

Why Russia's Facebook ad campaign wasn't such a success



By Patrick Ruffini November 3

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There was a sense in this past week's congressional hearings with executives from Facebook, Twitter and Google that Russia's meddling in the 2016 presidential campaign was a raging success. "If you look back the results," said Sen. Mark R. Warner (D-Va.), "it's a pretty good return on investment." Facebook lawyer Colin Stretch, testifying before the House Intelligence Committee, concurred: "It's clear that they were able to drive a relatively significant following for a relatively small amount of money. It's why this activity appears so pernicious."

Lawmakers made much noise about how such intervention undermines American democracy and threatens national security. And some went as far as to suggest that it tipped the presidential contest. "In an election where a total of about 115,000 votes would have changed the outcome, can you say that the false and misleading propaganda people saw on . . . Facebook didn't have an impact on the election?" asked Sen. Mazie Hirono (D-Hawaii).

I've run digital advertising campaigns on behalf of candidates in contested battleground states. And if the ads revealed this past week were an attempt to influence the election, they were a laughably botched and failed attempt. The total amount spent was less than what I've seen spent online in competitive congressional races. The ads were not well targeted to the battleground states that were most decisive. And the subject matter was designed to engage extremist voices on the political fringe, not persuadable voters undecided between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

Vladimir Putin's propaganda victory is not the advertising itself, but the notion that just over \$100,000 worth of poorly targeted Facebook advertising could swing a presidential election. It can't.

It is important for the United States to acknowledge that Russia's efforts were a direct attack on our democracy. But in the same way that we do not describe a terrorist attack as a victory for the terrorists, those seeking other explanations for November's results shouldn't succumb to the temptation to declare Russia's meddling decisive. Besides that being a greatly exaggerated view of Russia's capabilities, deeming the effort a geopolitical success emboldens Russia in its efforts to undermine Western democracies.

News of Russia's meddling has produced some scary-sounding numbers: as many as 126 million Americans reached on Facebook alone, a further 20 million on Instagram, and 1.4 million tweets sent by Russian-affiliated accounts in the two months leading up to the election.

Yet, the Russian content was just a tiny share of the 33 trillion posts Americans saw in their Facebook news feeds between 2015 and 2017. Any success the ads had in terms of reach seems attributable largely to the sheer doggedness of the effort, with 80,000 Facebook posts in total. Facebook reported that a quarter of the ads were never seen by anyone. And — with the average Facebook user sifting through 220 news-feed posts a day — many of the rest were simply glanced at, scrolled past and forgotten.

With \$81 million spent on Facebook by the Trump and Clinton campaigns, mostly to mobilize core supporters to donate and volunteer, a low-six-figure buy is unlikely to have tipped the election. The Russian effort looks even less influential when one considers the tiny amount of Russian Facebook spending directed at key battleground states — \$1,979 in Wisconsin, \$823 in Michigan and \$300 in Pennsylvania. From an electoral perspective, the campaign was remarkably unsophisticated.

Of course, some people did click and like and share. Where Russia appears to have made more headway — before and after the election — is in further animating partisans, capitalizing on their need to have their existing beliefs confirmed. It didn't matter that those confirming their beliefs were foreign adversaries.

In at least some cases, that translated into action. The most successful case appears to be an anti-Trump rally in New York City on Nov. 12, just five days after the election. More than 33,000 people expressed interest in an announcement of the event posted by Russian agents, and thousands ended up attending. The ad spending that we know of to promote the rally was piddling — \$1.93 to serve the post to 188 people. Yet, touching a raw nerve, news of this event spread organically. And no one bothered to dig into the sockpuppet Facebook page behind the announcement.

Despite all the focus in the past week on ads, compared to friend-to-friend sharing, a relatively small share of the Russian campaign was driven by advertising. Just 10 million of the people reached came in through the advertising campaign, out of 29 million who directly read Russian posts in their news feeds, and up to 126 million who were exposed indirectly through their Facebook friends. The Russian effort depended on the willingness of some Americans to go along with it and share. The credulity of these social media users is a fact more troubling than the advertising itself, and one not as easily addressed by policy.

Broken English aside, if the Russian content struck some Facebook users as perfectly normal and even share-worthy, that's because it mimicked the hallmarks of popular social media content. Social media often performs best when it speaks emotionally to deep-seated cultural identity. That's why debates about race, gender and religion can rage in social media in a way that discussions of economic policy don't. The Russian posts deliberately spoke to the identity of their potential audience — as Christians or Muslims, as gun owners or LGBT Americans, as military veterans or supporters of Black Lives Matter. "A 14-year-old Royce Mann brought hundreds of people to tears after he performed a slam poem on white privilege, police brutality, and the Black Lives Matter movement," read the most successful post, from the Russian-backed "Blacktivists"

Facebook page — inspiring more than 300,000 interactions around a message indistinguishable from something homegrown. Other content was more vile and sinister, likening a Clinton victory to a Satanic triumph.

In the wake of these revelations, social media companies are likely to adopt policy fixes that will reduce the likelihood of foreign agents advertising directly to Americans. These include restrictions on the use of foreign currency to buy political ads and voluntary transparency measures. Proposals to warn users before sharing false content from dubious sources are positive, too. Legislative initiatives such as the [Honest Ads Act](#) also would bring greater transparency to political advertising, but would do very little to stop the vast majority of Russian ads that did not expressly support a candidate. Short of an upheaval significantly curtailing the use of social media as a vehicle for free expression, no legislation can prevent their use as vectors for misinformation or propaganda from foreign powers, particularly when social media is largely free and open for anyone to use. Only a more vigilant citizenry can provide a full-proof defense.

Changes by Congress or social media companies may solve this problem at a surface level. But the reason Russia was able to blend in to Americans' news feeds is that those ugly divisions were there to be exploited, and, in fact, that exploiting them remains a potentially effective and lucrative social media strategy — one that's used right here in the United States every day. That's an issue much bigger than stopping ads from being purchased in rubles.

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