



Russian troll factory paid US activists to help fund protests during election

Investigation finds Russians posing as Americans made payments to activists
Revelations likely to put further spotlight on Russian meddling in US election

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Russian trolls posing as Americans made payments to genuine activists in the US to help fund protest movements on socially divisive issues, according to a new investigation by a respected Russian media outlet.

On Tuesday, the newspaper RBC published a major investigation into the work of a so-called Russian “troll factory” since 2015, including during the period of the US election campaign, disclosures that are likely to put further spotlight on alleged Russian meddling in the election.

The existence of the troll factory, which has a history of spamming Russian and English blogs and comment forums, has been reported on by many outlets including the Guardian, but the RBC investigation is the first in-detail look at the organisation’s activity during the election period.

RBC said it had identified 118 accounts or groups in Facebook, Instagram and Twitter that were linked to the troll factory, all of which had been blocked in August and September this year as part of the US investigation into Russian electoral meddling.

Many of the accounts had already been linked to Russian disinformation efforts in western outlets, but RBC said its sources at the troll factory had provided screenshots of the internal group administration pages of some of the groups, as proof they were run from Russia. It also spoke to former and current employees of the troll factory, all of whom spoke anonymously.

Perhaps the most alarming element of the article was the claim that employees of the troll factory had contacted about 100 real US-based activists to help with the organisation of protests and events. RBC claimed the activists were contacted by Facebook group administrators hiding their Russian origin and were offered financial help to pay for transport or printing costs. About \$80,000 was spent during a two-year period, according to the report.

The main topics covered by the groups run from Russia were race relations, Texan independence and gun rights. RBC counted 16 groups relating to the Black Lives Matter campaign and other race issues that had a total of 1.2 million subscribers. The biggest group was entitled Blacktivist and reportedly had more than 350,000 likes at its peak.

Last month, CNN also reported that US authorities believed the Blacktivist Facebook group and Twitter account were the work of Russian impostors.

The infiltration of American social networks by Russian trolls and bots appears to be the conclusion of an operation that began by targeting the Russian-language internet space, grew to encompass the comment pages of western newspapers and blogs, and eventually seems to have led to the creation of whole Facebook communities designed to look like they are run by ordinary Americans.

Two years ago, the Guardian spoke with two people who worked at the “troll farm”. They would clock on at the building on Savushkina St each morning, turn on a VPN connection to disguise their location, and spend their days inhabiting fake personas on Russian social networks.

These profiles would post dozens of innocuous musings on travel or baking, and then occasionally fill them out with politicised entries that mirrored Kremlin talking points. Generally, the posts were either in praise of President Vladimir Putin or about the “chaos” and “degeneration” of Europe, often with homophobic or racist undertones.

The Internet Research Agency, one of the companies believed to run the trolling operations, has long been rumoured to be a project of Evgeny Prigozhin, a shadowy businessman known as “Putin’s chef”, who ran Putin’s favourite restaurant in St Petersburg and later won billions of dollars worth of state catering contracts. A number of semi-legitimate news aggregating websites appear to be run by the same people as the troll operations.

Google has said Russian operatives spent tens of thousands of dollars on targeted ads on YouTube, Google and Gmail, according to reports. Last month, Facebook released a statement saying it had found \$100,000 of ad spending on about 3,000 ads that it linked to 470 “inauthentic” accounts that it had linked to Russia. The company later clarified that the ads focused on “divisive social and political messages across the ideological spectrum”.

The company estimated that about 10 million Americans saw the ads, but interestingly also specified that only 44% of the impressions took place before last November's election, making the Russian campaign look more like an attempt to sow general chaos rather than a narrowly focused electoral drive.

"The task wasn't to support Trump," one of the factory's employees told RBC. "We raised social issues and other problems that already existed in the US, and tried to shine as bright a light as possible on them." The employee said that because Clinton was part of the current regime, she was also a target.

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