

TWITTER POLITICS CHARTS

Junk news and Russian misinformation flooded Twitter during the 2016 election

The new study, from researchers at Oxford, comes as Twitter prepares to brief Congress.

BY **TONY ROMM** AND **RANI MOLLA** | SEP 28, 2017, 9:56AM EDT



Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey | Teresa Kroeger/Getty Images for Thurgood Marshall College Fund

Polarizing conspiratorial content and inaccurate “junk news” flooded Twitter during the 2016 presidential race, according to new research from Oxford University, particularly in swing states like New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and North Carolina.

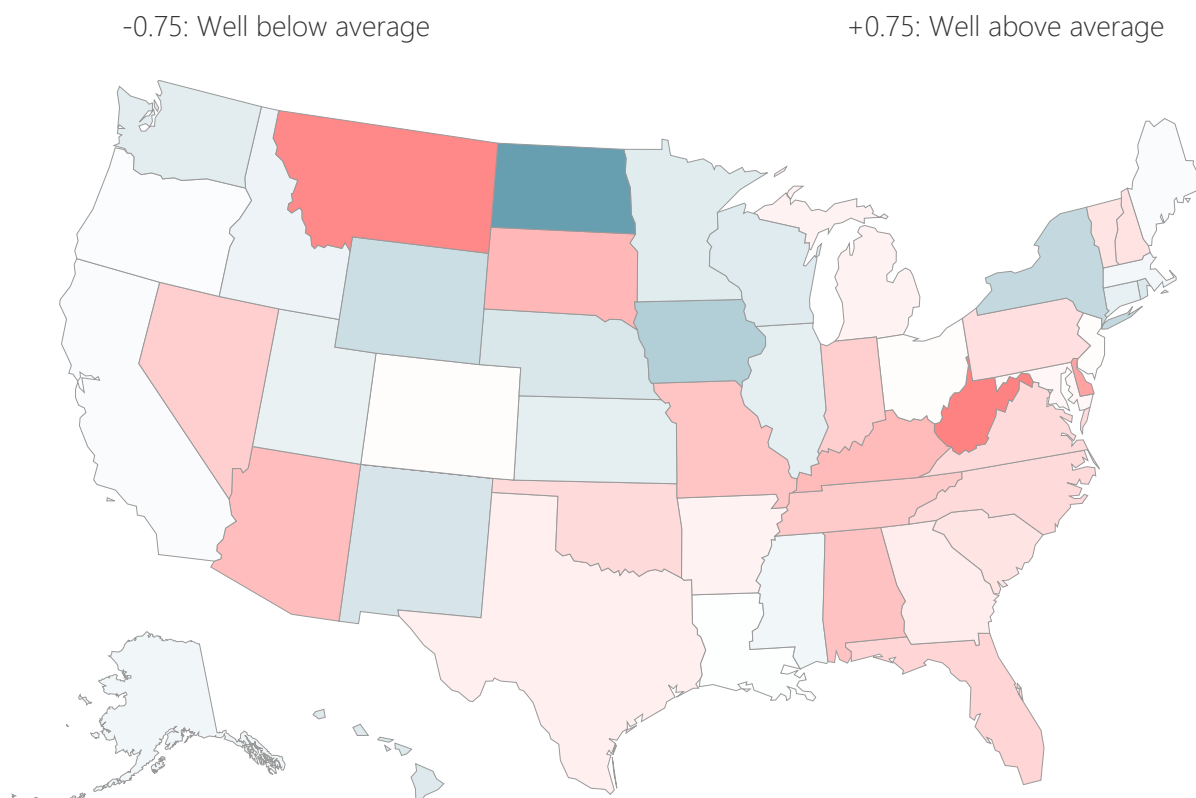
The new findings about the extent of misinformation on the site comes as Twitter prepares to brief House and Senate lawmakers on the extent to which Russian-backed agents may have co-opted social media in a bid to interfere with the U.S. election.

But unlike the recent revelations about the extent of Russia's use of Facebook to disrupt the U.S. presidential election, the study didn't conclude if there were specific agents behind the spread of misinformation on Twitter. Instead, the idea was to look at the spectrum of tweets and examine how often people (or bots) shared bad information.

It found about 20 percent of tweets sampled around the U.S. presidential election qualified as "polarizing and conspiracy content," including links to "junk news," WikiLeaks or Russian sources, like Sputnik and RT. At the same time, about 20 percent of the tweets also included links to "professional news brands," without citing specific news sources.

The study, conducted by researchers at Oxford's Computation Propaganda Project, sought to focus on U.S. political conversations on Twitter at a few major moments: The presidential debates as well as the 10 days prior to the election. They included only tweets from profiles that contained location information, a link and an election-related hashtag, about 1.2 million tweets in all.

