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Infektion's Evolution: Digital Technologies and Narrative Laundering

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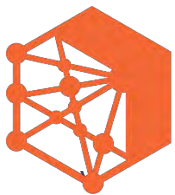
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CLEMSON® UNIVERSITY
MEDIA FORENSICS HUB

Infektion's Evolution*

Digital Technologies and Narrative Laundering

Darren Linvill and Patrick Warren
December 15, 2023

*This title was created using ChatGPT

Perhaps Russia's most notorious disinformation campaign to date was Operation INFEKTION, an active-measures campaign designed to persuade the world that the United States was responsible for the creation of the AIDS virus (Boghardt, 2009; Selvage & Nehring, 2019). The effort, perhaps more properly referred to by its Russian codename, Operation Denver, began in 1983 with the planting of a fictitious letter to the editor in *The Patriot*, an Indian newspaper created some years earlier by the KGB for the purposes of spreading pro-Soviet propaganda. The letter, entitled "AIDS may Invade India," was purported to be written by a respected American scientist and claimed that the virus originated at the US chemical and biological warfare research facility at Fort Detrick, Maryland. This original source was then cited in later KGB efforts to further spread the conspiracy theory. The conspiracy theory remains rooted in some communities. A 2006 study found as many as a quarter of Black Americans believe AIDS to originate from a U.S. government laboratory (Ross et al., 2006).

Operation Denver illustrates a key goal of many disinformation campaigns, that of narrative laundering. Narrative laundering is a process with the goal to conceal the origins and sourcing of false or misleading information.¹ The process can be thought of as proceeding in three stages (Korta, 2018; Meleshevich & Schafer, 2018). The first stage is placement, the initial posting of the false information. Recent campaigns, including Russian campaign to reveal information from the Podesta email hack, have relied on inauthentic social media accounts for this purpose. Following placement is layering, the spread of that information from its origin to more credible sources. Repetition of a narrative itself brings a perception of credibility, and so this process has also been engaged in by employing both authentic and inauthentic social media accounts. The final stage is integration. This is the point at which the information becomes endorsed by more credible and genuine sources and is widely disseminated by real users.

Proceeding through these three stages, this report will describe the details of a current Russia-linked narrative laundering campaign combining traditional KGB laundering tactics observed as part of Operation Denver with modern digital technologies, including social media, digital publishing, and artificial intelligence. While this report will focus on one narrative for the purposes of illustration, we will show that the campaign is linked to at least twelve wholly fabricated stories circulating with varying degrees of success through the digital ecosystem.

The affordances offered by digital technologies have impacted every stage of the narrative-laundering process. The ubiquity and reach of video-intensive social media platforms with extremely limited provenance substantially reduces the costs of placement. The rise of social media as the primary way that readers encounter news eases layering. Inauthentic actors have several ways to tamper with how novel narratives are presented, including the creation of fake accounts and the harnessing of ideologically focused communities. Small media outlets can easily have worldwide reach, while online financial integration means that transacting with those outlets is easier than ever. Finally, and most dramatically, technological changes in digital publishing and AI have enable an entirely novel strategy of integration—the *de novo* creation of a credible and (seemingly) mainstream media outlet to directly deliver the layered narratives to the target audiences. These technological changes mean the campaign described in this report distributes false narratives faster, at greater volume, and at lower costs than was the case with Soviet-era campaigns. Unlike many of the recent Russian-aligned activities (such as the 2015-2017 IRA campaign (Linville & Warren, 2020) or Secondary Infektion (Nimmo et al., 2020), this is not, primarily, a social-media phenomenon with substantial investments in fake persona with

¹ Previous conceptualization of narrative laundering described a process by which narratives made their way into the mainstream discourse organically, with no strategically motivated actor organizing the process (Klein, 2012). More recent work (Korta, 2018; Meleshevich & Schafer, 2018) explicitly models narrative laundering campaigns by tightening the link with older models of money laundering, including aligning with the three distinct stages from that context (United States Senate, 1990; Villányi, 2021).

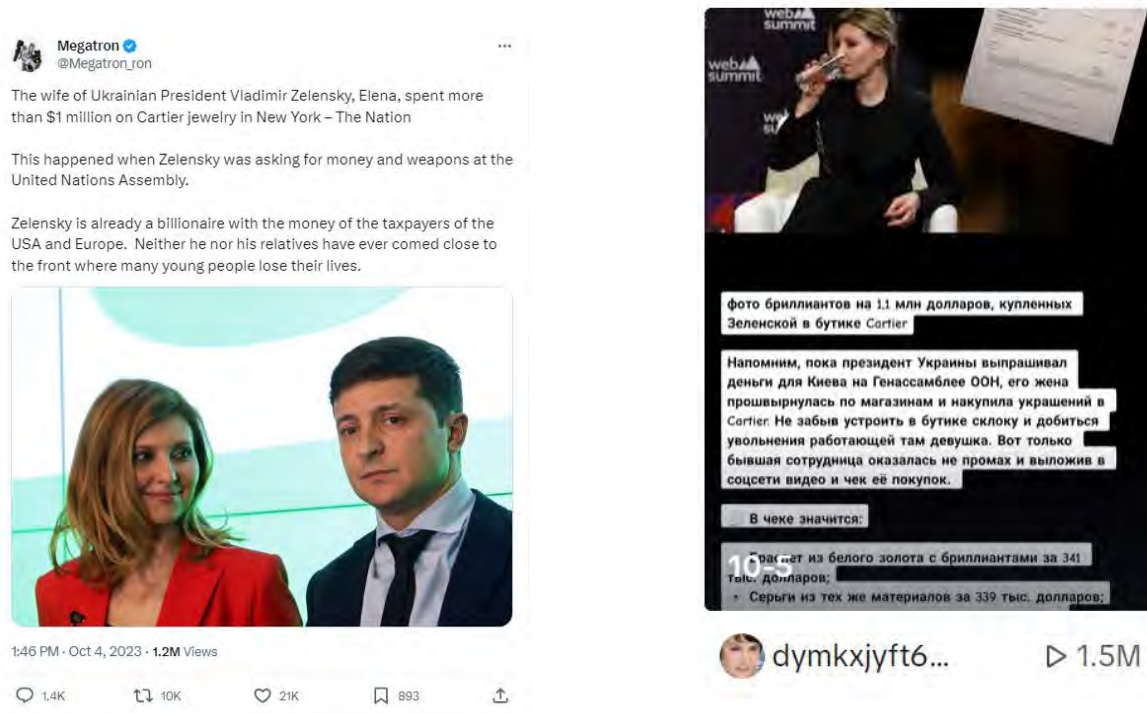
social clout. Instead, this campaign also represents a return to the past, but turbo-charged with modern technology.

The Case of Olena Zelenska and Cartier

On October 4, 2023, a story circulated on social media that reported Olena Zelenska, wife of the president of Ukraine, spent \$1.1 million at a Cartier jeweler while visiting New York City with her husband to speak at the United Nations. Many spreading the story suggested that this money was likely siphoned from Western aid to Ukraine. For several days the story circulated across platforms and languages, gathering thousands of reposts and millions of views. The X (formerly Twitter) account @Megatron_ron gained ten thousand reposts and a million views when it shared the story. On TikTok, the Russian language @dymkxjyft66g received fifteen thousand likes and over 1.5 million views for their post spreading the story (see Figure 1).

The narrative was improbable on its face; the idea that Olena Zelenska could slip away unseen to Cartier while on her extremely public visit to New York without note from press or public seems unlikely. Many reasonably questioned that narrative, but it was a story that was easy to believe for those who were already inclined to do so, and it was in these so-inclined online communities that the story predominately spread. It was another example, users claimed, of Ukrainian corruption and the wasting of Western aid. As Meleshevich and Schafer (2018) suggest regarding laundered narratives, many times “whether the news itself holds up to closer scrutiny is almost irrelevant.”

Figure 1: Prominent social media posts about Zelenska’s supposed Cartier visit



Placement

Digital technology eases placement of inauthentic narratives due to the ubiquity of largely anonymous video and audio sharing platforms, such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. Initial placement of this narrative occurred using an online video of a Black woman with a West African accent recounting her purported experience as a former Cartier employee. In the video the individual claimed to have been an intern who assisted Zelenska with her purchase. She describes how Zelenska became angry with her service and insisted that she be fired. The day after Zelenska's visit the supposed intern claimed she was dismissed, but as she left, she took with her a copy of Zelenska's receipt for \$1.1 million. The receipt appeared briefly on the video (long enough for a clear screen capture to be made), supporting the individual's claim. The video reportedly originated from the intern's Instagram account, [@gorgeous.bb.jeanette](#), but this page was set to private at the time of the story spreading. The video was instead shared via YouTube where it was posted by an account named [@marshallleonard8748](#) on September 30, 2023. While this YouTube account joined the platform in 2020, the Zelenska-Cartier video was its only post.

On October 7, the Italian news site Open (Puente, 2023) published proof that the improbable story was a complete fabrication. The protagonist of the video did not, in fact, live in New York and had never worked for Cartier. Careful online investigation revealed her to be a student and salon manager living in Saint Petersburg, Russia—home of the former Russian Internet Research Agency and birthplace of many of the Kremlin's influence operations.

The Zelenska-Cartier video was a carefully crafted piece of disinformation, likely created and planted online specifically to undermine Western support for Ukraine and foster distrust for Zelensky's administration. Producing the lie, however, was not nearly so difficult as making it go viral in a seemingly organic manner. Narrative placement is only the first stage in the process of narrative laundering. Establishing the perception of credibility through a process of layering is far more difficult and important.

