

UK exposes sick Russian troll factory plaguing social media with Kremlin propaganda

- UK Government funded expert research unveils new tactics of the Kremlin's large-scale disinformation campaign.
- Troll factory is targeting politicians and baiting audiences across a number of countries including the UK, South Africa and India.
- The operation has suspected links to Yevgeniy Prigozhin, founder of infamous bot-farm the Internet Research Agency.

UK-funded expert research has exposed how the Kremlin is using a troll factory to spread lies on social media and in comment sections of popular websites.

The cyber soldiers are ruthlessly targeting politicians and audiences across a number of countries including the UK, South Africa and India.

The research exposes how the Kremlin's large-scale disinformation campaign is designed to manipulate international public opinion of Russia's illegitimate war in Ukraine, trying to grow support for their abhorrent war, and recruiting new Putin sympathisers.

Sick masterminds of the operation are believed to be working overtly from an old factory in St Petersburg, with paid employees, and internal working teams.

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said:

We cannot allow the Kremlin and its shady troll farms to invade our online spaces with their lies about Putin's illegal war. The UK Government has alerted international partners and will continue to work closely with allies and media platforms to undermine Russian information operations.

Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries said:

These are insidious attempts by Putin and his propaganda machine to deceive the world about the brutality he's inflicting on the people of Ukraine. This evidence will help us to more effectively identify and remove Russian disinformation and follows our decisive action to block anyone from doing business with Kremlin-controlled outlets RT and Sputnik.

The evidence shows the troll factory is using Telegram to actively recruit

and co-ordinate new supporters who then target the social media profiles of Kremlin critics – spamming them with pro-Putin and pro-war comments. Targets include the senior UK ministers’ social media accounts, alongside other world leaders.

The operation has suspected links to Yevgeniy Prigozhin, the founder of the most infamous and wide-ranging bot-farm the Internet Research Agency, both of whom the UK has sanctioned.

The UK Government will share this latest research with major social media platforms. We are already working closely with them to ensure they swiftly remove disinformation and coordinated inauthentic or manipulated behaviour, as per their Terms of Service.

The UK has also created a Government Information Cell (GIC) to counter Russian disinformation. Made up of experts from across the UK Government, the Cell is focussed on identifying and assessing Russian disinformation and both advising on and delivering output to expose and challenge the Kremlin’s lies.

Through our unprecedented package of sanctions against Russia, we have already targeted peddlers of Russian disinformation, including Putin’s key political allies, regime spokespeople including Putin’s Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov and Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, and Kremlin-backed disinformation agencies.

The Government has also directly sanctioned state media organisations, targeting the Kremlin-funded TV-Novosti who owns RT, formerly Russia Today, and Rossiya Segodnya who control news agency Sputnik.

Key findings include

- A new troll farm that is seeking to guide and ‘brigade’ a wider network of supporters and sympathisers to engage in targeted trolling behaviours.
- This information operation and its associated targeted trolling activities are being directed at senior international politicians and international media outlets.
- Traces of the operation have been detected across eight social media platforms including Telegram, Twitter, Facebook and TikTok.
- Key tactical innovations of the operational methodology include the use of commenting behaviours, use of VPNs and deliberate amplification of ‘organic’ content supporting the Kremlin’s position. All of these methods help to avoid detection and interception by social media platforms.

Troll Tactics

- Calling on subscribers to target the social media profiles of opponents and Kremlin critics, including prominent politicians and world leaders, and spam them with pro-Kremlin comments.
- Asking them to turn on VPNs and spam the comments sections of specific links to Instagram, YouTube, and Telegram.

- Focusing activity on posting comments, rather than authoring original content – a tactic likely to decrease the risks of being detected by social media platforms for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behaviour and/or harmful content.
- Searching for 'organic content' posted by genuine users coherent with the lines they want to push, and then working to amplify these messages, in order that such views are distorted as the norm. This means that, provided the content they post is not too offensive, they are unlikely to be subject to de-platforming interventions.