

When Citizen Journalism Goes Rogue: A Case Study of Anti-West Misinformation Campaigns During the 2014 Russian-Ukraine Conflict

Samer Al-khateeb, Muhammad Hussain, and Nitin Agarwal
Department of Information Science
University of Arkansas at Little Rock
Little Rock AR 72204, USA
{sxalkhateeb, mnhussain, nagarwal}@ualr.edu

Abstract: Social media has ushered in the era of citizen journalism that has irreversibly changed traditional journalism and even the mainstream media. In his manifesto released on February 16, 2017 [1], Facebook's CEO Mark Zuckerberg outlines the future of Facebook will be to keep us safe, inform us, promote civic engagement, and afford inclusion for all. In other words, Mr. Zuckerberg intends to build a news corporation without the journalists, further changing the landscape of news and media. Blogosphere endows citizens the power and freedom to express their opinion or frame narratives more effectively than any other social media platform – (1) due to the absence of the character limit, and (2) by providing digital town halls. Commentaries documented on blogs afford ways to improve inclusiveness and discourse, manifesting the idea of citizen journalism. However, at a time when people like to get their news from social media rather than mainstream media, irresponsible citizen journalism poses a danger to democracy by misrepresenting facts and information. Several journalistic accounts have shown that social media has made disseminating misinformation, fake news, or propaganda easier than it used to be. There is plenty of empirical evidence on how blogs served as a vehicle for fake news and misinformation during the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections [2].

In this ongoing research, we study the network of blogs infested with anti-West/anti-European Union propaganda messages during the 2014 Russia-Ukraine conflict. Several journalists (many among them were citizen journalistic efforts) produced numerous videos, blogs, and stories in and around eastern Ukraine to cover the different crises faced by that region. We examined the blog network using social network analysis-based methodology, referred to as “Focal Structure Analysis” [3]. We discovered that Graham W. Phillips – a British journalist and an influential blogger – was the most prominent information broker and a leading coordinator of the misinformation campaign along with *ITAR-TASS* and *Voice of Russia*. Mr. Phillips' reporting's would carry a strong pro-Russian undertone with unsubstantiated claims, mock and delegitimizes Ukrainian government's policies and actions. Nevertheless, his live-blogging style of coverage of events in Ukraine earned Mr. Phillips more influence than some of the other mainstream news blogs and even the very well known news sources, such as the *Washington Post* and *The Guardian*. Our findings were further validated when RT.com reported on July 25, 2014 [4] that Mr. Phillips was deported from Ukraine because he works for *RT.com* and was banned from entering Ukraine for 3 years (from 2014 to 2017). Since anyone can be a “journalist” (do not have to be a professional) in the era of social media, in our research, we try to understand the social media ecology and how it aids disseminating misinformation, generating fake news, and conducting propaganda campaigns, so that actions could be taken towards developing countermeasures to stem the tide of fakery. Our research is a step forward towards bringing scientists and practitioners from various disciplines (such as communications, media, computer and information science, journalism, among others) to help advance understanding of the chaotic information environment of the lawless Wild West that social media currently is.

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