

## TECHNOLOGY

# Facebook's Russia-Linked Ads Came in Many Disguises

By MIKE ISAAC and SCOTT SHANE OCT. 2, 2017

SAN FRANCISCO — The Russians who posed as Americans on Facebook last year tried on quite an array of disguises.

There was “Defend the 2nd,” a Facebook page for gun-rights supporters, festooned with firearms and tough rhetoric. There was a rainbow-hued page for gay rights activists, “LGBT United.” There was even a Facebook group for animal lovers with memes of adorable puppies that spread across the site with the help of paid ads.

Federal investigators and officials at Facebook now believe these groups and their pages were part of a highly coordinated disinformation campaign linked to the Internet Research Agency, a secretive company in St. Petersburg, Russia, known for spreading Kremlin-linked propaganda and fake news across the web. They were described to The New York Times by two people familiar with the social network and its ads who were not authorized to discuss them publicly.

Under intensifying pressure from Congress and growing public outcry, Facebook on Monday turned over more than 3,000 of the Russia-linked advertisements from its site over to the Senate and House intelligence committees, as well as the Senate Judiciary Committee. The material is part of an attempt to

learn the depth of what investigators now believe was a sprawling foreign effort spanning years to interfere with the 2016 United States presidential election.

“We’re obviously deeply disturbed by this,” Joel Kaplan, Facebook vice president for United States public policy, said in an interview. “The ads and accounts we found appeared to amplify divisive political issues across the political spectrum,” including gun rights, gay rights issues and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Facebook declined to name or confirm any specific groups or advertisements, citing legal restrictions and ongoing participation with federal investigators. Several of the pages with Russian links were leaked or have been identified by reporters. The Times was told of at least seven Russia-linked Facebook groups by the people familiar with the investigation, some of which were previously unreported.

Late Monday, Facebook said in a post that about 10 million people had seen the ads in question. About 44 percent of the ads were seen before the 2016 election and the rest after, the company said.

The scope and types of the Facebook content being handed over underline the complicated nature of the investigation, and the degree to which the social network — home to more than two billion regular visitors — has been used to manipulate Americans and foment public unrest.

Facebook revealed on Sept. 6 that it had found 470 pages and profiles linked to the Internet Research Agency. It said the pages had purchased the 3,000 ads, a sampling of which has been shown to the Senate and House intelligence committees investigating the Russian influence campaign.

In a live video address on his Facebook page last month, Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook’s chief executive, acknowledged the gravity and novelty of the tactics used across his network.

“Many of these dynamics were new in this election, or at much larger scale than ever before in history, and at much larger scale than the interference we’ve found,” Mr. Zuckerberg said.

Since Facebook's public disclosures, the cross hairs have widened to encompass other companies in Silicon Valley and what part, if any, their networks had in shaping the 2016 election's outcome.

Last week, Twitter said it had discovered more than 200 accounts with links to the Russia-controlled pages Facebook had found. Senator Mark Warner, Democrat of Virginia and vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, criticized the company for failing to look beyond the Facebook research for stealth Russian activity on its platform.

And on Friday, Google said it would also cooperate with congressional inquiries into the election. The internet search giant has started an investigation internally into whether its advertising products and services were used as part of the Russia-linked influence campaign.

Officials from all three companies have been asked to testify at public congressional hearings on the Russian operations before the House committee this month and the Senate committee on Nov. 1.

While American intelligence agencies concluded in January that a major goal of Vladimir V. Putin, the Russian president, was to damage Hillary Clinton, the Facebook operation shows the Russian government reached deeply into polarizing political issues on multiple fronts. Russia experts said Mr. Putin hoped to mar the image of American democracy and handicap the United States' international influence.

In every case, the voices posed as Americans and presumed to speak for like-thinking fellow citizens: anti-immigration zealots, gun-rights advocates, gay rights supporters, African-American activists — and, more incongruously, dog lovers, according to the two people familiar with the sampling of advertisements.

The LGBT United page and a Twitter account called @LGBTuni, featuring a rainbow symbol, declared: "We speak for all fellow members of LGBT community across the nation. Gender preference does not define you. Your spirit defines you."

The Defend the 2nd page appeared to have spread messages of support for gun rights.

“Why do I have a gun?” asks a young woman in one image that appears to be associated with the page. “Because it’s easier for my family to get me out of jail than out of cemetery.” (The image and slogan seem to be borrowed from real gun activists, but the dropped “a” before “cemetery” is a characteristic mistake for Russians speaking English.)

Part of Facebook’s challenge in rooting out bad actors speaks to the very nature of how the company’s entire network is built. In some cases, the Russian-linked accounts created Facebook groups and posted images and content aimed to spread quickly across Facebook.