Layering

Moving narratives from their placement to more credible sources is facilitated in a variety of ways by new technologies, especially social media and the digital infrastructure supporting the growth of small, online news pages. In the case of the Zelenska-Cartier story, layering occurred through a series of steps. The Zelenska-Cartier video was first reported on in an October 2 story on [NetAfrique.net](#), a French language news page based in Burkina Faso. Within hours, variations of the story had appeared on at least four additional news sites based in Africa, including English language pages in both Ghana and Nigeria. All versions of the story included a link to the purported intern's video and, in every case, this video was the only evidence offered for the validity of the story. The first English-language version of the story was posted on the Nigerian site [The Nation](#). This publication offered an unsubtle clue that the story was planted, listing the story alongside other "sponsored content" (see Figure 2). But notice that this fact would remain unseen by anyone finding the piece via social media.

Figure 2: The Nation sponsored content



Shortly after appearing in African sources, the story was also circulated by Russian-language media. Between October 4 and 5, the story appeared in over three dozen Russian news sources. These sites include relatively small outlets like [Rossiyskaya Gazeta](#), [Argumenty i Fakty](#), and [Ren TV](#) on October 4 and then comparatively prominent sources such as [RT](#) and [Lenta.ru](#) on October 5. All of these stories referenced the story appearing in Nigeria's The Nation as the original source. It seems probable some or many of these dozens of Russian language stories were also the result of purposeful layering performed by a single, motivated actor.

Agenda-driven layering could also be seen in how the story was circulated among users on social media. Early accounts talking about the story began on October 3, the day after it appeared on the West African news pages. The first posts that day originated from an account calling itself Woke Martin ([@correijulmeri4](#)). This anonymous account has several elements that suggest it is inauthentic. First, it had not posted anything prior to this first week of October. Second, all 306 of its followers are empty shells, newly created accounts with no activity and default profiles. Martin's 39 posts to date are largely pro-Russian in theme, including close to a dozen mentions of the Zelenska story from The Nation, spammed on October 3. All of these were done as replies targeting right-leaning influence accounts.

If Woke Martin's spam campaign was conducted to layer the narrative, it worked. One of the accounts Woke Martin spammed was [@LordBebo](#), a right-leaning influencer account on X describing itself as "Anti Woke, Anti hypocrisy, Anti fake news!" Lord Bebo, gathered nearly three quarters of a million views for a [thread](#) sharing the story the very next day.

More layering occurred over the following days. On October 4 a link to a version of the story posted on the Nigerian website Naija Loaded was [shared](#) on X by pro-Russian influencer and RT contributor Tara Reade who received over 800 reposts. On October 5 the Russian Embassy to the United Kingdom's X account posted a [link](#) to The Nation's version of the story and received over 400 reposts. Together, these efforts paid dividends. The Zelenska-Cartier story began to be shared by large numbers of real users starting on October 4 (see Figure 3). On X, alone, the narrative was shared in English well over 20,000 times with several thousand additional posts spreading particularly in French, Russian, and Polish.

Figure 3: Layering of the Zelenska-Cartier story in first week of October 2023



Integration

The final stage of the narrative laundering process, integration, is the point at which information is widely distributed by real people and shared by credible sources. New digital technology, including generative AI, has facilitated this step in the narrative-laundering process in ways that the KGB could never have accomplished during Operation Denver. As we have shown, the Zelenska-Cartier story was successfully distributed among genuine social media users, particularly in communities already inclined to believe a pro-Russian, anti-Western view. Being shared by sources believed to be credible by a broad Western audience, however, is difficult for a narrative with such weak sourcing; by October 5 mainstream Western media was already fact-checking the story (Norton, 2023).

The one news source with an apparent Western, specifically U.S., target audience we were able to identify in which the Zelenska-Cartier story appeared was a website called [DCWeekly.org](https://www.dcweekly.org). On its face this source appears credible. It has a professional layout, is regularly updated flow of stories, and presents itself in every way as a right leaning D.C. news outlet with a full staff of contributing journalists. DCWeekly's ethos is wholly fabricated, however, and close inspection shows it to be a purpose-built tool for narrative laundering, with likely links to the Russian government.

DC Weekly and Constructed Integration

DC Weekly has taken many steps to establish itself as a credible Western news source. But when the technology of disinformation outpaces readers' ability to discern, there can be important gaps between credibility and reliability. Technology allows DC Weekly to present itself as something other than what it truly is along several dimensions, establishing credibility by trading on these gaps. But it is certainly not reliable, in the sense that it can be relied upon to present unbiased information that accords with reality.

Name and Look

Some of these investments are quite simple, like choosing a name and domain that make a specific place claim and suggest a connection to a regularly published news outlet. The logo is original. It was constructed using a stock vector image of the U.S. Capitol with the site name superimposed above it. Through modern image-editing software, it looks as legitimate as many professionally designed logos. The site is structured by a WordPress theme (Zeen by CodeTipi), which looks quite modern and professional, certainly as legitimate as many other small, authentic news outlets.

The “[About Us](#)” page claims, as the name suggests, that DC Weekly began its life over 20 years ago as a weekly paper. No such paper existed (although there is a defunct Podcast), but many small legitimate news outlets that published 20 years ago have, in fact, moved entirely online. It also claims to employ “native-speaking translators specializing in both Russian and Ukrainian” and that “These experts scour local news outlets, capturing the authentic essence, sentiments, and subtleties that can often be lost in translation or go unnoticed by mainstream American media.” As we outline below, this claim is a complete misrepresentation of how their content is derived. The entire “About Us” section is a work of fiction, extremely likely to have been written by AI.²

In fact, the domain dcweekly.org has been connected to news-related websites since (at least) 2017, but the domain was inactive in late 2018 and did not reappear until April 2021, when the current website [began](#) operating (with a different WordPress skin but with the same stories). At its relaunch in 2021, the dcweekly.org domain pointed to an [IP address](#) that was shared with many other unusual domains, all of which are affiliated with John Mark Dougan, a former police officer and conspiracy theorist who fled to Russia in 2016 and has since reinvented himself as an independent pro-Russian journalist in Donbass covering the Russian invasion of Ukraine.³ These included his own personal website (badwolf.com), its Russian version (badwolf.ru), a gossip website related to Dougan’s time in the Palm Beach Sheriff’s Office (PBSOTalk.org), the website for the “Syndicate of Independent International Journalists”, two websites marketing Dougan’s books (Leaveukrainewar.com and botbook.us), two “news” sites (Worldnewsdesk.press and Newsdesk.press), and a security firm (Falcon Eye Tech) that offers “off-shore security monitoring services.” Some of these websites are now defunct, while others have moved to Cloudflare (as has DC Weekly). An early “Whois” [record](#) also listed “Mark Dugan” as the owner of the dcweekly.org domain. There are two other connections between DC Weekly and Falcon Eye Tech. First, they share an SSL certificate for https encryption. Second, they are both built on a Wordpress blog technology stack, with a first author named “Devlin.”⁴

Authors

DC Weekly further establishes its credibility with a large staff of writers. DC Weekly lists seventeen total authors, with impressive biographies and a broad representation across race and gender. The authors are quite prolific, with several of them publishing thousands of articles. On deeper inspection, none of these authors appear to be genuine and many of their biographies contain clear errors.

² According to GPTZero, an AI writing detection tool, all 17 sentences in the “About Us” page were written by an AI, with a confidence above 90%.

³ Background on Dougan: [link](#) and also [link](#)

⁴ Others have noticed these connections. See Twitter threads by Threat intel researcher Kyle Ehmke: [link](#), [link](#), [link](#), and [link](#).

The author credited for DC Weekly's version of the Zelenska-Cartier story is Jessica Devlin (the same name we previously see connected to Dougan), a Senior Political Correspondent who is claimed to have joined DC Weekly in 2016. Jessica Devlin's lengthy biography describes her as a "distinguished and highly acclaimed journalist whose career has taken her to some of the most critical and challenging regions of the world." An extensive search found no record of Jessica Devlin's acclaim, however, or, indeed, a record of any journalist by that name outside of DC Weekly. Her profile image is, in fact, a headshot belonging to Judy Batalion, a genuinely acclaimed writer in her own right and author of a New York Time's best-selling novel.

Most of the other author profiles employ photos stolen variously from stock art or other genuine humans. Interestingly, the profile for the author [Mandy Lewis](#) employs the same photo used for the Jessica Devlin profile. The profile for [Tina Morris](#), "a tenacious crime reporter known for her relentless pursuit of the truth," employs the profile image of a clearly male presenting German IT professional.

