# NEW KNOWLEDGE

# The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency

ANALYSIS BY

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# Document Purpose and Overview

Upon request by the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI), New Knowledge reviewed an expansive data set of social media posts and metadata provided to SSCI by Facebook, Twitter, and Alphabet, plus a set of related data from additional platforms. The data sets were provided by the three primary platforms to serve as evidence for an investigation into the Internet Research Agency (IRA) influence operations.

The organic post content in this data set has never previously been seen by the public. Our report quantifies and contextualizes Internet Research Agency (IRA) influence operations targeting American citizens from 2014 through 2017, and articulates the significance of this long-running and broad influence operation. It includes an overview of Russian influence operations, a collection of summary statistics, and a set of key takeaways that are then discussed in detail later in the document. The document includes links to full data visualizations, hosted online, that permit the reader to explore facets of the IRA-created manipulation ecosystem.

Finally, we share our concluding notes and recommendations. We also provide a comprehensive slide deck accommodating a wide array of selected images directly from the data set illustrating our observations, and, as an appendix, a comprehensive summary of relevant statistics related to the data set.

*This publication and its conclusions are in part based on the analysis of social media content that the authors were provided by the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence under the auspices of the Committee's Technical Advisory Group, whose members serve to provide substantive technical and expert advice on topics of importance to ongoing Committee activity and oversight. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions presented herein are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence or its Membership.*

# Russian Interference Background and Context

## Data Set Provenance and Analysis Parameters

Broadly, Russian interference in the U.S. Presidential Election of 2016 took three distinct forms, one of which is within the scope of our analysis:

1. Attempts to hack online voting systems (as detailed by a United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence [report](#))
2. A cyber-attack targeting the Democratic National Committee, executed by the GRU, which led to a controlled leak via Wikileaks of email data related to the Clinton Presidential campaign team
3. A sweeping and sustained social influence operation consisting of various coordinated disinformation tactics aimed directly at US citizens, designed to exert political influence and exacerbate social divisions in US culture

This last form of interference, a multi-year coordinated disinformation effort conducted by the Russian state-supported Internet Research Agency (IRA), is the topic of this analysis.

The United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI) began an investigation into the IRA's social media activities following the 2016 election around the same time that investigative journalists and third-party researchers became aware that IRA's campaign had touched all major platforms in the social network ecosystem. In March 2018, some of the social platform companies misused by the IRA (Twitter, Facebook, and Alphabet) provided the SSCI with data related to IRA influence operations. Facebook's data submission includes Facebook Page posts and Instagram account content. Alphabet's data submission includes

Google AdWords and YouTube video and channel data. The data set reveals that Alphabet's subsidiaries YouTube, G+, Gmail, and Google Voice were each leveraged to support the creation and validation of false personas.

Evidence provided by these companies to SSCI ties the IRA operation to widespread activity on other popular social platforms including Vine, Gab, Meetup, VKontakte, and LiveJournal. Several complete websites were created to host original written content, and to provide source material for related social accounts and personas. The breadth of the attack included games, browser extensions, and music apps created by the IRA and pushed to targeted groups, including US teenagers. The popular game Pokémon Go was incorporated into the operation, illustrating the fluid, evolving, and innovative tactical approach the IRA leveraged to interfere in US politics and culture.

Several platforms that confirmed the presence of IRA interference operations (Reddit, Tumblr, Pinterest, and Medium) were **not** part of the formal SSCI investigation or data requests, and that content was not included in the SSCI data set. They have cooperated with law enforcement, and their information has been incorporated into a parallel Department of Justice investigation; the Mueller indictment of Russian nationals, Netyksho et al, dated 07/13/18, specifically references Tumblr-based interference operations. In the interest of thorough analysis, New Knowledge took initiative to **also** analyze relevant data from Reddit, Tumblr, and Pinterest in addition to the data set provided by SSCI.

The data set provided to the SSCI for the purposes of this analysis includes extensive amounts of data previously unknown to the public; it is the first comprehensive analysis by entities other than the social platforms themselves.

None of the platforms (Twitter, Facebook, and Alphabet) appears to have turned over complete sets of related data to SSCI. Some of what was turned over was in PDF form; other data sets contained extensive duplicates. Each lacked core components that would have provided a fuller and more actionable picture. For example:

- The platforms didn't include methodology for identifying the accounts; we are assuming the provenance and attribution is sound for the purposes of this analysis.
- They didn't include anonymized user comments, eliminating a key path to gauge impact.
- They didn't include any conversion pathway data to elucidate how individuals came to follow the accounts, eliminating another key path to gauge impact.
- There was minimal metadata.

- One data set did not include any user engagement data at all.

Regrettably, it appears that the platforms may have misrepresented or evaded in some of their statements to Congress; one platform claimed that no specific groups were targeted (this is only true if speaking strictly of ads), while another dissembled about whether or not the Internet Research Agency created content to discourage voting (it did). It is unclear whether these answers were the result of faulty or lacking analysis, or a more deliberate evasion.

## IRA Background

The IRA began its operations in mid-2013 in St. Petersburg, Russia. Run like a sophisticated marketing agency in a centralized office environment, the IRA employed and trained over a thousand people to engage in round-the-clock influence operations, first targeting Ukrainian and Russian citizens, and then, well before the 2016 US election, Americans. The scale of their operation was unprecedented — they reached 126 million people on Facebook, at least 20 million users on Instagram, 1.4 million users on Twitter, and uploaded over 1,000 videos to YouTube. As Department of Justice indictments have recently revealed, this manipulation of American political discourse had a budget that exceeded $25 million USD and continued well into 2018. IRA documents indicate the 2017 operational budget alone was $12.2 million US dollars. Independent researchers and social platforms were aware of the IRA as early as 2015, and its activities on Facebook are well-documented and discussed in detail in Adrian Chen's "The Agency". Subsequent glimpses into the operational structure and strategy of the IRA can be found in the February 2018 indictment of 13 Russian nationals by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, and the September 28, 2018 criminal complaint of United States of America v. Elena Alekseevna Khusyaynova.

The September 2018 indictment reveals that "[t]he Conspiracy has sought to conduct what it called internally 'information warfare against the United States of America.'" (p.6 of DOJ Khusyaynova Complaint). The data provided to SSCI clearly illustrates that for approximately five years, Russia has waged a propaganda war against American citizens, manipulating social media narratives to influence American culture and politics.

We hope that this analysis of the IRA information warfare arsenal – particularly the discussion of the influence operation tactics – helps policymakers and American citizens alike to understand the sophistication of the adversary, and to be aware of the ongoing threat to American democracy.

## Statistical Highlights

- The comprehensive dataset included:

  - ~10.4 million tweets (of which ~6 million were original) across 3841 twitter accounts
  - ~1100 YouTube videos across 17 account channels
  - ~116,000 Instagram posts across 133 accounts
  - ~61,500 unique Facebook posts across 81 Pages

- There were ~77 million engagements on Facebook, ~187 million engagements on Instagram, and ~73 million engagements on original content on Twitter. Precise summary statistics are presented later in this report.

## Key Observations

- **The Threat Persists**

  - Active and ongoing interference operations remain on several platforms.

- **Unpublicized Prominence of Instagram Operations**

  - Instagram was a significant front in the IRA's influence operation, something that Facebook executives appear to have avoided mentioning in Congressional testimony.
  - There were 187 million engagements on Instagram. Facebook estimated that this was across 20 million affected users. There were 76.5 million engagements on Facebook; Facebook estimated that the Facebook operation reached 126 million people. It is

possible that the 20 million is not accounting for impact from regrams, which may be difficult to track because Instagram does not have a native sharing feature.

- In 2017, as media covered their Facebook and Twitter operations, the IRA shifted much of its activity to Instagram.
- Instagram engagement outperformed Facebook, which may indicate its strength as a tool in image-centric memetic (meme) warfare. Alternately, it is possible that the IRA's Instagram engagement was the result of click farms; a few of the provided accounts reference what appears to be a live engagement farm.
- Our assessment is that Instagram is likely to be a key battleground on an ongoing basis.

- **Extensive Operations Targeting Black-American Communities**

  - The most prolific IRA efforts on Facebook and Instagram specifically targeted Black American communities and appear to have been focused on developing Black audiences and recruiting Black Americans as assets.
  - The IRA created an expansive cross-platform media mirage targeting the Black community, which shared and cross-promoted authentic Black media to create an immersive influence ecosystem.
  - The IRA exploited the trust of their Page audiences to develop human assets, at least some of whom were not aware of the role they played. This tactic was substantially more pronounced on Black-targeted accounts.
  - The degree of integration into authentic Black community media was not replicated in the otherwise Right-leaning or otherwise Left-leaning content.

- **Voter Suppression Operations**

  - Despite statements from Twitter and Facebook debating whether it was possible to gauge whether voter suppression content was present, there were three primary variants of specific voter suppression narratives spread on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube.

    - Malicious misdirection (Twitter-based text-to-vote scams, tweets designed to create confusion about voting rules)
    - Candidate support redirection ('vote for a 3rd party!')
    - Turnout depression ('stay home on Election Day, your vote doesn't matter')

- **Sowing Literal Division: Secession**

    - The IRA sowed both secessionist and insurrectionist sentiments, attempting to exacerbate discord against the government at federal, state, and local levels.
    - Content focused on secessionist movements including Texas secession (#texit) and California (#calexit). These were compared to #Brexit.

- **Pro-Trump Operations Commence During Primaries**

    - The IRA had a very clear bias for then-candidate Trump's that spanned from early in the campaign and throughout the data set.
    - A substantial portion of political content articulated pro-Donald Trump sentiments, beginning with the early primaries.
    - Aside from an extremely small set of early posts supporting Rand Paul, this preference was consistent throughout the Right-leaning IRA-created communities.
    - Some of the pages targeting traditionally Left-leaning audiences, such as United Muslims, very occasionally broached the idea that their members might consider Trump as well.

- **Comprehensive Anti-Hillary Clinton Operations**

    - A substantial portion of political content articulated anti-Hillary Clinton sentiments among both Right and Left-leaning IRA-created communities.
    - There was no pro-Clinton content on Facebook or Instagram, aside from a single United Muslims Facebook Event promoting a rally encouraging Muslims to publicly demonstrate in support of Clinton's candidacy. However, the bulk of the content on that same page was anti-Clinton, and the anti-Clinton motive behind this ostensibly pro-Clinton post is transparent.
    - There were some pro-Clinton Twitter posts (tweets and retweets), however, the developed Left-wing Twitter personas were still largely anti-Clinton and expressed pro-Bernie Sanders and pro-Jill Stein sentiments.
    - These tactics and goals overlapped with the pro-Trump portion of the operation.

- **Operations Targeting Prominent Figures**

    - IRA operations targeted a wide range of Republican leaders, including Sens. Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, Lindsay Graham, John McCain, and Dr. Ben Carson.
    - There were significant IRA mentions that aimed to increase or erode support for

prominent political figures, including Julian Assange, Robert Mueller, and James Comey. These mentions were largely an attempt to shape audience perception during a relevant news cycle.

- Given the recent news regarding a pending indictment of Mr. Assange, it is perhaps notable that there were a number of posts expressing support for Assange and Wikileaks, including several on October 4th, 2016, the day before Roger Stone's text message history indicated Mr. Stone believed hacked email data would be made public via Wikileaks.

- These tactics and goals overlapped with the pro-Trump portion of the operation.

# Themes

Based on publicly available open-source research, Twitter's release of 10 million IRA tweets, and the United States House of Representatives' release of the Facebook ad data, there is a prevailing narrative that the Internet Research Agency was focused on dividing Americans, and that the operation's focus on elections was merely a small subset of that activity. While accurate, this narrative misses nuance and deserves more contextualization in light of the additional material contained in the Google and YouTube data set, and the collection of the hundreds of thousands of non-ad "organic" memes and posts provided to SSCI.

The IRA had a roster of themes, primarily social issues, that they repeatedly emphasized and reinforced across their Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube content.

- Black culture, community, Black Lives Matter
- Blue Lives Matter, pro-police
- Anti-refugee, pro-immigration reform
- Texas culture, community, and pride
- Southern culture (Confederate history)
- Separatist movements and secession
- Muslim culture, community, and pride
- Christian culture, community, and pride
- LGBT culture, community, and pride
- Native American culture, community, and pride

- Meme and "red pill" culture
- Patriotism and Tea Party culture
- Liberal and feminist culture
- Veteran's Issues
- Gun rights, pro-2nd Amendment
- Political Pro-Trump, anti-Clinton content
- Pro-Bernie Sanders and Jill Stein content
- Syria and ISIS, pro-Assad, anti-U.S. involvement
- Trust in media

These recurring topics were grouped thematically on Facebook Pages and Instagram accounts designed to reinforce community and culture and to foster feelings of pride. The material can be classified into three broad groups: Black-targeted, politically Left-targeted, and politically Right-targeted. While other distinct ethnic and religious groups were the focus of one or two Facebook Pages or Instagram accounts, the Black community was targeted extensively with dozens; this is why we have elected to assess the messaging directed at Black Americans as a distinct and significant operation for purposes of this report.

The themes selected by the IRA were deployed to create and reinforce tribalism within each targeted community; in a majority of the posts created on a given Page or account, the IRA simply reinforced in-group camaraderie. They punctuated cultural-affinity content with political posts, and content demonizing out-groups. Partisan content was presented to targeted groups in on-brand ways, such as a meme featuring Jesus in a Trump campaign hat on an account that targeted Christians. A few traditionally hot-button issues, such as abortion, did not get their own dedicated thematic accounts but appeared sporadically across a few hundred posts on pages that generally focused on other things.



Two themes were disseminated nearly identically across all targeted communities: narratives to erode trust in mainstream media, and narratives to convey Russian's state-sanctioned talking points on the Syrian conflict.

On Twitter, where communities are amorphous, the IRA personas discussed the themes listed above but also included many others. The activity was driven by local and current events; the

themes appeared, but the accounts additionally worked in popular culture references, including emerging conspiracy theories.

While media narratives around the Russian/IRA Twitter activity have often focused on automation and bots, the agency ran human-operated precision personas that roughly mapped to the same Black, Left, and Right clusters observed on Facebook and Instagram. The personas were spontaneous and responsive, engaging with real users (famous influencers and media as well as regular people), participating in real-time conversations, creating polls, and playing hashtag games. These personas developed relationships with American citizens. They were designed to influence individuals and to shape narratives; the IRA appears to have attempted to solidify the positioning of well-developed Twitter accounts as influencers by alluding to them by name or screenshot in their posts on other platforms (i.e., TEN_GOP's Twitter content shared on the Facebook account Stand for Freedom). The Twitter personas regularly retweeted content by prominent and influential public figures; they were occasionally retweeted by influencers in return. The automated accounts were primarily news-focused, and largely limited to tweeting headlines and retweeting other accounts.

In addition to memetic content and tweets, the IRA pushed narratives with longform blog content. They created media properties, websites designed to produce stories that would resonate with those targeted. It appears, based on the data set provided by Alphabet, that the IRA may have also expanded into think tank-style communiques. One such page, previously unattributed to the IRA but included in the Alphabet data, was GI Analytics, a geopolitics blog with an international masthead that included American authors. This page was promoted via AdWords and YouTube videos; it has strong ties to more traditional Russian propaganda networks, which will be discussed later in this analysis. GI Analytics wrote articles articulating nuanced academic positions on a variety of sophisticated topics. From the site's About page:

> "Our purpose and mission are to provide high-quality analysis at a time when we are faced with a multitude of crises, a collapsing global economy, imperialist wars, environmental disasters, corporate greed, terrorism, deceit, GMO food, a migration crisis and a crackdown on small farmers and ranchers."

And, finally, in service to these themes, the IRA co-opted the names of real groups with existing reputations serving the targeted communities - including United Muslims of America, Cop Block, Black Guns Matter, and L for Life. This was perhaps an attempt to loosely backstop an identity if a curious individual did a Google Search, or to piggyback on an established brand.

# Summary Statistics: A Cross-Platform Operation

## Internet Research Agency-attributed domains

- blackvswhite.info
- dntshoot.com
- donotshoot.us
- blackmattersusa.com
- blackmattersus.com
- blacktivist.info
- blacktolive.org
- blacksoul.us

- proudtobeblack.org
- black4black.info
- patriotsus.com
- butthis.com
- dudeers.com
- imsanbernardino.info
- blackfist.pro
- reportsecret.com

*\*USAReally.com, another IRA-attributed site, launched during the SSCI investigation*

## Dates of First Posts

The dates of first posts (see graphs on next page) suggest that the IRA was active on Twitter for several years prior to their efforts commencing on Facebook and Instagram; however, given that the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence requested data from January 1, 2015 on, it is possible that some IRA content that appeared on Facebook or Instagram was simply not included in the data provided.

Interestingly, it appears that a majority of the Instagram accounts were created relatively early in the operation, then increasingly leveraged as the operation continued (Instagram activity

increased over time, including in 2017). Facebook Pages appear to have been created or leveraged later, with a wave of Pages that began to post leading into Election 2016.

## INSTAGRAM
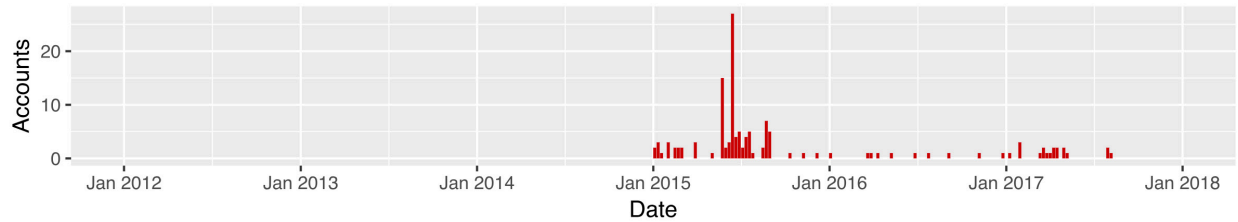


## FACEBOOK
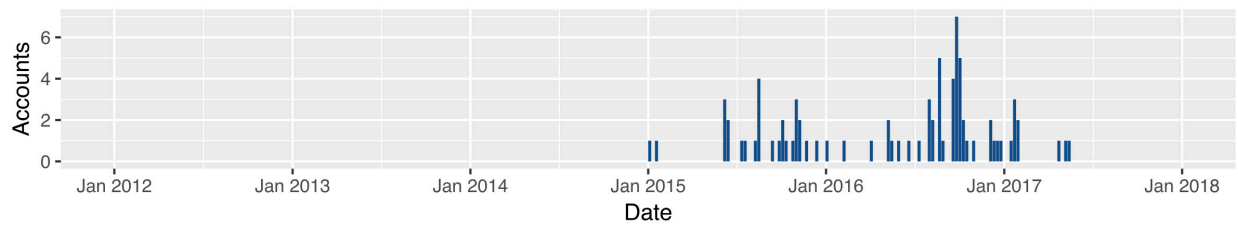


## TWITTER



Full summary statistics with charts and graphs highlighting platform activity, domains shared, ad spend, and more can be found in the accompanying slide deck analysis of the IRA data set.

# Organic Activities

## Organic Activity: YouTube

The IRA appears to have begun making YouTube videos in Sept 2015, producing 1107 videos across 17 channels. A few channels were active until July 2017. Several aggregated or repurposed Vine content. Two channels were specifically political, focused on the 2016 election. Three channels (30 videos) were devoted to Syria & related Near East conflicts. On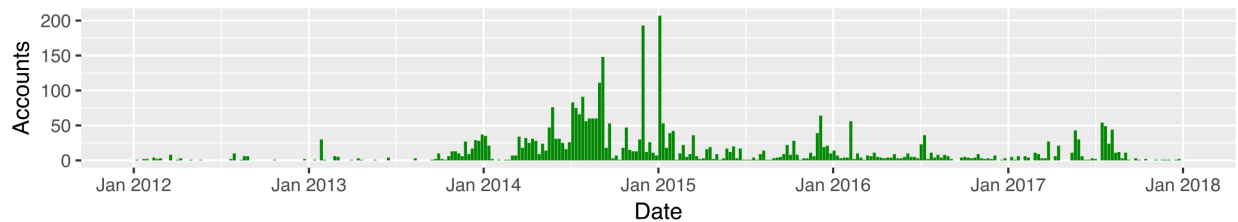e was affiliated with GI Analytics, which also ran AdWords, and the others were both variants of the name "New Inform" (related to a site of the same name).



Syria ■ Black community ■ Misc Political ■ Immigration ■ Guns
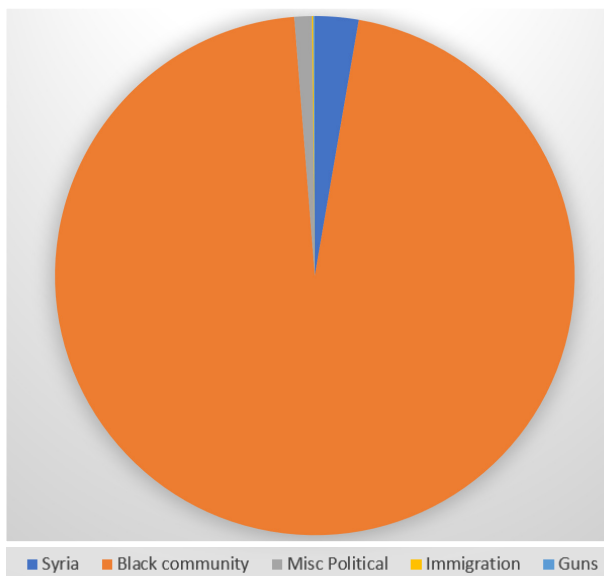
By far the most content was related to Black Lives Matter & police brutality: 1063 videos split across 10 different channels (59% of the channels, 96% of the content). 571 had title keywords related to the police and focused on police abuses. In light of this, YouTube's statement before the first Senate tech hearing – "These channels' videos were not targeted to the U.S. or to any particular sector of the U.S. population" – is perhaps using 'target' in the paid sense, but appears disingenuous.

## INTERNET RESEARCH AGENCY YOUTUBE CHANNEL LIST

- A Word of Truth (Williams & Kalvin)
- [Backyard of the White House](#)
- Black Matters
- BlackToLive
- Cop Block US
- Don't Shoot
- Global Independent Analytics
- GUNS 4LIFE
- Hong Zi
- New Inform
- Newinform Newinform
- Paul Jefferson
- PoliceState
- Starling Brown
- STOP A.I.
- Stop Police Brutality

*\*Backyard of the White House content is still aggregated and accessible online at the link*

Across all channels, 25 videos had election-related keywords in the title (candidate names, "vote"/"voting", "election", etc). These videos were all anti-Hillary Clinton. One of the political channels, Paul Jefferson, solicited videos for a #PeeOnHillary video challenge (the hashtag appeared on Twitter and Instagram) and shared submissions that it received. Videos on the "A Word of Truth" channel – the YouTube channel of Williams & Kalvin Facebook page and @williams.and.kalvin_ Instagram account – included voter suppression tactics targeting African-American voters – advocating Black voters stay home, or vote for Jill Stein. Titles included "The truth about elections", "HILLARY RECEIVED $20,000 DONATION FROM KKK TOWARDS HER CAMPAIGN", "A Word Of Truth: Dr. Alveda against fu\*\*in' Hillary".

YouTube provided some account metadata to SSCI. Several of the email addresses attached to the YouTube accounts were affiliated with Google Plus pages; the remainder were Gmail accounts. Several email addresses confirmed links between accounts, and across platforms. Addresses williamsjohnsonhiphop@gmail.com and copblock1@gmail.com were both affiliated with the "A Word of Truth" channel; copblock1@gmail was also attached to the "Cop Block US" YouTube channel. One of the email addresses linked to the "Don't Shoot" YouTube account appears to also have been linked to a Tumblr post that advocated that players of Pokémon Go name their Pokémon with a police brutality victim's name.

The two "New Inform" channels had Russian-language sites associated with them, and content related to Syria, Turkey, and the Middle East. They appear to be related to the site newinform.com.

