

Russian Disinfo Patterns: The Best Defense Is a Good Offense

The infamous 4 D's of disinformation have been profoundly used by Kremlin to impact the nature of information in the West. DFRLab's Information Defense Fellow Ben Nimmo describes these as: Dismiss – if you do not like what your critics say, insult them; Distort – if you do not like the facts, twist them; Distract – if you are accused of something, accuse someone else of the same thing; Dismay – if you don't like what someone else is planning, try to scare them off. These disinfo methods have proven themselves to be very effective and most of the messages Kremlin is forming can be explained through the lens of 4 D's. In this article we will take a deeper look into the method of Distract.

Using a social media listening tool Buzzsumo we were able to investigate which media outlets were using such keywords as 'Russophobic', 'Russophobia', 'Anti-Russian Hysteria', 'NATO Aggression' in English language and how much engagement these articles garner. Such keywords signify attempts to thwart criticism towards current Russian regime and their aggression against neighbors.

In the latest instalment of our 'Russian Disinfo Patterns', we investigate the different defensive keywords that constantly appear in Kremlin-funded media, to see their scope of outreach and their effectiveness.

Social Listening Tool and Methodology

BuzzSumo is one of the top social media analytics tools, which comes with a powerful search engine that helps to find and analyze the best performing content related to a specific niche, including social media. Originally created for marketing specialists, this tool is being increasingly used by researchers analyzing information warfare trends. This tool allows to analyze most engaged with (engagements on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Reddit and generated original links leading to the content) online content which has concrete keywords in it. Buzzsumo defines an engagement as a reaction, comments or a share. By using keywords, certain narratives that are formed by the Kremlin can be identified on a broader, strategic level.

In this case, we were interested to investigate the media content in regards to Russian defensive narratives and analyzed the keywords 'Russophobic', 'Russophobia', 'Anti-Russian Hysteria' and 'NATO Aggression'. We were able to check two-years' worth of data from August 22, 2016 to August 22, 2018, also investigating which content received the most engagement. Sorting the media content by the "most engaged with", we were able to see which media outlets were the most influential in the English language digital space.

Russophobic

For the keyword 'Russophobic', Russian state-funded media outlets RT (7,318 engagements) and Sputnik News (4,192 engagements) dominated over 75% of all engagement stats, totaling in over 11,000 engagements. Russia-Insider.com, which is has been criticized for being pro-Kremlin, Stalkerzone.org and TASS.com, two well-known pro-Kremlin outlets dominated in the remaining 25% of the engagements. The only not strictly pro-Russian

outlet, which had a significant share of engagements was Youtube. Nonetheless it is unclear what exact content received this engagement, as a separate research is required to assess the Youtube content.

Most Engaged With Media Content: 'Russophobic'

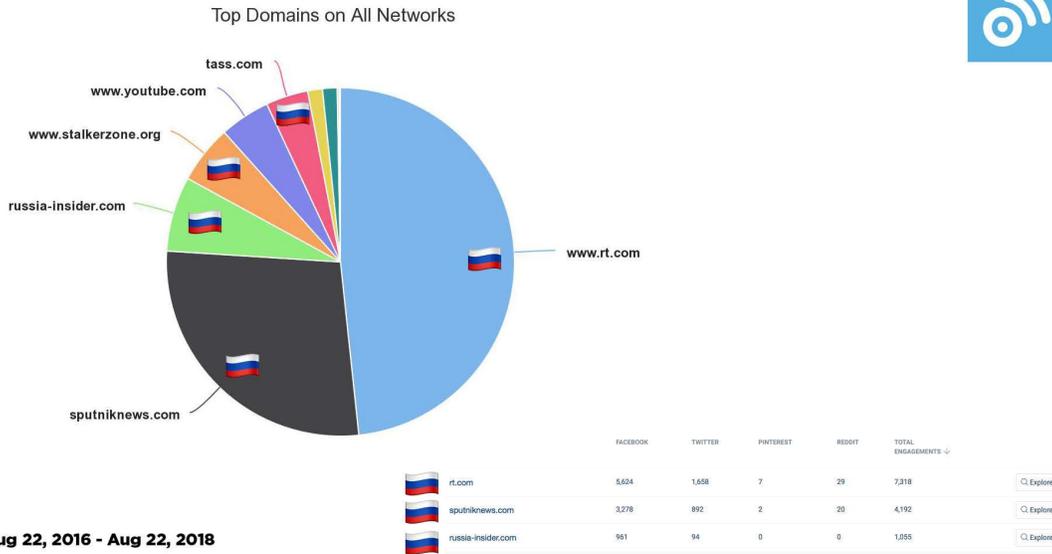


Image Source – Buzzsumo

Looking at the most engaged with articles in the two year period, we also see the dominance of the two Kremlin-funded media outlets. Out of five most engaged with articles three were written by RT and one by Sputnik News, all having loaded and subjective titles, clearly aiming to blame the West for Russophobic behavior. It is important to note that the most engaged with article was produced by Newsweek.com and it did not possess the keyword Russophobic in it. It most likely signifies an error by the search engine, as no other similar cases have been yet observed when using Buzzsumo in our reasearch. This finding suggested that all of the most popular media content were made the Kremlin-funded outlets.