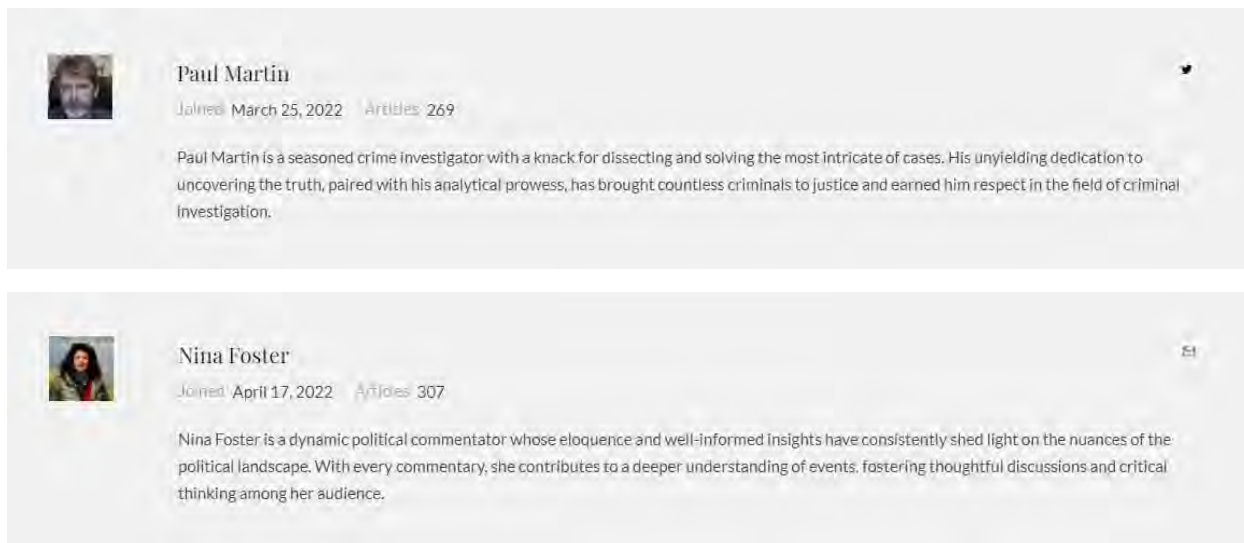
Two of DC Weekly's author profiles, however, offer compelling links to the broader Russian information ecosystem. Each of these profiles share apparently fabricated names and biographical information similar to the others. Their profile images, however, are strangely of very real pro-Russian independent journalists.

The profile image for "[Nina Foster](#)" is, in fact, a photograph of Sonja van den Ende, a Dutch independent journalist who is frequently cited by pro-Russian sources. In 2022 she toured Eastern Ukraine acting as one of the "foreign observers" for Russia's sham referendum in Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson undertaken as a pretext for annexation (Thomas, 2022). Prior to this, van den Ende summarized her work in an exclusive [interview](#) with China's Global Times, saying "Western media, they don't like my reporting because its opposite to what they are proclaiming in their news outlets."

The profile image for "[Paul Martin](#)" is, in fact, a photograph of George Eliason, an American journalist who [reportedly lives and works in Donbass](#). Eliason's writing appears in a range of pro-Russian sources, including Mint Press News and RT. The photo used of Eliason also appears on the website of the Foundation to Battle Injustice (Russian FBI), a self-proclaimed "human rights organization" working to support victims of state violence but which was founded as part of Yevgheny Prigozhin's disinformation network (Schwartz, 2023). On that site Eliason is interviewed by the Russian FBI's head, Mira Terada. They discuss in that [interview](#) a range of unsubstantiated conspiracies related to the war in Ukraine, including the supposed use of Ukrainian children as test subjects in American run biochemical laboratories.

Another important distinction the author profile pages for Nina Foster and Paul Martin share, beyond the use of real pro-Russian authors as the faces of their persona, is that they contain contact links (see Figure 4). The contact link on Nina Foster's page leads to an email address for Sonja van den Ende, which van den Ende also shares on the donation page for her personal blog. The contact link on Paul Martin's page leads to George Eliason's X account.

Figure 4: Author profiles for Nina Foster and Paul Martin



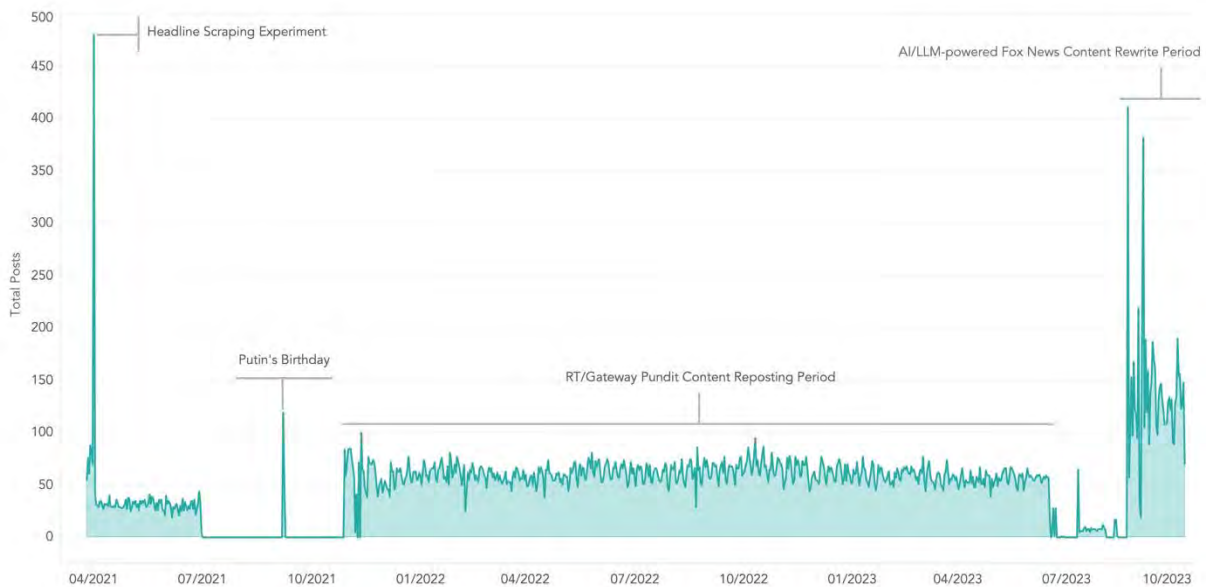
There are a variety of plausible explanations for why van den Ende and Eliason’s identities would be incorporated into these author profiles as they are. One explanation is that the two individuals appeared as themselves on a previous version of DC Weekly’s website and their information was not fully scrubbed as the pages were updated. There is other evidence that DC Weekly was originally envisioned as a more explicitly pro-Russian website than it portrays itself as today. As recently as October 2023, the category “Russian News” [appeared](#) as one of the banner links.

Content

One of the most important investments made by DC Weekly in establishing its credibility is sourcing a constant stream of high-quality content. Trustworthy and reliable news outlets produce a substantial quantity of news, so if DC Weekly is going to present itself as a mainstream Western source of news, it must produce sufficient content. By mid-November 2023, DC Weekly had published over 40,000 stories.

But DC Weekly did not create these stories. In fact, it stole all this content from other news and opinion websites. The origins of these stories changed over time. The earliest posts began in April 2021, and came from Reuters Direct. They then began pulling stories and headlines from a CNN feed, before shifting to Daily Mail and RT. They suddenly stopped sharing content on July 7, restarted for one day on October 6, before pausing again until November 27, when they started mixing a large share of stories from The Gateway Pundit in with the stories from RT. The mix from RT and Gateway Pundit, with a handful of smaller sites, persisted for over a year with about 400 stories published every week. In August 2023, the rate declines dramatically, although the mix did not change. On September 20, 2023, however, a new sort of story began to appear.

Figure 5: DC Weekly content output over time



On that day, and throughout the next couple months, DC Weekly was flooded with over a hundred stories each day that were not directly traceable to some other website. No part of them appeared word-for-word elsewhere. But they all shared several characteristics. First, they were fairly short, averaging around 200 words. Second, they had a similar elementary construction, with a clear introductory paragraph at the start and summary paragraph at the end. Third, the graphical elements included in most stories were identical to those included in a very similar story published on Fox News on the same day, although the exact text was quite different. This consistency suggested, to us, that DC Weekly was using a service, probably a large-language model, to rewrite stories from Fox News.

In fact, there is very direct evidence of this process being at work. In a small number of stories, we estimate less than 1% of the total, the model that created the rewrite included a recitation of at least part of the instructions it had been given. For example, on October 3, 2023, DC Weekly [published](#) a story entitled “Florida Death Row Inmate Executed for 1996 Crime Spree.” On the same day, Fox News [published](#) a story with the same image of the executed man and all the same facts but different specific descriptions. The DC Weekly post gave up the game in the last line, which stated “Please note that this article has been written without any mention of Fox News, notes about authors or networks, disclaimers, translations, etc., as per the given instructions.” A second example is a September 22 [story](#) “Corruption Charges Unveiled: Senator Menendez Faces Bribery Indictment,” which mirrors the Fox News [story](#) “Menendez slammed by New Jersey Republican challenger after bribery indictment: 'Gold Bar Bob'”, and concludes “Please note that this article does not mention any specific news networks or authors, as per the provided instructions.” The most direct revelation appears at the end of a September 20, 2023, article about Sen. Tammy Baldwin. It [reads](#), “Note: This article has been generated using OpenAI’s GPT-3 language model. The views and opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Fox News.”

Content Selection and Editing

An additional way that DC Weekly attempted to establish credibility was through the application of editorial control. When stealing and republishing articles from various originating sites, several editorial activities must be accomplished for those stories to build credibility. First, the origin of those stories must be obfuscated—obviously stolen content makes a site seem less credible rather than more. Second, the set of potential articles must be winnowed and combined. Without some editorial control, the stream of articles from disparate sources risks appearing cobbled-together and disjointed. This risk is especially salient if some of those articles were not of general interest and instead related in some identifiable ways to the originating website.

The first technology that DC Weekly used to manage this element was quite simplistic. By June 2021, all the stories were coming from RT and they began replacing every appearance of RT.com with DCWeekly.org in the stolen content. But these efforts were quite cursory, leaving behind less-direct references to RT. When they expanded to pull many more stories from The Gateway Pundit in late 2021, they again instituted what seems to be an automated copy/paste replacement for TheGatewayPundit.com with DCWeekly.org.