# Organic Activity: Twitter

*An extensive amount of writing has been dedicated to the various facets of the IRA's Twitter operation as researcher-acquired data sets, such as the one released by Clemson University and FiveThirtyEight, have emerged since Election 2016. In October 2018, Twitter itself released a data set of IRA tweets to the public. In light of this, we did a brief analysis of the Twitter data provided to SSCI during this investigation.*

The IRA developed a collection of over 3841 persona accounts on Twitter; approximately [1.4 million people](#) engaged with their tweets. They generated 72,801,807 engagements on their original content (not including retweets that they amplified, but which were written by others). The tweets from the 3841 persona accounts were delivered to SSCI in two batches; it appears that a couple of real accounts were [misidentified](#) as Russian, while other IRA were missed and discovered later.

Our investigation into the Twitter accounts corroborates the findings of other researchers and media over the past 18 months, and suggests that the English-language activity appears to have taken four primary forms:

- Repurposed accounts from a commercial botnet
- Newsbots: accounts that tweeted news articles focused on the regions they were purportedly from (including Russian-language newsbots targeting Russians); this is discussed later in this document in the Media Manipulation section
- "Right-leaning" accounts that participated in conversations or created political content designed to be resonant with right-of-center individuals on the American political spectrum
- "Left-leaning" accounts that did the same thing for Left-leaning audiences.

Our perception of the account personas has been confirmed by outside researchers from Clemson University and Five Thirty Eight, which released a collection of IRA tweets (a subset of the ones provided to the committee) during the period of this investigation. That coding [can be found in an easily-searchable interface here](#); by that classification, there were 1280 Russian language accounts, 630 Right-leaning, 233 Left-leaning, 54 Newsfeed. As noted elsewhere, automation played a role: many of the accounts tweeted at the same time. We visualized users clustered by similarity in temporal behavior on page 19.

In the course of a similarity analysis we discovered still-active bots that were likely part of a commercially acquired or repurposed botnet.

These charts look at Twitter account posting patterns over time. Each row is an individual Twitter account, green indicates tweets. Concentrated blocks of color in this plot represent users who posted at exactly the same time, and may indicate the use of automation. More extended color blocks indicate more intense coordination over a longer period of time.
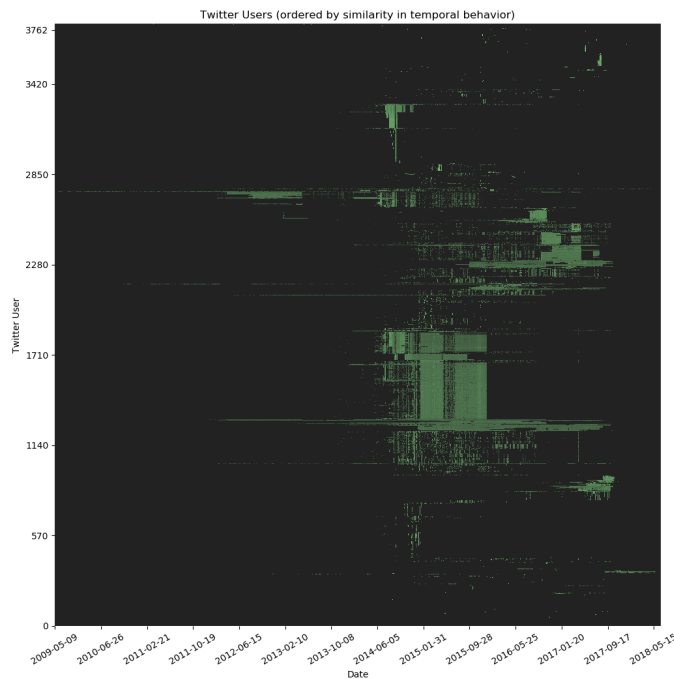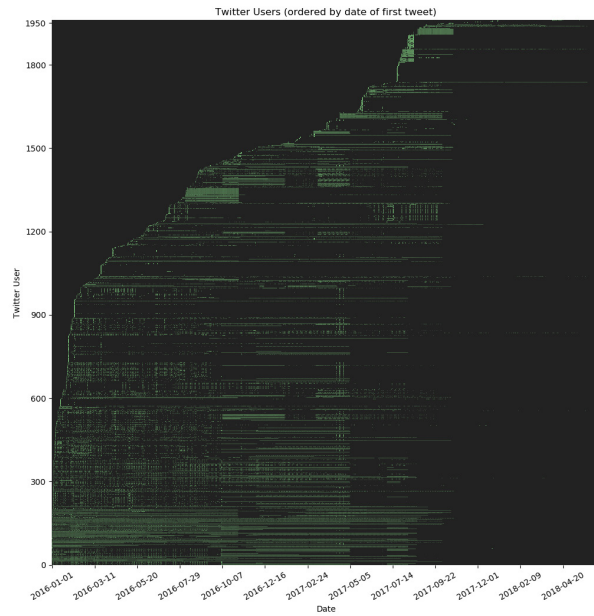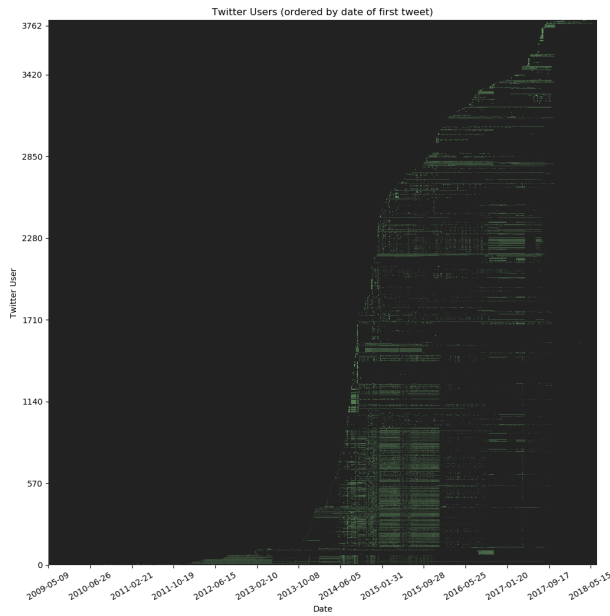
Based on the metadata provided by Twitter, most of the IRA twitter accounts were registered through various proxy services in the United states and Europe. Accounts intended to pass as American were registered from U.S. IP addresses, and accounts intended to pass as Germans were registered from German IP addresses. A significant number of IRA twitter accounts however, were registered from either a single IP address in Venezuela or the IRA building's real IP address in St. Petersburg.

Our impression of the IRA's Twitter operation is that it was largely opportunistic real-time chatter; a collection of accounts, for example, regularly played hashtag games. There was a substantial amount of retweeting. By contrast, Facebook and Instagram were used to develop deeper relationships, to create a collection of substantive cultural media pages dedicated to continual reinforcement of in-group and out-group ideals for targeted audiences. Twitter was, however, a part of the cross-platform brand building tactic; several of the Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and Reddit pages had associated Twitter accounts.

One interesting facet of the Twitter operation was the IRA site "Report Secret" – dozens of the IRA Right-wing persona accounts used ReportSecret.com as their bio URL. This site did not appear in the content for Facebook or Instagram. Looking at the Twitter bio URLs also revealed personas who linked themselves to Gab.ai, to LiveJournal, and to VKontakte. Some of the accounts in the bios are still active, although dormant.

One additional observation of note is an observation of absence: the data provided by Twitter did not include accounts, thought by many observers to be Russian, that were discovered to have engaged in narrative manipulation in 2017. One example of this is @umpire43, which [engaged in spreading disinformation](#) during the Roy Moore campaign; this account does not appear in the SSCI data set. It is still possible that such accounts were Russia-owned, but operated by a non-IRA entity. Alternately, they may have belonged to a different adversary.

# Organic Activity: Facebook

The IRA leveraged the majority of Facebook's features, including Ads, Pages, Events, Messenger, and even Stickers. Over the past two years, Facebook has undergone a significant transformation in how it discusses influence operations on the platform, and it deserves commendation for that evolution in thinking. However, the earliest public comments by the platform attempted to diminish the IRA operation as just 'a few hundred thousand dollars of ads'. This inaccurate assessment has stuck among people who remain skeptical of the IRA operation's significance; we hope that this report on the reach of the hundreds of thousands of organic posts puts that to rest.

The Facebook data provided included posts from 81 unique Pages, of which 33 had over 1000 followers. Of these 33, fourteen major pages focused on Black audiences, five were aimed at Left-leaning audiences, one was a travel-focused older page, and thirteen targeted Right-leaning audiences. Overall, 30 targeted Black audiences and amassed 1,187,810 followers; 25 targeted the Right and amassed 1,446,588 followers, and 7 targeted the Left and amassed 689,045 followers. The remaining 19 were a sporadic collection of pages with almost no posts and approximately 2000 followers across them.

As mentioned in the opening section of this report, there were 76.5 million engagements across 3.3 million Page followers. These included 30.4 million shares, 37.6 million likes, 3.3 million comments, and 5.2 million reactions across the content. Since Facebook did not provide data about any sockpuppet accounts involved in the distribution of the content or the existence of "fake Likes" from these accounts, we are operating under the assumption that this engagement was from real people, and that this content was pushed into the Newsfeeds of their Friends as well.

There was a long tail of failed attempts and weak engagement. The Top 20 Pages show substantially more success across the four types of engagement (likes, shares, comments, reactions) than the remaining 61. Of the top ten Pages by engagement, 50% focused on Right-leaning audiences; despite the significant efforts made to target the Black community on Facebook, only two Black-targeted pages cracked the top 10 by engagement.

The Page with content that garnered the most Likes was Being Patriotic (Right-targeted; 6.3 million Likes). The most comments appeared on Stop All Invaders (Right-targeted, 773,305 comments), most reactions on Blacktivist (Black-targeted, 1.4 million reactions), most shares from Heart of Texas (Right-targeted, 4.8 million shares)

## Total Engagement

Page Name



Page Name: **Stop A.I.**
Total Engagement:
**12,471,531**

## IRA Facebook Pages - Comparative Engagement Overview (ALL)



Page: **Being Patriotic**
# **Likes: 6,312,962**
# Comments: 385,702
# Reactions: 386,266
# Shares: 4,345,436

Page: **Stop A.I.**
# Likes: 5,991,416
# **Comments: 773,305**
# Reactions: 545,993
# Shares: 5,160,817

Page: **Blacktivist**
# Likes: 4,539,240
# Comments: 501,824
# **Reactions: 1,381,037**
# Shares: 4,782,251

Page: **Heart of Texas**
# Likes: 5,279,052
# Comments: 399,746
# Reactions: 546,785
# **Shares: 4,819,456**
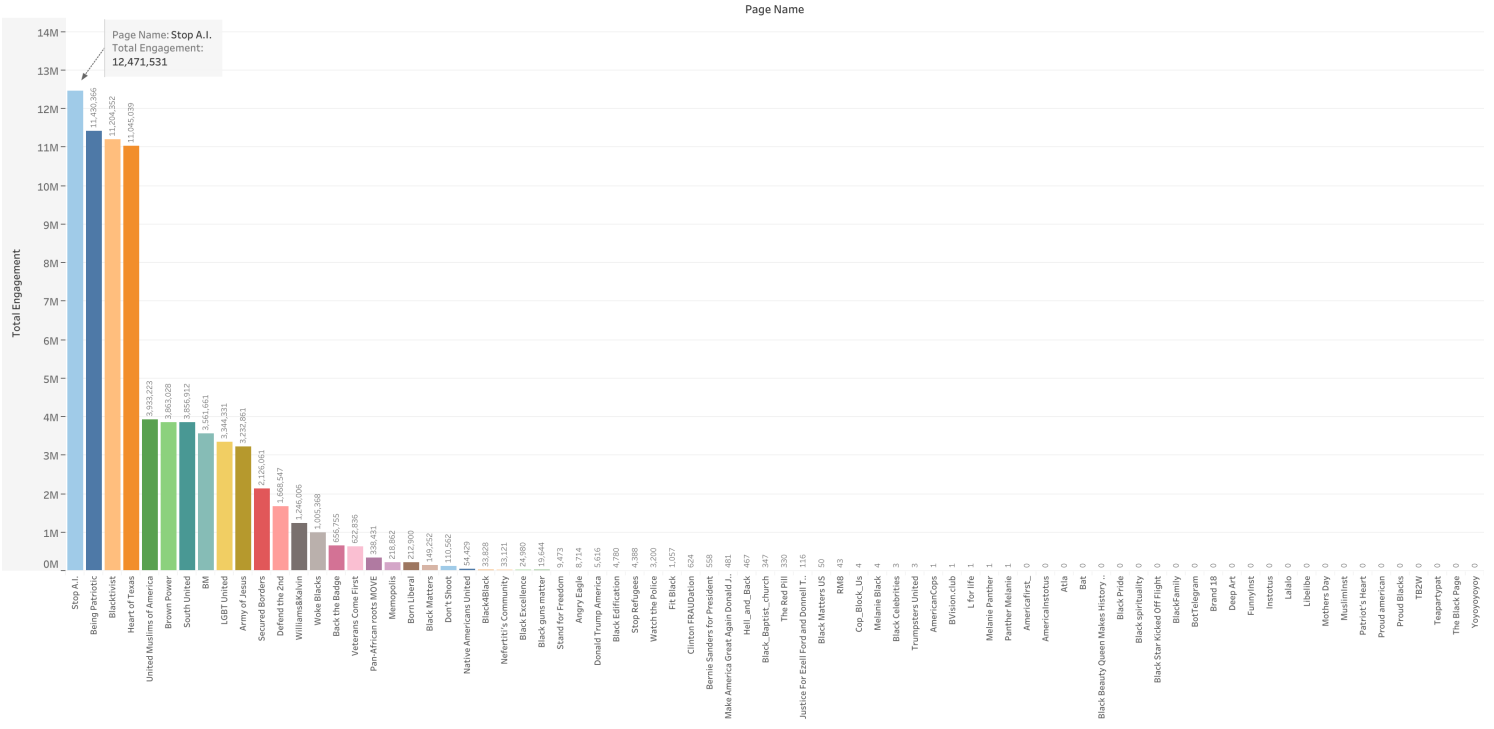
*Engagement Metrics for IRA Facebook Pages, illustrating the long tail in engagement.*

IRA Facebook Pages - Comparative Engagement Overview (Top 20)
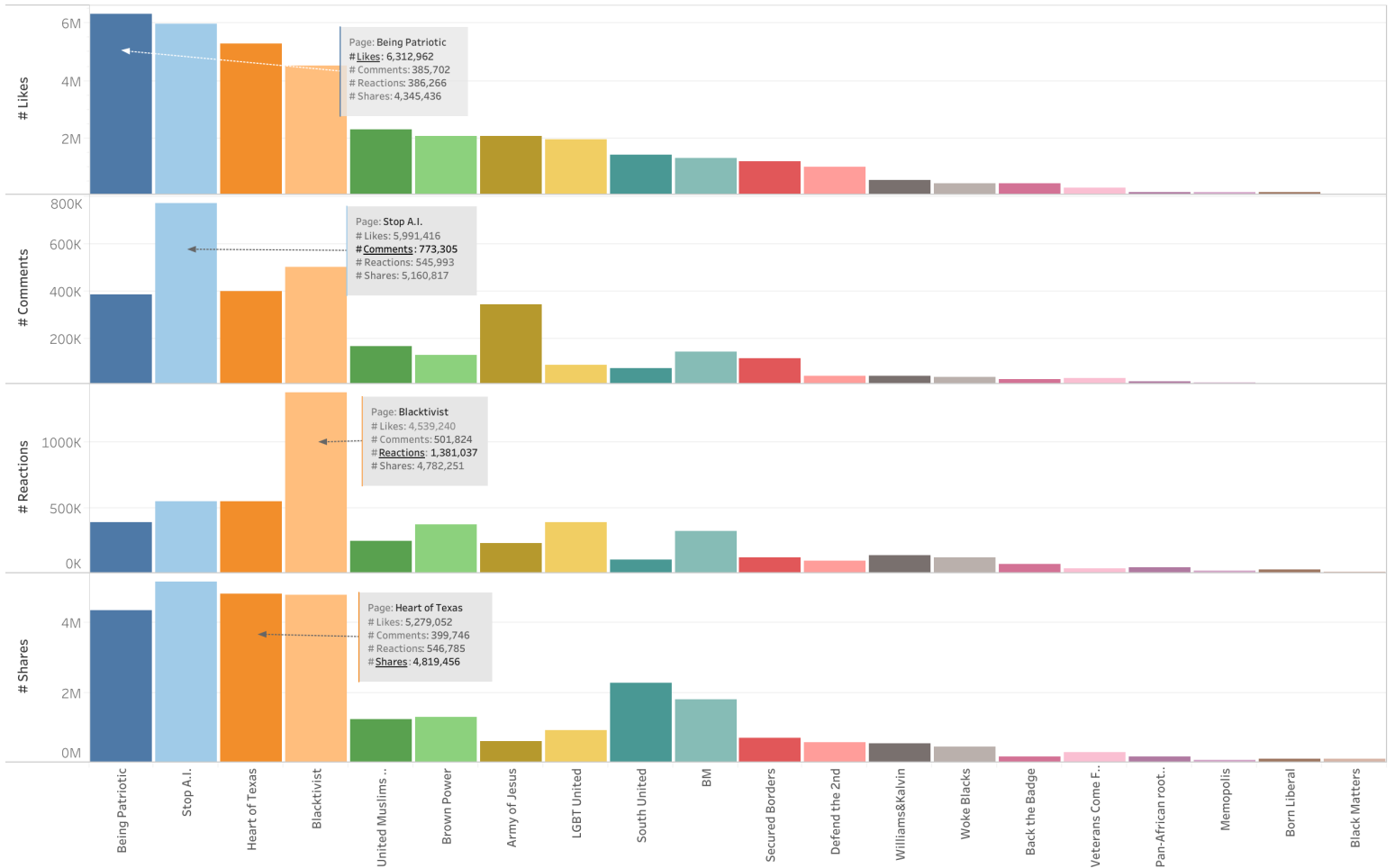


*Close-up of figure highlighting engagement types across the top 20 accounts*

Political content appeared in the IRA accounts on Facebook. The post with the most engagement that featured Donald Trump emerged after the election, on January 23, 2017. It was a conspiracy theory about President Barack Obama refusing to ban Sharia Law under the 1952 McCarran-Walters Act, encouraging President Trump to take action. It received 312,632 organic shares from the Stop All Invaders page. Searching for the meme on Facebook today, in November 2018, reveals that it was shared into several large Groups and Pages, presumably by authentic accounts, where it received hundreds of additional shares, comments, and engagements.



"On june 27, 1952, American government passed a law, called '1952 McCarran Walters act', that actually outlawed Sharia, but Obama never intended to enforce it or even let you know about it at all. Instead he started to import thousands of aggressive Muslim 'refugees', who refused to integrate and demanded to be allowed to live under sharia law instead of American constitution. Now it's within Donald Trump's authority to enforce that law and ban Sharia in every state across America. Do you want him to do that?" – Stop A.I., posted 1/23/2017

| # Likes | # Comments | # Reactions | # Shares | Total Engagement |
|---------|-----------|-------------|----------|------------------|
| 162850 | 93231 | 11014 | 312632 | 579727 |

The top post featuring Hillary Clinton was a conspiratorial post asserting a myriad of grievances related to theoretical voter fraud and alluding to an armed uprising. It was posted a month before the election.



"As I've said before, I'm really concerned if victory will go to Hillary Clinton due to voter fraud. If we can't trust the State Department, if we can't trust DOJ, if we can't trust the FBI, if we can't trust the DHS, hell we can't trust any division of our Federal Government, so it seems logical we can't put much trust in today's elections system.  And we see that Hillary is exhibiting the same cockiness that Obama did before he won in 2008/2012. As if she knows in advance that the results will put her in the White House. POTUS administration shamelessly exploit the rigged system, Democrats already have a great experience at this. Illegal aliens, dead people, incarcerated criminals or refugees who can't even speak English... They ALL work together to get Democrats over the top in these elections!! Are you outraged by this as much as I am? No wonder they trying to take away our guns - because Americans have had enough of this BS and if Killary wins there will be riots nationwide, not seen since the times of Revolutionary war!!" – posted on Secured Borders, 10/7/2016

| # Likes | # Comments | # Reactions | # Shares | Total Engagement |
|---------|-----------|-------------|----------|------------------|
| 19433 | 4543 | 871 | 77406 | 102253 |

The organic Facebook posts reveal a nuanced and deep knowledge of American culture, media, and influencers in each community the IRA targeted. For example, Turning Point USA and Pepe the Frog memes appear among the youthful alt-Right-targeted Memopolis and Angry Eagle Pages but don't appear on the boomer-conservative focused pages. The IRA was fluent in American trolling culture.



Right-leaning organic Facebook posts denigrated the U.S. media and intelligence community as untrustworthy, and diminished longstanding Conservative leaders such as Sen. Lindsay Graham and Sen. John McCain while elevating Donald Trump. Left-leaning pages similarly criticized mainstream, established Democratic leaders as corporatists or too close to neo-cons, and promoted Green Party and Democratic Socialist themes.

## Organic Activity: Instagram

The Instagram accounts followed similar Group alignments targeting Black, Left, and Right leaders. Many of the Facebook pages had associated Instagram accounts as part of the cross-platform co-branding strategy described earlier. Instagram was perhaps the most effective platform for the Internet Research Agency. Approximately 40% of its accounts achieved over 10,000 followers (a level colloquially referred to as "micro-influencers" by marketers); twelve accounts had over 100,000 followers ("influencer" level).

The top Instagram accounts had millions to tens of millions of interactions each.

IRA Instagram Engagement - Total Interaction for Top 25 Accounts

Handle: @blackstagram___
Follower Count: 303,663
# Comments: 452,184
# Likes: 27,831,239
Total Interactions: 28,283,423

Handle: @american.veterans
Follower Count: 215,680
# Comments: 211,971
# Likes: 18,265,913
Total Interactions: 18,477,884

Handle: @sincerely_black_
Follower Count: 196,754
# Comments: 279,821
# Likes: 13,514,845
Total Interactions: 13,794,666
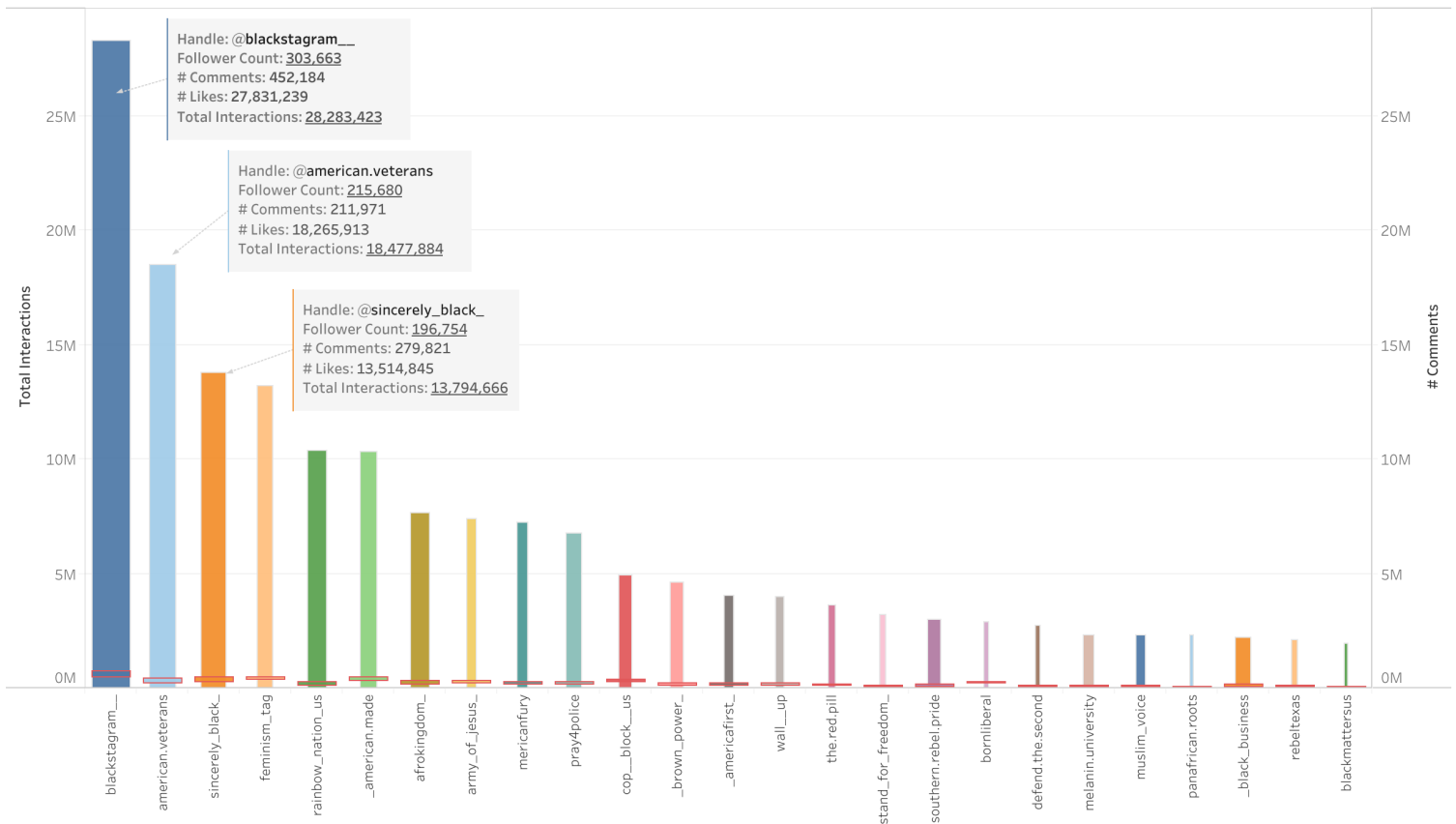


Total interactions (sum of likes and comments) for each Instagram account. The number of comments are shown as line on each bar for perspective. Color shows details about account name (@handle). Bar width shows the relative size of follower count. This graph shows the top 25 of 133 accounts ordered by decreasing total interations.

