Ambush on Black Veterans:
Foreign Disinformation Swayed the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election by Targeting Black Voters

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Abstract

A Russian-orchestrated influence campaign spread disinformation using social media during the 2016 United States (U.S.) presidential election. Digital evidence shows that Russian operatives developed presumptions about differing identity groups and tailored their interactions to sow strife between groups. The inferred intent was to influence and negatively impact African Americans' voting practices during the 2016 election campaign. Russian influence agents targeted the Black community more heavily than any other identity group. Influence operations also targeted veterans and veteran-adjacent communities; therefore, African American veterans (Black Vets) received twice the indoctrination because of their dual identity. The online impersonations of Black people and veterans on social media platforms was problematic for a myriad of reasons, but the Russian leadership's facilitation of disinformation represents adversarial exploitation of protection gaps uncovered in the Digital Age. Currently the First Amendment inhibits the U.S. government and social media platforms from performing the desired protective measures to maintain a healthy online environment that nurtures an informed citizenry. For Black Vets in particular, foreign entities suppressed the voting power of their ethnic group and sought to instigate members of their profession to join domestic violent extremist groups. The following project will propose that the U.S. government ought to change its approach in teaching digital media literacy competencies so that vulnerable populations receive the care and skills necessary to reduce their potential of becoming radicalized. Russian disinformation on social media and how the U.S. will embrace an identity-centric approach to educating digital media literacy is a matter of U.S. national security.

Introduction

The Foreign Agent Registration Act (FARA) provides the U.S. Department of Justice recourse to punish foreign subjects who violate international agreements in the practice of espionage. "[A]gents of foreign principals (which include foreign non-government individuals and entities),"[1] must disclose statements about their activities and incomes earned that are truthful and periodic when operating within the U.S. The U.S. government can disseminate information about how foreign influence may be affecting or distorting public opinion, policies, or laws when foreign agents comply with FARA.[2] A case study where Russian agents violated the FARA is the Russian influence campaign surrounding the 2016 U.S. presidential election. "Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller III indicted 13 Russian individuals and three Russian organizations for engaging in operations to interfere with U.S. political and electoral processes. [The Mueller report] spells out in exhaustive detail the breadth and systematic nature of this conspiracy, dating back to 2014, as well as the multiple ways in which Russian actors misused online platforms to carry out their clandestine operations."[3] Russian leadership, referred as the Kremlin, had a preference toward a Hillary Clinton defeat and their heavy targeting of the Black community with disinformation on social media platforms was just good enough to suppress enough Black votes for a Clinton victory in the electoral college.

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[1] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*. (18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A), 16 Feb. 2018, https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download: 11, ⁋ 26.

[2] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice, *Internet Research Agency Indictment,* 11, ⁋ 26.

[3] "Exposing Russia's Effort to Sow Discord Online: The Internet Research Agency and Advertisements." *Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence*. 4 Sept. 2021, https://intelligence.house.gov/social-media-content/. 1.

The foreign influence campaign in 2016 slighted large swaths of Americans; Hillary Clinton was not alone. Russian disinformation campaigns particularly wronged African American veterans (Black Vets) in 2016. The reward for Russia undermining the sanctity of the election was two-fold. First, Russia utilizes racialized fear to "promote discord in the United States and undermine public confidence in democracy."[4] Second, Russia leveraged the division created in the U.S. to propel Russia as a viable alternate leader in global affairs. Additionally, veterans pose a disproportionally dire threat to national security relative to other domestic violent extremists that lack military training. The intersectionality of Black Vets made them twice as vulnerable to the onslaught by trained influence agents seeking to manipulate with social media disinformation. The ambush Russian agents imposed on Black Vets displayed a sophisticated capability in its infancy that relied on recycled but divisive rhetoric. These claims and circumstances raise the following challenge: *How can the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs protect Black Vets from foreign disinformation campaigns on social media?*

Scoping

"Ambush on Black Veterans" is a policy study created from the applied research and review of academic literature, U.S. government policies, and approximately 3,500 examples of Russian social media content to influence American audiences between 2015 and 2017. The subject matter of this study will involve concepts that extend in between national security policy, technology policy, education policy, and social policy. In the pursuit of communicative clarity, this scoping portion of the study will define key terminology that will provide substantive context to the analysis.

Disinformation

Disinformation is the most significant concept of this study. The consequences of disinformation if employed effectively include, "exacerbating political conflict and cementing polarization,"[5] and, "sowing confusion, undermining trust in democratic institutions, discrediting civil society, and fueling a state of information disorder."[6] Disinformation is "manufactured information that is deliberately created or disseminated to cause harm."[7] Defining disinformation means explaining that this term is not an umbrella term for misinformation, malinformation, false information, 'fake news,' or propaganda. Some sources declare that disinformation is "false or manipulated information that is knowingly shared to cause harm or is made with reckless disregard of likely harm."[8] For this study, disinformation is defined as information that is either true, false, or in between so long as the actor who created the information is conscious of the nefarious effects it will likely produce.

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[4] Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. *Cyberwar How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*. Oxford University Press, 2018: 4-5.

[5] Hwang, Tim. "Dealing with Disinformation: Evaluating the Case for Amendment of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act." *Social Media and Democracy*, edited by Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker, 1st ed., Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 252–85. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108890960.012. 257.

[6] International Center for Not-For-Profit Law. *Legal Responses to Disinformation: A Policy Prospectus*. Mar. 2021, https://www.icnl.org/wp-content/uploads/2021.03-Disinformation-Policy-Prospectus-final.pdf. 1.

[7] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns: A Whole-of-Society Issue." *Public-Private Analytic Exchange Program*, Oct. 2019, 4.

[8] International Center for Not-For-Profit Law. *Legal Responses to Disinformation*, 2-4.

Disinformation is not to be confused with misinformation though it is a benign relative. Disinformation existed long before fifth century B.C when it was referred to as deception.[9] The same is true for misinformation; however, experts have described misinformation as contextual information that causes difficulty for the gullible.[10] "Misinformation is the unintentional dissemination of misleading information,"[11] and it can be, "false, but spread without intention of causing harm."[12]

There are other forms of information that are associated with disinformation beyond misinformation. "Malinformation is genuine information, typically private or revealing, that may be distributed in a campaign to cause harm to a person's reputation,"[13] and otherwise regarded as true.[14] Whereas, "inauthentic information is not transparent in its origins and affiliation. The source of the [inauthentic] information tries to mask its origin and identity."[15] For a quick reference, gossip is a form of malinformation, a mistake can be misinformation; but disinformation is heavier on a conscience than gossip or a mistake, it is more like telling a lie.[16]

Noteworthy terminology

The following terms are relevant to an explanation of foreign interference during the 2016 U.S. presidential election:

Influence campaign – a calculated yet predictable progression of disinformation engineered to produce a particular outcome or leverage.[17] [18] Agents that exploit the cynicism, fears, or anxieties of their subjects have effective influence campaigns. [19]

Information warfare – any action to "deny, exploit, corrupt or destroy the enemy's information and its functions [therefore, it is] all about measures to improve (or degrade) the efficiency of decision making."[20]

The Kremlin – this study's abbreviation for the cohort of the highest Russian government leaders or more specifically President Vladimir Putin and his senior-most advisors.

Violent extremism – to encourage, condone, justify, or supporting the commission of a violent act to achieve a political, ideological, religious, social, or economic goals. [21]

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[9] Kehrt, Sonner. "Troops, Veterans Are Targets in the Disinformation War, Even If They Don't Know It Yet." *The War Horse*, 1 Sept. 2022, https://thewarhorse.org/military-veterans-learn-to-fight-disinformation-campaigns/. 4.

[10] Boyd, danah. "You Think You Want Media Literacy… Do You?" *Medium*, 16 Mar. 2018, https://points.datasociety.net/you-think-you-want-media-literacy-do-you-7cad6af18ec2. 9.

[11] International Center for Not-For-Profit Law. *Legal Responses to Disinformation*, 2.

[12] Hisayasu, Louise. *Data Detox Kit: Misinformation and Disinformation*. https://onthinktanks.org/articles/data-detox-kit-misinformation-and-disinformation/. 1.

[13] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 4.

[14] International Center for Not-For-Profit Law. *Legal Responses to Disinformation*, 3.

[15] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 4.

[16] Henley, Jon. "How Finland Starts Its Fight against Fake News in Primary Schools." *The Guardian*, 29 Jan. 2020. *The Guardian*, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/28/fact-from-fiction-finlands-new-lessons-in-combating-fake-news. 6.

[17] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 4.

[18] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 254.

[19] Kehrt, "Troops, Veterans Are Targets in the Disinformation War, Even If They Don't Know It Yet." 5.

[20] Borden, Andrew Col (Ret.) USAF. "What Is Information Warfare?" *Air University*, Nov. 1999. 1, 5.

[21] Brown, Ryan Andrew, et al. *Violent Extremism in America: Interviews with Former Extremists and Their Families on Radicalization and Deradicalization*. RAND Corporation, 1 Apr. 2021. *www.rand.org*, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1071-1.html. 3.

Terrorism – the "use of violence and intimidation, especially against civilians, in the pursuit of political aims."[22]

Radicalization – the process of "leading someone to adopt 'radical positions on political or social issues.'"[23]

Algorithms – the codes that facilitate the inner workings of digital programs; algorithms are usually trade secrets with the purpose of maximizing user engagement.[24] Algorithms that generate recommendations on social media estimate content relevance for users based upon the previous behaviors of the user.[25]

Bots – scripts of software codes that automate online activity as if it were a physical user. "Bots can achieve discrete, repetitive tasks in a fraction of the time it would take a human counterpart."[26]

Trolls – human bots on social media that "affect the prioritization of content…post or amplify content [and] search for and respond to posts containing specific words or phrases."[27]

Memes – content that combine written text with visual images; experts caution that memes can be masterfully deceptive without being overtly suspicious when disseminated on social media.[28]

Heuristics – the mental shortcuts that lead to biases and decision making innately.[29]

Inoculation theory – the psychological belief that forewarning of an attack and exposure to counterarguments strengthens an individual's resistance against persuasion.[30]

Media literacy – an individual's ability to discern information from content, media literacy is used to evaluate the trustworthiness of the source and the message being communicated.[31] Another education expert describes media literacy as the "active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create."[32]

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[22] Brown, Ryan Andrew, et al. *Violent Extremism in America: Interviews with Former Extremists and Their Families on Radicalization and Deradicalization*. RAND Corporation, 1 Apr. 2021. *www.rand.org*, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1071-1.html. 3.

[23] Brown, Ryan Andrew, et al. *Violent Extremism in America: Interviews with Former Extremists and Their Families on Radicalization and Deradicalization*. RAND Corporation, 1 Apr. 2021. *www.rand.org*, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA1071-1.html. 3.

[24] Bisbee, James, et al. "Election Fraud, YouTube, and Public Perception of the Legitimacy of President Biden." *Journal of Online Trust and Safety*, vol. 1, no. 3, 3, Aug. 2022. *tsjournal.org*, https://doi.org/10.54501/jots.v1i3.60. 2-3.

[25] Gallo, Jason A., and Clare Y. Cho. "Social Media: Misinformation and Content Moderation Issues for Congress." *Congressional Research Service*, Jan. 2021. 25.

[26] Woolley, Samuel C. "Bots and Computational Propaganda: Automation for Communication and Control." *Social Media and Democracy*, edited by Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker, 1st ed., Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp. 89–110. *DOI.org (Crossref)*, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108890960.006. 91-92.

[27] Gallo and Cho, "Social Media", 11.

[28] Calderon, Janet. *LibGuides: Bias, Fake News, Hoaxes, & Lies: Fake News & Fact Checkers.* https://redwoods.libguides.com/fakenews/factcheckers. 3.

[29] Cherry, Kendra. "How Cognitive Biases Influence How You Think and Act." *Verywell Mind*, 19 July 2020, https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-a-cognitive-bias-2794963. 6.

[30] Compton, Josh, et al. "Inoculation Theory in the Post-Truth Era: Extant Findings and New Frontiers for Contested Science, Misinformation, and Conspiracy Theories." *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, vol. 15, no. 6, 2021, p. e12602. *Wiley Online Library*, https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12602. 2.

[31] NPR, Rachel Martin. "Illinois Now Requires Media Literacy Instruction in Its High School Curriculum." *NPR*, 14 Sept. 2022. *NPR*, https://www.npr.org/2022/09/14/1122895362/illinois-now-requires-media-literacy-instruction-in-its-high-school-curriculum. 1.

[32] Boyd, danah. "You Think You Want Media Literacy… Do You?", 2.

Propaganda – how governments communicate information to their constituents; propaganda usually has a political spin, and some find it difficult to distinguish from other forms of media such as advertising or news media.[33] "Propaganda is designed to link together brands, people, and nations with the goal of influencing ideas and attitudes. Successful propaganda campaigns typically include various forms of information, both truthful and deceitful, and try to cultivate a certain attitude or provoke a specific action in their target audiences."[34]

Black – race is a social construct that exists differently depending on the nation. In the U.S. during the eighteenth century, as settlers "looked to identify various population groups…and 'establish a rigid hierarchy of socially exclusive categories' with 'unequal rank and status,'" the settlers chose to make a racial system.[35] Those of African decent are members of the Black race.

Veteran – U.S. military servicemembers past and present that served in either active-duty, National Guard, or reservist capacities. This study's usage of veterans does not include the civilian military workforce, police and first responders, or the families of military members.

Theoretical Framework

Motives of the Kremlin

Modus operandi

The U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) was clear when it addressed great power competition in 2022. "The risk of conflict between major powers is increasing. Democracies and autocracies are engaging in a contest to show which system of governance can best deliver for their people and the world."[36] The director of the Heritage Foundation's Center for National Defense, a politically conservative organization, had stated that the NSS had, "seemingly [eliminated] the naivety of the Obama era" about Russia and China.[37] In contrast, the Kremlin never pauses from saber rattling or posturing for conflict. "Russia has attempted to portray itself as a viable alternative to the West,"[38] since the early days of the Cold War. Less than two months after taking office, the Biden administration recognized with official policy the Kremlin's modus operandi – to challenge the West for global influence and display an ability to outcompete the West to a global audience.[39]

The Kremlin maintains its information warfare proficiency as a disruptive practice against its foreign enemies. This practice falls below the threshold of an unprovoked act of aggression but is still adversarial. Interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election is one example. After the election, the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC) made key judgments on

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[33] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 4.

[34] Tripodi, Francesca Bolla. *The Propagandists' Playbook: How Conservative Elites Manipulate Search and Threaten Democracy*. Yale University Press, 2022. 18.

[35] Gamble, Danelle. "Toward a Racially Inclusive Military." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters*, vol. 50, no. 3, Aug. 2020, https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.2674. 58.

[36] White House. *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, DC: White House, 2022. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf. 7.

[37] Kahwaji, Riad. "Hits & Misses in Biden's Interim National Security Guidance." *Breaking Defense*, 5 Mar. 2021, https://breakingdefense.sites.breakingmedia.com/2021/03/hits-misses-in-bidens-interim-national-security-guidance/. 1.

[38] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 5.

[39] White House. *Interim National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. Washington, DC: White House, 2021. https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf. 8.

Russian interference on that election. One assessment stated, "the Kremlin sought to advance its longstanding desire to undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order, the promotion of which Putin and other senior Russian leaders view as a threat to Russian and Putin's regime."[40] Another disruptive practice is propaganda from Moscow. This "firehose of falsehood" has regularly oversaturated audiences with messages and infotainment intended to confuse, distract, and overwhelm audiences from detecting the actual purpose of the indoctrination.[41] This is the standard for influence campaigns ordered by the Kremlin.

The Kremlin invested in information warfare and therefore there are parts of Russian society that take on an active role. "[Russia] has a whole infrastructure to deliver information operations. Not only an infrastructure but it also has a realm of players from their intelligence services to their state media to their media spokespeople, their diplomats, through the media spaces that they own overseas."[42] (See Media and RT section for more details.) The Russian culture and media enterprise enables the Kremlin to capitalize in the information battlespace. A recurring theme is the U.S. is on the brink of collapse due to hyper partisan issues and divisive disruptions.[43] The Kremlin embraces a strategy of patience for the West is bound to exhaust themselves and then Russia can elevate.

The theoretical presumption of this project is Russia is a rational actor that will learn from its successes with information warfare and improve the effectiveness of this capability. The U.S. IC concurred with this claim back in 2017, "Moscow will apply lessons learned from its Putin-ordered campaign aimed at the U.S. presidential election to future influence efforts worldwide, including against U.S. allies and their election processes."[44] Information warfare is another example where the Kremlin maintains a Cold War approach in its efforts to disrupt U.S. interests and attempt to limit its strength around the world.[45]

Cold War approach

The U.S. going tit for tat with Russia in in the information battlespace should be familiar because that was the norm of the Cold War. Yet, after the Cold War ended the U.S. diverted its attention to other matters such as the war on terror. The Kremlin has not changed its focus or Cold War approach to information and its strategic applications.[46] Russia's meddling in U.S. elections stretches back long before the 2016 election. According to a defector of Russian intelligence services, Russian intelligence operatives recruited a Democratic party insider that provided them with campaign and foreign policy information from the Carter administration back in the 1970s. "During the Cold War, the Soviet Union used intelligence officers, influence

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[40] Intelligence Community Assessment. *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*. Washington DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017. https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf. 1.

