



Russian Troll Farms – Jessikka Aro

[00:00:06] Welcome back to the podcast, Bribe, Swindle or Steal. I'm Alexandra Wrage, and today, we're talking about the criminal conduct of Internet trolls and the troll farms that breed them. My guest is Jessikka Aro. Jessikka is a Finnish journalist working for Finland's public service broadcaster. A few years ago, she began to investigate Internet trolls, and her life has largely been upended as a result of her excellent work that apparently hit a bit too close with some of these trolls. Some of Jessikka's story was described in an excellent New York Times article that came out in October. Jessikka, thank you so much for joining me.

[00:00:44] Thank you so much for having me. It's an honor.

[00:00:46] You've been targeted since 2014, and you've been living with online abuse and threats to your physical safety. One article described you as "an unhinged bimbo driven by Russophobia." Can you describe the really remarkable work that you've been doing to elicit this response?

[00:01:06] Well, everything started already in September over four years ago when I wanted to specifically investigate the influence of the pro-Kremlin social media propaganda trolls because in 2014, I found out these really brave, excellent, independent Russian journalists had found out that there is a troll factory based in St. Petersburg — not so far from Helsinki, actually. There were even hundreds of people who were pretending to be opinionated citizens, praising Putin, giving out opinions in favor of Putin's regime and policies, but in fact, they were being paid to do that. We only knew so little about the troll factory, and I wanted to really look into the new phenomenon of Russian information warfare, the social media influence. I wanted to know: Does the troll factory have any kind of influence and impact on Finnish people? Is it just some joke that we shouldn't worry about at all, or can it actually form some kind of threat to Finnish people's freedom of speech or their right to receive factual information? Or can it cause some kind of other kind of unexpected threat? I wanted to look into that, and as soon as I started, as soon as I published my first article on this topic, in which I very briefly just described what the troll factory is about and how the trolls are known to operate. I asked people to share their knowledge, their information, about the troll activities. I became a target of harassment and horrible lies and fake news campaigns and all that. It has been ongoing for four years, but I made the decision at a very early stage, when I noticed that there is a horrible Russian fake news campaign against me, which was also inciting actual people — the believers of the fake news — to go after me very viciously. I decided that I will not just make one article about this topic. I will make more because it seemed that I had really hit the nerve, and there was something big going on. So then I continued, but I decided that I will discuss about this exceptional hatred that is being agitated against me so that everyone would know. It was a

very new phenomenon also in Finland that a journalist would become a target of such harassment, so it was actually news. I made it clear that this is happening, but I won't let it influence in my work too much, so I continued my investigation.

[00:04:00] I'm always curious about how these stories initially develop. How was the troll farm first identified?

[00:04:07] First, there was word on the street in St. Petersburg that there is — in Olgino on the outskirts of St. Petersburg — but there is a new kind of office being set up in which youngsters, like kids in their 20s or so, are being recruited to work not as trolls, yet social media propagandists. I interviewed one Russian journalist who had infiltrated the factory, a really brave woman journalist, Alexandra Garmazhapova. She told me that it was really easy to get a job at the troll factory at that time, so already in 2013. Her job interviewer had been really enthusiastic about telling about his own personal connections with members of the Russian Duma and Russian officials. It seemed to be really well connected to the Russian regime and political leadership — at least, the supervisors of the troll factory. Then in 2013, Alexandra and some other super Russian journalists, they worked at the factory. They started to publish their stories. But it took some time. It was super interesting that until the knowledge of the Russian articles became noticed in the West in 2014, there was one big article by BuzzFeed when BuzzFeed had gained access to hacked e-mails and leaked emails between the troll factory supervisors and some troll factory workers. These hacks were originally published in Russia, but BuzzFeed had also gotten their hands to them, and they found some strategy papers written by the troll factory supervisors. They found out that the strategy of the troll factory was to change the balance of commenting online about Russia and Kremlin. The troll factory wanted to push the pro-Kremlin narrative on online comment sections and on social media platforms. Then they started to put out this — as Alexandra, the Russian journalist, told very specifically — they started to put out and update fake profiles on the back of Vkontakte, the Russian equivalent of Facebook, then to Facebook, to Twitter, as well as different blog platforms. It was super, super powerful already in 2014 because then I read from The Guardian newspaper, the British newspaper, their social media manager told publicly in a small article that they received tens of thousands of pro-Kremlin troll comments under each piece of news that they published about the Ukrainian situation, which already back then in 2014 had slid into a full-blown war because Russia was waging war against Ukraine. I gathered some of that information that had already been published about the troll factory and its activities, and we had already at that time pro-Kremlin trolls in the Finnish information sphere doing all kinds of operations. I collected all that, and already in Finland, we had our then-defense minister, for example, ask a well-known cybersecurity expert who told publicly that they receive troll comments on their Twitter and Facebook sites whenever they comment, for example, Ukraine issues. It was clear on September 2014 that something was already happening. Something was out of place in the Finnish public debate sphere. Also, Finnish opinion leaders were being attacked and influenced by these operators. But I wanted to know how they really influenced the general public.