Most Engaged With Media Content: 'Russophobic'

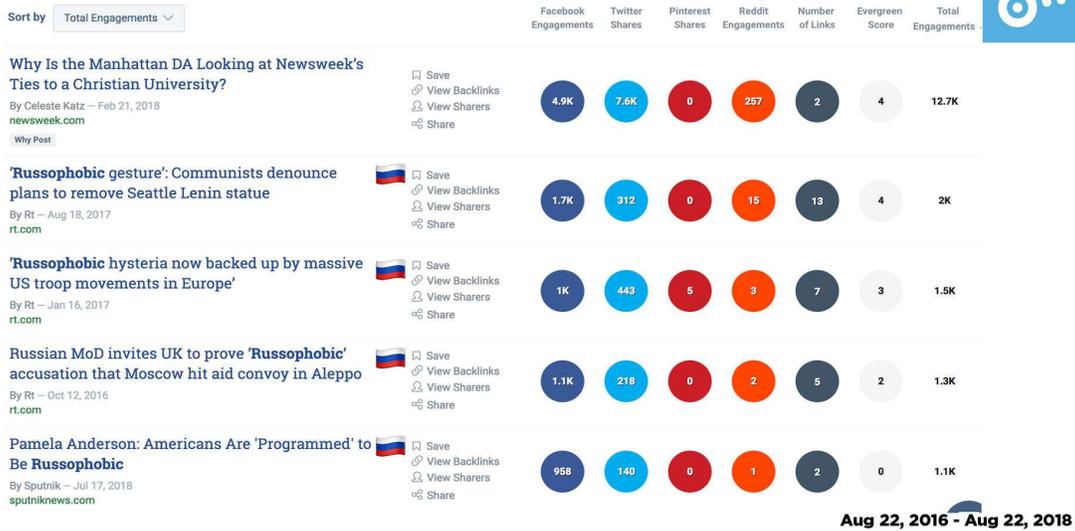


Image Source – Buzzsumo

Russophobia

Meanwhile, with the keyword 'Russophobia', the two most engaged with media outlets were also RT and Sputnik News, but these two outlets were less prominent than in the case of 'Russophobic'. These two outlets garnered 11,702 and 9,387 engagements respectively, totaling over 55% of the total number of engagements. Russia-Insider garnered not more than 5% of the engagement share, leaving the rest to more neutral (sott.net, consortiumnews.com) and social media sites, which require a more in-depth investigation (Reddit, YouTube).

Most Engaged With Media Content: 'Russophobia'