[41] Paul, Christopher, and Miriam Matthews. *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It*. RAND Corporation, 11 July 2016. *www.rand.org*, https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html. 1.

[42] Pomerleau, Mark. "Why Is the United States Losing the Information War?" *C4ISRNet*, 5 Oct. 2020, https://www.c4isrnet.com/information-warfare/2020/10/05/why-is-the-united-states-losing-the-information-war/. 5.

[43] Plant, Thomas. *Patriotism Divided: The Impact of Mis- and Disinformation During the Rally "Around the Flag Effect."* The College of William & Mary, May 2022, https://www.wm.edu/offices/global-research/research-labs/pips/white_papers/2021-2022-white-papers/tom-plant-whitepaper. 1.

[44] Intelligence Community Assessment. *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*. iii.

[45] Kahwaji, "Hits & Misses in Biden's Interim National Security Guidance." 3.

[46] Pomerleau, "Why Is the United States Losing the Information War?" 5.

agents, forgeries, and press placements to disparage candidates perceived as hostile to the Kremlin."[47] Moreover, Russia developed a reputation for having control over foreign press and manipulating academic, economic, and political environments with disinformation that made lasting impressions. Russia fabricated disinformation that accused the U.S. DOD of creating and weaponizing the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).[48]

Cold War-era propaganda techniques continue to be effective. The objective has always been to influence targets to act without them realizing that the propaganda invited them to do so. Even though the technology has altered the means, the methods have always involved journalism and media.[49] Researchers from the RAND Corporation believe effective Cold War techniques are never retired. The first example they identified was exploiting the social tensions of the U.S. – specifically class and race. The second example was reflexive control theory (RCT). RCT "appeared in Soviet military literature during the Cold War. This program describes a way to convey information to others that could lead them to make some predetermined decision."[50]

Threaten the U.S. from within

Research suggests that the Kremlin's information warfare goal is to seize opportunities while the U.S. struggles with inundation of social conflict among its citizens. The Kremlin has assumed that discord among U.S. citizens with divergent backgrounds will weaken national consensus on issues and thus provide Russia with opportunities.[51] Historically, U.S. adversaries have gambled that the attention of U.S. citizens will be attrite to an opponent's advantage; this risk was successful against the U.S. during the War on Terror. However, information warfare during the War on Terror was tactically focused, whereas information warfare during great power competition is much more strategic. There is a premium on critical thinking and to be competitive a nation must remain focused on clear goals. A former Central Intelligence Agency department chief on Russian affairs once communicated how the U.S. lacked focus on information warfare with Russia. Karen Monaghan explained, "A lot of guys on [Capitol] Hill, they like to pass bills that…are buying lots of guns and not much butter. This [information warfare capability] is the butter, this is not flashy, it's not something that you can put in a parade, but its's as important and in this day and age maybe even more so."[52]

The threat the U.S. poses against itself is real, and the Kremlin exacerbating the domestic disagreements using information warfare makes the threat even more daunting. Influence campaigns intend to inflate differences and provoke the escalation of disagreements. Online discord amongst strangers might seem relatively harmless, but consider the consequences when Russian disinformation infiltrates veteran communities to jeopardize unit cohesion.[53] During 2020 congressional testimony, the Acting Secretary for the Department of Homeland Security described white supremacists, some of whom aspired to befriend Russia during the 2016 election

[47] Intelligence Community Assessment. *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*. 5.
[48] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 6.
[49] Paul and Matthews. *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model*. 1.
[50] Posard, Marek N., Hilary Reininger, and Todd C. Helmus. *Countering Foreign Interference in U.S. Elections*. RAND Corporation, 2021. *www.rand.org*, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA704-4.html. 3.
[51] Posard, Reininger, and Helmus. *Countering Foreign Interference in U.S. Elections*. 33.
[52] Pomerleau, "Why Is the United States Losing the Information War?" 2, 4.
[53] Kehrt, "Troops, Veterans Are Targets in the Disinformation War, Even If They Don't Know It Yet." 6.

campaign, as the "most persistent and lethal" internal threat to the U.S.[54] [55] However, "the issue of the weaponization of social media is not only about extremism. It's about Russian information warfare…It's not just about what you push out. It's also about what you draw in, what you share. It's about your entire behavior."[56]

National Security Concerns

Modern sophistication

The technology of the digital age has distinguished the modern Russian influence campaigns from those of the past. "Russian political disinformation tactics continuously incorporated new techniques, and their intervention in 2016 represents the culmination of years of previous experimentation in the [social media] space."[57] Yet the modernity of influence deception has "lightning-fast propagation on social media and the alarming ease with which people are weaponized, typically without their knowledge, to spread it – is new. The problem affects anyone who is online…ideas that form on the internet spill over into the physical world."[58]

Social media changed the magnitude of influence campaigns. The technology of social media enabled activist to hurdle barriers to entry that were previously steeper, eased the division of labor, and the ability to scale media production or isolate to a specific audience intensified the power of media savvy activists. The power dynamic shifted with social media, and no national government or industry is immune to negative publicity that producers on social media can control.[59] However, government agencies have used social media for their bidding as well:

> Domestic and foreign agents no longer need to physically participate in street riots or student protests to polarize the population or invest in television advertisement or movies to manipulate public opinion. Although social media platforms make advertisement cheaper and make it easier for non-incumbents to get public and media attention, they also make it easier and cheaper to conduct influence operations shape politics at home or in a foreign state.[60]

Recycled themes and schemes

The U.S. was not the only nation manipulated by election interference during 2016. The Kremlin had conducted influence operations like that before. Russia's message – Western freedom is more dangerous than Russian order – is not new. The observed Russian technique schemes, indoctrination through online interaction, was predictable. Similar Kremlin-ordered influence campaigns have occurred throughout Central and Eastern Europe and the Middle East in recent years.[61] The Kremlin and its proxies identified social cleavages in the U.S. and

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[54] Tripodi, *The Propagandists' Playbook*, 18.
[55] Mitchell, Silber. "Domestic Violent Extremism and the Intelligence Challenge." *Atlantic Council*, 18 May 2021, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/domestic-violent-extremism-and-the-intelligence-challenge/. 15.

[56] Kehrt, "Troops, Veterans Are Targets in the Disinformation War, Even If They Don't Know It Yet." 8.
[57] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 270.
[58] Kehrt, "Troops, Veterans Are Targets in the Disinformation War, Even If They Don't Know It Yet." 4.
[59] Alizadeh, Meysam, et al. "Content-Based Features Predict Social Media Influence Operations." *Science Advances*, vol. 6, no. 30, July 2020, p. eabb5824. *science.org (Atypon)*, https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abb5824. 1.
[60] Alizadeh, et al. "Content-Based Features Predict Social Media Influence Operations.", 9.
[61] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 255.

attempted to pit identity groups that dislike each other against one another.[62] An unclassified U.S. IC assessment announced, "Moscow's influence campaign followed a Russian messaging strategy that blend covert intelligence operations – such as cyber activity – with overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or 'trolls.'"[63]

A recycled Russian disinformation method utilizes sensational themes. When news appeals to the emotions of the audience it spreads more rapidly. Influence agents seek story themes that heighten agitation in audiences and provoke harassment and violence. Stories that feature societal fault lines, strong ideologies, public policies, or demographic differences such as religion or race are crucial to the success of disinformation. Even if the information or stories are false the damage caused to individuals, companies, and governments has an effect. Influence agents thrive on the volatility of panic especially if it is financial panic.[64]

Influence campaign messages are incomplete without schemes to accompany them. Typical Russian schemes include impersonations and blending authentic content within inauthentic content to increase the difficulty to distinguish fact from fiction. Increased distrust keeps audiences from doing further online research and therefore they are more prone to sensationalized appeals when making decisions. The purpose of these schemes is to "undermine trust in democracy and confidence in the ability of government institutions to solve societal problems."[65]

Select target audiences

The themes and schemes Russian influence campaigns recycles are audience focused. The Kremlin knows the following about information warfare:

> Divisive content is developed with two target audiences in mind: The first target audience consists of those who sympathize with the content's message and are likely to share it, spreading it across social media platforms. The second target audience, on the other hand, consists of those who will reject the message and respond heatedly and negatively toward the first target audience. The primary purpose of these accounts is to create conflict and deepen divisions.[66]

For the 2016 disinformation campaign to have achieved success, influence agents relied on unwitting agents that Soviet intelligence manuals call "useful idiots." Unwitting social media users who receive content, engage with content, and increase content credibility by passing it along do not comprehend the objectives of those using them. Targeted disinformation campaign prey on audiences they believe have connected useful idiots.[67]

Russian disinformation is successful because of useful idiots but also because of how influence campaigns exploit U.S protections of speech and the press. Trolls from St Petersburg can disguise themselves with countless personas such as a Pennsylvania housewife, a Black nationalist in Georgia, or a disaffected Democrat in Wisconsin with the assistance of social

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[62] Posard, Reininger, and Helmus. *Countering Foreign Interference in U.S. Elections*. 33.
[63] Intelligence Community Assessment. *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*. 2.
[64] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 6-7.
[65] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 7.
[66] Goldsmith, Kristofer. *An Investigation into Foreign Entities Who Are Targeting Servicemembers and Veterans Online*. Vietnam Veterans of America, 2019. 77.
[67] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 14.

media in the rouse.[68] U.S. citizens mistakenly assume that other U.S. citizens "are creating and distributing online content that actually is coming from Russia. In the future, [the U.S.] should expect that other adversaries will take notice of the effectiveness of Russia's efforts."[69]

It should be unsettling how Russian influence agents are improving their information *maskirovka* – their ability to disguise themselves or impersonate others online. The weaponization of race and its historical context in the U.S. are paramount to the understanding of Russian influence campaigns because it has driven polarization which has harmed U.S. communities of color. "Russian trolls have started to successfully mimic black routines and abuse black narratives to further polarize and already divisive political landscape. Leveraging black narratives is not only a means of furthering the racial divide within [the U.S.] more effectively, it is a scheme to complicate the American identity in a way that upends [the U.S. government and] democracy."[70] (See the Appendix for examples of Russian agents imitating Black people on social media.)

Veterans are another significant target audience for disinformation from the Kremlin. Russian agents have peddled counterfeit merchandise, introduced inflammatory political content, and used images that captured veteran specific experiences to infiltrate legitimate organizations or establish new organizations online.[71] "This means that foreign agents no longer need access to [U.S.] military bases to practice their tradecraft…All they need is a computer with internet access to reach thousands of service members at once on sites like LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook."[72]

Domestic Violent Extremism

The Kremlin was strategic with its targeting of veterans because doing so elevated the threat severity of domestic violent extremism (DVE). Veterans are the American identity group with the highest propensity to vote, and nearly a third of the U.S. federal government workforce are veterans. Targeting veterans with disinformation will reach employees in many sectors of government, ranging from law enforcement and defense to food safety and health care.[73] The U.S. IC assesses that DVE groups posed an increasing threat to the homeland and are the most likely violent actors to conduct mass-casualty attacks against civilians, law enforcement and the government once radicalized.[74] "In 1995, in the largest single act of domestic terrorism in U.S. history, an anti-government violent extremist detonated a bomb at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people – including 19 children – and injuring hundreds

[68] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 11-12.
[69] Posard, Reininger, and Helmus. *Countering Foreign Interference in U.S. Elections*. 38.
[70] Green-Riley, Naima, and Camille Stewart. *How to Combat the Spread of Misinformation from Russian Trolls*. https://www.theroot.com/a-clapback-to-russian-trolls-1841932843. 2-4.
[71] Goldsmith, *An Investigation into Foreign Entities Who Are Targeting Servicemembers and Veterans Online*, 7.
[72] Francis Jr., Robert. "Protecting Our Heroes from Disinformation on Social Media." *Council on Foreign Relations*, https://www.cfr.org/blog/protecting-our-heroes-disinformation-social-media. 2.
[73] Goldsmith, *An Investigation into Foreign Entities Who Are Targeting Servicemembers and Veterans Online*, 12.
[74] Office of the Director of National Intelligence. *Domestic Violent Extremism Poses Heightened Threat in 2021*. US Department of Homeland Security, 1 Mar. 2021, p. 4, https://www.dhs.gov/publication/domestic-violent-extremism-poses-heightened-threat-2021. 2.

of others. In 2016, an anti-authority violent extremist ambushed, shot, and killed five police officers in Dallas."[75] Both of those perpetrators were veterans; the latter was a Black Vet.

Veteran participation in DVE has increased beyond the previous mentioned examples which predate the 2016 case study. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, veteran participation in DVE attacks climbed from zero to six percent in 2020. Moreover, 12 percent of those arrested and charged for the January 6th assault on the U.S. Capitol were veterans.[76] The 2021 National Defense Authorization Act required the DOD create training for "foreign malign influence campaigns [including those] carried out through social media," but this requirement's implementation was insufficient. "Given the growth of misinformation and the risk of military audiences' exposure to foreign disinformation efforts, it is likely [still] a worthwhile effort to develop, test, and disseminate media literacy training content [especially for] U.S. service personnel."[77]

Background

2016 U.S. Presidential Election

Case study

The 2016 U.S. presidential election is a layered case study that requires careful deciphering to unveil Russian culpability in helping to elect Donald Trump. However, the election results summary shows that Clinton bested Trump in the popular vote by nearly three million votes but lost in the electoral college, specifically in three states where the margin of victory was less than one point of the popular vote. Seventy-eight thousand popular votes tipped the electoral college victories for Trump in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. [78] According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a record 137 million voted in the election even though eligible voter turnout was only on par with the 2012 turnout and about two percent less than in 2008. "[Some] long-standing trends in presidential elections either reversed or stalled in 2016, as black voter turnout decreased, white turnout increased, and the nonwhite share of the U.S. electorate remained flat".[79] "Intelligence analysts argue that proof of Russian culpability exists, albeit in classified form."[80] Nonetheless, Black voters in this election were expertly targeted by Russian influence operations.

The most popular third-party leader, in terms of the most 2016 presidential popular votes received, was Jill Stein of the Green Party. Unclassified Mueller report evidence shows Russian agents engaged in many disruptive practices, but "around the latter half of 2016, Defendants and their co-conspirators, through their ORGANIZATION-controlled personas, began to encourage U.S. minority groups not to vote in the 2016 U.S. presidential election or vote for a third-party U.S. presidential candidate."[81] The Kremlin has reason to advocate for Stein because some of her

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[75] "National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism." *The White House National Security Council*, June 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/National-Strategy-for-Countering-Domestic-Terrorism.pdf. Report: 5.

[76] Helmus, Todd C., et al. *Countering Violent Extremism in the U.S. Military*. RAND Corporation, Oct. 2021. 1-2.

[77] Helmus, *Countering Violent Extremism in the U.S. Military*, 7.

[78] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 2-4, 65.

[79] Krogstad, Jens Manuel, and Mark Hugo Lopez. "Black Voter Turnout Fell in 2016, Even as a Record Number of Americans Cast Ballots." *Pew Research Center*, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/05/12/black-voter-turnout-fell-in-2016-even-as-a-record-number-of-americans-cast-ballots/. 1.

[80] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 31.

[81] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 18, ⁋ 46.

campaign decisions indicated a pronounced friendliness toward Russia. Stein met with Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and made comments that suggested a justification for Russia to invade Ukraine and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would be overreaching by interfering. When Stein appeared on televised Russian programming, the Harvard University educated physician legitimized advocacy for a Ukrainian coup. Stein's unorthodox foreign policy opinions did not disqualify her, nor did it prevent her from gathering thousands of election altering votes. In Wisconsin, Trump bested Clinton by 22,748 votes. Stein received 31,072 votes in Wisconsin. In Michigan, Trump bested Clinton by 10,704 votes. Stein received 51,463 votes in Michigan. In Pennsylvania, Trump bested Clinton by 44,292 votes. Stein received 49,941 votes in Pennsylvania.[82]

Russia's interference with the 2016 U.S. presidential election saturated social media with disinformation; it also involved surveillance and invasive data collections on U.S. citizens. The General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) aimed their cyber operations at this election months before the voting began. GRU operators by cyber means began to compromise the personal email accounts of members of the Democratic Party leadership from March until May of 2016. Russian cyber operatives downloaded large swaths of information containing strategies, voter profiles, and more from the Democratic National Committee. The data "both informed and enabled the influence campaign."[83]

The Kremlin's concerted effort to disseminate disinformation during the 2016 U.S. presidential election was achieved its goals and was difficult to weed out despite debate over the strength of its causal or correlated influence on voting behavior. Regardless the claims that the American public's discernment was robust enough to protect itself from manipulation were overestimated.[84] One factor that complicates measuring the Kremlin's influence campaign is the variability of U.S. voting practices. U.S. presidential elections have a period of five weeks when campaign decisions and campaign coverage are profoundly consequential. The period begins when early voting starts in October and lasts until the last day of voting known as Election Day. Oxford's Computation Propaganda Project was aware of this sensitive time, so they focused their research to examine the last ten days of the election. Analysis of the 1.2 million tweets used for their research states that misleading information was more abundant in identified swing states compared to other states during the last ten days of the election.[85]

Russian influence operations during the closing weeks of the 2016 U.S. presidential election were unusually busy. Estimates say one-eighth of the voting electorate decides which candidate they will vote for during the last week of an election cycle. Voters that behave this way are the desired targets for a specific manipulation of their decision making known as priming. "Priming occurs when exposure to a stimulus produces an effect on memory and hence subsequent responses. By making them more cognitively accessible, priming is able to make some issues, candidate characteristics, or concepts more salient or focal than others in decision making."[86] Evidence of Russian disinformation content on social media indicates that influence agents disproportionately attempted to target Black voters with late decision priming. During October 2016, 40 Facebook ads created by Russian influence agents had over 10,000 impressions of which 28 were intentionally for Black audiences. The following November had

[82] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 115.
[83] Intelligence Community Assessment. *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*. 2.
[84] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 279.
[85] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 54, 122.
[86] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 40.

