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# There's still little evidence that Russia's 2016 social media efforts did much of anything

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By **Philip Bump** December 28, 2017

We've known for some time that the various investigations into Russian meddling in the 2016 election were looking at whether people associated with the campaign of Donald Trump had helped guide the Russians' digital efforts. Back in July we [explored](#) the idea that the Russian efforts to tamp down turnout for Hillary Clinton or boost support for Trump could have benefited from internal campaign data.

That idea was bolstered by a report from Yahoo News this week that investigators working with special counsel Robert S. Mueller III were talking to staffers for the Republican National Committee who worked with the Trump campaign on voter targeting efforts. "They are seeking to determine if the joint effort was related to the activities of Russian trolls and bots aimed at influencing the American electorate," sources told Yahoo's Michael Isikoff.

This plays into a popular sense of how the 2016 campaign unfolded. The Russians launched hundreds of Facebook ads, reaching millions of people in critical swing states. They unleashed thousands of fake Twitter accounts, which got retweeted hundreds of thousands of times. The targeting of users on Facebook in particular was described in [various news](#) reports as appearing to be "highly sophisticated" — naturally raising the question of whether the Russians had been aided in their efforts.

All of that, though, requires setting aside what we actually know about the Russian activity on Facebook and Twitter: It was often modest, heavily dissociated from the campaign itself and minute in the context of election social media efforts.

Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee [released](#) a series of examples of the sorts of ads purchased by the Russians in November. Many, as The Washington Post [reported](#), focused on highlighting divisive cultural issues, like the Black Lives Matter movement and immigration.

Of the 30 ads shared by the Democrats, six, viewed 1.2 million times in total, ran in 2015. Only seven ran in the last month of the campaign, totaling about 340,000 views. The ads targeted none of the four closest states in the election — New Hampshire,

Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin — specifically; most were national ad buys. States that were targeted specifically included Texas and New York, neither of which was considered a swing state.

A little-noticed statement from Sen. Richard Burr (R-N.C.), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, detailed how *unsophisticated* the Russian ad targeting actually was in the context of the election. Among the points he made:

- Maryland was targeted by nearly five times as many ads as was Wisconsin (262 to 55).
- Thirty-five of the 55 ads targeting Wisconsin ran during the primary.
- More ads targeted DC than Pennsylvania.
- A total of \$1,979 was spent in Wisconsin — \$1,925 of it in the primary.
- The spending in Michigan and Pennsylvania were \$823 and \$300, respectively.
- More of the geographically targeted ads ran in 2015 than in 2016.

Facebook's own public numbers hint at how the ads were weighted relative to the campaign. Ten million people saw ads run by the Russian agents — but 5.6 million of those views were *after* the election.

The targeting revealed by the House Democrats suggests a relatively broad approach to influencing the public. Facebook allows more sophisticated targeting relative than other advertising methods, including being able to target people by fairly specific geographies and interests (like people interested in the Confederacy, as one of the Russian ads sought out). The unusual possibilities offered by Facebook targeting can help contribute to the sense that the Russians did something especially clever. But there's a difference between a sophisticated *tool* and sophisticated *targeting*. You can drive a Tesla to the grocery store, which is essentially what the Russians did in the ads released by the Democrats.

What about those Twitter bots that have been the subject of so much consternation? Twitter has identified some 2,700-plus accounts it believes were associated with Russian actors. According to NBC News' analysis, those Twitter accounts tweeted about 202,000 times from 2011 to August 2017 (when Twitter shut them down).

How many is that? Just before Election Day in 2016, Twitter announced 1 billion tweets had been sent from August 2015 through that point. Even assuming all 202,000 of those tweets from the Russian accounts were in that period, it means they constituted 0.02 percent of the election-related tweets. On Election Day itself, there were another 75 million election-related tweets. If *all* of the Russian-linked tweets had been dropped on Election Day — closer to the point at which they would have directly helped suppress or boost turnout — they would still only have constituted 0.27 percent of the tweets that day. But they weren't.

Perhaps, one might argue, there is classified information about Russia's meddling that suggests a more dramatic problem. Perhaps. On Thursday morning, though, Rep. Jim Himes (D-Conn.) of the House intelligence committee told CNN he hadn't seen much evidence of any criminal collusion the American people weren't already aware of. (There's also the argument that, in

an election as close as that of 2016, even small efforts by Russian actors might have had an outsized effect. This is true, but it is also true of hundreds of other small things that happened (and didn't) in the closing days of the presidential race.)

As it stands, the public evidence doesn't support the idea that the Russians executed a savvy electoral strategy on social media to ensure Trump's victory. In fact, it seems *less* the case that they did so now than seemed might be possible back in July.

 **418 Comments**

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