

# Russian Propaganda is Back in Washington

In 2016, ahead of the US presidential election Vladimir Putin's government famously orchestrated a disinformation campaign that significantly influenced how Americans voted at home. Facebook was blamed, new regulations were put in place, Russia slowed down, and the world moved on. Despite the lingering memory of 2016 and the media's promise to fight disinformation, Russian AI-generated propaganda has skyrocketed over the past three years, and it has been shockingly effective at the Capitol ahead of this election cycle.

Ever since Putin's invasion of Ukraine, Russian disinformation has been a massive presence on the "Nazi underbelly of the internet." But this latest wave is different, it's fueled by AI. With the recent availability of AI tools, it has become easier than ever to flood the internet with disinformation and intentional lies. More recently, it has become surprisingly difficult to differentiate between real and AI-generated information.

The Russian pipeline follows a predictable path:

1. AI Fabrication
2. Social Media
3. Mainstream News
4. Government

**Beginning with fabrication**, the Kremlin now employs many AI tools to speed up its production. The most prominently used is the classic chatbot. Chatbots, like Chat GPT or LLAMA, churn out tens or even hundreds of articles every day about how Ukraine is wasting American funds, or is secretly run by Nazis, or is trafficking children, or any other claim Russia can make to deter American support. These articles are dumped en masse on websites created by the Russian government for this sole purpose.

[The Boston Times](#) and The Houston Post are the two most famous recent examples. Articles from these websites include:

["Do everything to prevent Donald Trump from winning the elections!' Leak from Ukrainian Troll Factory"](#)

[“Resurgence of Slavery: Zelensky’s Political Allies Kidnap and Sell People”](#)

[“New Evidence Emerges of Ukraine’s Horrific “Forced Fertilization” Program, Inspired by Nazi Lebensborn”](#)

And the classic

[“I apologize, but I do not feel comfortable generating a title for an article with such disturbing and unethical content. The subject matter involving the abuse and murder of minors is deeply troubling and not something I am willing to sensationalize or dramatize in a title. Perhaps it would be best to approach this topic with sensitivity and focus on reporting the facts in a responsible manner. I hope you understand my hesitation in this case.”](#)

That last article’s title is an error message spit out by Chat GPT or another chatbot after refusing to process the horrible contents. As you can imagine, these articles are complete garbage and entirely fabricated. None of them are true and probably never touched by a human (considering that they did not catch the error in the title). Even the logo of the website is AI-generated, you can tell by the unintelligible writing on the circumference of the circle:



The articles are blatantly designed to deter the US from supporting Ukraine during Russia's invasion. According to the Wayback Machine from Archive.org, "bostontimes.org" was first recorded on March 29, 2015, and operated well into the 2016 election. Today is just the latest iteration of their program.

US companies are far from blame-free even in the hosting of Russian websites completely separate from American social media. Performing a DNS lookup on "bostontimes.org" returns 68.105.28.11, the IP address of a Cox Communications server located in Naperville, Illinois. Cox could have canceled their contracts with "The Boston Times" when the website turned to disinformation, but they didn't. Russian propaganda is being hosted on American soil and American companies are complicit in letting it happen.

Another AI tool employed by Russia is the use of deepfakes. Deepfake videos replace the face and voice of the subject with whatever the editor chooses. This, of course, has led to many fraudulent videos of Joe Biden saying and doing things he never did. One such video can be seen below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmPDLQNYCbU>

**These videos**, unlike articles, are often dumped straight onto American social media rather than hosted on Russian websites. This makes them all the more viral. When referring to a Russian lie spread about Zelensky's wife buying a Bugatti with American funds, the [BBC](#) reports:

"...before the truth could even get its shoes on, the lie had gone viral. Influencers had already picked up the false story and spread it widely.

One X user, the pro-Russia, pro-Donald Trump activist Jackson Hinkle, posted a link seen by more than 6.5m people. Several other accounts spread the story to millions more X users – at least 12m in total, according to the site's metrics."

While it's worth noting that X's viewing statistics are exaggerated by the company's metrics, this disinformation undoubtedly reached and convinced a scarily large body of American voters. X, to a far greater degree than Cox Communications, is directly responsible for the spread of Russian disinformation, exactly like Facebook was in 2016.

Social media today is best at pairing content and its audience; so it continues to do exactly that. Delivering Russian propaganda to American voters in the well-studied [echo chamber effect](#).

**As these stories spread** on American platforms such as X, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram; the mainstream media is forced to pick it up and either amplify or disprove the message.

It begins with fringe news organizations often eager for anything that will attract new viewers. Organizations like Newsmax have the least to lose and the most to gain if these sources end up being false, so they are often the first to bring misinformation onto TV.

In the [Dominion voting case](#) against Fox News, many of the news anchors' text messages were made public. This revealed Tucker Carlson's text:

"We are not concerned with losing market share to CNN or MSNBC right now. Our concern is Newsmax and One America News Network... With Trump behind it, an alternative like Newsmax could be devastating to us."

Essentially, Tucker Carlson admitted that the larger media companies, like Fox News, are scared of losing market share to smaller, more fringe, and more extreme news sources. The audience is shifting toward that extreme, so Fox News has to follow Newsmax to keep its audience happy.

By following Newsmax and picking up the same stories they do, Fox News forces itself to cover social media disinformation as seriously as verified news sources. They legitimize it and spread its influence.

**Inevitably,** Russian disinformation, created by bots, spread by social media, and legitimized by mainstream news, makes its way to Congress. Remember the lie about Zelensky buying a yacht?

"Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., a vocal opponent of military aid to Ukraine, in November retweeted a post about the alleged yacht purchase from the Strategic Culture Foundation, a Russian-based propaganda outlet

directed by Russia's intelligence services, according to the Treasury Department" ([NBC](#)).

The yacht allegations are just one of the many Russian disinformation campaigns that have borne fruit in the Senate. These allegations delay critical supplies to Ukraine and help Russia in their invasion. According to the [Washington Post](#):

"During the first impeachment inquiry into President Donald Trump in 2019, former Trump national security aide Fiona Hill made an extraordinary plea. Seated in front of congressional Republicans, she implored them not to spread Russian propaganda."

There are some outspoken Republicans who are fighting this problem, like Fiona Hill, but there are not enough. More lawmakers need to be aware of this issue if we are to avoid a repeat of 2016.

**So, what can you do about it?** As long as the internet exists, there will always be misinformation and lies spread about every topic. Medicine, politics, and celebrities are all fair game; so it's more important than ever to check your sources. Make sure they are credible and, if you have the time, find another source to back it up.

With a few quick searches, you can find plenty of tools to detect AI-generated work and to get a sense of what is credible news. You can never take anything at face value on the internet, including this article. Read the sources yourself, every quote is linked.

Ultimately, this is a culture of misinformation that requires more than personal fact-checking to be fixed. Companies need to take the initiative in controlling the spread, legislation needs to be passed, and education needs to be expanded. Despite this, if everyone did their part before endorsing breaking news, the internet would be a lot safer.