

# WHY CALL ALICE DONOVAN A TROLL?

The WaPo and CounterPunch have the story of Alice Donovan, a pseudonymous persona the FBI suspected (it's not clear starting when) of being part of a Russian influence operation. The WaPo makes it clear sources told them about the investigation (though without clearly revealing when FBI identified Donovan or when they learned about the investigation) and leaked the report behind this story (or perhaps it is all one report).

The FBI was tracking Donovan as part of a months-long counterintelligence operation code-named "NorthernNight." Internal bureau reports described her as a pseudonymous foot soldier in an army of Kremlin-led trolls seeking to undermine America's democratic institutions.

[snip]

The events surrounding the FBI's NorthernNight investigation follow a pattern that repeated for years as the Russian threat was building: U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies saw some warning signs of Russian meddling in Europe and later in the United States but never fully grasped the breadth of the Kremlin's ambitions.

CP first learned about it when Adam Entous called about the leaked intelligence report on her.

We received a call on Thursday morning, November 30, from Adam Entous, a national security reporter at the *Washington Post*. Entous said that he had a weird question to ask about one of our contributors. What did we know about

Alice Donovan? It was indeed an odd question. The name was only faintly familiar. Entous said that he was asking because he'd been leaked an FBI document alleging that "Alice Donovan" was a fictitious identity with some relationship to Russia. He described the FBI document as stating that "Donovan" began pitching stories to websites in early 2016. The document cites an article titled "Cyberwarfare: Challenge of Tomorrow."

And CP reveals they first came to believe that Donovan was fake (and not just a serial plagiarist) when a NYT story listed Donovan's account among those that Facebook had shut down as fake.

This long story focused on dozens of phony Facebook accounts which the *Times* claims pushed pro-Russian messages during the election. Buried in the 28<sup>th</sup> paragraph of the story was the name "Alice Donovan." Donovan's Facebook page, the *Times* said, "pointed to documents from Mr. Soros's Open Society Foundations that she said showed its pro-American tilt and – in rather formal language for Facebook – describe eventual means and plans of supporting opposition movements, groups or individuals in various countries.'" According to the *Times*, Facebook had deactivated the Donovan account after it failed a verification protocol.

CP ends by noting that for the entirety of the period when FBI was investigating this pseudonymous persona, they never informed CP.

If the FBI was so worried about the risks posed by Alice Donovan's false persona, they could have tipped off some of the media outlets she was corresponding with. But in this case

they refrained for nearly two years. Perhaps they concluded that Donovan was the hapless and ineffectual persona she appears to be. More likely, they wanted to continue tracking her. But they couldn't do that without also snooping on American journalists and that represents an icy intrusion on the First Amendment. For a free press to function, journalists need to be free to communicate with whomever they want, without fear that their exchanges are being monitored by federal agencies. A free press needs to be free to make mistakes and learn from them. We did.

It's an interesting example – and given my prior focus on Facebook's intelligence apparatus (one reiterated by the revelation that Facebook has been taking down NK infrastructure of its own accord) – one that raises questions about whether FBI identified this persona or FB did.

But I'm wondering why both WaPo and CP are calling the Donovan persona a troll. While it sounds like Donovan's election related interventions were trollish about Hillary, some of what she published at CP and other outlets clearly supported Russian policy objectives (that CP might legitimately agree with) or – as CP notes – mirrored mainstream reporting on Clinton's emails.

Donovan served not just to poison debate, as trolls do.

So I'm wondering why people are using that term. I'm wondering, in part, why we should distinguish Donovan's authorship (or plagiarism) of articles from leaks from foreign intelligence services, which news articles have long relied on, whether Israeli, Saudi, or Russian sources (remember, for example, how presumed Yemeni or Saudi sources have repeatedly revealed details of US or UK double agents). A number of people in DC have laughed with me about the way that Rinat Akhmetshin – a central figure in the June

9, 2016 Trump Tower meeting and as such suspected of doing Russian intelligence bidding – has long regaled mainstream journalists as a source. And I've suggested that Scott Balber – and American lawyer working for a Russian oligarch – may be fostering a cover story for the same meeting.

So why is one kind of intelligence disinformation called journalism and another called trolling?