Below, a visualization of engagements for individual posts.

## IRA Instagram by Individual Post Engagement

_blacktivistt_
6/17/2017
Interactions: 169,952
"What a great idea for kids.
#Blacktivist#hotnews #black#africanam
erican#blacklivesmatter#blackpride#bla
ckandproud#dreamchasers#blackgirls#b
lackwomen#blackman#westandtogether
#proudtobeblack#blackbusiness#blacku
nity #blackis#melanin#icantbreath#neve
rforget #sayhername
#blackhistorymonth"

sincerely_black_
6/10/2017
Interactions: 85,985
Content Text: "True @melanin.city
@loveblackbodies_ #blackqueens
#blackexcellence #blackisbeautiful
#blackgirlmagic"

blackstagram__
6/11/2017
Interactions: 260,913
"What is your color? @expressiontees
@kahmune
#blackexcellence#blackpride#blackandproud
#blackpower#africanamerican#melanin#ebo
ny#panafrican#blackcommunity#problack#br
ownskin#unapologeticallyblack#blackgirl#bl
ackgirls#blackwomen#blackwoman"

feminism_tag
6/10/2017
Interactions: 132,555
"@expression_tees #feminismtag
#feminism #female #humanrights
#equality #freedom #love #support
#feminist #yesallwomen #womensrights
#heforshe #femen #equality #freedom
#feminist #woman #riot #support
#protest #gay #lesbian #equality
#motherhood #sextremism"



Circular mosaic graph of all inidividual Instagram posts, colored by @handle. Circle size shows the relative  number of total interactions for posts.  Circle rings are sorted starting on the outside based on account total interactions.

One unique account on Instagram that targeted a micro-group that was not segmented out separately on Facebook was the account @feminism_tag. It was the IRA's version of an intersectional feminist account, and posted extensively about feminism and social justice. The @feminism_tag account is unique in that it did not logo-brand its content; instead, it largely – perhaps entirely – repurposed other accounts' memes from the #feminism hashtag. For example, it drew extensively from the Instagram content of an inspirational t-shirt company, @expression_tees, mentioning it 136 times. The IRA may have co-opted the brand to run its own version of expressiontees as well; there is a dormant Twitter account here: https://twitter.com/expression_tees with some pro-Trump shares that seem incongruous with the Instagram account's content. On the political front, @feminism_tag – although perhaps the most likely to support Secretary Clinton based simply on the persona demographics – was a staunch supporter of Bernie Sanders, vehemently opposed to Hillary Clinton. The account actively worked to undermine traditional feminist narratives underpinning support for Secretary Clinton.
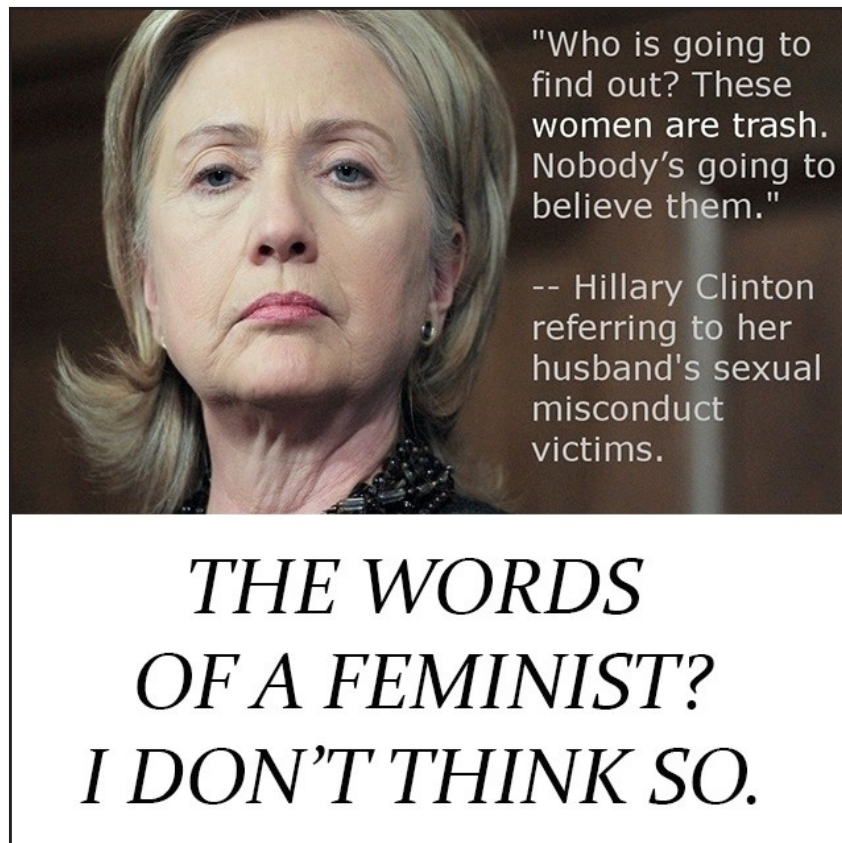
Another feature of Instagram platform activity was merchandise. Some of the merchandise promotion appeared to be with the goal of partnership building for audience growth, particularly in the Black community-targeted accounts. The hashtags #supportblackbusiness and #buyblack appeared frequently. Sometimes the IRA pages offered coupons in exchange for sharing content.



34301 @black4black
http://www.chloeandchad.com/
"We are happy to present you our partner Chloe and Chad . These products are all made by hand; they are all natural and are made when ordered, so they are as fresh as possible.   Using natural skin care is a great way to treat your skin right!   Enjoy a good discount with our promo! Just DM us!

(on FB: "Enjoy a good discount with our promo code after you share 3 posts from Black4Black or BM.")

Beyond promoting others' products, the IRA's own "merch" sites and products appeared in Instagram profile URLs as well as in their posts. Some of the merch, such as t-shirt sites for brand promotion, were similar to Facebook. Several of these t-shirt operations featured contentious political messaging likely designed to spark controversy in the real world. However, based on the image data provided there appear to have been other offerings unique to Instagram such as LGBT-positive sex toys and many variants of triptych and 5-panel artwork featuring traditionally conservative, patriotic themes.

Merchandise perhaps provided the IRA with a source of revenue – we have no sales data. Regardless, there are two other reasons to run merch sites: first, transactions enable the gathering of personal information: names, addresses, email address and phone numbers, potentially payment information. Second, time spent shopping on highly partisan sites could help identify committed audiences for Custom or Lookalike Facebook ad targeting.
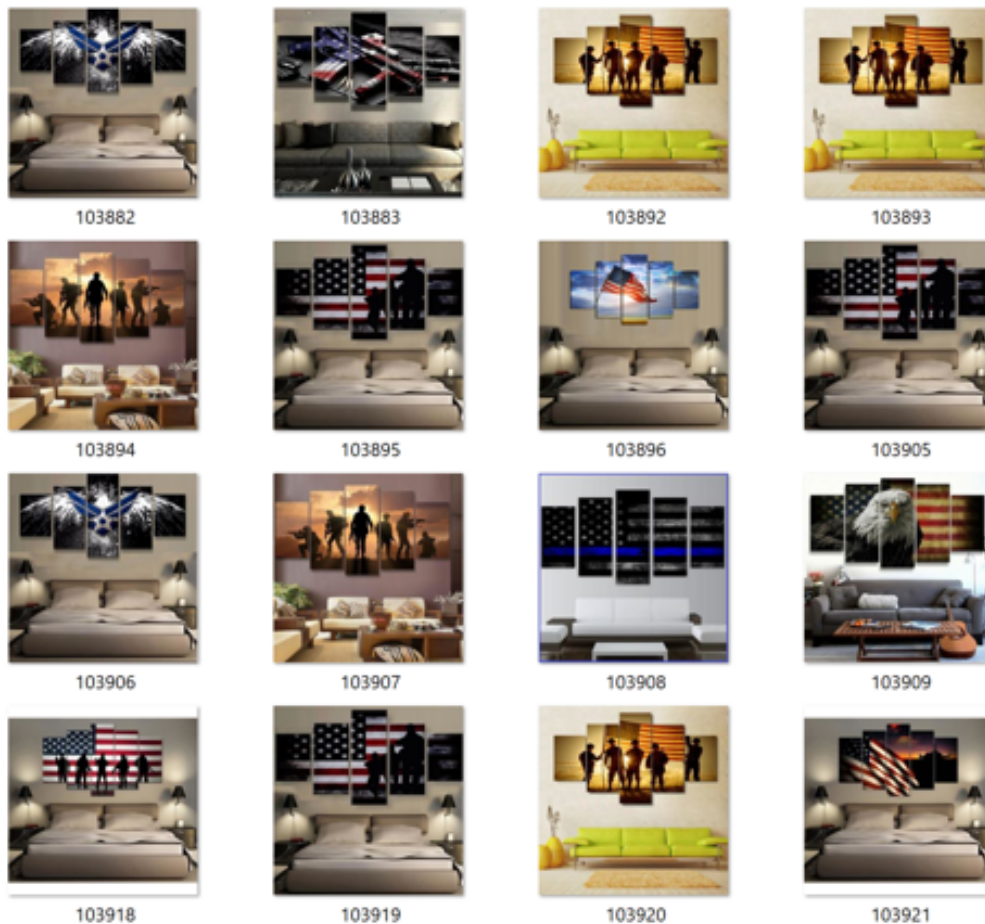
## Comparative Engagement: Understanding Facebook vs. Instagram

Summary statistics comparing Facebook and Instagram reveal that although the Facebook operation received more attention in the mainstream press, more content was created on Instagram, and overall Instagram engagement exceeded that of Facebook (including on a per-post basis) despite Facebook offering several additional ways to engage.

|  | First Post | Last Post | Number of Posts | Followers |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Facebook** | 1/10/2015 | 8/28/2017 | 61,483 | 3,334,202 |
| **Instagram** | 1/7/2015 | 10/26/2017 | 116,205 | 3,391,116* |

|  | Facebook | Instagram | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Likes** | 37,627,085 | 183,246,348 | 220,873,433 |
| **Likes/Post** | 612 | 1,568 |  |
| **Comments** | 3,339,752 | 4,017,731 | 7,447,483 |
| **Comments/Post** | 54 | 34 |  |
| **Reactions** | 5,188,182 | N/A | 5,188,182 |
| **Shares** | 30,350,130 | N/A | 30,350,130 |
| **Total Engagements** | 76,505,149 | 187,264,079 | 263,769,228 |

The Instagram and Facebook engagement statistics belie the claim that this was a small operation — it was far more than only $100,000 of Facebook ads, as originally asserted by Facebook executives. The ad engagements were a minor factor in a much broader, organically-driven influence operation. While a majority of IRA activity was unsuccessful, the top Facebook and Instagram accounts achieved hundreds of thousands of followers and millions of engagements. Instagram account @blackstagram_, perhaps their most successful property, was regularly getting upwards of 10,000 Likes on its posts by 2017.

Facebook estimated that the content was seen by 126 million users on Facebook, and 20 million Instagram users. This is because Shares on Facebook would have pushed the content into the feeds of other users on Facebook, and there is no comparable virality engine on Instagram. However, as researchers on our team have previously pointed out, the Instagram number is likely lower than it should be. Additionally, it is worth investigating whether Instagram users were substantially more likely to engage with the content to better understand how this material influenced and is likely to influence in the future.

The preceding statistics and themes roll up from the various tactics deployed by the IRA. The tactics vary in sophistication and volume and together manifest a complex effort. Below, we break out a variety of key tactics, the understanding of which must inform any successful attempt to remedy interference operations.

## Tactic: Targeting Americans

Propagandists need an audience, and paid advertising helped the Internet Research Agency facilitate audience growth. 73 different IRA-affiliated Pages and Instagram accounts were part of an ads operation that consisted of 3519 ads (video as well as still images). Ads were used to drive users to Like Pages, follow Instagram accounts, join Events, and visit websites. One ad appears to have linked to a music-related browser extension (also shared to Reddit) that may have captured access to browsing behavior and Facebook data.

The Facebook and Instagram ads, which were run by both Right and Left-leaning pages, as well as Black community-targeted pages, reinforced themes and messages to clearly-defined audiences. There were 1,852 ads that used interest-based targeting; of those, 808 included geographical targeting. The data set included mentions of three custom audiences — named "tr", "tesy", and "newtestaudit" — used in 31 ads, as well as Lookalike audiences that were used to find people similar to audiences who liked United Muslims of America, Defend the 2nd, and Being Patriotic. Most of the interest-based targeting focused on African American communities and interests.

Geographical targeting split into two strategies: first, targeting communities for local events and rallies. Second, targeting them with race- and police-brutality related content timed

following officer-involved shootings.

Some ads incorporated job titles. For example, one ad set in late Sept - early October 2016 geotargeted several regions in Pennsylvania, then added additional interest targeting to reach 18 to 65-year-olds with the interest "Donald Trump for President, Job title: Coal Miner". The goal was to galvanize support for then-candidate Trump and to hold a rally for miners. It secured 1225 impressions and 77 clicks with 876 RUB in spend.

| key | content | count |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Interests | Martin Luther King | 52 |
| Interests | African-American Civil Rights Movement (1954–68) | 43 |
| Interests | African-American history | 31 |
| Interests | Black Power | 18 |
| Interests | Gun Owners of America | 18 |
| Interests | Behaviors: African American (US) | 17 |
| Interests | Right to keep and bear arms | 17 |
| Interests | Black Panther Party | 16 |
| Interests | National Rifle Association | 16 |
| Interests | Black history | 15 |
| Interests | 2nd Amendment | 14 |
| Interests | Black History Month | 13 |
| Interests | Pan-Africanism | 12 |
| Interests | Concealed carry in the United States | 12 |
| Interests | African-American history or Malcolm X | 11 |
| Interests | Black is beautiful | 10 |
| Interests | Second Amendment to the United States Constit... | 10 |
| Interests | Pan-Africanism | 10 |
| Interests | My Black is Beautiful | 10 |

*Interest-based Facebook targeting*

Of the 1,852 ads that included Interest, 122 were targeted by gender, split into 32 female and 90 male. Women interested in "Black Economic Empowerment" and "Black Enterprise" were targeted with one set of ads; men in these categories were not targeted. Age was also a component in targeting: men starting at 15 were targeted with meme-related pages, men over 17 interested in the NRA and AR-15s were targeted with 2nd Amendment and gun rights content. Men over 45 were targeted specifically with pro-police Pages in support of law enforcement.

The only gender-specific political targeting was also focused on men, aged 18+ interested in "breitbart or conservative daily" and "Donald Trump for President".

| domain | currency | spend | impressions | clicks |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| blackmattersus.com | RUB | 163459.60 | 1327862 | 87837 |
| petitions.whitehouse.gov | RUB | 22451.55 | 48563 | 8109 |
| donotshoot.us | RUB | 20578.50 | 125179 | 2305 |
| meetup.com | RUB | 18671.31 | 36217 | 1114 |
| musicfb.info | RUB | 7023.96 | 21703 | 80 |
| represent.com | RUB | 4199.40 | 56317 | 4690 |
| black4black.info | RUB | 1735.75 | 8121 | 308 |
| dudeers.com | RUB | 1701.46 | 8227 | 274 |
| eventbrite.com | RUB | 1500.00 | 3880 | 151 |
| hilltendo.com | RUB | 1449.04 | 1143 | 34 |
| youtube.com | RUB | 1270.00 | 3703 | 184 |
| bonfirefunds.com | RUB | 399.98 | 596 | 29 |
| theguardian.com | RUB | 100.00 | 306 | 22 |
| edition.cnn.com | RUB | 88.92 | 164 | 9 |

*IRA ads targeting standalone, non-social-network domains*

The ads cross-promoted IRA Pages – for example, Instagram accounts @_born__black_ and Facebook Page Blackluive promoted Black Matters content, likely with the goal of increasing the perception of legitimacy and popularity for the media properties, and further encompassing targeted groups within the IRA's media mirage.

The ads also directed users to outside sites owned by the IRA. Blackmatters.us, Donotshoot. us, black4black.info, dudeers.com, hilltendo.com, musicfb.info were IRA-created domains.

Bonfirefunds, another outside site, is a custom t-shirt making platform that was used by Black Matters. Represent.com sold custom shirts for BM, Black4Black, Fit Black, Nefertiti's Community, Pan-African Roots, Williams & Kalvin, Blacktivist, and Woke Blacks. The merchandise strategy, discussed in the Instagram section in this report (that is where it was most prevalent), enabled fundraising, brand building, and the collection of addresses and potentially credit card information.

Meetup.com was used to organize black self-defense classes for the Fit Black/Black Fist IRA accounts.

The vast majority of the ads achieved substantially higher clickthrough rates (CTR) than typical Facebook ads; according to Wordstream Advertising Benchmarks, the average CTR for Facebook across all industries in .9% (as of August 2018). Although the IRA ran its ads earlier, from 2015-2017, 1182 of the 1306 unique ads in the dataset provided by Facebook (90%) that had documented spend achieved a CTR higher than .9%. This suggests that the Internet Research Agency had well-defined audiences, and reached them with resonant content. This perception is reinforced by the October 2018 Department of Justice indictment, which highlights the degree to which the IRA prioritized understanding the interests and communication styles of groups it targeted.



*A simple ad for the Back the Badge page had the highest spend and obtained the most clicks*

Despite having high CTRs, however, the overall ad spend was small. Approximately two dozen Facebook and Instagram accounts achieved audience sizes over 100,000 followers; however, no data was provided to indicate what percentage of followers came from ad conversions, engagement with organic content, or suggestions from the recommendation engine. Back the Badge, for example, had 110,912 followers per the data provided (and, in Figure 10, we see that at some point it appears to have had more Likes); it had one successful high-spend ad (Figure 11) but overall only 73,151 clicks across its ad portfolio. It did, however, have 155,514 Shares and an additional 500,392 social engagements across its posts, some of which we can reasonably assume were served up in the News Feed of those users' friends.
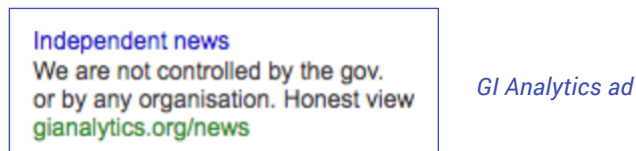
As a counter-example, Brown Power displayed the opposite: 694,633 clicks across its ads account, 1,300,901 shares and 2,601,004 additional social engagements…but only 204,331 followers on the Facebook Page per the data provided. High CTRs often indicate effective ad content and targeting, but one metric can't tell the whole story. Facebook acknowledged that the recommendation engine had promoted IRA pages, but noted in a response to a Senate inquiry that the recommendation engine was "not the primary way" that people found the pages.

| Ad Copy | Impressions | Clicks | CTR | Spend | Currency |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Community of people who support our brave Police Officers. Back The Badge | 1,334,544 | 73,063 | 5.5% | 110,588.00 | RUB |
| Together we are a shining beacon of faithfulness! Join us and light your way to Jesus! Army Of Jesus | 368,065 | 28,137 | 7.6% | 89,081.10 | RUB |
| Heritage, not hate. The South will rise again! South United | 511,224 | 40,134 | 7.9% | 78,357.30 | RUB |
| They fought for our freedom, now its our time to fight for their rights! | 112,737 | 15,163 | 13.4% | 72,735.10 | RUB |
| Join us if you know it's just a car, NOT A SYMBOL OF HATE South United | 300,815 | 16,587 | 5.5% | 65,705.80 | RUB |
| Brown Power is a platform designed to educate, entertain and connect Chicanos in the US. | 968,768 | 56,405 | 5.8% | 59,571.40 | RUB |
| A page to unit all Muslim people living in the USA! | 103,079 | 4,491 | 4.4% | 59,453.80 | RUB |
| Staying Woke,building-up our communities,uplifting our people. Join us! Woke Blacks | 752,179 | 33,444 | 4.4% | 58,193.60 | RUB |
| We are proud to be black and stand for our community! Join to end the racism in the US. | 371,295 | 16,442 | 4.4% | 55,609.60 | RUB |
| We are not against police, we against police brutality! | 226,262 | 9,657 | 4.3% | 54,729.50 | RUB |

*Top ten IRA ads by spend, and associated click-through rates. Using 67.07 RUB = 1 USD (average 2016 exchange rate), that is $1649 USD spent on highest-spend ad.*

Alphabet also provided a collection of ads data in the form of 38 folders, each for what appears to be an Adwords account number, containing a total of 655 ads. It is unclear from the data provided how Alphabet made their attribution. Given the shared management and the proximity of the Internet Research Agency to the Federal News Agency (FAN), which at the time of the operation was headquartered in the same building at 55 Savushkina, there is a possibility that the ads that promoted long-form sites were actually the purview of FAN's pro-Kremlin propaganda operation rather than the IRA. (This may be a distinction without a difference.)

Regardless of whether the IRA attribution was correct, AdWords accounts were used to promote blogs and news-type sites that offered opinion and analysis pieces in line with Kremlin agenda. The text of the ads featured headlines about President Barack Obama's perceived poor performance and the media's purported hiding of it, Russia's positions on Syria, European migrant concerns, and crises of democracy (e.g. messages about rethink democracy, anarchy is another way, etc).

Independent news
We are not controlled by the gov.
or by any organisation. Honest view
gianalytics.org/news

*GI Analytics ad*

GI Analytics was the most-promoted site, with 199 ads touting their unbiased coverage of civil rights, global security, and regional analysis. OnePoliticalPlaza.com (46), Blackmattersus (31), and Russia-direct.org (15) were the other 3 domains featuring more than 10 ads. The Black Matters ad content focused on race relations, and Russia-direct.org content included ads on Syria.

The Twitter-provided data set contained text ads for RT (Russia Today), which Twitter has since barred from advertising on its platform. The data did not indicate spend, nor suggest that any other IRA Twitter accounts leveraged Promoted Tweets.

## Tactic: Asset Development

A few press investigations have alluded to the IRA's job ads. The extent of the human asset recruitment strategy is revealed in the organic data set. It is expansive, and was clearly a priority. Posts encouraging Americans to perform various types of tasks for IRA handlers appeared in Black, Left, and Right-targeted groups, though they were most numerous in the Black community. They included:

• Requests for contact with preachers from Black churches (Black_Baptist_Church)
• Offers of free counseling to people with sexual addiction (Army of Jesus)
• Soliciting volunteers to hand out fliers
• Soliciting volunteers to teach self-defense classes
• Offering free self-defense classes (Black Fist/Fit Black)
• Requests for followers to attend political rallies
• Requests for photographers to document protests

- Requests for speakers at protests
- Requests to protest the Westborough Baptist Church (LGBT United)
- Job offers for designers to help design fliers, sites, Facebook sticker packs
- Requests for female followers to send photos for a calendar
- Requests for followers to send photos to be shared to the Page (Back the Badge)
- Soliciting videos for a YouTube contest called "Pee on Hillary"
- Encouraging people to apply to be part of a Black reality TV show
- Posting a wide variety of job ads (write for BlackMattersUS and others)
- Requests for lawyers to volunteer to assist with immigration cases

Recruiting an asset by exploiting a personal vulnerability – usually a secret that would inspire shame or cause personal or financial harm if exposed – is a timeless espionage practice. So is the tactic of infiltrating protest movements. The IRA attempted both, even going so far as to create help hotlines for people struggling with sexual behavior, creating an opportunity to blackmail or manipulate these individuals in the future.



