



Baltic Engagement
Centre for Combating
Information Disorders

HOT REPORT

DEFAMATION THROUGH DISINFORMATION AND “DIGITAL REPUTATION WASHING” VIA GOOGLE

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THIS REPORT IS BASED ON THE ARTICLE PUBLISHED IN EESTI EKSPRESS (DELFI MEEDIA) TITLED “RUTHLESS LIES ABOUT INNOCENT PEOPLE FLOURISH ON GOOGLE WHILE REPUTATION LAUNDERING SCHEMES THRIVE”.

WHAT’S HOT?

Disinformation actors are using Google’s search engine and false copyright complaints to suppress investigative journalism that exposes their activities. At the same time, they flood the internet with defamatory content about innocent individuals – content that is extremely difficult to remove. This systematic practice of “digital reputation washing” threatens the visibility, credibility, and impact of journalism as well as the digital safety of individuals.

What Do We See?

- **Defamation campaign:** Dozens of Estonian journalists, lawyers, and businesspeople have been falsely accused of crimes through websites that imitate legitimate news outlets.
- **Platform manipulation:** Google’s search algorithm is being exploited using fraudulent takedown requests, which remove critical journalistic content while harmful mis- and disinformation remains visible.
- **Coordinated activity:** The individuals behind these efforts have previously been linked to pro-Kremlin narratives and disinformation campaigns, including on social media platforms.

Why Does It Work?

- **Trust in search engines:** People often assume Google search results are accurate and trustworthy.
- **Mimicking authority:** Disinformation is disguised as news, closely imitating the visual and textual style of real journalism, which lends it a false sense of credibility.
- **Platform inaction:** Google’s automated systems prioritize format over content, allowing false information to persist while reducing the visibility of legitimate journalism.

Risk Level: HIGH

- False and defamatory content about innocent individuals is widespread and difficult to remove.
- This causes real harm to reputations, job prospects, and professional trust.
- Platforms are often slow or unresponsive to such abuse.

How to Respond?

For the General Public

- Be sceptical and critical when encountering accusatory or defamatory information via Google. Always verify the original source and context.
- Check whether the link appears genuine (e.g., is it really delfi.ee, or a mimic like delfi uudised.ee?).
- If the source appears fake or unverifiable, consider that it may be malicious disinformation.
- Ask critical questions about the motives and goals behind such content.

For Teachers and Media Literacy Educators

- Use this case to teach about the vulnerability of search engines and how algorithms shape visibility.
- Analyse fake site URLs and content, and apply fact-checking tools (e.g., Google Fact Check Tools).
- Help learners understand the origins, context, and motives behind information production and distribution.

For Policymakers and Officials

- Support increased accountability for platforms and mechanisms to remove malicious disinformation.
- Attacks on journalism and the reliability of the information space undermine democratic institutions and contribute to rising public distrust and polarisation.

FURTHER READING

- [OCCRP: Fake Copyright Complaints Seek to Remove Reports on Minister and Lawyer](#)
- [Delfi: RUSSIAN INFLUENCE | How Russian propaganda and influence agents infiltrated Estonia's conspiracy ecosystem](#)
- [Eesti Ekspress: DARK BETS | Estonian-licensed online casinos: Russian ties and looming money laundering risks](#)

What is BECID?

BECID – the Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders – brings together expertise in fact-checking, media literacy, and journalism across the Baltics. We conduct fact-checks in collaboration with Delfi/Delfi Meedia, monitor disinformation narratives and campaigns under the leadership of investigative journalism organisation Re:Baltica, and promote media literacy through the Baltic Centre for Media Literacy (BCME). We also develop methodologies to effectively counter disinformation. Learn more: becid.ut.ee