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Once a U.S. cop, he now

In a life of subterfuge, he poses as fictional people, and builds fake websites.

By STEVEN LEE MYERS
New York Times

A dozen years ago, John Mark Dougan, a former deputy sheriff in Palm Beach County, Fla., sent voters an email posing as a county commissioner, urging them to oppose the reelection of the county's sheriff.

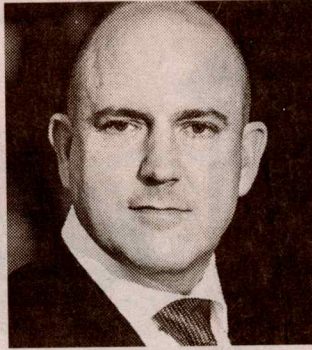
He later masqueraded online as a Russian tech worker with a pseudonym to leak confidential information in violation of state law, fooling officials in Florida.

He also posed as a fictional New York City heir he called Jessica, tricking an adviser to the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office into divulging improper conduct by the department.

"And boy, did he ever spill ALL of the beans," Dougan said in a written response to questions for this article, in which he confirmed his role in these episodes.

Those subterfuges were only a prelude to a more prominent and potentially more ominous campaign of deception he has been conducting from Russia.

Dougan, 51, who received political asylum in Moscow, is now a key player in Russia's disinformation operations against the West. Back in 2016, when the Kremlin interfered in the U.S. presidential election, an army of computer trolls toiled for hours to fool



John Mark Dougan

Americans online.

Today, Dougan may be accomplishing much the same task largely by himself, according to U.S. and European government officials and researchers from companies and organizations that have tracked his activities since August. The groups include NewsGuard, a company that reviews the reliability of news and information online; Recorded Future, a threat intelligence company; and Clemson University's Media Forensics Hub.

Dougan has built an ever-growing network of more than 160 fake websites that mimic news outlets in the United States, Britain and France. With the help of commercially available artificial intelligence tools, he has filled the sites with tens of thousands of articles. Interspersed among them are also bespoke fabrications that officials in the United States and European Union have attributed to Russian intelligence agencies or the administration of President Vladimir Putin.

Between September and May, Dougan's outlets have been cited or referred to in news articles or social media posts nearly 8,000 times, and seen by more than 37 million people in 16 languages, according to a report released Wednesday by NewsGuard.

The fakes have recently included a baseless article on a fake San Francisco Chronicle website that said Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy had smuggled 300 kilograms of cocaine from Argentina.

Another false narrative appeared last month in the sham Chronicle and on another site, called the Boston Times, claiming that the CIA was working with Ukrainians to undermine Donald Trump's presidential campaign.

Dougan, in a series of text exchanges and one telephone interview with the New York Times, denied operating the sites. A digital trail of clues, including web domains and IP addresses, suggests otherwise, the officials and researchers say.

A friend in Florida who has known Dougan for 20 years, Jose Lambiet, also said that Dougan told him in January that he had created the sites.

Steven Brill, a founder of NewsGuard, which has spent months tracking Dougan's work, said he represented "a massive incursion into the American news ecosystem."

Dougan's emergence as a weapon of the Kremlin's propaganda war follows a troubled life in the United States that included home foreclo-



W spreads Russian lies

sures and bankruptcy. As a law enforcement officer in Florida and Maine, he faced accusations of excessive use of force and sexual harassment that resulted in costly lawsuits against the departments he worked for.

He faces an arrest warrant in Florida on 21 felony charges of extortion and wiretapping that resulted from a long-running feud with the Palm Beach County sheriff.

Dougan's activities from Moscow, where he fled in 2016 one step ahead of those charges, continue to draw scrutiny from authorities in the United States. Last year, he impersonated an FBI agent in a telephone call to Brill, according to Brill.

Dougan, who acknowledged making the call in a text message this past week, had been angered by a NewsGuard report in February 2023 that criticized YouTube for allowing videos parroting Russian propaganda about the war in Ukraine, including some by Dougan.

The call prompted an FBI investigation that, according to Brill, traced the call to Dougan's telephone in Russia. (A spokesperson for the FBI did not respond to a request for comment on the investigation or Dougan's previous activities.)

After a four-year stint in the Marine Corps, Dougan became a police officer first in a small force in Mangonia Park, Fla., and then the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office from 2005 to 2009.

According to news reports and his own accounts, Dougan repeatedly clashed with superiors and colleagues, facing numerous internal investigations.

In 2009, he moved briefly to Windham, Maine, to work in another small-town police department. There he faced a complaint of sexual harassment that resulted in his dismissal before he completed his probationary period.

Dougan started a website called WindhamTalk to defend himself. The website foreshadowed others he would create, including one devoted to the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office, PBSOTalk.

In February 2016, PBSOTalk posted confidential information about thousands of police officers, federal agents and judges. The next month, FBI agents and local police officers searched Dougan's home, seizing all of his electronic equipment.

Fearing arrest, he said, he made his way to Canada and caught a flight to Moscow. He was indicted on the 21 Florida felony charges the next year.

In April 2021, Dougan revived a website called DC Weekly and published fake articles about the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office.

According to a report in December by Clemson's Media Forensics Hub, the domain and IP address were shared by PBSOTalk and Dougan's personal website, as well as two marketing books he wrote in exile and a security firm he operated, Falcon Eye Tech, which offered "offshore

security monitoring services."

After Russia's assault on Ukraine began in 2022, the site carried articles about the war.

Then, in August 2023, the site began to publish articles based on elaborate fabrications that the Western government officials and disinformation researchers said came from Russia's propaganda units.

The baseless narratives included claims that relatives or cronies of Ukraine's leader secretly bought luxury properties, yachts or jewelry, and that Prince Andrew, the brother of King Charles of Britain, had abducted and abused children during a secret visit to Ukraine.

Dougan, who became a Russian citizen last year, said in his messages to the Times that he made a living by selling security devices he designed for a manufacturer in China.

He denied being paid by any Russian authorities, claiming he funds his activities himself.

While Dougan's sites have focused on Russian narratives about the war in Ukraine, the researchers and government officials say he has laid the foundation for interference in the unusually large confluence of elections taking place around the world this year.

This suggests a "risk of an expanded operation scope in the near future, potentially targeting diverse audiences and democratic systems in Europe and other Western nations for various strategic objectives," the E.U. diplomatic service wrote in a report last month.

