



# UK Trade Leaks and Secondary Infection:

New Findings and Insights  
from a Known Russian  
Operation

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# Executive Summary

On December 6 - acting on information shared by Graphika - Reddit banned 1 subreddit and 61 accounts that the company believed were "part of a campaign that has been reported as originating from Russia." Twelve of the accounts had been involved in amplifying a high-profile leak of UK government trade documents; many of the remaining had not been previously exposed.

Graphika analyzed the new accounts and identified 44 stories launched by the Russian operation between October 2016 and October 2019. Many of the stories were demonstrably false, based on forged documents or nonexistent interviews; all were amplified by networks of fake accounts across a wide range of social platforms and forums where users could post content without moderation, including the BuzzFeed Community, Reddit, Medium, quora[.]com, and fringe German website homment[.]com. This report summarizes our main findings in the hope that others in the open-source community will continue adding to the picture.

Most of the stories seemed designed to create divisions between Western countries, especially the United States and United Kingdom, but also Poland and Germany and Germany and the United States. Several stories seemed aimed at undermining German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron. A cluster of articles spread alarming rumors about the 2018 Winter Olympics in South Korea, games from which Russia had been banned for doping.

Two stories focused on political controversies in the United States: the smear campaign against former US Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch in 2019 and the "dossier" of claims against US President Donald Trump in early 2017. In both cases, the stories were presented in a way that seemed designed to undermine the United States abroad, rather than dividing it at home.

None of these stories gained significant traction. This operation struggled to place its content in front of real users, perhaps in part because of the measures it took to hide the true identity of its operators, such as the use of single-use burner accounts.

The discovery of these new Secondary Infektion assets and stories is important for what it reveals about the scale, scope, and tactics used in this operation. The accounts suspended by Reddit reveal an operation that covered a three-year span, used hundreds of accounts, posted over 40 false stories in at least six languages, and targeted a wide range of cleavages in and between Western societies. This was a sophisticated and well-resourced operation.

This discovery is also important for what it says about the limitations of information operations. With the notable exception of the UK/US trade leaks, the stories planted online throughout the three years of this campaign gained little to no traction. Some were openly mocked by real users; many were simply ignored.

All the earlier stories were based on forgeries. Some were carefully crafted, others were laughably inept, but all were false. Almost all these stories fell flat. By contrast, the leak of genuine UK trade documents was one of the headline moments of the UK election campaign and made the news well beyond British shores. As the 2020 US presidential election approaches, it is vital to be wary of potential interference, but it is equally important to understand what forms of interference are most damaging.

As this report goes to press, it is still unclear how the documents were obtained, whether by genuine leaking from an inside source or through some form of cyber intrusion.

This report is divided into three sections. The first describes three key stories from the Russian operation that are of special political relevance. The second provides a chronological overview of each new story run by the operation, together with a list of where the stories ran. This list is likely to be incomplete: as ever, we look forward to others using this work to continue the collective investigation and analysis of this campaign. Finally, the appendix describes the original Secondary Infection findings, including the tradecraft the operation used that is of relevance to the latest finds.

# Analysis | Key Findings

## **Additional Assets from Reddit: General Features**

On December 6, 2019, Reddit named 61 accounts that it had identified as being tied to the Russian operation.<sup>1</sup> Two of these, u/gregoriator and u/osternaxnn, had specifically been involved in spreading the US/UK trade leaks in October 2019. Thirteen more, created that day, appear to have been set up for the sole purpose of up-voting the original posts. A further eight were involved in disseminating false stories. Those stories had already been exposed in the original Secondary Infektion report, in June 2019.

This leaves 38 accounts that were neither associated with the trade leaks nor part of previously documented Secondary Infektion forgeries. They constitute a new trove of assets that expose many more false stories planted by the same operation. Reddit banned the accounts but left them visible online, “so that researchers and the public can scrutinize them to see for themselves how these accounts operated.”

The articles posted by the 38 new accounts covered the following main topics, in descending order of frequency:

- Ukrainian politics: 7 articles, including one on former US Ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch
- Hillary Clinton and the 2016 election: 6 articles
- Angela Merkel: 5 articles, with a special focus on migrants
- Winter Olympics in South Korea: 5 articles, all painting an alarming picture of the security situation ahead of the Games
- UK “interference” in U.S. elections: 2 articles
- Brexit and Northern Ireland: 2 articles
- Emmanuel Macron: 2 articles
- NATO: 2 articles
- CIA “interference” in Africa: 2 articles
- Georgia: 2 articles
- NGOs as intelligence assets: 1 article
- Turkish referendum: 1 article
- Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny: 1 article
- Kaspersky antivirus: 1 article

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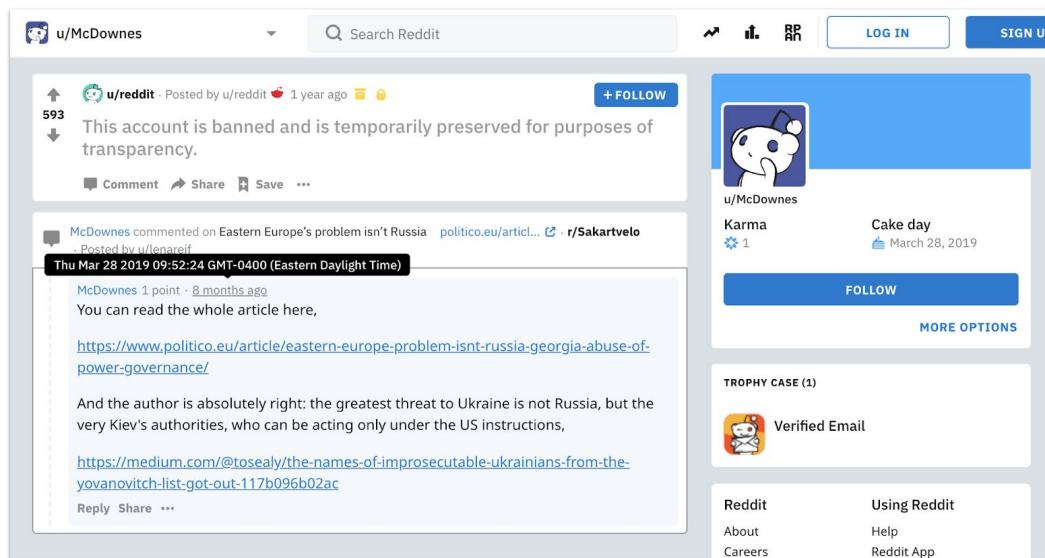
<sup>1</sup> “Suspected Campaign from Russia on Reddit,” Reddit Security, December 6, 2019, [https://www.reddit.com/r/redditsecurity/comments/e74nml/suspected\\_campaign\\_from\\_russia\\_on\\_reddit/](https://www.reddit.com/r/redditsecurity/comments/e74nml/suspected_campaign_from_russia_on_reddit/), archived [here](#).

The accounts posted articles or comments in the following languages:

- English: 26 articles
- Spanish: 4 articles
- German: 4 articles
- French: 2 articles
- Russian: 2 articles
- Ukrainian: 1 article

The earliest persona identified on the basis of this set began posting on October 21, 2016: this was the persona Lukas Esmeraldas,<sup>2</sup> the only asset in this set to post multiple articles over a period of months. Graphika identified this persona in the course of the investigation. The most recent persona was created on October 21, 2019, the same day as the operation launched the UK trade leaks; it was called u/Defiant\_Emu and was posted in Russian about opposition leader Alexei Navalny.<sup>3</sup>

Reddit's decision to leave the accounts visible means that a trove of information is now available to open-source researchers. Basic information, such as the creation date and time and content of the posts, are readily available.



Post-takedown view of u/McDownes, showing posting history and creation date ("Cake day").<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> On Medium as <https://medium.com/@lukasesmerald1989>, archived [here](#); on the BuzzFeed Community as <https://www.buzzfeed.com/lukasesmeraldas>, archived [here](#); on Reddit as <https://www.reddit.com/user/LukasEsmerald>, archived [here](#); on Quora as <https://www.quora.com/profile/Lukas-Esmerald>, archived [here](#). Its first post was on homment[.]com, and attacked Hillary Clinton. The article is at <https://homment.com/Hillary-path-to-victory>, archived [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> [https://reddit.com/user/Defiant\\_Emu](https://reddit.com/user/Defiant_Emu), archived [here](#). Its one post is archived [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> <https://reddit.com/user/McDownes>, archived [here](#). Its one post is archived [here](#).



These accounts can still be scanned using tools such as [reductive\[.\]com](https://reductive.com). This reveals curious extra features commonly indicative of spam: for example, u/McDownes, illustrated above, was created at 9:51:14 am (ET) on March 28 this year, posted its only comment exactly one minute and ten seconds later, and was never used again.

### Profile Information

(Dates displayed in your device's timezone)

**Name:** [McDownes](#)

**Created:** 3/28/2019, 9:51:14 AM (256 days ago)

**Link Karma :** 1

**Comment Karma:** 0

**Reddit Gold:** No

**Reddit Gold Trophy:** No

**Subreddit Moderator:** No

#### Overview

(Dates displayed in your device's timezone)

Type	Domain	Subreddit	Title	Text	Date	Total Votes
S	self.reddit	u_reddit	This account is banned and is temporarily preserved for purposes of transparency.		Apr 10, 2018, 10:00:05 AM	591
C		Sakartvelo	Eastern Europe's problem isn't Russia	<a href="#">View</a>	<span style="border: 2px solid red; padding: 2px;">Mar 28, 2019, 9:52:24 AM</span>	1

*Profile information and posting details for u/McDownes, from [reductive\[.\]com](https://reductive.com).*

Many of these accounts posted identical stories to a number of different subreddits, in a clear attempt to spread the message across the platform. These attempts largely failed, as the great majority of posts gained only a handful of votes, if any.