Top Domains on All Networks

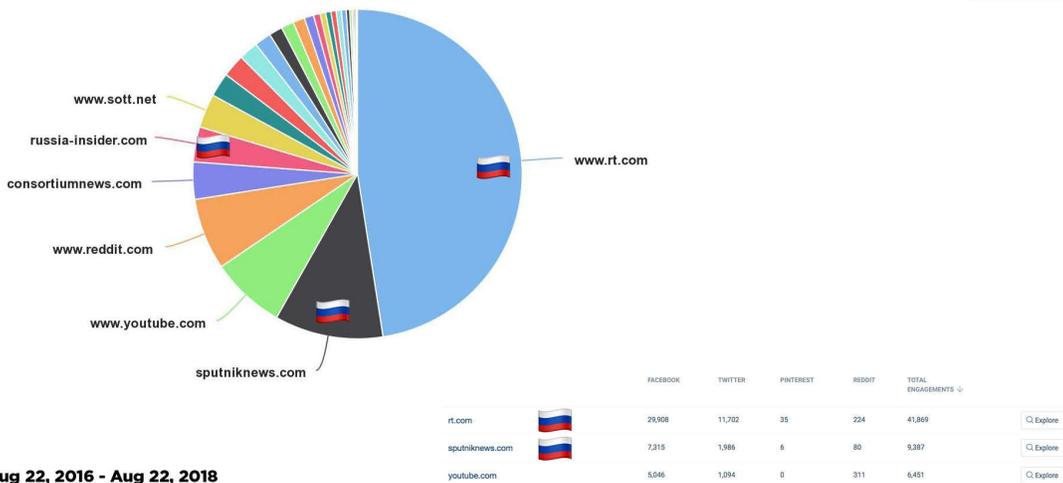


Image Source – Buzzsumo

Looking at the most engaged with articles, similar patterns to the keyword ‘Russophobic’ appeared. Out of five most popular articles, three were published by RT. Nonetheless, the most engaged with article was the story by an American outlet Rawstory.org, and the third most popular story was written by Politico. As in the previous case, the Politico article did not contain the word ‘Russophobia’, but was still picked up by Buzzsumo’s search engine.

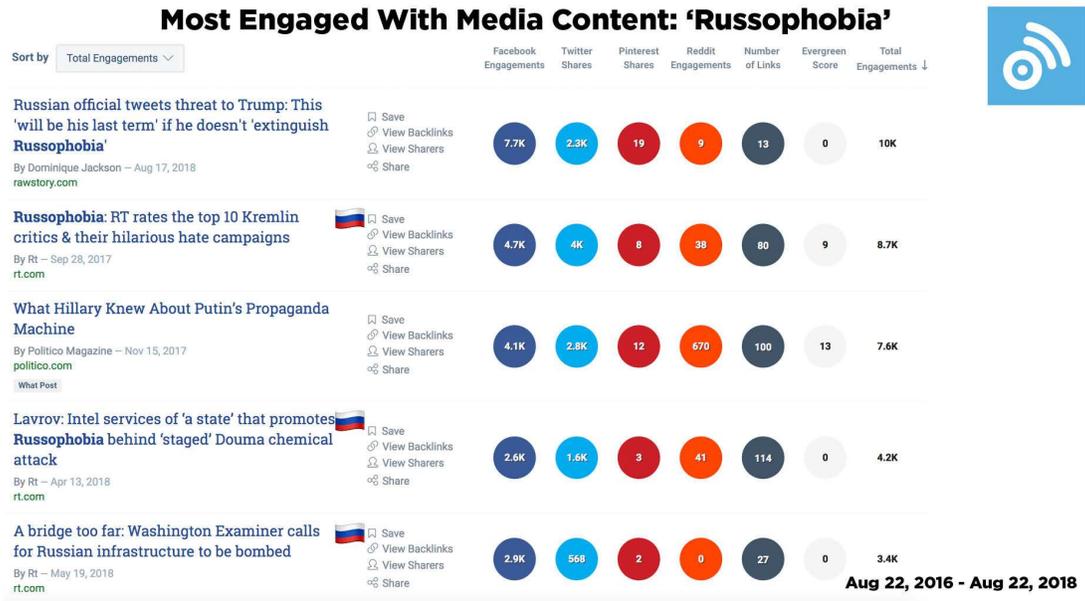


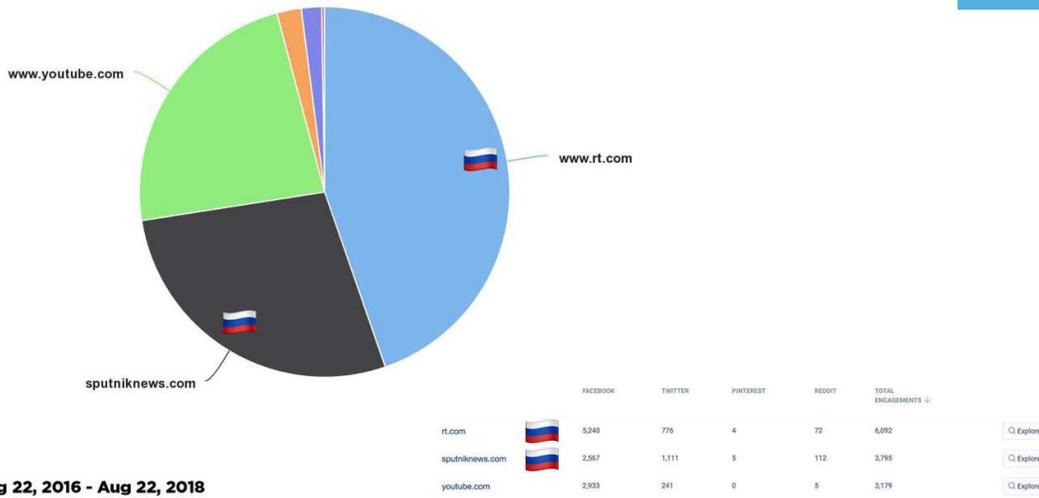
Image Source – Buzzsumo

Anti-Russian Hysteria

In the case of keywords ‘Anti-Russian Hysteria’, the dominance of RT and Sputnik News was clearly visible. These two outlets garnered 5,240 and 2,567 engagements respectively, totaling in over 70% of the total engagements. The third most popular outlet appeared to be YouTube, which had close to 25% of the total engagement statistics. As in previous cases, YouTube requires a separate in-depth research in order to find out what content was promoted on this platform.

