IRA and American politics

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Abstract—In this paper we analyze a collection of tweets from the IRA (Internet Research Agency), an organization sponsored by the Russian government. These tweets were suspected to have a political agenda and strategies to influence the public opinion on several American political topics.

I. Introduction

At the era of fast and world wide communication, new means of influence are getting developed. With the omnipresence of social media it is now possible to present contents to a large number of individuals. Furthermore with the relay of these information, it is getting harder and harder to distinguish trustworthy content from fake news. Russia took advantage of this during the last few years pushing politically engaged tweets in order to influence political public opinions. The challenge was to reach as many persons as possible while keeping their agenda and identity hidden.
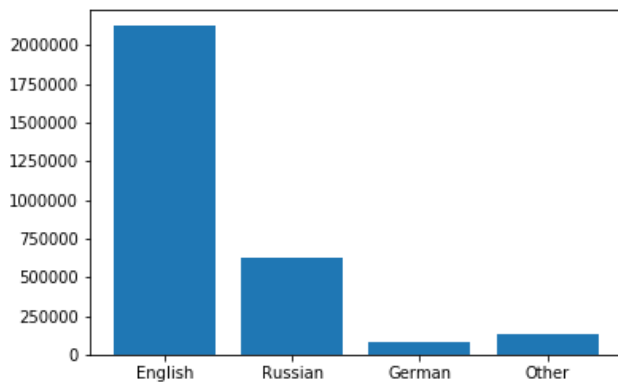

Fig. 1. Amount of tweet per language

II. Data Exploration

The data is composed of approximately 3 millions tweets, some of them being retweets. The tweets were in different languages as shown in the Figure 1. The great majority of them are English tweets enlightening the international goal of the agency, thought over 600 000 are written in Russian. In all likelihood to promote their national agenda. The first tweets appeared in 2012 and the activity reaches its climax during the American presidential election of 2016. Figure 2 shows the evolution of the IRA activity.
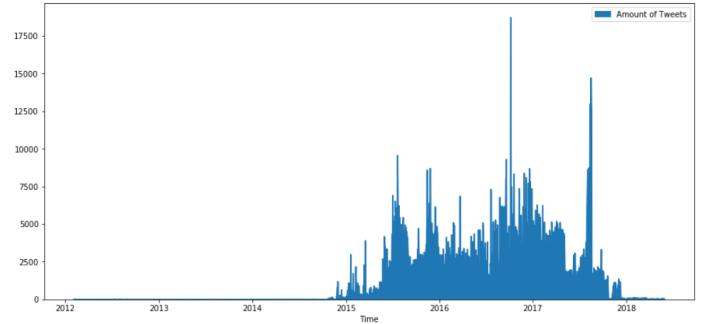
Fig. 2. Repartition of tweets over time

The peaks in tweets publication are due to public event in the USA like the release of Hillary Clinton's email in October 2016, the presidential election in November 2016, the syrian conflict in the third quarter of 2017 with the defeat of ISIS in Raqqa by the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Americans. It is interesting to notice that the IRA took a really slow start in the first years, probably not to raise any suspicions and suggesting that they planned their operations way ahead. The fast decrease in tweet number at the end of 2017 must be due

Fig. 3. Russian (above) and English (below) tweets over time

to the discovery of these accounts by Twitter.
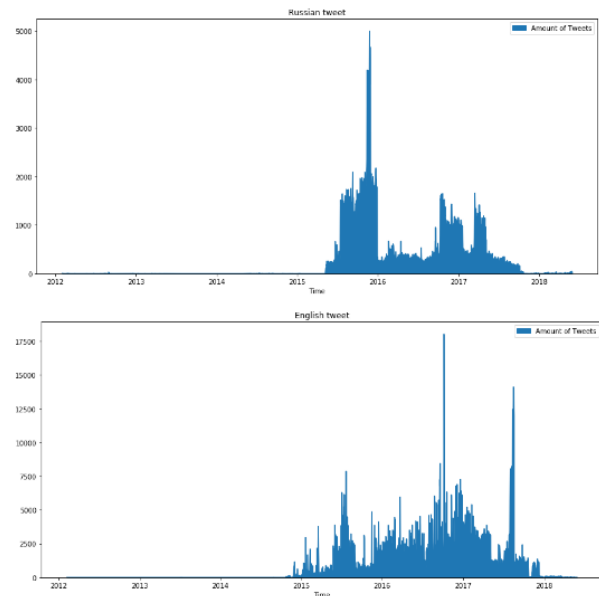
If we take a closer look to the span of tweets according to their language we observe very different trends. Figure 3 shows that a large amount of Russian tweets were published around the Su-24 incident. Reminder : a Russian military aircraft was shot by the Turkish army creating a great geopolitical crisis in a region already at war with Syria. As the circumstances of the incident were shady at the time, it is obvious that the Russian government tried to convey its version as much as possible through these tweets. Regarding the English ones, several peaks can be associated to public event in the US as the presidential election or the announcement of Donald Trump candidacy in mid 2015. This shows also how organized the IRA was since they definitely had different targets and had appropriate ways to reach out to them.