## Profile Information

(Dates displayed in your device's timezone)

**Name:** [lauraferrojo](#)

**Created:** 9/28/2017, 4:30:05 AM (802 days ago)

**Link Karma :** 1

**Comment Karma:** 0

**Reddit Gold:** No

**Reddit Gold Trophy:** No

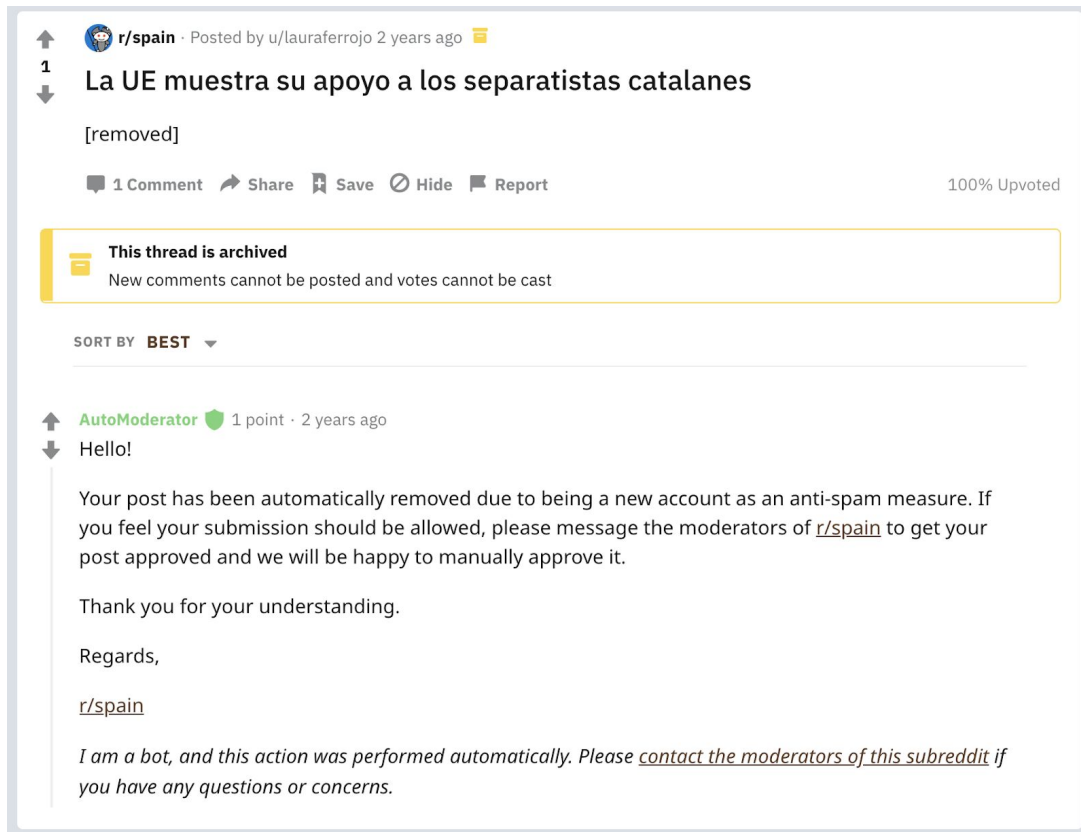
**Subreddit Moderator:** No

Type	Domain	Subreddit	Title	Text	Date	Total Votes
S	self.reddit	u_reddit	This account is banned and is temporarily preserved for purposes of transparency.		Apr 10, 2018, 10:00:05 AM	592
S	self.Andalucia	Andalucia	La UE muestra su apoyo a los separatistas catalanes	<a href="#">View</a>	Sep 28, 2017, 5:40:32 AM	1
S	self.Barcelona	Barcelona	La UE muestra su apoyo a los separatistas catalanes	<a href="#">View</a>	Sep 28, 2017, 5:10:03 AM	1
S	self.spain	spain	La UE muestra su apoyo a los separatistas catalanes	<a href="#">View</a>	Sep 28, 2017, 4:51:52 AM	1
S	self.catalunya	catalunya	La UE muestra su apoyo a los separatistas catalanes	<a href="#">View</a>	Sep 28, 2017, 5:22:58 AM	0
S	self.es	es	La UE muestra su apoyo a los separatistas catalanes	<a href="#">View</a>	Sep 28, 2017, 4:41:05 AM	0

Profile information for u/lauraferrojo.<sup>5</sup> Note the match between the creation date and the posting dates, the 11 minute gap between account creation and the first post, the way it posted the same article five times in less than an hour, and the way the five posts together scored just three up-votes.

Because of this rapid-fire posting, many of the operation's stories were blocked and removed automatically as soon as they were made, because they were suspected of being spam. It is unclear whether the operators of Secondary Infektion made any attempt to circumvent this blocking by contacting the moderators; they certainly continued posting very quickly after they created their accounts. The operation's most recent confirmed account, the evocatively named u/Defiant\_Emu, created on October 21, 2019, also follows this pattern, with a first post shared 18 minutes after its creation.

<sup>5</sup> <https://reddit.com/user/lauraferrojo>, archived [here](#).



Post by u/lauraferrojo alleging EU support for separatists in Catalonia, posted to the popular r/spain subreddit (34,900 members as of December 9, 2019), together with the reply from the automoderator explaining that it was removed because it came from an account that was, at that moment, 21 minutes old.<sup>6</sup>

### March 25, 2019: Ukraine, Corruption, and US Politics

The operators behind this campaign clearly paid attention to the news in the US and adjusted their operation to take advantage of developing divisive issues. On March 20, 2019, *The Hill* columnist John Solomon interviewed Ukraine's Prosecutor General Yuriy Lutsenko and reported the claim that the then-US Ambassador to Ukraine, Marie Yovanovitch, had handed Lutsenko a list of Ukrainians who were to be shielded from prosecution for corruption.<sup>7</sup> The claim was false: Lutsenko later explained that he had accused Yovanovitch of wanting such a list, rather than her

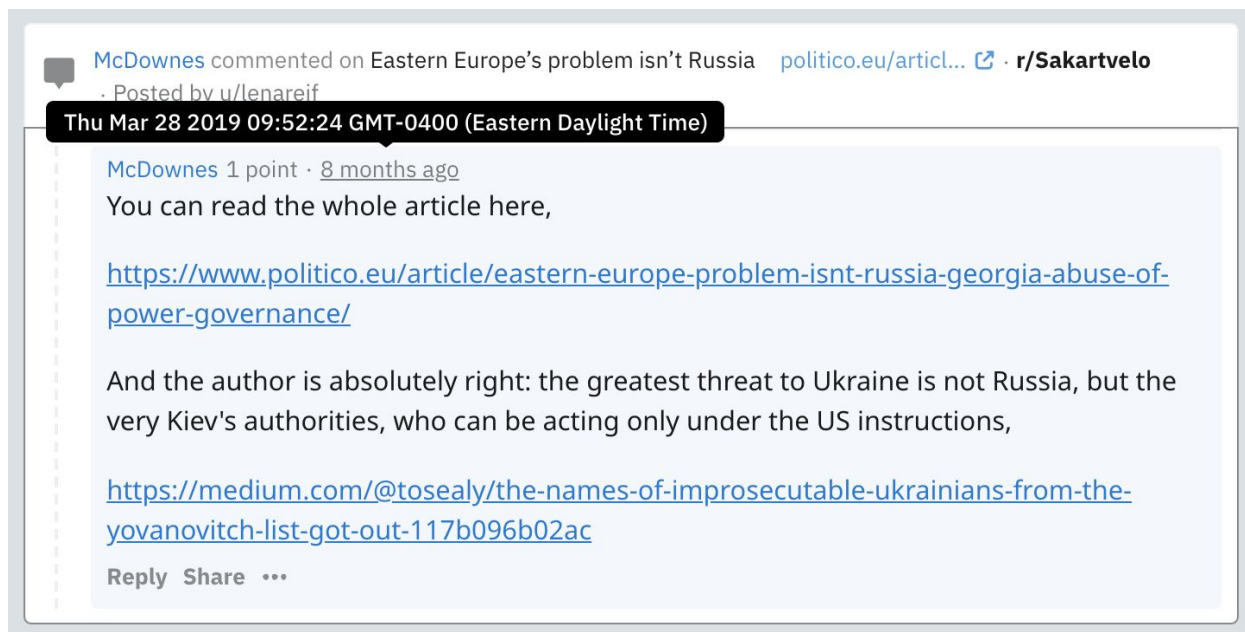
<sup>6</sup> Attributed to u/lauraferrojo, "La UE muestra su apoyo a los separatistas catalanes," Reddit, September 28, 2017, [https://www.reddit.com/r/spain/comments/72yuz3/la\\_ue\\_muestra\\_su\\_apoyo\\_a\\_los\\_separatistas/](https://www.reddit.com/r/spain/comments/72yuz3/la_ue_muestra_su_apoyo_a_los_separatistas/), archived [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> John Solomon, "Top Ukrainian justice official says US ambassador gave him a do not prosecute list," *The Hill*, March 20, 2019, [https://thehill.com/hilltv/rising/434875-top-ukrainian-justice-official-says-us-ambassador-gave-him-a-do-not-prosecute?fbclid=IwAR3fpf5ajCIRpuDczErVShsjoe7JDuoUeZ1LbQX73Vt\\_IpNo4TBgRcWFeL4](https://thehill.com/hilltv/rising/434875-top-ukrainian-justice-official-says-us-ambassador-gave-him-a-do-not-prosecute?fbclid=IwAR3fpf5ajCIRpuDczErVShsjoe7JDuoUeZ1LbQX73Vt_IpNo4TBgRcWFeL4), archived [here](#).



demanding one.<sup>8</sup> The false claim featured prominently in Yovanovitch's later testimony to the investigation into US President Donald Trump's possible impeachment.<sup>9</sup>

Eight days after Solomon's article broke, on March 28, 2019, an asset from this campaign u/McDownes, posted a comment and two URLs under a Politico article on corruption in Eastern Europe. Despite the Scottish surname, the user wrote in grammatically incorrect English characteristic of non-native English speakers, struggling with the possessive genitive ("the very Kiev's authorities") and the definite article ("acting only under the US instructions").



*u/McDownes' only post, on March 28, 2019, one minute and ten seconds after the account was created.*

The first URL pointed to the Politico article, but the second linked to a Medium post from a user called @tosealy, dated March 25.<sup>10</sup> This post made the sensational claim that a photo of the

<sup>8</sup> "Ukraine Prosecutor General Lutsenko admits U.S. ambassador didn't give him a do not prosecute list," Unian, April 18, 2019, <https://www.unian.info/politics/10520715-ukraine-prosecutor-general-lutsenko-admits-u-s-ambassador-didn-t-give-him-a-do-not-prosecute-list.html>, archived [here](#). The article presents an accurate translation of a Russian-language interview: Maria Zhartovskaya and Gleb Gusev, "Генпрокурор Юрий Луценко не уходит в отставку," theBabel, April 17, 2019, <https://thebabel.net/texts/28898-genprokuror-yuriy-lucenko-ne-idet-v-otstavku-vot-chto-on-rasskazal-nam-o-konfliktah-s-poslom-ssha-i-glavoy-nabu-dele-burisma-plenkah-rozenblata-i-istochnikah-korrupcii-bolshoe-intervyu>, archived [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> Her testimony is online at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/context/read-marie-yovanovitch-s-prepared-deposition-statement/dffb-f543-a373-46e0-a957-bc12a9371af4/>.