[00:08:02] You talk about two different issues here. One is, again, the general propaganda and how undermining that is globally, but also the incitement to certain followers of that propaganda to action, and that's more immediately of concern particularly when somebody's reputation and safety is at risk. I want to come back and revisit some of the issues you've just described, but why don't you bring us through to the recent trial first? Because in many respects, that underscores how seriously the Finnish government took this.

[00:08:40] Definitely. The trial was — at least, the outcome of the trial — was just such a massive, big relief for me personally, as well as to many other journalists and public debaters, public discussioners who had become afraid that they would become targets of a similar kind of paid campaign as I have become throughout the years. Now, for the first time, it really looks that at least parts of the smearing against me have toned down a little bit. In 2016, after the smearing had been ongoing against me for one-and-a-half years, and it has already shown a really serious impact and influence in my personal security, I filed a criminal complaint of stalking and libels and possible aggravated libels and privacy breaches. It took some time for the police to investigate it and to get the suspected perpetrators to hearings. Altogether, I had to wait for over a couple of years for the outcome, but in the end, the perpetrators, they received what some analysts say are very extraordinarily harsh sentences because they were convicted for aggravated libel and stalking, as well as inciting aggravated libel and assisting aggravated libel against me. A total of over two years, almost three years, of conditional and unconditional prison sentences. Also, they were ordered to pay quite big damages, not just for me, but also because they had some other victims as well. Altogether, 136,000 euros. That is what the justice experts say is a historically strict sentence. It was really a good sentence in also another way because the trial itself, which was taking place in June in Helsinki, it was like some kind of really scary simulation on what kind of spillover effects — like physical threatening incidents — digital propaganda, as well as incitement on the cyber sphere, can have in the actual world, in the physical world. I have to go to the court in police escort because there had been active threats against me by actual people, of whom one even had an active plan on how she would attack me in the stairs of the courtroom. The pro-Kremlin and pro-racism and hate speech agitators online, they had been inciting and fueling actual people — their followers — to come physically to the Helsinki District Court and to protest against the court, protest against me, to come close to me, to feel me, to so-called ask me questions. Basically, they were being incited to harass me. It was so horrible, and it was so scary because you would expect that if you sometimes have to go to court, which is in itself a very severe thing, serious thing, you would expect that you could go there in peace, especially in a very peaceful and stable country like Finland. But because there had been so aggressive incitements of actual, normal, everyday people who just happened to like the narratives and the choices of words of these professional propagandists, you might get a really serious outcome. I basically had to sit behind walls to secure myself inside the courtroom, which was also full of hate-speech, pro-Kremlin extremists. They even took seats — think about it — from actual, proper, traditional journalists who were there to professionally cover the trial, but because there were so many extremists, they actually took half of the public seats of the courtroom.