Most Engaged With Media Content: 'Anti-Russian Hysteria'

Top Domains on All Networks



Aug 22, 2016 - Aug 22, 2018

Image Source – Buzzsumo

As of the most engaged with media content, only two out of five most popular were published by pro-Kremlin media. Two of the most popular articles were RT's and the other three were published by Washington Post, Fox News and Yahoo, which reposted Fox news' article.

Most Engaged With Media Content: 'Anti-Russian Hysteria'



Sort by: Total Engagements

Article Title	Author	Domain	Facebook Engagements	Twitter Shares	Pinterest Shares	Reddit Engagements	Number of Links	Evergreen Score	Total Engagements
Moscow blames anti-Russian hysteria for Sessions's plight	By David Filipov - Mar 3, 2017	washingtonpost.com	2.7K	442	2	83	17	3	3.2K
Anti-Russian hysteria isn't in America's national interest	By John Dale Grover - Aug 11, 2018	foxnews.com	2.3K	334	0	2	61	0	2.6K
Building bridges: Austrian Chancellor on why he didn't join anti-Russian hysteria over Skripal case	By RT - Apr 5, 2018	rt.com	2.3K	182	1	3	27	4	2.5K
Anti-Russian hysteria isn't in America's national interest	Aug 11, 2018	yahoo.com	2.3K	2	0	0	0	0	2.3K
With anti-Russia hysteria rampant, Beijing reminds US about ties between Russian & Chinese forces	By RT - Apr 5, 2018	rt.com	1.9K	223	1	12	30	0	2.2K

Aug 22, 2016 - Aug 22, 2018

Image Source – Buzzsumo

NATO Aggression

Lastly, we analyzed, compared with other previous cases, the more offensive 'NATO

Aggression' keywords. The results turned out to be rather different from other cases, as the German language RT and Sputnik News appeared in the domain mix. All of the Russian outlets that appeared in the search were pro-Kremlin outlets and all together consisted more than 70% of the total engagements.

Most Engaged With Media Content: 'NATO Aggression'

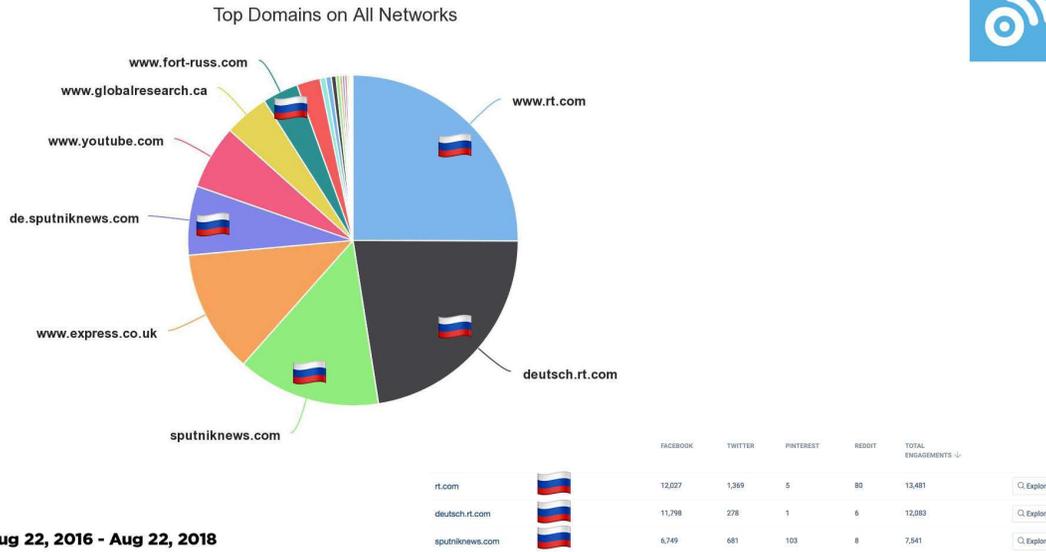


Image Source – Buzzsumo

Analysis of the most engaged with media content presented no pro-Kremlin media outlets' entries. Nonetheless, a closer look revealed that the Buzzsumo search engine did not pick up articles about 'NATO Aggression', but rather found separate keywords 'NATO' and 'Aggression' in the articles. In this case, these articles did not represent themes we were interested in as in some cases the word aggression was used when talking about Russia, rather than NATO.