<sup>10</sup> Attributed to "Tony Sealy," "The names of 'improsecutable' Ukrainians from the Yovanovitch list got out," Medium, March 25, 2019.

Yovanovitch list had been circulating “on Facebook communities oppositional to the current President of Ukraine.” The post provided a screenshot, but without source links. It argued that the “leak” was part of a feud between then-Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and US President Donald Trump:<sup>11</sup>

Most likely Poroshenko himself ordered to set Yovanovitch up trying to gain support of both Donald Trump and the Republicans at the elections. However, Trump did not appreciate such an attempt. He made it clear he never forgave Poroshenko’s support of Clinton at the elections in the United States. After receiving an aggressive reaction, Poroshenko instantly passed the buck to Lutsenko, and confirmed he completely backed Yovanovitch. Yet, the last move was still made by the White House. The list of the names that were not mentioned in the sensational interview by the Prosecutor General of Ukraine has magically appeared on the web.

The account had no profile picture, and this was its only post on Medium.<sup>12</sup> Reverse image searching on Google and Yandex failed to show any copies of the photo earlier than this one. The only account that linked to it was Reddit account belonging to this campaign. Available evidence suggests that the @tosealy Medium account was created by the same operation in order to post this one story, and that the photo was itself a fake designed to bolster the false claim about Yovanovitch.

The same English-language article appeared the same day, March 25, and under the name “Tony Sealy” or “ToSealy,” on homment[.]com,<sup>13</sup> debatepolitics[.]com,<sup>14</sup> southafricatoday[.]net,<sup>15</sup> and indybay[.]org.<sup>16</sup> A URL showing the same headline, now deleted, suggests that the identical story was also posted to the BuzzFeed user forum.<sup>17</sup>

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<https://medium.com/@tosealy/the-names-of-improsecutable-ukrainians-from-the-yovanovitch-list-got-out-t-117b096b02ac>, archived [here](#).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> The account is online at <https://medium.com/@tosealy>, archived [here](#).

<sup>13</sup> <https://homment.com/KDOD4QbqeyQIdEAKNc5H>, archived [here](#).

<sup>14</sup>

<https://www.debatepolitics.com/international-politics/351609-names-improsecutable-ukrainians-yovanovitch-list-got-out.html>, archived [here](#).

<sup>15</sup>

<https://southafricatoday.net/world-news/europe/the-names-of-improsecutable-ukrainians-from-the-yovanovitch-list-got-out/>, archived [here](#).

<sup>16</sup> Preserved via

<https://www.usposts.net/2019/03/the-names-of-improsecutable-ukrainians-from-the-yovanovitch-list-got-out-indybay/>, archived [here](#).

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.buzzfeed.com/tosealy/the-names-of-improsecutable-ukrainians-from-the-66enj1zpem>.

On March 28, a Spanish translation of the article, signed by a user named “cabradolfo,” appeared on Reddit,<sup>18</sup> globedia[.]com,<sup>19</sup> burbuja[.]info,<sup>20</sup> and mediavida[.]com,<sup>21</sup> and the following day, a German translation under the name “Ute Schaefer” appeared on meinbezirk[.]at,<sup>22</sup> homment[.]com,<sup>23</sup> nexusboard[.]de,<sup>24</sup> and politopia[.]de.<sup>25</sup>

Just as in the original campaign, the personas that posted these articles were single-use accounts, set up and abandoned in a single day. u/cabradolfo posted this story for the first time just 52 seconds after account creation, while the persona on nexusboard[.]de, “UteSchaefer,” was registered, last online, and last active, all on March 29.<sup>26</sup> The specific combination of websites was also the one documented in the previously exposed Secondary Infektion Russian operation.

These articles did not appear to gain significant traction in the West. Only one Twitter user is known to have shared any of the versions (the English text from Medium) on March 30; it was not retweeted.<sup>27</sup> The Spanish and German articles do not appear to have been shared at all. The operation clearly invested resources in translating and posting its story across languages, but there is no evidence that it tried to tweet the story to individual reporters or post it into Facebook groups, as operators behind Secondary Infektion are known to have done on other occasions.

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<sup>18</sup> “Salieron a la luz los nombres de los ucranianos “no enjuiciables” de la lista de Yovanovitch,” Reddit, March 28, 2019.  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/espanol/comments/b6fut6/salieron\\_a\\_la\\_luz\\_los\\_nombres\\_de\\_los\\_ucranianos/](https://www.reddit.com/r/espanol/comments/b6fut6/salieron_a_la_luz_los_nombres_de_los_ucranianos/), archived [here](#).

<sup>19</sup> <http://globedia.com/salieron-luz-nombres-ucranianos-enjuiciables-lista-yovanovitch>, archived [here](#).

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.burbuja.info/inmobiliaria/threads/salieron-a-la-luz-los-nombres-de-los-ucranianos-no-enjuiciables-de-la-lista-de-yovanovitch.1150175/>, archived [here](#). The account claimed the author was a fireman.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.mediavida.com/foro/off-topic/salieron-luz-nombres-ucranianos-no-enjuiciables-629421>, archived [here](#).

<sup>22</sup> “Yovanovitch-Liste: die Namen der “unberührbaren” ukrainischen Bürger sind bekannt geworden,” MeinBezirk.at, March 29, 2019,  
[https://www.meinbezirk.at/enns/c-politik/yovanovitch-liste-die-namen-der-unberuehrbaren-ukrainischen-buerger-sind-bekannt-geworden\\_a3292395](https://www.meinbezirk.at/enns/c-politik/yovanovitch-liste-die-namen-der-unberuehrbaren-ukrainischen-buerger-sind-bekannt-geworden_a3292395), archived [here](#).

<sup>23</sup> <https://homment.com/kTe0UFuvfOf7co1E1FP8>, archived [here](#).

<sup>24</sup> <http://f2293.nexusboard.de/t298863f18606-Yovanovitch-Liste-die-Namen-der-quot-unberuehrbaren-quot-ukrainischen-Buerger-sind-bekannt-geworden.html>, archived [here](#).

<sup>25</sup> <https://politopia.de/forum/index.php?thread/19332-yovanovitch-liste-die-namen-der-unber%C3%BChrbaren-ukrainischen-b%C3%BCrger-sind-bekannt-g/&postID=1006584#post1006584>, archived [here](#).

<sup>26</sup> Profile at [http://f2293.nexusboard.de/u194761\\_UteSchaefer.html](http://f2293.nexusboard.de/u194761_UteSchaefer.html), archived [here](#).

<sup>27</sup> <https://twitter.com/lopatonok/status/1112141789928906753>, archived [here](#).

Profil für UteSchaef	
E-Mail:	
Homepage	
Name	
Geburtsdatum	4. August 1985
Benutzer-Titel	☆☆☆☆☆
Geschlecht:	männlich
Geschriebene Beiträge:	1
Beschäftigung	
Hobbies	
Wohnort	
Biographie	
ICQ Nummer	
Registriert am:	29.03.2019
Zuletzt Online	29.03.2019
Letzte Aktivität:	29.03.2019

*Account details for UteSchaef on nexusboard[.]de, showing that the account was registered, last online, and last active on March 29, 2019.*

However, also on March 29, a Russian-language edition of the article appeared under two separate bylines (Владимир Плотников and Newsnet, the latter leading to an URL including the name “Ivan Gunda”)<sup>28</sup> on the websites begemot[.]media<sup>29</sup> and newsname[.]info.<sup>30</sup> Both authors appeared to be prolific writers rather than single-use accounts. Their articles had different ledes but were otherwise identical in wording and in the URLs they embedded: both sourced the photo of the list to the homment[.]com English-language version. The articles were posted just over an hour apart, according to the time stamps.

The one significant difference from the articles in other languages was the sourcing. The English, Spanish, and German articles attributed the photo to unnamed Facebook groups; the Russian-language versions were headlined, “A new variant of the ‘Lutsenko list’ leaked in the Western press” and sourced the photo to the English-language homment post.

<sup>28</sup> <https://newsname.info/author/ivan-gunda/>, archived here.

<sup>29</sup> Attributed to “Владимир Плотников”, “В западной прессе всплыл новый вариант «списка Луценко»,” Begemot Media, March 29, 2019, <https://begemot.media/news/v-zapadnoj-presse-vsplyl-novyj-variant-spiska-lutsenko/#>, archived [here](#).

<sup>30</sup> Attributed to “Newsnet”, “В западной прессе всплыл новый вариант «списка Луценко»,” March 23, 2019, <https://newsname.info/v-zapadnoj-presse-vsplyl-novyj-varyant-spyska-lutsenko/>, archived [here](#).

The linguistic matches are too close to be coincidental. All the different language variants were clearly translations of one another, with minimal adjustments.<sup>31</sup> The relationship of the Russian author bylines to Secondary Infektion is unclear, but it is unlikely that two separate Ukrainian writers stumbled on the same hommet[.]com article from March 25, translated it with identical wording, and published it just one hour apart, four days later. It is more plausible to suggest that the Russian-language version, too, was the work of Secondary Infektion.

This Russian-language version was the only version to gain even modest traction. The begemot[.]media version was shared on March 29 by four Facebook pages.<sup>32</sup> All were run from Ukraine, and they shared news articles from a wide range of sources, suggesting that they were aggregators, rather than part of the operation. The same day, a Ukrainian member of parliament posted a screenshot of the hommet[.]com English-language article.<sup>33</sup> It was shared 51 times and reported by a handful of websites in Russian, but it did not spread to mainstream outlets.

That a known Russian information operation latched onto the false claim about Yovanovitch five days after it was launched, and tried to provide evidence to support the claim, is especially interesting because of the role that the fake list subsequently played in President Trump's dismissal of Ambassador Yovanovitch. However, there is no indication that this "evidence" was noticed in the United States, and nothing to suggest that the operation succeeded (or even tried) to land this proof in front of American commentators. The only pickup was in Ukraine, where the story was sourced to the Western media. This suggests that the operators behind the campaign saw the Yovanovitch story primarily as a way to discredit US diplomacy in Ukraine rather than a way to interfere in US politics again.