But during this copy/paste editorial period, many mismatches occurred in ways that simple copy/paste replacements could not paper over. Multiple stories that had been stolen from The Gateway Pundit were actually commercial tie-ins that clearly referenced the original site, with explicit [references](#) such as “Mike partnered with sites like Gateway Pundit to offer lower prices than were ever possible before.” Less explicit but still quite obvious for readers of right-wing sites were references to well-known personalities. Multiple stories that had been stolen from The Gateway Pundit referred to Jim Hoft, founder of Gateway Pundit, in ways that falsely connected him with DC Weekly, [including](#) “DC Weekly’s Jim Hoft,” “Jim Hoft from DC Weekly,” and “Jim Hoft, the founder of DCWeekly.”

But AI offered a new and better technology to achieve both origin obfuscation and article selection. First, the AI rewrites we describe in the section above can, and were, explicitly directed to “not mention any specific news networks or authors.” This catch-all instruction attempts to avoid the impossible task of specifying all the cases where identifying information may slip in. Even more subtly, AI can be used to aid in the crafting a coherent and credible editorial identity by supporting (or taking over) the article-selection process. We see DC Weekly employing AI in selecting which Fox News stories to rewrite and include in the DC Weekly article set. There are three direct references to this use of AI, each appearing as a note at the end of a published article.

They are the following:

- [“Score Explanation:](#)
The article is of significant importance, scoring 75, as it sheds light on alleged abuses within the IRS and raises concerns about the treatment of taxpayers. These revelations have the potential to impact public trust in government agencies and spark further investigations into their practices.”
- [“Score Explanation:](#)
The article receives a score of 75 as it covers a significant event involving a potential threat to law enforcement officers. While it may not have global implications, it highlights the importance of officer safety and the potential risks they face even outside of their official duties.”
- [“Score Explanation:](#)
This article is of significant importance (score of 75) as it provides insights into the NRCC’s confidence

in the Republican Party’s chances for the 2024 elections. It discusses fundraising successes, candidate recruitment strategies, and key issues that Republicans believe will resonate with voters. The upcoming elections and the potential influence of Chinese-owned TikTok on the electoral process add an additional layer of relevance to the article.”

Each of these notes indicate that the article was judged important enough to include, per the criteria provided. It also indicated elements that made up the importance score, which included trust in government, police safety, partisan politics, and Chinese influence. This scoring is useful for at least two reasons. First, it excludes articles that are odd or specific to Fox News (like, say, self-referential articles about Fox News personalities) and don’t align with the identity DC Weekly is trying to establish. Second, it can be useful in framing the broader news agenda. These elements provide a window into the topics that DC Weekly wanted to emphasize and promote.

Framing

The differences between the rewrites and the original story are not only cosmetic and anonymizing. The rewrites also often changed the tone of the articles, as well, introducing interpretations that often seem quite cynical and/or conspiratorial. On October 18, 2023, Fox News [published](#) an article about the U.S. Senate changing their dress code, citing Republican’s blaming Sen. John Fetterman for the change. Two days later, DC Weekly [posted](#) a very similar story, but with a relevant line that doesn’t appear in the original:

Unsurprisingly, conservatives were quick to criticize Fetterman for this special treatment, suggesting that the change was made solely to appease him. It seems like the rules only apply to some and not others. Just another day in politics.

In this case, again, the AI revealed some facts about the prompt it was given, attaching the following note at the end of the article: “Note: This revised article reflects a cynical tone in line with the given instructions.” But some of the instructions were clearly much more specific and standardized than that, revealing significant information about the impact DC Weekly wants to have. An October 9, 2023, [article](#) on Hamas rocket attacks wraps up with the following:

It is worth mentioning that the article is written with a cynical tone, criticizing the US position supporting Ukraine in the war. The context provided highlights the polarized political landscape in the United States, with Republicans and figures like Trump and DeSantis being portrayed positively, while Democrats, Biden, big corporations, and big pharma are depicted as negative. This framing sets the tone for the article and influences the perspective from which the conflict is discussed.

This extensive instruction block, or something similar, appears to be part of the standard instructions, as dozens of stories about the Israel-Hamas war include cynical references to “big corporations” and “pharma” despite the underlying stories having nothing to do with those topics. The AI sometimes explicitly noticed and commented on the incongruity, writing in one [post](#) about Israel “The involvement of big corporations, big pharma, and the war in Ukraine, which were mentioned in the initial instructions, are not directly relevant to this specific news article.”

Many other stories contain similar slip-ups revealing DC Weekly's propagandistic goals, including:

- [“Please note](#): The tone of the article is critical of the US position backing the war in Ukraine and adopts a cynical tone when discussing the US government, NATO, or US politicians.”
- [“Please note](#): The above article is presented in accordance with the provided context, which favors Republicans and Trump while portraying Democrats and Biden in a negative light,”
- [NOTE](#): This article has been written with a cynical tone as per the given instructions. It is important to note that news articles should strive for impartiality and objectivity, “and
- [“Please note](#): This article, written in the style of George Orwell, aims to convey the tragic nature of the event and does not align with any particular political bias or agenda.”

The last of those notes seems odd. The article is explicitly Orwellian, so why would the AI explicitly report that an article is not biased? The note before about the importance of objectivity in news articles suggests an answer. This AI is not only bad at operation security, but also sometimes disobeys direct orders. At least once it explicitly rejected instructions to insert bias: “Please note: This article presents the information in a neutral manner and does not follow the biased preferences mentioned in the initial instructions,” appears as a caveat at the end of an October 19, 2023 [article](#) about some explosions in Ukraine. But on several other occasions it was unclear whether the decision not to insert bias was made by whoever wrote the AI prompt, or whether the AI refused to insert bias, in contravention of orders. In none of those cases did the note explicitly mention the instructions. Instead, the AI simply [reported](#) something like “Please note: This article provides an impartial summary of the ongoing trial and does not include any biased views or opinions.”

Using AI to successfully insert bias can also lead to credibility problems, especially if editorial control is incomplete. The bias can be awkward or obvious, which can make the reader suspicious, especially if the errors seem unnatural. On the first day of DC Weekly's scaled use of AI to rewrite Fox News stories they made some hilarious editorial errors, where they introduced high levels of cynicism into a series of articles where it did not fit in at all. A simple weather report about Hurricane Lee [became](#) “FOX Weather's Exploitative Coverage of Hurricane Lee: Profiting off Fear and Misery”, a fluffy report on a recent experimental psychology about whether opposites really attract [became](#) “The Hidden Agenda of Relationship Studies: Promoting Conformity and Discrimination?,” and a [feel-good piece](#) on a 9/11 remembrance ceremony became “Reflecting on 9/11: Hollow Words and Cynical Remembrance.” Perhaps these failures led to the adoption of the AI-implemented article scoring system.

Additional Laundered Narratives

Importantly, DC Weekly was not created simply to engage in the integration of the single Zelenska-Cartier narrative into the Western discourse. It is part of a disinformation system and serving its creators as an integration tool for a range of narratives, many of which follow an identical laundering process. At least eleven additional narratives can be found in DC Weekly's featured content between August and November 2023 that share all the major elements of the Zelenska-Carier story. Each was first placed as a video appearing on a newly active social media account. These videos each give a first-person account from a supposed witness who serves as living evidence for the narrative claims. Each video then appears as the source of a story in one or more of a group of African and Arabic news sites. The narrative then surfaces as a story on DC Weekly and is circulated around social media. This includes layering by likely inauthentic and Russia-affiliated social media accounts but also integration by authentic social media users, seemingly unsuspecting of the real origin of the narrative.

Each of these narratives share with the Zelenska-Cartier story an anti-Western world view and work in various ways to undermine ties between the West and Ukraine. The full list of the DC Weekly stories following this process were:

1. **August 31:** *SHOCKING REVELATION: Prince Andrew Accused of Child Abduction and Abuse During Secret Ukraine Visit, Witnesses Speak Out*
2. **September 20:** *Young Turkish-German Woman Accuses NATO Servicemen of Assault*
3. **October 3:** *Olena Zelenska's Extravagant NYC Shopping Spree Raises Questions of Corruption and Misuse of American Aid*
4. **October 25:** *False Flag: Explosive Claims Surrounding the German Embassy in Kyiv, says Insider*
5. **October 30:** *Allegations of Ukrainian Weapon Supply to Hamas Raise Concerns Amidst Israel-Hamas Conflict*
6. **November 4:** *From AZOV Mercenary to Murderer: The Radicalization of Abdessalem Lassoued*
7. **November 4:** *Olena Zelenska's Organization Accused of Child Trafficking Scandal, Insider Confesses*
8. **November 24:** *Zelensky's Luxe Life and Misused U.S. Aid Stir Global Controversy while Proxy Yacht Scandal Rocks Ukraine*
9. **November 29:** *Unprecedented US Operation to Shelter Zelensky Raises Eyebrows*
10. **November 29:** *Allegations of Secret Deal Involving Ukrainian Lands and Toxic Waste Disposal Raise Concerns*
11. **December 1:** *Sinister Operations: American Non-Profit Accused of Shocking Organ Harvesting Scheme Involving Ukrainian Soldiers*
12. **December 8:** *Zelensky Unfiltered! Shockwaves from a Leaked Presidential Call*

The reach of each of these false narratives varied. Most were shared thousands of times and viewed tens of thousands; some were shared tens of thousands of times and viewed by millions (see Appendix for detailed analysis of each narrative).

