

Chapter 18

False Information Narratives: The IRA's 2016 Presidential Election Facebook Campaign

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ABSTRACT

The issue of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election has been widely debated by scholars and journalists. However, these works have not fully analyzed the ads that have been released by Facebook and the U.S. Congress. This project uses a case study to analyze the ads posted by the Russian-affiliated Internet Research Agency, considering the quantities of ads targeted to particular geographic locations, the frequency of targeting for unique keywords, and the reach and impressions of each of the ads. Further, these results are compared to results from best practices in traditional social media campaigns as a way to better understand the goals and potential impacts of the IRA ads. In conclusion, the project, by analyzing the full set of IRA ads, sheds new light on the way false information narratives were leveraged by the Russian-linked IRA.

INTRODUCTION

This project examines Russian ads that were distributed on Facebook and Instagram between 2015-2017 and were released to the public by the United States House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. These ads were often filled with false, misleading information that compelled users to act, setting them apart from other fake news sites and actors.

The chapter presents a qualitative analysis of a set of quantitative data and analyzes the impact of these ads on their target population, highlighting this impact through the engagement mechanisms of their social network. As the networks themselves underwent interface changes during the distribution period of these advertisements, the impact of these advertisements was potentially greater as the engagement options increased due to the new interface possibilities.

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We introduce the concept of “false information narratives” to the discussion of fake news and fake news agents that has been popularized in the wake of the 2016 Presidential election in the United States. Since these advertisements do not fall under news and information per se, but did have a potential impact, it is important to denote them as potentially impactful actors. Aside from the introduction of this concept, the analysis does not set out to build new theory, but rather draws on established communication and media theory in order to better analyze the data contained in the Russian ads released by Congress. In order to more fully understand these ads, we draw on existing work related to memetics, media effects, and sociotechnical practices.

Based on this framework, our research question for the project is: Were the false information narratives on Facebook created by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) successful in generating engagement? One important caveat for this research is that our question, based on the data available, is to assess the social engagement of these ads and *not* whether they were able to change the decisions of individual voters or impact the outcome of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election.

BACKGROUND

The term “fake news” became a popular talking point during the 2016 Presidential election cycle, but it has existed in academic networks as a catch-all descriptor for a variety of content, from satire such as *The New Yorker’s* “Borowitz Report” to Photoshopped imagery, maliciously constructed false information, propaganda, and outreach pieces. Often this term is linked to the anxiety regarding the shift in distribution of news from newspaper and television stations to the online realm, where social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are used to circulate information.

Perhaps the best example to illustrate fake news comes from Dan Faltesek (2016), who describes the phenomenon as “social media news stories that feature sensational headlines referring to untrue information. These stories are produced by actors who are not mandated to do journalism and are remunerated by online ad networks.” Indeed, this illustrates how fake news agents are not only distributed largely through social networks, but also places a focus on the monetary value of false information. While the attention of individuals is not a “zero-sum” game, there is limited bandwidth for information, which necessitates the use of tools such as sensationalistic writing to capture the attention of users. Faltesek’s work suggests that users are more likely to be captivated by news that replicates traditional news writing, which makes these malicious actors invisible to the untrained eye (Faltesek, 2016).

While researchers have discussed the fact-checking apparatuses that have emerged to combat false information narratives – a term we introduce here to differentiate these advertisements from the more traditional fake news actors and artifacts typically discussed as rhetorical devices – only now are we able to better define how fake news and narratives operate in the online realm. These narratives often function as means of reinforcing narratives about race, class, and gender that help build and maintain collective identity, particularly for those users on the right of the political spectrum (Polletta & Callahan, 2017).

Narratives also emerge through framing of news articles, particularly by high-ranking political figures who describe information as “fake news.” Frames themselves play a large role in forming political attitudes (see Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954), and have been a useful tool for highlighting the myriad ways that news has been placed amidst cultural shifts and social upheaval in political communication (Busby, Flynn, & Druckman, n.d.; Klar, Robison, & Druckman, 2013). Fake news may escape these specific frames due to the volume of misinformation that is transmitted through various social

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media, which itself is linked to frames of legacy news outlets and political communication as being disseminators of false information narratives (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

Alice Marwick's recent taxonomy of social roles of problematic information emphasized how fake news, partisan news coverage, and disinformation were linked to self-presentation and reinforcing group identity. By using a sociotechnical approach to determine how and why people share fake news, Marwick (2018) illustrated that users shared complex social motivations that would not necessarily be changed. Moreover, the internet as a communication medium has created a number of subcultures that are not necessarily benign in ideology or nature. Internet subcultures may take advantage of the existing, shifting media ecosystem to manipulate news frames, create and formulate agendas, set agendas, and disseminate ideas and ideology (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

If this is the case, information may be used by malicious actors to cause users to harm persons, organizations, or nations (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This type of information is called "malinformation," although its usage is questionable because information may also be subversive without being untrue. Moreover, the remixing of internet content to fit within emergent communication patterns and new users suggests a fluidity that divests information from original meaning.

Many internet users propagate online content through "memes," which are themselves linked to Richard Dawkins's original concept of "a packet of culture" (Dawkins, 1976, 1990). Memes have emerged to become defined beyond their format as image macros, and are now commonplace tools of communication for users across platforms. Often their impact is seen as limited, yet their relative simplicity means that user participation can impact political affiliation and argumentation (Tryon, 2012). Memetic culture itself has resulted as a use of tweets throughout political elections (Freelon & Karpf, 2014); indeed, now-American president Donald Trump often utilized his Twitter account as a more intrinsic form of communication for his campaign throughout the 2016 presidential election, and expanded its usage once he was elected president. These uses can reflect the organization of memes as related to political values (Seiffert-Brockmann, Diehl, & Dobusch, 2018), the integration of key information as related to cultural practices (Hristova, 2014; Milner, 2016), or how memes themselves become integrated with politics as a means of subverting and creating new meaning within political spheres (Milner, 2013).