27 ads with more than 10,000 impressions for Black audiences; that November 28 ads had more than 10,000 impressions.[87]

Duality of Black Vets

The first Black Vet to die in defense of the U.S. was a gentleman named Crispus Attucks; he perished during the Boston Massacre in 1770. Mr. Attucks was the first American casualty of the Revolutionary War, and his story shows that Black Vets have contributed and existed in long before journalist chronicled their U.S. history. Prior to 1827 no press in the U.S. catered to Black audiences. Ida B. Wells was a pioneer in recording the grievances of Black people and publishing the history of African Americans in print. The Black press was still in its infancy well after the U.S. Civil War began. In the Reconstruction period that followed, "Black Americans used their voting rights to ascend the ranks of political office, conservative elites began circulating disinformation that African Americans had 'abused their voting rights privileges, engaged in corruption, and stood generally unfit for democracy.'"[88]

Black Vets in the U.S. exist in a distinct duality; the Black identity typically overshadows other identities even those with privilege or prestige such as being a veteran. Thousands of Black men served in the Civil War, World War I, and during World War II but the Equal Justice Initiative has confirmed that some of those Black Vets were threatened, assaulted, or lynched upon their return from service.[89] After World War I there was an optimism that the U.S. government would reward Black Vets for their sacrifice by giving them equal rights at home. Despite the optimism a subset of Americans considered Black military acumen as a threat to the established southern order and a wave of violence against returning Black Vets erupted. The Red Summer of 1919 saw a series of anti-Black riots. Police officers and white civilians assaulted Black Vets wearing military uniforms. "No one was more at risk of experiencing violence and targeted racial terror than" Black Vets. White mobs lynched at least thirteen Black Vets.[90]

The legacy of the mistreatment of Black Vets is graphic and longstanding. Sergeant Isaac Woodard was in uniform while riding on a bus to his home in 1946. The chief of a South Carolina police department forcefully removed Sergeant Woodard from the bus, and the police brutally beat the sergeant. The police permanently blinded Sergeant Woodard. Similarly in 1962, the police shot and killed Corporal Roman Duckworth while he was riding a bus from Maryland to return to Mississippi. Timothy Berry, a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, proclaims that Black Vet mistreatment extends beyond altercations with the police harassing Black Vets riding buses. A third of Black troops have admitted to experiencing racial harassment from within the ranks and believed reporting of their harassment would jeopardize their career progression. Berry said, "In the military, unchecked white nationalism places a tax

[87] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 104.
[88] Tripodi, *The Propagandists' Playbook*, 105, 200.
[89] Finley, Ben, and Tom Foreman Jr. "Black Soldier Mistreatment Common Even Before Virginia Case." *NBC4 Washington*, 18 Apr. 2021, https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/black-soldier-mistreatment-common-even-before-virginia-case/2643676/. 3.
[90] Horton, Alex. "Police Encounter with Black Army Officer Is a Hurtful Reminder That 'Service Is Not Going to Save You,' Veterans Say." *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2021/04/13/caron-nazario-black-veterans/. 1.

on Black service members' psychological safety. It is a cancer to unit cohesion and military readiness."[91]

Mistreatment of Black Vets hides in plain sight despite its reflection in policy or anecdotes. Isiah James is a Black Vet who served completed three combat tours in Afghanistan and Iraq. Mr. James suffered injuries from his deployments and displayed a disabled-parking placard for his vehicle. Police officers harass disabled Black Vets as if they are abusers of handicapped parking spots. When Mr. James attempted to record one of these interactions on his phone he stated multiple times, "I'm a disabled veteran!" before the officer slapped the phone from his hand. Coretta Gray, a Black Vet who served as an Air Force attorney, says that her Black colleagues would share tips with her on towns to avoid due to unpleasant police harassment near bases in Texas and Louisiana. Gray intentionally wore her uniform in between her home and her office as a precaution to avoid police harassment.[92]

There are examples of mistreatment of Black Vets that receive more attention than others. The distressed relationship African Americans have with the police is not a secret kept from foreign nations. The racial injustice Black Vets experience is the subject of exploitation from foreign influence agents and this vulnerability is threatening toward U.S. national security, especially with examples that become large media stories.[93] A video recording of a traffic stop of a Black National Guard officer being pepper-sprayed, threatened, struck, and handcuffed went viral once released in 2021. Lieutenant Caron Nazario did not avoid excessive force from police despite being in uniform during the traffic stop.[94] One article about the mistreatment of Black Vets noted: "His skin color trumped his status as a military officer", "Even if Nazario drapes his body in the highest symbolic capital, that being United States military attire, it doesn't gain him anything", and Black Vets echoed "Race itself in America trumps our professional titles, our honorifics."[95]

The attempt to resolve the Lieutenant Nazario traffic stop in court further illuminated the injustice of the situation. The police officer testified that he suspected the Lieutenant's vehicle was carrying contraband when it was not. Additionally, the court ruled in favor of the officers and blamed the Lieutenant for refusal to comply with the officer's commands. The Lieutenant's lawsuit for $1.5 million in punitive damages resulted in a $3,685 restitution.[96]

Russian influence agents leveraged examples of racial injustice to splinter American audiences perceived to be on opposite ends regarding U.S. race relations. The narratives that guided separation between American audiences embellished xenophobic fears between Americans and created us versus them narratives. Russian influence agents impersonating white Americans reinforced "those who are endangering 'us' include Muslims, illegal aliens, Black Lives Matter activists, atheists, demanding women, those who oppose gun rights, and Hillary

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[91] Brookshire, Richard. "Black Vets Weren't Surprised Military Members Stormed the Capitol. Now They Want the Department of Defense to Root Out Far-Right Extremism in Its Ranks." *The Root*, 27 Jan. 2021, https://www.theroot.com/black-vets-werent-surprised-military-members-stormed-th-1846140899. 3.

[92] Horton, "Police Encounter with Black Army Officer Is a Hurtful Reminder That 'Service Is Not Going to Save You,' Veterans Say."1-2.

[93] Green-Riley and Stewart, *How to Combat the Spread of Misinformation from Russian Trolls*, 5.

[94] Horton, "Police Encounter with Black Army Officer Is a Hurtful Reminder That 'Service Is Not Going to Save You,' Veterans Say."1.

[95] Finley and Foreman Jr., "Black Soldier Mistreatment Common Even Before Virginia Case.", 3-4.

[96] Hipolit, Melissa. "He Wanted $1.5 Million for the Way He Was Treated during a Traffic Stop. He Got $3,685." *CBS 6 News Richmond WTVR*, 17 Jan. 2023, https://www.wtvr.com/news/local-news/windsor-traffic-stop-army-lt-caron-nazario-verdict-january-17-2023. 1-3.

Clinton, to name a few. Among those cast as 'we' [are] white males, Donald Trump, Christians, veterans, and workers whose jobs are threatened by bad trade deals and job-stealing 'illegals.'"[97]

Russian propaganda has characterized the U.S. unfavorably, and public examples of injustice reinforce this perspective. Russian television programs such as "Breaking the Set" and "Truthseeker," both broadcasted on RT, describe the U.S. democratic way as prone to excessive breaches upon civil liberties, normalized police brutality, and overuse of drone surveillance.[98] Using this perspective the Kremlin aims to destroy U.S. social structure and benefits from search engine optimization to exacerbate racial division. An example of this would be using #AllLivesMatter rhetoric to undermine #BlackLivesMatter rhetoric.[99]

Russian influence campaigns seek to exploit racial division, but a foreign perspective can sometimes lack a complete understanding of U.S. racial nuance and context. In the U.S. racially minoritized groups all faced specific forms of discrimination different from others; however, the African American experience is the only one that involves chattel slavery. U.S. society praised their military for being the benchmark and first subsets of society to implement racial integration and diversity efforts. Yet, even from the beginning, the U.S. military held that Black Vets were biologically inferior. "Blacks were eliminated from the force through policy on account of the fear of Black servicemen mounting a revolt against race-based chattel slavery after the Revolutionary War; Blacks were denied service at the beginning of the Civil War; Blacks were denied commissioned officer leadership positions and relegated to auxiliary and service specialties after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863; Blacks were relegated to all-Black units after the Civil War; and Blacks were forced into the 'menial occupations' of support positions in World War I."[100]

African Americans have a unique relationship with voting that a foreign perspective may not fully appreciate. One of the primary objectives of the Ku Klux Klan immediately following the Civil War was to conduct terror campaigns against Black voters to maintain white control over political power. For many decades the method employed to contain Black political power included terroristic demonstrations that killed or injured African Americans.[101] According to political philosopher Iris Young there are five dimensions of oppression inflicted to keep groups out of political power: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.[102] Russian influence agents use these dimensions of oppression as tools to construct divisive narratives. Russian disinformation narratives have mimicked the fears of Conservatives who believe Blacks, immigrants, Muslims, homosexuals, and feminists innately threaten job security for white workers, loosen moral values and church faith, and erases the cultural norms of "real Americans."[103]

The concept of "real Americans" and voter suppression collided in the form of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The following are three examples of Russian disinformation exposed in the Mueller Report. Each example aimed to suppress the political power of Black voters in 2016. (For more see sections: Mueller Report findings, Example of Disinformation, and the Appendix):

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[97] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 45.
[98] Intelligence Community Assessment. *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*. 6-7.
[99] Tripodi, *The Propagandists' Playbook*, 137.
[100] Gamble, "Toward a Racially Inclusive Military.", 58-59.
[101] "National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism." *The White House National Security Council*, 5.
[102] Gamble, "Toward a Racially Inclusive Military.", 61.
[103] Tripodi, *The Propagandists' Playbook*, 27.

> • [A] particular hype and hatred for Trump is misleading the people and forcing Blacks to vote Killary. We cannot resort to the lesser of two devils. Then we'd surely be better off without voting AT ALL (Woke Blacks, Facebook, October 2016). • Choose peace and vote for Jill Stein. Trust me, it's not a wasted vote (Blacktivist, Instagram, November 2016). • American Muslims [are] boycotting elections today, most of the American Muslim voters refuse to vote for Hillary Clinton because she wants to continue the war on Muslims (United Muslims of America, Facebook, November 2016).[104]

The results of Black voter turnout for the 2016 U.S. presidential election were staggering. The Black voter turnout rate declined for the first time in 20 years. The seven percentage-point decline from the previous presidential election was the largest dip on record for any racial group since 1996. Seven hundred sixty-five thousand Black voters from 2012 did not vote in 2016. The voter turnout rate for women between 2012 and 2016 remained the same even though Black women experienced a decline just as sharp as the decline for Black men.[105]

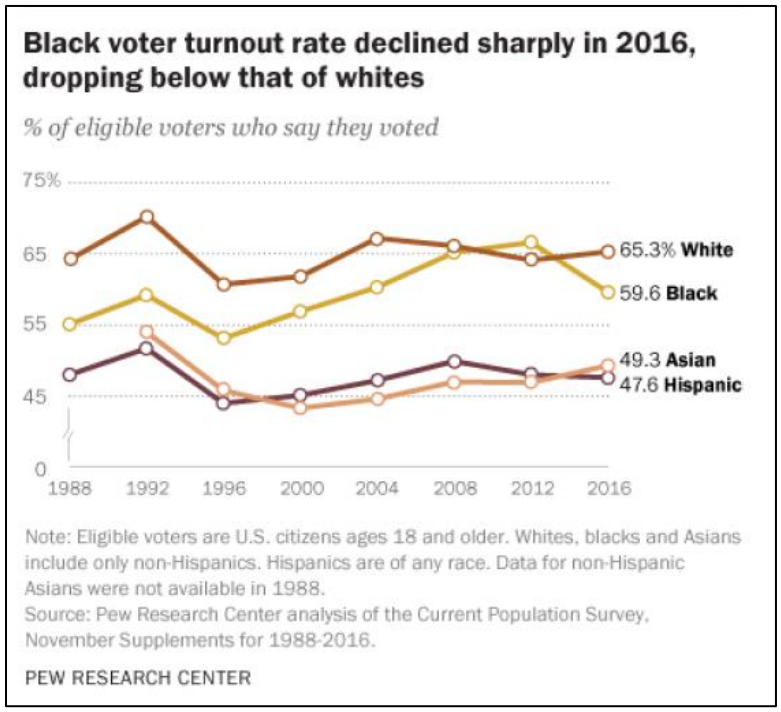

Figure 1. Recent election voter turnout by race [106]

Activity from the Kremlin

Opposing Clinton

The U.S. intelligence community assessed with high confidence "Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered [the] influence campaign in 2016 aimed at the U.S. presidential election [with the expressed goals] to undermine public faith in the U.S. democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency." The assessment

[104] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 18, ¶ 46.
[105] Krogstad and Lopez. "Black Voter Turnout Fell in 2016...", 2, 7.
[106] Krogstad and Lopez, "Black Voter Turnout Fell in 2016...", 2.

continues, "Putin and the Russian Government developed a clear preference for President-elect Trump. When it appeared to Moscow that Secretary Clinton was likely to win the election, the Russian influence campaign then focused on undermining her expected presidency."[107]

Russian influence agents on social media impersonated American citizens and created a "communication climate more hostile to Clinton that it otherwise would have been"[108] which produced effects on the election results. Analysis of 2016 U.S. presidential election data favored Donald Trump and illuminated how Black voting behaviors were uncharacteristically different from before. Of non-participant voters, 46 percent were Black. Seven percent of 2012 Obama voters, approximately four million voters in total, did not vote for a president in 2016 at all. Hundreds of thousands of voters swung their votes to Trump. Twelve percent of Bernie Sanders voters swung their support to Trump. Nine percent of 2012 Obama voters swung their votes to Trump. Clinton performed below expectation with voters of color, voters under thirty, and low-earning voters that had voted for Obama. "[A] combination of Sanders' supporters and Blacks avoided the ballot box in numbers that would have been great enough to put Clinton over the top" in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania and elected her as the President of the U.S.[109] Nonetheless, that did not happen, and Russian interference played a part in Clinton's election loss.

The U.S. IC claimed that Putin's contentious relationship with Clinton dated back to 2011, and he allowed for unfavorable Clinton coverage on televised Russian propaganda. When massive anti-Putin civilian protests erupted in late 2011 the Kremlin blamed Clinton for inciting them.[110] Five years later U.S. intelligence analysts claim that Putin authorized and encouraged Russian propaganda on RT to feature arguments that Clinton was being funded by international Islamic extremist groups and that she was not healthy enough to sustain the duties of the office.[111] Moreover, RT's negative coverage of Clinton focused on her leaked email scandal and proposed that corruption was rampant in her campaign team. A recurring hypothesis was that a 2016 Clinton presidency would lead to war between the U.S. and Russia.[112]

The Kremlin communicated a preference of Trump publicly but also worked in secrecy. Dmitriy Kiselev, the Kremlin's chief propagandist, publicly used weekly news magazines as forums to portray Trump as a political outsider who was combating the establishment corruption and was willing to work with Moscow if elected.[113] Yet privately the Russian influence campaign mirrored the "fake news outlets [that] explicitly targeted Donald Trump, tweeting fake news stories directly to his Twitter account during periods when he was known to be online, under the presumption that he has shown himself to be particularly susceptible to disinformation."[114]

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[107] Intelligence Community Assessment. *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*. 1.
[108] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 60.
[109] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 113-116, 211.
[110] Intelligence Community Assessment. *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*. 1.
[111] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 68.
[112] Intelligence Community Assessment. *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*. 4.
[113] Intelligence Community Assessment. *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*. 4.
[114] Napoli, Philip M. *Social Media and the Public Interest: Media Regulation in the Disinformation Age*. Columbia University Press, 2019. 97.

Internet Research Agency

The Internet Research Agency (IRA) should receive immense credit for the success of the Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The IRA is notoriously known as a Russian troll farm and has operated thousands of social media accounts since 2013.[115] [116] This organization is a proxy of the Kremlin and used bot technologies to spread disinformation in social media spaces for U.S. citizens, which inflamed discord.[117] The St. Petersburg based private company is led by Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin. [118] The U.S. IC assesses the likely financier of the IRA is connected in the Russian intelligence apparatus and a close ally to Putin. Additionally, a leading expert on the IRA claims that accounts "appear to be tied to Russia's professional trolls–because they previously were devoted to supporting Russian actions in Ukraine [and] started to advocate for President-elect Trump as early as December 2015."[119]

The online behavior of IRA bots between 2016 and 2017 so closely mimicked normal U.S. user behavior that most users overlooked subtle clues that suggested otherwise.[120] The IRA created approximately 3,000 social media accounts which impersonated U.S. citizens and attracted U.S. audiences to fraudulent networks and pages of disinformation. The impact of the IRA was significant because they posted over ten million tweets, accumulated 6.4 million followers to disinformation pages and groups, and 3.4 million Twitter account followers.[121] The U.S. IC labeled the IRA "the Kremlin's principal international propaganda outlet,"[122] which is surprising given the international reach and prominence of RT.