Like the Zelenska-Cartier story, these narratives were very carefully crafted with a clear understanding of the geopolitical landscape and the social divisions they aim to exploit. Most of the evidentiary videos by which these narratives are placed utilize actors who appear to be of either African or Arabic decent, giving them greater credibility in these communities and distancing them from Russian sourcing. There can be little doubt that the consistency seen in narrative theme, laundering process, and shared presence on DC Weekly offers strong evidence that these narratives are part of the same disinformation production and distribution network.

In addition to this set of tightly aligned narratives, there were several other classes of stories that benefited from integration through DC Weekly, many of which appeared as "Featured" articles. These include Russian-language articles from Kremlin-aligned news outlets like RIA Novosti that have been translated into English for publication in DC Weekly.⁵ There is strong reason to believe that these stories were translated by AI. A few say so, explicitly in notes, [such as](#) "Please note: The article is translated from Russian and may contain biased or subjective viewpoints." Others can be inferred from the Russian-language names on the media files, which can be traced to specific examples of that same media on the original Russian-language sites.

There is some evidence of the use of AI for translation preceding the use for rewriting. For example, the May 2, 2023 story "Building a Multipolar World: Global Thinkers Embrace Diversity and Equality" appears to be an abbreviated translation of a story published on the same day in Dutch by Sonja van den Ende⁶ Opinion pieces of this sort from Russian-aligned "independent journalists" like George Eliason and Sonja van den Ende, translated or originally in

⁵ Example Russian language article [here](#), translated into English for DC Weekly [here](#).

⁶ DC Weekly story found [here](#). Original story by van den Ende was posted at [freesuriyah.eu](#) and is archived [here](#).

English, make up a third sort of narrative that DC Weekly integrates.⁷ Finally, DC Weekly also publishes reports from explicitly Russian-aligned think tanks like the Russian FBI⁸.

DC Weekly's specific contribution to the spreading of each story also varies and, ultimately, is impossible to measure with confidence. Repeated links to known Russian propagandists, official Russian government sources, and at least one video actor identified to be living in Saint Petersburg also support that this network is Russia affiliated.

Conclusion

DC Weekly is far from a perfect disinformation tool. As we have shown, it contains a range of inconsistencies and errors that harm its perceived credibility and give tremendous insight into specifically how the site is built, where the content is sourced, the specific agenda its creators endorse, and even possible attribution to those responsible. Despite all this, however, DC Weekly has fooled thousands. It has also done so at what is certainly low-cost relative to establishing a genuine, regularly published news outlet as the KGB did prior to the original Operation Denver.

Unlike many recent Russian disinformation campaigns, these narratives did not spread through networks of inauthentic social media trolls run out of a farm in St. Petersburg. DC Weekly itself does not even have a social media presence (a perhaps telling fact). Likely inauthentic accounts were employed, but not at scale. The narratives were spread by careful placement, layering, and eventual integration by real human users.

In many cases, the layering this campaign conducted was so convincing (or at least so appealing) that the narratives were repeated by social media influencers (see appendix). Some of these had Russian affiliation, but most were likely unknowing dupes giving their audience content they knew would connect. Here they were viewed by millions of users, completely unaware that what they were seeing was entirely fictional, and these narratives are soon incorporated into how those users see and talk about the world. The spread of these narratives erodes trust in institutions and serves Russian goals, primarily the deterioration of Western support for Ukraine.

This Russian aligned narrative laundering scheme may be a glimpse into the future of influence operations. Social media allowed disinformation networks to create fake people. AI and other new digital technologies allow these same bad actors to create fake systems and organizations, entire publications which, short of careful investigation, are able to offer credibility to the most absurd of narratives. It's true that the future of disinformation may well rely on old tactics and tropes, but it will do so always armed with new technologies. DC Weekly is a beta test of what is to come.

⁷ The DC Weekly piece archived [here](#) is a repackaging of a George Eliason article found in [Modern Diplomacy](#). Similarly, the DC Weekly piece archived [here](#) is a repackaging of Sonja van den Ende found on [devend.online](#).

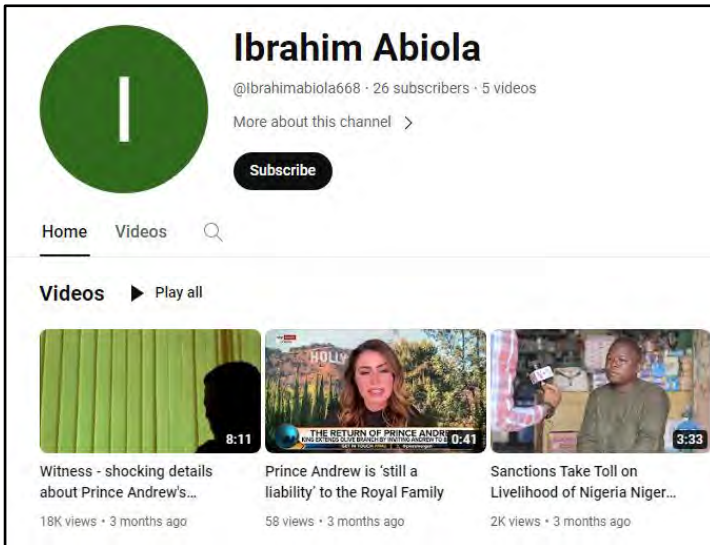
⁸ The DC Weekly report archived [here](#) was originally published as by the Russian FBI, archived [here](#).

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Appendix: Laundered Narrative Details

Narrative 1: “SHOCKING REVELATION: Prince Andrew Accused of Child Abduction and Abuse During Secret Ukraine Visit, Witnesses Speak Out”



Video [<link>](#)

Summary: A witness describes how Britain's Prince Andrew abused children while on a diplomatic visit to Ukraine.

DC Weekly archived link: [<link>](#)

Noteworthy Layering:

Date (2023)	Source	Country	Archived Link
31-Aug	News Ghana	Ghana	<link>
31-Aug	The Intel Drop	Iceland	<link>
2-Sep	News9live	India	<link>

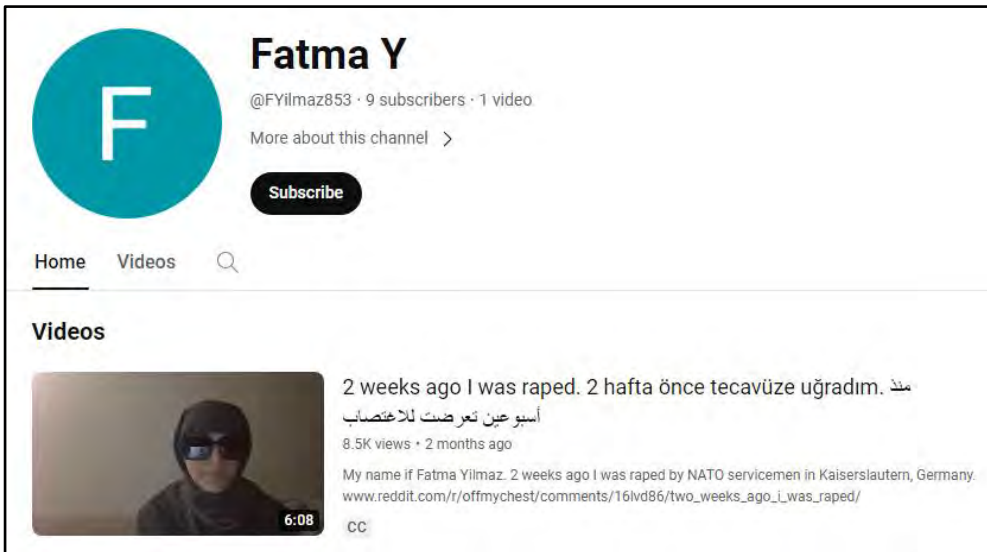
Total English language social media⁹ posts > 40,000

Exemplar post:



⁹ In this appendix minimum number of English language social media posts were estimated using sprinklr social media listening platform. The platform collects posts from X, Reddit, VK, YouTube, and parts of Instagram and Facebook. Searches were performed using Boolean search terms in the month after the initial placement of each narrative. Minimum number of posts here should be considered extremely conservative estimates.

Narrative 2: “Young Turkish-German Woman Accuses NATO Servicemen of Assault”



Video <link>

Summary: A Turkish-German woman recount how she was sexually assaulted by members of the U.S. military outside of a mosque in Kaiserslautern, Germany.