## January 25, 2017: Interview with a Spook

One of the operation's longer-lasting storylines began in January 2017, soon after President Trump's election. This story built up over a number of months and included at least three sets of fake accounts. The overall attempt can confidently be attributed to this operation through the specific combination of websites it used, the repeated deployment of single-use burner accounts, and, more importantly, that the first investigative lead came from two accounts that Reddit confirmed as belonging to the operation.

<sup>31</sup> The article on newsname[.]info had a different lede but was otherwise the same text. This was the earlier of the two Russian-language posts, so it cannot have been copied and changed from the begemot[.]media version.

<sup>32</sup> The posts are online at <https://www.facebook.com/380906379053271/posts/578678862609354/>; [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=166047507418717&story\\_fbid=307145973308869](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=166047507418717&story_fbid=307145973308869); [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=870564429818726&story\\_fbid=1096612187213948](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=870564429818726&story_fbid=1096612187213948); and [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=414710392335076&story\\_fbid=614852518987528](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?id=414710392335076&story_fbid=614852518987528).

<sup>33</sup>

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2365392630358507&set=a.1652585378305906&type=3&theater>.

The content appeared flimsy and implausible, almost a parody, but the scale suggests a serious intention to turn US Republicans against the United Kingdom, similar to earlier fakes from this operation.<sup>34</sup>

The first lead to this particular story came from two Reddit accounts, u/Rinzoog<sup>35</sup> and u/MikeHanon,<sup>36</sup> that Reddit listed as belonging to the operation. Both accounts were created on May 26, 2017, and both posted a single comment that day. According to reductive[.]com, the former was created at 6:20:24 ET and posted at 6:20:47; the latter was created at 6:29:18 and posted at 6:31:31. This is not the pattern of casual users: it is one of the trademarks of Secondary Infektion.

U/Rinzoog pointed<sup>37</sup> to an article on articlesreader[.]com headlined “Evolution of Relations between Donald Trump and Her Majesty’s Secret Service,” first published on March 22, 2017. U/MikeHanon pointed<sup>38</sup> to an article on a website called clickug[.]com. The URL was <https://clickug.com/news/2017-03-22/news-201154-source-14864-evolution-of-relations-between-donald-trump-and-her-majesty-s-secret-service>; the link is now broken, but the date and words in the URL strongly suggest that this was a copy of the same article posted the same day on another site.

Graphika searched for the headline and found the article on three other websites, all posted on March 22: Medium,<sup>39</sup> indybay[.]org,<sup>40</sup> and local forum dover.co[.]uk.<sup>41</sup> In each case, the author only posted once<sup>42</sup>; on the Dover website, the account was only registered that day. On IndyBay and Medium, the author’s name was “Thomas Cooke.”

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<sup>34</sup> Ben Nimmo, “Russian Op 1: Fantasy Assassins,” DFRLab, June 22, 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/russian-op-1-fantasy-assassins-84b7af77c83a>, archived [here](#).

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.reddit.com/user/Rinzoog>, archived [here](#).

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.reddit.com/user/MikeHanon>, archived [here](#).

<sup>37</sup> Post at [https://www.reddit.com/r/worldnews/comments/6d8ft3/uk\\_police\\_stop\\_passing\\_manchester\\_bombing/di2ct7n/?context=3](https://www.reddit.com/r/worldnews/comments/6d8ft3/uk_police_stop_passing_manchester_bombing/di2ct7n/?context=3), archived [here](#).

<sup>38</sup> Post at [https://www.reddit.com/r/policeuk/comments/6d4dms/how\\_on\\_earth\\_did\\_the\\_ny\\_times\\_get\\_hold\\_of/di2d1i2/?context=3](https://www.reddit.com/r/policeuk/comments/6d4dms/how_on_earth_did_the_ny_times_get_hold_of/di2d1i2/?context=3), archived [here](#).

<sup>39</sup> Attributed to “Thomas Cooke,” “Evolution of Relations between Donald Trump and Her Majesty’s Secret Service,” Medium, March 22, 2017, <https://medium.com/@ThomasCooke/evolution-of-relations-between-donald-trump-and-her-majestys-secret-service-a20586e80153>, archived [here](#).

<sup>40</sup> Attributed to “Thomas Cooke,” “Evolution of Relations between Donald Trump and Her Majesty’s Secret Service,” IndyBay, March 22, 2017, <https://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2017/03/22/18797614.php>, archived [here](#). The post was deleted, but a stub remains.

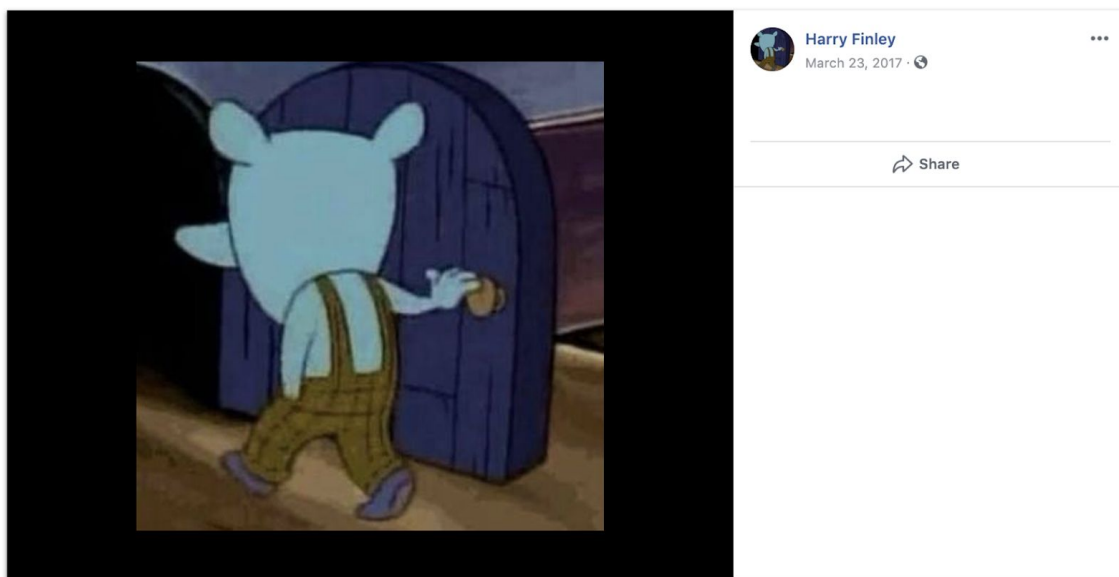
<sup>41</sup> Attributed to “Guest 2029,” “Evolution of Relations between Donald Trump and Her Majesty’s Secret Service,” dover.co[.]uk, March 22, 2017, <https://www.dover.uk.com/forums/politics-forum/evolution-of-relations-between-donald-trump-and-her-majestys-secret-service>, archived [here](#).

<sup>42</sup> On Medium, see <https://medium.com/@ThomasCooke>, archived [here](#). User stats for dover.co[.]uk are included on the post itself.



The following day, a Facebook account called “Harry Finley” posted the indybay[.]org version of the article to the libertarian, US-focused Facebook page Liberty Evolution.<sup>43</sup> The “Harry Finley” account had no friends, made no other publicly visible posts, and gathered no engagement on its post. Its profile did not show a creation date, but its profile picture was uploaded on March 23, 2017, just half an hour before it posted its one story.

This sequence of events followed the same playbook as the known Russian operation: single-use burner accounts, Reddit accounts attributed to the operation, and websites including Medium and IndyBay.



*The profile picture of “Harry Finley”; note the upload date. This was the account’s only image.*

This chain of events did not end there. The Medium article, similarly written in grammatically incorrect English and with awkward turns of phrase, centered on the claim that UK intelligence services had interfered in the 2016 US election and sourced its claim to the “dossier” produced by former British agent Christopher Steele and published by BuzzFeed<sup>44</sup>:

Interference of British intelligence in US election campaign got first heard of after former MI6 officer Christopher Steele’s shocking report on BuzzFeed. In this report ex-British spy asserted that Moscow has enormous influence on President-elect Donald Trump. Regardless of the fact there is not much credibility in the published information, it became the basis of the information campaign

<sup>43</sup> The post is at <https://www.facebook.com/LibertyEvolution/posts/106341596572570>.

<sup>44</sup> Ken Bensinger, Miriam Elder and Mark Schoofs, “These Reports Allege Trump Has Deep Ties To Russia,” BuzzFeed, January 10, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/kenbensinger/these-reports-allege-trump-has-deep-ties-to-russia>, archived [here](#).

against Trump, which was started by the liberal media and supporters of former candidate for the post of US president Hillary Clinton.

The hook in this story came in the second paragraph, where “Thomas Cooke” mentioned an interview with an anonymous British agent, also sourced to BuzzFeed:

Later BuzzFeed also published an interview by another British intelligence officer who refused to give his name for security reasons. The MI6 officer unraveled the goals of the surveillance operation against Trump. Like the rest of the world, Great Britain was expecting Clinton to win and was developing certain agreements with her aimed at introducing preferences in trade and economic relations during the Brexit and after it. No wonder that Her Majesty’s intelligence was seeking ways to assure the victory of the candidate who was supported by Downing Street. Trump’s victory was a bitter blow to them. According to the latest news, they still didn’t recover from it.

The Medium version of the story provided a link to BuzzFeed as a source.<sup>45</sup> That link is genuine and leads to an article published on January 20, 2017, but the article was not published by BuzzFeed: it was posted on the BuzzFeed Community, an uncurated site where, by the site’s own description, “anyone can create a post or quiz.”

Titled “MI6 Operative On Anti-Trump Campaign,” the article on the BuzzFeed Community was written as a conversation between interviewer “Oliver Stone” and “MI6 operative Richard Jones.” The article claimed that Jones agreed to the interview “as insurance in case something happened to him.”

Adding an ominous and dramatic note, the introduction to the BuzzFeed “interview” went on, “We haven’t been able to get in touch with our informer [sic] for some time, so we believe it is our duty to keep our promise and make the interview available to public [sic] for consideration.”

Several clues easily betray the fact that the interview is fabricated. At times, “MI6 operative Richard Jones” spoke like a character in Shakespeare: “I remember the election day full well” and “His commitment to the European Union is just a peacockery.”

At times, the character in the interview struggled with the word “the”: “British government staunchly supported Hillary Clinton after former PM David Cameron reached an agreement with her”; “When he won, the highest ranks in MI6 and British political elite had gone mad, and today they continue looking for the guilty.”