The effects of memetic culture and their impact have not fully been explored, largely due to the massive shift that memetic culture reflects for the implementation of an increasingly globalized communications network upon daily life. Indeed, the classic structure of media effects research did not anticipate the participatory news culture that has emerged in the wake of the dramatic shift in the American news media landscape after the 1996 Federal Telecommunications Act was passed. More vulnerable groups, no longer linked to a centralized legacy publication system that acted as a more monocultural agent of organization of information, are exploited through online disinformation campaigns. This is largely due to a shift in news aggregation and publishing to the realms of social media; more specifically, the greater reliance on Facebook and Google for content dispersion. News media's increasing dependence on social media, metric-driven and analytically sound content, sensationalistic writing, prizing novelty rather than cultural importance, and modeling after clickbait content makes the industry vulnerable to such media manipulation (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

The effects of memes reflect some of the concerns of media regulation within the United States and the global sphere, particularly when it comes to media literacy (Jang & Kim, 2018). Lasswell's (1948) classic model of media effects assumed that the medium would be the biggest driver of change among information from sender to receiver (Chandler, 1994). However, more recent scholarship by Henry Jenkins (2006) posits that user roles have shifted through more participatory culturally mediated forms

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of communication, which rely on shifting convergent roles to drive the use of these platforms. This has distinct implications for fake news and false information narratives since the form of misinformation may matter less than who shared it (Marwick, 2018). Popular perception regarding the influence of fake news and false information is that individual susceptibility is low, when the opposite is likely true (Jang & Kim, 2018). When factoring in partisan identity, social undesirability of content, and external political efficacy, the third-person perception of susceptibility to fake news is greater (Jang & Kim, 2018). While it is imperative to determine the impact and media effects of memes and memetic culture, users are far less likely to believe that they are directly impacted by such content. Whether this leads to a greater focus on media literacy education or media regulation remains to be seen (Jang & Kim, 2018).

Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner (2017) theorize that the interlinked nature of massively online communication and the ability to replicate and remix images, text, and video makes it impossible to determine where a particular idea, image, or meme originated, let alone pinpoint the intent of the author. This is especially important for memetic communication, as Milner (2016) points out that memetic content is linked to sociotechnical practices that transform information. These Russian ads are themselves transforming information and recirculating them to users, often identifying more vulnerable users who may be more likely to share remixed content such as this.

The sociotechnical practices of false information distribution by individuals is linked to their social status and identity, along with their technical ability with regards to digital discourse. This is also linked to a media-industrial position where social meanings of information are tied to the necessity for increased media consumption or expanding the reach of a political stance. Finally, the very nature of the connected online realm affects the meaning of the content and information present on the medium of the internet, different from televisual or newsprint content. These work practices are sociotechnical in that they are organized and developed differently from other media because they are located in different social systems and technical organizations (Trist, Murray, & Trist, 1993). Human agency and technical affordances are linked in shaping artifacts of practice through sociotechnical means, for any conceptual framework of this practice must integrate actor and structure together (Bijker, Carlson, & Pinch, 1997).

The emphasis on Russian ads thus places the audience for these ads as actors who have agency within their structured environment. Research into social media and online use shows that people gravitate towards content that reflects their own user interests (boyd, 2014). The production of culture perspective provides a strong lens to help navigate these systems. These systems are defined as “how the symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught, and preserved” (Peterson & Anand, 2004), which means that the memetic cultural content created by users - including Russian propagandists - are symbolically shaped by the online realm of information distribution and remixed according to the user base.

The realm of false information narratives thus arrives in a complicated arena of online idiosyncrasies, where cultural content may be communally true while also maintaining a hint of falsehoods that deter the average user from engaging with the content. The systems of production have allowed for the dissemination of information similar to a propaganda campaign, but the very systems also allow for individual user agency to take over the integration and assimilation of content within said cultural systems. Thus, false information narratives are predicated upon the user or group of users disseminating content across a system to be fully effective. The Russian advertising on Facebook and Instagram prior to and after the 2016 U.S. Presidential election was predicated on allowing users to integrate their agencies into the false information narrative that was intentionally spread by malicious agents.

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Though a robust exploration of the larger geopolitical climate in which these ads took place is well-worth exploring, only a brief sketch of this will be possible due to the confines of the book chapter format. The IRA effort was a massive undertaking that began long before the start of the U.S. Presidential election. Before shifting its attention to U.S. based politics, the Russian “troll factories” leveraged Russian social media sites in order to spread false information narratives about Vladimir Putin, Ukraine, and the European Union (Alexander, 2015). Though these campaigns have been less well reported within the U.S. media, they likely offered an opportunity to test and refine strategies that were then transferred to the attempts to interfere in U.S. politics.

In addition to the expensive social media-based campaign, Russian interference also included efforts to hack voting machines and the email accounts of prominent politicians, most notably the 2016 Democratic Presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton (DiResta, Shaffer, Ruppel, Sullivan, Matney, Fox, Albright, & Johnson, 2018). Clinton’s emails were not only obtained but also released through the WikiLeaks organization. The coordination of these three approaches were targeted toward tilting the election in favor of Republican Presidential nominee Donald Trump.

Finally, although the social media campaigns by the IRA through Facebook and Twitter were reported both the earliest and most thoroughly by U.S. media, later analysis has demonstrated that such campaigns spread to additional platforms (Howard, Ganesh, Liotsiou, Kelly, & François, 2018). This included intentional actions by the IRA such as creating content for YouTube and Google and creating new websites to host content and garner donations. In other cases, content was shared passively by U.S. citizens to additional social networking sites such as Pinterest (DiResta *et al.*, 2018). The present study therefore offers an analysis of only one small, though nonetheless very important piece of the larger efforts by Russia to interfere in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, highlighting the integration of memetic content into the social media campaign.

METHODS

The current project is the first stage of a larger research project analyzing the Facebook ads placed by the Russian Internet Research Agency surrounding the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. This project addresses our research question of how much engagement the Russian Internet Research Agency was able to generate through its false information narrative campaign via Facebook. A total of 3,511 ads were analyzed for this project. These were downloaded as PDFs from U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence website. The text in the PDF files were then individually entered into a Google Sheets spreadsheet that was connected to Tableau Public for further analysis. The images themselves were not copied into the database. Based on categories used in the original PDF, columns in the spreadsheet were created with the following headers: Ad ID, Ad Text, Ad Landing Page, Ad Targeting Custom Audience, Ad Targeting Location, Excluded Connections, Ad Targeting Age, Language, Ad Targeting Placement, People Who Like, Friends of, Interests, Behavior, Exclude, Ad Impressions, Ad Clicks, Ad Spending (in RUB), Ad Creation Date, Ad End Date, Photo ID #, Reactions, Comments, Shares, People Interested, People Going, and Currently Using OS.

Although this data transcription was straight-forward, there were several irregularities worth mentioning. First, some ads had redacted text and/or images. When the text was redacted, this was transcribed as [redacted] into the spreadsheet. The [redacted] formatting was used even in cases when the redacted material was clearly visible in subsequent similar versions of the ad.

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Further, there appears to be some errors related to the reporting of the ads, likely by Facebook to the U.S. House of Representatives. Many of the ads that indicate that there were zero impressions of the ad have a start date for the ad that occurs *after* the end date. Ad ID 1477 offers an example of this, with a start date of 07/06/16 07:05:58 AM PDT and end date of 05/09/16 06:36:15 AM PDT. This reversal of dates may be emblematic of an error in data reporting and could therefore be related to an overall underreporting of both spending and public engagement of the ads.

At other points, the same ad seemed to be repeated multiple times. For example, ad IDs 728, 730, 732, 734, 736, 738, 740, 742, 744, 746, and 748 are identical, down to the second of the time stamp for the ad start date. It is not clear if these were truly different ads all created at the same time, or merely representative of a reporting error by Facebook. However, all ads such as these were entered separately into the database.

