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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-backed-facebook-accounts-organized-events-on-all-sides-of-polarizing-issues-1509355801>

## TECH

# Russian-Backed Facebook Accounts Organized Events on All Sides of Polarizing Issues

They publicized or financed at least 60 events before and after the 2016 election



Russian-linked Facebook accounts helped organize and fund real-life events around the most polarizing issues in the U.S., including a 2016 demonstration near Minneapolis, above, in response to the shooting of motorist Philando Castile by a St. Anthony, Minn., police officer. PHOTO: JEFF WHEELER/STAR TRIBUNE/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Deepa Seetharaman

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Workers behind Russian-linked Facebook Inc. [FB +1.00% ▲](#) accounts helped organize or finance real-life events before and after the 2016 election, often working directly with U.S. activists and playing both sides of the same hot-button issue—even on the same day.

In July 2016, as outrage swelled over fatal shootings in Dallas and Minneapolis, alleged social-media agitators tied to Russia worked quickly to capitalize on the emotionally charged atmosphere.

Workers linked to a Russia-based firm organized two gatherings, both for July 10: In Dallas, a “Blue Lives Matter” rally honored the five police officers slain there on July 7; and near Minneapolis, nearly 300 people rallied in support of Philando Castile, a man fatally shot by a police officer during a traffic stop.

The events show that the Russian-linked account activity went far beyond paying for polarizing ads dropped into Facebook members’ news feeds. At least 60 rallies, protests and marches were publicized or financed by eight Russia-backed Facebook accounts from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C., according to a review by The Wall Street Journal, which looked at archived versions of now-deleted Facebook posts and interviewed activists, attendees and others familiar with the events, most of which were posted on Facebook.

Facebook said in September that it had found 470 such accounts that it says belonged to Russians and that sought to exploit social divisions in the U.S. through provocative issue ads. The eight accounts the Journal examined are among those Facebook unearthed, according to people familiar with the matter. Facebook said it closed the accounts.

Much of the scrutiny of the Russian accounts so far has focused on their online activity, but the live events demonstrate how the alleged use of social media by Russian forces served as a launchpad for deeper infiltration into the American democratic process.

Many rallies were sparsely attended, but some attracted news coverage, helping the accounts seem legitimate, add followers and enlist activists to plan future events.

People representing “Black Matters US,” one of the Russia-backed accounts, pressured Los Angeles activist Nolan Hack to plan events that would raise the account’s visibility. “They’d say, we need to continue to up the protest numbers. We need to continue to get more people to know about us,” Mr. Hack said. “I would say—who cares about that? We’re not trying to win a reality show here.”

At least 22 of the 60 events actually took place, such as a May 2016 protest of an Islamic center in Houston planned by “Heart of Texas”, a Russia-created page that supported Texas secession and posted the “Blue Lives Matter” rally in Dallas two months later. On June 25, 2016, following the shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Fla., “LGBT United” organized a candlelight vigil, where one of the victim’s brothers spoke. Both were covered by local media and attracted a dozen or more attendees.

It is unclear if the other 40 or so events occurred as publicized. Collectively, the eight accounts analyzed by the Journal were “liked” nearly two million times, archived websites show.

“Getting someone to physically show up somewhere is huge,” said Sarah Oates, a political communications professor at the University of Maryland. “That is a level of political commitment that is a whole degree stronger than getting someone to comment.”

This week, executives from Facebook, Twitter Inc. and Alphabet Inc.’s Google are scheduled to appear before Congress to answer questions about Russian activity found on their platforms by congressional investigators examining alleged Russian interference in the U.S. democratic process. Russia has denied any interference in the election.

“We take this very seriously and that’s why we’re taking strong action to improve security on Facebook by investing in new technology and hiring more people,” a Facebook spokesman said, when asked about the events.

Disclosures by Facebook about covert Russian influence on its platform around the election have centered on 3,000 ads bought by accounts connected to pro-Kremlin firm Internet Research Agency. The Russian actors also, however, churned out free posts, including event listings. Facebook has estimated that the ads were seen by 10 million people, but academic researchers believe the content, such as free posts and event listings, could have reached many times that.

Russian entities likely promoted events because the Kremlin believes protests destabilize democracies, according to Ms. Oates, who studies Russian propaganda. Event listings show how Russia-backed pages organized protests for and against the same issues. The page “Born Patriotic” planned 17 pro-Trump rallies on the same day in August 2016 while “Black Matters” hosted anti-Trump rallies after the election.

The Russia-backed pages often contacted U.S. activists over Messenger, a free messaging service from Facebook, or by phone to ask for help organizing events, according to activists. In other cases, activists reached out after seeing a Facebook event, such as the planned protest in Minneapolis following Mr. Castile’s death by an account named “Don’t Shoot.”

Some of the organizers say they spoke to people with British, South African and other non-U.S. accents who said they represented the accounts.

The pages covered some event costs, like travel and equipment rental, and sent funds to activists through bank cards or money-transfer services like MoneyGram, activists said. But the people behind the accounts were also hasty planners and often failed at basic logistics, such as securing permits—and appeared eager for their events to provoke reactions or make headlines, said activists who worked with them.

Representatives from the Facebook page “United Muslims of America” asked Mike Ghouse, an interfaith activist, to speak at a Sept. 3, 2016 event in Washington, D.C. billed as “a peaceful rally, to make mosques and their neighborhood safe!”

The group sent Mr. Ghouse placards they intended to use that included anti-Trump messages, causing him to back out, he said. “I said they should be more pluralistic, more inclusive because there’s no need to attack Trump,” Mr. Ghouse said. “They wouldn’t, so I didn’t go.”

Some events stoked public discord. At the rally in front of the Islamic center in Houston, about a dozen protesters gathered, some waving confederate flags or holding a sign that said “#WhiteLivesMatter,” according to video footage.

Across the street, about 60 counter protesters assembled in an effort that didn’t appear to have any Russian ties. Some of them held a banner with Adolf Hitler’s photo and the words, “Follow your leader: kill yourself.”

Photos and videos from Houston and some of the other events later appeared on Facebook, Google’s YouTube, as well as Twitter and its live-streaming video service Periscope.

*—Jack Nicas contributed to this article.*

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