The messaging used by the IRA on U.S. social media was polarizing. The IRA created an ecosystem of disinformation that paired Kremlin state-run propaganda with influence agents that mobilized communities of social media users.[123] The accounts used for this campaign created racially charged posts from St. Petersburg that reached Black Vets in the U.S. on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.[124] When Russian intelligence services shaped messages for the IRA they peddled financial scams, anti-American agendas, and sowed discord year-round that was not always related to election interference. Their goal was to build rapport with disgruntled Americans and anger others.[125]

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[115] "Exposing Russia's Effort to Sow Discord Online." *Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence*, 1.
[116] Yin, Leon, et al. *Your Friendly Neighborhood Troll: The Internet Research Agency's Use of Local and Fake News in the 2016 US Presidential Campaign*. New York University's Social Media and Political Participation Lab. 11.
[117] Woolley, "Bots and Computational Propaganda", 89.
[118] Grossman, Shelby, and Josh A. Goldstein. "How Disinformation Evolved in 2020." *Brookings*, 4 Jan. 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/how-disinformation-evolved-in-2020/. 6.
[119] Intelligence Community Assessment. *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*. 4.
[120] Alizadeh, et al. "Content-Based Features Predict Social Media Influence Operations.", 7.
[121] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 10.
[122] "Exposing Russia's Effort to Sow Discord Online." *Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence*, 2.
[123] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 257.
[124] Green-Riley and Stewart, *How to Combat the Spread of Misinformation from Russian Trolls*, 3.
[125] Goldsmith, *An Investigation into Foreign Entities Who Are Targeting Servicemembers and Veterans Online*, 12.

Figure 2. Fraudulent coupon (unknown source) [126]

The reach of IRA activity on U.S. social media was difficult to calculate in the beginning. When a general counsel for Facebook testified at a Congressional hearing he raised the estimate of those affected by IRA content from more than ten million to 126 million.[127] The investigation of Russian interference on social media revealed the IRA had purchased 3,519 Facebook advertisements and 11.4 million American users viewed them. Additionally, 470 IRA Facebook pages shared 80,000 pieces of content which when disseminated and passed along as misinformation exposed 126 million Americans.[128]

The stories and narratives amplified by IRA accounts gathered notable attention from U.S. audiences. Between September and mid-November 2016, the IRA used more than 36,000 accounts to tweet and react to election specific content. Estimates say 288 million Americans interacted with the content from IRA Twitter bots.[129] The 20 top-performing IRA manipulated election stories on Facebook generated more engagement than the 20 top-performing authentic stories from reputable outlets, and IRA bots were programmed to comment on stories in 32 of 33 legitimate new media outlets.[130] [131] IRA activity was nearly impossible to avoid and certainly difficult to distinguish from actual human created engagements.

IRA accounts used elaborate hoaxes to spread disinformation. One long-term strategy the IRA employed was to gain audience trust using sleeper tactics on Twitter. Sleeper tactics involves patiently building rapport with audiences using trustworthy news sites. About half of the IRA accounts fed U.S. election interference into the news diets of U.S. audiences. This required using local news for months prior to integrating disinformation. The sleeper accounts

[126] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 13.
[127] Napoli, *Social Media and the Public Interest*, 126.
[128] "Exposing Russia's Effort to Sow Discord Online." *Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence*, 3.
[129] "Exposing Russia's Effort to Sow Discord Online." *Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence*, 3.
[130] International Center for Not-For-Profit Law, *Legal Responses to Disinformation*, 1.
[131] Napoli, *Social Media and the Public Interest*, 103.

steadily increased their content output as they neared the 2016 U.S. presidential election day.[132] [133]

During 2016, IRA accounts would average sharing fewer than 500 misleading or fabricated news links per week. This tempo was amplified by 400 percent during the months of September and October but returned to normal after Election Day. The Election Integrity IRA archive contains 9 million tweets written in either Russian, German, or English. Only 209,156 tweets did not use Cyrillic symbols and came from 556 accounts. Three hundred and twelve accounts, 56 percent, used content published by local news outlets. Two hundred and fifty-eight accounts that used local news outlet content shared links to unreputable or junk news sites. The tactic these accounts used mixed disinformation from junk new sites with authentic news sites to build audience trust. Twenty-seven of the most active accounts pretended to be local media outlets "calling themselves Atlanta_Online, TodayMiami, or KansasDailyNews, for example. These 27 fake local news outlets were responsible for the vast majority (80 percent) of all local news sharing by the IRA."[134]

IRA content targeted U.S. audience identities. For Black audiences, the IRA accounts imitated politically left-leaning profiles and used names that suggested they were Black people. Examples of Black audience accounts included: "Crystal1Johnson, TrayneshaCole, BleepThePolice, BlackToLive or blackmattersus".[135] Whereas, IRA accounts designed to engage veterans were Facebook pages that resembled trusted veteran service organizations "such as 'Vietnam Veterans of America,' 'Disabled American Veterans," and 'AMVETS,' as well as veterans organizations affiliated with far-left and far-right politics such as 'Vietnam Veterans Against the War' and 'Concerned Veterans for America.'"[136]

Mueller Report findings

The Mueller Report produced explicit detail that explained how Russian influence operations spread disinformation on social media using the IRA. The report referred to the IRA as the ORGANIZATION and IRA agents were defendants. The findings contained evidence that showed a structured and concerted effort to undermine the 2016 U.S. presidential election using cover names such as Project Lakhta or the Translator Project.[137] The Mueller Report claims that the monthly budget for these specific influence operations exceeded 73 million rubles or more than 1.25 million US dollars for September 2016 operations alone. This estimate did not include financial incentives for agents that added up to another 1 million rubles.[138]

Mueller accused the defendants of executing specific responsibilities in the overall influence operation. Dzheykhun Nasimi Ogly Aslanov served as the head of the project and oversaw targeting operations as related to the 2016 U.S. presidential election.[139] Vadim Vladimirovich Podkopaev conducted analysis on U.S. focused research and the drafting of social media content.[140] Gleb Igorevich Vasilchenko posted, monitored, and updated social media

[132] Yin, et al. *Your Friendly Neighborhood Troll*, 4.
[133] Napoli, *Social Media and the Public Interest*, 102.
[134] Yin, et al. *Your Friendly Neighborhood Troll*, 1-11.
[135] Yin, et al. *Your Friendly Neighborhood Troll*, 7.
[136] Goldsmith, *An Investigation into Foreign Entities Who Are Targeting Servicemembers and Veterans Online*, 13.
[137] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 5-6, ⁋ 10.
[138] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 7, ⁋ 11b.
[139] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 10, ⁋ 20.
[140] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 10, ⁋ 21.

content over several accounts and impersonated actual U.S. persons and grassroots organizations online.[141] Irina Viktorovna Kaverzina also operated multiple U.S. personas to post, monitor, and update social media content.[142] There were more defendants than those whom have been identified here.

The formal accusation states that the defendants knowingly committed crimes related to the misuse of personally identifiable information and illegal banking practices. The defendants were able to impersonate U.S. persons by unlawfully using victims' social security numbers and dates of birth without consent to open PayPal accounts and other digital finance services. Some defendants went as far as creating false driver's licenses for their personas.[143] Bank accounts and credit cards were created for fictitious U.S. personas to purchase political advertisements and to further conceal the Russian origins pretending to be U.S. grassroots activists.[144] In a captured electronic message, Irina Viktorovna Kaverzina wrote the following to a family member, "We has a slight crisis here at work: the FBI busted our activity (not a joke). So, I got preoccupied with covering tracks together with the colleagues. I created all these pictures and posts, and the Americans believed that it was written by their people."[145]

The defendants of the Mueller Report pretended to be their U.S. personas. Defendants and their co-conspirators had collected intelligence for use in the election interference by spending time in the U.S. under false pretenses.[146] Select agents were known as specialists and operated in shifts so their posts would be appropriate in accordance with U.S. time zones. Furthermore, the IRA leadership instructed specialists to reference U.S. holidays in their content and to post about more germane subjects like economics and foreign policy in conjunction with pro-Russian propaganda and disinformation.[147] The findings also explained how the ORGANIZATION understood the value of purposefully targeting "purple states like Colorado, Virginia, and Florida."[148]

Examples of Disinformation

Context

Kremlin-ordered disinformation created election interference but was concerning for multiple reasons. First, "the capability of foreign powers to effectively manipulate political discourse within a country raises difficult questions about the representativeness of elected officials and the decisions made by them. To the extent that disinformation seen during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign focused on exacerbating political conflict and cementing polarization, such activities might also erode the ability of democracies to effectively act as engines for compromise between segments of society."[149] Secondly, the recycled narratives of this influence operation were effective narratives of past generations. Presently available technologies and social media have changed the landscape in a way that was inconceivable before. The modern propaganda used "Soviet Cold War-era techniques, with an emphasis on

[141] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 10, ⁋ 22
[142] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 10, ⁋ 23.
[143] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 16, ⁋ 41.
[144] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 19-20, ⁋ 49-51.
[145] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 24, ⁋ 58d.
[146] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 12, ⁋ 30.
[147] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 14, ⁋ 33.
[148] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 13, ⁋ 31.
[149] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 257.

obfuscation and on getting targets to act in the interests of the propagandist without realizing that they have done so."[150]

Russian agents organized the disinformation that affected the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The messaging strategy blended covert intelligence with cyber activity and overt influence operations from agencies beholden to the Kremlin, state sponsored media outlets, intermediaries, and social media content creators.[151] Collectively these "nefarious actors actively politicize[d] and weaponize[d] the media to undermine democratic participation."[152]

Identity was the central topic that epitomized influence operations. An "army of a thousand Russian trolls working to spread fake news stories specifically targeted voters in swing states such as Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania."[153] The influence agent content involved identity-based topics such as:

> Immigration (with group names including "Secured Borders"); the Black Lives Matter movement (with group names including "Blacktivist"); religion (with group names including "United Muslims of America" and "Army of Jesus;" and certain geographic regions within the U.S. (with group names including "South United" and "Heart of Texas"). By 2016, the size of many ORGANIZATION-controlled groups had grown to hundreds of thousands of online followers.[154]

The topics of the disinformation were contentious but what made them effective was how the topics had distinct audiences in mind. In 2016 the U.S. had an increasing pool of independent voters, conflicted voters, and late decision voters, and all were susceptible to the contagion of the environment.[155] The Kremlin perceived these types of voters were overrepresented in their targeted audience and would therefore elicit strong partisan reactions to Russian agenda setting believed to be from U.S. sources. The capacity of influence agents to disguise their origins using social media provided a tactical advantage to exploit audiences.[156]

The Permanent Select Intelligence Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives compiled a cache of Russian created disinformation on social media that the U.S. IC used for analysis. The content is publicly available. Senator Mark Warner of Virginia, the current chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee was quoted as saying, "The Russians appear to have targeted women and African Americans in two of three decisive states, Wisconsin and Michigan," after having read the analysis.[157] Independent analysis on the disinformation examples concludes that the 2,042 piece of content were disseminated specifically for a Black primary audience. The process used in this study to match each publicly available piece of disinformation content to a primary audience was partially automated using a computer script. The automated process sorted the metadata attached to the content by the titles of its advertisers (ex. Blacktivist) or the desired interest of the recipients (ex. justice, culture, or slavery in the United States). The 500 pieces of content analyzed and labeled by the author of the study became a key for a machine to analyze. Then the 3,000 unlabeled pieces were labeled based upon

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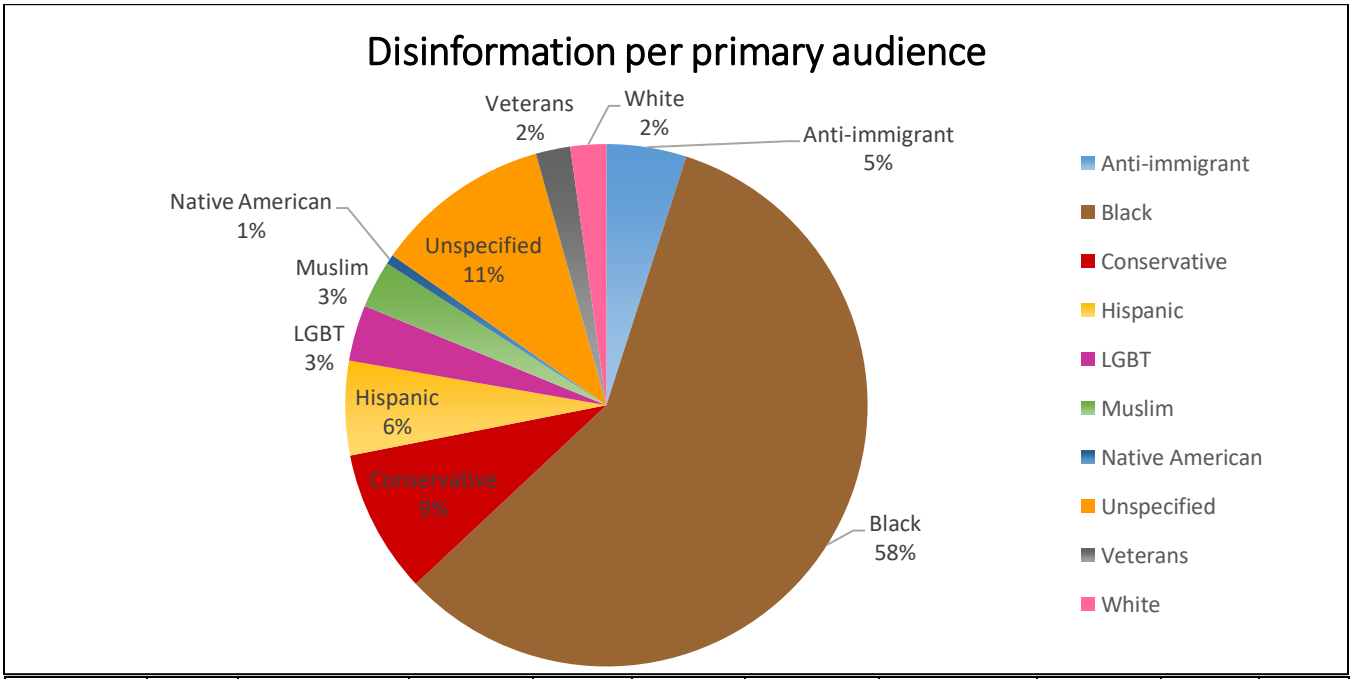
[150] Paul and Matthews. *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model*. 1.
[151] Intelligence Community Assessment. *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*. ii.
[152] Tripodi, *The Propagandists' Playbook*, 17.
[153] Napoli, *Social Media and the Public Interest*, 97.
[154] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 14, ⁋ 34.
[155] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 57.
[156] Posard, Reininger, and Helmus. *Countering Foreign Interference in U.S. Elections*. 35.
[157] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 139.

patterns learned from the human-analyzed key. The ten categories listed below in Figure 3 were determined by human analysis of the message content. See the Appendix for examples of Russian disinformation message content.



Anti-Immigrant	Black	Conservative	Hispanic	LGBT	Muslim	Native American	Unspecified	Veterans	White	**Total**
174	2042	313	205	122	103	21	384	75	75	**3517**

Figure 3. Disinformation per primary audience

Black audiences

A former U.S. diplomat and a former senior cyber policy advisor to the Department of Homeland Security, Naima Green-Riley and Camille Stewart Gloster respectfully, wrote in an editorial that Russian disinformation "weaves real narratives, manipulates real sentiments, reasonably understands the needs of the [Black] community, and has derived the way those outside the [Black] community observe and internalize discourse."[158] The declassified sample shows the most targeted audience was Black.

The Appendix of this study highlights examples of Russian disinformation that targeted Black audiences from the approximate 3,500 pieces from the cache. The messages of this disinformation content included the following:

> Avoid the line. Vote from Home. This time we choose between two racists. No one represents Black people. Don't go vote. Only this way can we change the way things [are]. [The] Democratic party is the party of slavery, the party of Jim Crow and the party of oppression. [Watch a Black] pastor explaining why African Americans should vote for Trump! We, the Black people, we stand in one unity. We stand in one to say Hillary Clinton is not our candidate.[159]

[158] Green-Riley and Stewart. *How to Combat the Spread of Misinformation from Russian Trolls.* 3.
[159] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 107.

Veteran audiences

Despite Black Vets' existence being a long-standing intersection between a Black audience and a veteran audience, Russian influence agents considered veteran audiences to be in opposition to Black audiences. The Kremlin's saturation of content for Black audience warps all other categories by proportion; however, content for veteran audiences was not dissimilar to content for anti-immigrant, conservative, and white audiences. If the count includes these three adjacent categories with the hyper-specific veteran audience, they would represent the second most targeted category with 640 pieces of content but are still well below the 2,042 total for Black audiences.