A further limitation of the data provided by Facebook is that the ads only show the total number of reactions and do not break down the reactions by the type of emotion or emoji selected for this reaction. Facebook launched the expanded forms of reactions in early 2016, in middle of the set of ads being analyzed.

It also seems likely that the cumulative totals for number of people interested in and attending events based on the ads will be artificially inflated. Many of the event ads share identical numbers for those who are interested and attending, even when spread out across multiple ads. This was not the case for reactions, comments, and shares for other types of ads, which changed even when ads were otherwise identical.

In addition to events, it appears that certain ads were targeted specifically toward accruing Likes for the Page being advertised rather than for reacting, commenting and sharing. In this case, data for these actions were not available, and instead the image for the ad displayed only the image for the Page with the total number of likes. This number remained consistent across multiple ads and was not easily captured in our data collection because multiple versions meant that these numbers weren't attributable to any particular ad.

Finally, while most aspects of the ads were easily ascribable to particular headers, there were a few items that were not easily linked. In several ads, the attributes "African American (US)" and "Asian American (US)" were denoted as a Behavior. Following this, we expanded the Behavior header to include other less common data that did not fit elsewhere, including: gender, field of study, employer, Facebook access by a particular browser, likely to engage with particular political content, political preferences, home composition, industry, interest expansion, job title, and multi-cultural affinity. Each of these was used rarely and was not easily categorizable to other headers.

RESULTS

While this analysis mirrors in many ways the analysis that would be completed for any social media campaign, there are other important factors and metrics which must be considered due to the nature of this campaign. In addition to metrics such as reach, engagement, and the cost of the campaign, factors such as the timing of the ads in relation to the election, the geographical locations targeted, and the interests targeted will be of importance for this analysis.

First are the overall metrics for the entire campaign. The cost to run all of the ads was 5,817,853.65 Rubles or approximately \$86,000 USD. This ad spend garnered 40,220,722 ad impressions and 3,703,218 ad clicks. Additionally, there were 3,632,442 reactions to the ads, 185,730 comments on the ads, and

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3,334,161 shares of the ads. In terms of advertisements that were related to events, 177,189 people indicated that they were interested in attending events, while 76,769 indicated that they would be attending events.

One major measure of social media campaign success is the number of shares an ad received. Detailed below are the top three most shared advertisements of the entire campaign, including the images and details about targeting for each ad.

The most shared ad was ID 2773, which features the cartoon character Yosemite Sam holding two pistols in front of the Southern Cross version of the Confederate battle flag. The text on the image reads: "I was banned from TV for being too violent. Like & share, if you grew up watching me on television, have a gun, and haven't shot or killed anyone!" This was an ad for the page South United and was shared 956,000 times. This single ad accounted for 28.67% of the shares of all of the ads. It ran from March 10, 2017 to March 17, 2017, targeting users in the United States who were over 18 years old, and matched the interest of Confederate States of America and also Flags of the Confederate States of America, Hart of Dixie, or Dixie.

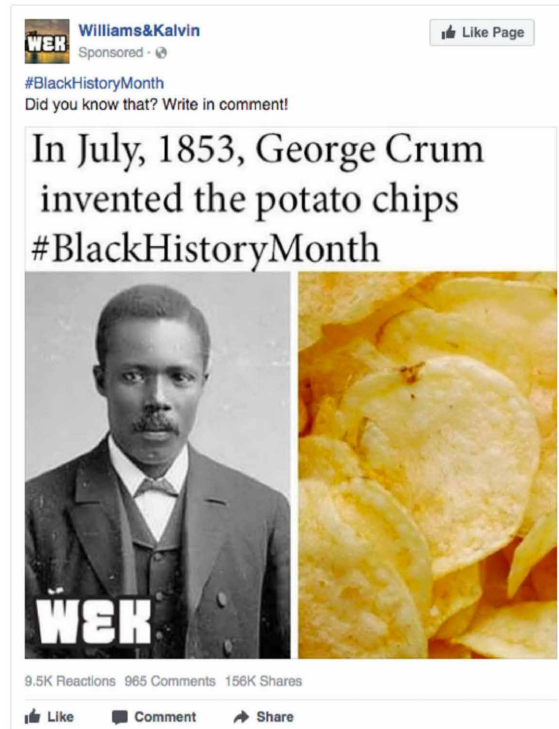
The second most shared ad was ID 3099 (Figure 1) for the page Williams & Calvin. This ad depicts George Crum on one side and potato chips on the other. The text on the image reads, "In July, 1853, George Crum invented the potato chips #BlackHistoryMonth." Additionally, the text appearing above the ad is, "#BlackHistoryMonth. Did you know that? Write in comment!" It was shared 156,000 times and targeted to people over 18 years of age in the United States who matched the interests of Martin Luther King, Jr., African-American Civil Rights Movement (1954-68), African-American history, or Malcom X. It ran from February 5, 2017 to February 10, 2017.

The third most shared ad was ID 2700 for the page Brown Power. This ad depicts a cartoon version of a man and a woman who are each holding some form of luggage. They are standing at what is presumably the border between the U.S. and Mexico while looking at two signs that read, "Land of the free," and "No trespassing." These signs are posted in front of barbed wire and there are cacti visible in the background. The text that is part of the image reads: "flawless mexicana: Guys. This picture fucked me up. We come for opportunity and a better life and all we get is hate and contempt. Sometimes I forget how lucky I am cause I can go back home whenever I want, but other people have to stay here and deal with racism and hate everyday. We didn't come to steal your jobs, we came to make a living. We're not here to murder. rape and steal; we're here to escape that. Please stop hating on *mi gente* we're trying our best," [sic]. This ad was targeted to people over 18 years of age living in the U.S. and matching interests Mexico, Latin hip hop, Chicano Movement, Hispanidad, Lowrider, Chicano rap or La Raza. It ran from January 27, 2017 to January 29, 2017 and was shared 95,000 times.

Another metric that can be used to assess the success of particular ads is the lowest cost per share of the ad. In other words, which ads produced the most shares for the least cost? There was a great deal of overlap in this category with the most shared ads above. Ad ID 2700 was the third lowest cost at 0.0001 Rubles per share. Ad ID 2773 had the second lowest cost at 0.00008 Rubles per share. The best performing ad according to this metric, however, was not one of the most widely shared ads. Ad ID 2733 features an image that has been redacted except for the text, "I will just leave it here." It was targeted to users over the age of 18 living in the U.S. with interests matching, "Hispanic and latino american culture, Mexico, Mexican american culture, Hispanic culture, Latino culture, Latin hip hop, Chicano, Chicano Movement, Hispanidad, Mexican Pride, Lowrider, Chicano rap or La Raza." This ad spent 0.14 Rubles to attract four impressions and 1 click, but managed to garner 9,500 shares, for a cost per share of 0.00001 Rubles. It ran from March 16, 2017 to March 17, 2017.