[00:13:08] It's interesting you call it a "scary simulation," and that's really such a good phrase because the whole situation — your investigation into these trolls and their followers culminating in this scene in the courtroom — and it does seem especially shocking in Finland, as you say, where we think of the country as stable but also as open-minded and somehow less susceptible to this kind of conduct. It's a wakeup call that, even in Finland, something like this could happen. Could you describe for us what sort of support or response you got from the public in Finland?

[00:13:47] The general public — good, intelligent, well-educated, moderate Finnish people, how we are like on average — they have been super supportive, and I have been really proud. I'm really honored to see how even people who don't know me, who only read about my case from the news or even who saw some of the filth cases being produced about me, they contacted me spontaneously and told me that they really support my job. They really want me to keep going. They hated what the anonymous trolls and harassers are doing to me. Sometimes, even some of the followers — the diehard and true believers of these conspiracy theories about me and all other things that these extremists push — sometimes even some of them have become tired of this campaign against me. For example, in 2016, February, when this filth site, What the F" Paper — so the WTF paper — that pretends. You know, "new site that brings the news that the mainstream media hides from the audience," which is what they say is the only place where freedom of speech is still totally free. When they published an almost 15-year-old court sentence of mine of 300 euros, which I had received for drug use — when I was in my twenties, I had a really bad drug problem and was even treated for it and had to pay a justified fine — when WTF paper published this and made even more spins around the story and started suggesting that I had written my investigations under the influence of drugs and that my brain's probably damaged because I have been using drugs, that I am a NATO drug dealer. Even some of the WTF paper's active readers told that now they have had enough, that this is not okay, that maybe they had some relatives who sometimes had some issues with some alcohol or drugs, that this goes now too far. I was specifically happy to see those people approaching to me and saying that, "I like to read the WTF paper stories earlier because they were exciting and different from the so-called mainstream media, but they went too far." But generally, I have to say that the support from the average Finns — who I, as a journalist, serve and who I provide information for and who is the most important audience for me — they have been just so lovable, and with their support, I have been able to continue this. Also, there has been really great support coming from the chief editors of the Finnish normal media. Already in 2016, when WTF put this horrible drug campaign and even contacted my employer and asked them — demanded — for an explanation why my employer employs a drug addict and demanded for my resignation. Soon after, the chief editors started a public joint statement in which they told that they protect their journalists for all kinds of nasty filth campaigns and that they support anyone who becomes targets and that they won't let their journalists be smeared like that. That also reinforced not just me, but also other journalists. Then, again, earlier this year, they made another statement because another journalist became a target by the same operators and, again, because of that, freedom of speech was endangered, but this time, there

were over 80 chief editors, when in 2016, there were something over 20 chief editors. I would say that the journalistic community and the general audience, they have been super, super supportive. In the sentence, it was very important that the judge stated that this kind of activity doesn't have anything to do whatsoever, nothing to do with freedom of speech, that this has everything to do with smearing and filth and even mental violence. This is a really important ruling because this is a really common statement and justification spin that pro-Kremlin extremists, as well as all kinds of neo-Nazi and online, so-called alt-right neo-Nazis are saying. They are justifying even mental violence and harassment and incitement — basically crimes — claiming that they have freedom of speech to do this, but no, they don't. This was now also made clear in court.

[00:18:53] That's an excellent clarification because, of course, hiding behind a free speech argument when they are, in fact, promoting propaganda, but also defaming and risking violence toward a journalist is not in keeping with free speech or longstanding principles of free speech. I think it's valuable that the judge called that out very specifically. You had mentioned that the prison sentences — I think for some of our listeners, over two years, almost three years, will not sound as shocking, but by Finnish standards, where prison sentences are unusual and almost always very brief, that is a striking statement about the culpability of the defendants. This is a financial crime podcast, and while, of course, there is a financial crime element to this — the troll farms are businesses, even if they are businesses for a hateful and deeply depressing purpose — but there were some side stories to this as well. I wonder if you can describe the fundraising fraud that coexisted alongside this larger story.