III. Tweet analysis

In this section, we take a deeper look at the dataset. What ideas were the IRA trying to convey?

A. Account categories

Each account is labelled with one of these six categories:

- **Right troll (**34%**):** These tweets act like the average Republican follower. They are the most frequent tweets and often support Trump. They also regularly condemn Obama's and other democrat's actions.
- **Left troll (**21%**) :** On the other hand, these accounts adopt the personae of activists on social and racial issues. However, they do not necessarily express support towards Hillary Clinton. On the contrary their goal is to divide the Democratic party and their vote count.
- **News feed (**28%**) :** Impersonating American local news, these accounts tried to acquire legitimacy using name like @KANSASDAILYNEWS to massively influence public opinion.
- **Hashtag Gammer (**11% **:** This is an interesting category as the tweets seem harmless. Indeed most of them appear like regular user tweets. We suspect this to be a hiding strategy.
- **Fear Monger (**< 1%**) :** These tweets appear in the very beginning of the operations. They spread news about fake crisis. An example is the salmonella contaminated turkeys in 2015.
- **Commercial (**5%**) :** This category regroups all other tweets around mainstream topics

B. IRA strategy

To get a better insight on the topics these categories are tweeting about, we created word clouds for each category. These word clouds show the most commonly used hashtag, which refers to the topic of the tweet. Figure 4 shows the results for right and left trolls

Some of these hashtags are exclusively specific to Amercican politics and an appendix is given in section VI.
The famous MAGA acronym stands out as the most commonly

Fig. 4. Most common hashtags for right trolls (above) and left trolls (below)

used hashtag for the right trolls, but still these word clouds don't show an excessive support for candidates. Furthermore, taking a closer look at at the frequency appearances of all hashtags on all the data reveal that most tweets were not directly criticizing nor approving any politician. We see in Figure 5 that #MAGA is not significantly more frequent than #BlackLivesMatter which convey the idea that the ultimate goal of the IRA was not to support a candidate but rather to divide the population on social issues such as racism, gun rights or immigration. In order to do that, they relied on fake local news as American are known to heavily trust those. The authors TODAYPITTSBURGH, SEATTLE_POST, KANSASDAILYNEWS published around $100k$ tweets impersonating real newspapers : no controversial hashtags or public

Hashtags	Appearence
#news	128760
#sports	48713
#politics	39780
#world	27573
#local	25910
#TopNews	15162
#MAGA	12374
#health	11485
#tcot	11300
#BlackLivesMatter	11276

Fig. 5. Most common hashtags

position. It was simply a matter of presenting the news in an advantageous way for the Russian government and chose the topics they wanted to present. The Russian trolls were also aware of emerging conspiracy theories and helped propagate them, as they are an efficient way to install doubt. Two of the massively relayed conspiracy theories are #QAnon, and #FollowTheWhiteRabbit. QAnon is supposed to be an anonymous American citizen with high level security clearance who wants to get rid of evil and establish an oligarchy. #FollowThe-WhiteRabbit is a reference at Lewis Carroll's children book *Alice in Wonderland* and hints a belief that there are hidden truths being concealed by a global elite heavily involved in a pedophile network – which Donald Trump is trying to bring to justice. These hashtags first appear in October 2017 from anonymous users but were reused thousands of times by the IRA between November and December 2017 with theories such as Hillary Clinton and personalities of her staff wearing ankle bracelets and being on the verge of arrest, or Trump's allusion to *a storm coming* which led to hundreds of tweets with the hashtags #theStorm, #theStormHasArrived or #theStormIsUponUs. This storm was supposed to be a group of radical actions from Trump's administration and consequent efforts were deployed by the IRA to push this information.