*Figure on the left posted 3x by Army of Jesus on Facebook, and 3x on Instagram, with slightly different visuals, in March and April of 2017. Received 5436 Likes and 284 comments. Figure on the right in LGBT United.*

Investigative reporting and Department of Justice indictments show that the IRA had some success with several of these human-activation attempts. The comment and engagement numbers in the data indicate that people did respond to these posts, and shared the posts to their networks as well. We have no information beyond the numbers, though; there's no text to clarify the direction the comments went. It's unclear if investigative agencies or the platforms themselves reached out to the people who did comment and likely engaged.

This tactic will be increasingly common as platforms make it more difficult to grow pages and buy ads with fake personas. It will be extremely difficult to detect. The number of organic posts that reveal attempts to engage with Americans reinforces our conviction that influence operations are unlikely to be managed without information sharing between the public and private sector.
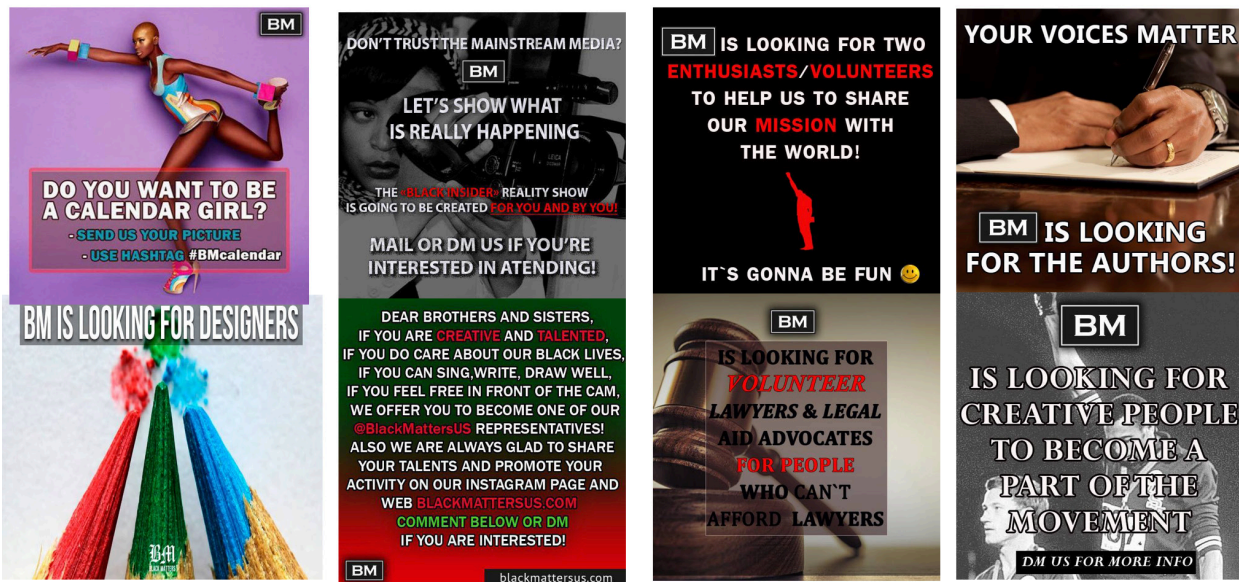
## Tactic: Cross-Platform Brand Building

The Internet Research Agency operated like a digital marketing agency: develop a brand (both visual and voice), build presences on all channels across the entire social ecosystem, and grow an audience with paid ads as well as partnerships, influencers, and link-sharing. They created *media mirages*: interlinked information ecosystems designed to immerse and surround targeted audiences. The IRA developed their content using digital marketing best practices, even evolving their Facebook Page logos and typography over time. The degree of these efforts has not previously been understood from the scattered discovery of ads and memes; this data set of organic content reveals it.

To illustrate the commitment to a social ecosystem-wide presence, consider one of their midsize efforts, Black Matters.
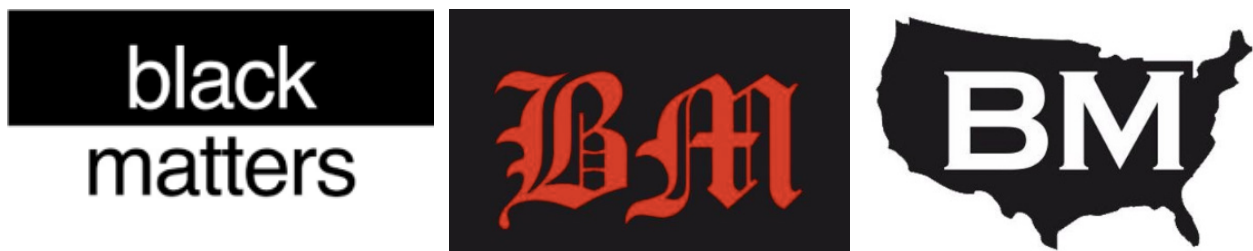


Black Matters consisted of a website and an extensive network of linked social profiles. The IRA launched the property on June 8, 2015 with a post on a Facebook Page they initially called "BM" (facebook.com/blackmatters). Other social presences for Black Matters included:

- Google+: Blackmatters
- Google Ads: 31 ads for blackmattersus.com
- YouTube: 95 videos
- Facebook: fb.com/blackmatters as well as fb.com/blackmatters.mvmt
- Facebook Ads
- Facebook Stickers
- Instagram: @blackmattersus, 28,466 followers and 1,929,855 engagements
- Twitter: 5841 followers
- Soundcloud: "SKWAD 55" podcast
- Tumblr: SKWAD55

The Black Matters Facebook Page explored several visual brand identities, moving from a plain logo to a gothic typeface on Jan 19th, 2016. On February 4th, 2016, the person who ran the Facebook Page announced the launch of the website, blackmattersus.com, emphasizing media distrust and a desire to build Black independent media. Black Matters ran ads; some directed people to follow them on social media, others linked out to the site. On February 12, 2016 the admin announced they'd reached 100,000 subscribers to the site. We examined CrowdTangle data for Black Matters (not included in the provided data set). That data reveals that influencers with large followings, such as Color of Change, Unapologetically Black, and YourAnonNews, shared Black Matters articles to their own Facebook Pages. The articles were also shared into popular subreddits.

The Internet Archive's oldest capture of blackmattersus.com shows the gothic BM logo, and links to an Instagram account: @blackmattersus. The Instagram account amassed 28,466 followers and 1.9 million engagements. The first Instagram post appears to have been in 2016, based on mentions of the account by a more established and popular IRA Instagram property, @blackstagram_, although the Facebook-provided data set shows a first post date in 2017.

The @blackmatters Twitter account was relatively small, with 5841 followers, but the IRA leveraged other Twitter accounts, as well as IRA accounts on Reddit and Pinterest, for SEO, discovery, and audience-growth purposes. The brand maintained presences on all primary social networks and created multimedia content such as YouTube videos and a Soundcloud podcast.



*The blackmattersus.com launch announcement banner*

On August 19th, 2016 the original Black Matters Facebook Page ceased posting, and on August 23rd, 2016 appears to have rebranded and renamed itself again, changing the URL to facebook.com/blackmatters.mvmt, with a new logo featuring the letters inside the US map. BM continued to post on the .mvmt Page until June 28, 2017, when it ceased posting for two months before switching back to the Black Matters name and resuming posts on August 23, 2017. Press coverage suspecting the Page of being a Russian propaganda operation did not emerge until October 2017, so it's unclear why the Page managers made these changes.

Black Matters content focused on building community – and sowing division – in real life as well as online. Many posts solicited protestors, writers, activists, lawyers, and photographers to attend the property's numerous events. They posted job ads for real American writers to create content for blackmattersus.com – a clear example supporting the hypothesis that the IRA engaged in narrative laundering.

The goal of working with real Americans is to eliminate the detection and exposure risk of inauthentic personas.

Black Matters created numerous posts to push for 1:1 engagements with people who followed its accounts, looking for everything from designers to immigration lawyers.  They asked for user-submitted photos of Black women, purportedly for a calendar. They posted about the creation of a reality show on November 17, 2016, looking for contestants: "All that is required of you is to send us a video, depicting the problems facing our people."
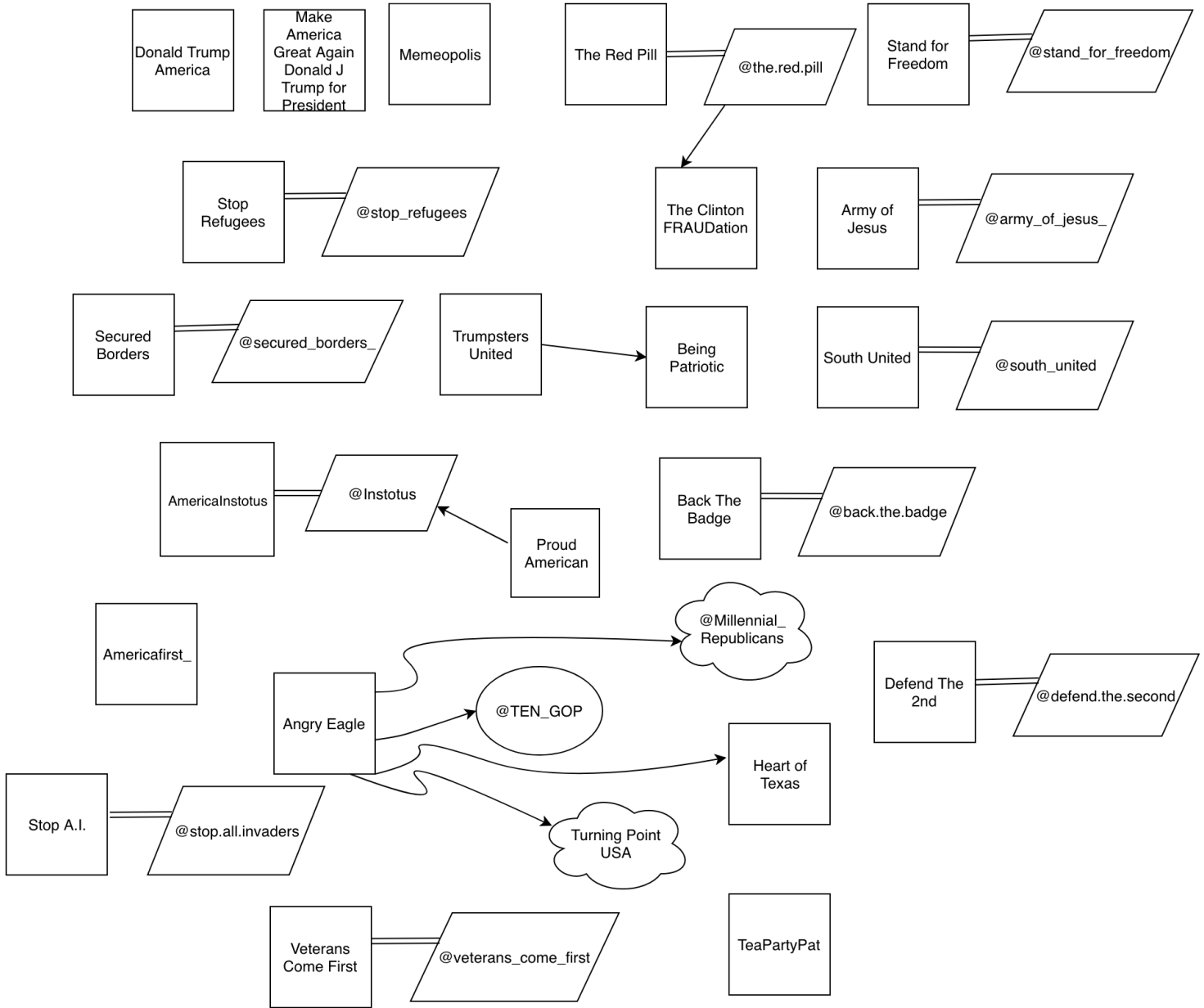


*Black Matters job ad*



*Black Matters Facebook stickers by IRA*
*Facebook persona "Melanie Panther",*
*still available for download*

## Tactic: The Media Mirage

The case study of Black Matters illustrates the extent to which the Internet Research Agency built out *one* inauthentic media property, creating accounts across the social ecosystem to reinforce its brand and broadly distribute its content. To further contextualize this, Black Matters was one property among 30 Facebook Pages that targeted the Black community. Using only the data from the Facebook Page posts and memes, we generated a map of the cross-linked properties – other accounts that the Pages shared from, or linked to – to highlight the complex web of IRA-run accounts designed to surround Black audiences.

An individual who followed or liked one of the Black-community-targeted IRA Pages would have been exposed to content from dozens more, as well as carefully-curated authentic Black media content that was ideologically or thematically aligned with the Internet Research Agency messaging.



*A "media mirage" of interlinked Facebook Pages and Instagram accounts targeting Black Americans. Squares are IRA-owned Facebook Pages, parallelograms are IRA-owned Instagram accounts. Cloud shapes indicate non-IRA-attributed accounts including authentic Black media. A larger version with easily-readable page names is available online at newknowledge.com/IRAfigures*

In the diagram on the previous page, IRA Facebook Pages are represented as squares, IRA-associated Instagram accounts are represented as parallelograms, and the arrows pointing from the squares to other shapes indicate that the Page shared that account's content. The 'cloud' shapes represent other Black Media accounts that have never been formally attributed to the Internet Research Agency; they appear in the diagram if they were shared more than 10 times by known IRA accounts. Many of them appear to be real, authentic Black Media properties. However, several of the most interlinked, such as @17thsoulja4, appear to have been deleted or taken down by Instagram. Significant memetic content overlap on those accounts (discovered via the Internet Archive, regram services, and Pinterest) suggests that they may have been unacknowledged IRA creations as well.

There is only minimal interlinking among the Facebook Pages targeting the Right and Left-leaning audiences. The diagram on the next page shows the Right-leaning Facebook Pages (squares), their associated Instagram accounts (parallelograms), and one notable Twitter account (oval) that was leveraged on Facebook. There is far less cross-promotion of IRA-created media brands, and far less active, attributed sharing of authentic Right-leaning media content. Turning Point USA was one exception; the IRA shared brand-marked Turning Point memes. It also took memes that originated on Turning Point and rebranded them with IRA Facebook Page brand marks.

Ultimately, the purpose of the Black community-targeted media mirage appears twofold: first, to grow audiences across all of their Black-targeted accounts simultaneously, so that that users who followed one of their accounts would follow others and therefore be exposed to repetitive messaging. Second, to ingratiate their Pages with the authentic Black media community so that they in turn were promoted by legitimate Black cultural entities; this would have helped the IRA increase the perception of their accounts as trusted brands. That strategy was not replicated in the Left or Right-leaning Facebook Page clusters.

Donald Trump America

Make America Great Again Donald J Trump for President

Memeopolis

The Red Pill — @the.red.pill

Stand for Freedom — @stand_for_freedom

Stop Refugees — @stop_refugees

The Clinton FRAUDation

Army of Jesus — @army_of_jesus_

Secured Borders — @secured_borders_

Trumpsters United → Being Patriotic

South United — @south_united

AmericaInstotus — @Instotus

Proud American → @Instotus

Back The Badge — @back.the.badge

@Millennial_ Republicans

Americafirst_

Angry Eagle

@TEN_GOP

Heart of Texas

Defend The 2nd — @defend.the.second

Stop A.I. — @stop.all.invaders

Turning Point USA

Veterans Come First — @veterans_come_first

TeaPartyPat

We conducted a similar analysis starting from the Instagram accounts, to get a sense of how users might have been exposed to other IRA narratives and properties after following one Instagram account. Using the text mentions in the Instagram post copy, we explored relationships between accounts that regrammed or mentioned each other at least 10 times. Distinctive clusters emerge here as well, including a far deeper commitment to interlinking Right-targeted accounts than was observed on Facebook. The IRA used terms such as "partners" in copy on Right-targeted accounts, suggesting that their account's followers should follow a broader ring. Occasionally they would include what appear to be authentic Right-oriented Instagram accounts in these partner rings. It is unclear to what extent these partners knew what they were participating in. In at least one case, a domestic Facebook Page related to an Instagram account that was regularly regrammed by the IRA (@unclesamsmisguidedchildren) was taken down for inauthentic distribution; there is no indication that USGC's owners knew of their Instagram account's longstanding history of being promoted by Russian trolls.
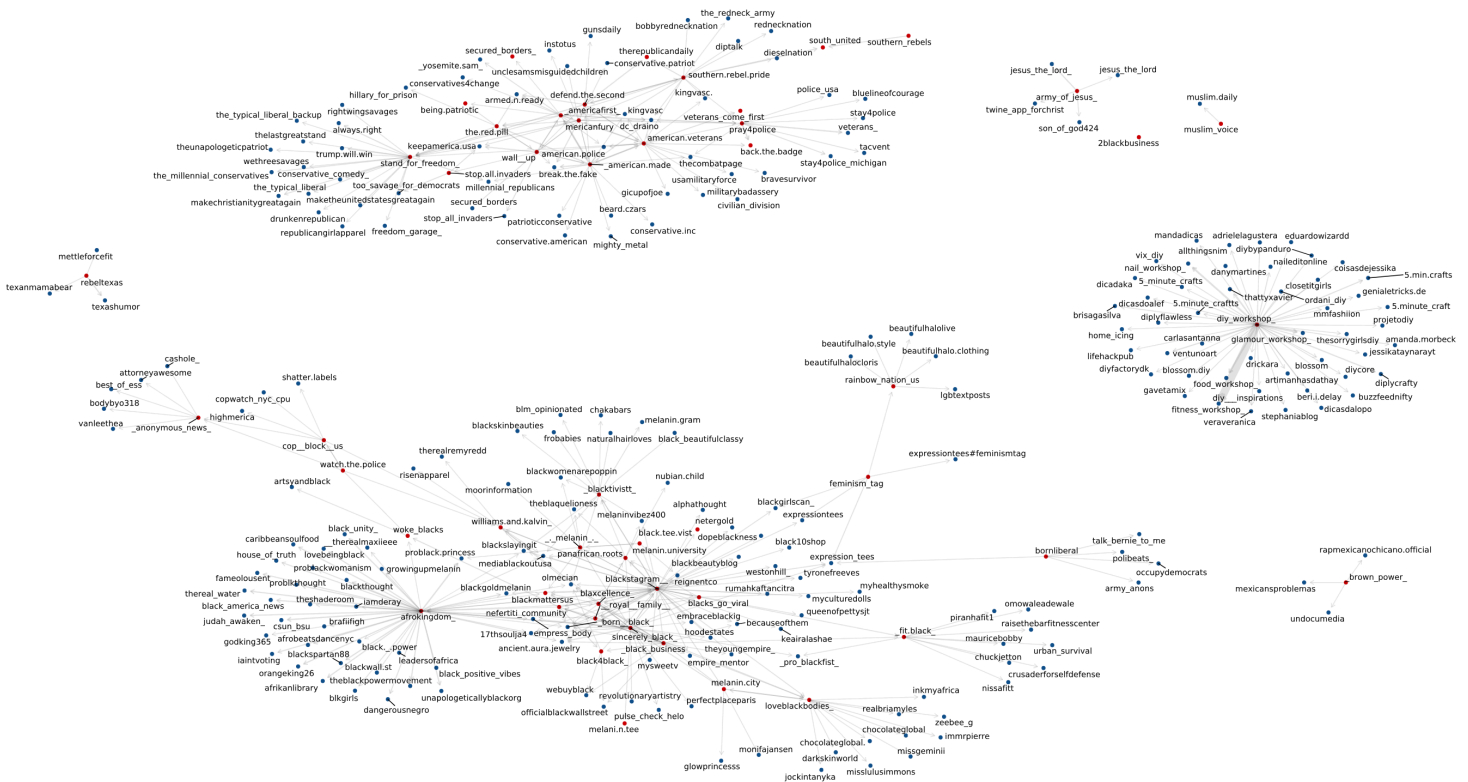


*A visualization of the network graph obtained by examining mentions and regrams by IRA Instagram accounts. Red dots indicate a known, attributed IRA account, blue dots denote accounts mentioned or regrammed more than 10 times.*

Finally, we conducted a third mapping of the media mirage by analyzing the #hashtag topics that the IRA Facebook and Instagram Pages mentioned most frequently. The IRA Instagram accounts deployed hashtags prolifically, beginning with "#followback" appeals when an account was first created. They frequently used dozens of hashtags per post, a standard digital marketing tactic to improve discoverability and facilitate audience growth. These hashtag networks reveal the terms that bridge communities: #jesus linked Black community content to Right-leaning Army of Jesus, #love was used by both Army of Jesus and Left-leaning Instagram account @feminism_tag. They also show the topics that are clear points of contention, as they were keyword links between communities but deployed in opposition to each other. The Right, Black, and Left-leaning Instagram accounts all used #police and #cop, for example, with diametrically opposed content.

None of the data sets provided by the Facebook, Twitter, or Google included comments, and it is impossible to gauge how many followers the pages attracted – or how many disagreements they provoked – through the strategic use of either interlinking, or divisive hashtags. We still know very little about what audience acquisition methods were most effective.



*A visualization of the network graph obtained by examining hashtags leveraged by IRA Instagram accounts. Red dots indicate a known, attributed IRA account name, blue dots denote hashtags mentioned at least 1000 times.*

## Tactic: Memetics

The Internet Research Agency's content relied extensively on memes, a popular format for the transmission of information – and propaganda – across the social ecosystem. Memes can take the form of pictures, icons, lyrics, catchphrases; they are a sort of 'cultural gene', part of the body of society, transmitted from person to person, often mutating. While many people think of memes as "cat pictures with words", the Defense Department and DARPA have studied them for years as a powerful tool of cultural influence, capable of reinforcing or even changing values and behavior.

Memes turn big ideas into emotionally-resonant snippets, particularly because they fit our information consumption infrastructure: big image, not much text, capable of being understood thoroughly with minimal effort. Memes are the propaganda of the digital age. The IRA extensively studied its American targets. It both created and appropriated highly relevant memes for each target audience, sharing from other pages and encouraging its own audiences to reshare to their personal accounts as well.

Memes are powerful because they can be easily recontextualized and reshared, and act as "in-group" cultural signifiers. In the image on the following page, IRA Facebook Pages Secured Borders and Stop A.I. shared a meme branded with their own page logo. Image search traces the meme as far back as a forum post from 2014 (presumably from a real American participant). This ease of repurposing makes it harder to identify malign pages; the content looks – and in fact is – largely identical to content shared by real people who hold a common point of view. A large part of the 100,000+ pieces of IRA visual content in the data set provided to SSCI were repurposed popular memes.

Posted by Dee on November 7, 2014 at 5:23am in Illegal Alien Invasion

View Discussions





Secured Borders



Stop A.I.

Our research team carried out both textual extraction using OCR as well as clustering of visually similar images to understand messaging and identify memetic tactics. We examined the shift in visual themes weekly across the 2016 Twitter data (helpful for insights into what topics they were sharing, since many of the t.co links did not properly unroll) and Facebook Page images. A thorough manual review of the approximately 67,000 Facebook Page memes and 100,000+ Instagram memes was also conducted.

This March 9, 2016, South United meme was the most-shared post on Facebook and had 986,203 total engagements, the most for a single piece of content.





