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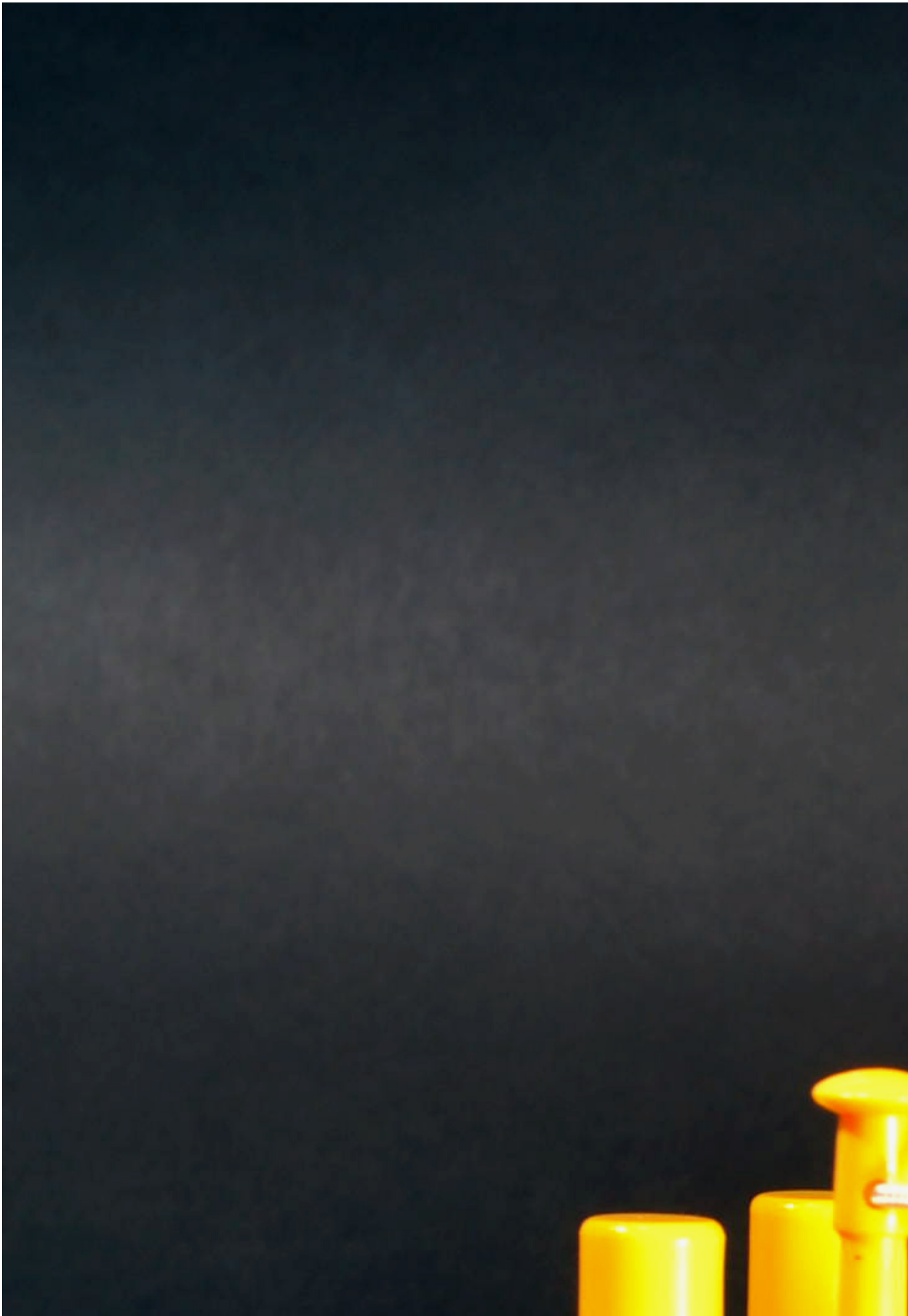

Nov 02, 2017 by Mark Dillen

Battle of the Bots [1]

An extraordinary conference on one of the most important and troubling phenomena of international communication and politics took place last month in Washington D.C.

The phenomenon — Russian official propaganda and disinformation — is hardly a novelty. However, for several years now, as Putin's control over Russian politics and society has become more complete, Russia has resourced and developed an ever-larger, more complex foreign information strategy, funded at far higher levels than anything the U.S. government is now undertaking.

The conference "Recognizing and Countering Russian Propaganda," held at George Washington University's Institute for Public Diplomacy and Global Communication, was a particularly timely look at what is going on and what needs to be done.

Participants such as Peter Pomerantsev of the U.K.'s Legatum Institute and former U.S. Ambassador to Ukraine John Herbst, now with the Atlantic Council, detailed the extent to which Putin has directed a stealth information campaign against Western institutions. Citing General Valery Gerasimov, head of the Russian General Staff, whose thesis is that "information conflict" should be part of Russia's response to "asymmetric and indirect" threats, Pomerantsev maintained that the Russian idea of war in the 21st century is to destroy a country without attacking it militarily.

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Last year, working as a Fulbright Specialist for several weeks at Ukrainian universities, I could certainly see the impact of the Russian approach.

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One scholar at the conference, Sergey Sanovich of New York University, described a study that had examined political tweets from Russia from 2013-15 and found that a large percentage of them were simply bots. As he and his co-authors put it, "

Bots could perform two key functions: either cluttering conversations with “digital dust" or altering search results, internet rankings, top lists and other automated tools for sorting, sharing, discovering, and consuming online content."

Between the impact of (Ukrainian) oligarch-controlled media on one side — and the massive disinformation campaign waged by Moscow-controlled media on the other — it has become difficult for honest, fact-based reporting to be created and find an audience.

Add that to the fact that Western-supported truth-tellers — broadcasters such as VOA and information services such as USIA — were gutted or dissolved in the post-USSR decades and funds were put in the service of trying to counter “violent extremism” — Washington-speak for jihadist movements such as ISIS — it is now clear that the West simply has not been adequately represented in this new, non-Communist “struggle of ideas.”

Moscow and jihadist propaganda employ different strategies — ISIS’ goal is to use propaganda especially via social media to gain adherents among impressionable Muslim youth while Moscow’s goal is to immobilize foreign public opinion by sowing doubt about any version of events.

The West needs strategies and tactics to fight both phenomena. Finally, there is some sense that the two lines of effort are getting more traction and funding. On the anti-ISIS side, the State Department’s new Center for Global Engagement has made a promising start in supporting moderate voices in the Islamic world.

On the disinformation campaign financed by Moscow, there now needs to be more efforts — independent efforts — to examine and debunk false information. The recent BBC documentary on the shoot down of the MH17 passenger airliner two years ago is a start in the right direction. So was the Countering Russian Propaganda conference in Washington D.C.

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