The character in the interview hinted at his own fears for his safety and sketched out a conspiracy between the UK intelligence service and Hillary Clinton to undermine Donald Trump:

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<sup>45</sup> <https://www.buzzfeed.com/oliverstone/mi6-operative-on-anti-trump-campaign-2sdhe>, archived [here](#).

Q. Could you expand on your assignment?

A. Searching for and, if necessary, creating the damaging and sensitive information that could harm Trump as a presidential candidate, and now as president-elect.

Q. So the work continues?

A. It has never stopped. We have a lot of prepared data on Trump that could irretrievably ruin his reputation.

Q. And you are going to publish it.

A. I don't know whether MI6 is going to publish it or not. But this data is also in my possession and I keep it as a part of my insurance.

Q. How could the data be made available to the public?

A. By means of the U.S. media that support Clinton. We pass all information on Trump to Clinton's team and the rest is their part.

The available evidence suggests that this evidently forged interview was planted by the operators behind this campaign. The account that posted it, "OliverStone," only published this one article.<sup>46</sup> The same article showed up three days later on indybay[.]org<sup>47</sup> and quora[.]com,<sup>48</sup> where it was attributed to "Matthew Wheeler." The same day, a Reddit user called u/LewisArnott, created that morning, posted it repeatedly to popular subreddits r/the\_donald and r/politics.<sup>49</sup> According to reductive[.]com, the account was created at 3:04:44 EST, and began posting at 3:05:47.

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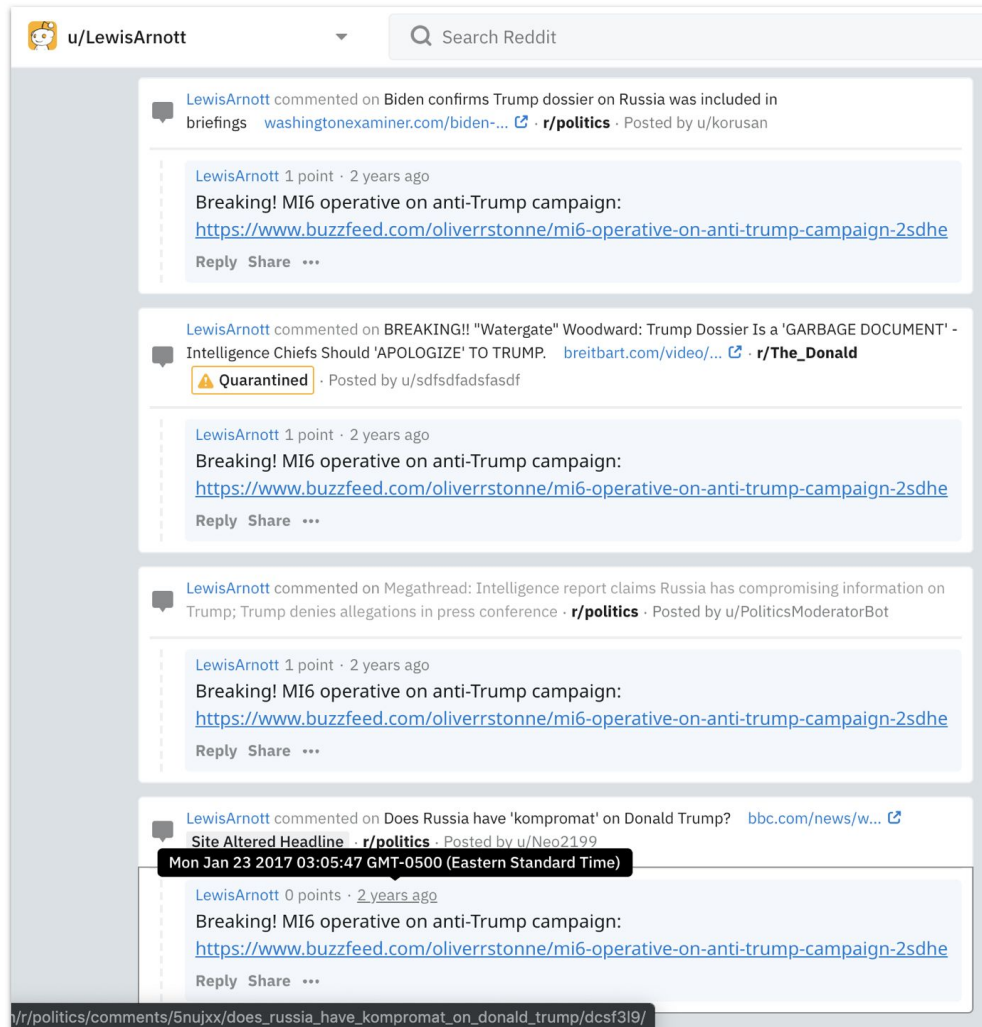
<sup>46</sup> Profile page <https://www.buzzfeed.com/oliverstone?language=all>, archived [here](#). The name appears to be a reference to controversial filmmaker Oliver Stone.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2017/01/23/18795662.php>, archived [here](#).

<sup>48</sup>

<https://www.quora.com/When-did-US-journalists-first-learn-about-the-allegations-of-Russian-Komprotat-against-Donald-Trump-publicized-in-January-2017>, archived [here](#).

<sup>49</sup> Profile online at <https://www.reddit.com/user/LewisArnott/>, archived [here](#).



Posts by u/LewisArnott to r/politics. Note the time of the first post: 03:05:47 EST.

On January 25, a Facebook account called Michael Brown posted one version of the article to Facebook page "Teen Take."<sup>50</sup> The profile page for "Michael Brown" showed that the account's profile picture was uploaded that same day, just 23 minutes before the post.<sup>51</sup> These are the fingerprints of Secondary Infektion.

This, too, was a potentially explosive story that would, if picked up, have fed into the stormy US debate around foreign interference in the 2016 election. However, it appears that the main goal was not to stir up tensions inside the US but to provoke tensions between the US and the UK. The article attributed to the Thomas Cooke persona wrote, "it is pretty obvious that Donald Trump and

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/TeenTake/posts/112960662550254>.

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=112942112552109&set=a.112942135885440&type=3&theater>.

British intelligence fell out with each other, which may trigger major problems in relations of the two countries.” A separate article that can also be attributed to the operation, posted on indybay[.]org,<sup>52</sup> liberalforum[.]org,<sup>53</sup> and quora[.]com,<sup>54</sup> states “The current state of affairs proves that Britain faces an international scandal which, alongside with the Brexit, will have a heavy impact on country's reputation and economy that could suddenly lose not only its membership in the EU but its key American ally as well.”

Such stories help to illuminate the goals of the operators behind this campaign. They suggest that the operators closely followed US and UK politics, but they also demonstrate that their stories were framed to stoke geopolitical tensions more than internal turmoil.

### September 28, 2017: Catalan Independence

On September 28, 2017, two days before the Catalan region of Spain held a disputed referendum on independence, a Reddit account belonging to this operation (u/lauraferrojo) posted an article to Spanish-focused subreddits r/es and r/spain and regional subreddits r/barcelona, r/catalunya, and r/andalucia.<sup>55</sup> This represents one of the few Spanish posts made by operators in this campaign.

That article claimed that the EU had secretly decided that Catalonia would be allowed to join the Union after declaring independence, “even if the Government of Spain does not accept the results of the referendum.” This would have been controversial at any time, let alone two days before the referendum itself.

The article posted on the subreddits contained a screenshot of a letter attributed to the Secretary of State for Territorial Administrations, Roberto Bermúdez de Castro Mur, and addressed to Deputy Prime Minister María Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría Antón. It claimed that “our representatives in the European Parliament” had heard EU leaders promising the Catalan separatists to recognize their independence.<sup>56</sup> A number of users who responded to the letter on

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<sup>52</sup> Attributed to “Kyle Warren,” “Trump-May meeting: Downing Street's desperate attempt to save face,” indybay[.]org, February 2, 2017, <https://www.indybay.org/newsitems/2017/02/02/18796099.php>, archived [here](#).

<sup>53</sup> Attributed to “Nick Johnson.”

<https://www.liberalforum.org/topic/206222-trump-may-meeting-downing-streets-desperate-attempt-to-save-face/>, archived [here](#).

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.quora.com/Does-May-understand-that-she-is-creating-a-big-mess-for-the-UK>, archived [here](#).

<sup>55</sup> Profile at <https://www.reddit.com/user/lauraferrojo/>, archived [here](#). The only post not to be blocked by an automated system was that to r/catalunya, online at [https://www.reddit.com/r/catalunya/comments/72yyzk/la\\_ue\\_muestra\\_su\\_apoyo\\_a\\_los\\_separatistas/](https://www.reddit.com/r/catalunya/comments/72yyzk/la_ue_muestra_su_apoyo_a_los_separatistas/), and archived [here](#).

<sup>56</sup> The screenshot can be viewed at <http://s1.bild.me/bilder/110417/4961666doc.jpg>, archived [here](#).

various forums pointed out language errors uncharacteristic of ministerial speech.<sup>57</sup> Like so many other screenshots posted by the operation, this one can be classified as a forgery designed to bolster the narrative laid out in the article that contained it.



*The forged Spanish letter.*

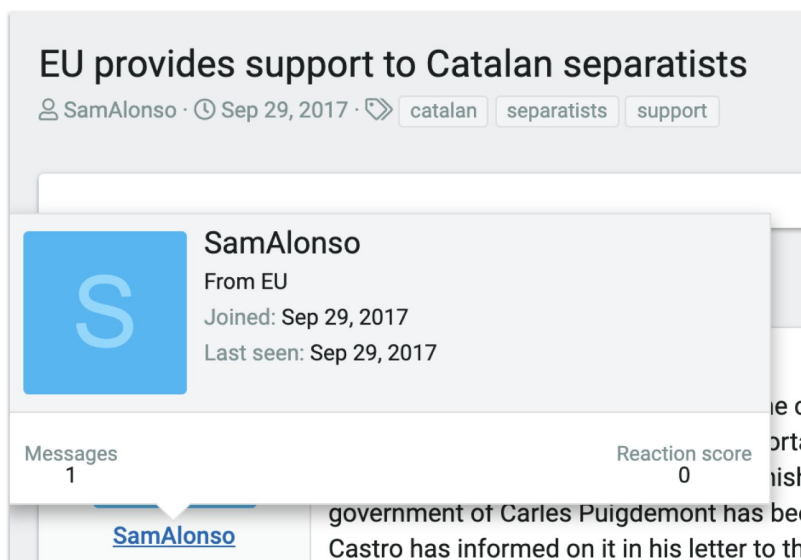
The amplification of the letter bore the hallmarks characteristic of the rest of this operation. The u/lauraferrojo account was created at 4:30:05 ET on September 28, began posting at 4:41:05, posted five times in 59 minutes, and then never posted again. The same text posted by this user

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, the responses at <https://www.burbuja.info/inmobiliaria/threads/la-ue-muestra-su-apoyo-a-los-separatistas-catalanes.946969/>.



on Reddit turned up almost simultaneously<sup>58</sup> on globedia[.]com,<sup>59</sup> rankia[.]com,<sup>60</sup> burbuja[.]info,<sup>61</sup> and entornointeligente[.]com,<sup>62</sup> all websites repeatedly used throughout this operation.

