

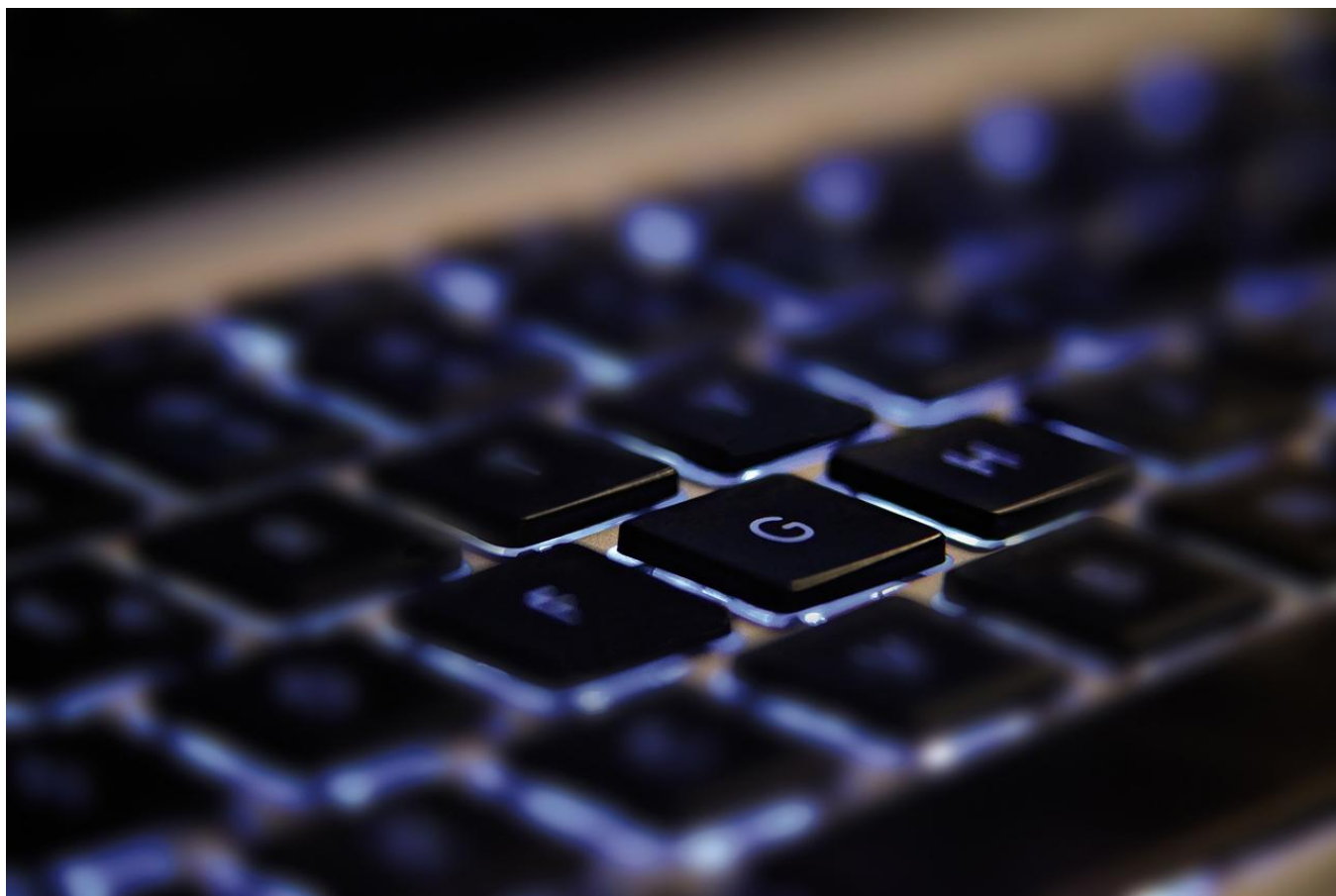
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NEWS

An ex St. Petersburg ‘troll’ speaks out Russian independent TV network interviews former troll at the Internet Research Agency

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One of the many remarkable things about 2017 is that American journalists no longer have the Irish Republican Army in mind when writing “IRA,” which is now used most often to mean Russia's Internet Research Agency — the “troll factory” responsible for buying ads on social media and polluting American online news discussion in an apparent effort to destabilize U.S. democracy. On October 15, the Russian independent news network *Dozhd* published the latest development in this ongoing story: an [interview](#) with a man who allegedly worked for the IRA from 2014-2015. *Meduza* summarizes that interview [here](#).

