

Pizzagate: From rumor, to hashtag, to gunfire in D.C.

By **Marc Fisher**, **John Woodrow Cox** and **Peter Hermann** December 6, 2016

What was finally real was Edgar Welch, driving from North Carolina to Washington to rescue sexually abused children he believed were hidden in mysterious tunnels beneath a neighborhood pizza joint.

What was real was Welch — a father, former firefighter and sometime movie actor who was drawn to dark mysteries he found on the Internet — terrifying customers and workers with his assault-style rifle as he searched Comet Ping Pong, police said. He found no hidden children, no secret chambers, no evidence of a child sex ring run by the failed Democratic candidate for president of the United States, or by her campaign chief, or by the owner of the pizza place.

What was false were the rumors he had read, stories that crisscrossed the globe about a charming little pizza place that features ping-pong tables in its back room.

The story of Pizzagate is about what is fake and what is real. It's a tale of a scandal that never was, and of a fear that has spread through channels that did not even exist until recently.

Pizzagate — the belief that code words and satanic symbols point to a sordid underground along an ordinary retail strip in the nation's capital — is possible only because science has produced the most powerful tools ever invented to find and disseminate information.

What brought Welch to the District on a crisp Sunday afternoon in early December was a choking mix of rumor, political nastiness, technological change and the intoxicating thrill that can come from running down a mystery.

His actions Sunday in one of Washington's wealthiest neighborhoods reminded Americans that last month's election did not quite conclude the strangest political season in the nation's history. Welch did not shoot anyone in the disturbance on Connecticut Avenue NW, but he delivered a troubling message about the shattering of trust in a troubled time.

On Oct. 28, FBI Director James B. Comey told Congress that he was reopening the investigation of Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server when she was secretary of state. New emails had been found on a computer belonging to disgraced former New York congressman Anthony Weiner, the estranged husband of top Clinton aide Huma Abedin. Two days later, someone

tweeting under the handle @DavidGoldbergNY cited rumors that the new emails “point to a pedophilia ring and - @HillaryClinton is at the center.” The rumor was retweeted more than 6,000 times.

The notion quickly moved to other social-media platforms, including 4chan and Reddit, mostly through anonymous or pseudonymous posts. On the far-right site Infowars, talk-show host Alex Jones repeatedly suggested that Clinton was involved in a child sex ring and that her campaign chairman, John Podesta, indulged in satanic rituals.

“When I think about all the children Hillary Clinton has personally murdered and chopped up and raped, I have zero fear standing up against her,” Jones said in a [YouTube video](#) posted on Nov. 4. “Yeah, you heard me right. Hillary Clinton has personally murdered children. I just can’t hold back the truth anymore.” Jones eventually tied his comments about Clinton to U.S. policy in Syria.

According to YouTube, that video has been viewed more than 427,000 times.

Over the next couple of days, the wild accusations against Clinton gradually merged with a new raft of allegations stemming from WikiLeaks’ release of Podesta’s emails. Those emails showed that Podesta occasionally dined at Comet Ping Pong.

On Nov. 7, the hashtag #pizzagate first appeared on Twitter. Over the next several weeks, it would be tweeted and retweeted hundreds or thousands of times each day.

An oddly disproportionate share of the tweets about Pizzagate appear to have come from, of all places, the Czech Republic, Cyprus and Vietnam, said Jonathan Albright, an assistant professor of media analytics at Elon University in North Carolina. In some cases, the most avid retweeters appeared to be bots, programs designed to amplify certain news and information.

“What bots are doing is really getting this thing trending on Twitter,” Albright said. “These bots are providing the online crowds that are providing legitimacy.”

Online, the more something is retweeted or otherwise shared, the more prominently it appears in social media and on sites that track “trending” news. As the bots joined ordinary Twitter users in pushing out Pizzagate-related rumors, the notion spread like wildfire. Who programmed the bots to focus on that topic remains unknown.

On the Friday before the election, James Alefantis, who owns two restaurants on the same block in upper Northwest Washington, noticed something odd in his Instagram feed: a stream of comments calling him a pedophile.

Upset, Alefantis told some of his young employees at Comet Ping Pong about the hateful comments, and they poked around online. They found rapidly burgeoning discussions on Reddit, 4chan and Instagram about a purported child sex ring operating out of their restaurant.

Alefantis, who grew up in an affluent section of the District, was no stranger to politics. He had held a fundraiser for the Clinton campaign at Comet. He’d had a relationship with David Brock, the erstwhile Clinton nemesis who had a midcareer