This Being Patriotic homeless veterans meme on September 8, 2016 had 723,750 total engagements on Facebook.
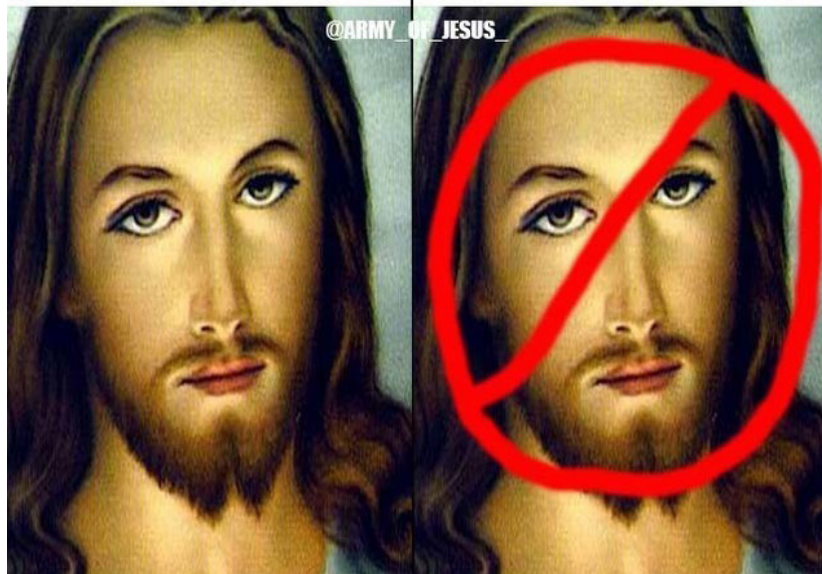


The IRA recycled memes within Pages and accounts, reusing top performers and thematically-relevant content. The Jesus image above was the most-Liked Instagram content created by the IRA prior to Election 2016. Posted on March 2, 2016 by @army_of_jesus_, it garnered 87,750 likes. The second most-Liked post is the exact same image from the same account – this time with 84,469 likes, shared 3 months later on June 13, 2016. This Jesus meme also had the greatest number of comments of IRA pre-election Instagram content, with 1,989 and 2,177 comments, respectively.

All the tones are nude! Get over it!

@blackstagram__

This meme, originally created as an advertisement for a Black-owned leather goods company named Kahmune, appears to have been reposted by @blackstagram__ (303,663 followers) with the text "What is your color? @expression_tees @kahmune #blackexcellence #blackpride #blackandproud #blackpower #africanamerican #melanin #ebony #panafrican #blackcommunity #problack #brownskin #unapologeticallyblack #blackgirl #blackgirls #blackwomen #blackwoman"

It had the highest total engagements on Instagram as well as the most likes (254,179) and comments (6734). It was posted on June 11, 2017, per the Instagram data set; the @kahmune account posted it as part of what appeared to be a product launch, branded with their own handle, on June 12, 2017. It is possible that this was a time zone or other issue with the data set. It is also possible that this was one of what appear to be many examples of the IRA promoting real businesses that engaged with them. @blackstagram__ went on to mention @kahmune products as an example of Black-owned, pro-Black businesses on three other occasions, including the next day (June 12, 2017).

The IRA pages and Instagram accounts rebranded memetic images for their own unique Page. Sometimes they also used identical text content in the posts across pages.
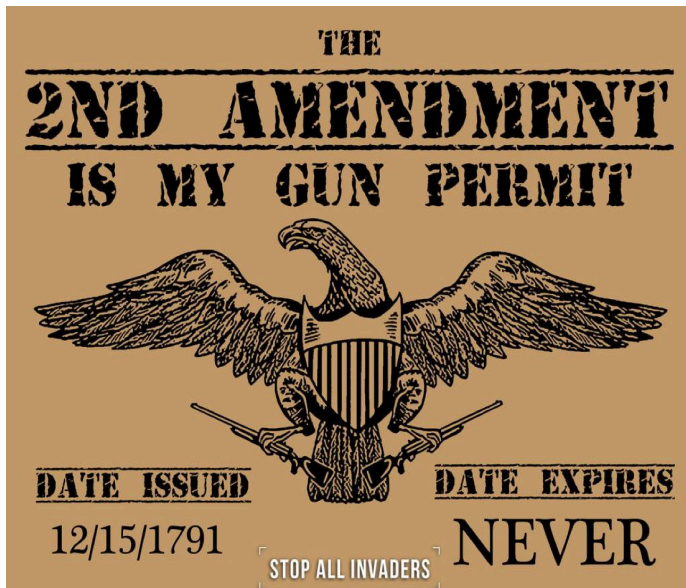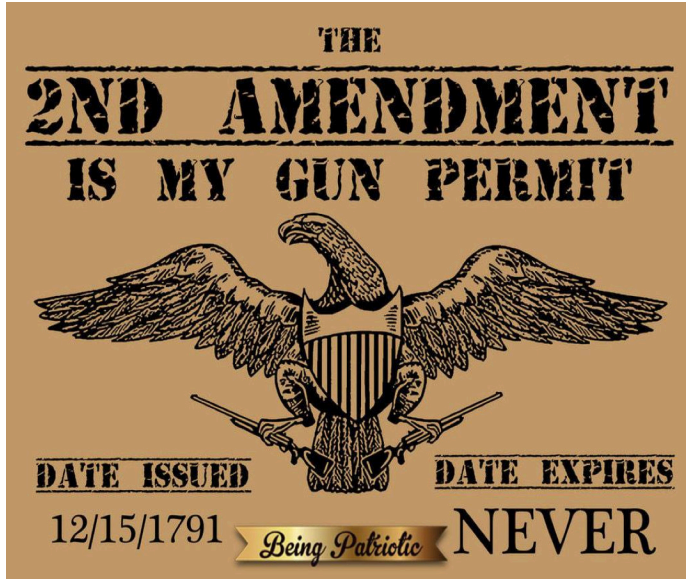


It is unclear whether the Pages that repurposed the same base memes were run by the same IRA employee; file system images from an IRA hack reveal that they had a content management infrastructure and folders of image files, much as a digital agency would.

The Pages also shared each other's memetic content, particularly from Instagram in the form of regrams, sometimes from Tumblr, to crosslink audiences and increase follower growth. This was done very regularly on the Pages targeting the Black community (see mentions network graph earlier in this report).

Pages stuck to themes, incorporating visuals that reinforced in-group dynamics. This is an example of visual image clustering applied to the Facebook Page "Heart of Texas". Heart of Texas visual clusters included a wide swath of shapes of Texas, landscape photos of flowers, and memes about secession and refugees. Further examination of the memes surfaced a collection of 2nd Amendment and anti-immigration memes.

In another example, the more explicitly political Page "Being Patriotic" featured many memes containing photos of candidates. There was a cluster of Hillary Clinton memes, a cluster of Donald Trump memes, and other memes related to GOP politicians.

## Impact: Memetic Spread

When memetic warfare experts examine the success of a meme campaign, they look at its propagation, persistence, and impact. Propagation is how far it spreads – does the meme move into new communities? Does it spread to new channels, platforms, or forms? Persistence is how long the meme is part of community conversation – does the meme stick in the popular zeitgeist for a long period of time, or is it short-lived? And finally, impact – does the meme change hearts and minds?
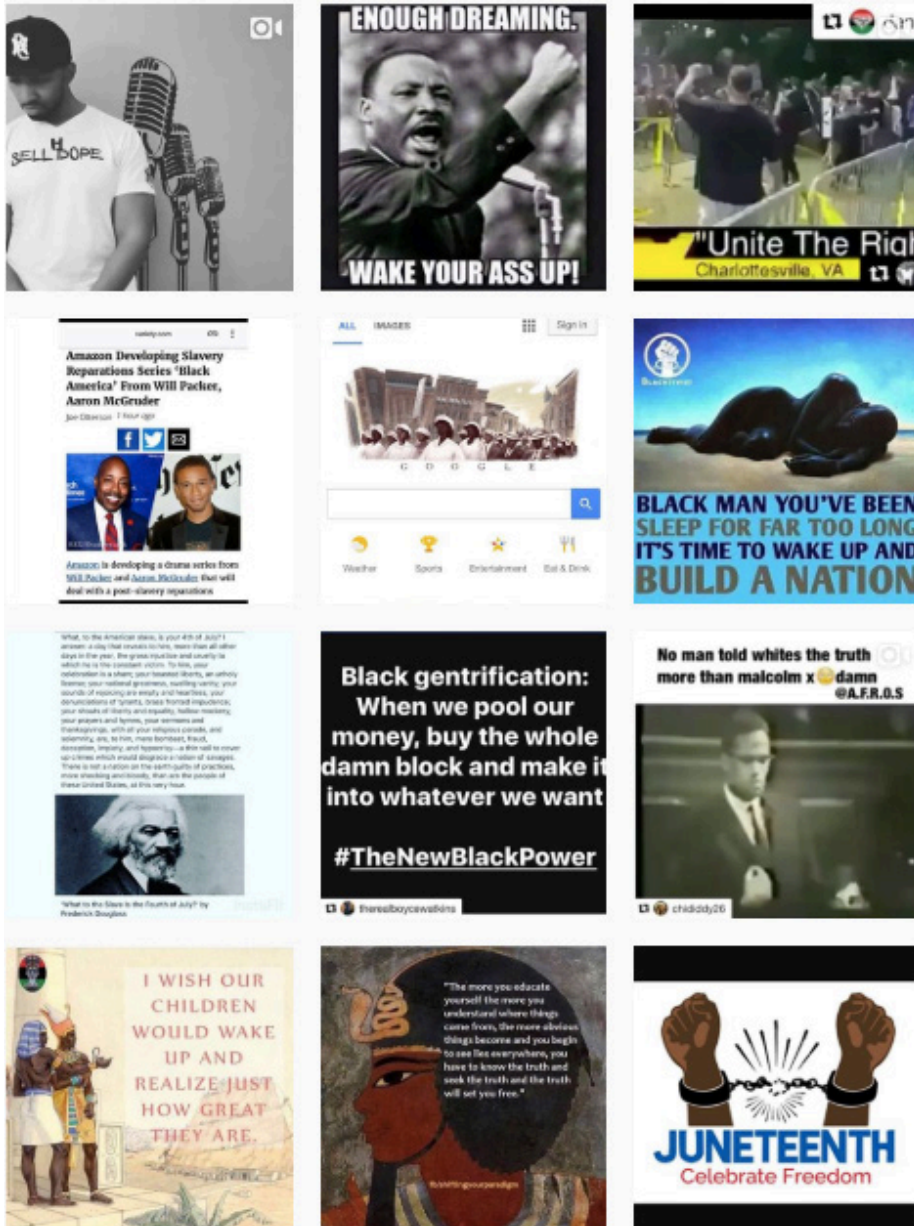


*IRA memes from Blacktivist (2nd row, right) and Nefertiti's Community (bottom left) on a non-IRA account*

When we talk about the "impact" of the Russian influence operation, most conversations focus on whether the IRA operation *swayed voters* and swung the Presidential Election in 2016. The answer is, we can't tell from this data.

But in terms of whether or not the operation was a success: thousands of the memes propagated far and wide, and they continue to persist in the targeted communities to this day. The extent to which they *changed*, rather than merely reinforced, minds is difficult to answer. Facebook and Instagram have additional data that could help answer that question. They know how engaged the Page audiences were, what the comments said, and to what extent user behavior changed after engaging with the content.

Evaluating this operation purely based on whether it definitively swung the election is too narrow a focus. The operation started prior to 2015 and the explicitly political content was a small percentage.

These memes do continue to spread within the communities they were targeting, particularly content by lesser-known or quietly-removed pages. One type of impact that merits further research is the extent to which these memes continue to shape culture and conversation in targeted communities.

## Tactic: Inflecting a Common Message for Different Audiences (Syria)

We see with content about Syria a tactic to persuade audiences similarly by tailoring details of the messaging to align with disparate and ideologically diverse audiences. Regarding Syria, everyone got a similar take, but the nuance was tailored for each group.

There were over three thousand posts about Syria in the Instagram and Facebook data sets alone, beginning in early February 2015 and continuing through the duration of the operation — including, based on our assessment of 2018 election activity, into the present day. The narratives support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and frame Russian operations in the country as a defense of the legitimate president and a determination to avoid the country collapsing into the hands of ISIS. The Russian government's foreign policy talking points on the Syrian conflict appear in English language content targeting their U.S. audiences; their Russian-language and Arabic-language accounts, such as the account AsdiqaRussiya, targeted audiences outside of the U.S. as well. They also amplified aligned personalities; on YouTube, one of the accounts featured a video from the SyrianGirlPartisan channel.

The IRA's focus on Syria began years ago. Adrian Chen wrote about it in his June 2015 article "The Agency", describing the narrative as one that was so important that it leapt from the realm of troll Facebook pages to an IRL photojournalism exhibit called Material Evidence, promoted with the #MaterialEvidence hashtag. In the collection of pages targeting Americans, material about Syria was presented to all groups in the ways that would be most relevant to their other interests. For the Left-leaning accounts, the narratives about Syria were framed as antiwar opposition, objections to U.S. involvement in another country's affairs.

The Instagram account @feminism_tag was one of the most prolific pushers of this narrative, running with Syrian stories dozens of time, racking up half a million Likes. The posts focused on a combination of appealing to the human element – the suffering of Syrian mothers and children – and reinforcing the idea that the cause of the suffering was U.S. government air strikes.
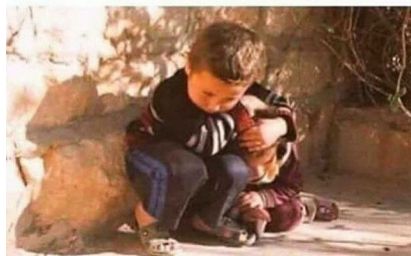


*Some of @feminism_tag's popular images, pulled from other popular accounts*

The Black-targeted pages presented very similar narratives, advocating that the U.S. stop paying attention to Syria so that it could solve its own domestic problems. "Who really thinks that American attacks will stop the use of gas in Syria in the future? It sounds rediculous. In fact, the U.S. threats increase, rather than reduce, the chances of a new chemical weapons attack. They bomb the other country for no reason and don't pay attention to their own problems, for example, in #Flint."



Several Black-targeted Instagram accounts shared the same memes of Syrian children as @feminism_tag; they chose to focus on the similarities between Black and Syrian children, using the hashtags #blacklivesmatter and #syrianlivesmatter alongside each other.

On the Right-leaning pages, the content ranged from false political narratives (Barack Obama and/or Hillary Clinton founded ISIS) to refugee stories. Citizens of the United States should advocate for the U.S. to get out of Syria, the posts suggested, so that the Syrian refugee floods would stop. There were also posts advocating for more attention to ISIS and less to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad:



> *ISIS is our real enemy! Not the legitimate leader of Syria Bashar al-Assad. Not a single Syrian has ever done any harm to the US. We should fight the real threat - ISIS. It seems someone just wants Assad to lose power, so Syria gets taken by ISIS and these jihadists become even stronger than now. There's a lot of dirty shit going on here! What do you think?*
>
> *#veteranscomefirst #veterans_us #Veterans #Usveterans #veteransUSA #SupportVeterans #Politics #USA #America #Patriots #Gratitude #HonorVets #thankvets #supportourtroops #semperfi #USMC #USCG #USAF #Navy #Army #military #godblessourmilitary #soldier #holdthegovernmentaccountable #RememberEveryoneDeployed #Usflag #StarsandStripes*

When President Donald Trump took office but continued to order air strikes on Syria, the IRA accounts that were traditionally supportive of the President blamed the offense on General McMaster and began to darkly hint at a Republican-establishment conspiracy.



*Conservative journalist Mike Cernovich says Current National Security Adviser Herbert Raymond "H. R." McMaster is manipulating intelligence reports given to President Donald Trump. McMaster is plotting how to sell a massive ground war in Syria to President Trump with the help of disgraced former CIA director and convicted criminal David Petraeus, who mishandled classified information by sharing documents with his mistress. As NSA, McMaster's job is to synthesize intelligence reports from all other agencies. President Trump is being given an inaccurate picture of the situation in Syria, as McMaster is seeking to involve the U.S. in a full-scale war in Syria. The McMaster-Petraeus plan calls for 150,000 American ground troops in Syria. General McMaster is a man who worked closely all his life with such odious figures as John McCain, Lindsey Graham and David Petraeus. There was a big intrigue at the headquarters of Donald Trump's supporters, and now Trump himself is a victim of a large-scale conspiracy: in the beginning, General Michael Flynn was dismissed, then Steve Bannon was ousted from the National Security Council, then Trump unexpectedly announces that he will strike Syria with missiles. I'm sure Trump is a victim of cunning and dirty manipulations from the political establishment that wants to draw America into another senseless military campaign. Trump promised to "drain the swamp", I hope he himself has not yet drowned in it.*

# Tactic: Narrative Repetition and Dispersal

The repurposing of the same story across accounts in the media mirage was a deliberate tactic, deployed to reinforce key themes and create the perception that certain messages or opinions were widespread and worthy of attention. This tactic was especially common in the IRA-created media mirage surrounding the Black community. The posts below show one example in which the IRA used the real human-interest story of an inspirational young Black American who made the national news for a device he invented, and his accompanying GoFundMe. The story was promoted at both the start and completion of the GoFundMe. The Black community-targeted Facebook pages and Instagram accounts repurposed the story, each putting a slightly different tone on the content to make it fit their brand ("these are stories of Black children the media don't want you to see", "White people invent tools for killing, this Black child is inventing a tool for saving lives.") BM went so far as to create their own article about it for the blackmattersus website, and Williams & Kalvin made a YouTube video to tell the story. We have elected not to show the associated memes because these, like thousands of other images in the data set, feature real Americans unwittingly used as propaganda collateral in a foreign influence operation. However, we wanted to call attention to this tactic to illustrate the co-opting of emotionally resonant human-interest stories as well as the coordinated dispersion of chosen narratives.

| Page Name | Share URL | Content Text | # Shares | # Likes | # Reaction | # Comments | Post Date/Time |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| @afrokingdom_ | | The kid is only 10 years old, but he is a genius! Let me introduce you Meet Bishop Curry V, outstan | NA | 1587 | | 32 | 2017-02-02 01:03:18 PDT |
| Williams&Kalvin | | "The kid is only 10 years old, but he is a genius! Let me introduce you Meet Bishop Curry V, outstan | 165 | 207 | 60 | 14 | 2017-02-02 07:24:51 PDT |
| Woke Blacks | | "Meet Bishop Curry V from Texas, he's working on a device that could help prevent children from c | 223 | 299 | 87 | 13 | 2017-02-03 02:37:07 PDT |
| @woke_blacks | | Meet Bishop Curry V from Texas, he's working on a device that could help prevent children from dy | NA | 531 | | 10 | 2017-02-03 03:02:45 PDT |
| Black Excellence | | "10-year-old Bishop Curry V was saddened by the death of a baby of his neighbors. The child was le | 4 | 6 | 3 | 0 | 2017-02-06 03:06:55 PDT |
| @blaxcellence_ | | 10-year-old Bishop Curry V was saddened by the death of a baby of his neighbors. The child was left | NA | 169 | | 6 | 2017-02-06 07:49:14 PDT |
| Nefertiti's Community | | "A brilliant 10-year-old black boy is trying to prevent hot car baby deaths with his new invention. | 4 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 2017-02-17 07:24:11 PDT |
| @nefertiti_community | | A brilliant 10-year-old black boy is trying to prevent hot car baby deaths with his new invention. T | NA | 347 | | 5 | 2017-02-17 08:36:17 PDT |
| Williams&Kalvin | | "White people can easily invent tools for killing, but black people can invent something really usef | 5 | 11 | 1 | 0 | 2017-02-22 02:33:53 PDT |
| Blacktivist | | "10-YEAR-OLD BISHOP CURRY RAISED $20,000 TO HELP DEVELOP HIS DEVICE TO STOP HOT-CAR DEA | 65 | 144 | 46 | 0 | 2017-06-16 04:21:54 PDT |
| @_blacktivistt_ | | 10-YEAR-OLD BISHOP CURRY RAISED $20,000 TO HELP DEVELOP HIS DEVICE TO STOP HOT-CAR DEA | NA | 146 | | 6 | 2017-06-17 09:04:39 PDT |
| @blaxcellence_ | | Little inventor appeared to be successful! He raised over $20,000 via GoFundMe page. His patent i | NA | 635 | | 8 | 2017-06-18 11:56:05 PDT |
| BM | https://blackmattersus.com | "As the hot summer months are rapidly approaching, a 10-year-old from McKinney, Texas, wants t | 61 | 155 | 24 | 7 | 2017-06-18 14:52:33 PDT |
| @_black_business | | The Oasis would respond to rising temperatures by emitting cool air and use an antenna to signal p | NA | 1689 | | 21 | 2017-06-27 01:02:43 PDT |

## Tactic: Repurposing and Re-Titling Pages and Brands

One entirely new finding, based on the organic Instagram data set, is that the IRA appears to have pivoted existing accounts to focus on new topics. One example of this is can be seen in the data set that Facebook attributed to @army_of_jesus_, which appears to be one of the earliest Instagram accounts created (first post date January 7, 2015). Based on the content and dates, it appears that @army_of_jesus_ was originally created as first a Kermit the Frog, and then The Simpsons, meme account. The Instagram data set attributed a large collection of Kermit memes with a brand mark reading "@naughtykermit" to the account @army_of_jesus_. The @naughtykermit Instagram account no longer exists, and NaughtyKermit was the name of an IRA tumblr account (which at some point was repurposed to be "skullofjustice").

A large collection of Simpsons images is similarly attributed to @army_of_jesus; there is a transitional post on August 27, 2015 that reads, "Hey guys! I, Homer Simpson, am taking Kermit's page. He was messing with cops too much and finally he got some... punishment, ke-ke!  Okay let's have some fun! WOO-HOO!  #Simpsons #Homer #HomerSimpson #HomerSays #News #FunnyNews #Politics #USA".

Army of Jesus' Instagram operator did not find Jesus until 915 posts in: on January 15, 2016 the account rebooted yet again with a collection of posts simply featuring the hashtags "#freedom #love #god #bible #trust #blessed #grateful"; the data for the related Facebook page indicates a first post date of September 23, 2016. It's likely that the IRA decided that the audience engagement on Simpsons and Kermit content just wasn't there, but didn't want to abandon the followers it had amassed; the data set did not include follower growth over time, nor comments, so we have no insight into the audience response.

It's possible that the Instagram team that provided the data made an incorrect account attribution, or that @army_of_jesus_ was simply repeatedly sharing @naughtykermit content. However, this happens elsewhere in the data set as well. Another instance is an account called @liberty_rising that spent over a year sharing humor and anti-Clinton meme content branded with "@dummy_news" and "facebook.com/NewsOfTheStupid" before switching to a very different brand mark with new Ron Paul memes, and a strong Libertarian alignment reflective of the attributed name.