The day after the Spanish version was disseminated, an English-language translation was posted on Medium,<sup>63</sup> theapricity[.]com,<sup>64</sup> defendingthetruth[.]com,<sup>65</sup> and (curiously) on the Swedish website thelocal[.]se.<sup>66</sup> As in so many other stories launched by this operation, all the accounts involved were single-use accounts set up and abandoned on the same day.



*Profile for SamAlonso on defendingthetruth[.]com: Joined on September 29, 2017, posted on September 29, 2017, and last seen on September 29, 2017.*

<sup>58</sup> The articles are timestamped 11:30, 11:37 and 11:49. This is CET, six hours ahead of ET; thus the web articles all appeared online while the Reddit account was still posting.

<sup>59</sup> <http://globedia.com/muestra-apoyo-separatistas-catalanes>, archived [here](#).

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.rankia.com/foros/politica/temas/3696785-ue-muestra-apoyo-separatistas-catalanes>, archived [here](#).

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.burbuja.info/inmobiliaria/threads/la-ue-muestra-su-apoyo-a-los-separatistas-catalanes.946969/>, archived [here](#).

<sup>62</sup> <https://archivo.entornointeligente.com/articulo/199391/VENEZUELA-La-UE-muestra-su-apoyo-a-los-separatistas-catalanes/>.

<sup>63</sup> <https://medium.com/@SamAlonso/eu-provides-support-to-catalan-separatists-b779e95e93dd>, archived [here](#).

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.theapricity.com/forum/showthread.php?222743-EU-provides-support-to-Catalan-separatists>, archived [here](#).

<sup>65</sup> <https://defendingthetruth.com/threads/eu-provides-support-to-catalan-separatists.62578/>, archived [here](#).

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.thelocal.se/discuss/index.php?showtopic=89615?showtopic=89615>, archived [here](#).

This story, too, failed to gain traction online. The forged letter was not reproduced on any sites beyond those it was initially posted on, and the story was not picked up by any mainstream media or political influencer.

However, the attempt to plant a story apparently designed to encourage the separatist movement in Catalonia and turn the Spanish government against the EU, just two days before the referendum, marks this as a particularly interesting attempt at sowing disinformation designed to divide and inflame Spanish and European audiences. .

# Appendix: Timeline of Assets and Stories

Assets are listed as “disclosed by Reddit” if they feature in the Reddit list shared on December 6, 2019 and “discovered” if they emerged during the investigation and were assessed with high confidence to be part of the same campaign. An entry as “given/discovered” indicates that the first asset was given, and subsequent ones were discovered.

## **October 21, 2016: Clinton Conspiracies**

Persona: “Lukas Esmeraldas”

Status: discovered

Headline: “Hillary: Path to Victory”

Main Theme: Anti-Clinton conspiracy theories

Posted on: [Reddit](#), [homment.com](#), [articlesreader.com](#)

## **October 31, 2016: Clinton as Murderer**

Persona: “Lukas Esmeraldas”

Status: discovered

Headline: “Hillary Clinton, a killer (proclaimed) above the law”

Main theme: Benghazi killings, American wars

Posted on: [Reddit](#), [homment.com](#), [Medium](#), [articlesreader.com](#)

## **November 5, 2016: Clinton Funding**

Persona: “Lukas Esmeraldas”

Status: discovered

Headline: “Who else is pumping money into the election campaign of Clinton?”

Main theme: Clinton campaign funding and leaks

Posted on: [Reddit](#), [homment.com](#), [defendingthetruth.com](#), [quora.com](#), [articlesreader.com](#)

## **November 11, 2016: Celebrating Trump**

Persona: “Lukas Esmeraldas”

Status: discovered

Headline: “Trump’s victory is the new beginning for America”

Main theme: Vote for Trump was vote against system

Posted on: [Reddit](#), [homment.com](#), [Medium](#), [quora.com](#)

## January 20, 2017: UK Campaign Against Trump

Persona: "Oliver Stone", "Kyle Warren", "Terry Br0wn", "Matthew Wheeler", "Nick Johnson"

Status: discovered

Headline: MI6 Operative On Anti-Trump Campaign; Trump-May meeting: Downing Street's desperate attempt to save face

Main theme: UK interfering in U.S. election against Trump

Posted on: [BuzzFeed Community](#) (as "Oliver Stone"), [indybay.org](#) (as "Matthew Wheeler"), [indybay.org](#) (as "Kyle Warren"), [quora.com](#) (as "Matthew Wheeler"), [quora.com](#) (as "Kyle Warren"), [liberalforum.org](#) (as "Nick Johnson"), [Reddit](#) (as "LewisArnott"), [Reddit](#) (as "TerryBr0wn")

## January 27, 2017: "Russians Did It"

Persona: "Lukas Esmeraldas"

Status: discovered

Headline: "What else have the Russians done but you still got no idea about?"

Main theme: Mocking claims of Russian interference<sup>67</sup>

Posted on: [Medium](#), [quora.com](#), [indybay.org](#), [articlesreader.com](#), [Reddit](#), [BuzzFeed Community](#)

## January 30, 2017: Obama and Ukraine

Persona: "Lukas Esmeraldas"

Status: discovered

Headline: "Ukraine to recycle America's waste"

Main theme: [Petition](#) on Ukrainian presidential website inviting Obama to Ukraine

Posted on: [Medium](#), [articlesreader.com](#), [quora.com](#), [Reddit](#), [BuzzFeed Community](#)

Notes: Further investigations could assess whether the petition was posted by the same operators.

## February 1, 2017: Blame Clinton

Persona: "KimJjj", "Rita Hatchett", "Colom Yvonne", and "Jurgen Schneider"

Status: disclosed by Reddit / discovered

Headline: "DemoGate. How Clinton wimped herself out"

Main theme: Blaming Clinton for defeat

Posted on: [Medium](#) (as Rita Hatchett), [debatepolitics.com](#), [articlesreader.com](#), [meine-news.de](#) (as Jurgen Schneider), [Reddit](#) (as KimJjj, disclosed by the platform), [Reddit](#) (as ColomYvonne, discovered)

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<sup>67</sup> Trolls have a sense of irony too.

## February 2, 2017: Obama and Ukraine (French Post)

Persona: "Charles Richardson"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: "L'Ukraine peut être invité Obama et son people [sic] dans les postes de direction au sein du gouvernement"<sup>68</sup>

Main theme: links to Lukas Esmeraldas Medium post on Ukraine recycling America's waste

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by the platform)

## February 20, 2017: Attacking NGOs

Persona: "Sherry Nuno," "Leslie Vasquez"

Status: disclosed by Reddit / discovered

Headline: "Protection against NGO's abuse on a national and global scale"

Main theme: Need to crack down on NGOs and how well Russia does it

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (as "Sherry Nuno," disclosed by the platform), [Groundreport.com](#), and [quora.com](#) (as "Leslie Vasquez")

## February 27, 2017: Attacking Merkel

Persona: "Pushy Frank," "Jens Cormac," "Lee Weber"

Status: disclosed by Reddit / discovered

Headline: "The Merkel's Chancellorship results. 12 years of prosperity or fear?"

Main theme: Broadly anti-Merkel and pro-Russia

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (as "PushyFrank," disclosed by the platform), [Medium](#) (as "Jens Cormac"), [groundreport.com](#), [articlesreader.com](#), [quora.com](#) (as "Lee Weber")

## March 3, 2017: Linking Clinton and Merkel

Persona: "Lukas Esmeraldas"

Status: discovered

Headline: "Clinton's infamous team will resurrect Merkel's dead political body"

Main theme: [Petition](#) in Germany claiming that Clinton's team will advise Merkel

Posted on: [Medium](#), [quora.com](#), [blogarama.com](#), [Reddit](#) (discovered), [BuzzFeed Community](#)

Notes: Further investigation should include verifying whether the petition was posted by the operation.

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<sup>68</sup> The asset demonstrates grammatically inaccurate French and awkward turns of phrase.

### March 6, 2017: Ukraine Nuclear Safety

Persona: "Billie Folmar"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: "Ukraine on the brink of a nuclear disaster"

Main theme: Dangerous nuclear power plants in Ukraine

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by the platform), [Medium](#), [groundreport.com](#)

### April 10, 2017: Merkel an Alcoholic

Persona: "demonanz," "Josh Groll"

Status: disclosed by Reddit / discovered

Headline: "Chancellor of Germany and female alcoholism"

Main theme: Suggests that Merkel is alcoholic

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (as "demonanz", disclosed by the platform), [Medium](#) (as "Josh Groll"), [quora.com](#), [blogarama.com](#)

Notes: based on [BuzzFeed Community](#) article attributed to German doctor; this is the account's only post.

### April 20, 2017: Macron and Terrorism

Persona: "Alain Belmot," "StPatrick"

Status: disclosed by Reddit/discovered

Headline: "Macron moves in the Élysée Palace on shoulders of migrants and jihadists"

Main theme: Terrorism in France

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by the platform), [indybay.org](#), [defendingthetruth.com](#) (as "StPatrick"), [politicsforum.org](#), [quora.com](#)

Notes: the article was posted three days before the first round of the French presidential election.

