok declined to offer comment for this story.

**Not 'freelancing'**

Besides regularly tracking the alerts from news outlets on their phones, the two often also appear troubled by what they viewed as inaccuracies in reporting or gripes about headlines.

On January 19, 2017, Page texted Strzok, "I'm really angry about the times article. This just has got to stop." He agreed, responding the next day, "Yeah and it's not even news! No substance, and largely wrong. The press is going to undermine its credibility.'

A CNN review of New York Times articles published that day shows one titled, "Intercepted Russian Communications Part of Inquiry Into Trump Associates" but it is unclear whether their texts were in reference to that article and no texts suggest they provided information for it.

On February 14, 2017, after the New York Times published its account of the FBI's interview with former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, Page and Strzok appear to discuss Kortan's involvement in the following exchange:

Strzok: Bottom line Mike ran through boss' thinking/timeline/narrative on this. Bunch of additional detail (redacted) has etc

Page: K. Did you mention my attendance to kortan?

Strzok: Not to Mike, he had left. The guys left seemed to think no, said Mike was going to talk to you.

Another message refers to cooperation and "access," but they do not name the outlet!

"Going to be very apparent we cooperated and gave access A LOT for an article that I think is going to be very negative. Bad enough for negative press. Far worse to chose to

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Moreover, other messages show their befuddled and unease as they try to figure out the source of "leaks" to the news media and struggle with guarding against their own information falling into the wrong hands of those "with partisan axes to grind."

"Think our sisters have begun leaking like mad," Strzok told Page on December 15, 2016, without further elaboration. "Scorned and worried and political, they're kicking in to overdrive."

Strzok does not specify who their "sisters" were, but Campbell explained that agents often referred to colleagues at the CIA and NSA as "sisters."