

Hillary Clinton Was the First Casualty in the New Information Wars

The former presidential nominee made her case that a Russian-backed “conspiracy” to “weaponize” social media took down her campaign.



Shannon Stapleton / Reuters

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Hillary Clinton came to Recode’s [Code Conference](#) with her gloves off. In an interview with the journalists Kara Swisher and Walt Mossberg, she delivered a fully baked articulation of the ways technology was “weaponized” against her campaign to aid Donald Trump.

“I take responsibility for every decision I made,” Clinton said, “but that is not why I lost.”

In previous elections, the internet was primarily used to identify likely donors and voters and then get them to give money and turn out to cast their ballots, she said. That was definitely the story of the 2008 and [2012 Obama campaigns](#), as I encountered them as a journalist.

But that changed in 2016, Clinton said.

“What we thought we were doing was going to be Obama 3.0: better targeting, better messaging, and the ability turn out our voters as we identified them, and to communicate more broadly with voters,” she explained. “Here’s what the other side was doing, and they were in a different arena. Through content farms, through an enormous investment in falsehoods, fake news, call it what you will—”

“Lies,” Mossberg interjected.

“Lies, that’s a good word, too,” Clinton continued. “The other side was using content that was just flat-out false, and delivering it in a very personalized way, both above the radar screen and below. And, look, I’m not a tech expert by any stretch of the imagination, [but] that really influenced the information that people were relying on.”

“The question is where and how did the Russians get into this.”

She called out fake news stories on Facebook, which she said were spread by [1,000 Russian agents](#), as well as [bots running on social media](#) to amplify the disinformation. “It was such a new experience. I understand why people on their Facebook pages, [said] ‘Oh, Hillary Clinton did that. I did not know that! Well, that’s gonna effect my opinion about her,’” Clinton said. “And we did not engage in false content.”

Mossberg asked her why the Democrats were not better at combatting that false information. “There’s a way to weaponize tech that doesn’t involve lying or having Russians help you,” he said. “It is a political weapon. It’s a fact of life. But how do you do it?”

At that point, Clinton claimed that the data candidate Trump received from the Republican National Committee was much better than what she received from the Democratic National Committee.

“I get the nomination. I’m now the nominee of the Democratic party. I inherit nothing from the Democratic party,” she said. “I mean, it was bankrupt. It was on the verge of insolvency. Its data was mediocre to poor, non-existent, wrong. I had to inject money into it.”

(Michael Tyler, the DNC’s spokesman, notes that DNC chair Tom Perez has admitted that the committee was not “firing on all cylinders,” and says that the DNC “is now undergoing an organizational restructuring that will include a new Chief Technology Officer, who will do an in depth analysis and maintain the party’s analytics infrastructure needs.”)

Meanwhile, Clinton continued, the Republican National Committee [spent \\$100 million on its data infrastructure](#) between 2012 and 2016, which it handed over to Donald Trump’s campaign.

“Then you’ve got Cambridge Analytica,” Clinton said, referencing the political analytics start-up backed by the wealthy and right-wing Mercer family.

In the run up to and aftermath of the election, Cambridge Analytica got [tons of press](#) for its targeting abilities. “We are thrilled that our revolutionary approach to data-driven communication has played such an integral part in President-elect Trump’s extraordinary win,” the company’s CEO said in a press release. [Later reports](#) tended to be more circumspect about the firm’s importance.

“You can believe the hype on how great they were or how not great they were, but the fact is they added something. And I think we better understand that,” she said.

“The Mercers did not invest all that money just for their own amusement.”

She described a deal that Cambridge Analytica cut with the Trump campaign that put Steve Bannon, who had been running Breitbart, into the center of Trump’s world.

“They marry content with delivery and data. And it was a potent combination,” Clinton said. “The question is where and how did the Russians get into this.”

Then, like a prosecutor walking through her argument, she talked about the [17-agency report from the intelligence community](#) about Russian interference into the presidential election.

“I am leaning Trump,” Clinton said.

“[The report] concluded with high confidence that the Russians ran an extensive information war campaign against my campaign to influence voters in the election,” Clinton said. “They did it through paid advertising, we think. They did it through false news sites. They did it through these 1,000 agents. They did it through machine learning, which kept spewing out this stuff over and over again, the algorithms they developed.”

Then she asked, not-quite-rhetorically, “Who were they coordinating with or colluding with?”

Unlike previous Russian cyberattacks inside the U.S., “This was different. They went public,” she said. “The Russians, in my opinion—and based on the intel and counterintel people I’ve talked to—they could not have known how best to weaponize that information unless they had been guided.”

“Guided by Americans?” Mossberg asked.

“Guided by Americans,” Clinton answered. “And guided by people who had polling data and information.”

After a brief tour of James Comey's behavior during the election, Kara Swisher asked Clinton who she thought was guiding the Russians. "I hope that we'll get enough information to be able to answer that question," Clinton responded at first.

Swisher prompted, "But you're leaning Trump."

"I am leaning Trump," Clinton said.

"We're going to, I hope, connect up a lot of the dots," she said. "And it's really important because when Comey did testify before being fired this last couple of weeks, he was asked, 'Are the Russians still involved?' And he goes, 'Yes. They are.' Why wouldn't they be? It worked for them. It is important for Americans, particularly people in tech and business, to understand, Putin wants to bring us down and he is an old KGB agent."

Having made her case, Clinton then tried to put herself in Mark Zuckerberg's shoes. "With respect to the platforms, I am, again, not exactly sure what conclusions we should draw," she said. "But here's what I believe. I believe that what was happening to me was unprecedented and we were scrambling."

But she did have some advice for Facebook and Twitter. "They've gotta get back to trying to curate more effectively," she said. "Put me out of the equation. They've got to help prevent fake news from creating a new reality that does influence how people think of themselves, see the world, the decisions that they make."

Have Conspiracy Theories Gone Mainstream?



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