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Figure 1. Second Most Shared Ad (U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Democrats, n.d.)



Because of the issue mentioned above in the methods section related to capturing data for ads aimed at Page Likes rather than interaction, one further metric remains important for assessing success. This is the total number of clicks each ad received. When assessed in this way, a completely different set of ads emerges at the top.

Ad ID 2751 (Figure 2) was the most clicked ad. It was an ad for the Facebook page Back the Badge that was targeted at users over 20 years of age in the U.S. whose interests matched State police, Law enforcement in the United States, Police, Sheriffs in the United States, Law enforcement or police officer and must also have matched Support Law Enforcement, The Thin Blue Line, Officer Down Memorial Page, Police Wives Unite, National Police Wives Association or Heroes Behind the Badge. The image featured a Back the Badge logo on top of a police shield on top of red police cruiser lights. The ad was created on October 19, 2016 and did not have a reported end date. It received 73,063 clicks.

The second most clicked ad was ID 450 (Figure 3). This was an ad for the Being Patriotic Facebook page with the customized Facebook URL containing the phrase *patriototus*. This ad was targeted to users over 18 in the United State who were interested in independence or patriotism. The image for this ad featured an artistically rendered bald eagle with two American flags on either side in the background. The text accompanying the ad reads, "United We Stand! Welcome every patriot we can reach. Flag and news!" This ad received 72,043 clicks and began running on June 23, 2015 with no end date reported.

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Figure 2. Most Clicked Ad (U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Democrats, n.d.)

Suggested Page

 **Back the Badge**
Sponsored

Community of people who support our brave Police Officers.



Back the Badge
Community
111,113 people like this.

 Like Page

Figure 3. Second Most Clicked Ad (U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Democrats, n.d.)

Suggested Page

 **Being Patriotic**
Sponsored

United We Stand! Welcome every patriot we can reach. Flag and news!



Being Patriotic
Community
219,810 people like this.

 Like Page

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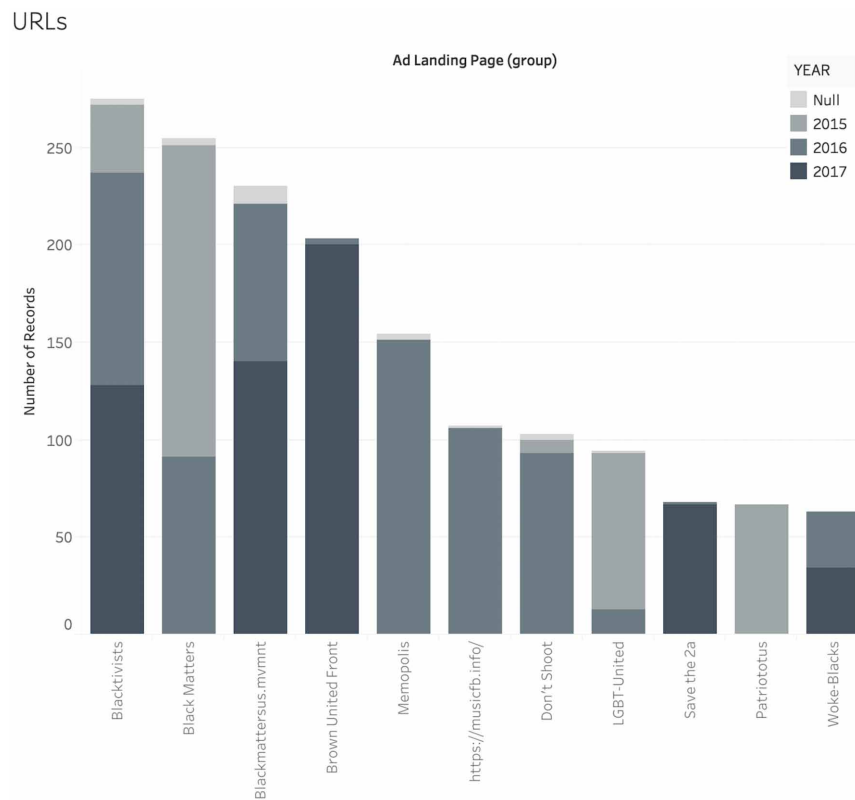
The third most clicked ad is ID 2647 (Figure 4). It was targeted at users over 16 years of age in the United States, and, unlike the other ads, included those who speak Spanish in addition to English. Of note, however, is that the Spanish language referred specifically to Spain rather than Mexico. It was targeted to those whose interests matched Mexico, Latin hip hop, Chicano Movement, Hispanidad, Lowrider, or Chicano rap, and also must have matched La Raza. It was created on December 9, 2016 with no reported end date and received 56,405 clicks. The image features a prominent fist in the middle of the image, with what appears to be either henna or a tattoo on the wrist. The words, “Brown Power” are featured on either side of the fist. There are four stylized versions of the Mexican flag in the background. The accompanying text reads, “Brown power is a platform designed to educate, entertain and connect Chicanos in the US.”

One important question for understanding the ads is where users were being directed when the ad was clicked. Figure 5 shows the top ten most frequent destination Facebook Pages or URLs for all ads. These are also color coded by the year that each ad began running.

The interests at which the ads were targeted are of particular value because they give the clearest insight into what type of audience was being targeted by the IRA. Figure 6 demonstrates which sets of interests had the largest number of ads targeted to them by the size of the rectangle. The darker blue the rectangle is, the larger the total ad spend on those interests. The numbers of ads and total ad spend are also depicted in that order under each set of interests. We can see from this visualization that the most frequently used set of interests was, “Martin Luther King, Jr., African-American Civil Rights Movement (1954-68), African-American history, or Malcolm X,” while the interests that garnered the largest ad spend were, “Independence or Patriotism.”

Figure 4. Third Most Clicked Ad (U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Democrats, n.d.)

The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook advertisement. At the top, it says "Suggested Page". Below that is the profile picture and name of "Brown Power", which is a community page. The text of the ad reads: "Brown Power is a platform designed to educate, entertain and connect Chicanos in the US." The main image features a raised fist in the center, with the words "BROWN" on the left and "POWER" on the right. The background consists of four stylized Mexican flags. At the bottom of the ad, it says "Brown Power Community" and "203,148 people like this." There is a "Like Page" button in the bottom right corner.

False Information Narratives*Figure 5. Top 10 Ad Landing Pages by Year (Image created in Tableau Public, 2018)*

Six of the top ten most frequently targeted interests were related to African-American civil rights or news related themes. The other themes from these most targeted ads were for Cop Block, Patriotism, Chicano related interests, and humor. The Patriotism ads received the largest ad spend by a significant amount. These will be discussed more thoroughly in the Discussion section below.

