

Lithuanians are using software to fight back against fake news | The Economist

By The Economist

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“Patient zero” is a medical term that started as a misunderstanding. An early North American victim of AIDS was anonymised in some documents as “Patient O”. The individual in question, Gaëtan Dugas, a Canadian flight attendant, was thought at the time to have been the point of origin of the North American AIDS epidemic. The misreading of O (for “Outside of California”) as 0 (ie, zero), though accidental to begin with, thus seemed propitious. In fact, Dugas was not the sole point of that epidemic’s origin. But the term stuck, and has spread. It has, indeed, spread beyond medicine to embrace another sort of plague—disinformation.

Demaskuok, which means “debunk” in Lithuanian, is a piece of software that searches for the patient zeros of fake news. It was developed by Delfi, a media group headquartered in Lithuania’s capital, Vilnius, in conjunction with Google, a large American information-technology company. It works by sifting through reams of online verbiage in Lithuanian, Russian and English, scoring items for the likelihood that they are disinformation. Then, by tracking back through the online history of reports that look suspicious, it attempts to pin down a disinformation campaign’s point of origin—its patient zero.

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