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Disinformation Briefing



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Minority Communities: Targets for Disinformation Ahead of 2020 Election

In the run up to the 2020 Presidential Election, state-sponsored disinformation campaigns will likely feature racially and culturally divisive content targeting minority communities—tactics that were employed successfully in 2016. These disinformation campaigns are designed to exploit the grievances of minority communities to incite feelings of paranoia or anger. In 2016, Russian disinformation campaigns targeted blacks on social media more than any other group to amplify existing social tensions and discourage blacks from voting.

- On October 21, Facebook announced it removed 50 Instagram accounts, nine of which posed as supporters of “black activism” and some which targeted specific 2020 candidates. The accounts were believed to be linked to the Internet Research Agency (IRA), Russia’s disinformation “factory” that was exposed in 2016.
- In 2017, IRA advertisements on social media focused heavily on immigration issues—including topics such as deportation and mistreatment of migrants—to provoke anger among supporters on both sides of the debate. The campaign also tried to dissuade Hispanic American voters by building distrust and cynicism toward the US political system.



Screenshot of post from an IRA-operated Instagram account recently removed (Source: Graphika)

It is uncertain if we can attribute the decline in black voter turnout in 2016—for the first time in 20 years in a presidential election—to Russia’s racially-focused disinformation campaign. However, of the 81 Facebook pages the IRA operated, 30 targeted black audiences and the majority of the 133 IRA-operated Instagram accounts also targeted the black community.

- One popular IRA-run account that called itself, “Blacktivist,” on Facebook and Twitter promoted voter disengagement, advocated for votes directed toward third-party candidates, and included content discouraging voting such as, “not voting is a way to exercise our rights.” The account received 4.6 million likes and 4.8 million shares on Facebook alone.

Members of the public are encouraged to exercise caution when online—particularly when it comes to information regarding elections and voting. Check out tips on [how to detect disinformation campaigns](#) and learn more about disinformation at ncrintel.org.



Russian Disinformation Campaign Targeting the United States

Background

Federal indictments reveal the reach of recent Russian disinformation campaigns, with over 126 million Americans consuming and interacting with fake content intended to amplify societal divisions and sow mistrust in US government institutions, according to media reports. Major social media platforms are cracking down and closing accounts linked to state-backed influence and disinformation campaigns.

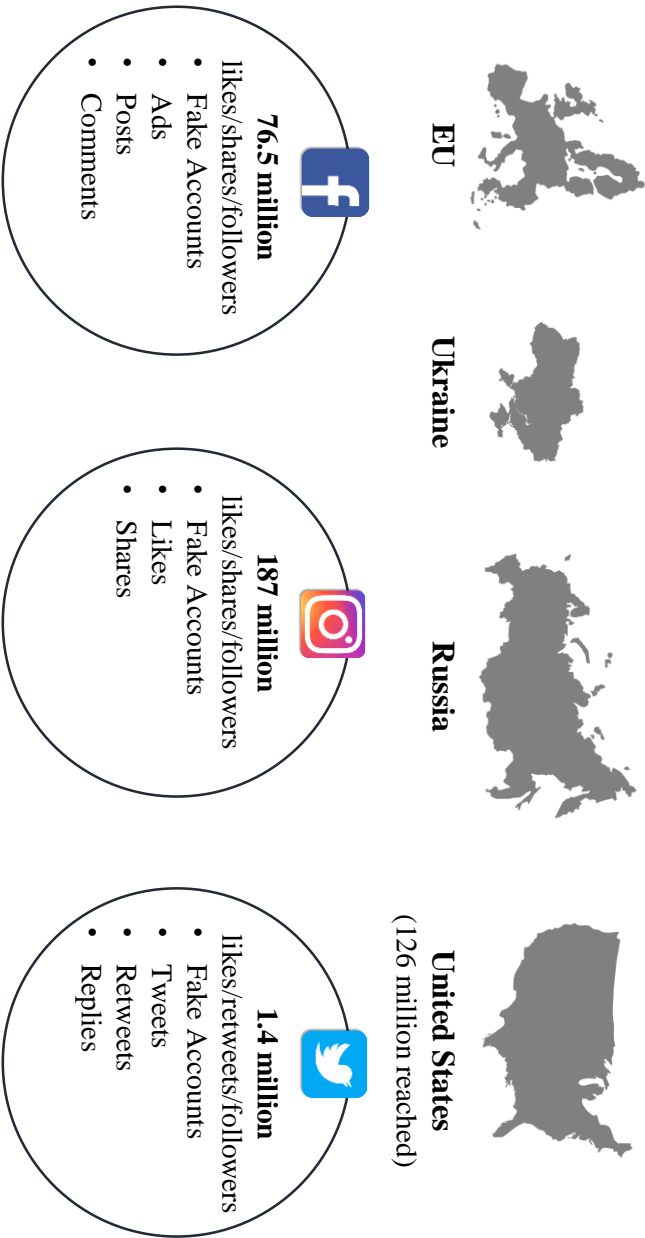
- From 2012-18, the Russian government’s disinformation “factory,” the Internet Research Agency (IRA), disseminated US-targeted content, that was “liked” or “shared” 187 million times on Instagram and 76.5 million times on Facebook.
- In October 2018, Twitter disclosed information on 3,841 accounts linked to the IRA and almost 6 million tweets containing divisive content, while Facebook removed more than 600 fake accounts spreading misleading content. In January 2019, Twitter announced they removed an additional 491 accounts, while Facebook removed 364 more accounts and pages.