Another important aspect of these ads is when they were run. Figure 7 illustrates both how many ads were run by month and year and is color coded to show how much was spent on advertisements in each month. The top three months for the number of ads run were October 2016, May 2016, and April 2017. The months with the highest ad spend were September 2015, June 2015, October 2016. October 2016, the month immediately preceding the U.S. Presidential election, is noteworthy as it was the only month at the top of the list both in terms of the number of ads run and the amount of money spent.

Some of the ads were targeted to specific geographic regions, which may be of interest because of the roll that the electoral college system plays in the U.S. Presidential election. The majority of ads were targeted broadly to anyone in the United States. However, Figure 8 visualizes the ten next most common geographic areas targeted, broken down by year. Fewer trends are noticeable here, but it is clear that Ferguson and St. Louis, MO and Cleveland, OH were frequent targets in 2015, but declined in subsequent years. Further, specific geographic targeting seems to have declined altogether in 2017.

Finally, Figure 9 visualizes the number of shares per group of interests at which ads were targeted, also broken down by year. These interests reflect the top shared ads examined above: Confederate States of America, African-American civil rights, and the Chicano Movement. One interesting trend

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Figure 6. Top 10 Interests by Number of Ads and Ad Spend (Image created in Tableau Public, 2018)

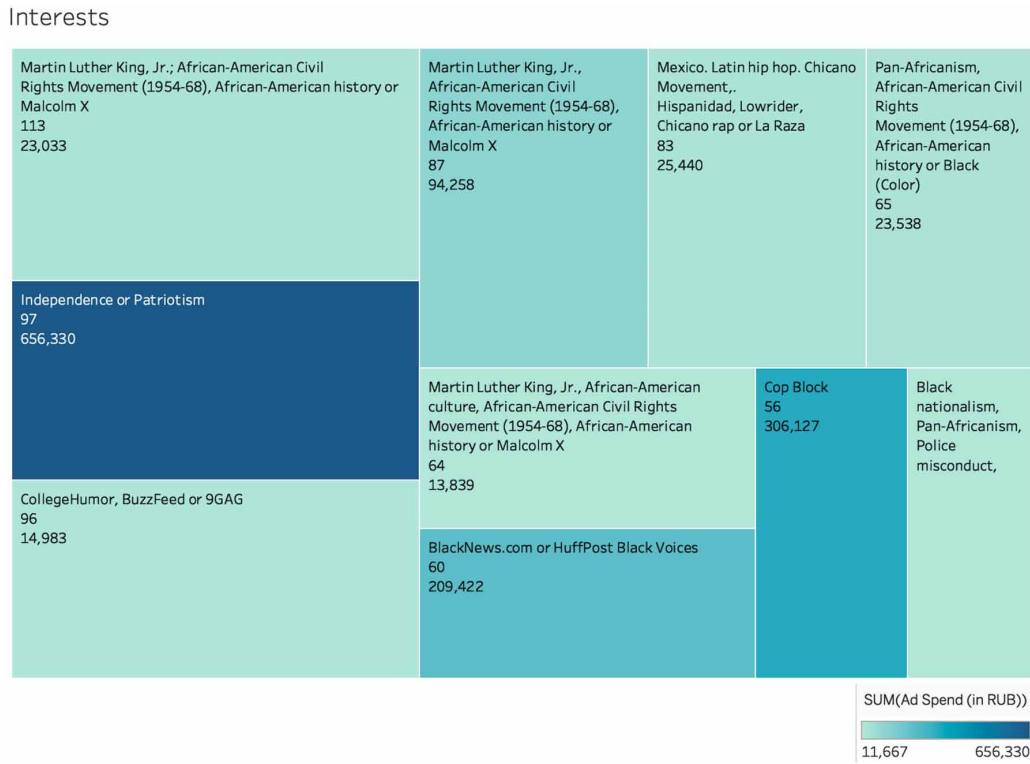
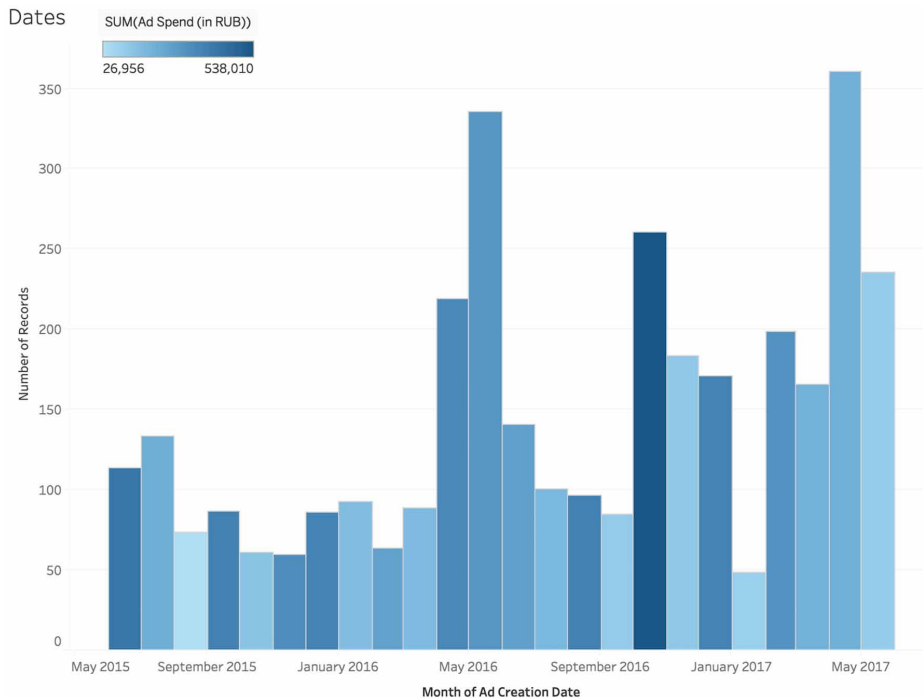
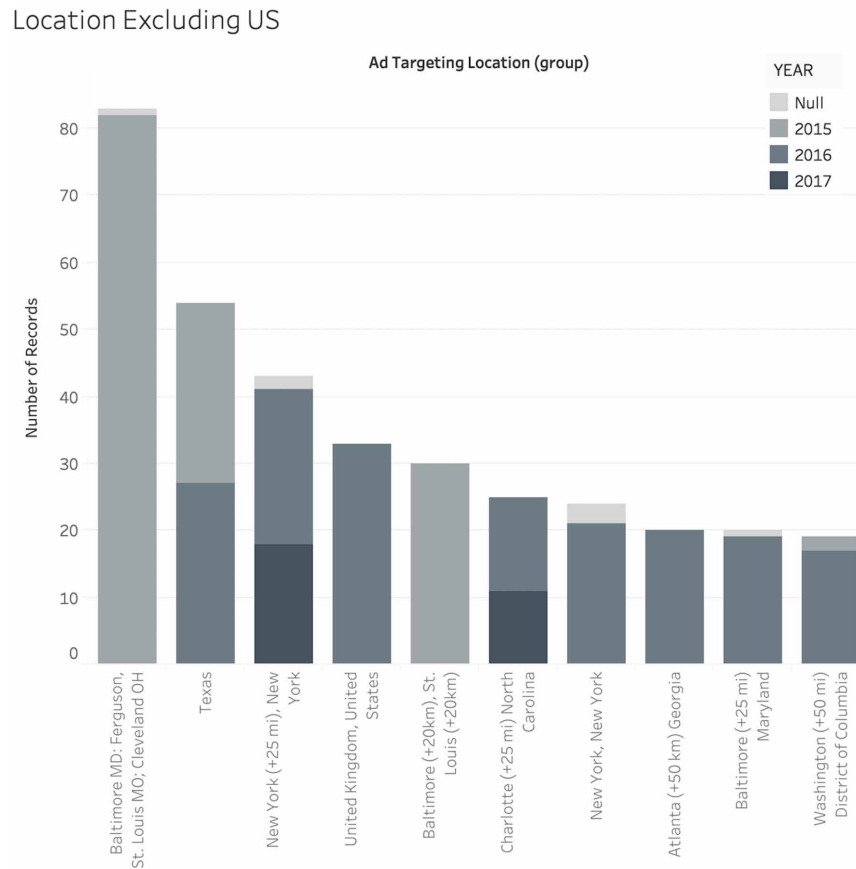