The early efforts on the @army_of_jesus_ account, whatever its name was at the time, provide a glimpse into the use of hashtags for early audience-building. The accounts were already getting dozens of Likes, so it is also possible that these accounts were older and the data provided began in early January 2015 because that's precisely what SSCI asked for and the platforms didn't volunteer earlier content.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| army_of_jesus_ | There is no shortage of products in the US, there is a huge amount of the population that doesn't have the means to purchase food in the quantities that would ensure their normal functioning. | 54 | 0 | 2015-01-13 |
| army_of_jesus_ | Gustav Klimt - The Kiss #kermit #kermitthefrog #fun #lol #themuppets #themuppetshow #follow #followforfollow #followback #instantfollowback #follow4follow #followforfollow #likeforlike #li | 72 | 4 | 2015-01-13 |
| army_of_jesus_ | Everyone should know #kermit #kermitthefrog #fun #lol #themuppets #themuppetshow #follow #followforfollow #followback #instantfollowback #follow4follow #followforfollow #likeforlike #li | 88 | 1 | 2015-01-13 |
| army_of_jesus_ | #kermit #kermitthefrog #fun#lol #themuppets #themuppetshow #follow#followforfollow #followback #instantfollowback#follow4follow #followforfollow #likeforlike #like #usa#american #amer | 73 | 1 | 2015-02-11 |
| army_of_jesus_ | #kermit #kermitthefrog #fun#lol #themuppets #themuppetshow #follow#followforfollow #followback #instantfollowback#follow4follow #followforfollow #likeforlike #like #usa#american #amer | 74 | 2 | 2015-02-11 |
| army_of_jesus_ | #kermit #kermitthefrog #fun#lol #themuppets #themuppetshow #follow#followforfollow #followback #instantfollowback#follow4follow #followforfollow #likeforlike #like #usa#american #amer | 62 | 0 | 2015-02-12 |
| army_of_jesus_ | #kermit #kermitthefrog #fun#lol #themuppets #themuppetshow #follow#followforfollow #followback #instantfollowback#follow4follow #followforfollow #likeforlike #like #usa#american #amer | 92 | 8 | 2015-02-13 |
| army_of_jesus_ | #kermit #kermitthefrog #fun#lol #themuppets #themuppetshow #follow#followforfollow #followback #instantfollowback#follow4follow #followforfollow #likeforlike #like #usa#american #amer | 110 | 10 | 2015-02-14 |
| army_of_jesus_ | #kermit #kermitthefrog #fun#lol #themuppets #themuppetshow #follow#followforfollow #followback #instantfollowback#follow4follow #followforfollow #likeforlike #like #usa#american #amer | 57 | 0 | 2015-02-14 |
| army_of_jesus_ | #kermit #kermitthefrog #fun#lol #themuppets #themuppetshow #follow#followforfollow #followback #instantfollowback#follow4follow #followforfollow #likeforlike #like #usa#american #amer | 58 | 3 | 2015-02-15 |
| army_of_jesus_ | #kermit #kermitthefrog #fun#lol #themuppets #themuppetshow #follow#followforfollow #followback #instantfollowback#follow4follow #followforfollow #likeforlike #like #usa#american #amer | 114 | 8 | 2015-02-15 |
| army_of_jesus_ | #kermit #kermitthefrog #fun#lol #themuppets #themuppetshow #follow#followforfollow #followback #instantfollowback#follow4follow #followforfollow #likeforlike #like #usa#american #amer | 124 | 4 | 2015-02-16 |
| army_of_jesus_ | #kermit #kermitthefrog #fun#lol #themuppets #themuppetshow #follow#followforfollow #followback #instantfollowback#follow4follow #followforfollow #likeforlike #like #usa#american #amer | 79 | 0 | 2015-02-16 |
| army_of_jesus_ | #kermit #kermitthefrog #fun#lol #themuppets #themuppetshow #follow#followforfollow #followback #instantfollowback#follow4follow #followforfollow #likeforlike #like #usa#american #amer | 57 | 1 | 2015-02-17 |
| army_of_jesus_ | #kermit #kermitthefrog #fun#lol #themuppets #themuppetshow #follow#followforfollow #followback #instantfollowback#follow4follow #followforfollow #likeforlike #like #usa#american #amer | 63 | 0 | 2015-02-17 |

Another example of what appears to have been an account repurposing is the @_anonymous_ news_ Instagram account. This account's repurposing pattern is of note because it may indicate that the IRA had yearly reviews or yearly metrics goals. For almost exactly one year, May 28, 2015 to May 27, 2016, the account posted local news about Jackson, Mississippi. On May 27, 2016, it went dormant. On November 9, 2016, it respawned as a Black Guns Matter account; there was an IRA-run Black Guns Matter Facebook page (as well as a real Black American gun rights advocate who currently runs a business with the same brand name), and the data set did not include any other attributed "@blackgunsmatter" Instagram accounts. The content attributed to @_anonymous_news_ during the period from November 9, 2016 to May 31, 2017 is extremely similar to the Black Guns Matter Facebook content.

On May 31, 2017 the account went dormant again until July 13, 2017, when it appears to have respawned yet again as a Guy-Fawkes-mask-branded account posting content that included

hashtags such as #truther, #hactivist, and #sheeple. The turnover on the account at nearly the exact date each year is curious and indicates they may have purchased the account the first time, or potentially that it was considered a failure upon annual review and changed up.

## Tactic: Manipulating Journalism

The IRA impersonated state and local news enterprises on Twitter and Instagram. There were approximately 109 Twitter accounts masquerading as news organizations. The 44 U.S.-focused Twitter accounts amassed 660,335 followers between them, with an average of 15,000 followers each. Many of these accounts were automated and behaved nearly identically, posting links to articles and local content dozens of times per day. The incorporation of local news into their strategy was possibly undertaken because Pew and others have found that Americans have a higher degree of trust in local news.

A look at the metadata associated with the Twitter newsbots reveals that despite their names, they were created with obviously Russian device information (beeline_russia as the carrier) and were tweeting from overseas IPs. Several others (not pictured) used Google Voice accounts.

| | | | IP | User-Defined Geolocation | Carrier | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Baltimore0nline | online.baltimore@gmail.com | Eastern Time (US & Canada) | 125.25.121.120 | Thailand | beeline_russia | Breaking news, weather, traffic and more for Baltimore. DM us anytime. RTs |
| Atlanta_Online | atlanta.online1@gmail.com | Eastern Time (US & Canada) | 108.174.63.166 | United States, NY | beeline_russia | Breaking news, weather, traffic and more for Atlanta and Georgia. DM us any |
| OaklandOnline | online.oakland@gmail.com | Pacific Time (US & Canada) | 181.72.249.129 | Chile | beeline_russia | Breaking news, weather, traffic and more for Oakland. DM us anytime. RTs nc |
| OnlineCleveland | cleveland.online1@gmail.com | Central Time (US & Canada) | 113.170.100.132 | Vietnam | beeline_russia | Breaking news, weather, traffic and more for Cleveland. DM us anytime. RTs |
| OnlineMemphis | memphis.online1@gmail.com | Central Time (US & Canada) | 178.90.86.28 | Kazakhstan | beeline_russia | Breaking news, weather, traffic and more for Memphis and Tennessee. DM u |
| StLouisOnline | online.st.louis@gmail.com | Eastern Time (US & Canada) | 125.207.173.241 | Japan | beeline_russia | Breaking news, weather, traffic and more for St. Louis. DM us anytime. RTs nc |
| WashingtOnline | online.washington@gmail.com | Eastern Time (US & Canada) | 113.190.174.116 | Vietnam | beeline_russia | Breaking news, weather, traffic and more for Washington. DM us anytime. RT |

A handful of Instagram accounts similarly tried to present news and images as if they were local U.S. news agencies: @my_baton_rouge and @new_york_live and @baltimore.blackvoice presented current events and information about the cities and communities they purported to be from.

This tactic was not limited to U.S. audiences; of the 109 news-related Twitter accounts, 58 were "Novosti" accounts that tweeted news related to regions in Russia. One of the most popular was @NovostiCrimea, which had 107,011 followers. In addition, Russian-language news and propaganda sites such as Sputnik embedded tweets from different IRA-linked Twitter accounts. This is not unexpected given the IRA's early mission of propagandizing to Russian citizens.

Despite their dedication to impersonating media, the IRA simultaneously worked hard to undermine trust in *real* media across Black, Left, and Right-targeted accounts. This took two forms. The first tactic was to advocate for the creation of niche community media, which was positioned in opposition to unrepresentative (across a myriad of axes) mainstream media. The second approach was to actively undermine trust in journalism.

A sub-thread of note was the dozens of posts extolling the virtues of Wikileaks and Julian Assange that the IRA placed across Black, Left, and Right-leaning audiences on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The Instagram accounts and Facebook pages produced memes teasing new Wikileaks drops (such as via IRA account @therepublicandaily, which positioned itself as a Republican news source) and reinforcing Assange's reputation as a whistleblower with a commitment to journalistic freedom. The Twitter accounts joined in as well. There were a small number of Facebook and Instagram posts about Assange, reinforcing his reputation as a freedom fighter, on October 4th, 2016 – a few days before the major Podesta email dump occurred. Given the GRU involvement in the DNC hack with Wikileaks, it is possible that the IRA was tasked with socializing Wikileaks to both Right and Left audiences. Prior to October 4th, the last post about Assange had been in early September 2016. Once the emails were released, there were many more tweets and Facebook posts about them.

HILLARY WHEN WIKILEAKS WRITES ABOUT REPUBLICANS: THEY ARE FREEDOM FIGHTERS!

HILLARY WHEN WIKILEAKS WRITES ABOUT DEMOCRATS: WE MUST DRONE ASSANGE!



WHISTLEBLOWERS ARE HEROES

ASSANGE, MANNING AND SNOWDEN HAVE MADE OUR SOCIETY MORE OPEN THEY MUST BE AWARDED NOT PROSECUTED



"Clinton leaks could come as early as next week," Assange says

RD THE REPUBLICAN DAILY

## Tactic: Amplify Conspiratorial Narratives

The Internet Research Agency amplified a myriad of conspiracy theories on all platforms they prioritized. The greatest breadth and repetition of these narratives was on Twitter. Thousands of conspiratorial tweets were predominantly advanced or amplified by the right-wing personas, and included topics such as pseudoscience conspiracies (vaccines, chemtrails), paranormal activity and aliens, the "globalist" agenda (explicitly anti-Semitic angles were present), and domestic political conspiracies such as QAnon, Pizzagate, and the murder of Seth Rich.

With the exception of one anti-vaccine Instagram post, Facebook and Instagram had no pseudoscience conspiracy content, no QAnon, and no Pizzagate. There are, however, dozens of posts blaming George Soros for a myriad of complaints across dozens of the Right-targeted Instagram accounts and Facebook Pages; these do not display the degree of explicitly anti-Semitic vitriol or harassment that appeared in the tweets. Domestic political conspiracies were present on Facebook and Instagram – the Seth Rich murder conspiracy was presented to both Right and Left-leaning audiences. On the Left, it was accompanied by an appeal to trust Julian Assange.

The Black-targeted groups were presented with distinct historical conspiracies – ones intended to reinforce cultural identity as well as create discord. Three that appeared repeatedly (all debunked on Snopes) were the idea that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was Black, that Shakespeare's plays had been written by a Black woman, and that the Statue of Liberty had originally been made in the likeness of a Black woman that the U.S. government rejected, prompting France to send the current Lady Liberty as a whiter-looking replacement. These posts generated enough audience engagement that they were reposted multiple times by the same accounts across the duration of the operation.

## Tactic: Sow Literal Division

The Internet Research Agency has been implicated in the promotion of secessionist and insurrectionist movements in several countries; there is no sowing of division quite so pronounced as attempting to create a literal territorial split. In Europe, this took the form of involvement in Brexit and Catalonian independence efforts. In the United States, it was #Texit and #Calexit, as well as active support for the Bundy ranch and Malheur Reserve standoffs.

The vote in favor of Brexit, which happened on June 23, 2016, was subsequently used by the IRA to promote its Texas Secession initiatives. Brexit narratives were shared on the Instagram account @rebeltexas as a justification for #Texit, as well as on @_americafirst_and @mericanfury to encourage American isolationism and a retreat from involvement in global affairs. The Facebook Page Heart of Texas posted about secession with some regularity, and coordinated real-world pro-secession demonstrations across the state using Facebook Events.

The #Calexit hashtag was pushed hundreds of times by @mericanfury beginning on Feb 2, 2017 – that account's content was reposted by @wall_up, @_americafirst, @_american.made, and @defend.the.second; the @southern.rebel.pride account used it a few dozen times as well. The narrative around Calexit was somewhat convoluted; on Twitter it was presented as liberals trying to leave after the election of Trump; one of the Right-wing twitter personas got involved, tweeting "Calexit leader discovered to have ties to #Russia - communists attempting to take #California". The #Calexit presence on Facebook was virtually nonexistent; it consisted of two posts, both by Angry Eagle, suggesting that California liberals were whiny and should leave. The second post is an example of the way in which the IRA tied controversial recent news (in that case, an anti-Milo Yiannopoulos protest in Berkeley) to the broader narrative:

"The fucking lefty scumbags seeded destruction around at UC Berkeley overnight in response to the planned speech by a right-wing firebrand Milo Yiannopoulos who's an actual gay! Who's intolerant now? They broke windows, set fire, surrounded occasional passersby and beat them with their 'antifa' flags. Fucking animals. Soros wants to spark civil war 2.0. Police are told to stay away. Cabel news networks cover up what's going on there. Is this the cost of free speech?  Btw Trump threatens to cut UC Berkeley's federal funding. I think he'd better completely cut the entire funding of California since they're so worried about keeping illegals inside. Let them pay for all that shit themselves, they're boasting so much about Cali being a donor state, so let's see how they can handle all this shit! Or maybe... support #calexit?"

At a local level, the IRA promoted riots and rallies to call attention to a myriad of issues and grievances. At the state level, the IRA promoted secession (#texit, #calexit) and amplified regional cultural differences. And at a national level, the IRA promoted armed insurgency, through exhortations to violence over issues ranging from the Bureau of Land Management to Black Lives Matter, from protesting Confederate monument removal to threatening riots over election legitimacy (if Hillary Clinton were to steal the election).

Armed insurrection and the Bundy standoff were talking points on Stand for Freedom, Defend the 2$^{nd}$, Heart of Texas and Being Patriotic – all in favor of it. LaVoy Finicum was hailed as a hero and martyr in memes following his death; in addition to the Facebook pages mentioned, Instagram accounts @stop_refugees, @army_of_jesus_, @_american.made, @stand_for_ freedom, @rebeltexas, @_americafirst_, @wall__up, and @defend.the.second weighed in with the opinion that he had been murdered by the government.

Blacktivist and United Muslims of America, meanwhile, used the Bundy story to point out that Black or Muslim individuals who had occupied government land would not have been treated so graciously by Federal officers.

# Tactic: Dismiss and Redirect

Soon after the November 2016 election, investigative journalism began to uncover evidence of both the IRA's social influence and the GRU's hacking operations. As articles began to emerge about election interference – pointing the finger at Russia – the IRA didn't shy away or ignore it. It used derision and disparagement in content targeting the Right-leaning pages, to create and amplify the narrative that the whole investigation was nonsense, that Comey and Mueller were corrupt, and that the emerging Russia stories were a "weird conspiracy" pushed by "liberal crybabies". As facets of the investigation trickled out over 2017, the Right-targeted accounts justified, dismissed, normalized, and redirected.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| the.red.pill | 93228 | Everything is Russians' fault! #Killary#Clintonfraudation#fraud#elections2016#Clinton#Clintonforprison#Hillno#HillaryClinton#Hitlary#presi | 2016-11-29 |
| the.red.pill | 93053 | Oh these nasty Russians #Killary#Clintonfraudation#fraud#elections2016#Clinton#Clintonforprison#Hillno#HillaryClinton#Hitlary#presidenti | 2016-12-12 |
| the.red.pill | 93075 | BREAKING: According to CNN aliens kidnapped Democratic voters in key states to make Donald Trump win the election! A huge relief for Russia | 2017-01-12 |
| the.red.pill | 93094 | The Russians did it #Killary#Clintonfraudation#fraud#elections2016#Clinton#Clintonforprison#Hillno#HillaryClinton#Hitlary#presidentialelec | 2017-01-16 |
| the.red.pill | 93577 | Don't forget to blame Russia when you run out of arguments. Our education system is totally occupied by perverted liberal crybabies who teacl | 2017-02-07 |
| The Red Pill | 55686 | "I just hate when Russian do this..." | 0 | 2017-02-22 |
| the.red.pill | 93289 | I just hate when Russian do this... #Killary#Clintonfraudation#fraud#elections2016#Clinton#Clintonforprison#Hillno#HillaryClinton#Hitlary#| 2017-02-26 |
| the.red.pill | 93313 | Oh nasty Russians #liberal#Killary#Clintonfraudation#fraud#elections2016#Clinton#Clintonforprison#Hillno#HillaryClinton#Hitlary#presiden | 2017-02-28 |
| The Red Pill | 55537 | "Oh these nasty Russians" | 0 | 2017-02-28 |
| the.red.pill | 93410 | Repost @eddie_loves_elsa_ Republicans are under a friggin microscope and it's SO HYPOCRITICAL! 1.Democrats thought misleading congress v | 2017-03-03 |
| The Red Pill | 55547 | "Liberal logic: there was no voter fraud but the Russians hacked the election" | 0 | 2017-03-06 |
| the.red.pill | 93434 | Liberal logic: there was no voter fraud but the Russians hacked the election #liberal#Killary#Clintonfraudation#fraud#elections2016#Clinton# | 2017-03-06 |
| the.red.pill | 93382 | Everyone I Don't Like Is a Russian Agent: In desperate attempt to promote his weird conspiracy narrative John McCain made another idiotic stal | 2017-03-16 |
| the.red.pill | 92550 | The Russians for sure #liberal#Killary#Clintonfraudation#fraud#elections2016#Clinton#Clintonforprison#Hillno#HillaryClinton#Hitlary#presic | 2017-03-25 |
| the.red.pill | 92651 | Al Jazeera Arabic's Facebook coverage of the terror attack in St. Petersburg, Russia was flooded with positive comments and happy emoticons a | 2017-04-04 |
| the.red.pill | 92465 | RUSSIANS RUSSIANS RUSSIANS #liberal#Trump#MAGA#PresidentTrump#NotMyPresident#USA#theredpill#nothingleft#conservative#republica | 2017-05-11 |
| The Red Pill | 55581 | "RUSSIANS RUSSIANS RUSSIANS" | 0 | 2017-05-11 |
| the.red.pill | 92886 | Lol is it real? These Russians are savage #liberal#Trump#MAGA#PresidentTrump#NotMyPresident#USA#theredpill#nothingleft#conservative#re | 2017-05-17 |
| the.red.pill | 92900 | Do you remember the Russians kidnapping Democrat voters in order to prevent them voting for Hillary? Me neither. #liberal#Trump#MAGA#Pr | 2017-05-22 |
| the.red.pill | 92860 | Traitor McCain is in the news again saying Russia (specifically Putin) is the bigger threat than ISIS. You know it's funny cause I'vent heard of Russi | 2017-05-30 |
| the.red.pill | 92747 | A peaceful transition of power is impossible in a country full of terrorists. It was the mistake made in Libya when the legitimate government wa | 2017-06-20 |
| the.red.pill | 92701 | Or maybe the Russians... Credits @massachusettstrumpster #liberal#Trump#MAGA#PresidentTrump#NotMyPresident#USA#theredpill#nothin| 2017-06-21 |
| the.red.pill | 92708 | CNN Senior Producer John Bonifield caught on tape admitting the Trump-Russia story is "bullsh•t" for "ratings."Bonified admits CNN CEO Jeff z | 2017-06-27 |
| the.red.pill | 93633 | NY Times are so hysterical they can't even remember how the president of Russia looks like. Russia everywhere and everyone is Russsian. #liberal | 2017-07-12 |
| the.red.pill | 93641 | Skittles hacked by Russians #liberal#Trump#MAGA#PresidentTrump#NotMyPresident#USA#theredpill#nothingleft#conservative#republican#li | 2017-07-13 |
| the.red.pill | 93616 | I think Donald Trump Jr had every right to meet with a Russian lawyer. First of all, she might have got really important information about Hillar | 2017-07-14 |
| the.red.pill | 93647 | You've lost and don't know what to do? Just blame it on Russian hackers #liberal#Trump#MAGA#PresidentTrump#NotMyPresident#USA#therec | 2017-07-21 |
| the.red.pill | 93661 | Russia Russia Russia #liberal#Trump#MAGA#PresidentTrump#NotMyPresident#USA#theredpill#nothingleft#conservative#republican#libtard# | 2017-07-28 |
| the.red.pill | 93726 | Also he helped the economy, lowered taxes, reduced the use of welfare and food stamps, he struck fear into the Russians and kept American out | 2017-08-16 |
| the.red.pill | 93714 | Trump is NO Racist just like he never colluded with Russia. It's all #fakenews bull shit. Check out my friends: @wall__up @Being.patriotic @sta | 2017-08-18 |

*IRA accounts created dozens of posts throughout 2017, attempting to frame the Russian election interference investigation as a paranoid fantasy of the Establishment and the Left.*

*I think Donald Trump Jr had every right to meet with a Russian lawyer. First of all, she might have got really important information about Hillary Clinton. If the information is true I don't care where it comes from Russia or China or wherever. If the Russians are able to expose Clinton's lies then let them do it. I want to know the truth. Secondly, Donald Trump Jr published all the emails in order to be transparent and there is nothing outrageous in them. Not like he has deleted 33,000 of classified emails of smth. Third, this lawyer is a really suspicious figure who according to some news sources was spotted at an anti-Trump rally and has connections with the Democratic Party. Moreover, she has no proven connections with the Russian government. So the whole story looks like another provocation dedicated to resurrecting the dead Russian collusion story. They tried to defame the president and they lost now they are trying to use this weak ace in the sleeve against his son. Good luck with that!" #liberal#Trump#MAGA#PresidentTrump#NotMyPresident#USA#theredpill#nothingleft#conservative#republican#libtard#regressiveleft#makeamericagreatagain#DonaldTrump#mypresident#buildthewall#memes#funny#politics#rightwing#blm#snowflakes*

## Quantitative

Summary statistics examining mentions of "Trump" and "Clinton" appear to confirm the consensus across researchers and experts that the Internet Research Agency's influence operations were minimally about the candidates. Roughly 6% of tweets, 18% of Instagram posts, and 7% of Facebook posts mentioned Trump or Clinton by name. Trump was mentioned roughly twice as often as Clinton on most platforms. The text of the Instagram posts contained a much higher proportion of insult names like "Shillary" or "Hitlery".

|  | Facebook | Instagram | Twitter |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Total posts** | 61,483 | 116,205 | 10,401,029 |
| **Clinton posts** | 1,777 | 7,915 | 198,123 |
| **% mentioning Clinton** | 2.9% | 6.8% | 1.9% |
| **Trump posts** | 2,563 | 13,106 | 430,185 |
| **% mentioning Trump** | 4.2% | 11.3% | 4.1% |

There were 1777 political posts on Facebook that mentioned Hillary Clinton (or a nickname). 268 appeared on pages that targeted Left-leaning and Black community pages, generating 49,635 engagements; the remainder, generating 1.7 million engagements, were on Right-leaning pages. They were all negative.

There were 109 posts devoted to creating and amplifying fears of voter fraud; the overwhelming majority of them targeted right-wing audiences. 71 were created in the month leading up to election day, and made claims that certain states were helping Sec. Clinton win, that militia groups were going to polling places to stop fraud (called for volunteers to participate), that civil war was preferable to an unfair election or the election of Sec. Clinton, that "illegals" were overrepresented in voter rolls in Texas and elsewhere, or were voting multiple times with Democratic Party assistance. The Being Patriotic page created a 1-800 number hotline for tips about voter fraud, which prominent accounts such as @March_for_Trump promoted on Twitter as well. The narrative was also disseminated on Twitter via the popular @TEN_GOP account.
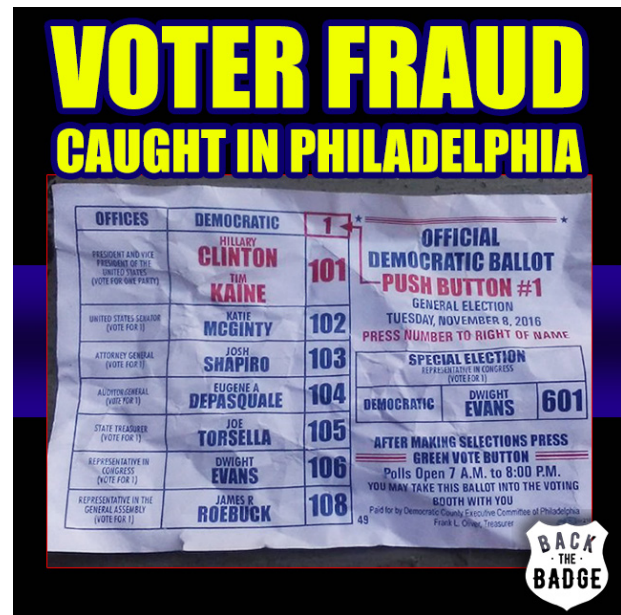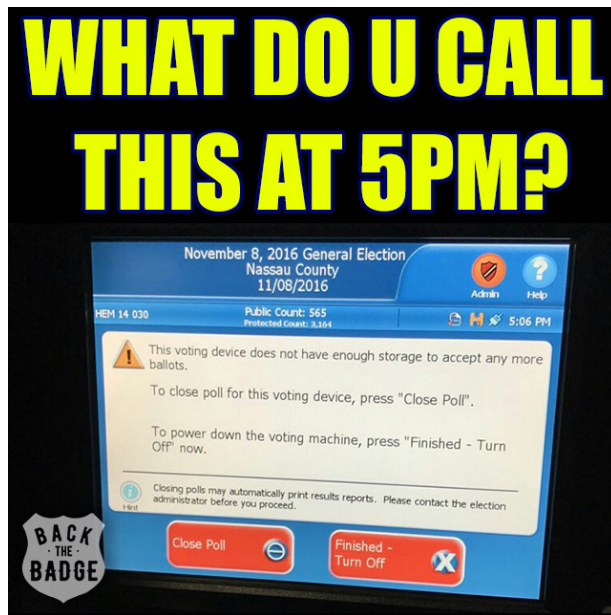


The prevalence of this narrative suggests they may not have expected Trump to win; regardless, they intended to incite violence if he did not.

