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Russia's Infamous 'Troll Factory' Is Now Posing as a Media Empire

A Russian 'troll factory' rebranded itself as a network of legitimate news sites. But hasn't quite abandoned its old ways.

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Russia's infamous troll factory — the most successful weapon in its information war arsenal — has rebranded itself as an emerging media conglomerate, an investigation by the Russian news website RBC has revealed.

The secretive troll factory, which garnered massive scrutiny from news organizations both at home and abroad in the past two years, now consists of several websites that produce original reporting and analysis with a strong "patriotic" slant, RBC reported.

The hub of these media operations is a website called FAN (Federal News Agency) whose

offices in St. Petersburg are just a stone's throw from the troll factory's original location on Savushkina street.

FAN was initially showcased in a New York Times Magazine article in 2015. A Magazine reporter traveled to Petersburg to investigate the troll factory and meet one of its employees. Inexplicably, a muscular man who was introduced as the interviewee's brother also attended the reporter's meeting.

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But the day after the reporter left Russia, FAN published: "What Does a New York Times Journalist Have in Common With a Nazi From St. Petersburg?" The brother, it turned out, was a notorious neo-Nazi recruited by FAN to discredit the reporter and his story.

From 'troll factory' to media empire

Today, FAN forms the core of a media empire consisting of 16 news websites. Collectively, they employ over 200 full-time journalists and editors whose content attracts more that 30 million pageviews every month.

The monthly cost of running FAN and its sister sites is in the area of 20 million rubles ($350,000), RBC estimates. The source of the funding is unclear too, but most of the websites in the empire attract little if any ad revenue. Allegedly, the group has a mysterious sponsor, believed to be Yevgeni Prigozhin, who also known as "Putin's Cook."

Everyday, the sites churn out dozens of articles every day that praise Putin, cast Ukraine as a failed Nazi state and expose the nefarious machinations of the United States. Still, FAN stands out. It exploits the unstable media labor market to lure in journalists from other publications with salaries above the market average. FAN even employs foreign reporters — RBC reports they are the most likely to be sent to Syria to provide coverage.

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In its coverage of Syria, FAN has an unique advantage over other news outlets — including state-owned media behemoths. Unlike new organizations, FAN reporters are not obligated to embed with Russia's Defense Ministry, which censors coverage.

Instead, RBC reports that FAN reporters embed with the so-called the "Wagner Group," a private military company — also reportedly funded by Prigozhin — that is covertly employed by Russia's Defense Ministry to buttress its Syria operation. This allows FAN's reporters to file their reports from dangerous frontlines faster than state news media.

Keep on trollin'

Despite its new status as a network of legitimate — if heavily biased news outlets — the "troll agency" hasn't quite abandoned its old ways, RBC's report suggests.

At least one popular pro-Trump, anti-Clinton Facebook group called Secured Borders, says RBC, is managed from the St. Petersburg troll factory.

RBC claims it obtained a screenshot of the group's advertisement statistics (available only to a Facebook group's administrator) from someone who claims to be its owner, which confirmed that the group is managed from St. Petersburg.

Secured Borders boasts 140 thousand subscribers, and just one of its posts published at the height of the election campaign and heavily advertised on Facebook, reached 4 million people on Facebook, was "liked" more than 300 thousand times and shared more than 80 thousand times. RBC also reported that a right-wing Twitter account called Tea Party News, which is followed by 22 thousand other accounts, is also run from the St. Petersburg hub.

All in all, RBC's sources say that at the zenith of the U.S. election campaign, the troll factory's accounts across different social media platforms would churn out as many as 50 million posts a month, with anti-Clinton messages getting the most attention.

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