The Moscow Times
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Russian Trolls Targeting Western Media: U.K. Research

By AFP

September 06, 2021



Crime and Security Research Institute director Martin Innes. **cardiff.ac.uk**

Western media news websites are being hijacked by pro-Russian trolls to spread propaganda and disinformation supporting the Kremlin, according to research published by a British university on Monday.

The Crime and Research Security Institute at Cardiff University said it had unearthed evidence from 32 major news outlets in 16 countries that have been targeted via manipulation of their readers' comments sections.

They include the Daily Mail, Daily Express, and The Times in Britain; Fox News and the Washington Post in the United States; France's Le Figaro; Germany's Der Spiegel and Die Welt; and La Stampa in Italy.

Researchers say they found 242 stories where "provocative pro-Russian or anti-Western

statements" were posted in reaction to stories related to Russia.

Russian-language outlets then used them as the basis for stories to suggest wider support among the Western public for Russian policies and President Vladimir Putin.

Related article: Facebook Accuses Russia of Spreading Disinformation

The research into online activity was conducted during ongoing tensions between Russia and Ukraine earlier this year.

But the unit said the tactics have been escalating since 2018, amid heightening tensions between Moscow and the West.

Crime and Security Research Institute director Martin Innes said the trolling operation was "significant" given its sophistication, scope, and scale.

"By hijacking the comments sections of Western media brands, it has been able to present its propaganda as indicative of mainstream opinion," he added.

"The Western media outlets we investigated are especially vulnerable to this kind of manipulation, with no security measures in place to prevent, deter or detect this kind of activity.

"Trolls have been able to easily switch between personas and identities, which is something the technology actually enables."

Researchers used data science recognition and detection techniques, which indicated an orchestrated campaign, with suspicious account profiles repeatedly changing their persona and location.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, whose department helps partly fund the Open Source Communications Analytics Research program at Cardiff headed by Innes, said Britain and its allies were working to combat "Kremlin trolls peddling lies."

"This report highlights the threat to our democracy of Russian state-backed misinformation on the internet," he added.

The report said there was evidence of coordination between Russian state-owned media, those with a history of spreading misinformation, and outlets identified by Western intelligence as having links to Russian security services.

Innes said given the potential to influence public opinion, it was "vital that media companies running participatory websites are more transparent about how they are tackling disinformation and more proactive in preventing it."

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