The elusive cyber beasts:
How to identify the communication of pro-Russian hybrid trolls in Latvia's internet news sites?

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ABSTRACT: The research described here was performed on the background of the geopolitical fluctuations in Eastern Europe and the annexation of Crimea by Russia. These events caused fear of pro-Russian propaganda particularly in the so-called Internet hybrid-trolls, i.e., commentators who are on the payroll of Russian state agencies who disrupt internet discussion boards with massive pro-Russian information and opinions. This paper describes methodology of identifying possible hybrid-trolls, data gathering from the biggest Latvian online news sites (delfi.lv, apollo.lv, tvnet.lv) that provide information in Latvian and Russian language, and analysis of the data by means of quantitative analysis as well as qualitative, that included content analysis and a case study. The analysis shows that the presence of pro-Russian hybrid trolls is inconclusive. However, following the outlined methodology some cases were recorded. Quantitative as well as qualitative analyses demonstrate that the overall presence and exposure of the alleged trolls in the given period was insignificant and the influence of trolls on public opinion highly questionable.

KEYWORDS: Internet trolls, hybrid trolling, Internet users' comments, news sites, Latvia.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this research is to identify particular kinds of internet trolls, that are or can be used as purposeful tactical weapons of hybrid warfare and more specifically — by pro-Russian forces. The background information suggests that Russian special forces maintain offices ("troll-farms" or "troll-factories") from which paid workers post information online with the purpose of distracting populations of Western countries (including Latvia) and to further Russian ideological claims.[1] Therefore,

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[1] See for instance the story about an ex-troll who wins a court case against a former employer for not being paid that circulated the world media http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2015/08/17/ex-kremlin-internet-troll-wins-suit-against-ex-employer.

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ANNEX 1.

Table 3. Audience data of the Internet news sites (time period from August 1 to August 3, 2014; data only on PC users)

	Visitors (real users)	Avg. daily visitors	Avg. time spent per visitor [hr:min:s]	Avg. time spent per visit [hr:min:s]	Avg. visits per visitor
delfi.lv-DELFI- LAT	253 638	136 950	00:32:08	00:09:08	3.37
delfi.lv-DELFI- RUS	125 711	70 785	00:48:41	00:12:49	3.80
tvnet.lv-LV	191 003	172 740	00:40:01	00:09:38	4.15
tvnet.lv-LV-Apollo.lv	163 726	107 783	00:21:55	00:06:45	3.25
tvnet.lv-RUS	101 337	51 054	00:15:10	00:06:20	2.40

Source: audienceGemius.