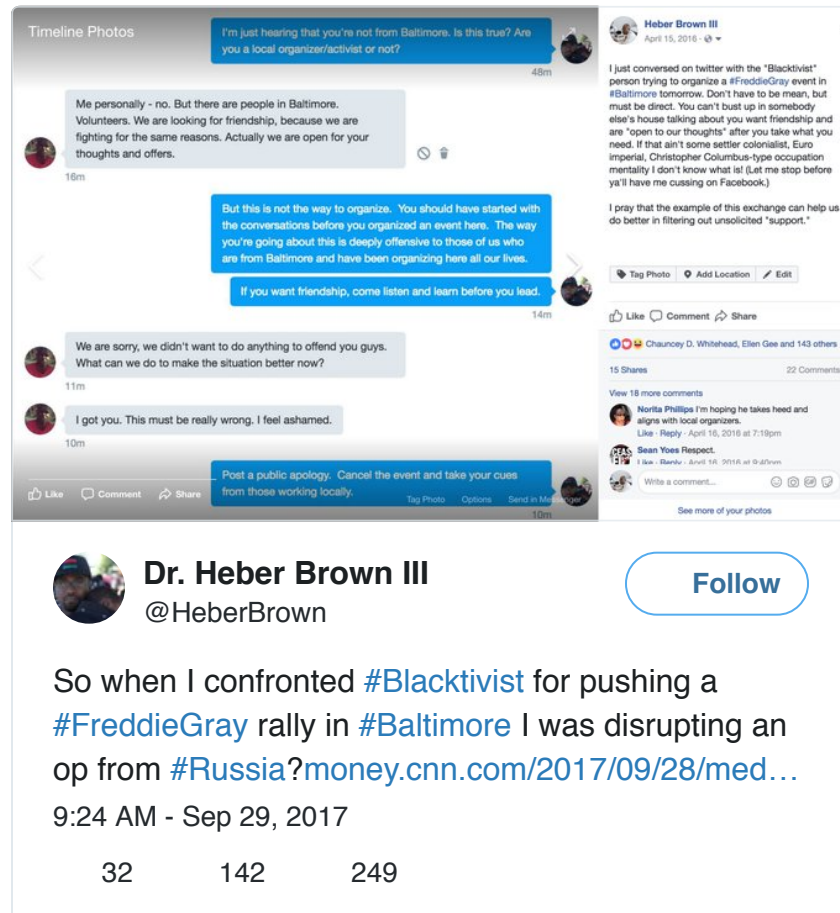
To aid the viral spread, these accounts paid for “boosted posts” — Facebook’s name for one of its paid advertisements — to appear interspersed in users’ news feeds, the central column filled with status updates and photos from friends. Those posts often included a call to action, like asking users to join a bogus group or share the post.

Moreover, the disinformation campaign spread well beyond Facebook to sites like Reddit, Instagram, 4chan and Imgur — other popular online social networks — making it more difficult for any one company to curb the tide of fake accounts.

In at least one case, authentic American activists actually engaged the Russian fakes. When the “Blacktivist” Facebook page and Twitter account — now suspected of being linked to Russia — called for a march in Baltimore amid the turmoil that came after the death in police custody of a black man, Freddie Gray, a genuine local activist confronted the Blacktivist operator via Twitter.

The Rev. Heber Brown III, pastor of a Baltimore church, asked Blacktivist if those behind the account were in Baltimore. The person or people behind the account responded that they were not but “we are looking for friendship, because we are fighting for the same reasons. Actually we are open for your thoughts and offers.”

Mr. Brown replied that they should “come learn and listen before you lead” and urged Blacktivist to apologize publicly. When he learned on Friday, first from a CNN report, that the account originated in Russia, Mr. Brown tweeted his amazement that he had not been correcting an overeager out-of-town activist but had unwittingly been “disrupting a Russian op.”



Another page, called “Secured Borders,” offered a stream of inflammatory anti-immigrant commentary. One called “Heart of Texas” agitated for that state’s secession. A third, “Being Patriotic,” tried to rally Floridians in favor of the Trump campaign.

The goal of the dog lovers’ page was more obscure. But some analysts suggested a possible motive: to build a large following before gradually introducing political content. Without viewing the entire feed from the page, now closed by Facebook, it is impossible to say whether the Russian operators tried such tactics.

Clinton Watts, a former F.B.I. agent now at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia, said Russia had been entrepreneurial in trying to develop diverse channels of influence. Some, like the dogs page, may have been created without a specific goal and held in reserve for future use.

“They were creating many audiences on social media to try to influence around,” said Mr. Watts, who has traced suspected Russian accounts since 2015.

Facebook said it was taking steps to fight back. The company plans to hire more than 1,000 new employees for its ads review team, and said it would cooperate and share what it learned with other technology companies. It also plans to restrict “more subtle types of violence” from appearing in ads, and will require more thorough documentation to verify the identities of advertisers who wish to buy political ads.

On Saturday, at the conclusion of the Jewish holiday Yom Kippur — the “Day of Atonement” — Mr. Zuckerberg, who is Jewish, also appeared penitent.

“For the ways my work was used to divide people rather than bring us together, I ask forgiveness,” he wrote in a post to his personal Facebook page. “I will work to do better.”

Mike Isaac reported from San Francisco and Scott Shane from Washington.

Follow Mike Isaac on Twitter @MikeIsaac and Scott Shane @ScottShaneNYT.

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