

Cui Bono? David Leask, Ben Nimmo and the Attack on Ordinary Scottish Nationalists

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We know for certain that the Integrity Initiative targets Scottish Nationalists, because two of its luminaries, otherwise unconnected to each other, David Leask and Ben Nimmo, collaborated on a massive [attack piece](#) in the Herald identifying individual SNP supporters as “Russian Bots”.

Meet the McBots: How Scottish cyber activists try to game Twitter

DAVID LEASK
CHIEF REPORTER

THERE is nothing as trendy as politics. At least not when you want to push your agenda on social media.

For years experts have been tracking automated and semi-automated accounts that try to “game” the complex algorithms which determine what we all see on our Twitter or Facebook feeds.

Many have blamed these so-called “bots” on Russia – either its private firms or its Kremlin propaganda machine.

But specialists monitoring online conspiracy theories about Alex Salmond and the allegations against him have spotted a new online weapon: the McBot.

Scottish online activists have set up automated or semi-automated accounts to retweet a hashtag #dissolvethunion.

Ben Nimmo, an analyst for Nato-linked think-tank the Atlantic Council, found 10,000 tweets using the hashtag from more than 2000 accounts in just a week. This level of hashtag use, he said, was double what you would expect in spontaneous traffic.

Mr Nimmo said: “It looks like there’s a deliberate attempt by a relatively small user group to make the hashtag trend. Some were bots, some looked like human users.”

“There’s no reason to suppose they were Russian – this looked like a local attempt to hijack the trends.”

Accounts using #dissolvethunion last week were prominent in spreading claims or innuendo about the investigation into the former first minister and current host on Russia’s state-funded RT News.

One tweeted: “To succeed in the British State the establishment will have dirt on you, that’s how they control you.”

“If you’re a threat to the establishment



they will trap you, failing that, smear you. Whatever happens the State must win. #DissolveTheUnion.”

Mr Nimmo, meanwhile, stressed Russian state broadcasting outlets had “jumped to Mr Salmond’s defence” after allegations surfaced.

■ In just one week, 10,000 tweets were found from 2,000 accounts using #dissolvethunion.

He said: “RT and Sputnik both ran stories on his accusations against the Scottish Government. Neither bothered to include the Government’s response. That’s not journalism.”

“Salmond has his own show on RT, so this partly looks like the Russian outlets

coming to the defence of one of their own. It’s not likely this will add to Salmond’s credibility. It’s more likely to harm it.”

He added: “It’s worth remembering Ofcom found the first episode of the Alex Salmond Show guilty of materially misleading the audience.”

Bots flood Twitter with conspiracy theories in support of Salmond



ANALYSIS
JENNIFER JONES

THE conspiracy theories spread so quickly even seasoned Twitter commentators were surprised.

As soon as allegations of sexual misconduct emerged against Alex Salmond there came an instant response: Westminster must be behind them.

But – as you might have expected – often those making such claims are not who or what

they appear to be. This weekend on Twitter I started a thread breaking down how to spot a bot. I used an example of an account which said the allegations against Salmond were part of a Unionist plot.

I then started comparing profiles that were sharing this account. They all shared and exhibited the same characteristics and tactics: a non-identifying profile picture; a biography that refers to the fact they are a parent or spouse; and a quote about wanting a better future for Scotland.

The majority of their feed would be made up of retweets of other similar accounts. They appear to semi-automated until

something happens. Like being accused of being a bot.

To begin, they were tweeting replies slightly out of context in response to my thread, mainly about Salmond’s innocence, which wasn’t the topic of discussion.

But once they realised that I was looking at and discussing these accounts, the responses were picked up by the humans behind the account.

If you search through my twitter handle @jenniferjones you can see I am now in the middle of my own Twitter pile-on.

These accounts claim that they must be anonymous to protect their political views from their employer.

However, I don’t imagine it is unusual, or a sackable offence, to take a pro-independence stance these days.

I do, however, imagine that their anonymity allows them to use their account as a harassment tool for what I am now experiencing first hand.

The same tactics were used against SNP member Professor Tanja Buelmann, which she experienced around the People’s Vote campaign; and SNP Councillor Rhianon Spear encountered similar when she questioned the lack of non-male speakers at – and the very basis of – a “BBC bias” protest at Pacific Quay.

What is going on? Well, this

type of online interaction is designed to muddy the water, and attempt to discredit an individual. The irony is not lost that the women targeted were all pro-independence and were active during the original 2014 campaign.

We should not behave like the online equivalent of a faded Yes car sticker – lacking the impact and enthusiasm of 2014.

What we are seeing here is a mix of bots, sock puppets and real users with multiple accounts. They are acting like a pack, ready to pounce on anybody who questions them.