There was one post alluding to voter fraud targeting a left-wing audience on the page @cop_block_us; it conveyed a conspiracy theory that someone with evidence that the Democratic Party primary had been rigged in Hillary's favor had been found dead.

This data set does not include enough information to make a strong assessment about the extent to which the IRA operation had a significant influence on the election. However, the organic content does offer insights into the extent to which the IRA's memes and messages resonated with its target audiences, and the ways in which they evolved their political messages in some ways and remained remarkably consistent in others. As stated earlier, the Internet Research Agency's operation was not focused entirely on the political, but the election of 2016 did figure significantly in the content. There were approximately 6.5 million posts not related to the election, and approximately 686,000 posts that focused on it. In engagement terms, there were 246 million non-election-related engagements, and 82 million election-related. Put another way, 11% of the total content was related to the election and 33% of the engagement was related to the election. This indicates that overall the IRA did receive higher engagement on election-related content. However, this effect was dominated by the volume of Twitter posts; Facebook and Instagram had similar engagement rates between election and non-election-related posts. Overall, Instagram's engagement rates were higher after the election because of the increase in activity in 2017.

# Weekly Post Volume Through Election 2016
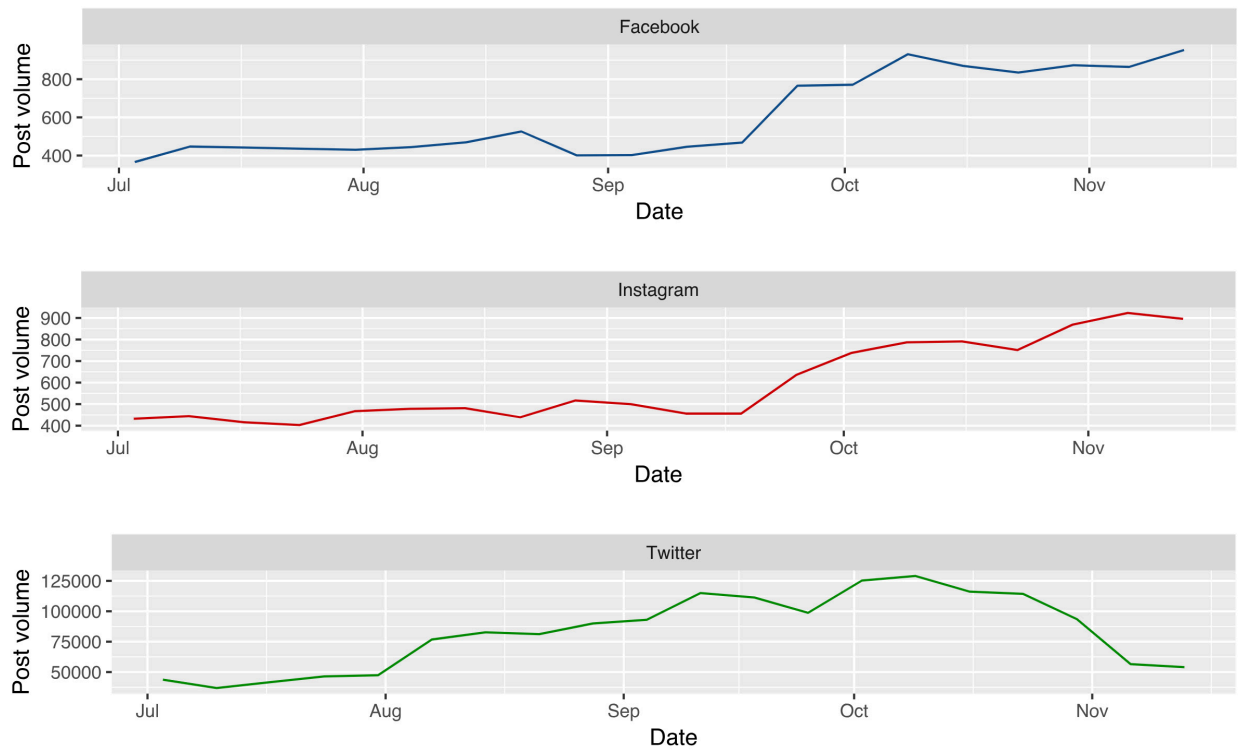


Posting patterns for five months leading into the election show increases on Facebook and Instagram, but a drop-off in mid-October on Twitter. By November 2016, journalists were already writing about the presence of Russian Twitter bots. The drop-off may have been related to the IRA losing some of its accounts; we do not have account deletion dates in the data provided.

## Qualitative

First, it is our assessment that aside from a handful of early-2015 posts expressing support for a Rand Paul candidacy, the Right-targeted IRA pages aligned to display a clear and consistent preference for then-candidate Donald Trump from July 2015 onward. They actively disparaged Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio, and Jeb Bush on Facebook and Instagram.
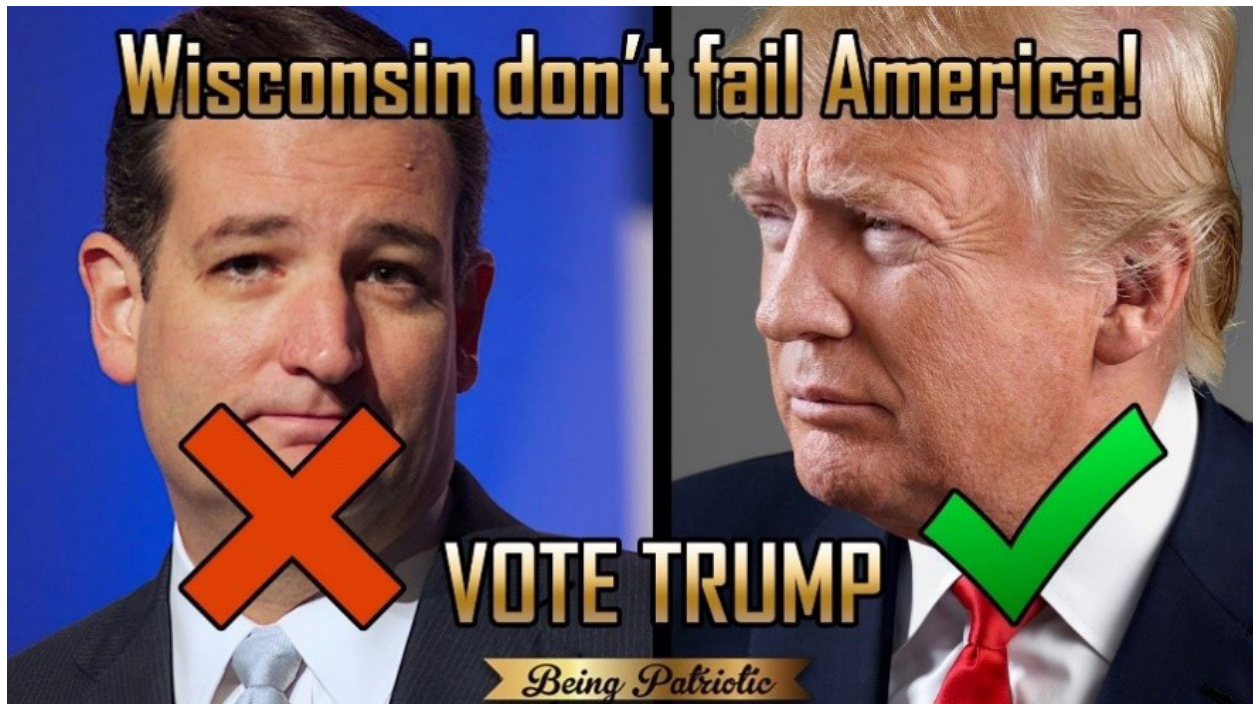


Saying that the IRA expressed strong and consistent support for then-candidate Trump does not imply that there were no negative posts about President Trump; there *were* negative posts among the Left-targeting and occasionally Black-targeting Facebook groups. It also makes no claim about whether the campaign was in communication with the IRA in any way, as any determination about that topic is outside of the scope of this data set. However, the IRA consistently supported his candidacy throughout the primary in Right-leaning groups, keeping their memes and content positive with the exception of a few posts expressing strong disapproval and disappointment that then-candidate Trump was in favor of a hard line on Edward Snowden.

Kremlin-aligned narratives appeared in a handful of posts, including this one from Dec. 18, 2015 that expressed the conviction that Trump was going to have a very sensible Russia policy.
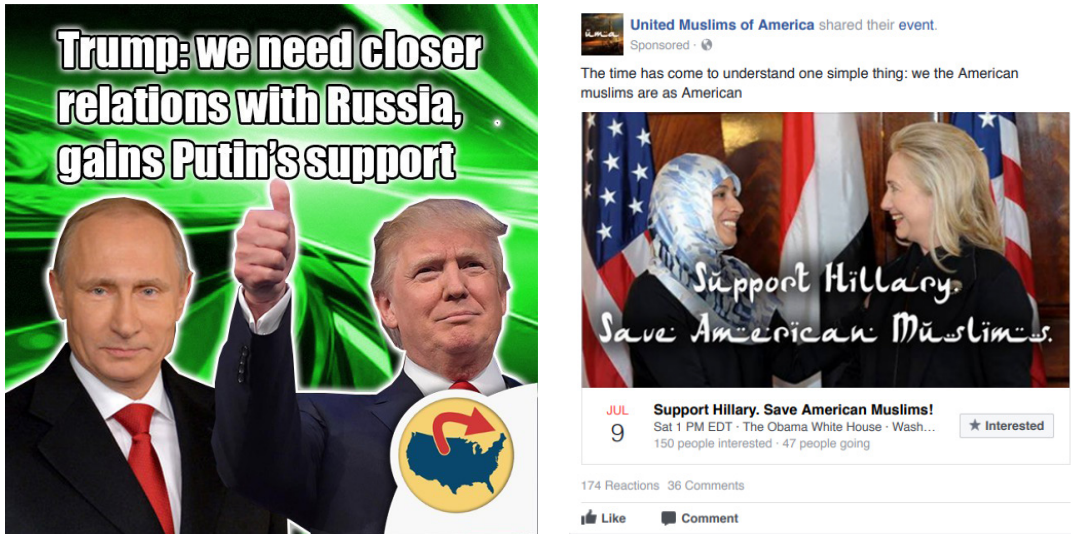
> (Above left) *@stop_refugees #91323 12/18/2015 Trump said that he is honored by Putin had called him an absolute leader, and expresses his support for Russian president. His dislike for President Obama - and it's a mutual thing - is terrible. That's why you see all the conflict, all the problems, all the hatred. If we can't work with Russia, that's not a good thing, Trump said. Well to my mind we need Russia on our side, not on the opposite, what's your point? #usdaily #news #hotnews #newspaper #coffee #reading #local #cnn #foxnews #nbc #nytimes #morning #politics #usa #america #americannews #followme #trump #russia #putin - 314 Likes*

Second, it is our assessment that the IRA was similarly strong and consistent in their efforts to undermine the candidacy of then-candidate Hillary Clinton throughout all of their pages – Black, Left, and Right-targeting. The one purportedly positive Clinton post was an event (and ad) promoting a Muslim community march to support Sec. Clinton (above right). It is likely that the IRA saw a high-profile march by Muslims as a way to create social tension, and as a negative for Sec. Clinton's candidacy. The remainder of the United Muslims of America page content actively opposed Sec. Clinton, primarily promoting further-left candidates but at one point going so far as to broach the idea that Muslims might vote for then-candidate Trump.

In the days leading up to the election, the IRA began to deploy voter suppression tactics on the Black-community targeted accounts, while simultaneously fearmongering on Right-targeted accounts about voter fraud and delivering ominous warnings that the election would be stolen and violence might be necessary. The suppression narratives were targeted almost exclusively at the Black community on Instagram and Facebook; there appeared to be a concerted effort to keep the conversation on other topics, such as alienation and violence, and away from politics.
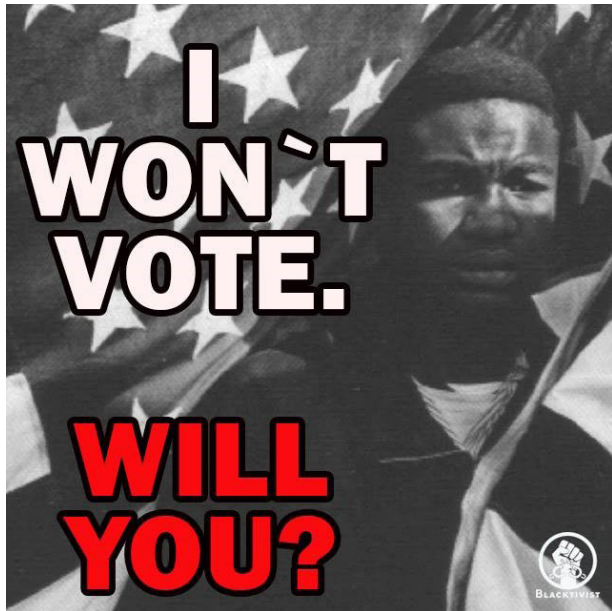
## Election week at the IRA:
## Content analysis, November 5 – November 9, 2016

Based on the data set provided by the social platforms, the IRA made approximately 32,000 posts across Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram between 11/5/2016 and 11/9/2016. We removed duplicates, revealing 29,040 unique pieces of content. For tweets that included "RT" in the content text, Twitter provided the number of retweets, but not favorites. (The number of replies were not included in the Twitter data set.)

The reason that we isolate this detailed study of the IRAs cross-platform efforts during election week is to illustrate the distinctive ways in which they attempted to manipulate the Black, Left-leaning, and Right-leaning groups over the same timeframe. The strategy for Right-leaning groups appears to have been to generate extreme anger and suspicion, in hopes that it would motivate people to vote; posts darkly hinted at conspiracy theories, voter fraud, illegal participation in the election, and stated the need for rebellion should Hillary Clinton "steal" the election. The Black-targeted content, meanwhile, largely ignored the election until the last minute, instead continuing to produce posts on themes about societal alienation and police brutality. As the election became imminent, those themes were then tied into several varieties of voter suppression narratives: don't vote, stay home, this country is not for Black people, these candidates don't care about Black people. Left-targeted content was somewhat political, with an anti-establishment slant. It focused primarily on identity and pride for communities such as Native Americans, LGBT+, and Muslims, and then more broadly called for voting for candidates other than Hillary Clinton.

ELECTION WEEK 2016

In summary, the goal appears to have been to generate extreme anger and engagement for those most likely to support then-candidate Donald Trump, and to create disillusionment and disengagement on the Left-leaning and Black communities.

## November 5, 2018

Leading into election week, the IRA Twitter newsbots, notably NBAHawks_Fans, rapidly tweeted out miscellaneous news headlines; these had very low engagement. Many of the 3841 IRA persona twitter accounts appeared to be focused exclusively on retweeting. They primarily amplified the #SpiritCooking and #RememberWhenTrump hashtags, the latter of which appears to have begun with the goal of bumping up unfavorable moments in Donald Trump's campaign and prior public life. According to an archived thread on Reddit from November 4th, 2016, the two hashtags were part of a battle for attention. Some pro-Trump online communities had alleged that that Twitter was censoring #SpiritCooking; several IRA accounts amplified or produced unique pro-Trump #RememberWhenTrump contributions that incorporated #SpiritCooking, likely with the goal of keeping it trending and redirecting attention. Of the 60 IRA contributions to the hashtag on 11/5, all but five retweets amplified or created negative Hillary Clinton-related content; their twenty-three original tweets generated 642 engagements. Other retweeted topics included Pizzagate and pedophilia, Sec. Clinton's alleged involvement in funding ISIS, and former President Bill Clinton's past.

The IRA personas' online conversations managed to be consistently divisive, and yet nearly entirely separate across target audiences. Among the Right-wing persona group, multiple accounts, particularly @GreatKublaiKahn, retweeted @realDonaldTrump and trolled real Twitter users, occasionally mentioning alt-right activists such as Baked Alaska and Microchip. Others retweeted @wikileaks' tweets about Sec. Clinton's finances, the Clinton Global Initiative, spirit-cooking emails, the private email server, Benghazi, and sex scandals; amplification of Wikileaks was observed across all social platforms throughout the campaign. Some IRA Twitter personas promoted conspiratorial rumors by authentic influential accounts such as @LatestAnonNews, which claimed "Clinton Underground Child Sex Scandal to break in a couple hours. Happy 5th of November!", and @KimDotCom, who wrote, "FBI now has deleted Clinton emails." They amplified misspelled-name hoax and satire accounts such as @HllLARYCLINT0N (spelled with a zero), which were subsequently shut down by Twitter. They amplified Donald Trump campaign insiders such as @MichaelCohen212, @DonaldJTrumpJr and @DiamondandSilk, as well as conservative influencers such as @charliekirk11, @gatewaypundit, and @AmyMek.

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Several "shitposter"-style accounts, including @Based_Plissken, @TheeFash, @George-Prescottt, @30PiecesofAG_, @drtywhiteboy68, and @harrykleinfeld, produced original content, tweeting racist and anti-Semitic political remarks, and harassing regular users. Account @Chris__Tegner ran a voter suppression strategy, repeatedly @-messaging individual Twitter users, including several famous influencers, to post "Heads Up: If you voted for Bernie in the Primaries, the Election Board will NOT let you vote for Hillary on Nov 8." The IRA frequently engaged with influencers, presumably an attempt to achieve wider viewership by appearing in the replies to prominent accounts. Meanwhile, the Texas-secession focused social media accounts on all platforms pushed a #Texit rally.

The accounts that appeared to be targeting and engaging with Black audiences focused on an entirely different conversation, almost entirely absent any mention of "Trump" or "Clinton". On Twitter as well as Facebook, they were talking about Dillard university protesting David Duke, and about police brutality. The highest-engagement tweet by an IRA Black persona account on November 5th came from @Crystal1Johnson: "St. Louis mother wants answers after 'hideous' photo of officer posing with her dead son surfaces. https://t.co/I9pO8QhEgz". It received 2497 retweets and 1365 likes; the copy, although it was presented as original, was pulled verbatim from a KTLA headline. This is a tactic observed many times in IRA content; it likely allowed them to mask language fluency shortcomings. Accounts such as @BLK_Voice talked about men and youth killed by police. On Instagram, a substantial portion of the content focused on Black culture with no mention at all of the upcoming election. @BlackToLive asked where black people were mentioned in textbooks, @Blacktivist asked where black people were on television. The sparse political content (~5 posts) included commentary about the Jay Z-Beyonce concert for Hillary.

Overall, 75 unique accounts produced 802 pieces of original content, generating 117,255 engagements spanning the full 24 hours. Instagram account @blackstagram__ secured the most engagement (18,250 likes and comments). Of the original Twitter content, TEN_GOP dominated in engagement, with 9296 RTs and 8800 favorites across its 12 tweets. The account tweeted claims that Rand Paul had said Hillary Clinton would go to prison for 5 years, and that "Hillary is the first candidate in American history to be labeled a threat by American troops".

## November 6, 2018

Once again, a lot of the Twitter content focused on amplification via retweets. The Right-leaning persona accounts retweeted and amplified Wikileaks, #SpiritCooking, and Jill Stein, as well as Donald Trump and the celebrities and media personalities supporting him (James Woods,

Clint Eastwood). The accounts also repeated a myriad of accusatory theories about the Clinton Foundation funding, who provided it, and what it was used for. The Black community-targeted accounts retweeted commentaries on black female beauty, and a school bus bullying incident. Nonpartisan accounts retweeted radio station-related content.

Original content from TEN_GOP repeatedly attacked James Comey's investigation into Hillary Clinton's emails, earning 38,000 engagements across the collection of tweets. Facebook posts on the Right-targeted Pages focused on allegations that illegal immigrants were committing voter fraud. Once again, the original content on the left focused nearly exclusively on themes of Black culture, police brutality, and Black erasure – the election was barely mentioned. One representative Black-focused Instagram account discussed the election, with @woke_blacks presenting a range of voter suppression/depression narratives:



> *I say it as it is. When you decide to choose between two evil, you are somehow condoning to what-ever comes afterwards. The excuse that a lost Black vote for Hillary is a Trump win is bs. It could be late, but y'all might want to support Jill Stein instead. Trust me, for a presidential candidate to have so much scandals before election and still be the no. 1 candidate should tell you how things will get more f\*cked up after the elections. Should you decide to sit-out the election, well done for the boycott. However if you decide you are still going to vote, then don't choose any of the major ones. I remind us all one more time, anyone who wins can literally change less about the state of Black people, we are on our own, esp. after Obama. Wise up my people!*

## November 7, 2018

There were 2,457 pieces of content put out on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram on November 7th, not including retweets. The trend from the prior two days continued: the Black and the handful of Left-leaning persona accounts rarely tweeted about political issues. Instead, they continued to focus on supporting Black businesses, praising Black beauty, and talking about the challenges faced by Black boys. @Crystal1Johnson weighed in on twitter 18 times; she contributed to the #ElectionFinalThoughts hashtag with "So we're screwed either way". Instagram accounts @ woke_blacks and @afrokingdom_ incorporated election-related hashtags as well as "#boycott" into content that was focused on black culture and police-brutality related content.

The apolitical content targeting the Left and Black communities may have been intended as a distraction; there were also more overt suppression narratives. Williams8kalvin, the Williams & Kalvin Facebook Page's Twitter account, tweeted a link to their YouTube video: "The truth about elections," which explained why Black people should not vote. They also posted to Facebook: "Hillary Clinton is a traitor! Hillary Clinton is a liar! Hillary Clinton is insane! I know that many black people support this old dirty bitch. I don't know why they do this, still it's their personal choice and we are a free country yet. But, listen to my word of truth and don't let them fool you."

@afrokingdom_ advocated that Black people not vote: "Students from St. Augustine's University and Shaw University, two historically Black colleges, expressed their frustration with Clinton's tendency to lie.  Almost every student doesn't believe that Hillary is the best candidate, but said that they have to "settle" for Clinton!  But I say that this is the BIG mistake! Black people don't have to vote for Hillary because she is liar!  Black people are smart enough to understand that Hillary doesn't deserve our votes!  DON'T VOTE!  #williamsandkalvin#a-wordoftruth #PanAfricanism #BlackNationalism #BlackEmpowerment #AfricanEmpowerment #AfricanAndProud  #BlackAndProud #BlackPride #BlackPower #BlackLivesMatter #Amerikkka #UnapologeticallyBlack #UnapologeticallyAfrican #BlackInAmerica #BlackIsBeautiful #JusticeOrElse #ProBlack #dontvote #boycottelection #election2016" The post got 453 engagements.

Meanwhile, the Right-leaning collection of accounts continued to amplify political conspiracy theories (i.e., that Clinton and the Podestas had ties to the Madeline McCann disappearance), and posted inflammatory content about James Comey's investigation into Hillary Clinton's emails. @TEN_GOP tweeted 22 times, talking about patriotism and arguing that Hillary Clinton was receiving special treatment on the emails issue, and should not be above the law; the tweets received 12,383 favorites and 16,058 retweets. At one point, Right-targeted persona @TEN_GOP engaged with Black-targeted persona @Crystal1Johnson: "@Crystal1Johnson Wake up! This will happen if Hillary wins. Stop being slave of Democrat plantation!"

The Right-leaning troll account, @Based_Plissken, tweeted 392 times, largely arguing directly with real users. Another troll account – one that had several names across its existence but was reported as @CovfefeNationUS in the data set – tweeted a poll about the election repeatedly at influencers, and pushed a narrative that Barack Obama did not trust Hillary Clinton. (@CovfefeNationUS, which used a Gab presence as its profile URL, would go on to become a prominent voice in the #boycottKeurig campaign and a promoter of QAnon conspiracy theories.)

Both Right- and Left-targeted IRA personas participated in the hashtag conversation #2016electionin3words dozens of times, with contributions ranging from "Clinton Spirit Cooking", "better stay home", "Hillary for Prison", and "Drain the Swamp" to "Fuck Donald Trump", "Both equally terrible", and "America is done".

