

# Investigative Journalism: A Lynchpin for Understanding Disinformation

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*Investigative journalism is a key tool in the fight against disinformation and influence operations. Investigative journalists are one of democracies' competitive advantages against authoritarian and illiberal governments, serving as the "white blood cells" within the democratic body politic that hunt disinformation networks and counter their negative impact. While a free press alone is not enough to stop the spread of disinformation, investigative journalists' ability to recognize and publicly identify disinformation networks is vital to disrupting influence operations.*

To best address a complex challenge, it is first necessary to understand it. With the rapid explosion of disinformation that has adversely impacted societies globally, investigative journalism has proven vital in revealing the nature and extent of disinformation operations. It also has identified the actors responsible for these efforts and those who stand to gain from such activity. With a firmer grasp of modern disinformation campaigns, investigative journalism can also help provide governmental and civil society actors with the necessary tools to counter disinformation operations successfully.

The tools investigative journalists use to report on other criminal investigations are equally crucial in the fight against disinformation. First, the skill with which they conduct basic investigative work is central to uncovering information operations and networks. Second, their expertise in fielding tips and interviewing key actors grants them invaluable insight into the inner workings of these information networks. Finally, investigative journalists' healthy skepticism regarding subject material is integral to their efforts as it drives them to find original or corroborative evidence about any networks they examine or uncover.

In recent years, investigative journalists have harnessed these skills and exposed disinformation networks<sup>1</sup> around the world. From details of Russia's social media influence operations,<sup>2</sup> to China's so-called "50 Cent Army,"<sup>3</sup> to campaigns launched by both state-linked and non-state actors, we now have a greater understanding of the breadth of disinformation campaigns—and their intersection with a swelling number of social media platforms—than at any point prior.

Investigative journalism puts critical information about disinformation into the public domain that can be used and interpreted across borders. For example, investigations into Russia's disinformation campaigns in the wake of a contentious U.S. presidential campaign in 2016 revealed the extent of Moscow's disinformation operations in the U.S., Russia, and elsewhere. One primary prong of the Kremlin's disinformation campaign centered on false Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts. While authorities at Facebook and Twitter led efforts to remove a number of accounts in September 2017, they only did so following journalistic investigations<sup>4</sup> into these Kremlin-linked disinformation efforts. From tracking down the troll operators to those duped by fake accounts—including Americans (or others) who

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abetted Russian disinformation operations—investigative journalists unearthed much of what is now known about these networks' operations, as well as their broader context and their success.

American journalists were hardly alone in pursuing these investigative efforts. For instance, in the Philippines, the online outlet Rappler has consistently broken stories<sup>5</sup> regarding disinformation campaigns linked to President Rodrigo Duterte's administration, including identifying coordinated social media campaigns that attacked the independent Filipino press. Collaborations among multiple outlets in numerous countries have also unearthed disinformation campaigns. Indeed, a 2020 joint investigation from Russia's The Insider and Bellingcat, discovered<sup>6</sup> that Russian authorities organized disinformation campaigns relating to the downing of a passenger plane over Ukraine.

Investigative journalism does not merely identify fake social media accounts and their impact. Big data-based mapping projects do an incredible job tracking and analyzing these networks, especially on social media platforms.<sup>7</sup> However, investigative journalists expose these complex disinformation activities in an entirely different, sometimes more evocative or personal manner. Shortly after Russia's social media disinformation campaigns were discovered (and in many cases thwarted successfully), investigations probed deeper into these campaigns and uncovered another strand of Kremlin-linked disinformation efforts. According to CNN reports,<sup>8</sup> a new series of highly popular news outlets targeting American young adults maintained direct links to Moscow. Though nominally independent, journalists discovered that these outlets were overseen by a company called Maffick Media, whose majority stakeholder is a subsidiary of the Kremlin-controlled RT. These outlets promoted divisive, slanted, or malign material regularly, similar to other traditional disinformation channels. They also managed to gain millions of followers on social media accounts, magnitudes more than previous Kremlin-backed disinformation operations had accrued.