Dozhd calls him “[Maxim](#),” but that’s not his real name. The TV network says Max’s employment records confirm that he spent 18 months at 55 Savushkina in St. Petersburg, working for the Internet Research Agency (IRA), Russia’s infamous “troll factory.” He quit in early 2015, before Donald Trump even announced his presidential candidacy, but not too soon to get a taste of the “factory’s” war on Hillary Clinton.

The foreign desk

According to Max, the IRA’s “foreign desk” had open orders to “influence opinions” and change the direction of online discussions. He says this department within the agency considered itself above the “Russian desk,” which he claims is generally “bots and trolls.” The foreign desk was supposedly more sophisticated. “It’s not just writing ‘Obama is a monkey’ and ‘Putin is great.’ They’ll even fine you for that kind of [primitive] stuff,” Max told *Dozhd*. People in his department, he says, were even trained and educated to know the nuances of American social polemics on tax issues, LGBT rights, the gun debate, and more.

Max says that IRA staff were tasked with monitoring tens of thousands of comments on major U.S. media outlets, in order to grasp the general trends of American Internet users. Once employees got a sense of what Americans naturally discussed in comment forums and on social media, their job was to incite them further and try to “rock the boat.”

According to Max, the Internet Research Agency’s foreign desk was prohibited from promoting anything about Russia or Putin. One thing the staff learned quickly was that Americans don’t normally talk about Russia: “They don’t really care about it,” Max told *Dozhd*. “Our goal wasn’t to turn the Americans toward Russia,” he claims. “Our task was to set Americans against their own government: to provoke unrest and discontent, and to lower Obama’s support ratings.”

Covering their tracks

The trolls at the IRA were also careful about covering their tracks. Max says anyone working in the foreign desk was required to post comments using a VPN, to disguise their Russian origins. He says an employee once shared a photograph taken at the IRA's office, which was especially forbidden, because photos can contain revealing metadata. This incident also revealed that the IRA employed staff to spy on its own trolls, Max says.

Even two years before Americans actually voted on their next president, St. Petersburg trolls were told to attack Hillary Clinton, reminding Internet users about her wealth, her husband's legacy, and her various corruption scandals. The IRA even encouraged employees to watch Netflix's "House of Cards," supposedly as an education in U.S. politics. Staff would also monitor each other's use of English, nitpicking over grammar and punctuation, in order to weed out ESL formulations.

A separate "Facebook desk" supposedly battled endlessly with the website's administrators, who regularly deleted their fake accounts just as IRA staff managed to "develop" them into supposedly powerhouse influencers (accounts with many friends and posts). IRA staff challenged these decisions, Max said. Facebook staff would write to them, saying, "You are trolls," and the agency would respond, invoking the U.S. Constitution, and arguing that they believed in what they were doing, and were entitled to free speech. Sometimes they even won, according to Max.

Growing sophistication

As time went on, the IRA's themes grew more complex, and staff were even subjected to lessons on U.S. tax policy, so they could expand their trolling to tax-related issues. A separate "Analytics desk" would supposedly supply his department with Excel files containing hyperlinks to news stories and short summaries of how to comment on these articles, in order to incite American Internet users and derail political discussions.

When the U.S. presidential race was just starting, the IRA supposedly conducted classes on which of the early candidates were best for Russian interests. Max says the IRA even maintained a "secret department" that sent staff to the United States for certain undisclosed tasks.

Max says the international desk had about 200 employees, each earning 50,000 rubles (\$870) a month. Staff would work two days, then have two days off, before repeating the schedule. People worked 12-hour shifts, he says.

When the job stopped being fun

Before he left, Max says the IRA started demanding more from its staff, fining employees more often and focusing more on the quantity than the quality of their

output. Then there was a change in management and all his co-workers were fired, he says.

The staff changes apparently followed an employee's decision to grant an interview to local reporters, including leaked photos of the IRA's St. Petersburg office. "They found the culprits quickly," Max says. "They detained them in the basement, and interrogated them, asking, 'What did you do? How did you do it? Whom did you tell?'"

In early 2015, something happened, Max says, and the IRA apparently started burning documents. He didn't see it himself, but he says he could smell the fire in the office building. Staff were ordered to delete their records, people started being reassigned, "and everything got much worse," Max claims.

After the leak and the interview, IRA administrators apparently started meeting specially with employees, telling them that they should be proud, not ashamed, of their work. "Because every country has their own kind of organization that defends their national interests and distributes civil unrest," managers told staff. "This is information war, and it's official."

Read the [full interview](#) in Russian at *Dozhd*.



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