

Google uncovers Russian-bought ads on YouTube, Gmail and other platforms

By [Elizabeth Dwoskin](#), [Adam Entous](#) and [Craig Timberg](#) October 9 at 7:00 AM

SAN FRANCISCO — Google for the first time has uncovered evidence that Russian operatives exploited the company's platforms in an attempt to interfere in the 2016 election, according to people familiar with the company's investigation.

The Silicon Valley giant has found that tens of thousands of dollars were spent on ads by Russian agents who aimed to spread disinformation across Google's many products, which include YouTube, as well as advertising associated with Google search, Gmail, and the company's DoubleClick ad network, the people said, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss matters that have not been made public. Google runs the world's largest online advertising business, and YouTube is the world's largest online video site.

The discovery by Google is also significant because the ads do not appear to be from the same Kremlin-affiliated troll farm that bought ads on Facebook -- a sign that the Russian effort to spread disinformation online may be a much broader problem than Silicon Valley companies have unearthed so far.

Google previously downplayed the problem of Russian meddling on its platforms. Last month, Google spokeswoman Andrea Faville told The Washington Post that the company is "always monitoring for abuse or violations of our policies and we've seen no evidence this type of ad campaign was run on our platforms."

Nevertheless, Google launched an investigation into the matter, as Congress pressed technology companies to determine how Russian operatives used social media, online advertising, and other digital tools to influence the 2016 presidential contest and foment discord in U.S. society.

Google declined to provide a comment for this story. The people familiar with its investigation said that the company is looking at a set of ads that cost less than \$100,000 and that it is still sorting out whether all of the ads came from trolls or whether some originated from legitimate Russian accounts.

To date, Google has mostly avoided the scrutiny that has fallen on its rival Facebook. The social network recently shared about 3,000 Russian-bought ads with Congressional investigators that were purchased by operatives associated with the Internet Research Agency, a Russian-government affiliated troll farm, the company has said.

Some of the ads, which cost a total of about \$100,000, touted Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders and the Green party candidate Jill Stein during the campaign, people familiar with those ads said. Other ads appear to have been aimed at fostering division in United States by promoting anti-immigrant sentiment and racial animosity. Facebook has said those ads reached just 10 million of the 210 million U.S. users that log onto the service each month.

At least one outside researcher has said that the influence of Russian disinformation on Facebook is much greater than the company has so far acknowledged and encompasses paid ads as well as posts published on Facebook pages controlled by Russian agents. The posts were shared hundreds of millions of times, said Jonathan Albright, research director of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University.

On Monday he said the revelations about Google suggest the Russian online influence campaign likely used many of the American technology industry's most prominent online platforms and services.

"It's a system," Albright said. "It's not necessarily magic. It's social media marketing at an expert level... This is very well executed."

Oxford University researchers, meanwhile, reported Monday that Twitter and Facebook accounts linked to Russians targeted online content at U.S. military veterans and active-duty personnel, mixing disinformation alongside other content already being read and shared widely among these communities.

In a blog post, Facebook wrote it is also looking at an additional 2,200 ads that may have not come from the Internet Research Agency.

"We also looked for ads that might have originated in Russia — even those with very weak signals of a connection and not associated with any known organized effort," the company wrote last month. "This was a broad search, including, for instance, ads bought from accounts with US IP addresses but with the language set to Russian — even though they didn't necessarily violate any policy or law. In this part of our review, we found approximately \$50,000 in potentially politically related ad spending on roughly 2,200 ads."

Meanwhile, Twitter said that it shut down 201 accounts associated with the Internet Research Agency. It also disclosed that the account for the news site RT, which the company linked to the Kremlin, spent \$274,100 on its platform in 2016. Twitter has not said how many times the Russian disinformation was shared. The company is investigating that matter and trying to map the relationship between Russian accounts and well-known media personalities as well as influencers associated with the campaigns of Donald Trump and other candidates, said a person familiar with Twitter's internal investigation. RT also has a sizeable presence on YouTube.

Twitter declined to comment for this story.

Executives for Facebook and Twitter will testify before Congressional investigators on Nov. 1. Google has not said whether it will accept a similar invitation to do so.

U.S. intelligence agencies concluded in January that Russian president Vladimir Putin intervened in the U.S. election to help Donald Trump win. But Silicon Valley companies have received little assistance from the intelligence community, people familiar with the companies' probes said.

Google discovered the Russian presence on its platforms by siphoning data from another technology company, Twitter, the people familiar with Google's investigation said. Twitter offers outsiders the ability to access a small amount of historical tweets for free, and charges developers for access to the entire Twitter firehose of data stemming back to 2006.

