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Disinformation
Index**

Research Brief:

Ad Tech Fuels Disinformation Sites in Europe – The Numbers and Players

Introduction

There are multiple factors driving the constant flow of disinformation we see infiltrating our online news ecosystem every day.

One of these factors is the financial incentive for sites to spread disinformation. Disinformation sites generate a sizable revenue stream from online advertising on them.

In Europe alone, the **Global Disinformation Index (GDI) estimates¹ that disinformation news sites take in more than US\$76 million each year in revenues from online ads.**² Disinformation sites are rewarded by an online ad tech industry where the more sensational and outrageous news stories get our clicks – and our attention for ads. To combat disinformation, this revenue stream must be cut off from disinformation sites. We should have the right to say what we want, but not the right to make money off it – or the right to amplify it via online platforms. We have the right to free speech, but not profit and reach.

The countries of the European Union (EU) recognised this principle in the self-regulatory standards outlined in the *European Commission's Code of Practice on Disinformation*. Adopted in 2018, it has since been signed by key platforms like Google and Facebook, and advertising associations like the World Federation of Advertisers. Under the Code, signatories voluntarily commit to “improve the scrutiny of advertisement placements to reduce revenues of the purveyors of disinformation”. This includes a commitment “to deploy policies and processes to disrupt advertising and monetization incentives” that spread disinformation.

Unfortunately, new research conducted by the GDI shows that progress on this commitment has fallen short. Our findings detail, through numbers and examples, how key signatories to the Code continue to provide ad services and ad revenues to known disinformation sites.

As the Code of Practice is being reviewed, now is the time for signatories to renew their commitments by demonstrating unambiguous actions that deliver on the promise to disrupt and demonetise disinformation sites in 2020 and beyond.

We also call on the European Commission to extend the Code of Practice and to set metrics to advance its implementation among signatories and ad tech companies operating in Europe. Such metrics should include the elimination of ad services and ad revenues to known disinformation sites.

Evidence

Our research shows that the ad tech industry continues to give disinformation sites a funding lifeline through the ads they place on them. This is not a question of not knowing which sites are carrying disinformation. The GDI has found numerous adverts for well-known advertisers next to stories and on sites which the EU's European External Action Service (EEAS) has flagged as disinformation through its site www.euvsdinfo.eu.³ All of these stories are in the public domain, as are the names of the sites that consistently carry them: RT.com and SputnikNews.com (and all of their different language channels). These sites form part of the broader list of 1,400 sites that have been analysed to produce our findings.

Take the example of a Made.com advert placed by Xandr (formerly AppNexus) on the Kremlin-run Sputnik news service and its Polish language site (see Screenshot 1). The ad is placed next to a story that claims the US was promoting a cult of Nazi collaborators throughout Eastern Europe – which the EEAS debunked:⁴

Screenshot 1. Made.com ad provided by Xandr on www.sputniknews.com

pl.sputniknews.com/opinie/2020022711991429-kult-zolnierzy-wyklytych-a-interesy-niemiec-i-stanow-zjednoczonych-sputnik/

„Tydzień Denazyfikacyjny to oddoina inicjatywa roznym srodowisk lewicowych, demokratycznych i antyfaszystowskich, której celem jest ogólnopolski sprzeciw wobec nowego państwowego święta. Odbywa się to 1 marca, kiedy władze państwowe, organizacje skrajnie prawicowe świętują pamięć żołnierzy wykłetych” – mówi działacz lewicowy Michał Nowicki.

Michał Nowicki (ur.1982) – historyk i dawny redaktor portalu Lewica Bez Cenzury, zamkniętego w 2008 roku przez warszawską prokuraturę. Pierwszy [komuniści w III Rzeczpospolitej](#) represjonowany za działalność polityczną. Skazany w 2010 roku na karę 100 dni więzienia.

Od 8 lat – robotnik, emigrant we Francji. Najpierw usował azbest, dziś pracuje w podparyskiej chłodni w temperaturze minus 25. Członek francuskiego związku zawodowego CGT, autor kanału na YouTube Odrodzenie Komunizmu i inicjator kampanii Tydzień Denazyfikacji.

Prywatnie jest synem [Wandy Nowickiej](#), znanej polskiej działaczki społecznej i feministycznej, posłanki na Sejm VII i IX kadencji, w latach 2011–2015 wicemarszałek Sejmu VII kadencji.

