

Russian ads, now publicly released, show sophistication of influence campaign

By **Craig Timberg**, **Elizabeth Dwoskin**, **Adam Entous** and **Karoun Demirjian** November 1 at 2:03 PM

Lawmakers on Wednesday released a trove of ads that Russian operatives bought on Facebook, providing the fullest picture yet of how foreign actors sought to promote Republican Donald Trump, denigrate Democrat Hillary Clinton and divide Americans over some of the nation's most sensitive social issues.

The ads that emerged, a sampling of the 3,000 that Russians bought during the 2016 presidential campaign and its aftermath, demonstrated in words and images a striking ability to mimic American political discourse at its most fractious. The targeting information also showed a shrewd understanding of how best to use Facebook to find and influence voters most likely to respond to the pitches.

As a group, the ads made visceral appeals to voters upset about illegal immigration, black political activism, the declining economic fortunes of coal miners, gun ownership, the rising prominence of Muslims in some U.S. communities and many other issues. Some ads, many of which were bought in Russian rubles, also explicitly called for people to attend political rallies amid a campaign season that already was among the most polarizing in recent U.S. history.

A Facebook page called "Being Patriotic" bought an ad touting a "Miners for Trump" rally in Pennsylvania, one of several key swing states.

"Mr. Trump pursues the goal of creating more jobs and supports the working class," says the ad, which features images of miners and Trump in a miner's protective hard hat. "He said he would put miners back to work."

Another ad, from a Russian-controlled group called Heart of Texas, announced a rally for May 21, 2016, under the banner of "Stop Islamization of Texas." A separate Russian-controlled group, United Muslims of America, publicized a competing rally to "Save Islamic Knowledge" at the same place and time, causing the two groups to face off in competing demonstrations in Houston — a sign of how Russians hoped to turn divisions into open conflict.

Another page, targeting Donald Trump and Donald Trump Jr. supporters, touted a rally opposing Hillary Clinton in New York City in July.

This crossover of online influence to real-world consequences was among the issues raised in a contentious Capitol Hill hearing Wednesday as members of the Senate Intelligence Committee repeatedly scolded technology company lawyers for not doing more to thwart Russian disinformation.

"I don't think you get it," said Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), whose home state includes the headquarters for Facebook, Google and Twitter. "What we're talking about is a cataclysmic change. What we're talking about is the beginning of cyberwarfare. What we're talking about is a major foreign power with sophistication and ability to involve themselves in a presidential election and sow conflict and discontent all over this country. We are not going to go away, gentlemen. And this is a very big deal."

Facebook disclosed in September that it had discovered more than 3,000 ads bought by 470 accounts and pages run by a Russian troll farm in St. Petersburg. All those accounts have now been shut down and the ads provided to congressional investigators.

The ads released Wednesday cover only a small part of how the Russians targeted Americans on Facebook. The biggest impact was through ordinary posts by Russian-backed Facebook groups that were not paid. Those posts reached up to 126 million Americans, Facebook said, far more than the 10 million who saw the ads.

Several of the advertisements were first released during that Senate hearing Wednesday morning. A second, larger trove was released during a House Intelligence Committee hearing a few hours later, as lawmakers prepared to question lawyers from Facebook, Google and Twitter.

These Facebook ads, like others that had emerged in news reports over the past several weeks, had the apparent goal of needling America's cultural sore spots.

Three ads from a group called "Stop All Invaders" showed photos of woman wearing Islamic religious head-coverings, along with calls to action to stop the spread of Sharia law. "All face covering should be banned in every state across America!" read one ad, which had been shared more than 4,300 times and drummed up 14,000 likes alone.

Another Facebook ad promoted a "Down With Hillary!" rally in July 2016 outside Clinton's campaign headquarters in Brooklyn. The ad was targeted to Facebook users, 18 to 65 years old, who had declared interest in Donald Trump or Donald Trump Jr., and lived within 25 miles of New York City.

Yet another ad targeted the other end of the political spectrum with the creation of a "Black Matters" community page. It featured pictures of black men killed in high-profile police shootings, including Michael Brown, shot in Ferguson, Mo., in 2014, and Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy shot by Cleveland police that same year. The ad was targeted to a number of groups, including people who declared an interest in Martin Luther King Jr., Blacknews.com or HuffPost Black Voices.