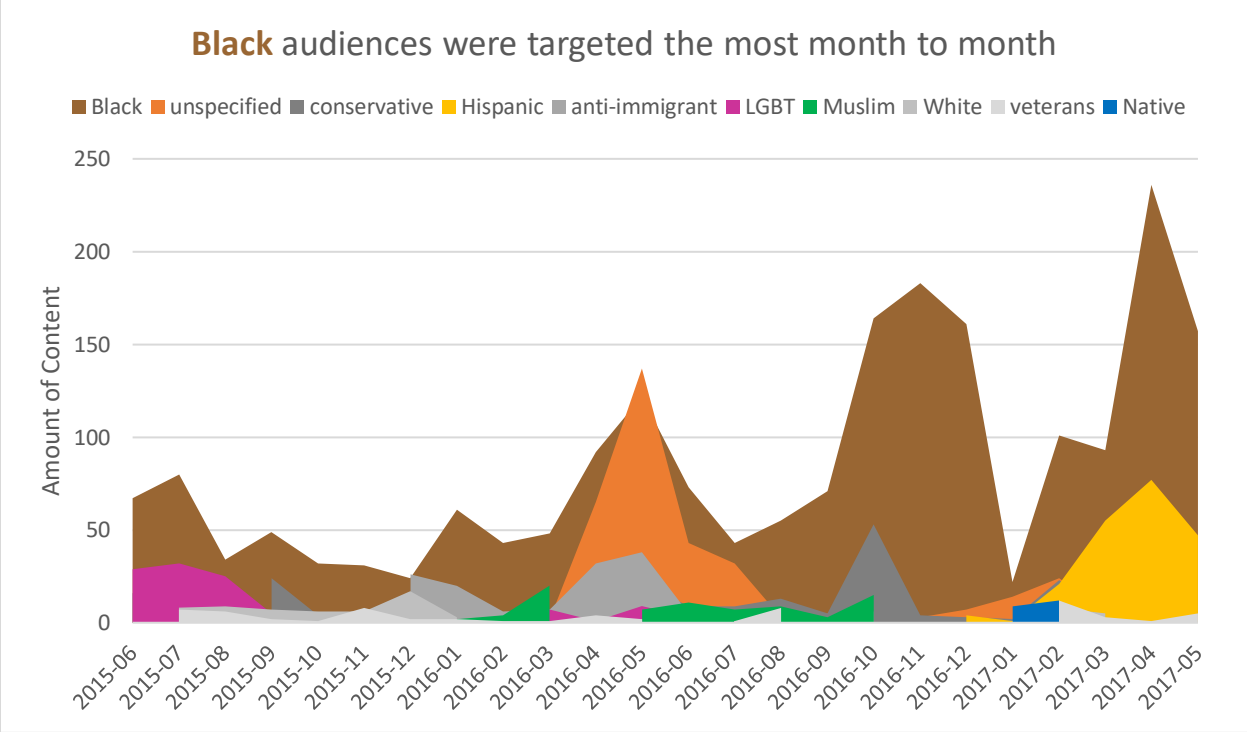


Figure 4. Disinformation area chart by month

Russian influence agents assumed that veterans on social media would share an affinity for conservativism that contrasts prevalent Black political opinion. This belief stems from the core tenets of conservatives: faith, family, firearms, a free market, and the armed forces. Francesca Bolla Tripodi, author of *The Propagandists' Playbook: How Conservative Elites Manipulate Search and Threaten Democracy*, claims that "conservative elites have used fear of others (Black people, immigrants, Muslims, members of the LGBTQ+ community, feminists) to make white workers [or] 'real' Americans worry that more change would mean more loss [for them]."[160] Hence the two reliable groups of voters with staunch support for Republican candidates are white evangelicals and military families whereas the loyal constituency for Democratic candidates are Black people.[161]

The Appendix of this study highlights examples of Russian disinformation that targeted veteran audiences from the approximate 3,500 pieces from the cache. Hyper-specialized content

[160] Tripodi, *The Propagandists' Playbook*, 19, 27.
[161] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 57.

for veterans like those included in the Appendix have raised awareness of veteran vulnerability. The Council on Foreign Relations criticized the U.S. Department of Defense for insufficiently preparing its service members and veterans for online interactions with Russian intelligence operatives:

> There was a period of time when the average U.S. military service member's closest encounter with foreign intelligence agents and spies was through the lens of a Hollywood movie. Today, many of our service members unknowingly interact with actors who spread disinformation through social media, but the Department of Defense (DOD) has been slow to adapt to this new reality. This leaves service members and their families to be targeted by highly trained foreign agents using military-style techniques to influence their thoughts and actions. The DOD should move with haste to formally educate service members, civil servants, and their families about disinformation to minimize the damage from this national security threat.[162]

Elections and Voting

Calls to action

The examples of disinformation point to a crisis that leads to calls to action. Extreme polarization that stems from identity-based ploys to promote discourse can and will tear a citizenry apart and in some case provoke escalatory violence.[163] During the 2016 election interference campaign the Kremlin's influence agents posted event announcements on Facebook designed to stoke in-person conflict between Black Lives Matter supporters and Blue Lives Matter supporters.[164] Some Russian-organized calls to action on social media mobilized considerable support from demonstrators. In the aftermath of the Freddie Gray and Michael Brown police killings in Baltimore and Ferguson, protestors were mobilized by posts with deceptive foreign origins. Foreign posts then initiated July 2016 anti-Clinton protests and September pro-Trump rallies. Approximately three hundred people attended a Minneapolis rally to support Philando Castile's family; the police shot and killed Castile near Minneapolis, but influence agents partially arranged the rally from Russia.[165]

Calls to action grew more brazen as the 2016 U.S. presidential election neared. IRA accounts requested that attendees of rallies begin to carry specific signs with prepared messages and this initiative was successful. Posters of Clinton served as enlarged memes and used quotes saying "I think Sharia Law will be a powerful new direction of freedom" with the intention to stir Islamophobia and xenophobia.[166] Russian propaganda and influence operations are deliberate about calls to action because their doctrine emphasizes the usefulness of imagery. Photographic evidence, manufactured by editing or otherwise, is foundational to Russian information operations.[167] Individuals at risk of targeting by Russian disinformation should be weary of images and especially memes found on social media. When images combine with written messages they are known to be effective tools that can manipulate an individual's perception of reality unconsciously.[168]

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[162] Francis, "Protecting Our Heroes from Disinformation on Social Media." 2.
[163] "National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism." *The White House National Security Council*, 29.
[164] Hwang, Tim. "Dealing with Disinformation", 270.
[165] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 133-135.
[166] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 21, ¶ 53.
[167] Paul and Matthews. *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model*. 5.
[168] Calderon, *LibGuides: Bias, Fake News, Hoaxes, & Lies*, 3.

Manipulative information warriors build credibility when the public answers a call to action. Russian influence agents understood that a source's reputation for being credible grows as targets' belief in the source spreads to others within the in-group, especially if source messaging already aligns with a recipient's preconceived beliefs. As an example, "Angry messages are more persuasive to angry audiences."[169] Therefore, the Kremlin intended for its information saboteurs to create visuals from public events to promote narratives useful to Russia. A protestor at a Russian-organized anti-Clinton rally in West Palm Beach, Florida pretended to be candidate Clinton while wearing a prison uniform while aboard a float. The Wall Street Journal estimates that Russian influence agents financed and publicized at least sixty similar rallies across the U.S. in 2016.[170] [171]

Russian influence doctrine seeks to leverage the passions of others to promote their own agendas. "A 'useful idiot' is a type of unwitting agent believed to be sympathetic to the manipulator's cause but does not comprehend the objectives of the campaign. Unwitting agents often spread disinformation not knowing that he or she is participating in a disinformation campaign."[172] Investigative analysis of the 2016 U.S. presidential election influence campaign suggests that the Kremlin found unwitting agents to call into action in Florida. Over 100 U.S. citizens were recruited for their ability to mobilize and facilitate grassroots election rallies primarily in Florida, but in a few other states also.[173] One estimate claims 129 social media-initiated events were created by Russian influence agents in Florida between 2015 and 2017, and approximately 62,000 U.S. citizens communicated interest or attended these events.[174] The model used to organize rallies in Florida became the template for rallies in New York and Pennsylvania. The process began with purchasing advertisements on social media, paying U.S. citizens to participate or perform picture worthy tasks at the rallies, and then persuading more U.S. citizens to attend with messaging on social media.[175]

Media and RT

Media is an invaluable element to an influence campaign on of the Kremlin's widely popular media outlets is RT, which was formerly known as Russian Today. RT is the Kremlin's propaganda outlet. The RT operation is expensive, but it has a media outlet competitor that accomplishes similar tasks, Sputnik. Each of these companies works adjacent to online communities and have a presence on social media platforms and influence over proxy websites.[176] In Russian media there have been instances where reporters have hired actors to portray victims of crimes and atrocities, and other reporters have attempted to simulate being on location on battlefields when on set in television studios. Despite this, RT commands a 300-million-dollar annual budget and "broadcasts in English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, and several Eastern European languages. [RT claims to be] the most-watched news source on the Internet."[177] The Editor in Chief for RT, Margarita Simonyan, is politically connected with the

[169] Paul and Matthews. *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model*. 3, 6.
[170] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 23, ⁋ 55d.
[171] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 73.
[172] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 14.
[173] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 29, ⁋ 81.
[174] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 136.
[175] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 23, ⁋ 56.
[176] Hwang, Tim. "Dealing with Disinformation", 254.
[177] Paul and Matthews. *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model*. 2, 5.

Kremlin, and is especially close with Aleksey Gromov, who is President Putin's Deputy Chief of Staff. Gromov is responsible for televised coverage of Russian political matters. Prior to this responsibility he was a founder of RT.[178]

Digital Citizenship

Issues

Communications and Decency Act of 1996

During the Spring of 2017, awareness and fear of political bots soared in the U.S. public conscious. The Acting U.S. Attorney General Sally Yates and the former U.S. Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper Jr. testified to Congress and described Russian cyber capabilities that caused interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. These testimonies dissolved into public fear of an army of Russian political bots and therefore heightened interest on the matter.[179] In the aftermath, society gave little attention to revelations that the Russian disinformation campaign was determined to use racial tensions in the U.S. to wedge influence on the citizenry. Russian bots were designed with race in mind and proceeded to isolate Black social media users as part of their strategy.[180] Russian trolls also utilized "individual behavior on social media that can harm the [U.S.] military's image".[181] Regardless, this method of computational propaganda was enabled by loopholes in U.S. law that provide immunity to social media platforms. Therefore, social media platforms do not regulate unlabeled bots from posting content or unauthenticated users from mobilizing genuine U.S. social media users with phony news outlets.[182]

The key legal provision that protects social media platforms from liability for user posted content is Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 (CDA 230). There are multiple forms of harmful content that CDA 230 inhibits social media platforms from censoring, purging, or regulating. Digital citizens have argued that social media platforms ought to be liable for enabling online harassment, defamation, the inappropriate placement of pornography, and foreign disinformation to influence elections. However, the law remains that, "no provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information" with exception for if accused of violating any criminal, intellectual property, state, or communication privacy law.[183]

Despite technology firms and social media platforms being exempt from the treatment or responsibilities of a publisher, they have authorities that muddy the distinction. Social media platforms can enforce their own rules to limit the freedom of speech for U.S. citizens without the burden of accountability and without a citizen-controlled means to check and balance that platform's power. [184] CDA 230 is analogous to social media platforms acting as "good Samaritans" to restrict dissemination of obscene or excessive violence, "digital media platforms [possessing] the editorial authority of a publisher while simultaneously possessing the immunity

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[178] Intelligence Community Assessment. *Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections*. 9.
[179] Woolley, "Bots and Computational Propaganda", 89.
[180] Green-Riley and Stewart. *How to Combat the Spread of Misinformation from Russian Trolls*. 3.
[181] Kehrt, "Troops, Veterans Are Targets in the Disinformation War, Even If They Don't Know It Yet." 8.
[182] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 278.
[183] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 252, 259.
[184] Mcclain, Colleen. "56% of Americans Oppose the Right to Sue Social Media Companies for What Users Post." *Pew Research Center*, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/07/01/56-of-americans-oppose-the-right-to-sue-social-media-companies-for-what-users-post/. 3.

from liability more akin to a common carrier."[185] This means that social media platforms are closer to common carriers like bookstores and libraries that remove harmful content only by request instead of preventing access to harmful content proactively.[186]

Seventy-seven percent of U.S. adults polled believe companies like Facebook, Google, and Amazon already have too much power, meanwhile only one percent believe the opposite and say these companies have too little power.[187] U.S. Senator Mark Warner, the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, has proposed that CDA 230 be revised to codify digital platforms with "information fiduciary' responsibilities which would mandate platforms label bot activity, authenticate the origins of posts, and transfer liability to platforms given the U.S. users' privacy rights. Warner has also called for the technology industry to develop algorithms that can audit other algorithms for government verification purposes.[188]

Proposals to amend CDA 230 have not passed. Experts have suspected that amending CDA 230 would create secondary disruptions in U.S. technology policy and privacy law that digital citizens may not be currently prepared to manage. An amendment to permit content moderation on social media platforms could apply to other entities such as search engines, internet service providers, video sharing sites, dating websites, and other digital entities. To prevent undesired spread into other internet sources, legislators would first have to establish a legally binding definition for social media platforms to differentiate them from other interactive computer services. This is a particularly challenging task because the technology companies have intellectual property rights, or their algorithms are protected trade secrets.[189]

Digital citizens who believe amending CDA 230 is too jarring for technology policy have supported other policy solutions to address the 2016 U.S. presidential election interference. The Federal Election Campaign Act (FECA) includes select portions of CDA 230 amendment proposals and if enacted represent a laser focused attempt to prevent foreign interference with online forums when they serve as spaces for U.S. political discussion.[190]

Protecting an informed citizenry

The government should inoculate citizens from foreign disinformation campaign messaging but need to tread carefully:

> Governments should not be the arbiters of truth, and citizens should be able to access true and false information, and then assess the validity of that information. To achieve this, regulation must comply with international norms relating to the freedom of expression and privacy. Restrictions on expression are only permissible when…provided by law and necessary in a democratic society in furtherance of legitimate government aims.[191]

The election interference conducted by the Kremlin was an attack on the informed citizenry of the U.S. The Kremlin's strategy defrauded the lawful functions of the U.S. and

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[185] Napoli, *Social Media and the Public Interest*, 33, 158.
[186] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 260.
[187] "Techlash? America's Growing Concern with Major Technology Companies." *Knight Foundation*, https://knightfoundation.org/reports/techlash-americas-growing-concern-with-major-technology-companies/. 13.
[188] Napoli, *Social Media and the Public Interest*, 184.
[189] Gallo and Cho, "Social Media", 22.
[190] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 277.
[191] International Center for Not-For-Profit Law. *Legal Responses to Disinformation*, 6.

obstructed its citizens using deceit.[192] "The Russian trolls had access to a ready-to-read playbook on how to reach voters susceptible to mobilizing or demobilizing appeals," that was boosted from U.S. research or observed from U.S. mainstream political media.[193] In August of 2016 a U.S. mainstream news network, CNN, ran a story that would validate why Florida held significance in the presidential election. "Florida: The Swingiest Swing State with 29 electoral votes…4.4 million Republicans, 4.6 million Democrats, 3 million independents who are young and care about jobs and the environment." This story and other stories like FiveThirtyEight's "Why Pennsylvania Could Decide the 2016 Election" [194] were useful scouting reports for influence agents to concentrate their targeting of U.S. voters. These examples of information show the dichotomy of the complex difficulties disinformation poses against an informed citizenry in the digital age.

The phenomenon known as the "sleeper effect" is a particularly challenging disinformation tactic leveraged against informed citizens. The sleeper effect describes sources that initially lack meaningful credibility but grow in impact and persuasiveness over time. Heuristically, thinkers may dissociate information from less credible sources but remember the information's message and consider the message to be true long after the forgotten source.[195] For example, once information passes between users the information gains impact or legitimacy, especially if the information is popular. When election disinformation in 2016 was popular its accuracy became less significant. Dangerously, "if you make it trend, you make it true."[196] Moreover, the trustworthiness of the individual who shared the disinformation or converted misinformation on social media can indirectly add a perception of truthfulness to the content. This way of thinking compounds the danger of social media networks because users interact with other users that share ideologies, hence increasing their inclination to trust.[197]

The nefarious purveyors of disinformation on social media are unincumbered by obstacles others face. Russian propagandists create online content quickly because they do not have obligations to fact check or verify the information. The practice is to interpret events in the best favor of their own objectives first. Influence agents can be nimble and agile to create first impressions and then employ frequent barrages of content over multiple mediums to amplify their message into a thematic statement while more credible sources produce at a slower pace or too late entirely.[198]

Social media enables disinformation to propagate incredibly quickly and can be weaponized with simplistic technologic knowledge. Online manipulators with firm understanding of how to use deception can spill their ideas into the physical world.[199] "The 2016 Russian campaign was a multifaceted effort aimed at undermining trust in targeted political figures. This included conspiracy theories such as 'Pizzagate,' which spread the notion that Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton and Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta were members of an underground sex trafficking ring." [200] This online conspiracy became dangerous

[192] AAW, U.S. Department of Justice. *Internet Research Agency Indictment*: 3, ¶ 2.
[193] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 131.
[194] Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 137.
[195] Paul and Matthews. *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model*. 6.
[196] International Center for Not-For-Profit Law, *Legal Responses to Disinformation*, 10.
[197] Napoli, *Social Media and the Public Interest*, 101.
[198] Paul and Matthews. *The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model*. 4.
[199] Kehrt, "Troops, Veterans Are Targets in the Disinformation War, Even If They Don't Know It Yet." 4.
[200] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 254.

when an armed man traveled to the alleged location of the conspiracy, a pizza restaurant, to rescue the fictional victims.