Another noticeable thing is that the use of the most controversial hashtags were almost non-existent after Trump's
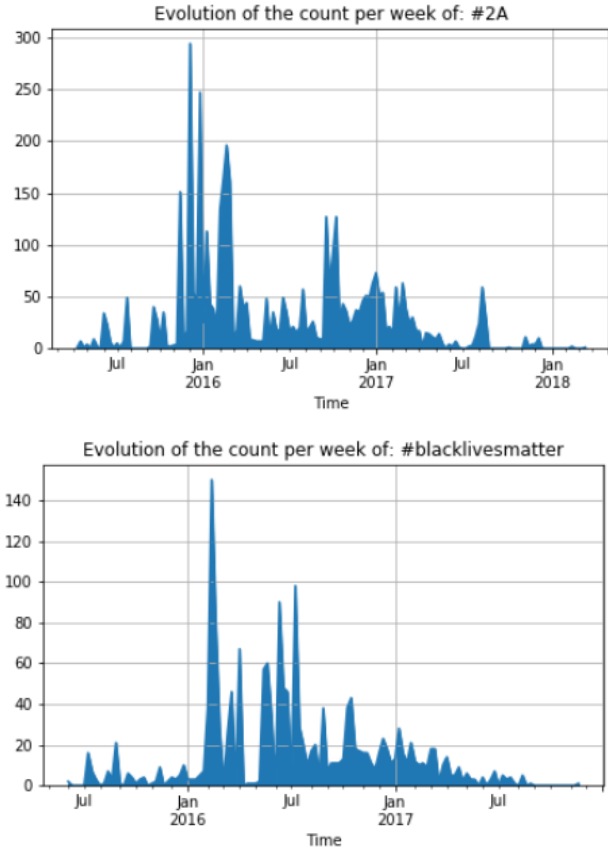
election. Figure 6 shows the results for #2A, a gun related topic and #blacklivesmatter a racism topic. Other hashtags such as #crime, #ACAB or #IslamKills have similar trends. It makes sense to believe that after this point they didn't need to rely on anger of both sides and stopped the usage of these debateable hashtags. On the contrary, #maga was still highly used in 2017.

Additionally to their objective of division, the IRA also had to remain hidden and defend itself from potential accusation. In mid 2017 was launched the *Special Counsel Investigation* to examine the role Russia might have played in the presidential election. This investigation was led by Robert Muller, former head of FBI. Figure 7 shows the immediate reactions of the IRA condemning this *witch hunt* with hashtags like "#CorruptCongress", "#FireMueller", "#FireMcMaster", "#DirtyCongress" being among the most frequent (McMaster is the former National Security Advisor known for his anti-Kremlin positioning)
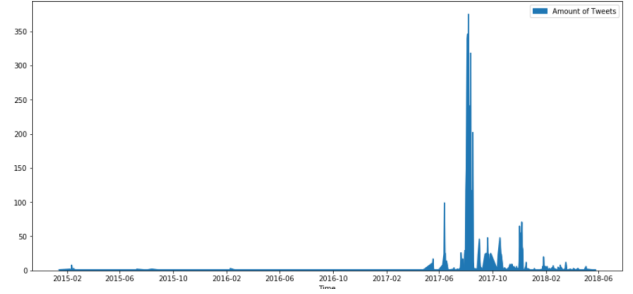

Fig. 7. Evolution of tweets mentioning Robert Mueller

IV. RETWEET SCHEMES

In this section, we try to determine how the IRA deployed its resources to reach as many people as possible with their tweets. 44% of the tweets are actually retweets and 6% of them are retweets from their own tweets. It makes sense to believe that they want to emphasize the topics in these retweets since it is the content they render the most visible. Half of the 20 most active accounts retweet almost exclusively their own content and 178 accounts are only retweeters.