A similar ad from a group called Blacktivist showed a black-and-white photo of militant Black Panthers with the words, “never forget that the Black Panthers, group formed to protect black people from the KKK, was dismantled by us govt but the KKK exists today.” It targeted people interested in African-American culture or Malcolm X. It was seen by nearly 300,000 people, according to Facebook data. More than 13,300 clicked on the ad.

One ad, also bought by the Heart of Texas group, took particular aim at veterans and others concerned about military issues, saying, “Hillary is the only one politician (except Barack Obama) who is despised by the overwhelming majority of American veterans.”

Sen. Mark R. Warner (D-Va.), the ranking Democrat on the committee, cited a free post by a Russian-controlled account called “Army of Jesus” showing Clinton dressed as Satan, with red horns and boxing gloves, appearing to punch Jesus, who also was wearing boxing gloves as well as a determined glare as heavenly light appeared above him. Unlike some of the other content shown at the hearing, this was not a paid advertisement.

“‘LIKE’ IF YOU WANT JESUS TO WIN!” the post said, using the terminology of Facebook as it tries to get users to publicly declare their interest in groups, events or products. People who hit “like” buttons on Facebook can later be shown ads.

Lawyers for Facebook, Google and Twitter, though all denounced the Russian campaign, also said the Russian content amounted to a tiny part of the overall flow of content on their platforms. But senators from both parties repeatedly sought to make clear how important they believed the online influence campaign was during the 2016 vote.

“If you look back the results,” Warner said, “it’s a pretty good return on investment.”

Sen. Richard Burr (R-N.C.), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, told the lawyers, “This isn’t about re-litigating the 2016 U.S. presidential election. . . . This isn’t about who won or lost. This is about national security. This is about corporate responsibility. And this is about the deliberate and multi-faceted manipulation of the American people by agents of a hostile foreign power.”

Russian ads from the 120 Russian-backed Facebook groups including Being Patriotic, United Muslims of America, Defend the 2nd targeted specific groups of Americans, including people who “liked” Dixie, supporters of pro-2nd amendment, Muslims, supporters of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

Being Patriotic, sponsored a “Down with Hillary!” rally on July 23 in New York City. The rally was targeted using Facebook’s targeting tools towards supporters of Donald Trump and Donald Trump Jr.

More than 300,000 people liked the fake Russian Facebook group United Muslims of America

Many ads were paid for using the Russian payment platform, Qiwi.

Wednesday’s hearings follows revelations this week that the reach of the Russian-connected disinformation campaign on Facebook, Google, and Twitter was much larger than initially reported.

Technology lawyer Albert Gidari, director of privacy at the Stanford Center for Internet and Society, said that in turning over the ads companies were entering complex legal territory. Ads have long been considered private data on par with email content and other records that the government must have a search warrant to obtain, he said.

This includes ads published by foreign governments or even terrorists. The tech companies, he said, had likely made the calculation in this case that the risk of subjecting themselves to the ire of lawmakers and potential regulation was worse than the risk of being sued by Russians, but the negative consequences of that choice would be felt down the road.

“These are huge mistakes with consequences that far outweigh the benefits because they make us feel better about how Russians interfered in the election. It turns the platforms into agents of the US government to decide what people should like or not like, read or not read. This is bad policy in the US and even worse abroad.”

Todd C. Frankel and Hamza Shaban contributed to this report.

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dogless_infidel 11 minutes ago
This is disgusting--and it's shaming. How gullible we Americans are. How easy it is to manipulate us.

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Pence is complicit 12 minutes ago
I wish the CIA would just polonium Putin already. But as long as Dump's loyal Russian asset Mike Pompeo is in charge I doubt that's going to happen.

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james c bowen 5 minutes ago
How many people saw my fakebook posts of Hillary Gollum Clinton and her bid for her precious presidency? The comparisons were striking.

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sentionaut 7 minutes ago *(Edited)*
Wow! It's so cool that the world is discovering that all of this is true more than a year after so many experts and people with experience in these kinds of misinformation campaigns tried to point it out, using many of these exact examples. Twitter, Google, and Facebook, any time you want to stop pretending you know what you're up against, try taking advantage of their knowledge.