The most salient issue with disinformation on social media is the threat it poses against the marketplace of ideas from the public. There are four failures that jeopardize a forum for citizens to evaluate their ideas with other citizens. First, the proliferation and acceptance of false ideas. Second, the suppression of truthful information. Third, the failure to produce truthful information. Finally, limits on choices and the channeling of preferences.[201] Anti-democratic forces engage in these behaviors using disinformation and weaponized corruption to expose weaknesses and expand division within democratic states. When democracies are vulnerable, anti-democratic regimes offer authoritarian governance as an alternative.[202] The intended goal of the Kremlin was to facilitate election interference to reduce the chances that the U.S. citizenry could find consensus within its politics and therefore create a tactical opportunity to weaken the U.S.[203]

The value of the marketplace of ideas is its ability to shape opinion. Disinformation can be effective at shaping opinions when the audiences are ignorant of the influence.[204] Sharing a post on social media is not as benign as it appears at first because campaigns grow, and trust grows with the sharing of content. "Given [the] public trust in the military, posts by veterans and service members can lend a degree of credibility to an idea or narrative [that may be unintentional and pose] a real threat to unit cohesion."[205] Data surrounding the 2016 U.S. presidential election digital information environment suggests the twenty percent of U.S. adults saw false headlines that claimed the Pope endorsed Trump for president or that counter-protestors at Trump rallies were being paid thousands to fabricate disdain for the Trump candidacy.[206] Misrepresentations like these examples are engaging but ultimately pollute the honest discussion that make democracy thrive, especially when trustworthy sources share them with others on social media.

Policy recommendations

Solutions for the difficulties with disinformation on social media require an understanding of how informed citizens interact with news, the nuanced protections of U.S. citizens' freedom of speech, and technology policy. Additionally, U.S. citizens are conflicted on whom should be responsible for the problem and implementing its solutions. Enacting regulations on internet enabled platforms is a delicate matter. Four of every five U.S. adults polled favored digital platforms removing suspected misinformation, but they also opposed these same platforms having the authority to censor speech and distrust company biases and ill-defined meaning of which content is offensive.[207] Furthermore, 62 percent of U.S. adults believe that news in print, on television, and over the radio is biased, whereas 44 percent describe the news as inaccurate. A third of U.S. adults go further and believe the news is misinformation. These statistics of distrust are higher for social media since approximately two of every three U.S.

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[201] Napoli, *Social Media and the Public Interest*, 115.
[202] White House. *Interim National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 7.
[203] Posard, Reininger, and Helmus. *Countering Foreign Interference in U.S. Elections.* 33.
[204] Francis, "Protecting Our Heroes from Disinformation on Social Media." 2.
[205] Kehrt, "Troops, Veterans Are Targets in the Disinformation War, Even If They Don't Know It Yet." 6.
[206] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 253.
[207] Wolf, Holly. "Americans' Views on News Content from Internet Companies." *Gallup.com,* 15 Aug. 2018, https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/240587/americans-views-news-content-internet-companies.aspx. 3.

adults polled described social media as inaccurate and misinformation. Additionally, Republicans are less trusting of news and social media than Democrats.[208]

Most Americans can agree that misinformation is problematic for the digital spaces used to maintain an informed citizenry but speculation on a remedy is more difficult to settle. Seventy-six percent of U.S. adults believe Facebook, Google, and Twitter share an ethical obligation to disclose when their users are exposed to misinformation.[209] Sixty percent of U.S. adults polled hold those same companies responsible for national division, 52 percent say these companies amplify unpopular views that would have not received attention otherwise, and 47 percent claim these companies make more problems than they solve. About half of U.S. adults polled say the government should play a significant role in creating a solution. Even election interference is a partisan issue; 80 percent of Democrats are more than concerned about it versus only 23 percent of Republicans. Despite having differences in concerns for the election interference, 80 percent agree that the government should address the interference with the election but have not specified how to do so. [210]

An initiative toward protection of an informed citizenry is disclosure about the dangers of disinformation on social media. Warning U.S. citizens of online propaganda is a more thoughtful alternative to allowing them to discern for themselves without any warnings.[211] This measure levies the benefits from inoculation theory which became popular in the 1960s in public health, political campaigns, and other fields. A focus of inoculating audiences would strengthen citizens' resistance to persuasion. This process requires participants to practice their literacy skills and discernment against known disinformation to prepare themselves against more complex examples.[212]

Prudent policy solutions keep the most vulnerable communities in mind. Black Vets are twice as vulnerable to Russian disinformation based on the attention they garnered during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Black people were the most targeted group, and influence agents groomed veterans to radicalize them. Critics from veterans' organizations have claimed that the DOD has not provided service members and their families with the necessary education to inoculate themselves against highly trained foreign agents. However, others argue that a mandatory DOD digital literacy program would be government overreach into the political opinions of veterans. In response the DOD ought to create "a carefully crafted educational program that narrowly focuses on how to evaluate online content's credibility and teaches the tactics being employed to spread disinformation online by nefarious actors." Or the DOD should provide veterans access to an assistance hotline particularly for discerning information and debunking conspiracies online. Other programs fall short and provide inadequate mitigation which ignores the severity of this national security threat.[213]

Consider veterans' specific policy solutions to foreign disinformation on social media. The first step is that the Department of Veterans Affairs appoints a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Cyber-Health who will be responsible for developing programs to improve the cyber-hygiene of veterans. Next, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs must reprioritize cyber-hygiene to an urgent

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[208] Jones, Jeffery. "Americans: Much Misinformation, Bias, Inaccuracy in News." *Gallup.com*, 20 June 2018, https://news.gallup.com/opinion/gallup/235796/americans-misinformation-bias-inaccuracy-news.aspx. 3.
[209] Jones, "Americans: Much Misinformation, Bias, Inaccuracy in News.", 3.
[210] "Techlash? America's Growing Concern with Major Technology Companies." *Knight Foundation*, 4, 6-7, 10.
[211] Plant, *Patriotism Divided*, 12.
[212] Posard, Reininger, and Helmus. *Countering Foreign Interference in U.S. Elections.* 47.
[213] Francis, "Protecting Our Heroes from Disinformation on Social Media." 2, 4.

priority and initiate cybersecurity training on threats, vulnerabilities, and safe practices. Finally, the Armed Services Committees need to initiate formal inspections on social media disinformation risks to military readiness. The congressional leaders must sharpen their understanding of the impacts and risks veterans face as targets in the sphere of information warfare.[214]

Solutions to protect informed citizenry do not need to be exclusive to only veterans, other vulnerable populations should be considered as well. The California state legislature has proposed a bill to criminalize the creation or dissemination of disinformation online as it pertains to voting and elections. This concept is still in its infancy and the consequences of enacting such a bill is still unobserved.[215] At the federal level, the Honest Ads Act is the most aggressive proposal U.S. legislators have drafted to address political disinformation. According to this potential law, any digital platform that maintains more than 50 million unique visitors in a month (the large firms like Facebook) would be legally required to disclose all advertisers on their platform that spent more than 500 U.S. dollars in the previous year. [216] This too would create a new technology policy and expose what information advertisers use to target users and record information about the whom made the purchase. The proposed Honest Ads Act would mitigate the impact of bots by fortifying requirements on account profiles and platform services.[217]

Digital Media Literacy

Algorithms

The 2016 U.S. presidential election interference is linked to social media and the response to the interference quickly vilified inanimate algorithms as the entity responsible for all the disinformation instead of the human culprits. Algorithms are just one component of social media platforms and demystifying what an algorithm is and is not can be critical. Social media platforms are programs that combine human users to each other with content or information by using an algorithm, meaning a system of filters for large swaths of information. On social media human users connect with other users and exchange information. Social media platforms use digital codes, known as algorithms, to sort and prioritize the content or information exchanged. The reward algorithms provide platforms is engagement by the users via clicking links or commenting on post. Programmers for social media platform enhance algorithms to promote content that captures the most user attention and provoke the most user engagement.[218]

The dilemma with algorithms is that disinformation and misinformation is often more interesting or engaging with human users than more genuine content. Human nature is at fault, but social media algorithms provide humans with more of the harmful information they are seeking. Citizen users in the digital age should be mindful:

> There are qualities of community-driven filtration of disinformation that make it preferable to automated, algorithmic approaches. Algorithms are opaque, possessing hidden biases that can be difficult to ascertain as a user. Similarly, algorithms are designed and maintained by the platform. Effectively delegated decisions over true and falsity to the company operating the service. In contrast, a filtration approach that

[214] Goldsmith, *An Investigation into Foreign Entities Who Are Targeting Servicemembers and Veterans Online*, 8-9.
[215] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 262.
[216] International Center for Not-For-Profit Law, *Legal Responses to Disinformation,* 13.
[217] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 267.
[218] Gallo and Cho, "Social Media", 1.

> leverages community debate and moderation can take place in a more transparent manner and leaves decisions about disinformation to the users.[219]

Algorithms used for good can contribute to healthy cyber-hygiene if users respond appropriately to content. The sorting, indexing, and prioritization features of algorithms can suppress illegal content and unengaged content. Software engineers refine algorithms to meet the needs of clients whether its for business advantages or for improvements in customer relations.[220] Similarly, individual users personalize their own content diets based upon their engagement with the content. The algorithm recommendations create a social media "feed" for users to engage. When users view defamatory content in their feed and choose to react with engagement or providing commenting they are programming their algorithm to show similar content on their feed in the future.[221] Algorithms do not automatically decipher if users are accepting or dismissive of content if the content commands communal user attention.

A challenge with algorithms is their function using the evolving consensus or lack thereof within a community. The recommendations provided by algorithms are skilled at providing what people find interesting or trending, but the users are responsible for what they choose to consume.[222] Algorithms prioritize content that entertains rather than content and unfortunately most entertaining content lacks veracity. "According to a Wall Street Journal article, slides presented by an internal Facebook team to company executives in 2018 stated, 'Our algorithms exploit the human brain's attraction to divisiveness,' and warned that the algorithms would promote 'more and more divisive content'".[223] Therefore, individual good cyber-hygiene practices will not be enough to fix this harm if the community does not collectively refuse to engage the content considered to be harmful.

There are terms associated with algorithms that assist with identifying the drawbacks of improper use of algorithms. Algorithms are closely related to the creation of echo chambers. When algorithms design users' social media feeds, digital filtering often integrates what other users with similar interests find engaging which inevitably draws similar users closer together. Echo chambers become digital communities or spaces where the participants are wearing similar thing, watching the same content, reading the same post, or thinking similarly.[224] User choice drives echo chambers on social media more so than algorithms manipulating content to create more echo chambers. Research on social media algorithms has shown that "user skepticism about the legitimacy of [recent U.S. elections] is positively associated with the number of videos about election fraud that were recommended by the algorithm."[225]

Computational propaganda is another relevant technological term, but it involves algorithms and disinformation. In academic literature computational propaganda is interchangeable with information operations, information warfare, or influence operations. This concept is "the use of algorithms, automation (most often in the form of political bots), and human curation are used over social media to purposefully distribute misleading information."[226]

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[219] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 274.
[220] Gallo and Cho, "Social Media", 10.
[221] Hwang, "Dealing with Disinformation", 265.
[222] Bisbee, "Election Fraud, YouTube, and Public Perception of the Legitimacy of President Biden.", 2.
[223] Gallo and Cho, "Social Media", 10.
[224] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 9.
[225] Bisbee, "Election Fraud, YouTube, and Public Perception of the Legitimacy of President Biden.", 3, 15.
[226] Woolley, "Bots and Computational Propaganda", 90.

The purpose of algorithms is to minimize the complex judgment necessary to characterize a user profile and assumed preferences.[227] Yet the influence agents bend algorithms to execute tasks autonomously called bots, and bots can lighten the work load to popularize disinformation on social media immensely.[228]

Bots and trolls

To those unfamiliar with bots and trolls, they seem like science-fiction technologies reserved for the future, however bots and trolls are real and seemingly omni-present in the digital sphere. Spambots generate an abundance of content, Wikiedits bots monitor the Wikipedia pages of politicians for edits and alert followers using Twitter of the observed updates. Sleeper bots on social media will observe activity for years to learn how to disguise their content contributions in a way that appears more realistic or authentically human. These sleeper bots usually hibernate in between election cycles. Honeypot bots hunt other bots, and troll bots harass and demobilize other users just like the human internet trolls they imitate.[229] Bots and trolls contribute to the deception ingrained on the internet and social media.

Political bots are particularly problematic for digital citizenship. Both bots and trolls can have politically motivated agendas and perform tasks that amplify political speech or work to suppress others from voting. Political bots can masquerade as followers to the candidate, so the candidate's support becomes inflated. The perception of a popular candidate affects public opinion and can persuade undecided voters to back a popular candidate. Alternatively, political bots can spread partisan disinformation or false disinformation to spoil a candidate's reputation and likelihood of maintaining supporters.[230]

Digital citizens are not entirely defenseless, there are promising emerging technologies and policy ideas that could broach the difficulties associated with disinformation on social media. The DOD's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) has announced an initiative to detect and counter this national security vulnerability. DARPA engineers are designing and evaluating three new software algorithms with unique capabilities to assist this effort. "The first would identify manipulated media, the second would determine where the media came from, and the third would somehow figure out whether the media were 'generated or manipulated for malicious purposes.'"[231] Conversely, California has an anti-bot law already and was the first state to reduce the immunity of malicious bot practices with a law. "The law requires that bots (or the person controlling them) reveal their 'artificial identity' when they are used to sell a product or influence a voter."[232]

Bots are dangerous to national security as they are becoming more sophisticated. Technological advancement has increased the difficulty in recognizing content from newer bots that perform more human like than before. Disinformation messaging created by an influence agent and channeled through a bot can spread exponentially quickly before defenses can prevent

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[227] Stukal, Denis, et al. "For Whom the Bot Tolls: A Neural Networks Approach to Measuring Political Orientation of Twitter Bots in Russia." *SAGE Open*, vol. 9, no. 2, Apr. 2019, p. 2158244019827715. *SAGE Journals*, https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244019827715. 4.
[228] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 14.
[229] Woolley, "Bots and Computational Propaganda", 95.
[230] Woolley, "Bots and Computational Propaganda", 92-93.
[231] Funke, Daniel, et al. "The U.S. Defense Department Is Going after Disinformation. Here Are 3 Questions about What They're Proposing." *Poynter*, 5 Sept. 2019, https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/the-u-s-defense-department-is-going-after-disinformation-here-are-3-questions-about-what-theyre-proposing/. 3-4.
[232] International Center for Not-For-Profit Law. *Legal Responses to Disinformation*, 11.

it.[233] The luxury of bots is that they can perform repetitive tasks in the fraction of the time it would take a human and do so discretely.[234] Furthermore bots are plentiful:

> Millions of bots spread information on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. According to a 2017 estimate, there were twenty-three million bots on Twitter (around 8.5 percent of all Twitter accounts), 140 million bots on Facebook (up to 5.5 percent of all Facebook accounts) and approximately twenty-seven million bots on Instagram (8.2 percent of all Instagram accounts). These three platforms alone contained 190 million bots—more than half the number of people who live in the entire U.S. These zombie-like accounts often sit dormant, waiting for external activation to begin their preassigned tasks on the platform.[235]

Civic duty

An identity-centric approach to teaching digital media literacy would improve the U.S. government's response to the national security threat of foreign disinformation campaigns on social media. Americans have declining trust in the four pillars of their information ecosystem – the internet, computers, television and radio, and printed publishing.[236] For the Black community, it is critical that literacy skills are promoted in media spaces designed for Black audiences.[237] "Education and literacy are widely acknowledged as crucial to be able to navigate the information space and recognize disinformation. The responsibility to increase digital hygiene, integrate digital skills in education programs and generate awareness and increase literacy is left to citizens, educational institutions, civil society, and government agencies."[238] Yet malicious actors exploit vulnerabilities in the laws that govern social media platforms and then target identity groups with disinformation that can easily spread out of control.[239] Therefore, the U.S. government ought to change its approach in teaching digital media literacy competencies so that vulnerable populations receive the care and skills necessary to reduce their potential of becoming radicalized by foreign indoctrination.

