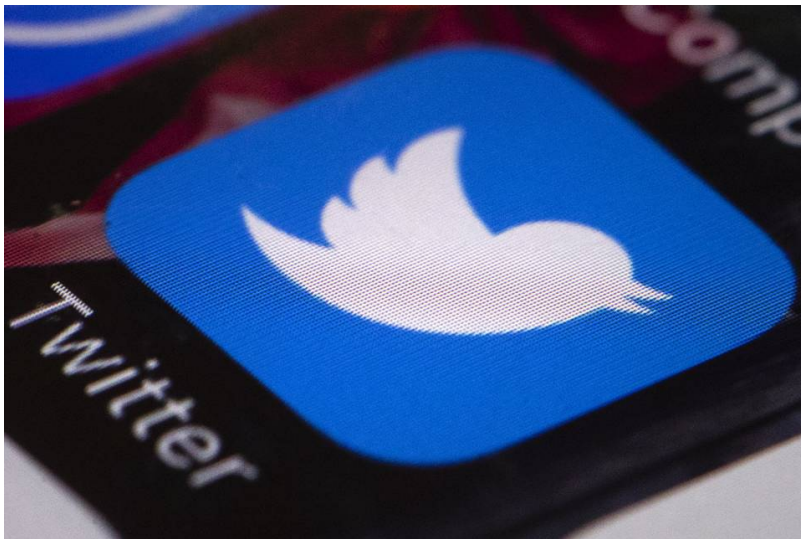


TECH

Tech Giants Disclose Russian Activity on Eve of Congressional Appearance

Facebook estimates 126 million people saw Russian-backed content



Twitter's acting general counsel is scheduled to testify in front of the Senate judiciary subcommittee on crime and terrorism Tuesday afternoon. PHOTO: MATT ROURKE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Deepa Seetharaman and Georgia Wells

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Facebook Inc., [FB 2.09%](#) ▲ Alphabet Inc.'s Google and Twitter Inc. are set to divulge new details showing that the scope of Russian-backed manipulation on their platforms before and after the U.S. presidential election was far greater than previously disclosed, reaching an estimated 126 million people on Facebook alone, according to people familiar with the matter, prepared copies of their testimonies and a company statement.

Facebook estimates that 470 Russian-backed accounts connected to a single pro-Kremlin firm, the Internet Research Agency, churned out 80,000 posts on Facebook between January 2015 and August 2017, the social-media company plans to tell congressional investigators Tuesday, according to an advance copy of the remarks obtained by The Wall Street Journal. Facebook previously had focused narrowly on the 3,000 advertisements spread by the 470 accounts.

Twitter, meanwhile, has identified and removed 2,752 accounts linked to the Internet Research Agency, according to a source familiar with Twitter's testimony, significantly more than the 201

accounts it identified in an initial review last month.

Google said in a blog post Monday it has discovered 1,108 videos uploaded to its YouTube video site, which were viewed a total of 309,000 times in the U.S. from June 2015 to November 2016, by accounts linked to Russian operatives. The videos encompass 43 hours of content from 18 different English-language accounts, it said. In addition, Google said two accounts linked to the Internet Research Agency spent \$4,700 on search and display ads during the 2016 elections.

The disclosures came on the eve of representatives from Facebook, Twitter and Alphabet Inc.'s Google appearing in front of a Senate committee to explain how Russian entities allegedly used their platforms to disrupt American society. Until now, Facebook in particular has focused its disclosures on advertising by the Russian entities. The new revelations provide greater detail about the extent of Russian-backed attempts to sow social and political divisions in the U.S. through social media.

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“Many of the ads and posts we’ve seen so far are deeply disturbing—seemingly intended to amplify societal divisions and pit groups of people against each other,” Facebook General Counsel Colin Stretch plans to say, according to the prepared remarks. “They would be controversial even if they came from authentic accounts in the United States. But coming from foreign actors using fake accounts they are simply unacceptable.”

Mr. Stretch, Twitter’s acting general counsel Sean Edgett and Google General Counsel Kent Walker are scheduled to testify in Congress a second time on Wednesday. They are due to present in front of the House and Senate intelligence committees, which are both conducting probes of Russian activity during the 2016 election to uncover what happened during the campaign for president. Facebook has previously given posts and ads created by the 470 accounts to the committees.

Twitter plans to give committee investigators the account names of the 2,752 accounts related to the Internet Research Agency, and the company is also taking steps to block future registrations related to these accounts, the source says.

The new disclosures come as the tech industry is facing the threat of regulation. Tech companies are expected to face tough questions about their ad disclosure policy and their opposition to

greater regulation.

Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D, Minn.)—who has proposed a bill that would toughen disclosure rules for political advertising online—is expected to press the companies on their objections to regulation, according to a person with knowledge of the senator’s plans.

In his testimony, Mr. Stretch plans to say that “any amount” of fake or malicious activity is “too much”, while at the same time playing down its importance, according to the prepared remarks. Mr. Stretch plans to argue that these posts were a small fraction of the content consumed by Americans during the period—0.004% of posts, or one out of 23,000 pieces of content on Facebook.

The testimonies come nearly a year after the Nov. 8 election. Facebook faced scathing criticism immediately following the election for allowing misinformation and fabricated news articles to run rampant on its platform and harm political discourse.

Over the summer, Facebook said it had no evidence of malicious Russian activity on its site before revealing on Sept. 6 that the IRA, a Russian outfit that shares pro-Kremlin views online, spent \$100,000 on ads on the platform between June 2015 to May 2017.

Facebook learned from “press accounts and statements by congressional leaders” after the election that Russian entities might have exploited its ad tools to interfere in the election, according to the prepared remarks. In October 2016, Facebook disabled about 5.8 million fake accounts in the U.S., but the sweep missed the 470 accounts unearthed by the company a year later, the remarks say.

Critics including lawmakers said the accounts likely had much broader scope including their organic content, such as free posts and events listings. Facebook has said the ads and posts were meant to exploit social and political divisions in the U.S. Facebook previously said roughly 10 million people saw those ads. Tuesday, the company plans to update that figure to 11.4 million.

The accounts were even more active on Instagram, the photo-sharing app that Facebook bought for \$1 billion in 2012, Facebook’s figures will show. The Internet Research Agency created 170 profiles on Instagram, which shared about 120,000 pieces of content during this same time frame.

Twitter’s disclosure in late September included only accounts on its service linked to malicious actors that Facebook had previously identified. These new findings include accounts beyond the ones that overlapped with Facebook.

Twitter’s initial disclosure spurred criticism from lawmakers who are pushing for greater transparency from internet companies over how their platforms are manipulated.

Nearly 10% of the tweets from the 2,752 accounts from Sept. 1, 2016 through Nov. 15, 2016 were election-related, and about half of their tweets were automated, according to the source. During this time, these accounts sent about 1.4 million automated tweets related to the election.

As a part of Twitter's review, the company also identified nine accounts that were linked to Russia and promoted election-related content that violated Twitter's ad policies. Twitter last week announced it will no longer run ads from two of these accounts, Russian-backed news outlets RT and Sputnik.

—Douglas MacMillan and Byron Tau contributed to this article.

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