

Today over Macedonia...

16th January 2019

Russia and China are the headline names when it comes to fake news, but tiny Macedonia is attempting to outstrip them all. This country has become the gold standard in creating and spreading fake news: sometimes at the behest of shadow clients, sometimes just for the fun of it. However the normalisation of fake news as a business has dire consequences for the pursuit of truth – and for the people who consume it.



Macedonia first rose to fake news prominence in 2016 when it was behind hundreds of posts and articles promoting the Trump campaign but has since exploded to cover all kinds of alt-right, right-wing content that is not even propaganda, by virtue of being untrue. Partly this is driven by simple profit: place adverts around a column of lies and you will eventually see some return as readers are lured in by obvious 'clickbait'. But the larger percentage comes from organisations who want specific type of content and are willing to pay to ensure that their view becomes the only one that gains traction and focus.

With over one hundred websites being identified in the town of Veles alone as pumping out right-wing, pro-Trump propaganda during the final weeks of the 2016 presidential election, this has gone from being a cottage industry to a booming business, and one that does not need to rely on the peaks and troughs of an election cycle – whether with Brexit, Trump's daily impeachment-inviting infractions, or just general spreading of right-wing bile, there is not only the motivation to create fake news and the political will behind it, but also a willing audience.

With insufficient steps being taken – not least from the major tech giants that abet and allow such abuse of media and true news reporting to take place – it is difficult to see this being stemmed at the source; after all a Veles inhabitant could make more money from a few hours posting than in a month of working a local wage. As onerous as the task may be, it now falls to those at the other end of the pipeline to judge for themselves whether what they are reading is genuine or not: to not simply take anything at face value and approach the news with a degree of criticism and scepticism. Sad that it has come to this, perhaps, but it is better to tread carefully than rush in based on false assumptions.

However the other danger of having so much fake news emerging from the Balkans goes comparatively unreported.

While citizens of Veles and Macedonia's other cities might not overly care about their influence (whether large or small) on an election held thousands of miles away in a country they might never visit, views might shift the closer one comes to home. Studies have shown that the Balkan region is consistently the most at risk in Europe of falling prey to the untruths in fake news, a consequence of largely unchallenged state medias and mistrust in the '*alternative point of view*'. This of course is music to the ears of Russia, which has a vested interest in bringing the Balkans back in line with the Russian point of view and, through fake news factories, the perfect means to make this happen. Not only could this work for broad political campaigns and geopolitical frictions, but also on the comparatively smaller level: spreading only good news about a company that Moscow wishes to have closer engagement with the West, for instance, or castigating all other competitors so that only one choice remains.

Macedonia's favourite son Alexander might weep, for there were no more message boards to conquer...

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