According to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, increased media literacy will harden the nation's defenses against foreign disinformation. The agency's hope is for Americans to embrace media literacy and treat their information consumption "as a patriotic choice in [the] defense of democracy."[240] Similarly, a U.S. government sponsored nonprofit research organization, the RAND Corporation, identified foreign disinformation and domestic misinformation campaigns as significant role players in the radicalization of subjects toward violent extremism.[241] RAND also reported that media literacy interventions have positive effects that can assist in the deradicalization of another if properly structured.[242]

Finland has an excellent reputation for education policy because their government successfully implemented a profound media literacy curriculum long ago. Finland's media

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[233] Gallo and Cho, "Social Media", 12.
[234] Woolley, "Bots and Computational Propaganda", 92.
[235] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 15.
[236] Saad, Lydia. "Internet and Other Information Industries at New Image Lows." *Gallup.Com*, 15 Sept. 2021, https://news.gallup.com/poll/354749/internet-information-industries-new-image-lows.aspx. 1.
[237] Green-Riley and Stewart. *How to Combat the Spread of Misinformation from Russian Trolls.* 1.
[238] International Center for Not-For-Profit Law. *Legal Responses to Disinformation*, 18.
[239] US Department of Homeland Security. "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 10.
[240] US Department of Homeland Security, "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 24.
[241] Helmus,, et al. *Countering Violent Extremism in the U.S. Military*, 7.
[242] Brown, et al. *Violent Extremism in America*, 87.

literacy program has also adapted to modern digital challenges. Finland is a northern European nation with a parliamentary republic government and approximately 5.6 million citizens.[243] More than a century ago, Finland declared its independence from Russia and despite Russian media waging disinformation campaigns against Finland, the nation maintains the highest marks in the European Union for reading education, press freedom, and other forms of media literacy. The literacy education philosophy challenges Finnish citizens in early childhood to develop critical thinking tools to vaccinate them instead of preaching about the polarization of correct and incorrect information. Students learn to ask who produced this information and why, where was it published, what are the underlying messages and whom are they intended for and is there verifiable evidence that supports the claims presented. One Finish educator described a sense of duty their digital citizens share, "We are a small country, without many resources, and we rely on everyone contributing to the collective defense of society."[244]

The U.S. can achieve similar success with policies that practice inoculation theory on citizens early and often to develop citizen resistance to foreign disinformation persuasion. The protections U.S. digital citizens seek already exist in the First Amendment because its intention is the protect an informed citizenry.[245] Russian election interference weaponized racialized polarization and used disinformation against the Black community. An emphasis on cyber hygiene and threat exposure specifically for the Black community would facilitate media literacy education that is prepared for modern challenges.[246] The U.S. is missing the opportunity to gather participatory buy-in from digital citizenry by not framing media literacy as a civic duty in defense of democracy similar to the Finnish model.[247] Black Vets would be a deserving and most relevant focus group for a media literacy training designed to address the Russian disinformation that caused interference in 2016.

Conclusion

The Russian disinformation campaign on the 2016 U.S. presidential election deliberately targeted African Americans and veterans. Russian disinformation attacked Black Vets through social media to dissuade Black voting power and it baited veterans to radicalize into domestic violent extremism. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution articulates the rights of citizens and therefore protects the sanctity of an informed citizenry, yet the Kremlin facilitated influence campaign of 2016 polluted the online environment where citizens discuss politics and exchange ideas – social media. Black Vets identify with two communities that are vulnerable populations to the targeting of U.S. adversaries and a failure to intervene will leave a national security wound exposes for others to exploit. The 2016 interference campaign used U.S. racial tensions to sow discord; the Russian hypothesis was defeating American unity to create an opportunity for the world to seek leadership from different governments under authoritarian rule, such as Russia. Russian influence operations displayed a strategy to weaken the U.S. during the 2016 election while reusing old divisive rhetoric.

This study asked how the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs could protect Black Vets from foreign disinformation campaigns on social media. Then this study provided a new

[243] "Finland." *The World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency, 11 Apr. 2023. *CIA.gov*, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/finland/#geography. 1.
[244] Henley, "How Finland Starts Its Fight against Fake News in Primary Schools.", 4-7.
[245] Napoli, *Social Media and the Public Interest*, 81.
[246] Green-Riley and Stewart. *How to Combat the Spread of Misinformation from Russian Trolls*. 5.
[247] US Department of Homeland Security, "Combatting Targeted Disinformation Campaigns", 3.

perspective on how the U.S. could teach digital media literacy competencies. One solution was educational programs that address this national security threat. The intent should focus on giving vulnerable populations the specialized attention they deserve so they can inoculate themselves against foreign ploys to demobilize and radicalize them. Additionally, this study discussed policies in draft and recently minted laws that address liability protections for digital platforms and the legality of bots to distort perceptions of political campaigns. Technology in the digital age has expanded beyond the pace of the laws that have attempted to keep up to regulate it and protect the rights of citizens affected by the technologies.

"Ambush on Black Veterans" used applied research and a review of academic literature, U.S. government policies, and approximately 3,500 examples of Russian social media content used to influence American audiences between 2015 and 2017. The story behind the 2016 U.S. presidential election interference and the ways to protect against repeating the mistakes made involve national security policy, technology policy, education policy, and social policy. Identity based information warfare attacks aimed at Black Vets in 2016, but as adversaries improve their capabilities and the technologies improve, more communities of various identities will be vulnerable to disinformation campaigns on social media. Therefore, it would behoove U.S. policymakers to partner with leaders in digital technology to enact protections against the next wave of information warfare to be waged on vulnerable digital citizens. The pathways and information provided in this study are a framework toward creating a modern solution to this national security threat.

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Appendix

Black Audience Content

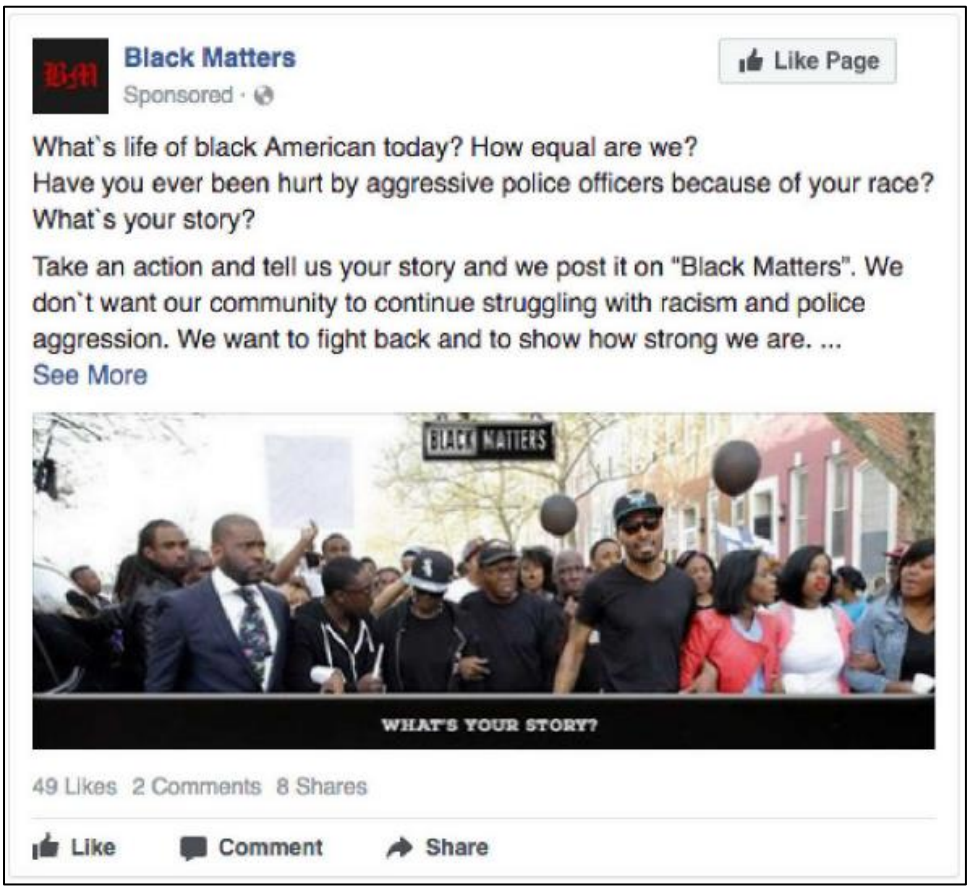
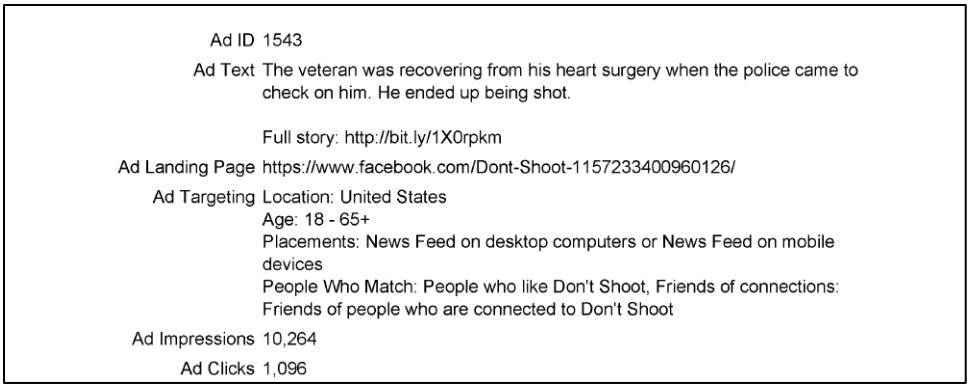


Figure A1. July 2015

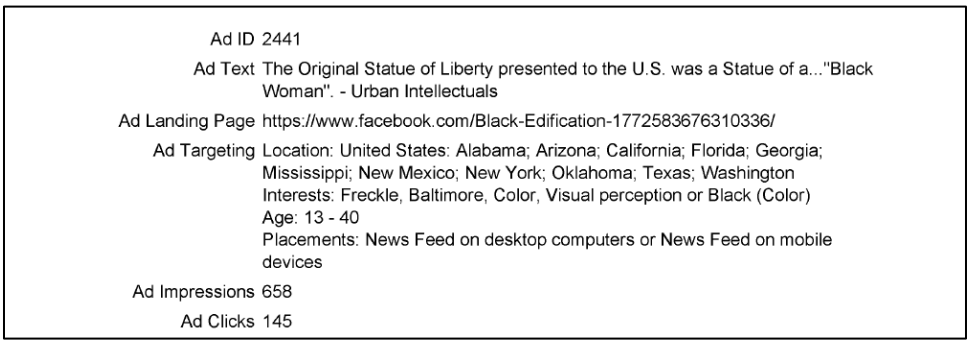
Ad ID	207
Ad Text	Trump said "You know, Barack Obama — African-American — if I were African-American, I would be so angry at him," "I will do more for the African-American people in one year than Barack Obama has done in his seven years, soon to be eight years, and then by the way, he's out and thank goodness, OK?". The controversial Trump has made so many promises especially to African-Americans during his recent campaigns. Some of these promises include Trump saying, "I'm going to unify the country," Trump told thousands of people at a rally in this suburb of Detroit. "I'm going to unify blacks and whites." A... Donald Trump's Promises to African-Americans | Black Matters Black Matters
Ad Landing Page	https://www.facebook.com/Black-Matters-1579673598947501/
Ad Targeting	Location: United States: New York New York Age: 18 - 65+ Placements: News Feed on desktop computers or News Feed on mobile devices
Ad Impressions	45
Ad Clicks	5

Figure A2. March 2016



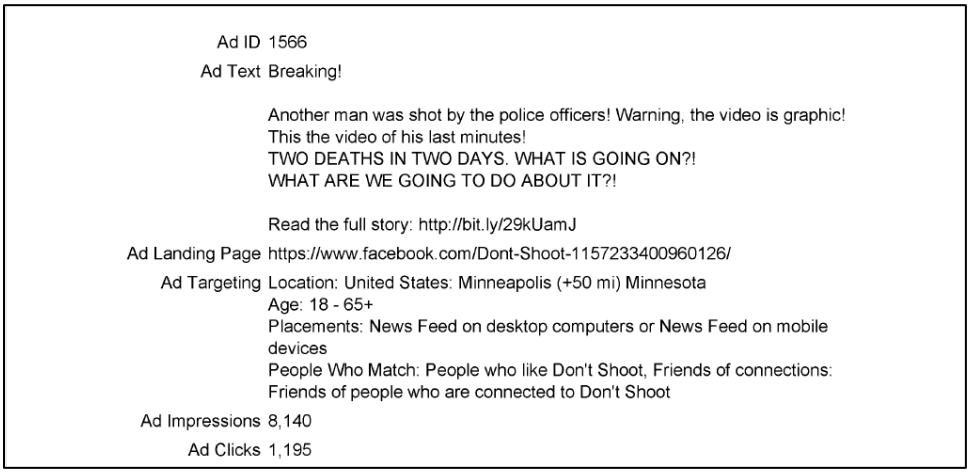
Ad ID	1543
Ad Text	The veteran was recovering from his heart surgery when the police came to check on him. He ended up being shot. Full story: http://bit.ly/1X0rpkm
Ad Landing Page	https://www.facebook.com/Dont-Shoot-1157233400960126/
Ad Targeting	Location: United States Age: 18 - 65+ Placements: News Feed on desktop computers or News Feed on mobile devices People Who Match: People who like Don't Shoot, Friends of connections: Friends of people who are connected to Don't Shoot
Ad Impressions	10,264
Ad Clicks	1,096

Figure A3. June 2016 (a)



Ad ID	2441
Ad Text	The Original Statue of Liberty presented to the U.S. was a Statue of a..."Black Woman". - Urban Intellectuals
Ad Landing Page	https://www.facebook.com/Black-Edification-1772583676310336/
Ad Targeting	Location: United States: Alabama; Arizona; California; Florida; Georgia; Mississippi; New Mexico; New York; Oklahoma; Texas; Washington Interests: Freckle, Baltimore, Color, Visual perception or Black (Color) Age: 13 - 40 Placements: News Feed on desktop computers or News Feed on mobile devices
Ad Impressions	658
Ad Clicks	145

Figure A4. June 2016 (b)



Ad ID	1566
Ad Text	Breaking! Another man was shot by the police officers! Warning, the video is graphic! This the video of his last minutes! TWO DEATHS IN TWO DAYS. WHAT IS GOING ON?! WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?! Read the full story: http://bit.ly/29kUamJ
Ad Landing Page	https://www.facebook.com/Dont-Shoot-1157233400960126/
Ad Targeting	Location: United States: Minneapolis (+50 mi) Minnesota Age: 18 - 65+ Placements: News Feed on desktop computers or News Feed on mobile devices People Who Match: People who like Don't Shoot, Friends of connections: Friends of people who are connected to Don't Shoot
Ad Impressions	8,140
Ad Clicks	1,195

Figure A5. July 2016

Figure A6. August 2016 (a)

Ad ID	866
Ad Text	African-Americans have to choose between old b*tch Hillary Clinton and rich bastard Donald Trump. This is like to choose between the devil and the deep see. Still, you can not only survive in the deep see called Trump but also to catch a fish to feed your family there. But there's no way to have a good deal with the devil called Hillary Clinton. Subscribe to our channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSbzPCwUDPvDCR6VRaOcDtg Follow my Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/WilliamsandKalvin Follow me on Twitter: https://twitter.com/Williams8kalvin
Ad Landing Page	https://www.facebook.com/WilliamsKalvin-788980617892144/
Ad Targeting	Location: United States Excluded Connections: Exclude people who like Williams&Kalvin Age: 18 - 51 Language: English (UK) or English (US) Placements: News Feed on desktop computers or News Feed on mobile devices

Figure A7. August 2016 (b)

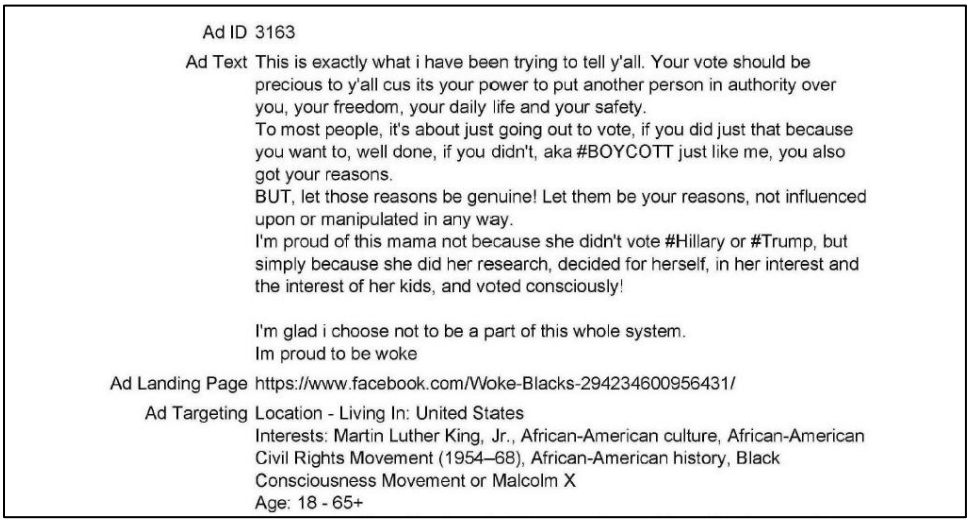
Figure A8. October 2016 (a)

Ad ID	1064
Ad Text	Don`t choose the side of the oppressor! There is enough room for you in the fight for black equality and justice. A fight for Civil Rights isn`t over
Ad Landing Page	https://www.facebook.com/Blacktivist-128371547505950/
Ad Targeting	Location: United States Interests: Human rights, Justice, Culture, Slavery in the United States, Black is beautiful, Equal opportunity, Angela Davis, Anti-discrimination or Black (Color) Age: 16 - 65+ Language: English (UK) or English (US) Placements: News Feed on desktop computers or News Feed on mobile devices
Ad Impressions	11,148
Ad Clicks	1,265

Figure A9. October 2016 (b)