Google downloaded the data from Twitter and was able to link Russian Twitter accounts to other accounts that had used Google's services to buy ads, the people said. This was done without the explicit cooperation of Twitter, the people said.

Google's probe is still in its early stages, the people said. The number of ads posted and the number of times those ads were clicked on could not be learned. Google is continuing to examine its own records and is also sharing data with Facebook. Twitter and Google have not cooperated with one another in their investigations.

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VOICE FREEDOM 36 minutes ago

During this time of uncertainty -What is true? What is fake news?What is manipulation? What are the hidden agendas? What is objective, subjective?- we must first take on the responsibility of clarifying our own knowledge of ourselves. Are we motivated by our own self interest vs the interest of our society? Do we truly believe that "Truth shall set your free"? If we buy and pass on untruths- we all become imprisoned by these actions. We are responsible for the injustices that it creates. Our responsibility must take a slow steady hand at seeking out the truth from a variety of sources. Even then stop ourselves from our impulses of anger and lashing out against those that may not meet with standards that we value. In anger the objectivity of the truth is blurred. May the actual truth be the goals of our citizens for the sake of a unified and advanced society, who will not sell their soul at

any price. Our communication with one another will only go as far as we can take our actions with respect- which will lead to trust and any meaningful relationship with one another .

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Jeanne_dArc 1 hour ago

After 9/11, we discovered that our various intelligence agencies whose responsibility it was to safeguard our country, were isolated and secretive to the point of not sharing information that "might" have prevented that catastrophe. Sixteen years later, a different insidious invasion that threatens our democracy is just beginning to be exposed, and similarly, the social media giants - Facebook, Google and Twitter are isolated and secretive. Trickling out, only after Congressional coercion are the preposterous, but true details that Russian troll farms and roBOTS were infesting our public and personal dialogs in the 2016 election with lies and propaganda. The American public was too naive and unsophisticated about internet hacking to understand how our privacy was (and still is being) violated.

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gladgrace 6 hours ago

This helps answer some questions but it doesn't help answer why so many people wanted to believe the propaganda, no matter how preposterous or obscene it was. Nor does it explain their intense satisfaction and glee at spreading it. Most of what I saw was from things "liked" because I have a lot of FB friends in VT and they were almost all either Republicans or Sanders fans. They were "liking" and sharing all sorts of really, frankly, stupid memes and things that looked like legitimate news outlets with made-up names like AmericanPatriotNews. Some of them seemed more than willing to suspend disbelief if they could thrill over some bizarre charges against HRC. Some seemed to cherish memes that pushed the military or the flag in a divisive, and often misrepresented, way. I guess that's the point of propaganda, that it can pick up on fear and ignorance and juice it up and give it language and legs. But there were posters who I would have thought would have been more self-aware. I had a back and forth in FB messaging after the election with one of them and she asked me to stop rebutting her reposts of horrible political anti-gay propaganda because she "has gay friends and doesn't want them angry at her." Citizens need to get smarter about letting themselves be manipulated. If something appeals to a base instinct, stop. Don't just pass it on because it's amusing in a cruel way and you think it will do no real damage.

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petrafab 6 hours ago

The problem with the internet, Social media, campaign contributions and half the other ills in this society is Anonymity. If everyone was required to admit who they are when they open an account, make a contribution, take a public position or comment on anything this society would be a lot better off. Anonymity was never part of civil society. Maybe in the wild west you could keep changing your name but your face was still attached to your actions. Government espionage agents have always striven for it but I would not count them as part of civil society. What happened to needing to stand behind your beliefs.

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SilkkyFire 6 hours ago

I would like to hope we will be smarter next time, but there is a problem. Being told what we want to hear, and having our inner id stroked and fed via racist propaganda and such (which gives you a lovely feeling of confidence and puts a spring in your step), is basically another opioid experience. The Russians must know this as they deliver the dope to their own people every day and watch them get all nice and cozy. The truth is often scratchy. Yes I challenge myself with this insight every day. It is an uncomfortable way to live.

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Oldandtired 7 hours ago

The history of any new technology starting with nuclear science to on-line communication shows that it is always a double edged sword. Freedom of expression vs. Spreading of lies and untruths. As with the nuclear technology, we have to find a reasonable limit or placement of fines and imprisonment to protect our freedom to elect our leaders without foreign involvement.

Like 👍 30 Reply ↩ 1 Link 🔗



mikeincolorado 7 hours ago

They can buy all the ads they want. The problem is the number of people willing to believe them or any other amount of actual fake news that is put out on social media etc. It disappoints me to see the number of friends, family, and acquaintances that share these stories as absolute truth without any sort of varification.

Like 👍 97 Reply ↩ 2 Link 🔗