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DID RUSSIA AFFECT THE 2016 ELECTION? IT'S NOW UNDENIABLE



In the wake of the Mueller indictment of a Russian troll farm, any attempt to claim that the 2016 presidential election wasn't affected by Russian meddling is laughable.

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propaganda and disinformation; cyber-security issues and the hacking of elections systems versus information operations and information warfare; paid advertising versus coercive messaging or psychological operations—when discussing “Russian meddling” in the 2016 US elections. The refrain has become: “There is no evidence that Russian efforts changed any votes.”

But the [bombshell 37-page indictment](#) issued Friday by Robert Mueller against Russia’s Internet Research Agency and its leadership and affiliates provides considerable detail on the Russian information warfare targeting the American public during the elections. And this information makes it increasingly difficult to say that the Kremlin’s effort to impact the American mind did not succeed.

The [indictment](#) pulls the curtain back on four big questions that have swirled around the Russian influence operation, which, it turns out, began in 2014: What was the scope of the Russian effort? What kind of content did it rely on? Who or what was it targeting, and what did it aim to achieve? And finally, what impact did it have?

Most of the [discussion](#) of this to date has focused on ideas of political advertising and the reach of a handful of ads—and this discussion has been completely missed the point.

So let’s take these questions one at a time.

The Mueller indictment permanently demolishes the idea that the scale of the Russian campaign was not significant enough to have any impact on the American public. We are no longer talking about approximately \$100,000 (paid in rubles, no less) of advertising grudgingly [disclosed](#) by Facebook, but tens of millions of dollars spent over several years to build a broad, sophisticated system that can influence American opinion.

The Russian efforts described in the indictment focused on establishing deep, authenticated, long-term identities for individuals and groups within specific communities. This was underlaid by the establishment of servers and VPNs based in the US to mask the location of the individuals involved. US-based email accounts linked to fake or stolen US identity documents (driver licenses, social security numbers, and more) were used to back the online identities. These identities were also used to launder payments through PayPal and cryptocurrency accounts. All of this deception was designed to make it appear that these activities were being carried out by Americans.

Additionally, the indictment mentions that the IRA had a department whose job was gaming algorithms. This is important because information warfare—the term used in the indictment itself—is not about “fake news” and “bots.” It is about creating an information environment and a narrative—specific storytelling vehicles used to achieve goals of subversion and activation, amplified and promoted through a variety of means.

2. What kind of content did it rely on?

As the indictment lays out in thorough detail, the content pumped out by the Russians was not paid or promoted ads; it was so-called native content—including video, visual, memetic, and text elements designed to push narrative themes, conspiracies, and character attacks. All of it was designed to look like it was coming from authentic American voices and interest groups. And the IRA wasn't just guessing about what worked. They used data-driven targeting and analysis to assess how the content was received, and they used that information to refine their messages and make them more effective.

3. Who or what was the operation targeting, and what did it aim to achieve?

The indictment mentions that the Russian accounts were meant to embed with and emulate “radical” groups. The content was not designed to persuade people to change their views, but to harden those views. Confirmation bias is powerful and commonly employed in these kinds of psychological operations (a related Soviet concept is “[reflexive control](#)”—applying pressure in ways to elicit a specific, known response). The [intention](#) of these campaigns was to activate—or suppress—target groups. Not to change their views, but to change their behavior.

4. What impact did it have?

We're only at the beginning of having an answer to this question because we've only just begun to ask some of the right questions. But Mueller's indictment shows that Russian accounts and agents accomplished more than just stoking divisions and tensions with sloppy propaganda memes. The messaging was more sophisticated, and some Americans took action. For example, the indictment recounts a number of instances where events and demonstrations were organized by Russians posing as Americans on social media. These accounts aimed to get people to do specific things. And it turns out—some people did.

Changing or activating behavior in this way is difficult; it's easier to create awareness of a narrative. Consistent exposure over a period of time has a complex impact on a person's cognitive environment. If groups were activated, then certainly the narrative being pushed by the IRA penetrated people's minds. And sure enough, The themes identified in the indictment were topics frequently raised during the election, and they were frequently echoed and promoted across social media and by conservative outlets. A key goal of these campaigns was “mainstreaming” an idea—moving it from the fringe to the mainstream and thus making it appear to be a more widely held than it actually is.

Russian or American information architecture in the US information environment. This will make it far harder to assess where stories and narratives are coming from, whether they are real or propaganda, whether they represent the views of our neighbors or not.

This corrosive effect is real and significant. Which part of the fear of “sharia law in America” came from Russian accounts versus readers of InfoWars? How much did the Russian campaigns targeting black voters impact the low turnout, versus the character attacks run against Clinton by the Trump campaign itself? For now, all we can know is that there is [shared narrative, and shared responsibility](#). But if, as the indictment says, Russian information warriors were instructed to support “Sanders and Trump,” and those two campaigns appeared to have the most aggressive and effective online outreach, what piece of that is us, and what is them?

PERSUASION AND INFLUENCE via social media cannot be estimated in linear terms; it requires looking at network effects. It is about the impact of a complex media environment with many layers, inputs, voices, amplifiers, and personalities. All of these elements change over time and interact with each other.

So anyone trying to tell you there was little impact on political views from the tools the Russians used doesn't know. Because none of us knows. No one has looked. Social media companies don't want us to know, and they obfuscate and drag their feet rather than disclosing information. The analytical tools to quantify the impact don't readily exist. But we know what we see, and what we heard—and the narratives pushed by the Russian information operation made it to all of our ears and eyes.

The groups and narratives identified in the indictment were integral parts of the frenzied election circus that built momentum, shaped perceptions, and activated a core base of support for now-President Trump—just as they helped disgust and dismay other groups, making them less likely to vote (or to vote for marginal candidates in protest).

In the indictment, Trump campaign officials are referred to as “unwitting” participants in Russian information warfare. This gives the White House an out—and a chance to finally act against what the Kremlin did. But the evidence presented in the indictment makes it increasingly hard to say Russian efforts to influence the American mind were a failure.

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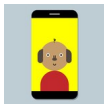
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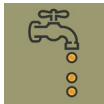
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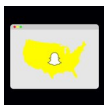
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