

# Twitter finds hundreds of accounts tied to Russian operatives

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By **Elizabeth Dwoskin**, **Adam Entous** and **Karoun Demirjian** September 28 at 3:57 PM

Twitter has shut down 201 accounts that were tied to the same Russian operatives who posted thousands of political ads on Facebook, the company told congressional investigators in a meeting Thursday and revealed in a blog in the afternoon.

The company said it also found three accounts from the news site RT — which Twitter linked to the Kremlin — that spent \$274,100 in ads on its platform in 2016.

Despite the disclosures, Sen. Mark Warner (D-Va.) questioned whether the company is doing enough to confront the problem of Russian meddling. He called Twitter's presentation to a closed door meeting of Senate Intelligence Committee staffers Thursday morning was "deeply disappointing" and "inadequate on almost every level." Twitter made a similar presentation to House Intelligence Committee staffers on Thursday afternoon.

The company "showed an enormous lack of understanding... about how serious this issue is, the threat it poses to democratic institutions," Warner said.

The meeting between the company and Congressional investigators was part of a widening government probe into how Russian operatives used Facebook, Google, Twitter and other social media platforms to sow division and disinformation during the 2016 campaign. Those companies are under increasing pressure from Capitol Hill to investigate Russian meddling on their platforms and are facing the possibility of new regulations that could impact their massive advertising businesses.

Facebook, Google and Twitter are also being summoned to a public hearing on Capitol Hill on Nov. 1.

The Twitter accounts, which were taken down over the last month, were associated with 470 accounts and pages that Facebook last month said came from the Internet Research Agency, a Russia-connect troll farm. Twitter said the groups on Facebook had 22 corresponding Twitter accounts. Twitter then found an additional 179 accounts linked to those 22.

But lawmakers and analysts criticized Twitter for appearing as if it only accepted and looked into the data that it received from Facebook, rather than conduct a broader internal investigation. Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Ca.), the ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, said Twitter needs to launch “a far more robust investigation” into how Russian actors used the platform.

“They have no idea who is on their platform. If it wasn’t for Facebook’s data, they would have no idea these were even Russian accounts,” said Clint Watts, senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute.

In its blog post, Twitter did not reveal who the ads reached and how many times they were shared. It is also not clear whether Twitter did a broader search of its users for Russian interference.

Twitter wrote that it was cooperating with the Congressional investigation. “Twitter deeply respects the integrity of the election process, which is a cornerstone for all democracies. We will continue to strengthen Twitter against attempted manipulation, including malicious automated accounts and spam, as well as other activities that violate our Terms of Service,” the post said.

But Alex Howard, deputy director of the Sunlight Foundation, said there’s plenty of evidence that Russian intelligence operatives have been on Twitter for years and have used the platform to amplify messages.

“We need to think very carefully about what role we want these companies to have in our debate – and, since these platforms largely regulate themselves, what kind of accountability we want them to have,” Howard said.

Silicon Valley has long enjoyed a hands-off approach from regulators, and has become a major lobbying force in Washington in order to keep things that way. But that attitude appears to be shifting quickly.

Last week Sens. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) and Warner urged colleagues Thursday to support a bill that would create new transparency requirements for platforms that run political ads online akin to those already in place for TV stations, according to a letter obtained by The Washington Post. Lawmakers from across the political spectrum – from Sen. Cory Booker (D-NJ) to Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex) – have called for more scrutiny into the market power of technology companies over the last few months.

Facebook has faced the greatest scrutiny. The company has said it will provide 3,000 political ads, in addition to payment information and data about who those ads targeted, to Congress in the coming days.

In a Facebook post on Wednesday, Mark Zuckerberg apologized for saying it was “pretty crazy” that fake news could have influenced the U.S. election.

“Calling that crazy was dismissive and I regret it. This is too important an issue to be dismissive,” he wrote. He then emphasized the role Facebook played in spurring authentic debate and sustaining democratic ideals was much greater than any exploitation that took place.

“The data we have has always shown that our broader impact -- from giving people a voice to enabling candidates to communicate directly to helping millions of people vote -- played a far bigger role in this election,” he said.

Google, the largest online advertising company in the world, has also been asked to provide information to Congressional investigators and to testify before Congress, but has not said whether it will do so. The company has said it will cooperate with any investigation and has “seen no evidence” of a Russian-promoted ad campaign. Google did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

In many ways, Twitter has been the most vulnerable to exploitation of all the social media companies. The company officially says the 5 percent of accounts on Twitter are automated bots, but outside researchers say the number could be much higher.


It’s very easy to buy fake accounts on Twitter, making it hard for Twitter to discern the extent of the Russian meddling, analysts said.

“Anyone can create an account anonymously on Twitter and hide its origin,” said Watts, the Foreign Policy Research Institute fellow.

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