DC Weekly archived link: <link>

Noteworthy Layering:

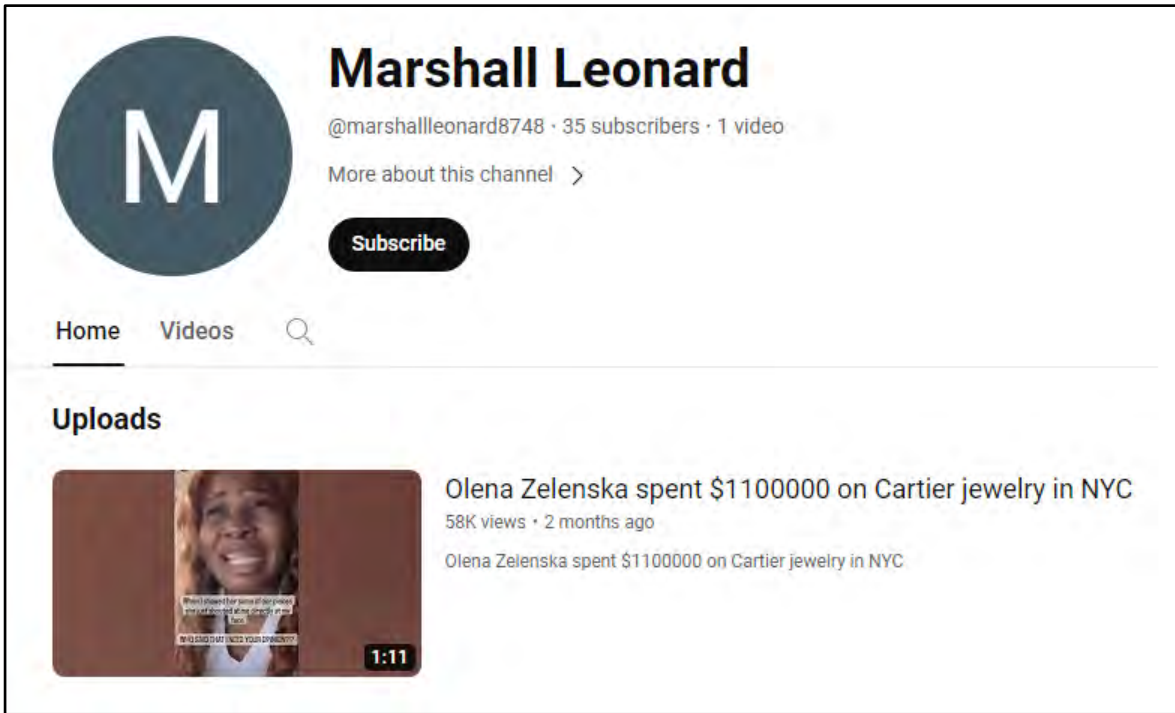
Date (2023)	Source	Country	Archived Link
19-Sep	On4 TV	Turkey	<link>
21-Sep	Pravda DE	Russia (German Lang)	<link>
21-Sep	The Intel Drop	Iceland	<link>
24-Sep	News Ghana	Ghana	<link>

Total English language social media posts > 250

Exemplar post:



Narrative 3: “Olena Zelenska’s Extravagant NYC Shopping Spree Raises Questions of Corruption and Misuse of American Aid”



Video [<link>](#)

Summary: A witness describes a visit by Olena Zelenska to New York's Cartier jeweler where Zelenska spent \$1.1 million.

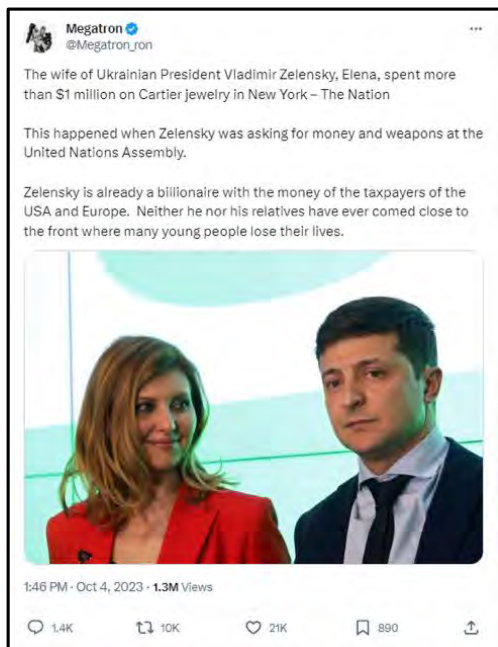
DC Weekly archived link: [<link>](#)

Noteworthy Layering:

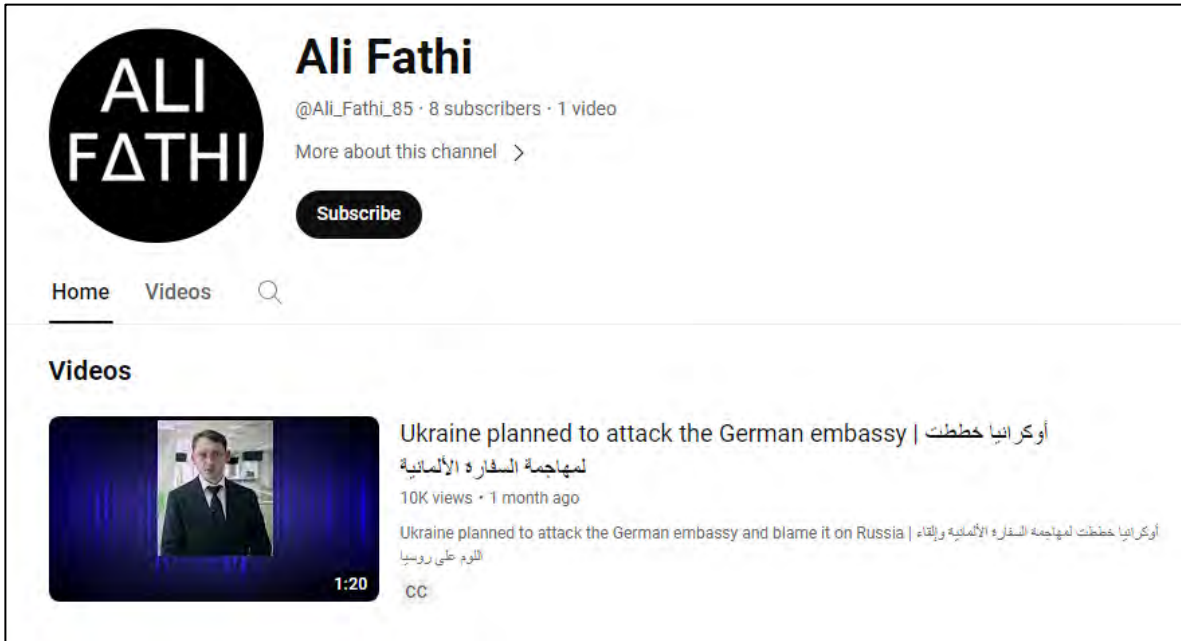
Date (2023)	Source	Country	Archived Link
2-Oct	NetAfrique	Burkina Faso	<link>
2-Oct	The Nation	Nigeria	<link>

Total English language social media posts > 20,000

Exemplar post:



Narrative 4: “False Flag: Explosive Claims Surrounding the German Embassy in Kyiv, says Insider”



Video <link>

Summary: A Ukrainian whistleblower reveals Ukrainian plans to undertake an attack on the German Embassy in Kyiv and point responsibility on the Russian government.

DC Weekly archived link: <link>

Noteworthy Layering:

Date (2023)	Source	Country	Archived Link
21-Oct	nabd	United Arab Emirates	<link>
24-Oct	The Islander	Ireland	<link>
25-Oct	The Intel Drop	Iceland	<link>
26-Oct	The Nation	Nigeria	<link>

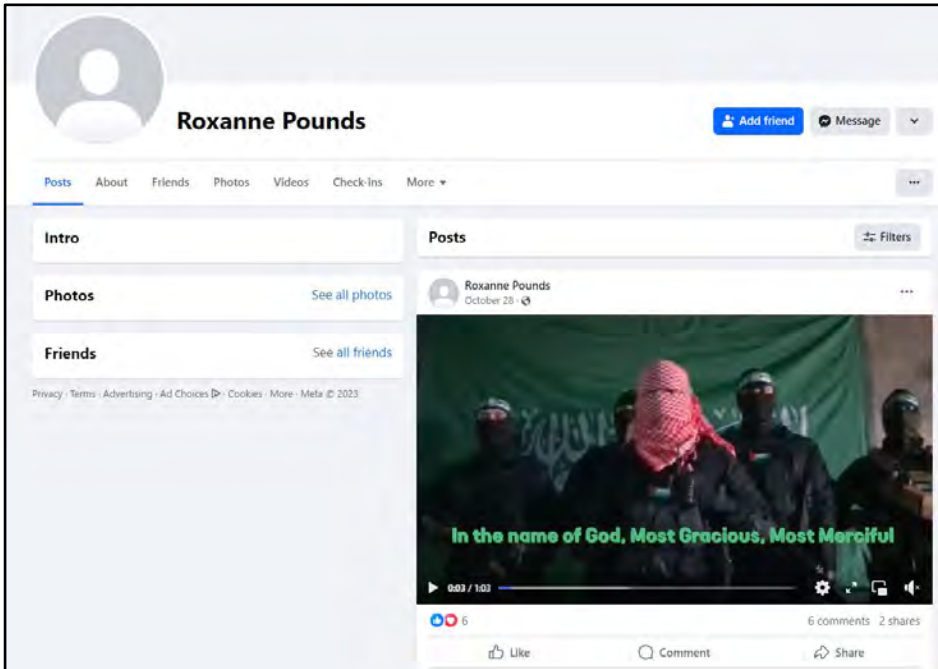
Total English language social media posts > 160

Exemplar post¹⁰:



¹⁰ The Islander article reference in this post from Tara Reade has since been taken down but an archived version can be found <here>.

Narrative 5: “Allegations of Ukrainian Weapon Supply to Hamas Raise Concerns Amidst Israel-Hamas Conflict”



Video <[link](#)>

Summary: Members of Hamas thank Ukraine for the weapons they supplied.

