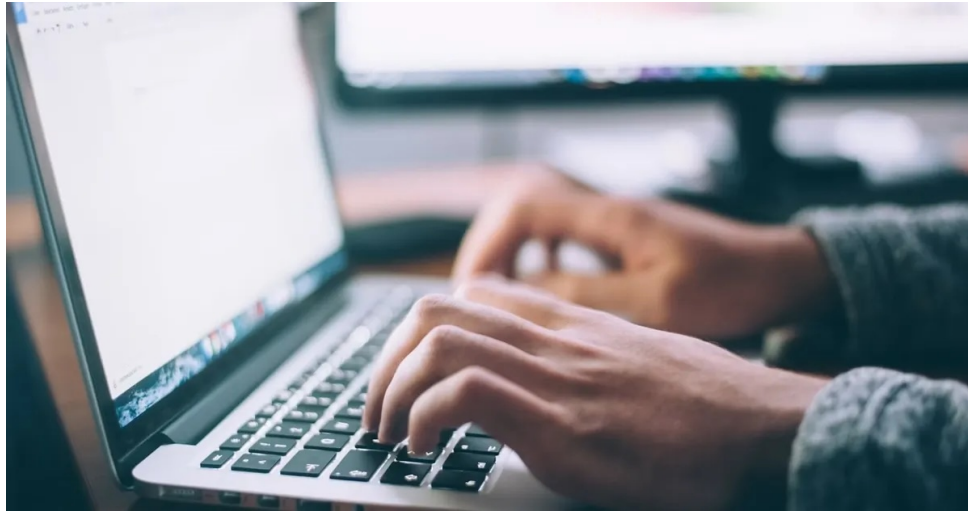


‘Phantom’ columnist duped Canadian media with AI-generated identity

A writer calling himself Daniel Robson published articles in several Canadian media outlets, refusing video calls and failing identity checks. Turns out, he wasn’t a real person.

By Melanie Bennet | Juno News

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Source: Unsplash (Glenn Carstens-Peters)

A columnist who published national security and foreign policy commentary across Canadian media may not have existed at all.

A new investigation by Türkiye Today alleges that “Daniel Robson” used an apparently AI-generated photograph and unverifiable credentials to secure bylines in the Ottawa Citizen, Policy Options, The Hub, Western Standard, and other publications.

The writer built a public profile over nearly two years, commenting on immigration, terrorism, antisemitism, pro-Palestinian demonstrations, and Canada’s relationship with Morocco.

Questions about his identity emerged after Robson approached Türkiye Today with an article accusing a Moroccan dissident living in Canada of operating an international drug trafficking and migrant smuggling network.

According to the outlet, Robson refused a video interview and said a dental condition prevented him from speaking. He supplied material attributed to Atlas Hacks, a pro-Morocco hacking group, including financial documents that allegedly showed transfers to a Turkish textile merchant.

Türkiye Today said the transfers were worth between roughly \$1,500 and \$2,500, amounts it considered inconsistent with Robson’s allegations of a global criminal enterprise.

The outlet also tested Robson’s profile photograph using three AI-detection programs. Those programs reportedly assessed the image as 97 per cent likely to have been artificially generated, possibly through the website This Person Does Not Exist.

AI-detection tools are not conclusive proof that an image is fake. More significant was the apparent inability of publishers to verify the person behind it.

Policy Options removed Robson's work and published an editor's note acknowledging that it could not confirm his identity, education or employment. The magazine said Robson would not provide a résumé or participate in a video call.

"We are on a very steep learning curve with AI," Policy Options editor-in-chief Les Perreux told Türkiye Today.

Perreux said a review suggested that some of Robson's emails were likely written with heavy AI assistance.

The Ottawa Citizen also reportedly removed Robson's biography and articles, although Türkiye Today said the newspaper did not publish an accompanying explanation.

Western Standard continued publishing Robson after questions were raised, including a September 11 column calling for Canada to reset its counterterrorism strategy. The articles were later removed, according to the investigation.

Western Standard opinion editor Christopher Oldcorn told Türkiye Today that the publication had communicated with Robson through a "variety of methods," but reportedly did not say whether anyone had spoken with him by phone or video.

Robson was also credited with writing a chapter in *Fulfilling the Promise of Canada: Charting a National Strategy for an Unstable World*, a collection edited by retired Canadian Armed Forces officer Charles Oliviero.

Asked whether he could now confirm Robson was a real person, Oliviero answered "not yet."

Robson's work frequently promoted closer relations between Canada and Morocco while attacking critics of the Moroccan government.

He praised King Mohammed VI's reforms and argued that Canada could not develop a credible African strategy without Morocco. Other articles accused Moroccan dissidents living in Canada of criminal activity or extremism.

Hicham Jerando, a Quebec businessman and outspoken critic of Morocco's ruling establishment, told Türkiye Today that he believes Moroccan intelligence was behind the campaign. He identified a Moroccan-born legal consultant as the person he suspects of operating the Robson identity.

No independent evidence establishing who controlled the account, or proving a connection to Moroccan intelligence, was presented in the report. Those claims remain allegations.

The clearest failure lies closer to home.

Several Canadian outlets gave a purported journalist access to their audiences without apparently confirming his education, employment history, or even whether they could see and speak to him. His refusal of payment may also have allowed him to contribute widely without passing through the administrative checks normally required to compensate a writer.

A polished pitch, plausible biography, and professional-looking photograph were apparently enough to create the illusion of credibility.