Most Engaged With Media Content: 'NATO Aggression'

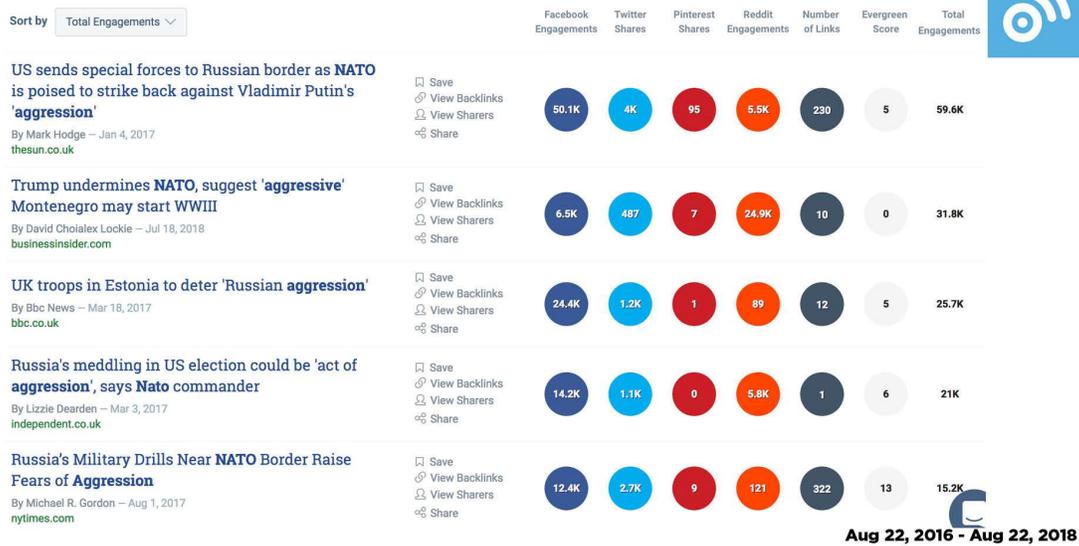


Image Source – Buzzsumo

Findings

As the analysis suggested, the keywords that are often used in Russia's defensive narratives were highly dominated by the pro-Kremlin outlets. This is especially common to the keywords 'Russophobia' and 'Russophobic' that were used almost exceptionally by the pro-Kremlin outlets.

All of the investigated keywords presented high dominance of the pro-Kremlin media outlets, but not all of the most engaged with articles were from these outlets. This finding suggests that even if not all of the RT and Sputnik News produced articles garner most engagements, the outlets themselves are producing the highest volumes of content using these keywords. This serves as evidence that these outlets are systematically pushing content in English with wording that defends Kremlin's actions.

As in the [previous research](#), YouTube appeared amongst one of the popular domains, but did not provided clear context of what content was promoted on this platform. To asses this information, a more in-depth research is required, focusing only on this platform. In the near future research, VIPA is planning to investigate the scope of Russian propaganda on YouTube platform.

It is important to note the possible shortcomings of the Buzzsumo search engine which appeared in this research. One of the most significant limitations is that when using more than one word, the search engine does not always pick up the content with the expected meanings. As in the case of 'NATO Aggression', these two words were searched separately and the word aggression was often attributed to other parties than NATO, rendering the search results questionable.

One of the goals of this research is to provide methodological evidence basis, on which further, more in depth research could be based on. Also, to encourage

researchers use innovative research methods, when it comes to disinformation analysis.

Conclusion

In this research, Buzzsumo has allowed to take a deeper look in to the Kremlin's information warfare method of Distract. As the graphs show, pro-Kremlin outlets are dominating when it comes to defensive keywords, suggesting a systematic Kremlin's approach. Even if individual articles not always appear amongst the most engaged with, the share volume of content that RT and Sputnik News are publishing with these keywords secures them positions amongst the most popular domains.

As this influence would not be surprising in Russian language space, in English language space it is rather alarming. Some of the keywords, such as 'Russophobic' or 'Russophobia' appear to be used exceptionally by the Russian outlets without quotations, showing that this term is not used organically in the Western media.

These findings should encourage to think what message the article conveys every time one of these keywords is seen in it.

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