

Opinion | EDITORIAL

# Russia's Fake Americans

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD    SEPT. 8, 2017

It is commonly believed that Russia's interference in the 2016 presidential campaign consisted mainly of the hacking and leaking of Democratic emails and unfavorable stories circulated abroad about Hillary Clinton. But as a startling investigation by Scott Shane of The New York Times, and new research by the cybersecurity firm FireEye, now reveal, the Kremlin's stealth intrusion into the election was far broader and more complex, involving a cyberarmy of bloggers posing as Americans and spreading propaganda and disinformation to an American electorate on Facebook, Twitter and other platforms.

Whether the Trump campaign was colluding with the Russians is, of course, the question at the heart of the investigation by the special counsel, Robert Mueller. Donald Trump Jr. told Senate investigators this week that he met with Russians claiming to have dirt on Mrs. Clinton because it could concern her "fitness, character or qualifications." But Russia's guile in using hackers and counterfeit Facebook and Twitter accounts to undermine her campaign represents a new dimension in disinformation that must not go unchallenged by Mr. Trump, however much he may have benefited from it and however close his relationship to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The attack, according to the Times report, involved hundreds or even thousands of fake accounts on Facebook and Twitter that regularly posted anti-Clinton

messages.

To viewers, the messages resembled the normal partisan give-and-take one expects in a political campaign; in fact they came from foreign sources. Many of the rapid-fire salvos came from automated accounts.

In the normal bounds of American politics, such partisan messaging is required by law to account for its source — as in “I’m candidate McAdoo and I approve this message.” But in the riotous world of social media, disclosure is not a high priority.

Now that the scheming is clear, Facebook and Twitter say they are reviewing the 2016 race and studying how to defend against such meddling in the future. Facebook announced Wednesday the removal of 470 fake accounts and pages “likely” engineered in Russia. It requires account identities and can challenge the bona fides of fakers. Twitter does not, nor does it prohibit automated accounts, which can create fake “trends” to attract readers. Between them, the sites have more than two billion accounts.

Russia has not exactly hidden its intentions. In February of last year, a top cyberintelligence adviser to Mr. Putin, Andrey Krutskikh, hinted at a Moscow conference of a possible attack. “I’m warning you: We are on the verge of having something in the information arena which will allow us to talk to the Americans as equals,” he said. Mr. Putin has insisted there is “no proof” Russia is directing the work of “free spirited” hackers — despite decisive American intelligence to the contrary.

Facing the Russian challenge will involve complicated issues dealing with secret foreign efforts to undermine American free speech. National security agencies in Washington have identified Russian involvement in the spread of the email leaks that bedeviled Mrs. Clinton, and the Russian military intelligence agency’s use of hackers to penetrate state voting systems.

But it is unclear whether any federal agency is focused specifically on the problems Mr. Shane and FireEye have illuminated — foreign intervention through social media to feed partisan anger and suspicion in a polarized nation.

The social media scheming is further evidence of what amounted to unprecedented foreign invasion of American democracy. If President Trump and Congress are not outraged by this, American voters should ask why.

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