Right-leaning IRA Facebook and Instagram pages featured dozens of posts about the corruption of Hillary Clinton and allegations that President Barack Obama was complicit in helping her orchestrate voter fraud by illegal voters. Secured Borders was particularly committed to riling up its user base, posting that President Barack Obama himself was illegal, and therefore treasonous. A post to that effect secured 4,891 engagements, including 1,478 shares.



> *I can't believe this. Our so-called President, Kenyan illegal bastard Barack Hussein Obama encourages illegal aliens to vote – because as you know law breaking comes naturally to both Democrats and Illegal aliens! "This is not a surprise at all to me" - says Obama. What the hell are you talking about Barry?? This is a CRIME, a VOTER FRAUD! And you just saying that you're not surprised?? Are you encouraging this? You're illegal. You cannot vote. And the President of the United States is saying, 'Don't worry, no one will be spying on you, or catching you.' Why President Obama says so? Apparently because he himself is illegal and cares nothing for this country!! When maybe whether you're for the president, against the president, whether you're pro-immigration reform, anti-immigration reform – you are ignoring the fact that you've been questioned about illegal voting, which you can't do. Why? Because you're not a citizen of this country! Isn't that true, Mr. Obama? I cannot stand the level of corruption that surrounds this administration. Obama and Hillary have committed treasonous acts against our country. They both belong behind bars, not in the White House! Do you agree?*

# November 8, 2018

The amount of original content produced by the IRA operation jumped to approximately 4316 posts on Election Day 2016 (this number varies a bit depending on the time zone chosen). The Right-wing persona Twitter trolls @Based_Plissken, racist_paul, and @jemalhudso12111 produced the most posts (~100 each), primarily arguing with other users and journalists. @Based_Plissken mocked the idea of Russian hacking, and a myriad of smaller accounts participated in #HillaryForPrison chatter. @CovefefeNation played in the hashtag #ImVotingBecause, offering up anti-Clinton reasons. Once again, the highest engagement account was @TEN_GOP, which also participated in #ImVotingBecause, as well as tweeted inspirational quotes about Donald Trump (and against Hillary Clinton) by other political figures such as Rudy Giuliani, Marine LePen, etc. @Ten_GOP earned 65,751 retweets and 56,906 favorites.

On the Left-leaning and Black-targeted account side, @Crystal1Johnson debated whether Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump was "the lesser evil", but once again the content targeted at these groups was far less focused on the Election; @Crystal1Johnson wrote content about the Black suffragists that "history forgot".

Several accounts, such as @MikeMikej344, active on both November 7th and 8th, mentioned pro-Clinton hashtags in their tweets, but primarily tweeted URLs (the Twitter-provided data set did not unroll the URLs; in the slide deck associated with this report we use the Twitter images to gauge the topics in the links) Others, such as @MRNyc2015, a persona that pretended to be a liberal gay man, participated in pro-Clinton hashtags with active voter suppression messages, dropping calls to vote online: "@lauren_koontz @smrtgrls @HillaryClinton SKIP THE LINE #ImWithHer Lets do this! #Gays4Hillary #HillYes #Hillary #StrongerTogether https://t.co/R3806jcKgH"," @SOMEXlCAN YAAS QUEEN. Everyone needs to vote ONLINE   #ImWithHer #HillYes #Hillary #StrongerTogether https://t.co/YVotzfS1CO". He appeared to get little uptake, but tweeted these messages dozens of times. Curiously, the persona account also participated in anti-Clinton conversations.

On Facebook, the Right-leaning pages posted repeatedly about voter fraud, stolen elections, conspiracies about machines provided by Soros, and rigged votes. One made a slight error, alleging that a voting machine in PA was not accepting votes for Clinton; it quickly corrected the post, which went on to receive 983 shares.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A voting machine in Pennsylvania refuses to accept a vote for Clinton. Like & share to spread the information! Trump must win despi | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 2016-11-08 17:29:59+0 |
| A voting machine in Pennsylvania refuses to accept a vote for Trump. Like & share to spread the information! Trump must win despit | 983 | 261 | 191 | 133 2016-11-08 17:36:47+0 |

Left-leaning Facebook Page Muslims United discussed whether Muslims would be boycotting elections. The Black-targeted pages discussed Black beauty, unity, women, and culture. On Instagram, the Black-targeted accounts discussed Eric Garner, pointing out that his daughter was not voting in the election. They lobbied for votes for Jill Stein, and discussed kneeling, the National Anthem, and police brutality. And they repeatedly discussed boycotting…as @blackstagram__ put it, "Think twice before you vote. All I wanna say is that they don't really care about us.  #Blacktivist #hotnews"

## November 8-9th

*One data set was in GMT+0, so citing U.S. Election Day content involves two dates.*

As voter returns began to come in, the IRA joined millions of Americans in tweeting them out. The highest engagements were again by @TEN_GOP and @Pamela_Moore13 (who complained about voter fraud as states reported results). They called out mainstream media as being the real loser of the night. Prolific troll account @CovefefeNationUS gleefully predicted that Hillary Clinton was going to prison, and accused CNN of being biased (demanded a boycott). The troll account @racist_paul, popped up again, with dozens of tweets harassing a variety of Jewish reporters and other (real) Twitter users with content about how Trump was "warming up an oven" for them.

Black Twitter personas @BleepThePolice and @BlackToLive became far more political and wondered how Trump had won. @Crystal1Johnson account immediately called for a #Not-MyPresident protest (that the IRA promoted on its Facebook Events). Aside from the incorporation of #NotMyPresident, however, much of the Black-targeted content remained the same: stories of police brutality and a reiteration that the country was not for Black people. Some of the accounts merged the two themes: @BlackToLive's Twitter account posted "I don't wanna hear from anyone that this country is not racist. Don't you even dare.  #PresidentElectTrump".  (@williams.and.kalvin_, interestingly, reposted a religious meme by IRA Right-targeted Instagram account @army_of_jesus_)

And, of course, the hashtag gamer accounts came out: #CelebrateTrumpWith closed out the evening, with trolls posting pro as well as anti-Trump responses.

Ultimately, the trolls closed out Election Week by extending their election-related political outrage playbook to the Black and Left audiences, as those groups now had a new grievance to be upset about. However, they kept pushing angry narratives to their Right-wing audiences…the narratives just evolved.

## Post-Election 2016 Activity: 2017 Instagram Ramp-Up



Following Election Day, the Right-targeting narratives about how voter fraud would deliver the election to Hillary Clinton immediately shifted to narratives claiming that President Trump would have won the popular vote, too, were it not for voter fraud. This narrative and related memes appeared on four different Instagram accounts and two Facebook Pages on November 10th, generating 7,117 engagements; on Nov 28th, the narrative was updated to state that President-elect Trump himself had tweeted that he would have won the popular vote were it not for illegal voters (this tweet attracted a substantial amount of controversy in the press at the time because the claim was made absent any supporting evidence).

The Left-targeted narratives, meanwhile, immediately called for protests of the concept of the electoral college. There were extremely immediate posts that attempted to pre-empt calls for impeachment – an interesting choice, given that the President had not yet been inaugurated – by framing Vice President Mike Pence as an even worse option. A post by LGBT United on November 10th read, "In case anyone forgot, Mike Pence in the White House would mean disaster for queer people!! I heavily disagree with his policies regarding church and state and his lgbtq policy. I see alot of leftist calling for impeachment or assassination on trump but truely Trump is worlds better than Pence when talking about equal rights for all…"
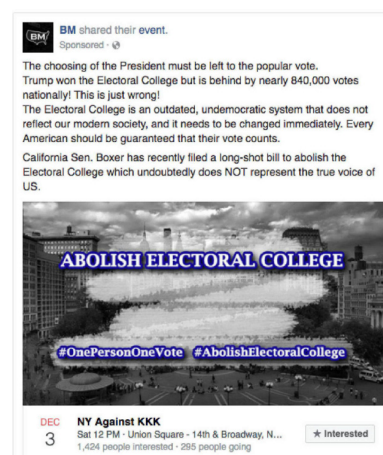
And, as investigative journalists began to uncover their operation, the IRA narratives began to actively mock the idea that Russians had interfered in the U.S. election (as described earlier in this report). Facebook and Instagram accounts targeted James Comey after President Trump fired him, and targeted the Robert Mueller investigation.



While the evidence of Russian interference was beginning to be made public, Facebook appears to have begun to moderate at least one of the pages, although it is unclear exactly why. At least one moderation-related post alludes to a page being accused of a Community Standards violation. Dissatisfaction about being moderated appears to have led the IRA to spread the narrative that Facebook was censoring conservative voices as early as March 2017.

Despite the moderation challenges on Facebook, the IRA ramped up activity on Instagram in 2017.
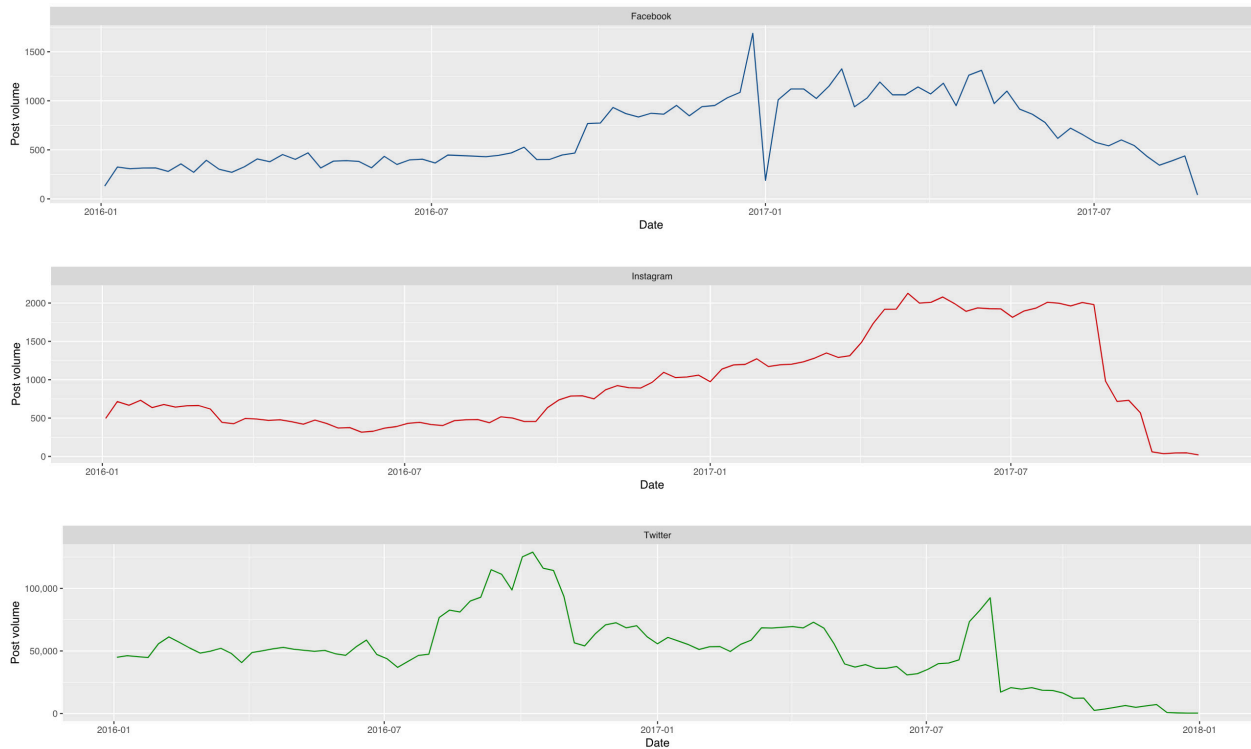


*Posts per week on social platforms, 2016-2018. Facebook is in blue, Instagram in red, Twitter in green.*

# Ongoing Efforts

## Ongoing Effort: Live Accounts Remain

Although the platforms have been making a stronger effort toward uncovering influence operations, the data sets provided by Facebook and Twitter led to the discovery of additional IRA pages.

For example, an Arabic-English bilingual Facebook Page called "Friends of Russia" was discovered through the tweets of IRA-attributed Twitter account @AsdiqaRussiya (roughly translated as "Friends of Russia"). AsdiqaRussiya's tweets had been embedded in Russian-language propaganda articles — an example of IRA's ongoing history of inwardly-focused propagandizing to the Russian



people. One of these articles linked to a video on the Friends of Russia Facebook page. The page last updated on May 12, 2018 and had approximately 9,600 Likes.

Similarly, an analysis of the profile URLs in the Twitter data set revealed active profiles on Gab.ai, VKontakte, and LiveJournal. In addition, some of the IRA accounts appear to have been bots that were purchased or repurposed from several different existing botnets. As we looked back
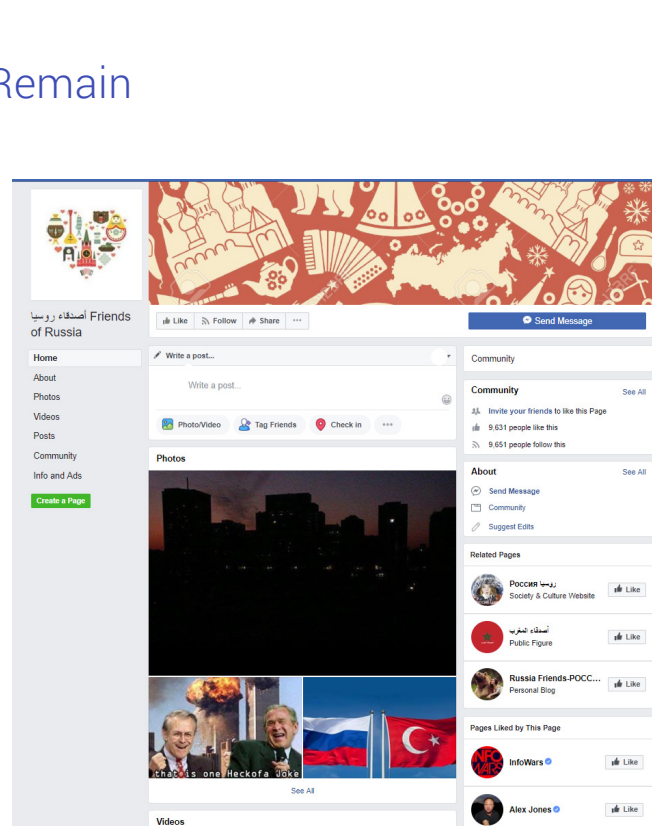
at the account behavior over time, we found tweet histories in 2013 that revealed commercial spam content. Bots from the same botnets appear to still be active and are relatively easy to find with the Twitter public API. These accounts, for example, have similar patterns to bots that are in the provided data:

- https://twitter.com/Elsa_Aben - dormant
- https://twitter.com/Florrie_Schamel - dormant
- https://twitter.com/fitness_craving - active
- https://twitter.com/besttattooing - active
- https://twitter.com/becca51178 - active

Although these bots are not doing anything malicious now, they are available to be repurposed for future malicious use.

## Ongoing Effort: The Broader Propaganda Ecosystem

If the Alphabet data set was correctly attributed, there are dozens of Russian-linked propaganda pages promoted by IRA-linked ad accounts; at a minimum, they are promoted by FAN. As noted above in the Ad Targeting section of this report, one of the largest of these was GI Analytics. Purportedly a global analysis property with an international masthead, GI Analytics was active from 2015 until Aug 31, 2016, when editor Joshua Tartakovsky announced it was "on hold". The site's **About page** positions it as a voice of integrity in opposition to mainstream media: "We are in a desperate need of truth and of hard-cutting analysis, especially now, when we are being betrayed by our elected representatives and the corporate media."

The site's content is repurposed on other properties around the web, including Russia News Now, Russia Insider, The Russophile, and NovoRussia Today. It has links to other known Russian propaganda sites by way of authors, AdWords accounts, and repurposed content. The masthead of authors shows several Americans. Several of these USA-affiliated authors, such as Joaquin Flores, have personal blogs or appointments at other Russia-linked think tanks. Others, such as Stefan Paraber, have almost no social presence aside from their writing on the site. It is unclear whether they knew they were writing for an IRA entity. The **Twitter account** still exists, dormant but visible. GI Analytics also appears in the YouTube data set provided to SSCI, with a channel that promoted the account 'SyrianGirlPartisan'.

Propaganda and content from IRA-linked think tank GI Analytics remains prevalent on Facebook's platform, although the GI Analytics Facebook page itself was taken down while our investigation was underway; it had approximately 7000 likes and was taken down sometime after May 30, 2018.

It is unclear whether still-active Facebook pages (for example, "Russia Truth") and Groups that regularly shared GI Analytics content did so knowingly, or whether those pages have been investigated for possible IRA links. Since GI Analytics contributors include Americans, it is unclear whether they knew who they were writing for. Several individuals on the masthead were recently identified as authors for newly-launched IRA propaganda property USAReally; a few contribute to known Russian propaganda outlets and think tanks such as Katehon.
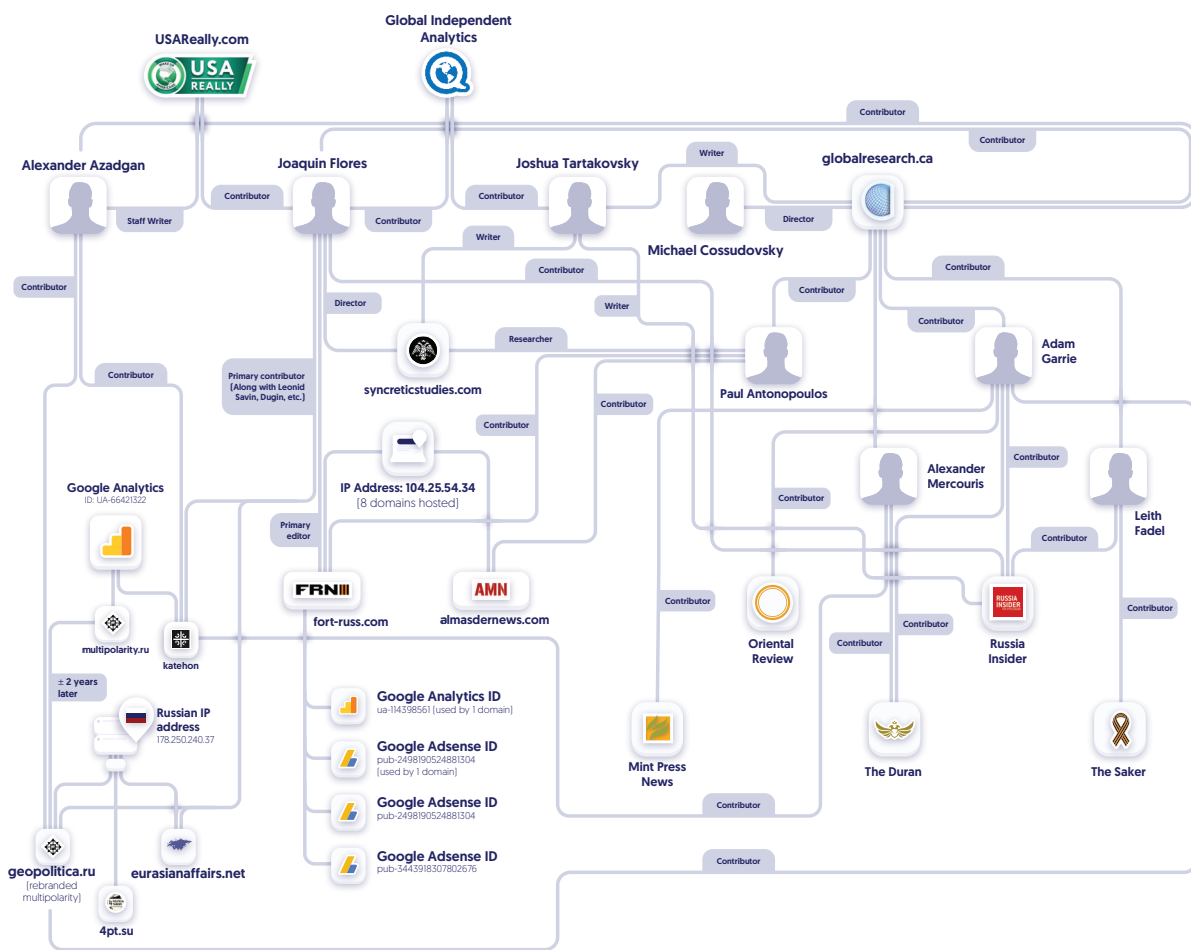
# In Conclusion

This investigation of the Internet Research Agency's activities and tactics highlights complex technological, social, and cognitive vulnerabilities.

Throughout its multi-year effort, the Internet Research Agency exploited divisions in our society by leveraging vulnerabilities in our information ecosystem. They exploited social unrest and human cognitive biases. The divisive propaganda Russia used to influence American thought and steer conversations for over three years wasn't always objectively false. The content designed to reinforce in-group dynamics would likely have offended outsiders who saw it, but the vast majority wasn't hate speech. Much of it wasn't even particularly objectionable. But it was absolutely intended to reinforce tribalism, to polarize and divide, and to normalize points of view strategically advantageous to the Russian government on everything from social issues to political candidates. It was designed to exploit societal fractures, blur the lines between reality and fiction, erode our trust in media entities and the information environment, in government, in each other, and in democracy itself. This campaign pursued all of those objectives with innovative skill, scope, and precision.

With at least some of the Russian government's goals achieved in the face of little diplomatic or other pushback, it appears likely that the United States will continue to face Russian interference for the foreseeable future; as the September 2018 Department of Justice indictment makes clear, they continued to budget for ongoing operations. The September 2018 DoJ indictment also illustrates that Americans were systematically developed as assets by the IRA. Most, it appears, were recruited via Facebook Messenger, tapped to perform on behalf of an entity that misrepresented itself as someone just like them. Now that automation

techniques (e.g. bots) are better policed, the near future will be a return to the past: we'll see increased human-exploitation tradecraft and narrative laundering. We should certainly expect to see recruitment, manipulation, and influence attempts targeting the 2020 election, including the inauthentic amplification of otherwise legitimate American narratives, as well as a focus on smaller/secondary platforms and peer-to-peer messaging services.

Over the past five years, disinformation has evolved from a nuisance into high-stakes information war. Our frameworks for dealing with it, however, remain the same -- we discuss counter-messaging and counter-narratives, falling into the trap of treating this as a problem of false stories. Our deeply-felt national scruples about misidentifying a fake account or inadvertently silencing someone, however briefly, create a welcoming environment for malign groups who masquerade as Americans or who game algorithms. Ironically even Internet Research Agency trolls laid claim to these principles, complaining publicly about being censored when Facebook moderated or banned them. When tech platforms or regulators strive to take meaningful action to suppress abuse of their platforms and our American polity, there are waves of outrage over censorship. We have conversations about whether or not bots have the right to free speech, we respect the privacy of fake people, and we hold Congressional hearings to debate whether YouTube personalities have been unfairly downranked. More authoritarian regimes, by contrast, would simply selectively firewall the internet. It is precisely our commitment to democratic principles that puts us at an asymmetric disadvantage against an adversary who enthusiastically engages in censorship, manipulation, and suppression internally.

## Looking Forward

There remains much to be done. With regard to the Internet Research Agency specifically, further investigation of subscription and engagement pathways is needed; and only the platforms currently have that data. Understanding the reactions of targeted Americans, and attempting to gauge the impact that the repeated exposure to this propaganda had, is also a key area for ongoing investigation; only the platforms have the comment data. We hope that platforms will provide more data that can speak to the impact and uptake among targeted communities.

More broadly, we must promote a multi-stakeholder model in which researchers, tech platforms, and government work together to detect foreign influence operations that attempt

to undercut public discourse and democracy. The United States government has departments with decades of experience managing foreign propaganda and espionage. But because these influence operations are happening on private social platforms, there has been minimal information sharing. Robust collaboration between government agencies, platforms, and private companies is key to combatting this threat.

Finally, we hope that additional sections of this data set will be released to the public for further research. There are millions of posts, hours of video, and hundreds of thousands of memes, and additional eyes will undoubtedly continue to provide valuable insights into this operation.

We hope that our work has resulted in a clearer picture for policymakers, platforms, and the public alike and thank the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence for the opportunity to serve.