We have drawn a graph of users and represented their 'retweet connections' with edges, an author's position is calculated with a PCA on his feature vector:

$$x = [x_0, x_1, x_2, x_3]$$
$$x_0 = amount\ of\ hashtags\ supporting\ Trump$$
$$x_1 = amount\ of\ hashtags\ supporting\ Hillary$$
$$x_2 = amount\ of\ hashtags\ concerning\ BLM$$
$$x_3 = amount\ of\ gamer\ related\ hashtags$$

We got some insightful results from graphs in Figure 8:

- First of all, we see that before Hillary Clinton won over Bernie Sanders at the Democratic party (6 June 2016),

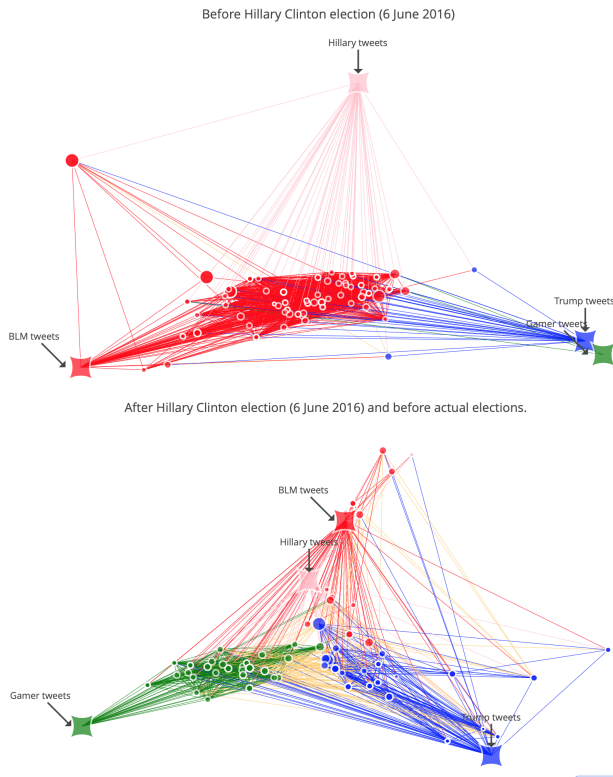

Fig. 6. Evolution of use of controversial hashtags

Fig. 8. Graph of retweet connections through different periods

among the above categories, Black Lives Matters was the most tweeted and retweeted by IRA accounts. Much more than support toward Trump or Hillary. So it seems that at this time the IRA really tried to emphasize on the topics that divide the country instead of supporting any of them.

- After Hillary Clinton won at the democratic party, we see that BLM and Hillary centers got very close, this means that the people posting content about BLM were often the same people as the ones posting content about Hillary and vice-versa, as if now the IRA wanted people to make associations between BLM and Hillary support. At the same time, a lot of political content (supporting Trump) is being posted and retweeted by the IRA accounts, we also notice the apparition of gamer like users that seem to secretly support other political views (the yellow edges in Figure 8 represents retweets to a different categories). So here it seems that the IRA waited for Hillary to won the election against Sanders to completely pull out their strategy, helping Trump win popularity over Clinton. As if they wanted Hillary to win over Sanders.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The Internet Research Agency tweets were an attempt by Russia to push certain subjects in the center of discussions in American politics. Their goal was supposedly to influence the 2016 American election which saw Donald Trump become president. In an attempt to stay undetected, the vast majority

of tweets were not creating fake news but relaying selected information from local news, or at least presenting them according to a specified narrative. The proceeds of the IRA was the following, they established some accounts as being local newspapers, political whistleblowers, relaying information in a biased way to achieve some disruption in the public thinking as well as creating division on social issues such as : racism, gun rights, immigration.

This is an attack on the political system, which can be seen on multiple front, such as underlying the difference in treatment by the justice department based on skin color, some anonymous whistle blowers propagating conspiracy theory, or promoting the greatness of a system based on oligarchy. Finally, we saw that they add developed long term strategies with the evolution of trending hashtags over time.

Thought it is hard to quantify the impact these tweets had on the presidential election, it remains nonetheless an unprecedented aggression on free will. It raises numerous questions on how to detect and prevent such attacks on the future.

VI. HASHTAGS APPENDIX

- **#MAGA**: Make America Great Again
- **#PJNET**: Patriot Journalist Network
- **#TCOT** : Top Conservatives On Twitter
- **#2A**: Second amendment (gun regulation)
- **#CCOT**: Conservatives Christians On Twitter
- **#GOP** : Grand Old Party (Republican Party)
- **#POTUS** : President Of The United States
- **#USFA** : United States Fire Administration
- **#ACAB** : All Cops Are Bastards

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