Z [Michałem Nowickim](#) (Paryż) rozmawia komentator agencji Sputnik [Leonid Swiridow](#).

— **Dlaczego mieszka Pan we Francji?**

— O wyjeździe na zachód Europy poważnie myślałem od pierwszych dni [członkostwa Polski w Unii Europejskiej](#). Ponieważ jednak, mimo stosunkowo młodego wieku, byłem już wtedy aktywnym działaczem politycznym, to decyzje o emigracji ciągle odwlekałem w czasie.

Podjęcie decyzji o emigracji ułatwiły mi polskie władze. Najpierw prokuratura zamknęła portale, które prowadziłem (Lewica Bez Cenzury, a także Archiwum Marksizmu – największa w owym czasie internetowa biblioteka tekstów marksistowskich), a następnie trwające wiele miesięcy sążony, podczas których wytoczono mi łącznie cztery sprawy karne. Moje środowisko się rozpadło, a ja miałem problemy ze znalezieniem pracy.

06.03.11.51 Nowy projekt ustawy o aborcji. „To piekło musi się skończyć”

06.03.11.44 Eksplozja pod ambasadą USA w Tunezji

06.03.11.36 Samoloty szturmowe Su-25 w „akcji bojowej” pod Stawropolem – wideo

06.03.11.01 Kalliningrad: jechale z zakazonym koronawirusem Polakiem. Trafila do szpitala

Wszystkie wiadomości

949 €

JETZT SHOPPEN

MADE.COM

20200306_44E0648S7Vaw95d6dC&t=1583493629361&s=appnexus&p=MeBDnPXNaDL7CYC00vlu&c=K5WalUKazBBgpyug405G&tdc=ams&url=https%3A

Note: Highlighted code shows the ad service providing the advert (AppNexus, now Xandr)

Our evidence base even includes an ad for Amnesty International, which Google Ad Services placed next to a story that claims the US is blaming Russia for the coronavirus (see Screenshot 2). The story and ad were

published on the Spanish-language site of a known disinformation outlet called NewsFront, which is tracked by the EEAS.⁵

Screenshot 2. Amnesty International ad provided by Google on www.news-front.info

es.news-front.info/2020/02/23/el-coronavirus-es-el-nuevo-punto-negro-otra-pagina-del-libro-de-jugadas-de-la-malvada-rusia-segun-estados-unidos/

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RUSIA CRIMEA DONBASS UCRANIA EUROPA MUNDO EE.UU AMÉRICA LATINA SIRIA

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El coronavirus es el nuevo punto negro: Otra página del libro de jugadas de la «malvada Rusia» según Estados Unidos

14:04 Cerca de 60.000 personas en las Repúblicas Populares de Donetsk y Lugansk se le otorgaron la ciudadanía rusa este año

13:48 Estados Unidos dice que los terroristas no pueden ser catalogados como «terroristas» mientras luchan contra Bashar al Assad

13:44 Primer caso de infección

Detén Esta Barbarie de Condena

En Cualquier Momento Pueden Ahorcar a Magai. FIRMA Aquí Para que Magai Siga con Vida!

Amnistía Internacional

23.02.2020 12:56 Compartir

https://adssettings.google.com/whythisad?reasons=AB3afGEAAVHW1tbW1sW251bGwsmh0d4BzO8vZ29vZ2xYWRZLmduZG91YmkiY2xpY2submVOL3BhZ2VhZC9jb252ZXJzaW9uLz9haT1DX2ZNT2FUQmIYb3I0R2RyQTdnUElsYUN3R...

Note: Highlighted code shows the ad service providing the advert (Google)

Despite the EU Code of Practice, ads continue to fund disinformation sites in Europe at an alarming rate. Platforms and associations that endorsed the Code have fallen short on the self-regulatory obligation to “disrupt advertising and monetization incentives” on disinformation sites.

Our numbers show the extent of the problem. One signatory to the Code, **Google, serves over half of the sites in our sample and accounts for over 60 percent of the revenue paid to them.**

Criteo, an ad tech company based in France, is next in line, serving 13 percent of the sites and paying them 17 percent of the overall revenues going to disinformation sites in Europe. We found that Criteo placed adverts and provided user-retargeting services on a range of sites in the sample, including noted disinformation sites in Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia⁶.