### April 29, 2017: Ukraine Corruption

Persona: "rabbier," "Adam Jones," "Lila Smith"

Status: disclosed by Reddit/discovered

Headline: "Ukraine Wants to Establish a Prize Similar to Nobel to Help Politicians in Need"

Main theme: mocking Ukraine, focusing on corruption and poverty

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (as "rabbier," disclosed by the platform), [Medium](#) (as "Adam Jones"), [quora.com](#) (as "Lila Smith")



### **May 6, 2017: Macron Electoral Fraud**

Persona: "RitterC"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: "Macron Triumphant: Macro-lies of Micro-victory"

Main theme: Accusing Macron of election fraud

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by the platform), [homment.com](#)

Notes: the article was posted on Saturday, May 6, the day before the second round of the French vote and the morning after the Macron Leaks were published.

### **May 11, 2017: Germany vs Turkey**

Persona: "Peter Murtaugh," "Daniel Smith"

Status: disclosed by Reddit/discovered

Headline: "The effect of the referendum in Turkey: urged by Gülen followers, Germany to impose sanctions on Ankara"

Main theme: "Relations between Germany and Turkey are going down to the depths of hell."

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by the platform), [homment.com](#), [quora.com](#) (as "Daniel Smith")

### **May 23, 2017: NATO in the Arctic**

Persona: "Harrison Briggs"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: "NATO boosts its military presence in the Arctic Circle counter to Arctic Council's humanitarian initiatives"

Main theme: NATO aggression in the Arctic

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by the platform), [Medium](#), [quora.com](#), [climate-debate.com](#)

### **May 26, 2017: UK Plotting Against Trump**

Persona: "Rinzoog," "Thomas Cooke," "Mike Hanon," "Harry Finley"

Status: disclosed by Reddit/discovered

Headline: "Evolution of Relations between Donald Trump and Her Majesty's Secret Service"

Main theme: UK plotting against Trump

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (as "Rinzoog," disclosed by the platform), [Reddit](#) (as "MikeHanon", disclosed by the platform), [Medium](#) (as "Thomas Cooke"), [articlesreader.com](#), [dover.co.uk](#) (as "Guest 2029"), [Facebook](#) (as "Harry Finley")

## June 6, 2017: Merkel and the Far Right

Persona: "Klaus Steiner"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: Bundeswehr is to be accused for the sake of victory

Main theme: Merkel accused of attacking Bundeswehr dishonestly

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by the platform), [homment.com](#), [defendingthetruth.com](#), [quora.com](#)

Notes: the article is based on a letter attributed to a lieutenant general in the German army, [posted](#) on a local news forum, and now taken down. It is likely a fake created by the operation.

## June 7, 2017: Poland, the EU, and Ukraine

Persona: "krakodoc," "Sallyard"

Status: disclosed by Reddit/discovered

Headline: Is Poland to be punished for sabotage of the EU decisions on Ukraine?

Main theme: Poland refusing visas to Ukrainians who fought in the Donbass and facing sanctions from Germany and France

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by the platform), [homment.com](#), [defendingthetruth.com](#) (as "Sallyard")

Notes: the article was based on a [screenshot](#) of a tweet, allegedly from the Polish foreign ministry. This is a likely fake.

## July 29, 2017: Saakashvili on Ukraine Interfering in the US

Persona: "Kyle Fuller"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: "Normandy group stripped Mikheil Saakashvili of Ukrainian citizenship"

Main theme: Saakashvili claiming Ukraine interfered in US election

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (on r/the\_donald, disclosed by the platform), [Medium](#) (as "Kyle Fuller"), [Buzzfeed Community](#) (now down), [indybay.org](#), [mapleleafweb.com](#), [theapricity.com](#), [politics.ie](#)

Notes: the focus of the article was on a potential rift between the U.S. and Ukraine.

## August 29, 2017: European Divisions over Migration

Persona: "Uzun Adnan"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: Les députés italiens du Parlement européen sollicitent de Merkel des compensations de la situation avec des migrants

Main theme: European arguments on migrants

Posted on: Headline only on [Reddit](#), no other instances found

## September 27, 2017: Migrants Voting Merkel

Persona: "Laura Knecht"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: OSZE/ODIHR: 3,15 Millionen Neudeutsche haben den Wahlsieg der CDU gesichert

Main theme: OSCE claiming that 98% of newly registered voters voted Merkel

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [indymedia.org](#) (now down), [mein-suedhessen.de](#) (now down), [politik-forum.eu](#)

Notes: the article is based on an alleged [letter](#) from a former director of OSCE election monitoring, now taken offline. Most articles on this have been removed, indicating that the letter was probably faked. The election was held on September 24.

## September 28, 2017: Defending Kaspersky

Persona: "Tom Sallee"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: The Unfair Competition

Main theme: "That's why I absolutely don't like that bullshit which is being fueled around a fine product [Kaspersky antivirus] by the Washington state-mongers"

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [Medium](#), [quora.com](#)

## September 28, 2017: Catalan Separatists

Persona: lauraferrojo

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: La UE muestra su apoyo a los separatistas catalanes

Main theme: EU promising Catalonia membership

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [burbuja.info](#), [rankia.com](#), [globedia.com](#), [entornointeligente.com](#)

Notes: The article was posted two days before the Catalan independence referendum. It was based on a screenshot of a letter, presumably faked.

## October 12, 2017: Ukraine Nazis and the CIA

Persona: "NicSchum"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: Bandera-Messer mit US-Scheide

Main theme: CIA working with Nazis in Ukraine

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [homment.com](#), [primaso.de](#) (now down), [meine-news.de](#) (now down)

Notes: the story is sourced to a Russian Wordpress [blog](#) that only ever [posted](#) one article, likely another fake created by the operation.

### **November 1, 2017: Migrants in Germany**

Persona: "Brigitte Mauer"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: Geschenk von EU-Verbündeten: Mehr als 130 Tausend Migranten mit Blauen Karten EU umzogen 2017 nach Deutschland

Main theme: Muslim refugees as a problem in Germany

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [homment.com](#)

### **November 13, 2017: South Korea Winter Olympics Security Worries (English)**

Persona: "Ruff Moulton"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: The USA will reinforce security of diplomatic mission in South Korea with special forces

Main theme: Only the headline remains, but likely focus on security of Winter Olympics

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform)

Notes: Russia was banned from the Olympics for doping.

### **November 24, 2017: EU Breaking Up Britain**

Persona: "Kemp Naomi"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: The Stink of Treason

Main theme: EU trying to break up UK by funding separatists in Northern Ireland and Scotland

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [homment.com](#), [quora.com](#), [politicsforum.co.uk](#)

### **November 29, 2017: South Korea Winter Olympics Security Worries (Ukrainian)**

Persona: "Max Kasyan"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: Зимові Олімпійські ігри 2018 у Південній Кореї і їх безпека

Main theme: Security worries over Winter Olympics

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [korrespondent.net](#)

### **December 6, 2017: NATO**

Persona: "Dave Cooperr"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: NATO. Its history and prospects

Main theme: General criticism of NATO

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [quora.com](#), [theapricity.com](#)

## December 6, 2017: Turkey and Russia

Persona: "Dave Cooperr"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: Is The Moscow-Ankara Axis Forming

Main theme: Turkey turning to Russia from NATO

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [homment.com](#), [quora.com](#), [twoeggz.com](#)

## December 7, 2017: Merkel Minority Government

Persona: "LuzRun"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: M for Minority

Main theme: Merkel minority government

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [knowyourmeme.com](#)

Notes: meme only.

## December 21, 2017: US Planning Coup in Ukraine and Russia

Persona: "Jaime Ibanez," "Twy Mann"

Status: disclosed by Reddit/discovered

Headline: SNBO de Ucrania: EE.UU. prepara protestas masivas en Ucrania y Rusia / The NSDC of Ukraine: the USA is arranging mass protests in Ukraine and Russia

Main theme: US planning massive demonstrations in Ukraine and Russia

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (as "Jaime Ibanez", disclosed by platform), [Medium](#) (as "TwyMann"), [theapricity.com](#), [quora.com](#), [Reddit](#) (as "twymanne", discovered), [Twitter](#) (suspended)

Notes: based on a [screenshot](#) of a letter, presumably false. The image was widely picked up in Russian articles, including on [commentarii.ru](#), [newsrbk.ru](#), [gosnovosti.com](#), and [russianpulse.ru](#).

## December 21, 2017: Winter Olympics Security (German, English, Spanish)

Persona: "BernTurmann," "blancoless," "Phil Hoch"

Status: disclosed by Reddit/discovered

Headline: Olympische Winterspiele als Deckmantel für den Angriff auf Nordkorea / German sports officials are concerned for the safety of German athletes...

Main theme: "Will war be unleashed? Can South Korea guarantee the safety of athletes and guests?"

Posted on: in German: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [homment.com](#), [meine.stimme.de](#); in

English: [Medium](#) (as "PhilHoch"), [thestudentroom.co.uk](#), [futuretimeline.net](#), [getrevising.co.uk](#); in

Spanish, [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform)

Notes: based on an "open letter," only a screenshot.

## December 29, 2017: Winter Olympics Security (Spanish, English)

Persona: "Almanza Mary," "Hilda Kelly," "Ratliff"

Status: disclosed by Reddit/discovered

Headline: La petición de los aficionados al deporte pide al COI que cancele los JJ.OO. de Invierno-2018

Main theme: Petition asks for Winter Olympics to be moved from South Korea

Posted on: in Spanish: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [globedia.com](#), [burbuja.info](#), [vandal.elespanol.com](#), [entornointeligente.com](#); in English, [Reddit](#) (as "ratliffj", discovered), [Medium](#) (as "Ratliff"), [quora.com](#), [raidforums.com](#)

Notes: based on a [petition](#) on change.org posted by a [user](#) ("Hilda Kelly") that never posted anything else. This may be the operation's work, too.

## February 16, 2018: Arms for ISIS

Persona: "Effie Estelle"

Status: discovered

Headline: Arms transfers to Syria: who, what and why?

Main theme: West arming ISIS

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (as "Effie Estelle", discovered), [BuzzFeed forum](#) (now down), [quora.com](#), [thestudentroom.co.uk](#), [playbuzz.com](#), [raidforums.com](#)

## March 21, 2018: CIA in Liberia

Persona: "Delmar Yang"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: Liberian friend informs Langley...

Main theme: CIA operations in Liberia (interview with supposed whistle-blower)

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [Medium](#), [playbuzz.com](#), [quora.com](#)

## April 5, 2018: CIA in DRC

Persona: "Delmar Yang"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: A Congolese friend informs Langley...

Main theme: CIA operations in DRC (interview with supposed whistle-blower)

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [Medium](#), [playbuzz.com](#), [quora.com](#)



## August 1, 2018: UK Interference in US

Persona: "Ellison Redfall"

Status: disclosed by Reddit/discovered

Headline: Same shit, different day (meme).

