

Russian Social Media Information Operations

How Russia has Used Social Media to Influence US Politics



American Security Project

Fact Sheet

—
Patrick Savage

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Congressman Donald Beyer is the former United States Ambassador to Switzerland and Liechtenstein, as well as a former Lieutenant Governor and President of the Senate of Virginia.



Lieutenant General Daniel Christman, USA (Ret.)

Lieutenant General Christman is Senior Vice President for International Affairs at the United States Chamber of Commerce.



Robert B. Crowe

Robert B. Crowe is a Partner of Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough in its Boston and Washington, DC offices. He is co-chair of the firm's Government Relations practice.



Lee Cullum

Lee Cullum, at one time a commentator on the PBS NewsHour and "All Things Considered" on NPR, currently contributes to the Dallas Morning News and hosts "CEO."



Nicholas Clark

Nicholas Clark is the CEO and Executive Director of Alexium International. He is also co-founder and Managing Partner at Viaticus Capital.



Admiral William Fallon, USN (Ret.)

Admiral Fallon has led U.S. and Allied forces and played a leadership role in military and diplomatic matters at the highest levels of the U.S. government.



Raj Fernando

Raj Fernando is CEO and founder of Chopper Trading, a technology based trading firm headquartered in Chicago.



Scott Gilbert

Scott Gilbert is a Partner of Gilbert LLP and Managing Director of Reneo LLC.



Vice Admiral Lee Gunn, USN (Ret.)

Vice Admiral Gunn is the President of the Institute of Public Research at the CNA Corporation, a non-profit corporation in Virginia.



The Honorable Chuck Hagel

Chuck Hagel served as the 24th U.S. Secretary of Defense and served two terms in the United States Senate (1997-2009). Hagel was a senior member of the Senate Foreign Relations; Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs; and Intelligence Committees.



Lieutenant General Claudia Kennedy, USA (Ret.)

Lieutenant General Kennedy was the first woman to achieve the rank of three-star general in the United States Army.



The Honorable John F. Kerry

John Kerry is a distinguished fellow for global affairs at Yale University. In 2013, Kerry was sworn in as the 68th secretary of state of the United States. Kerry served for more than twenty-five years as a U.S. senator from Massachusetts.



General Lester L. Lyles, USAF (Ret.)

General Lyles retired from the United States Air Force after a distinguished 35 year career. He is presently Chairman of USAA, a member of the Defense Science Board, and a member of the President's Intelligence Advisory Board.



Dennis Mehiel

Dennis Mehiel is the Principal Shareholder and Chairman of U.S. Corrugated, Inc.



Stuart Piltch

Stuart Piltch is the Co-Founder and Managing Director of Cambridge Advisory Group, an actuarial and benefits consulting firm based in Philadelphia.



Ed Reilly

Edward Reilly is Global Chief Executive Officer of the Strategic Communications practice of FTI Consulting.



LtGen Norman Seip, USAF (Ret)

Lieutenant General Norman R. Seip, USAF (Ret) served in the Air Force for 35 years. His last assignment was Commander of 12th Air Force.

Introduction

Over the past several years, the Russian Federation has engaged in an unprecedented effort to attempt to influence American politics. A key component of that overall effort has been focused on social media, especially widely used platforms like Facebook and Twitter. By using social media tools to manipulate audiences, Russia has been able to support its policy priorities and create divisions by disseminating information which weakens its perceived adversaries.

This fact sheet aims to illustrate the challenge the United States faces from Russian social media information operations. It will first describe the effects these operations have had already, looking at social media platforms that have been exploited by Russia in pursuing its objectives. It will then examine the sources of Russian social media influence. Finally, it will highlight ways the United States is already working to meet this ongoing challenge.

Reach of Russian Social Media Influence

Twitter

- As of October 14, 2017, Twitter has provided the names of 201 Twitter profiles that have been linked to Russian influence operations during the 2016 presidential election to the US Senate.¹
 - Prior to this, Twitter had informed Congress that it had removed roughly 200 accounts that it believed were part of Russian influence operations in the United States.²
 - These accounts were involved with tweeting regarding divisive political topics.
- According to Twitter, Kremlin-controlled media outlet RT recently spent \$274,100 on promoting over 1,800 tweets targeting the US market.
- A Russian-controlled Twitter account was uncovered in October pretending to be the official Twitter account of the Tennessee branch of the Republican Party.³
 - The account tweeted links at prominent Republican politicians, celebrities, and other influencers to promote its content.
 - Several prominent figures evidently retweeted content from the false account.
 - The legitimate Tennessee Republican Party had complained to Twitter about the account as early as September of 2016, with no action taken.

Facebook

- Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has announced that Facebook will be turning over to Congress the contents of 3,000 Russian purchased ads that ran during the 2016 presidential election.⁴

- The ads focused on divisive political issues and ran between June 2015 and May 2017.⁵
 - The ads cost around \$100,000 in total and were reportedly purchased by a Kremlin-directed “troll factory” known as the Internet Research Agency.
- Facebook also shut down nearly 500 fake accounts that it stated were linked to the Russian ads.
 - These accounts had also apparently been created by the Internet Research Agency.
 - One Russian-backed, politically divisive Facebook page known as “Being Patriotic” had been interacted with around 4.4 million times before being shut down.^{6 7}
- Facebook estimates that 10 million people viewed advertisements bought by Russian groups.⁸
 - There may still be more Russian-financed ads active on Facebook that are undiscovered.



Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg discussing Facebook steps to limit election interference.

Google

- A review by investigators at Google has also found evidence of Russian interference in its network through advertising and fake accounts.⁹
 - Google has found \$4,700 worth of ads linked to the Kremlin.
 - It is also investigating another \$53,000 worth of funding originating in Russia to determine if it is legitimate advertising or part of political influence operations.
 - The ads in question have been distributed across multiple Google platforms.¹⁰
 - These include YouTube, Gmail, and its flagship Google search engine.
 - While Russian in origin, the entity behind the Google ads does not appear to be the same organization as the Internet Research Agency.

Microsoft

- Microsoft has stated on October 9, 2017 that it is examining whether Russians purchased 2016 election ads on any of its platforms or products.
 - Microsoft’s stated focus was primarily on its Bing search engine.

Sources of Russian Social Media Influence

Internet Research Agency

- The St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency is one of multiple “troll factories” operated out of Russia as part of influence operations in the US and the West on multiple platforms.¹¹
- Russia-based RBC Information Systems estimates that the organization has spent around \$2.3 million on its US operations over the past two years.

- Some 90 Russian employees were assigned to the organization's US operations during the height of its 2016 "trolling campaign."
 - The responsibility of this staff was to produce content purposefully designed to aggravate tensions across the political spectrum in the United States.
 - It is estimated that the organization still has around 50 employees working its US desk.
- The organization also paid 100 US activists to organize some 40 rallies and protests.
 - The event organizers were apparently unaware of the foreign source of their funding.
- The organization has also been connected to sponsoring and funding smaller gatherings and events on both sides of the political spectrum.¹²
 - It is suspected of having funded and promoted a group offering self-defense and martial arts classes geared towards African Americans.
 - The goal of the operation was apparently to make the group appear to be linked to the Black Lives Matter movement, and in turn to try to promote hostility and fear.
 - These organizers were also unaware of the Russian origin of their funding and guidance.
- The organization made use of American internet service providers in its US operations.¹³
 - An American based ISP—Greenflood LLC—has been used to host several websites linked to Russian social media influence operations in the United States.
 - On several of these websites Russians pretended to be African-American activists and used the websites to push Kremlin-approved, disruptive narratives.
 - Greenflood appears to be the subsidiary of a larger company based out of the city of Kharkiv, in Eastern Ukraine, known by the acronym "ITL."
 - ITL has reportedly been popular with Russian criminals and hackers for its "no questions asked" business practices on hosting servers and websites.
 - The company previously hosted a website that unmasked Russian opposition bloggers, as well as a pro-Russian website that covered the Ukrainian conflict.

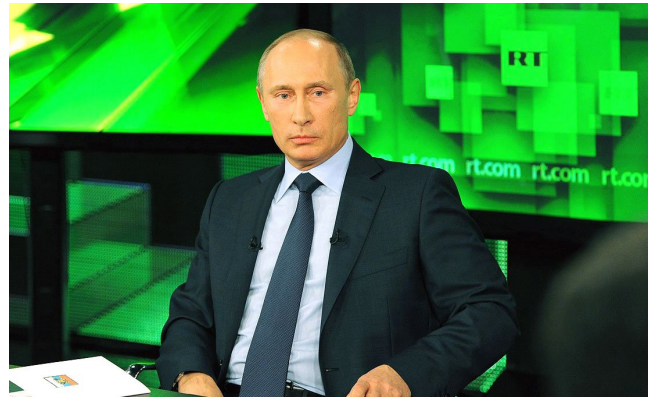


The Internet Research Agency building in St. Petersburg, Russia. Google Maps photo.

RT

- RT—formerly “Russia Today”—is a 24-hour cable and satellite news network that is funded by the Russian government and directed at an international audience.¹⁴
 - RT was rebranded from “Russia Today” in order to downplay its Russian connections.¹⁵
 - Its leadership and staff are directly and closely tied to the Kremlin.¹⁶
- Social media has become the primary focus of RT, and it has gone to great lengths to advertise and build up its social media presence.
 - Focusing on social media news content allows RT to avoid government regulations placed on traditional broadcasters and TV networks.

- Social media enables RT to put out content that would otherwise be prohibited on broadcast airwaves.
- Being a cable/satellite station also gives RT greater broadcast leeway.
- RT's social media following at the time of this sheet's publication is:
 - Around 2.65 million followers on Twitter.
 - Over 4.5 million followers on Facebook.
 - Over 2.2 million subscribers on YouTube.
 - 13 YouTube videos with more than 10 million views.
 - It is unclear how much of this following is due to bots or fake accounts.



Russian President Vladimir Putin appears on RT.

