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## The Buzz Around The Ballot

Media Landscapes and Disinformation in the V4



# MAGDALENA MULLEK

— ON —

## *Troll* by Michal Hvorecký

Michal Hvorecký, a well-known Slovak writer, commentator and translator, takes the reader into the world of paid Internet trolling in his latest novel, *Troll* (*Trol*).

Reading *Troll* is like stepping into quicksand. While the first few pages give the appearance of a solid surface, offering the backstory of its young protagonist, the book quickly collapses into a massive web of information control, scandal and data manipulation, leaving the reader questioning everything he has ever read on the web, seen in the news or even heard spoken in a public venue.

This fictitious world is all the more frightening because, with every passing day, it resembles more and more closely the world we live in today. When I attended a book reading of *Troll* at Christiania in Poprad, Slovakia, Michal Hvorecký said that when he started writing the book two to three years ago, he felt like he was writing science fiction, but by the time the book went into print, it was as if reality had gotten ahead of him. Indeed, the idea of paid troll factories that influence the outcome of elections is becoming part of the mainstream discourse, with Facebook's recent announcement on September 7<sup>th</sup> that it had unwittingly sold \$150,000 of advertising to a Russian troll-farm during the US presidential campaign season being only one such example.

The book's setting, a fictitious small country under the sphere of influence of the also fictitious *Reich*, is loosely based on contemporary Slovakia and Ukraine although it could just as easily be anywhere in Eastern Europe. A hybrid war, a combination of armed conflict and information warfare, has destroyed many of the country's institutions and all of the population's hope. In a dictatorship headed by the Leader-Son, who has succeeded his Leader-Father, power is no longer secured by weapons or money: it is gained and lost through misinformation and media manipulation. Professional trolling organizations make and break leaders, governments, and private individuals. Hate campaigns can be unleashed in a matter of minutes and have the force of a hurricane, destroying everything in their path, quickly moving from the Internet to the real world, and destroying lives and reputations built over decades.

"Men and women spoke about the information war as if they were expecting it to bring them everything they desired and believed in. Their favourite phrase was that duty and honour demand that they bravely defend their country. I thought they were trolling because they were bored with their everyday routine. The conflict had ripped them out of an organized existence.

They spoke of courage, but to me they were cowards, paralyzed by fear of living in a world full of threats and uncertainty. They were looking for sacrificial lambs."

At the heart of the story is a friendship between an obese young man who has spent more than a year in a hospital that destroyed his health, and Johana, a drug addict who loves Russian literature. Together they decide to take on the entire machinery of misinformation. They want to expose the endless web of lies, but to do so they must become part of it. They get hired by a large trolling firm, headed by a man named Valys, and turn into cogs in the very machine they seek to destroy. In the process, they nearly lose their own identities through the natural assimilation which occurs when pretending to become proponents of the same system they want to expose, eventually competing at who can produce more reprehensible lies, losing a grasp on what is real and what isn't.

In the end, they succeed in bringing down the organisation they work for, and perhaps even shed a little light onto a truth, shocking the citizenry into a moment of lucidity. But like an octopus, the trolling machine regenerates its arm – it sets up in another country to wreak havoc on another unsuspecting populace. While the ending offers a glimmer of hope, it also points out that any chance of freeing ourselves from the web of lies and misinformation rests entirely on our own shoulders and requires a tremendous amount of effort. It is so much easier to succumb to the stream of false information than to battle for even a single grain of truth.

During the aforementioned discussion, Michal Hvorecký said that "real violence is born of language." Indeed, in his book, filled with strong language, words have the power to destroy. Verbal violence readily transcends the page, or in this case, the computer screen, and turns into physical violence. Hate envelops its victims like quicksand. And while it may not be possible to drown in quicksand, the danger of both the literal and the literary varieties is that panicked motion results in becoming ever more trapped. The only way out is stillness. In the case of our information-overloaded world, this stillness translates into careful evaluation and thought. Wading through the endless stream of misinformation is nearly impossible, increasingly impracticable, and yet absolutely imperative. *Troll* stands as a warning against the lull of succumbing to the complacency of blindly trusting any source. It is a cutting-edge piece of writing which takes some time to get used to, but it is enlightening and well worth the read. /




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**Michal Hvorecký:**

*Troll,*

*Marenčin Media, 2017.*

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