Figure 7. Advertisements Created by Date with Ad Spend (Image created in Tableau Public)



False Information Narratives*Figure 8. Advertisements Created by Location per Year, Excluding Entire U.S. (Image created in Tableau Public)*

that becomes apparent in this visualization is that ads run in 2017 were by far the most frequently and widely shared ads.

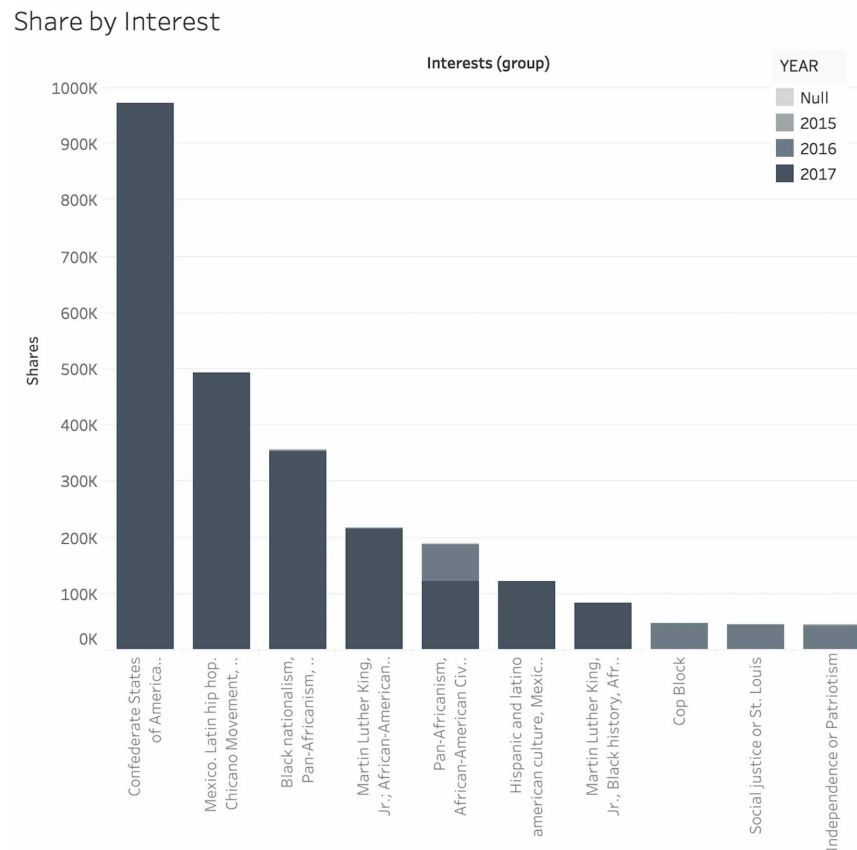
These results offer a rich set of data that are considered and further contextualized below. The discussion section will explore several of the themes that have emerged around the role of Russia in the 2016 Presidential election in light of this analysis of the full set of ads.

DISCUSSION

One narrative surrounding the Russian advertisements is that they could not have had a large effect on the election when the campaigns themselves spent significantly more on ads than the Russians (Ruffini, 2017). However, it's worth exploring just how much more successful these ads were than those placed by either the Clinton or Trump campaigns, and even than the average Facebook ad. The average cost per click for the Russian ads was 1.57 Rubles, or approximately \$0.02 USD. In comparison, the industry average is \$0.27 USD (McHale, 2018). The CPM (cost per one thousand impressions) for the Russian ads was approximately \$2.10 USD. While the industry average CPM is \$7.19 USD, the average for the

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Figure 9. Number of Shares by Interest per Year (Image created in Tableau Public)



Clinton and Trump campaigns ranged between \$10 USD and \$40 USD (Gotter, 2018; Shinal, 2018). The average click-through rate of the Russian ads was 9.2%, compared to an industry average of 0.9% (McHale, 2018).

The above comparisons should make clear that from the standpoint of traditional Facebook social media campaigns, the Russian ads were a resounding success. However, impressions and clicks do not necessarily translate into changed minds or votes. In fact, many of the ads were of seemingly benign or even nonpolitical topics, such as funny memes or the inventor of potato chips. While these relatively harmless gateway ads are part of the larger online ecosystem, they portend a method of interacting with users in terms of their processes of subjectivation as they construct and reconstruct their identities through social communication practices. By serving as an initial hook to have users like a particular page, it also opens up the possibility of future interactions with those users of a more political nature. Many of the communities created by the IRA grew to hundreds of thousands of members who were then subject to the approximately 80,000 pieces of organic content created by such pages (Stretch, 2017).

The indictment of the IRA and its associated members that was filed in February of 2018 by Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller III also makes clear that dismissing this campaign as a small budget operation is severely misguided. According to this filing, the planning for the IRA campaign began as early as 2013 and created a multi-million-dollar organization tasked with global travel, cultural analysis, and the creation of entire communities meant to appear American in origin, which were supported by both paid

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and organic posting. Employees of this organization studied already existing political organizations in the U.S. in order to guide their content creation and then carefully tracked and measured the performance of their own content (Mueller, 2018). In his 2017 testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Facebook's General Counsel Colin Stretch explained and downplayed this reach: "Our best estimate is that approximately 126 million people may have been served content from a Page associated with the IRA at some point during the two-year period. This equals about four-thousandths of one percent (0.004%) of content in News Feed, or approximately 1 out of 23,000 pieces of content." However, this well-funded support network for the IRA facilitated much more than social media posts that were widely shared. These efforts are elaborated below, beginning with a closer look at guiding mission of the ads.