[00:20:00] Interestingly, this site — this Finnish language, fake news, pro-Kremlin paid site — as well as many other sites that I have been investigating, they tried to frame themselves as if they are legitimate, crowd-sourced and crowd-financed citizen-journalist projects. By that, it looks that they are hiding their sources of bigger income, but they also — and specifically now, in this WTF paper's case — they have succeeded in collecting actual sums from actual people. Police found out in their investigations that, in the course of one year, hundreds of Finnish people had to be donating money to Ilja Janitskin, the owner and founder of What the F" Paper fake news site. The police had just looked into a Janitskin's bank account and found some big amount of actual people who are willing to finance such hate-mongering and fear-mongering and activity that, for example, frames all Muslims and refugees as some kind of terrorist rapists. Unfortunately, these malicious actors, they do not obey the laws that, in Finland, are very strict. You are not entitled to collect any kind of money without giving something in return. In this case, nothing was promised in return. Many other fake news sites, for example, buy in the English language as well. They also collect money, and they abuse different American and Western companies in their activity. WTF paper specifically has abused PayPal and has applied "donate" buttons to its site, but I have actually tried — I sometimes contacted PayPal with some of my friends. They have this service where you can report possible misuse of their service. Me and my friends, we actually reported it, and we sent the links to PayPal showing that, "This site is under police investigations. That the site has been suspected of over

50 crimes of multiple victims. Maybe you don't want to help such site fund their anonymous filth-spreading," but PayPal didn't do anything, and they still seem to have the button on their sites.

[00:22:48] You have described PayPal and YouTube and others as enablers of this kind of misconduct. I wonder if you have recommendations beyond just more monitoring for organizations like that, that presumably don't want to be associated with this kind of conduct?

[00:23:09] These companies like YouTube and PayPal, as well as many crowdfunding platforms which are also used by professional pro-Kremlin propagandists — some of them even travel to eastern Ukraine and work alongside Russian soldiers and Russian military intelligence while simultaneously collecting money to finance their activity through YouTube and through different kinds of crowdfunding platforms. It's really amazing that even though, despite many citizen activists in different countries have contacted these companies and asked, "Can you stop helping financing anti-democratic and possibly war crime activities?" They still continue helping these extremists. Definitely, there should be better regulation of these companies — political regulation when, as it now seems, these companies are unable or unwilling to regulate themselves on behalf or on the basis of the feedback that they get from concerned citizens who are following this scene. In America, it seems there is a little bit different kind of framework when it comes to regulating different companies. In Europe, there is much more public acceptance towards political decision-making, guiding companies' activities, thus creating laws that actually then help the general public. For example, the European Commission in 2016 demanded that YouTube and Facebook and Twitter, they actually have to remove hate speech from their platforms. The European Commission gave these companies 24 hours' time. Whenever they are reported about hate speech being spread out their platforms, they have 24 hours to remove it. Then a year went by, and the situation which the commission monitored, it became a little bit better. There was small development of the speed and the willingness of these companies to remove the hate speech, but it's still there.

[00:25:27] The public is clearly very conflicted, perhaps more conflicted in the United States than in Europe. It certainly sounds like it because any discussion of removing speech from these platforms is met with this knee-jerk, free speech argument. But of course, there have always been exceptions to free speech. It has never been entirely unregulated, so we do have to find the right balance. We've done a program on this podcast about cryptocurrency, including Bitcoin, and that played a role in this as well with respect to some of the funding.

[00:26:04] It was super interesting. This is also why I appreciate the police's job so much. They can have access to so much information that journalists never could, so in a way, they really dig out new and important information. What they found out during the course of their investigations, that one of these convicted people, who was actually the assistant of the founder of WTF paper site, was substituting whenever he was gone or was unable to run the site. This person was paid a total of tens of thousands of euros worth in Bitcoins. When police asked, "Where did this come from? Who gave this to you?" The person told, "Private

philanthropists." The police never could find out because the point of the Bitcoin is to keep the senders and the financiers anonymous — who it was who really financed this — but it's quite clear that no kind of philanthropists finance pro-Kremlin, racist hate speech. One can only imagine where that money must have come from. Also, there were other financing forms, such as so-called "loans" that were very salary—like that were paid through third-party bank accounts, as well as payment by PayPal worth tens of thousands.