Where misinformation spread most ahead of the 2016 presidential election



Source: Oxford's computational propaganda report

Microsoft Power BI



Researchers also discovered the greatest concentrations of misinformation happened in swing states — 12 of 16 of those states, seen as crucial in every presidential election, had higher levels of dubious content than the national average in 2016. The southeastern U.S. also registered higher-than-average misinformation.

Twitter, however, cast doubt on the report's methodology, citing how the authors compiled tweets using a specific Twitter database, in this case its API, which only allows researchers to download about 1 percent of all tweets.

"Furthermore, we believe the peer review process exists to ensure published research is authoritative and empirically sound. In this case, there does not appear

to have been any such review," the spokesperson said in a statement.

Table 1: What Political News and Information Were US Twitter Users Sharing during the Election?			
<i>Type of Source</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>% of Subtotal</i>	<i>% of Total</i>
Professional News Content			
Major News Brands	196,697	77	
Minor News Brands	60,055	23	
Subtotal	256,752	100	20
Professional Political Content			
Political Party or Candidate	121,323	98	
Experts	6,350	5	
Government	2,294	2	
Subtotal	124,273	100	10
Polarizing and Conspiracy Content			
Junk News	203,591	79	
WikiLeaks	48,068	19	
Russia	7,683	3	
Subtotal	259,342	100	20
Other Political News and Information			
Other Political	97,900	59	
Citizen, Civic or Civil Society	34,935	21	
Political Humor or Entertainment	30,021	18	
Religion	2,124	1	
Political Merchandise	2,067	1	
Subtotal	167,047	100	13
Other			
Social Media Platform	195,470	42	
Not Available	241,688	52	
Other Non-Political	25,164	5	
Subtotal	462,322	100	36
TOTAL	1,269,736		100
<i>Source: Authors' calculations from data sampled 1-11/11/16.</i>			

The study's authors acknowledge those limitations in their work. "Full access to user location data would provide better resolution on the distribution of users across states," they wrote, "but this response rate is sufficient to help us begin to understand the relationship between where users are and what kinds of political content they are being served by Twitter."

The findings still pose new problems for Twitter, which is set to head to the U.S. Capitol today to brief the House and Senate Intelligence Committees. The two panels are investigating Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election while Robert Mueller, a former FBI director, spearheads the U.S. government's own independent inquiry.

Democratic lawmakers on both intel committees already have expressed deep fears that Russian agents used social media sites to spread misinformation, and some are particularly concerned that's happened on Twitter as the result of bots.

Congressional investigators also have taken aim at one of Twitter's peers, Facebook, where Kremlin-aligned forces purchased about 3,000 ads in order to sow political discontent, sources have said. Both companies, along with Google, are set to testify in public about the matter at congressional hearings this fall.



Subscribe to the Recode newsletter

Sign up for our Recode Daily newsletter to get the top tech and business news stories delivered to your inbox.

GO

By signing up, you agree to our [Privacy Policy](#) and European users agree to the data transfer policy.

IN THIS STORYSTREAM

Russia, social media, fake news and the 2016 presidential election

A top Democratic senator briefed by Twitter on Russia and the 2016 election called the company's explanation 'frankly inadequate'

Junk news and Russian misinformation flooded Twitter during the 2016 election

Mark Zuckerberg admits he should have taken Facebook fake news and the election more seriously: 'Calling that crazy was dismissive and I regret it'

[VIEW ALL](#) **16** [STORIES](#)

AD

THE LATEST

Can consumers save their own privacy?

BY **ERIC JOHNSON**

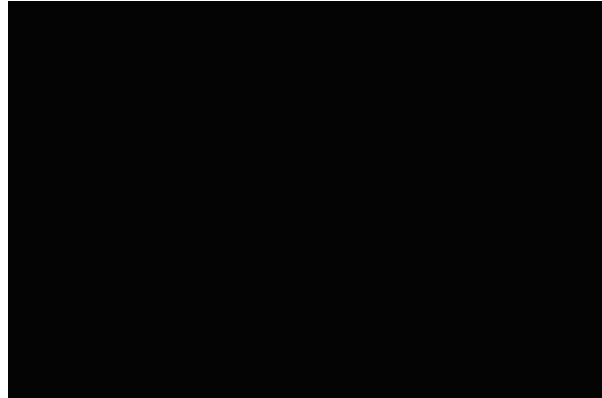
A top Democratic senator briefed by Twitter on Russia and the 2016 election called the company's explanation 'frankly inadequate'

BY **TONY ROMM**



Twitter just told Congress it found about 200 accounts linked to the same Russian agents found on Facebook

BY TONY ROMM



How to watch Amazon's first NFL livestream between the Chicago Bears and Green Bay Packers tonight

BY KURT WAGNER

AD