A lot of this crosses over with homegrown fascism and internet disinfo, so if you're aghast at how well they knew how to manipulate us, those experts can tell you where to start brushing up. Trolls were discussing how to spread the "text 'Hillary' to [fake number] to vote!" stuff publicly, in real time. The only reason half this stuff is so 'sophisticated' is that they know how to easily exploit your blind spots. They know what you'll ignore, they know what's effective, and they know how to get away with it by claiming it's all a joke.

For example:

for example.

Step 1: "Hey, let's troll the leftists and media by making them think the 'OK' hand sign is some kind of Nazi code."

Step 2: People familiar with this stuff try to inform everyone falling for it that it's fake: https://www.buzzfeed.com/josephbernstein/the-trump-internet-keeps-making-fake-hate-symbols-and?utm_term=.hrW2oGWDk6#.pfqXK4rGm03

Step 3: Success. Anyone pointing out that white supremacists have now actually begun using it as an identifying in-joke looks foolish or paranoid, and ignored. If it's brought up: "No, we're only using it because it's so funny people would think we're actually Nazis."

It's always a joke until it isn't. The line at which it stops being a joke is always blurry. Platforms, journalists, lawmakers all need people familiar with this stuff, and need to take them seriously. They're directly begging to be allowed to help. All your data will tell you is how to do a postmortem on how far you were taken for a ride.

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smj48 5 minutes ago (Edited)

Businesses in America have no morals and worship the \$. This is our home and I expect business in American to begin to repair its immoral ways immediately. Otherwise go do business somewhere like Russia where this type of lying and trickery is acceptable. Mark zuckenburg, your parents should be ashamed of you. Google and Twitter too.

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cris collingsworth 12 minutes ago

what we have here is a welfare state beating the richest country in the world to a pulp and robbing it of it's democracy. america so stupid

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ron haag 10 minutes ago

The Russians must be the smartest country in the world, they somehow made Hillary use a private server years ago, then somehow made her not campaign in swing states, then made her lie to congress then had her delete all the emails and somehow gave her the popular win while at the same time giving Trump the electoral college win, and then somehow bought ads on social media to turn us all against each other. Wow we don't stand a chance against them.

Like  2 Reply  Link  Report 



cris collingsworth 5 minutes ago

you're the problem if you think a private server is a bad thing. learn to use a computer for f* sake, your'e getting your butts kicked online. first grizzly steep then wanna cry

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cinna2000 5 minutes ago

I guess Hillary didn't impress Putin, did she?

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cognitive 5 minutes ago (Edited)

The Supernova Cloud effect is here to stay, meaning you can slice and dice Big Data powered by Social Media and parsed to reflect any reality or story line whatsoever, untethered and unhindered. Virtually anyone with internet access can do this. No longer are there any trusted arbiters of the Truth! Uncontrolled, this situation leads to an inevitable slide towards ever more virulent factionalism, division and ultimately a return to tribalism.

The only credible defense against this remains the human tendency to be suspicious of hearsay story lines. Knowing WHO is telling you WHAT has a direct bearing on whether logic and critical thinking can prevail over spin and outright lies. This is why until recently, political TV and radio ads have required statements about payment and sponsorship of the message.

HOWEVER that regulated messaging domain has seen an precipitous decline in its audience, having been rapidly eclipsed by Social Media and the internet...none of which require message source validation... yet! Just like the trade off between Liberty and Security, we face the choice between Privacy and Public disclosure in the online world.

My solution would be to place a modest requirement upon all media juggernauts like Facebook, Twitter, Google, etc. These guys do actually know who is who among their advertisers and posting public. Should any ads or tweets were to "go viral" to a pre-determined level, they would enter into the realm of

among their advertisers and posting public. Should any ads, or tweets were to go viral to a pre determined level, they would enter into the realm of meaningful public records and thus lose the right of anonymity. There would be an automatic "unmasking" of the person or entity behind the original message and the source information would be carried by all subsequent traffic. In this way, normal social interactions would remain anonymous, but any effective political messaging could be effectively scrutinized by the Public.

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Karen Moore Krohn 6 minutes ago

C'mon, WaPo- provide LINKS. Don't waste our time describing the ads.

Like  1 Reply  Link  Report 



6nom3s 5 minutes ago

Here's some: <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-41829537>

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metro chic 5 minutes ago



Yeah, I would like to see the ads too

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patrick ewing 5 minutes ago

Did you watch the first video in this article? It shows an example.

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