Toxic Twitter culture can make you feel as if the world is burning. How should we deal

with this? Well, we need to look out for the tell-tale signs of a bot. We need to learn to differentiate such accounts from real people we can trust. And, I think, we have to appreciate that bots and users with multiple accounts can make the attitudes they push seem so much bigger than they are in the real world.

Some of these accounts are motivated by concerns over “media bias”. Some must benefit from the feeling of being part of a movement, of having common purpose. But when does this tip into being part of a baying, bullying mob?

Dr Jennifer Jones is an independent media researcher.

Ben Nimmo works for the Atlantic Council, funded inter alia by NATO. He is also on a **retainer of £2,500 per month** from the Integrity Initiative, in addition to payments for individual pieces of work. For his attack on Scottish Nationalists Nimmo was therefore paid by the Atlantic Council (your taxes through NATO), by the Integrity Initiative (your taxes) and by the Herald (thankfully shortly going bankrupt). Leask claims to have received nothing but a cheese sandwich from the Integrity Initiative, but has **briefed them** in detail on Scottish nationalism, attended their seminars, and they have included Leask's output in their "outcomes" reports to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (on which more in a few days' time).

I **took apart** Leask and Nimmo's horrendous attack at the time, revealing among other things that one of Nimmo's criteria for spotting a Russian bot or troll was use of the phrase *cui bono*.

Nimmo's role as witchfinder-general for Russian Bots appears very remunerative. His **August 2016 invoice** to The Institute for Statecraft, apparently the 71st invoice he had issued to various neo-con bodies that year, was for £5,000.

It is interesting that rather than sort code and account number, his invoice gives IBAN and BIC, used for payments coming from abroad.

There is a very important aspect of the **detailed minute** of David Leask's briefing for the Integrity Initiative, which CommonSpace cut out of the extracts which **they published**. Leask says that the Integrity Initiative are "pushing at an open door" with the SNP leadership and the editors of The National, who he characterises as reliably anti-Russian and pro-NATO:

YATA – there would probably be a lot of studenty anti-NATO responses. But that might be more of a reason to do it. But SNP reversed NATO policy when it realised what Russia was up to (under influence of Nordic/Baltic allies)

- *Mainstream politicians don't want to challenge the fringe normally but they're starting to. Stewart McDonald (defence spokesman) pitching NATO – "friends in Norway, Balts etc are in it". SNP foreign policy chiefs have very anti-Kremlin, anti-RT, pro-Ukraine rhetoric.*

- *Immigration not an issue in Scotland.*

- *Pushing at open door – allies in Scotland about disinformation. Putin may want to sow discord among Scottish nationalists. Pro-independence sister paper had headline complaining Russian trolls attacking Sturgeon.*

http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/16094929.SNP_top_brass_warn__Sturgeon_is_being_targeted_by_Kremlin_trolls/

Yes campaign had attacks on servers and cyberactivity, thought it was the Brits but then concluded it was probably Russians.

http://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/referendumnews/15771388.Yes_leaders__Don_t_be__naive__about_Russian_online_meddling_in_independence/

- *SNP going to Ukraine – to reassure allies they are not pro-Russian.*

I am afraid Leask is not wrong. The continual willingness of the SNP leadership to endorse Britnat anti-Russian rhetoric without question is a nagging worry for many nationalists. Precisely the same department of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office which funds the Integrity Initiative, funds the Westminster Foundation for Democracy which paid for this joint Britnat/SNP leadership group event at the last SNP Conference, featuring a Ukrainian politician also used by the Integrity Initiative.

Sunday 7 October

Alsh 1, Ground Floor, SEC Centre
17h30 – 18h30

**Ukraine: Combating “fake news”
and the impact of disinformation on
energy security**

With “fake news” on the rise, nation-states, political parties and everyday citizens are more susceptible than ever to the threats of disinformation. Ukraine, like Scotland, is working to increase its renewable energy sources, while striving to remain independent of Russian influence.

This panel will explore the impact of Russian disinformation on the Ukrainian energy sector and what Scotland can learn and share, discussing existing challenges and potential solutions in both countries.

Speakers:

Nataliya Katser-Buchkovksa, Ukrainian MP,
Head of the Subcommittee on Sustainable
Development and Investments on the Committee
on Energy, Nuclear Policy and Security
Martin Docherty-Hughes MP

Chaired by: Stephen Gethins MP

Read that carefully, and note that it is not just a discussion on the Ukraine – no harm in that – but one which is openly anti-Russian. The very title, on countering Russian disinformation, is literally straight out of the [Integrity Initiative’s handbook](#). Two SNP MP’s took part, including the foreign policy spokesman.

Remember that meeting was on the conference fringe at which I **was not permitted** to hold a meeting on preparing for Indyref II. An awful lot of Nicola loyalists tell me that, in appearing at present to be much more interested in keeping the entire UK in the EU, rather than striking for Scottish Independence, the leadership are playing a brilliant tactical game.

Other explanations are available.