Main theme: meme of Marco Rubio tweet accusing UK of interfering in US

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [thehive.com](#)

Notes: a further asset linked to a Secondary Infektion claim [exposed](#) in June 2019.

## August 29, 2018: Brexit Border Tensions

Persona: "Garry Pugh," "Charles Smith"

Status: disclosed by Reddit, discovered

Headline: British border guards threaten to close their customs points along the border with the EU

Main theme: UK Brexit tensions with Ireland

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [Medium](#), [indybay.org](#), [defendingthetruth.com](#), [talk-uk.com](#), [scoop.it](#), Facebook (as "Charles Smith," now down)

## March 25, 2019: Yovanovitch List

Persona: "McDownes," "Tony Sealy," "Cabradolfo," "Ute Schaefer"

Status: disclosed by Reddit/discovered

Headline: The names of 'improsecutable' Ukrainians from the Yovanovitch list got out

Main theme: US corruption in Ukraine

Posted on: in English: [Reddit](#) (as "McDownes," disclosed by platform), [Medium](#) (as "[Tony Sealy](#)"), [homment.com](#), [debatepolitics.com](#), [southafricatoday.net](#), [usposts.net](#); in Spanish: [Reddit](#) (as "Cabradolfo", discovered), [globedia.com](#), [burbuja.info](#), [mediavida.com](#); in German: on [meinbezirk.at](#) (as "Ute Schaefer"), [homment.com](#), [nexusboard.de](#), [politopia.de](#)

## October 9, 2019: Georgian Integrity and Saakashvili

Persona: "Zurab Agriashvili"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: Политическая целостность Грузии под угрозой из-за закулисных интриг Саакашвили

Main theme: attacks on Saakashvili

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [perevodika.ru](#), [kremlinrus.ru](#), [worldcrisis.ru](#), [livejournal.com](#)

### **October 21, 2019: Attacking Navalny**

Persona: "Рамиль Сафиуллин"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: Слишком большая Россия: последователи Навального готовы поделиться территорией

Main theme: attacks on Navalny

Posted on: [Reddit](#) (disclosed by platform), [aftershock.news](#), [fishki.net](#)

### **October 21, 2019: UK Trade Leaks**

Personas: "Gregorator," "Max Ostermann," "PastJournalist," "vasiliskus," "MaryCWolf," "StevtBell," "victoriasanches," "FeistyWedding," "Party\_Actuary," "ZayasLiTel," "davidjglover," "feliciahogg," "ciawahhed," "saliahwhite," "KattyTorr"

Status: disclosed by Reddit

Headline: OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE: Great Britain is practically standing on her knees working on a trade agreement with the US

Main theme: leak of seemingly genuine US/UK trade negotiations documents

Posted on: in English: [Reddit](#) (as "Gregorator", disclosed by platform), [beforeitsnews.com](#); in

German: [Reddit](#) (as "Max Ostermann", disclosed by platform), [homment.com](#), [meinbezirk.at](#)

# Appendix | Operation Secondary Infektion

Secondary Infektion is the name given to a long-running information operation originating from Russia that Facebook initially exposed and attributed in May 2019.<sup>69</sup> The Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) found that the operation spread across at least six languages and dozens of platforms, especially Reddit and smaller blogging forums, including medium[.]com, homment[.]com, indybay[.]org, and meinbezirk[.]at.<sup>70</sup>

For the purposes of this report, four identifying features of Secondary Infektion should be borne in mind.

First, the operation typically began by creating fake documents that, if real, would have caused divisions between political groups or countries.<sup>71</sup> Such fakes included a screenshot of a tweet purporting to come from US Senator Ted Cruz that accused UK intelligence services of interfering in the 2018 midterm elections and a screenshot of a letter purporting to come from the Spanish foreign minister that claimed extremist Remainers were plotting to assassinate Brexit leader Boris Johnson. (To add piquancy, the letter misspelled the Spanish minister’s name.)

Second, the operation typically created accounts across a number of blogging sites on the same day, using the same name, or variations on one name (such as “Tom Taylor” and “TomTay”). In English, the sites it used most often included Reddit, Medium, beforeitsnews[.]com, indybay[.]org, debatepolitics[.]com, and quora[.]com. In German, it typically posted to Reddit, meinbezirk[.]at, homment[.]com, ask1[.]org, and mein-suedhessen[.]de; in Spanish, to Reddit, globedia[.]org, and burbuja[.]info, and in Russian to a wide range of websites that included korrespondent.net.

Third, once it had posted one story from those accounts, the operation typically abandoned them, never using them to post anything else, or even returning to them. Time and again, in the original Secondary Infektion analysis, investigators, including the author of this paper, discovered

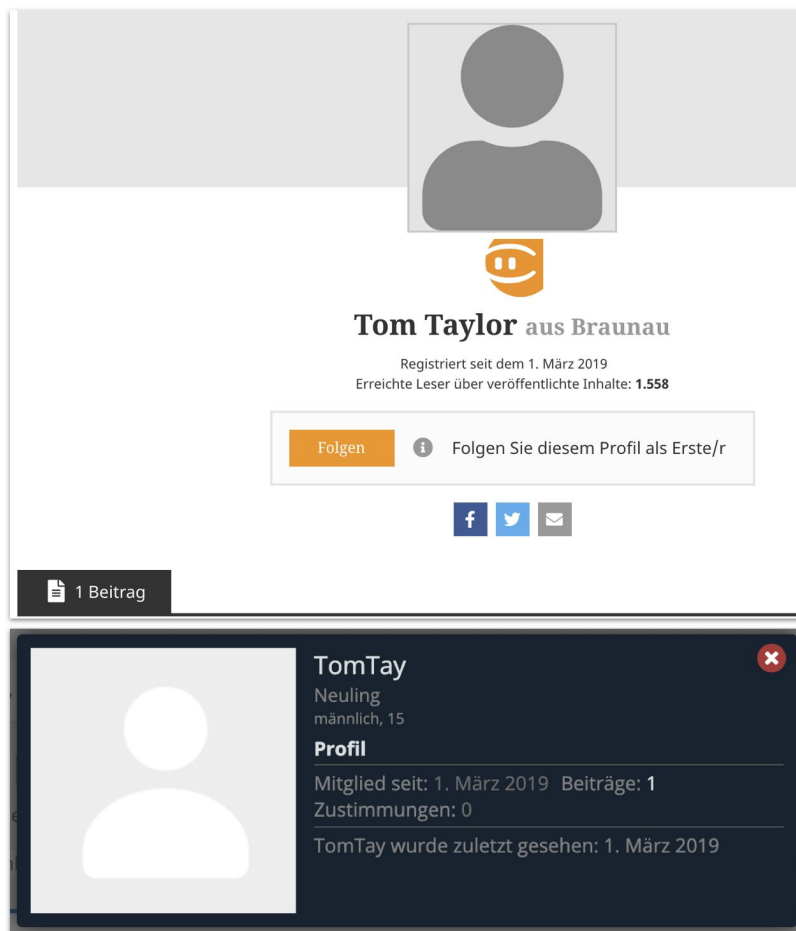
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<sup>69</sup> Nathaniel Gleicher, “Removing More Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from Russia,” Facebook Newsroom, May 6, 2019, <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/05/more-cib-from-russia/>, archived at <http://archive.ph/4ZIV1>.

<sup>70</sup> DFRLab, “Top Takes: Suspected Russian Intelligence Operation,” DFRLab, June 22, 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/top-takes-suspected-russian-intelligence-operation-39212367d2f0>. The operation appeared to be still active in November 2019: see Nika Aleksejeva, “Secondary Infektion redux? Suspected Russian intelligence operation targets Greenland,” DFRLab, November 13, 2019, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/secondary-infektion-redux-suspected-russian-intelligence-operation-targets-greenland-c4e04deb27c5>.

<sup>71</sup> The leaked US-UK trade documents that the operation pushed online in October 2019 were an exception to this usual pattern, as there is no indication that they were falsified.

accounts that showed one and the same date for the day they were created, the day they made their one post, and the last day the user logged in.



Profile pages for Secondary Infektion assets “Tom Taylor from Braunau” on [meinbezirk\[.\]at](https://www.meinbezirk.at/braunau/profile-521712/tom-taylor?type=article),<sup>72</sup> top, and “TomTay” on [ask1\[.\]org](https://www.ask1.org/threads/irak-syrien-venezuela-die-usa-planen-chemische-attacke.18117/), bottom.<sup>73</sup> The Tom Taylor account was registered on March 1, 2019 and contributed only one post (“1 Beitrag”). The TomTay account was registered the same day, only made one post, and last logged in (“wurde zuletzt gesehen”) on March 1, 2019.

Fourth, the operation tried to land its fake stories directly in communities and in front of individuals who might be especially susceptible to it. One German-language Twitter account repeatedly tweeted an anti-immigrant article at politicians from the anti-immigrant AfD party; the operation’s Reddit accounts posted Spanish-language disinformation to Spanish-language subreddits that were focused on politics and international relations. This approach revealed some

<sup>72</sup> Profile page for “Tom Taylor from Braunau,” [meinbezirk\[.\]at](https://www.meinbezirk.at/braunau/profile-521712/tom-taylor?type=article), <https://www.meinbezirk.at/braunau/profile-521712/tom-taylor?type=article>, archived at <http://archive.ph/wfvcO>.

<sup>73</sup> The author’s profile can be seen by clicking on the article at <https://www.ask1.org/threads/irak-syrien-venezuela-die-usa-planen-chemische-attacke.18117/>, archived at <http://archive.ph/wiXcH>.

degree of targeting and audience awareness and is an important reminder that the more advanced information operations do not simply scatter their disinformation to the winds: they pick their targets among the amplifiers whom they judge to be the most likely to fall for their stories.

However, and finally, almost all of Secondary Infektion's original stories failed to gain traction. This is likely to be partly because they were based on forgeries, and partly because the operation created new accounts for almost every story it posted, meaning that it never began to build a loyal audience. Its stories were not picked up by users on the platforms they targeted, and they did not spread to other platforms. Secondary Infektion's bizarre creations lived and died on the sites where they were planted, without seeding across to more fruitful soil.

This factor is especially relevant to the current report. The themes and narratives that emerge from Secondary Infektion are important for what they suggest about the operation's intended targets: the communities and individuals to whom it posted its stories and the political fault lines that its forgeries were intended to lever open. Those fault lines remain.