In response to these findings, social media companies like Facebook and Twitter began exploring ways to force these outlets to reveal their governmental ties for each platform's user base. However, shortly thereafter, investigative journalists dissected Maffick Media's network further and found that it had attempted to work around disclosure requirements by re-registering as a Delaware (USA) LLC. This action didn't require any information about the company's actual owners and allowed Maffick's accounts to dodge<sup>9</sup> new counter-disinformation transparency requirements. Social media companies appeared unaware that Maffick employed such a tactic. According to the head of Facebook's security policy, neither the RT subsidiary nor any of the related accounts informed the social media firm that they were changing ownership structure, allowing Maffick to work around Facebook's narrow disclosure requirements. It was only when journalists exposed the company's new ownership structures and alerted social media platforms of Maffick's actions that Facebook and Twitter began formulating new, more stringent disclosure policies that labelled the outlets as "state-controlled media."<sup>10</sup> While labeling is hardly a panacea,<sup>11</sup> it is nonetheless a step toward the kind of transparency required to combat this threat. Furthermore, simply mapping these disinformation networks online—without understanding the financial and multi-level backing of those networks—might not have had the same impact and response by outlets.

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These examples evince the vital roles investigative journalists play in discovering these disinformation networks.<sup>12</sup> These investigations have outed supposed “grassroots” media,<sup>13</sup> identified those behind nominally independent outlets,<sup>14</sup> uncovered disinformation efforts on secondary social media platforms like Tumblr<sup>15</sup> or Medium,<sup>16</sup> and tracked paid disinformation influencers to hidden pockets around the world.<sup>17</sup> These efforts have not slowed. Recently, BBC reporters<sup>18</sup> uncovered new China-linked campaigns to circumvent disclosure requirements on YouTube, pressuring YouTube influencers nominally independent from the CCP to whitewash Beijing’s crimes. It is suspected that these “vloggers” are remunerated for their work; however, they deny these charges. Moreover, investigative journalists at OpenSecrets analyzed how “dark money” networks continue to back outlets pumping out disinformation<sup>19</sup> for unwitting audiences.

These recent investigations underscore journalism’s place at the tip of the counter-disinformation spear. To use another metaphor, if disinformation campaigns are aimed at the democratic body politic, investigative journalists are akin to white blood cells, hunting and identifying malign disinformation campaigns that threaten the health of the democratic polity. They are part of democracies’ competitive advantage over autocratic or illiberal governments elsewhere. There is no stronger defense against disinformation than transparency. However, a free and transparent press is not the only solution. The U.S., for instance, has seen disinformation campaigns continue to spread despite the country’s free and fair press. Still, providing and protecting space for investigative journalists to uncover such networks remains vital to disrupting these campaigns.

In addition, there have been new developments and strategies in recent years among investigative journalists—especially in terms of collaboration—that further cement its importance in countering disinformation. Transnational organizations like the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) allow investigative journalists to work with colleagues elsewhere far more easily, resulting in remarkable, unprecedented investigations. Indeed, more international, collaborative approaches are crucial to combatting novel disinformation operations. After all, these disinformation networks rarely confine themselves to a single jurisdiction.

Investigative journalism is well positioned to uncover disinformation networks, and their work and tactics should be continued and emulated. However, investigative journalism still has limitations, from funding concerns to growing legal threats and physical intimidation—even within developed democracies. Yet even with these pressures, investigative journalists are rarely cowed.<sup>20</sup> Civil society and other actors should step into the breach to help in this global effort in the following ways:

CSOs and NGOs should consider strengthening independent funding for investigative journalists. Journalists around the world face financial pressures; this support would help eliminate some these concerns and allow journalists to focus on their work instead.

Likewise, civil society should help continue to construct cross-border bridges. These trans-national relationships have proven key to successful journalistic collaboration, and already exist in civil society; there’s no reason they shouldn’t be expanded.

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Few investigative journalists exhibit the doggedness and fearlessness of those in the profession than Maria Ressa—seen here on trial for Libel in the Philippines—as her recent Nobel Prize award illustrates.

Finally, civil society should continue to highlight the importance of investigative journalism (especially as it pertains to untangling disinformation networks) wherever possible. Not only will doing so highlight a relationship that often goes overlooked, but it will help draw more audiences to these outlets along the way.

Without continued support, investigative journalism will struggle to uncover disinformation, and our democracies will be the worse for it.

### KEY POINTS:

- Investigative journalists counter disinformation efforts by exposing operations and enabling deeper and more thorough investigations.
- Transnational organizations of journalists support robust investigations and cross-national collaboration, responding to the transnational nature of disinformation networks and operations.
- Despite playing a vital role in revealing disinformation networks and holding those who operate these networks to public account, it is important for civil society organizations and other nongovernmental actors to strengthen cross-border and sectoral ties and support for investigative journalists.

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## Endnotes

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