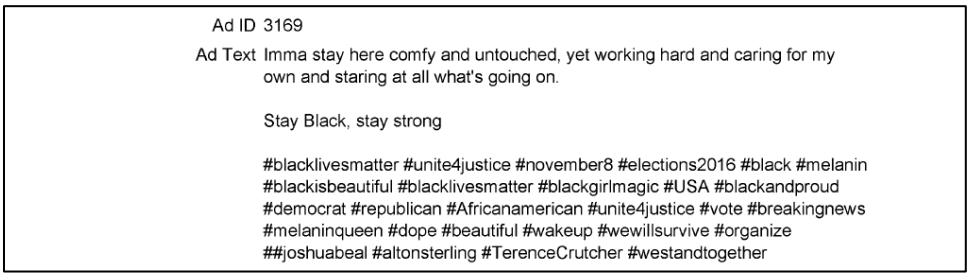
Ad ID	3021
Ad Text	Black Americans have really different problems to face no white American can ever experience in his own life. We have the same problems in our communities after the presidential elections as we had before. So, give no attention to what you are told by the media. Get down to your own business. Subscribe to our channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSbzPCwUDPvDCR6VRaOcDtg Follow my Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/WilliamsandKalvin Follow me on Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/williams.and.kalvin Follow me on Twitter: https://twitter.com/Williams8kalvin

Figure A10. November 2016 (a)



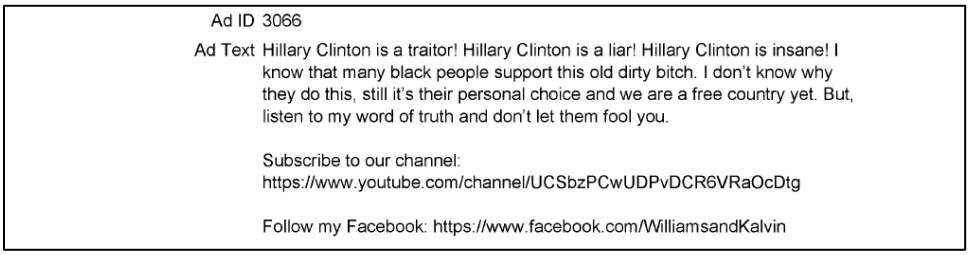
Ad ID	3163
Ad Text	This is exactly what i have been trying to tell y'all. Your vote should be precious to y'all cus its your power to put another person in authority over you, your freedom, your daily life and your safety. To most people, it's about just going out to vote, if you did just that because you want to, well done, if you didn't, aka #BOYCOTT just like me, you also got your reasons. BUT, let those reasons be genuine! Let them be your reasons, not influenced upon or manipulated in any way. I'm proud of this mama not because she didn't vote #Hillary or #Trump, but simply because she did her research, decided for herself, in her interest and the interest of her kids, and voted consciously! I'm glad i choose not to be a part of this whole system. Im proud to be woke
Ad Landing Page	https://www.facebook.com/Woke-Blacks-294234600956431/
Ad Targeting	Location - Living In: United States Interests: Martin Luther King, Jr., African-American culture, African-American Civil Rights Movement (1954–68), African-American history, Black Consciousness Movement or Malcolm X Age: 18 - 65+

Figure A11. November 2016 (b)



Ad ID	3169
Ad Text	Imma stay here comfy and untouched, yet working hard and caring for my own and staring at all what's going on. Stay Black, stay strong #blacklivesmatter #unite4justice #november8 #elections2016 #black #melanin #blackisbeautiful #blacklivesmatter #blackgirlmagic #USA #blackandproud #democrat #republican #Africanamerican #unite4justice #vote #breakingnews #melaninqueen #dope #beautiful #wakeup #wewillsurvive #organize ##joshuabeal #altonsterling #TerenceCrutcher #westandtogether

Figure A12. November 2016 (c)



Ad ID	3066
Ad Text	Hillary Clinton is a traitor! Hillary Clinton is a liar! Hillary Clinton is insane! I know that many black people support this old dirty bitch. I don't know why they do this, still it's their personal choice and we are a free country yet. But, listen to my word of truth and don't let them fool you. Subscribe to our channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSbzPCwUDPvDCR6VRaOcDtg Follow my Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/WilliamsandKalvin

Figure A13. November 2016 (d)

Figure A14. November 2016 (e)

Ad ID	863
Ad Text	Black America is not into politics. This is not our game and we don't want to play with whites. You know why? Because I don't give a fuck about it! I really don't care and I don't know why any black American should care anyhow. We have our own life and our own future in this country. Subscribe to our channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSbzPCwUDPvDCR6VRaOcDtg Follow my Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/WilliamsandKalvin Follow me on Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/williams.and.kalvin

Figure A15. November 2016 (f)

Figure A16. November 2016 (g)

Ad ID	2206
Ad Text	Investigations have disclosed that 3-months old police officer, Sherry Hall lied about being shot by a Black man. Stop Police Brutality: Officer Sherry Hall's Lies Exposed | BM BM
Ad Landing Page	https://blackmattersus.com/16611-stop-police-brutality-officer-sherry-halls-lies-exposed/

Figure A17. November 2016 (h)

Ad ID	2801
Ad Text	Kaepernick declared that both of the major presidential candidates, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, were racist and thus not worthy of his support! #woke #king #vote #election #black #power #resistance
Ad Landing Page	https://www.facebook.com/Nefertitis-Community-576081822594619/

Figure A18. November 2016 (i)

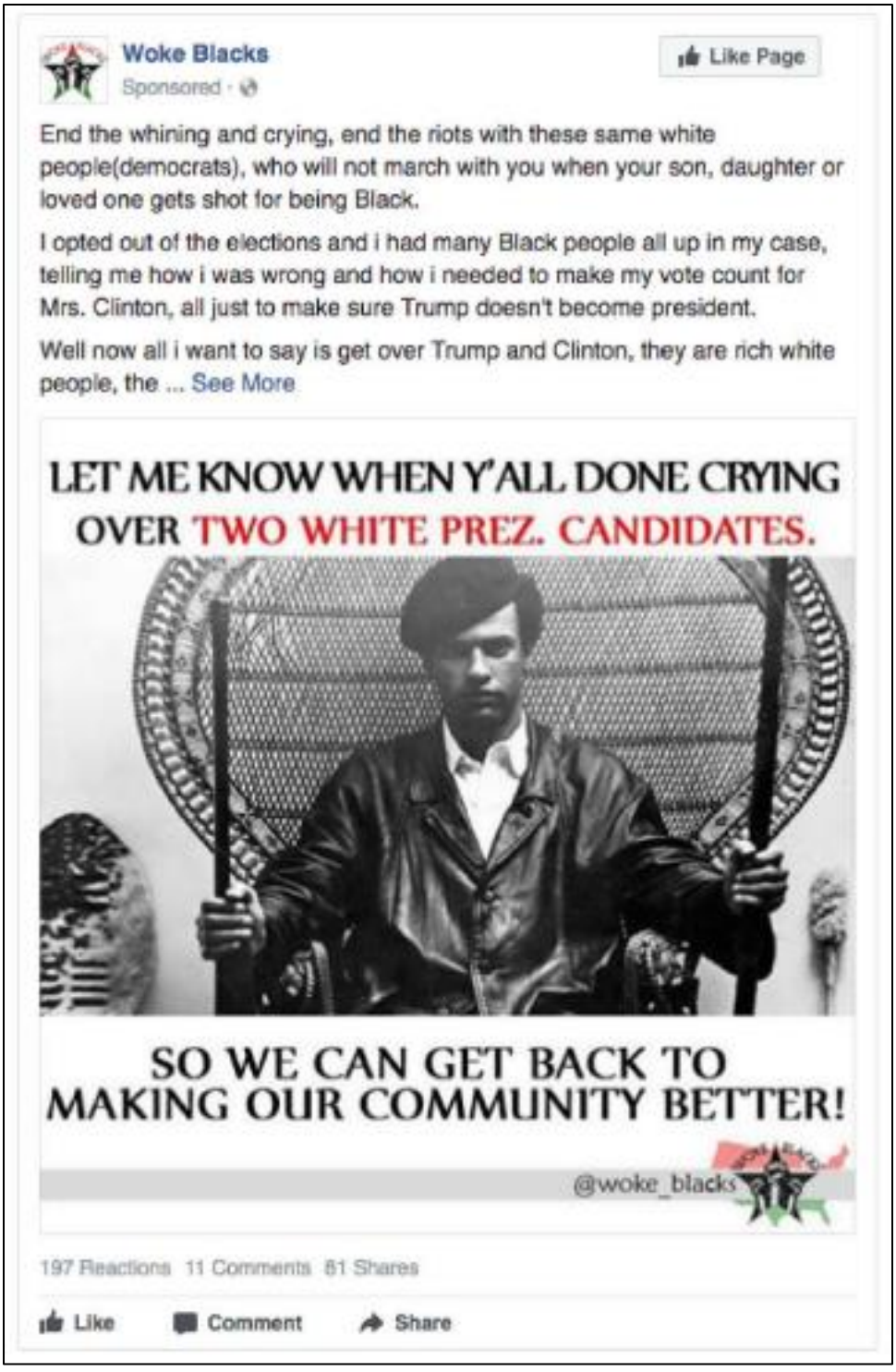


Figure A19. November 2016 (j)

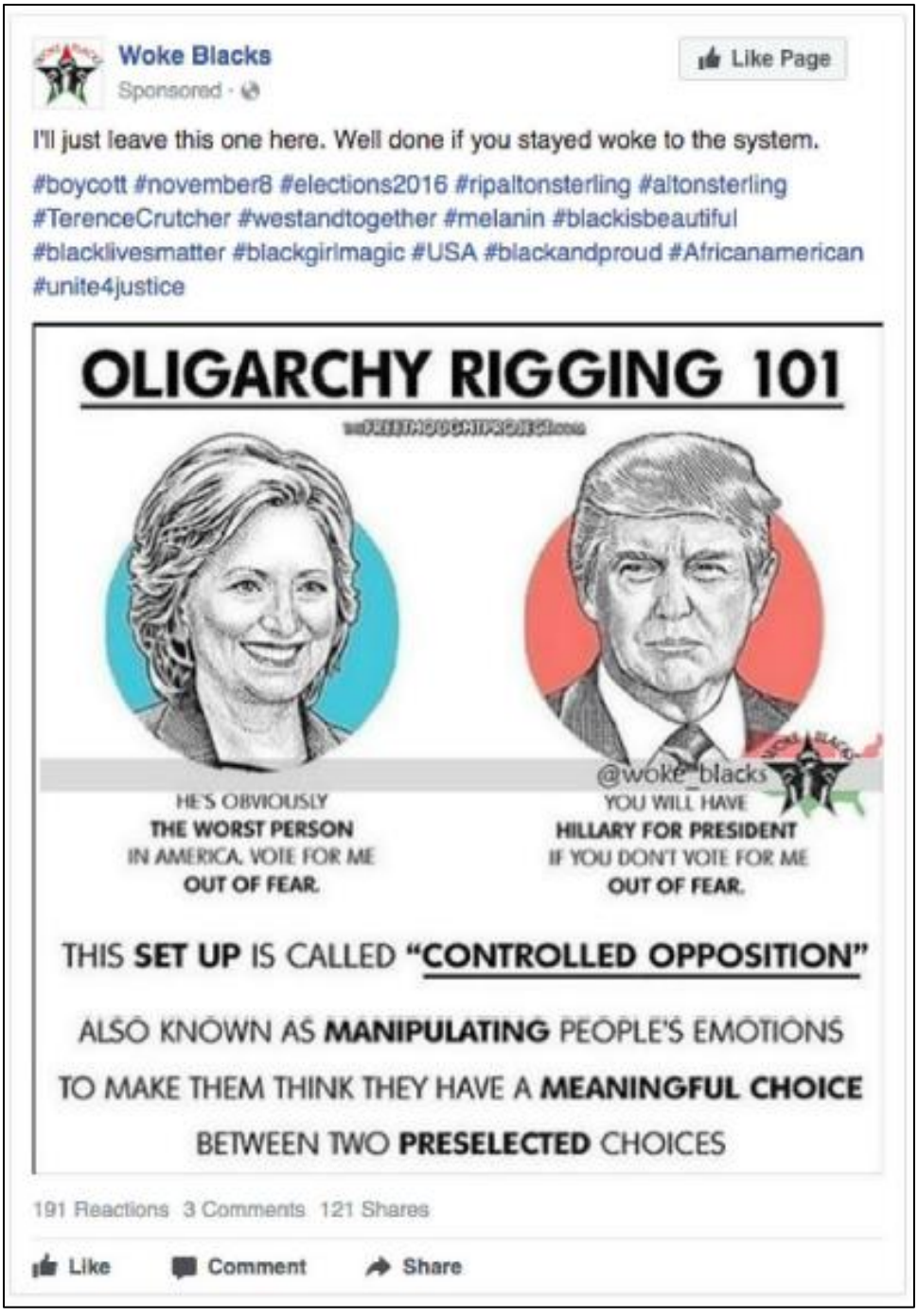


Figure A20. November 2016 (k)

Ad ID	3185
Ad Text	We support the 2nd Amendment! Join us, if self-defense is your top priority! Black Guns Matter
Ad Landing Page	https://www.facebook.com/ProtectBlackGunOwners/
Ad Targeting	Location: United States Excluded Connections: Exclude people who like Black guns matter Age: 18 - 65+ Placements: News Feed on desktop computers, News Feed on mobile devices or Right column on desktop computers People Who Match: Interests: Gun Owners of America, Concealed carry in the United States or Gun Rights And Must Also Match: Interests: African-American culture, African-American history or Huey P. Newton And Must Also Match: Interests: 2nd Amendment
Ad Impressions	9,202
Ad Clicks	933

Figure A21. December 2016 (a)

Figure A22. December 2016 (b)

Veteran Audience Content

Ad ID	500
Ad Text	Marine Corps General Joseph Dunford told the Congress last week that the deaths of 500 soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan could be attributed to Iran. This statement sounds strange on the background of rapproachment between Obama's administration and Tehran. Although, this rapproachment in itself looks strange. We would remind you that Tehran has never expressed its condolences for the Iran hostage crisis. Moreover, the Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Hosseini Khamenei is too disrespectful to the United States despite of friendly actions of Obama's administration. And Iranian military command claims that Iran is ready to come into collision with America at any moment. The Iran deal is a shame of the United States. Senate Republicans were right when they expressed their distrust of Iranian government. It's not clear why Obama has refused containment of Iran that is an potential enemy not only for the United States, but also for the rest world. Barack Obama is, by all appearances, a true traitor of the United States. And it's not empty words – the rapprochement with Iran is either a treachery or stupidness.
Ad Landing Page	https://www.facebook.com/patriototus

Figure A23. July 2015

Ad ID	543
Ad Text	You know the Second Amendment is our unalienable right to bear arms that was granted Americans by the Founding Fathers. However, liberals just spit on the U.S. Constitution. So, Hillary Clinton said it's "worth considering" a nationwide gun ban and a "buyback" program to eradicate private gun ownership. Hillary says she is a democrat. Huh! No, she like Obama should say they're socialists who want to set up tyranny. The Founding Fathers had enough brains for preventing the situation when dictators run the country. They decided that armed nation is able to overthrow a tyrant. Maybe is it a true reason why Hillary Clinton stands against the Second Amendment?
Ad Landing Page	https://www.facebook.com/patriototus/

Figure A24. October 2015

Ad ID	29
Ad Text	What do you know about PTSD? Do you know that US Military deaths since 1999 count 6,904, while veterans suicides since 1999 account for 128,480? We're losing 18 times more warriors in civilian life than on the battlefields! Learn more! Follow us! Veterans USA (@veterans GovSpending
Ad Landing Page	https://instagram.com/veterans_us/
Ad Targeting	Location: United States Interests: Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act or Supporting Our Veterans Age: 18 - 65+ Language: English (US) Placements: Instagram Feed
Ad Impressions	3,527
Ad Clicks	33

Figure A25(a). November 2015 (a)

Figure A25(b). November 2015 (a)

Ad ID	30
Ad Text	Click learn more! People don't want to look at the homeless. But maybe they will look at, or think about, or support dealing with homelessness once they know that 12% of the homeless adult population are veterans. Join us! Veterans USA (@veterans GovSpending
Ad Landing Page	https://instagram.com/veterans_us/

Figure A26. November 2015 (b)

Ad ID	7
Ad Text	Conservative Christians. Pro-life/ gun/ police/ military. Follow!
Ad Landing Page	https://www.facebook.com/Bat-240131319678646/

Figure A27. May 2016 (a)

Figure A28. May 2016 (b)

Figure A29. May 2016 (c)

Ad ID	445
Ad Text	We must ensure the Dallas attack on police will never happen again. Most problems we face happen because we've stopped calling things by their names and the assassination of cops in Dallas was no exception. We're hiding behind political correctness and denying the truth because we don't want to 'offend' someone. And the truth is: a group of people calling their supporters to commit violence is not a peaceful group. A group of people coming to their opponent's rallies and attacking peaceful people is a group of extremists. A group of people standing behind the attack on police is a group of terrorists. The Black Lives Matter are terrorists, and the sooner we admit it officially – the sooner this war on cops will end and people running a conservative rally won't be afraid to be attacked by a hateful gang. Sign the petition to formally recognize Black Lives Matter as a terrorist organization: https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/formally-recognize-black-lives-matter-terrorist-organization

Figure A30. July 2016

Ad ID	1328
Ad Text	It's wrong if you support Hillary Clinton, who said that problems within the Veterans Affairs Department have "not been as widespread." Hundreds of thousands of veterans may have died awaiting VA care. WE CANNOT TRUST HILLARY TO TAKE CARE OF OUR VETERANS!
Ad Landing Page	https://www.facebook.com/Stop-AI-896610653786585/
Ad Targeting	Location: United States Interests: Conservatism, The Tea Party or Republican Party (United States) Age: 18 - 65+ Placements: News Feed on desktop computers or News Feed on mobile devices

Figure A31. August 2016