In addition to these companies, others that we found providing ad services to our sample sites include Amazon, Moneytizer, OpenX, Pubmatic, Revcontent, Rubicon Project, Taboola, Teads, The Trade Desk, Twitter and Xandr⁷ (see Figure 1).

Figure 2 presents the top five ad tech companies providing revenues to the known disinformation sites we assessed in Europe .

Figure 1. Share of EU disinformation domains served and revenues paid, by ad tech company

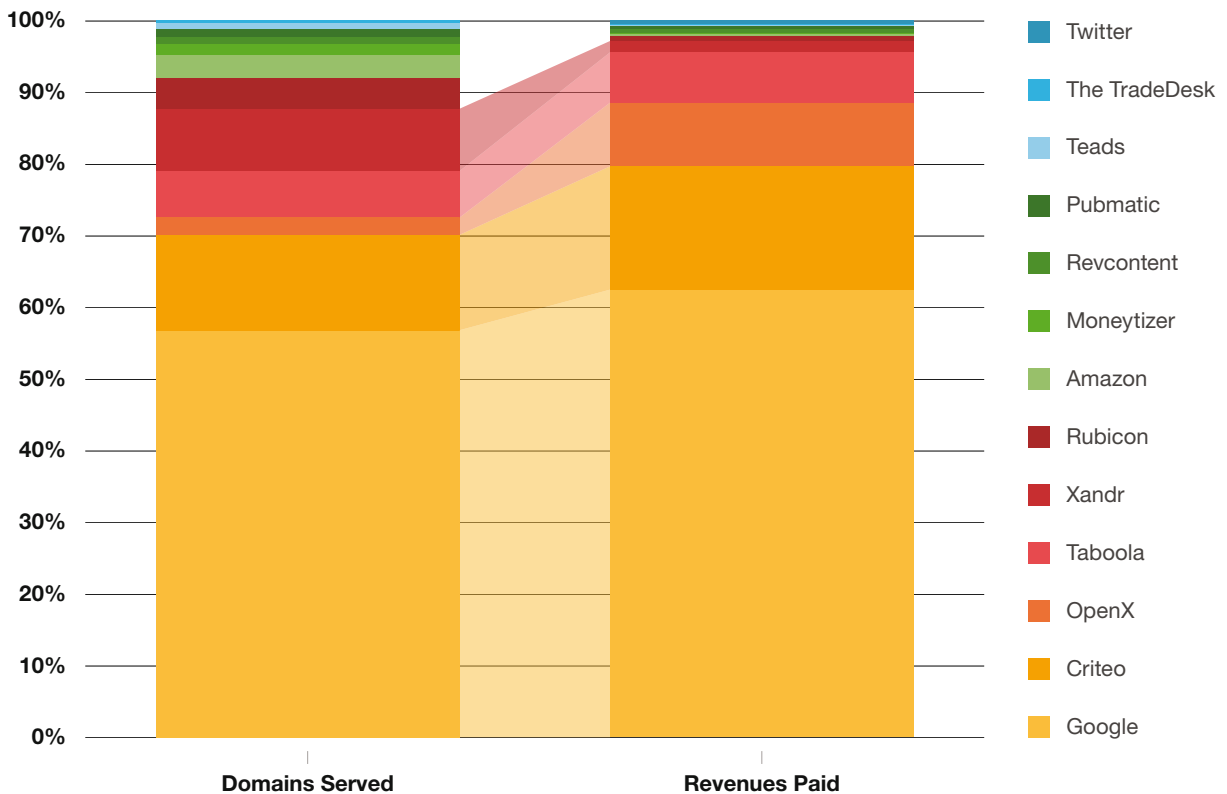
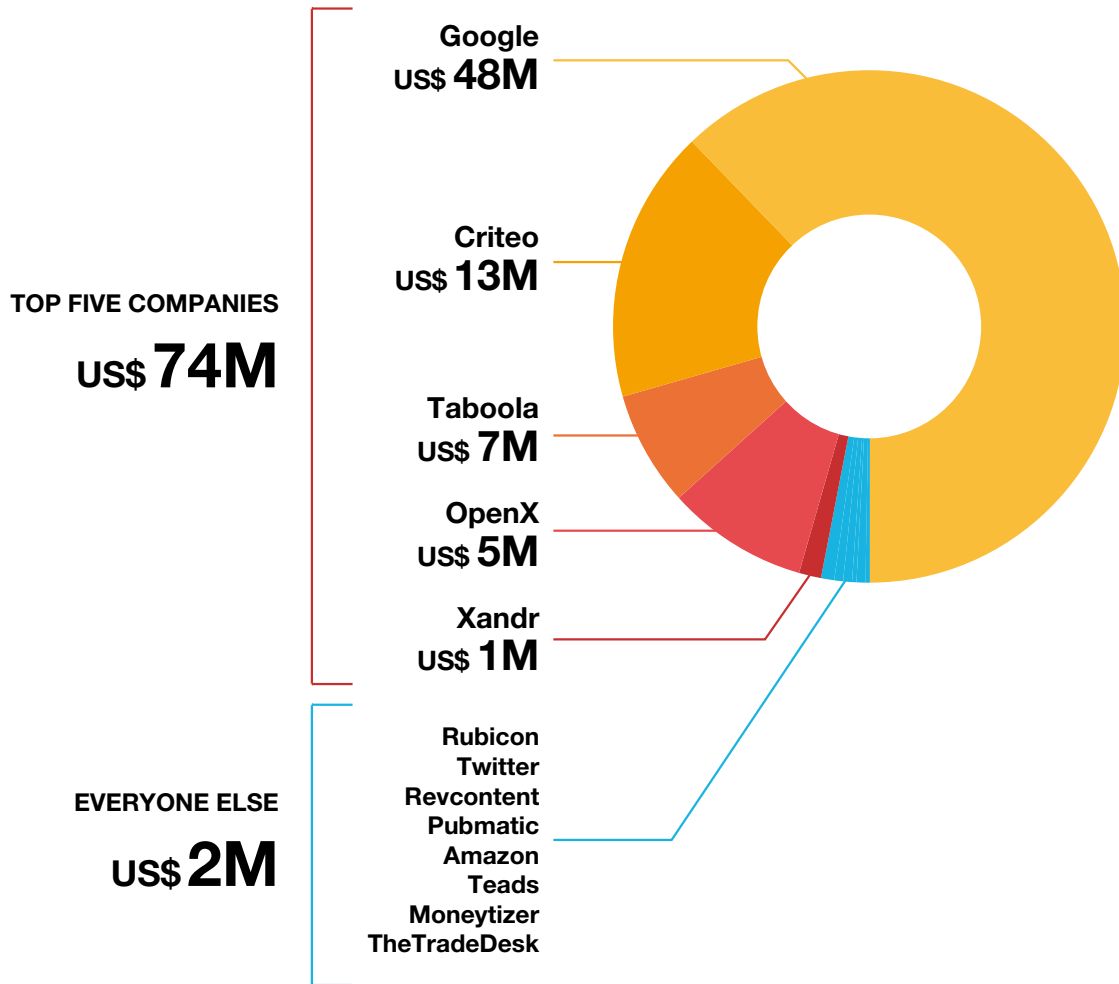