Project Lakhta

Internet Research Agency (IRA):
Russian entity that employs people to conduct the social media disinformation campaign
Funded by IRA chief Yevgeny Prigozhin

- January 2016 – June 2018: Over \$35 million
- January 2018 – June 2018: Over \$10 million

Targeted Areas & Platforms Used



Content Focus: American Political Debates

- Immigration
- Gun Control
- Race Relations
- LGBT Issues
- Women’s March
- NFL Controversy
- Police Shootings of African American Men
- Mass Shootings:
 - Las Vegas, NV
 - Charleston, SC
 - Parkland, FL
- 2017 Charlottesville Rally

Removal of Content: January 2019

- **Twitter:** 4,260 IRA accounts & nearly 6 million tweets
- **Facebook:** Over 964 fake accounts

Indictments/Sanctions

- In March 2018, US Department of Treasury sanctioned IRA chief Prigozhin and other IRA employees for election interference.
- IRA continued to operate, resulting in a second round of sanctions in December 2018.

Project Lakhta

- Project Lakhta is a global Russian disinformation operation that included targeting the 2016 US presidential election. The project’s infrastructure still operates today.
- Project Lakhta produced thousands of contentious social media posts, created fake social media accounts, and imitated US persons to promote partisan opinions aimed at people supporting specific sides of political issues.
- In an effort to preempt future campaigns, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms are employing algorithms and implementing policy changes to reduce the spread of disinformation.

Internet Research Agency

- The Internet Research Agency (IRA) is a Kremlin-sponsored organization, based in St. Petersburg, that executes part of Russia’s disinformation campaign.
- The IRA was charged with pushing false themes, information and content to influence public opinion and spread confusion so that the public could no longer distinguish fact from fiction.
- Set up in 2013, the IRA first focused on Russian and Ukrainian citizens, turning its attention in early 2014 to the 2016 US presidential election. IRA-sponsored social media accounts often pretended to be real American persons or organizations and frequently shared information produced by Russian state media and American news outlets.
- Last March, the US Department of Treasury sanctioned IRA chief Yevgeny Prigozhin and other IRA employees for their election interference. In December 2018, a second round of sanctions were imposed on Russian intelligence operatives after the IRA’s continued spread of disinformation.



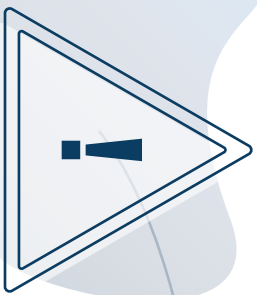
OH WELL

Not only do they get to break in and stay but now they get a job and free stuff too

Example of a post from an IRA-linked social media account targeting US citizens.
(Source: New Knowledge)

Disinformation Stops With You

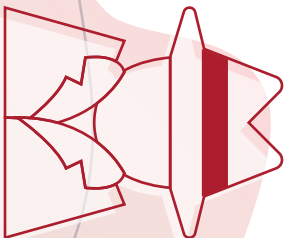
You have the power to stop foreign influence operations.



Recognize the risk

Understand how foreign actors try to affect behavior.

Foreign actors might build an audience by starting or joining groups and spreading entertaining, non-controversial content. Eventually, they sprinkle in disinformation and steer followers to more extreme positions. The same actor will do this in many groups and pit them against each other.



Question the source

Check who produced the content and question their intent.

Foreign actors can spend a lot of money to make disinformation seem like entertainment or news. U.S. laws require such agents engaged in political activities to disclose their relation to foreign governments. Look for those disclosures and think about what slant that relationship might put on how they report before accepting it as truth or linking to it online.



Investigate the issue

Search for other reliable sources before sharing.

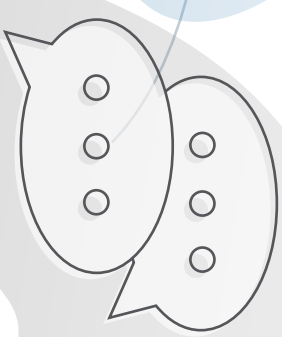
Do a quick search for other reliable sources before sharing a controversial or emotionally charged article, post, tweet, or meme you read. Studies show that being well informed requires getting information from many places. If it isn't from a credible source or if you can't find a second reliable source, don't share it.



Think before you link

Ask yourself why you're sharing—and let your emotions cool.