Due in part to the variety of interests at which these ads were targeted (see Figure 9) one of the narratives surrounding this effort by the IRA is that it equally targeted both sides in order sow division (Keating, Schaul & Shapiro, 2017; Shane, 2017). While division was one of the secondary goals of the campaign, the primary mission shared with specialists creating content was to "use any opportunity to criticize Hillary and the rest (except Sanders and Trump -- we support them)." (Mueller, 2018, p. 17). Further, pages that did not have enough content criticizing Clinton were reprimanded and instructed to increase this type of content in future posts. Thus, while *interests* on both sides of the political spectrum were targeted, the content itself was ultimately aimed at supporting candidates Sanders and Trump, and later, President Trump.

Even at only the most surface-level reading of post content, many of the themes touched upon by IRA posts have continued to play an outsized role in the U.S. political landscape. For example, a few days before the election, IRA accounts began alleging that, among other locations, voter fraud was occurring in Broward County, Florida associated with mail-in ballots supporting Clinton. This theme has been carried forward into the 2018 U.S. midterm elections, with Florida Senate candidate Rick Scott and President Trump sharing accusations of voter fraud in Broward County, calling this the "Broward Effect" and filing a variety of lawsuits related to this claim (Gregg 2018; Trump 2018). Additionally, in the days leading up to the 2016 Presidential election, IRA social media accounts associated with Woke Blacks, Blacktivist, and United Muslims of America pushed messages explicitly encouraging its members to either avoid voting as a form of protest or to vote for third-party candidate Jill Stein (Mueller, 2018). Unfortunately, it remains unclear how much impact, if any, these types of posts had on voters.

Yet, other impacts are far more tangible. Using these now well-established communities, the IRA was able to organize U.S. citizens into attending a variety of protests and rallies. They did this by promoting them in their own communities, partnering with other, legitimate U.S. grassroots activists, and by paying people to participate (Mueller, 2018). One prominent example of this influence is the Florida Goes Trump rallies that were held in August, 2016. These were organized by the Being Patriotic IRA group, but included collaboration with, among others, the local Team Trump Broward County Facebook page run by Florine Gruen Goldfarb (O'Sullivan, Griffin, & Bronstein, 2018). Additionally, the IRA contacted and paid local citizen Harry Miller between \$500 and \$1000 to build a replica jail cell in the back of a truck and attend the rally with someone inside the cage wearing a prison uniform and Hillary Clinton mask (Mueller, 2018; O'Sullivan, Griffin, & Bronstein, 2018).

The impact from these rallies extends beyond the events themselves. For example, at least one other person in Florida went on to build additional replicas of Clinton in a jail cell, such as the one built by Gary Howd in Cape Coral (Tinoco, 2016). Further reporting also suggests that those involved with these rallies simply do not believe there to be any Russian connection, even after being confronted by reporters with the evidence of the Mueller indictment. Goldfarb, the aforementioned facilitator of the Team

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Trump Broward County Facebook page, refused to accept that the Being Patriotic group was associated with the Russians, instead arguing that the Mueller indictment itself was a false information narrative meant to distract from the failures of the FBI to handle tips related to the Parkland school shooting (O’Sullivan, Griffin, & Bronstein, 2018). The ad for this event (ID 525, Figure 10) was promoted with a spend of 27,402.97 Rubles, or approximately \$400. It had a CTR of over 14% and generated 1,617 people interested in attending and 339 who marked that they would attend.

Other rallies organized in New York, Pennsylvania, and Charlotte, NC also attracted participants, with dueling rallies for and against President-Elect Trump attracting between 5,000 and 10,000 participants in New York City on November 12, 2016 (Breland, 2017). Although smaller, the Charlotte event offers a telling preview of the lasting effects of these events. The November 19, 2016 rally against Trump attracted less than 100 participants, but those who were duped by the event believe that there are much broader effects. Andrew Fede is a political organizer who collaborated with the IRA-created group BlackMattersUS to organize the event, and in light of the Mueller indictment linking this group to Russians, he argues that political organizers will be more wary of organizing future events, aggrieved communities will be less likely to attend events, and the media will be less likely to cover such events, all due to lingering concerns that such events could be part of a larger false information narrative (Gordon, 2018). The effects of these events go far beyond the sometimes-limited effects they had on the day of

Figure 10. Florida Goes Trump Event Ad (U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Democrats, n.d.)

The image shows a screenshot of a Facebook event advertisement. At the top, it says "Being Patriotic shared their event." with a "Sponsored" label. The text of the ad reads: "We announce a patriotic flash mob in Florida on August, 20! We either win Florida or lose". Below this is a large image featuring a woman in an orange jumpsuit behind bars on the left and a man in a suit and "MAGA" cap on the right. The text "FLORIDA GOES TRUMP AUGUST, 20" is overlaid on the image. Below the image, the event details are: "AUG 20 Florida Goes Trump! patriotic state-wid... Sat 2 PM EDT · Florida". It shows "1,617 people interested · 339 people going" and an "Interested" button. At the bottom, it displays "4.7K Reactions 359 Comments" and "Like Comment" buttons.

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the events themselves. The imagery, such as Clinton in a jail cell, has been picked up and extended by Trump supporters, and even those who acknowledge the Russian connection exists are wary of participating in future organized events out of concern they may not be legitimate. Because of national media coverage of these events and subsequently their connection to the IRA, these concerns extend far beyond the handful of people who were actually involved in the events.

In response to these challenges, Facebook has rolled out new initiatives that require political ads to be labeled and include a note about who has paid for the ad (Leathern, 2018). These changes will undoubtedly improve the issue in some ways, but the current set of ads under analysis already suggest some ways in which these changes will likely not solve all of the problems associated with foreign advertising. For example, it is not clear that ads such as those run by the IRA for Memopolis would fall under the scope of these new rules. It would then be possible for the page which has run non-political paid advertising to post unpaid organic political content to its new followers.

Perhaps more concerning than the overtly political ads is the potential for more sophisticated campaigns. The potential for these types of campaigns is suggested by the large number of IRA ads for a tool called FaceMusic (Figure 11). Although these ads were not successful in comparison to the more overtly political ads, these might be even more concerning. These ads were targeted at a younger audience (generally under 35, but often between 13 and 20) and attempted to get users to install a Chrome browser plugin for streaming music. The plugin requires permission to “read and change all your data on the websites you visit, display notifications, and modify data you copy and paste,” as well as post to the Facebook timeline and message friends (Lapowski, 2018).