Figure 2. Revenues paid to disinformation sites, by ad tech company



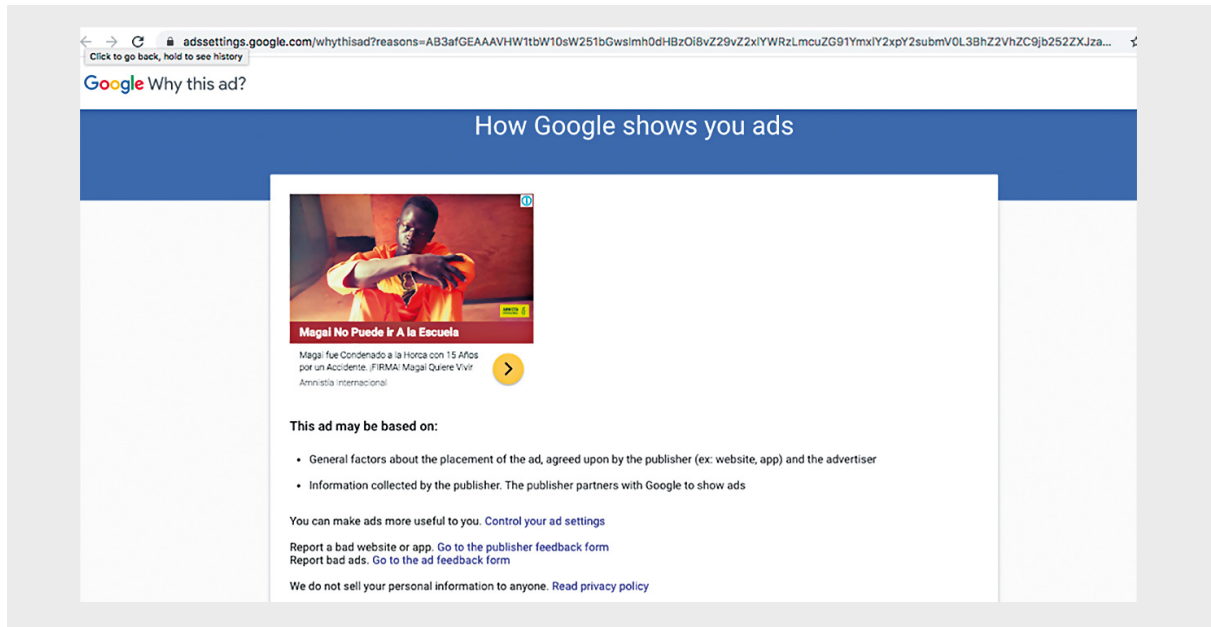
Note: US\$ values have been rounded to the nearest million

These five companies account for 88 percent of all sites served and 97 percent of all the ad revenues paid to them.⁸

These numbers are estimates to gauge the problem of ad tech's funding of disinformation in Europe. It serves as a baseline to publicly track the progress of all signatories to the EU Code of Practice in fulfilling their obligation to defund disinformation sites.

In addition to the monetary estimates, there is a paper trail of ad tech's presence on these sites. This trail is visible in Europe as a result of data protection regulation and privacy provisions.⁹ Anyone in Europe can see the source of a programmatic advert and determine why they are seeing a specific ad (see Screenshot 3). These provisions have allowed the GDI to capture a visual footprint of the problem to go along with the overall numbers.

Screenshot 3. Detail of Amnesty International ad provided by Google on www.news-front.info



Brands are inadvertently caught up in this systemic failure. They often lack information on where their ad campaigns are being run and the disinformation risks of these sites. As a result, their brand safety is undermined.

Moreover, their broader efforts to combat disinformation as online harm – such as through the Global Alliance for Responsible Media (GARM) – are compromised.

Methodology

This research follows the methodology¹⁰ that we used to estimate the global ad revenues funding disinformation sites around the world for a GDI report released in September 2019.¹¹ For this special focus on European sites, we studied a sample of approximately 1,400 news domains that are either based in Europe or target European readers. These domains were shared with us by partners and/or identified through trusted public lists of disinformation sites.¹²

All sites that had been flagged as frequently carrying disinformation were included. The sites covered in this report come from Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France,

Germany, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia and Spain.¹³ The report focused on European countries and members of the EU in order to better understand the current status of signatories in terms of their honouring the commitment to defund disinformation sites (as outlined in the standards of the EU the Code of Practice on Disinformation).

The sites in our sample were used to estimate the annual revenues being paid to these 1,400 sites and the ad tech companies providing them with ad services. Based on the share of Europe-based sites in GDI's overall data set of disinformation sites, we then scaled the findings for our sample.¹⁴

Conclusion

Online disinformation is a problem that cannot be stopped without meaningful reform in the business of online advertising. Europe has set the standard, and it's time for ad tech and advertisers to follow through.

Their collaboration with the European Commission to develop and sign the Code of Practice was an important and commendable first step.

However, malicious domains continue to pose as reliable sources of news and receive ad revenues for spreading disinformation. The ad-based funding of many of these sites threatens the integrity of democratic elections, the free press, and the public's faith in other essential institutions across Europe and beyond. This public policy failure will continue as long as advertisers extend an inadvertent multi-million dollar incentive to publish disinformation and spread online harm.

The GDI fully supports the principles outlined in the Code of Practice as a credible agent of change.

We encourage the European Commission and signatories to the Code to set ambitious metrics to disrupt and defund disinformation sites.