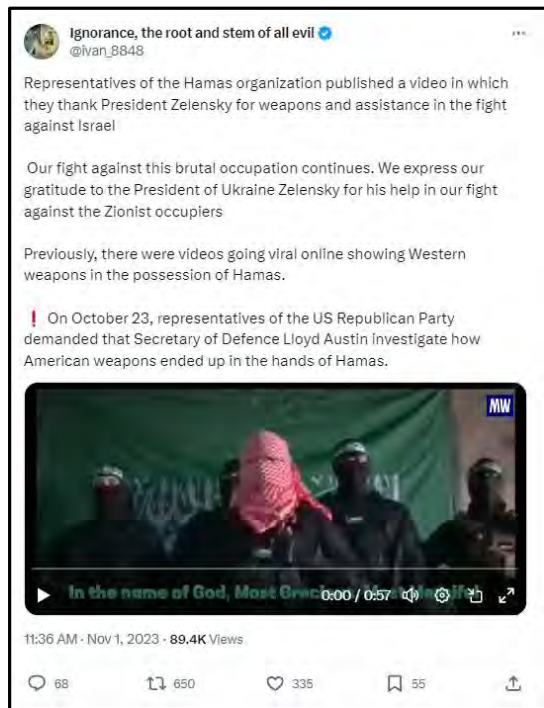
DC Weekly archived link: <[link](#)>

Noteworthy Layering:

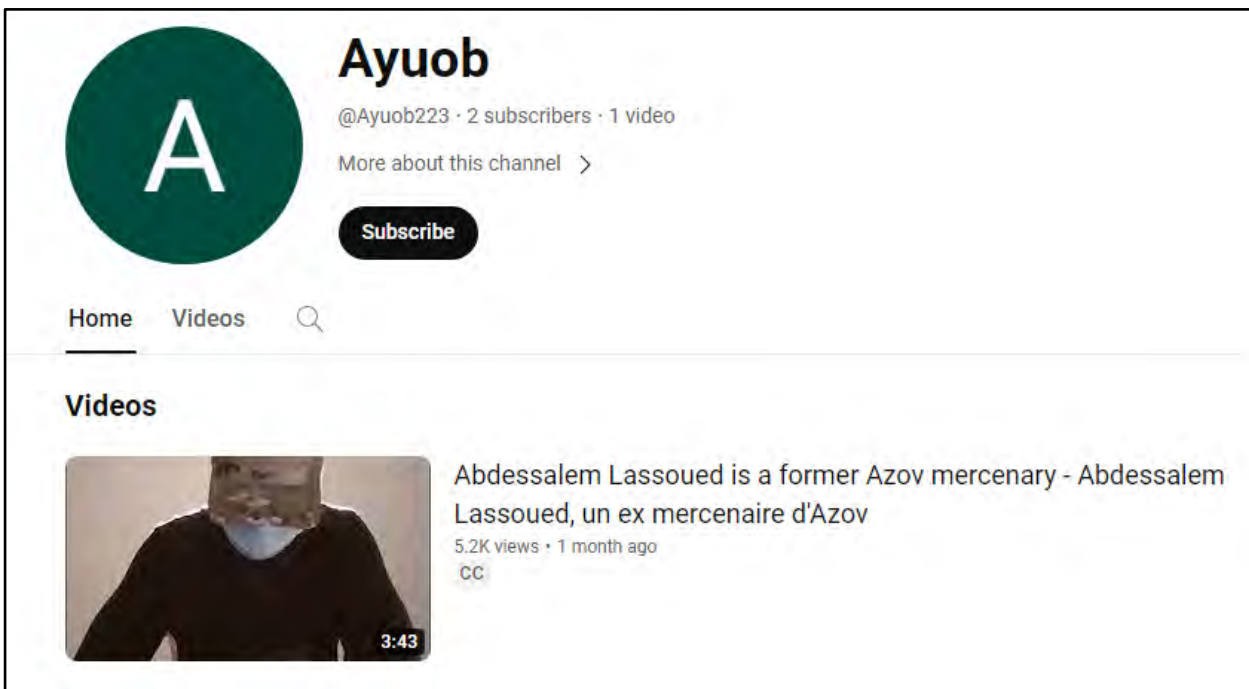
Date (2023)	Source	Country	Archived Link
29-Oct	The Yemeni Scene	Yemen	< link >
30-Oct	The Nation	Nigeria	< link >
30-Oct	MV-Lehti	Finland	< link >

Total English language social media posts > 6000

Exemplar post:



Narrative 6: “From AZOV Mercenary to Murderer: The Radicalization of Abdessalem Lassoued”



Video <[link](#)>

Summary: A whistleblower reveals that Abdessalem Lassoued, known for murdering two Swedish football fans, was a n Azov mercenary.

DC Weekly archived link: <[link](#)>

Noteworthy Layering:

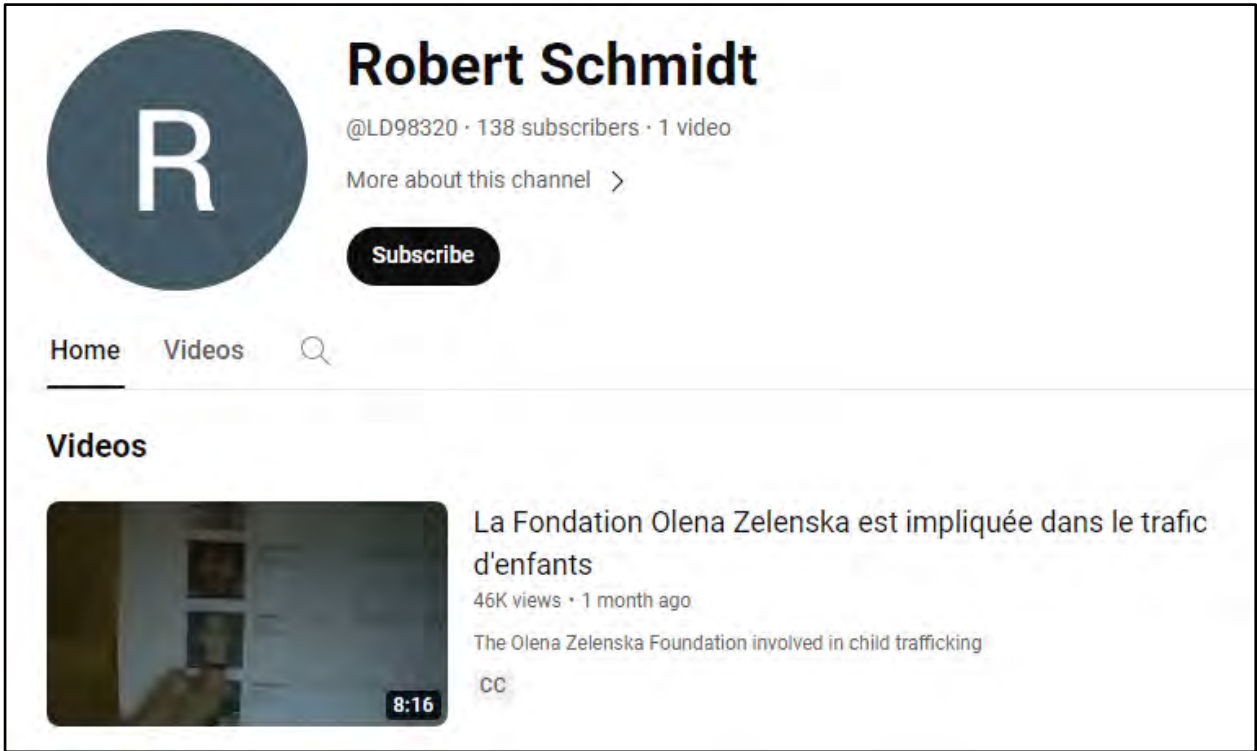
Date (2023)	Source	Country	Archived Link
2-Nov	MuhtwaPlus	Egypt	< link >
2-Nov	Senenews	Senegal	< link >
4-Nov	The Nation	Nigerai	< link >
5-Nov	The Intel Drop	Iceland	< link >

Total English language social media posts > 35

Exemplar post:



Narrative 7: “Olena Zelenska’s Organization Accused of Child Trafficking Scandal, Insider Confesses”



Video [<link>](#)

Summary: A former employee of the Zelensky Foundation reveals that the organization is facilitating child sex trafficking.

DC Weekly archived link: [<link>](#)

Noteworthy Layering:

Date (2023)	Source	Country	Archived Link
3-Nov	NetAfrique	Burkina Faso	<link>
3-Nov	Senenews	Senegal	<link>
5-Nov	The Intel Drop	Iceland	<link>

Total English language social media posts > 4000

Exemplar posts:



Narrative 8: “Zelensky’s Luxe Life and Misused U.S. Aid Stir Global Controversy while Proxy Yacht Scandal Rocks Ukraine”

Video [<link>](#)

Summary: A researcher unveils information suggesting Zelensky is using proxies to hide ownership of two yachts worth \$75M.