[00:27:41] And I recall you saying that the loans had absolutely no contract or other documentation in support of the terms of the loan.

[00:27:48] This is what was told by the person to the police: that they are supposedly loans, but no kind of contracts have been made.

[00:28:00] Journalists are under siege everywhere right now, even in the European Union. Can you describe how the response to your investigation has changed the way you live or the way you do your job?

[00:28:14] That's really the hardest part for me because I realized already, from the very beginning, that it looks like, ultimately, I have to make the very personal choice of, "Do I want to continue investigating this topic?" Which really, really needed to be investigated and put out there in the public, and, "Do I really want to put myself on the line?" Because it was very simple. I was being constantly communicated that if I just stay quiet, do not go to the publicity and tell about my investigations, or if I don't produce any more stories, I will be left alone. I will be doing just fine. But as long as I kept on speaking about the topic, as long as I kept on giving speeches, public trainings, interviews, even posting about this topic on my own social media, on Facebook or Twitter, I was immediately given — you would call this kind of like an electric shock — so in the form of another filth piece showing that, again, my activity had been stalked and mocked and smeared and twisted in an unrecognizable form. I really had to then think, "Am I really capable of doing this? Do I really trust that someday the Finnish police will look into this? Do I really trust that I could win this case in court? And am I willing to live with this also in my free time?" Because the trolls and the harassers, they don't care whether I was on vacation or whether I wanted to be left alone. The flow of these hateful messages coming from — some of them in different languages — and death threats and rape fantasies. It was just overwhelming. Basically, what I had to then start to do was to even start looking around when I have been walking in the streets of Helsinki because there have been cases in which a person has recognized me and started yelling at me and my name, and I had to ask, "Where do you know me? Like, why do you call my name?" And the person would tell me that, "I recognized you from the What the F" Paper pieces." I really had to start — I actually even installed a security system to my own home. There are many, many, many security precautions that I had to take, and this already actually started in the course of the very first week of this extraordinary campaign. Already then, I had to contact my supervisors who then contacted the security organization of the Finnish broadcasting company, and then we actually went to the security officials because they were then — at the end, it is the Finnish country, the Finnish

security system, as well as in any European country, any country's security system who is in charge that a journalist or anyone else is capable and secure enough to do their job which they chose to do because the freedom of "choose your job" is a constitutional right. I sometimes have some doubts whether it can be taken care of, whether it can be totally controlled, especially knowing that, according to academic research concerning extremism, hate speech and hate content online agitates and creates hate activity and violent activity, so the longer the campaign went on, the more probable it became that, one day, some of the people who have already threatened me — I even received death threats from my old friends who used to know me and even like me — some of them or then someone else who didn't even inform about these threats beforehand would actually physically attack me. That then led me to really actually find bulletproof ways of keeping myself safe.

[00:32:43] It's so important that you tell this story and that the public hear the price that investigative journalists pay to continue to do their work, which is ultimately a public service. This seems to be trending entirely in the wrong direction, both your own experience and what we're seeing elsewhere. Thank you for your commitment to this issue, for telling your story, for your courage in the face of this kind of vitriol and this series of threats against you. I appreciate your time today, and I encourage people to look up The New York Times article by Andrew Higgins that came out in October that tells a little bit more about the trial and refers to your vindication because, of course, a court of law found that the trolls were guilty of defamation against you, which is such an important part of this story, that the behavior didn't go unchecked. In 2019, we will look for your book, "Putin's Troll Army," and read that with real interest where you can tell the story in much more detail. Thank you for your time today, Jessikka.

[00:33:59] Thank you so much.