Although these types of permissions are not necessarily out of line with those required for the installation of other apps, the potential for abuse, particularly by organizations such as the IRA, is rife. The amount of data that could be collected through such an application could be put to nefarious use, as demonstrated by the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Granville, 2018). In other words, it is much harder to create rules that are able to identify and prevent the collection of data in one situation that is then later used in another context.

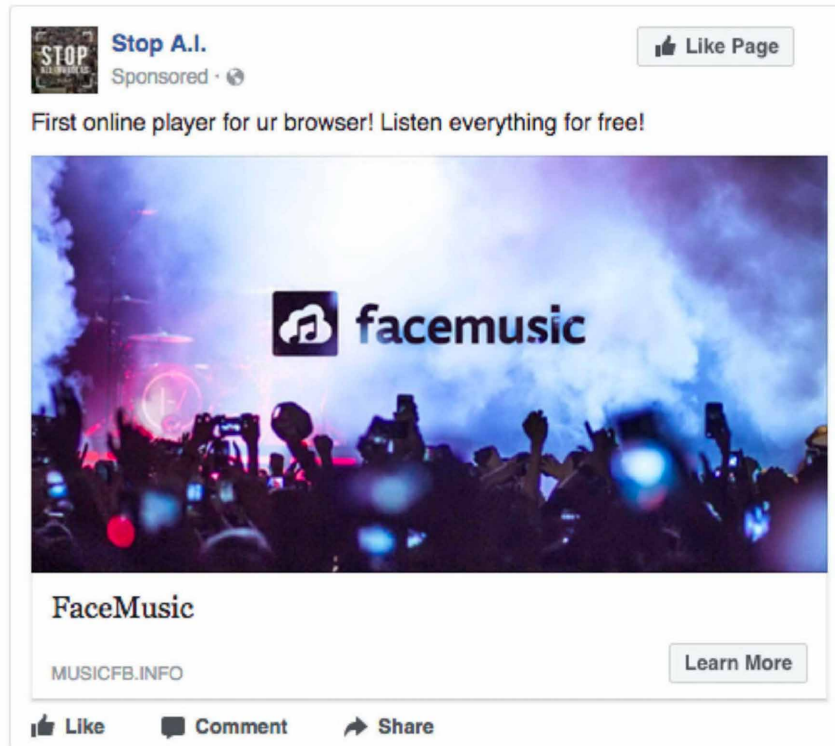
Jamieson (2018) explains how such Russian ads may have generated a variety of media effects. These include agenda setting around the issue of Clinton’s untrustworthiness and her leaked emails, framing how voters should think about issues such as immigration and using negative emotions and memetics to help these ads spread. Additionally, a sociotechnical framework can help one understand how these ads leveraged memes to drive the cultural production of identity through approaches such as brown power, patriotism, and Southern heritage. This afforded the opportunity for social media users to both identify with the material and then transform it and share it in ways that both resonated with and transformed already established cultural and political identities. Though none of this definitively demonstrates that such ads swung the outcome of the election or even changed individual votes, it does make clearer one small portion of the much larger Russian efforts to impact the election.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Much work remains to be done, not only in terms of this particular set of Russian ads, but on the larger role of social media in false information narratives. In the immediate future, it will helpful to extend the current analysis of the Russian ads into a qualitative analysis that more fully considers the sentiment of the ad text as well as a visual content analysis of the ad images.

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Figure 11. FaceMusic ad (U.S. House of Representatives Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Democrats, n.d.)



Such a qualitative analysis will also help drive one of the largest questions behind the Russian ads: just how effective were these ads? While the present analysis provides a good picture of how successful the ads were in garnering engagement and sharing in order to spread them more widely, it remains an open question as to whether those users who saw and engaged with these ads were actually impacted them. This impact might take the form of a hardening of divisive views, or, more concerningly, could have impacted whether and how some citizens voted. Though this is the hardest question to answer, it is nonetheless the most important.

Furthermore, it is imperative to examine this work in light of increasing news regarding meddling in U.S. elections by foreign agents. Given the production of culture perspective, it is impossible to disregard online engagement with users of social media content as having little to no impact on information consumption and potential voting patterns. The use of memes in particular by advertising agents speaks to a greater sophistication of usage of these online social media, and could expand knowledge of public propaganda usage and campaigns. As social networks change their policies regarding advertising and privacy, these campaigns are likely to grow in sophistication.

Understanding how these posts are linked to the culture of production within online systems is a necessary action to take. None of these posts are created within an information vacuum. Instead, the works created by these particular foreign agents are largely calculated for maximal impact within the online ecosystem. Qualitative studies regarding content found within said online advertisements will give a greater sense of how the content was crafted for engaging with users.

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CONCLUSION

This analysis has identified the most successful ads that were created as part of the Russian IRA campaign to interfere in U.S. politics. We have answered our research question which asked if the ads created by the IRA were successful at generating social engagement by concluding that, by traditional social media campaign statistics such as click-through-rates and cost-per-thousand views, these ads were not only exceedingly successful, but became more successful over time. Moving beyond the straightforward metrics of the ads themselves, this analysis has highlighted some of the larger cultural impacts of this campaign, many of which still linger in the national political narrative. While Facebook has taken some corrective measures, it is clear that these measures do not prevent all possible malicious interference by foreign actors.

In *Cyber-War*, Kathleen Hall Jamieson (2018) thoroughly demonstrates how communication theories such as agenda-setting and framing can be used to explain the ways these ads could have influenced voters. This present analysis, in its sociotechnical theoretical approach, presents an even more complicated challenge. Because the IRA campaign was so closely linked to memetic culture and issues of identity construction, it becomes much more difficult for one to take a step back and recognize the possibly false portions of a false information narrative. This can clearly be seen in Florine Gruen Goldfarb's denial of Russian links to the Being Patriotic Facebook page, despite overwhelming evidence.

This highlights the current media practices that have been implicated in a shift from disagreements about what happens to be true or false, to a much deeper epistemological struggle over *how we determine* what counts as truth (boyd, 2018). This is the debate that will drive the emerging political and larger cultural struggles in the United States and, increasingly, around the globe. Our participation in online information narratives will remain an important part of that debate as it continues to help construct and reconstruct our identities.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Click-Through Rate: The rate at which users click an advertisement in comparison to how many times it was displayed.

CPM: Interpreted as cost per one thousand views, this is a common metric for understanding the cost of a social media campaign.

Epistemology: A branch of philosophy dealing with questions about knowledge and truth.

Fake News: A catch-all term for intentionally false information, widely popularized during the 2016 Presidential Campaign of Donald Trump.

False Information Narrative: Meant to denote contexts beyond that of news, this term covers a variety of media in which false information is intentionally used to support a particular narrative.

Memetic Communication: Derived from Richard Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene*, memes represent units of cultural expression that spread between individuals, this form of communication traces the the how memes are spread and how they impact communication practices.

Sociotechnical Ensembles: A theoretical approach to knowledge creation and identity that blurs the line between social agents and the larger technical systems in which they exist.