We invite both parties to partner with us to continue to scope and address the problem. The GDI offers our expertise and independence to fully meet their commitments under the Code of Practice. We believe that only real-time ratings of a site's disinformation risk can help to untangle the current deadlock we see. We encourage ad tech companies and brands to join us in this effort.

Endnotes

- 1 We would like to thank the Atlantic Council, EEAS StratCom, EUDisinfoLab, KremlinWatch and StopFake.org for their guidance and collaboration on this study.
- 2 All figures in this report are estimates based on our reconstruction of revenue metrics available only to the advertising companies themselves. We were intentionally conservative in all assumptions upon which our calculations are based. The nature of ad services provided online means that different ad services compete to provide an ad when a specific user loads a page. The unique data footprint and geolocation of that specific user will determine which ads are provided and which services provide them.
- 3 This is done by its StratCom Task Force, which runs EUvsDisinfo: www.euvsdisinfo.eu. This website was set up in 2015 to track, flag and respond to the Russian Federation's ongoing disinformation campaigns affecting the European Union, its Member States, and countries in their shared neighbourhood.
- 4 For the story that was debunked, please see: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-usa-promotes-the-cult-of-nazi-collaborators-throughout-eastern-europe-in-order-to-spread-its-military-presence-in-the-region/>.
- 5 For the story that was debunked, please see: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/russia-falsely-accused-disinformation-campaign-coronavirus/>.
- 6 The sites in Czech Republic and Slovakia were identified by <https://www.konspiratori.sk/en/list-of-websites.php>. The sites in Hungary were identified for this report by Central European University: <https://cmds.ceu.edu/sites/cmcs.ceu.hu/files/attachment/basicpage/1676/businessofmisinformationhungary.pdf>.

- 7 As part of this study we accounted only for online advertising generated on the standard open-web version of the domains. We did not account for monetisation generated from these articles via walled-gardens such as “Facebook Instant Articles” or AMP (Accelerated Mobile Page) articles served within Twitter. For this reason, these revenue estimates should be seen as highly conservative and representing the lower boundary of the problem.
- 8 In both figures, we show data for the five companies that generated the most revenue in our sample. Collectively, they account for approximately US\$74 million.
- 9 See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-advertising-gdpr-insight/europes-new-data-law-upends-global-online-advertising-idUSKCN1L80HW>.
- 10 For a complete description of the methodology, see the original report: https://disinformationindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/GDI_Ad-tech_Report_Screen_AW16.pdf
- 11 This was estimated at an annual revenue of US\$235 million for the 20,000 disinforming domains in our database. In this report, Google had the largest share of revenue and sites served, followed by Xandr (formerly AppNexus). See: <https://disinformationindex.org/2019/09/the-quarter-billion-dollar-question-for-ad-tech/>. As our database is currently at 70,000 sites, the GDI will release new figures for the global ad market in the coming months.
- 12 We have used the following public sites to flag additional disinformation sites: www.euvsdisinfo.eu (range of European countries), <https://www.konspiratori.sk/> (Slovakia and Czech Republic), <http://www.atlaskonspiraci.cz/Hlavn%C3%ADstrana> (Slovakia and Czech Republic), https://www.evropskehodnoty.cz/fungovani-ceskych-dezinformacnich-webu/weby_list/ (Slovakia and Czech Republic), <https://www.butac.it/the-black-list/> (Italy), <https://cmds.ceu.edu/business-misinformation> (Hungary and Slovakia) and <https://www.lemonde.fr/web-service/decodex/updates> (France), and https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338740911_Desinformation_aufdecken_und_bekampfen_Interdisziplinare_Ansatze_gegen_Desinformationskampagnen_und_fur_Meinungspluralitat (Germany). The full list of sites assessed is not available publicly due to concerns over proprietary data provided by some third parties to GDI in confidentiality.
- 13 This sample also includes publishers identified by the European External Action Service as carrying disinformation, like RT and Sputnik, which target European audiences.
- 14 The multiplier reflects the share of Europe-based disinformation sites in GDI's overall data set of 70,000 disinformation sites: this equates to an estimated 14,000 sites.

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The Global Disinformation Index is a UK-based not-for-profit that operates on the three principles of neutrality, independence and transparency. Our vision is a world in which we can trust what we see in the media. Our mission is to restore trust in the media by providing real-time automated risk ratings of the world's media sites through a Global Disinformation Index (GDI). For more information, visit www.disinformationindex.org.

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