Sputnik

- Sputnik is an online propaganda outlet and satellite radio station disguised as a news outlet. Like RT, it is funded by the Russian government and geared towards an international audience.
- Sputnik uses many of the same tactics and techniques as RT and is closely linked to it.
- Sputnik's social media following at the time of this sheet's publication is:
 - Around 200,000 followers on Twitter.
 - Over 1.1 million followers on Facebook.
 - Over 20,000 subscribers on YouTube.
 - As with RT, it is unclear how many of these are genuine followers.

Third Party Influence Networks

- The German Marshall Fund's Hamilton 68 project currently tracks activity from 600 Twitter accounts that have been linked to Russian influence operations.¹⁷
 - The primary focus of the study is on Russian "influence networks" that work to amplify third party content that supports Russia and its goals.
- These networks are made up of several different types of members:
 - Overtly pro-Russian users who seek to support the Russian government.
 - Users who are covertly supporting Russian influence operations.
 - Automated "bot" users that respond to amplify messaging.
 - Users who have been influenced by the prior groups into amplifying influence.
- Many users who become part of Russian influence networks may not realize that is the case.
- The content amplified by the networks may not necessarily be "pro-Russian."
 - It may serve to attack and discredit individuals and entities that oppose Russian goals.
 - The influence networks will use popular hashtags and topics unrelated to Russian objectives to draw in more followers and amplify their reach.

Addressing the Threat

Legislative Branch

- Legislation has been introduced in the Senate that would require major social media platforms to disclose the identities of those purchasing political ads on their websites.¹⁸
 - Facebook and Google have previously argued that the companies should be exempt from political financial disclosure rules that affect TV and radio stations.
 - The companies contended that advertisements on the websites were too small for disclaimers about funding sources to be placed on them.
 - The Federal Elections Commission granted this exemption prior to 2016.
 - The exemption was justified on the basis that the internet was so different from TV or radio that it did not need the usual regulation.
 - The proposed law would expand existing campaign finance laws “to apply to internet and digital communications platforms that command a significant audience” according to Senator John McCain (R-AZ).

Executive Branch

- The Department of Justice (DOJ) has ordered the parent company of RT to register as a foreign agent under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA).¹⁹
 - FARA was originally enacted during World War II to prevent the proliferation of propaganda from Nazi Germany within the United States.
 - If registered, RT could still operate in the United States, but under restrictions.
 - It would be required to submit regular reports listing any revenue originating from foreign governments, and disclose all of its US contacts.
 - Under FARA, organizations are also required to clearly label their material with information stating it is being distributed on the behalf of a foreign agent.²⁰
 - According to the DOJ, the labelling requirement extends to a foreign agent’s “social media presence” and not just traditional informational materials.
 - RT was given an October 17 deadline to register under FARA by the DOJ.²¹
 - At the time of this report’s publication, it has taken no action to do so.
 - RT has stated it will do everything in its power to resist registration under FARA, which could potentially result in criminal charges and litigation.
 - Threatening reprisal, Russian President Vladimir Putin and other Russian officials are considering putting restrictions on US media organizations operating in Russia.²²



U.S. Department of Justice. Photo credit: Steve Fernie/Flickr.

- The DOJ also has also reportedly been investigating Sputnik for any wrongdoing.²³
 - Investigators handling FARA issues met with Sputnik's former White House correspondent, Andrew Feinberg, to discuss the organization's activities.
 - Feinberg has reportedly handed over thousands of internal emails and documents to the DOJ from his employment at Sputnik.

Private Industry

- Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg recently announced the following responses to Russian activity:
 - 250 employees will be assigned to ensuring political ad transparency and integrity.²⁴
 - Facebook will be working more closely with officials and other companies to spot suspicious ad activity on their platforms.
 - Facebook will hire 1,000 new staff to review ads running on the website.²⁵
 - New rules have been added to the Facebook ad-buying process, requiring advertisers to prove that they are genuine, and proving more transparency. A pilot program is set to roll out in Canada.²⁶
- On October 26, 2017 Twitter announced that it would be immediately removing all advertisements by RT and Sputnik on its platform and banning further advertisements by those organizations.²⁷
 - Twitter came to this decision based on its own internal investigation of events during the 2016 election and the US Intelligence Community's report on the election.
 - Twitter has also announced that it will be donating the roughly \$2 million it is projected to have earned from RT and Sputnik's advertising revenue since 2011.
 - The donation will go "to support external research into the use of Twitter in civic engagement and elections, including use of malicious automation and misinformation, with an initial focus on elections and automation."
 - This will include the \$274,100 that is specifically from the 2016 election cycle.
 - The Russian Foreign Ministry has condemned Twitter's actions as an aggressive violation of international norms.²⁸
 - A Foreign Ministry spokesperson has suggested Twitter's actions are a result of US government pressure and that "retaliatory measures will naturally follow" the decision.

Endnotes

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The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan organization created to educate the American public and the world about the changing nature of national security in the 21st Century.

Gone are the days when a nation's security could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor and competitiveness of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with our partners and with all the tools at our disposal and address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this we must forge a bipartisan consensus here at home.

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We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, nuclear proliferation, climate change, energy challenges, and our economic wellbeing. Partisan bickering and age old solutions simply won't solve our problems. America – and the world - needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

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