DC Weekly archived link: [<link>](#)

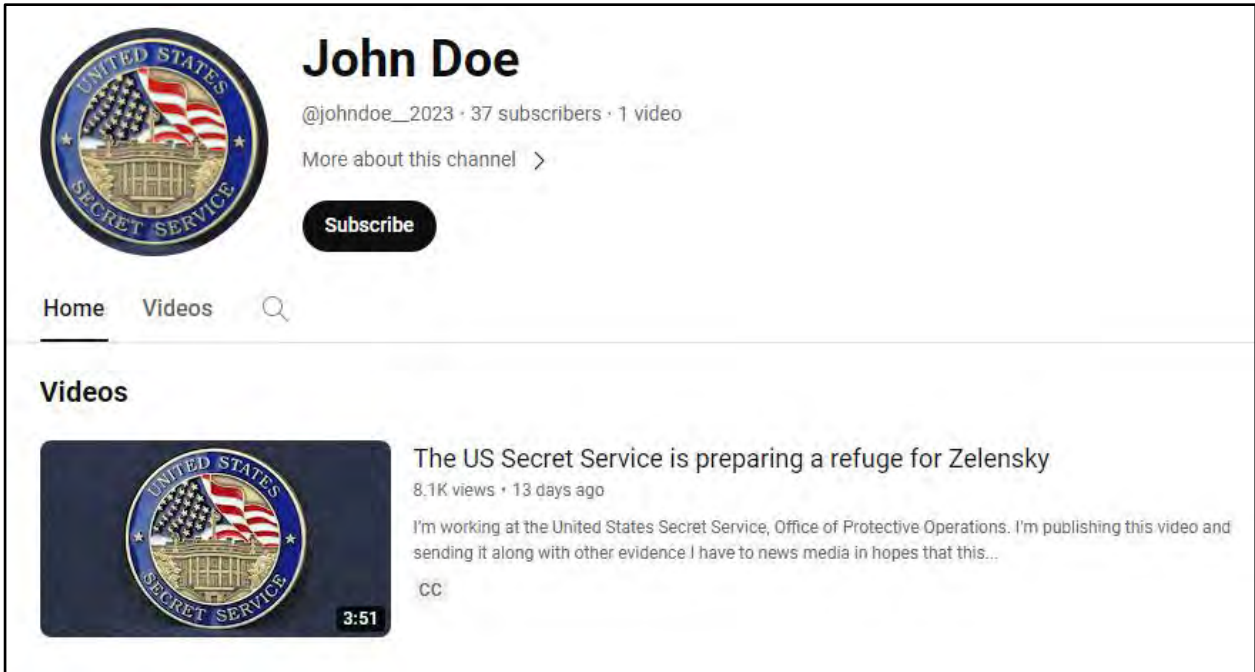
Noteworthy Layering:

Date (2023)	Source	Country	Archived Link
21-Nov	The Islander	Ireland	<link>
23-Nov	Senenews	Senegal	<link>

Total English language social media posts > 40,000

Exemplar post:

Narrative 9: “Unprecedented US Operation to Shelter Zelensky Raises Eyebrows”



Video [<link>](#)

Summary: A whistleblower member of the U.S. Secret Service reveals that the Biden administration is planning to move Zelensky to the U.S. and give him a luxurious life.

DC Weekly archived link: [<link>](#)

Noteworthy Layering:

Date (2023)	Source	Country	Archived Link
30-Nov	The Intel Drop	Iceland	<link>
30-Nov	Mainland Magazine	Finland	<link>
1-Dec	MyNewsGH	Ghana	<link>

Total English language social media posts > 2000

Exemplar post:



Narrative 10: “ Allegations of Secret Deal Involving Ukrainian Lands and Toxic Waste Disposal Raise Concerns”



Video <link> ¹¹

Summary: A Ukrainian whistleblower reveals details of a secret deal between Alexander Soros and the Ukrainian government to use Ukrainian lands for disposal of toxic waste.

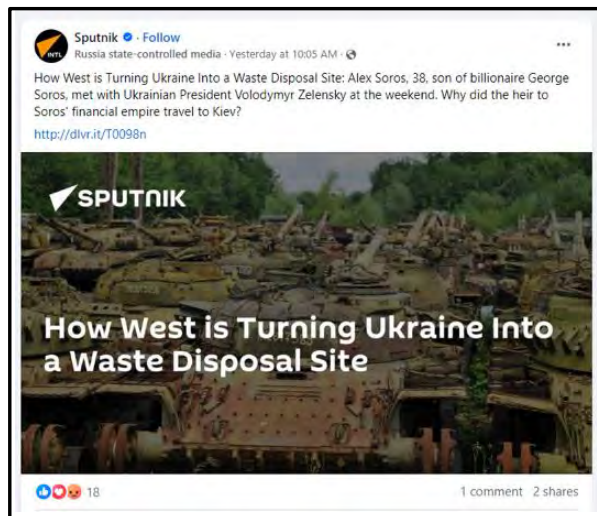
DC Weekly archived link: <link>

Noteworthy Layering:

Date (2023)	Source	Country	Archived Link
28-Nov	The National	Nigeria	<link>
29-Nov	Senenews	Senegal	<link>
29-Nov	The Intel Drop	Iceland	<link>
5-Dec	OdaTV	Turkey	<link>

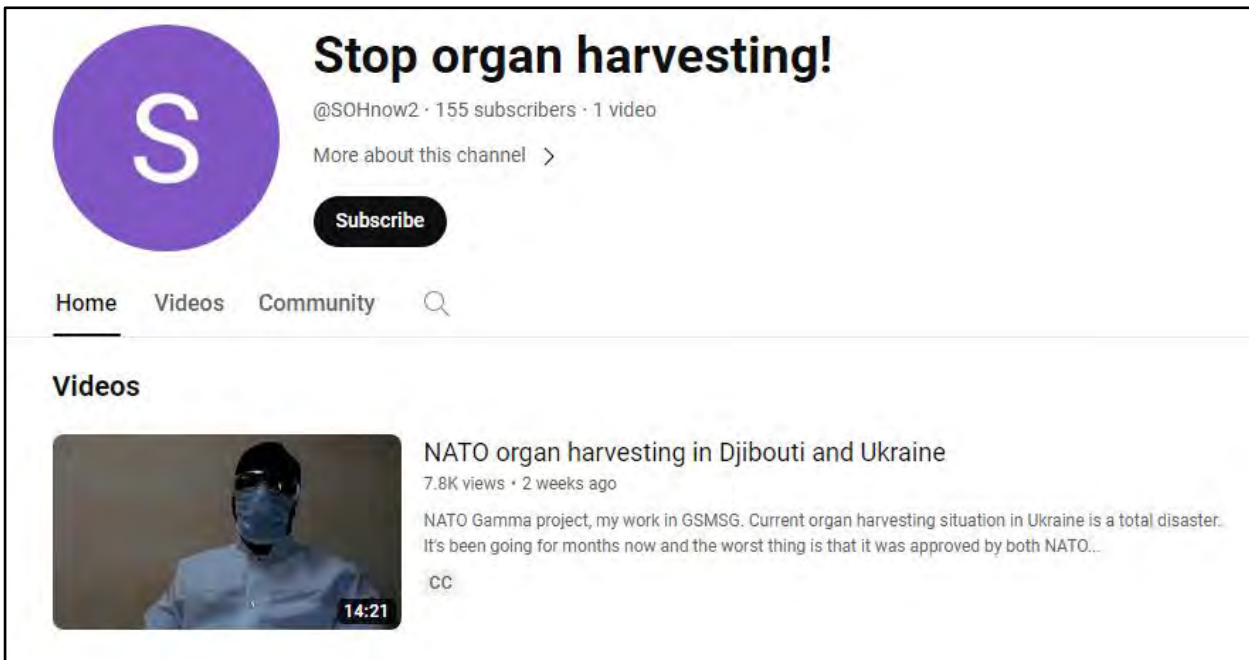
Total English language social media posts > 200

Exemplar post:



¹¹ This source material is an outlier as it was not linked to from DC Weekly, but in articles appearing before the DC Weekly version of the story.

Narrative 11: “Sinister Operations: American Non-Profit Accused of Shocking Organ Harvesting Scheme Involving Ukrainian Soldiers”



Video <link>

Summary: A whistleblower reveals that a U.S. non-profit is involved in harvesting organs from Ukrainian soldiers for use by NATO officers.

DC Weekly archived link: <link>

Noteworthy Layering:

Date (2023)	Source	Country	Archived Link
28-Nov	MyNewsGH	Ghana	<link>
30-Nov	The Nation	Nigeria	<link>
2-Dec	Donbass Insider	France	<link>

Total English language social media posts > 25

Exemplar post:



Narrative 12: “ Zelensky Unfiltered! Shockwaves from a Leaked Presidential Call”



Audio [<link>](#)¹²

Summary: A leaked phone call between President Zelensky and his wife reveal their hidden thoughts about Western allies and their own government.

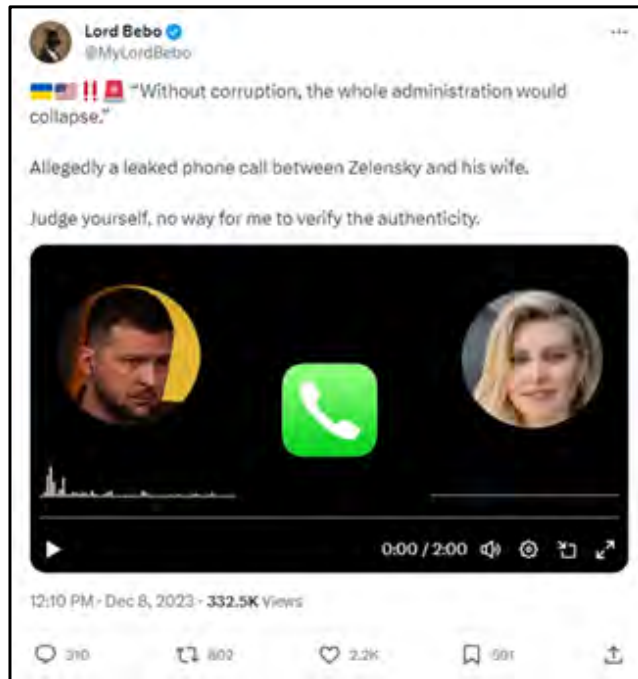
DC Weekly archived link: [<link>](#)

Noteworthy Layering:

Date (2023)	Source	Country	Archived Link
6-Dec	The Nation	Nigeria	<link>
10-Dec	iHarare	Zimbabwe	<link>

Total English language social media posts > 850

Exemplar post:



¹² Audio originally appeared on YouTube [<here>](#) but was removed for “violating YouTube’s Community Guidelines.” It was subsequently embedded on relevant web pages.