Take a moment before sharing a link, email, or other message. Disinformation is designed to make you feel angry, shocked, or smug – always ask yourself why you're sharing first. Are you posting to improve the conversation? Taking no action can be the best way to improve a discussion and thwart disinformation.



Talk to your circle

Talk with your social circle about the risks of spreading disinformation.

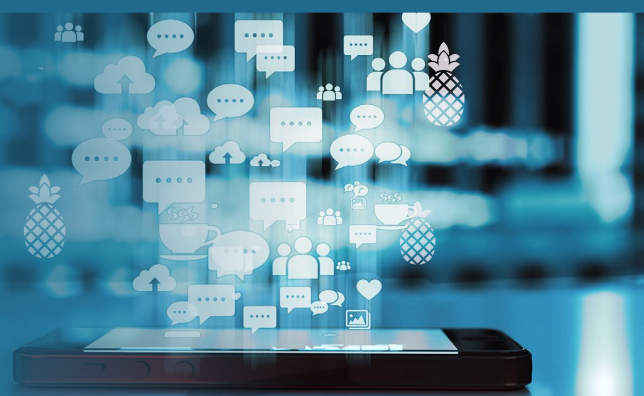
It's probably not worth engaging with every piece of disinformation, but if you are concerned with its spread you may want to speak out. Share what you know about the risks of spreading disinformation and how you handle it. Confronting with emotion may backfire, so when possible, combine humor with facts.



CISA
CYBER+INFRASTRUCTURE

To learn more about how you can stop disinformation, visit our website at www.dhs.gov/cisa/protect2020.

THE WAR ON PINEAPPLE: Understanding Foreign Interference in 5 Steps



To date, we have no evidence of Russia (or any nation) actively carrying out information operations against pizza toppings. This infographic is an ILLUSTRATION of how information operations have been carried out in the past to exploit divisions in the United States.

1. TARGETING DIVISIVE ISSUES

Foreign influencers are constantly on the lookout for opportunities to inflame hot button issues in the United States.



They don't do this to win arguments; they want to see us divided.



American Opinion is Split: Does Pineapple Belong on Pizza?

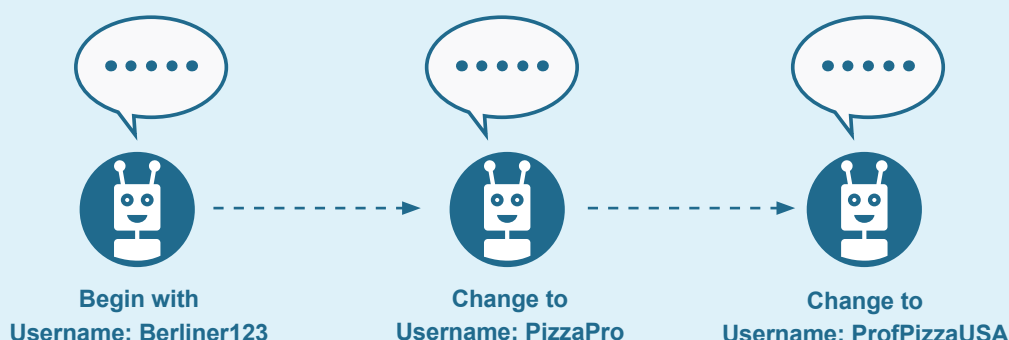
An A-list celebrity announced their dislike of pineapples on pizza, prompting a new survey. No matter how you slice it, Americans disagree on the fruit topping.

2. MOVING ACCOUNTS INTO PLACE

Building social media accounts with a large following takes time and resources, so accounts are often renamed and reused. Multiple accounts in a conversation are often controlled by the same user.



Pro Tip: Look at an account's activity history. **Genuine accounts usually have several interests and post content from a variety of sources.**



3. AMPLIFYING AND DISTORTING THE CONVERSATION

Americans often engage in healthy debate on any number of topics. Foreign influencers try to pollute those debates with bad information and make our positions more extreme by picking fights, or "trolling" people online.



Pro Tip: Trolls try to make people mad, that's it. **If it seems like an account is only aiming to raise tensions, think about whether it's worth engaging.**



Being anti-pineapple is un-American!

Millennials are ruining pizza!

Keep your pineapple off my pizza!

What's wrong with plain old cheese?

4. MAKING THE MAINSTREAM

Foreign influencers "fan the flames" by creating controversy, amplifying the most extreme version of arguments on both sides of an issue. These are shared online as legitimate information sources.

Sometimes controversies make it into the mainstream and create division among Americans. **This is a foreign influencer striking gold! Their meddling is legitimized and carried to larger audiences.**



5. TAKING THE CONVERSATION INTO THE REAL WORLD

In the past, Kremlin agents have organized or funded protests to further stoke divisions among Americans. They create event pages and ask followers to come out.

What started in cyberspace can turn very real, with Americans shouting down Americans because of foreign interference.



Pro Tip: Many social media companies have increased transparency for organization accounts. **Know who is inviting you and why.**

