

KUSHNER'S DIGITAL ARMIES AND FACEBOOK'S .1%

Back in May, I called attention to NYT's mention of the importance of Jared Kushner's successful reversal of his father-in-law's digital targeting to cement their relationship.

Amid its larger narrative that Kushner and Trump actually haven't been that close all that long, the NYT also reminds that Kushner got a lot of credit from his father-in-law for reviving the digital aspect of the campaign.

Mr. Kushner's reported feeler to the Russians even as President Barack Obama remained in charge of American foreign policy was a trademark move by someone with a deep confidence in his abilities that critics say borders on conceit, people close to him said. And it echoes his history of sailing forth into unknown territory, including buying a newspaper at age 25 and developing a data-analytics program that he has said helped deliver the presidency to his father-in-law.

[snip]

Despite the perception that he is the one untouchable adviser in the president's inner circle, Mr. Kushner was not especially close to his father-in-law before the 2016 campaign. The two bonded when Mr. Kushner helped to take over the campaign's faltering digital operation and to sell a reluctant Rupert Murdoch, the

chairman of Fox News's parent company, on the viability of his father-in-law's candidacy by showing him videos of Mr. Trump's rally during a lunch at Fox headquarters in mid-2015.

There lots of reasons to look askance at Trump's data program, even before you consider that it was so central in a year where Trump's opponent got hacked. So I find it notable (which is where I'll leave it, for now) that Kushner's role in the digital side of the campaign was so central to his perceived closeness to Trump.

McClatchy reports that the Congressional investigation committees are looking into my suspicions: that Kushner's digital targeting may have been assisted by Russian obtained data (though I hope someone considers whether Russians also hacked Hillary's analytics programs, blinding her to problems in places like MI).

Investigators at the House and Senate Intelligence committees and the Justice Department are examining whether the Trump campaign's digital operation – overseen by Jared Kushner – helped guide Russia's sophisticated voter targeting and fake news attacks on Hillary Clinton in 2016.

Congressional and Justice Department investigators are focusing on whether Trump's campaign pointed Russian cyber operatives to certain voting jurisdictions in key states – areas where Trump's digital team and Republican operatives were spotting unexpected weakness in voter support for Hillary Clinton, according to several people familiar with the parallel inquiries.

I'm glad they are doing this, but I'm a bit troubled by the belief (based in part on what I consider unproven analysis that Congress has already mainlined) that all the trolls and bots were Russian.

By Election Day, an automated Kremlin cyberattack of unprecedented scale and sophistication had delivered critical and phony news about the Democratic presidential nominee to the Twitter and Facebook accounts of millions of voters. Some investigators suspect the Russians targeted voters in swing states, even in key precincts.

Russia's operation used computer commands known as "bots" to collect and dramatically heighten the reach of negative or fabricated news about Clinton, including a story in the final days of the campaign accusing her of running a pedophile ring at a Washington pizzeria.

One source familiar with Justice's criminal probe said investigators doubt Russian operatives controlling the so-called robotic cyber commands that fetched and distributed fake news stories could have independently "known where to specifically target ... to which high-impact states and districts in those states."

I say this for two reasons. First, because a lot of it was self-evidently coming from 4Chan. 4Chan would (and I suspect has been) willfully manipulated by Russians or their agents, but a lot of the actual activity was American.

And that instinct is backed by an entity that has far better data than the researchers Congress has heard from (publicly at least): Facebook. Facebook, which was ground zero for the sharing of fake stories during the campaign, maintains that just .1% of the "civic content"

on Facebook during the campaign was malicious propaganda.

In a fascinating report on the use of the social media platform for Information Operations released yesterday, Facebook make a startling claim. Less than .1% of what got shared during the election was shared by accounts set up to engage in malicious propaganda.

Concurrently, a separate set of malicious actors engaged in false amplification using inauthentic Facebook accounts to push narratives and themes that reinforced or expanded on some of the topics exposed from stolen data. Facebook conducted research into overall civic engagement during this time on the platform, and determined that the reach of the content shared by false amplifiers was marginal compared to the overall volume of civic content shared during the US election.¹²

In short, while we acknowledge the ongoing challenge of monitoring and guarding against information operations, the reach of known operations during the US election of 2016 was statistically very small compared to overall engagement on political issues.

¹² To estimate magnitude, we compiled a cross functional team of engineers, analysts, and data scientists to examine posts that were classified as related to civic engagement between September and December 2016. We compared that data with data derived from the behavior of

accounts we believe to be related to Information Operations. The reach of the content spread by these accounts was less than one-tenth of a percent of the total reach of civic content on Facebook.

And they say this in a report that also coyly confirms they've got data confirming Russia's role in the election.

But in the US election section, the report includes a coy passage stating that it cannot definitively attribute who sponsored the false amplification, even while it states that its data does not contradict the Intelligence Community's attribution of the effort to Russian intelligence.

Facebook is not in a position to make definitive attribution to the actors sponsoring this activity. It is important to emphasize that this example case comprises only a subset of overall activities tracked and addressed by our organization during this time period; however our data does not contradict the attribution provided by the U.S. Director of National Intelligence in the report dated January 6, 2017.

That presents the possibility (one that is quite likely) that Facebook has far more specific forensic data on the .1% of accounts it deems malicious amplifiers that it coyly suggests it knows to be Russian intelligence. Note, too, that the report is quite clear that this is human-driven activity, not bot-driven.

All of which is my way of saying the Committees really ought to bring in Facebook's engineers (in closed session so Facebook doesn't freak customers out over the kinds of analytics it can do), to understand what this .1% really means, as well as to have a sense of how the .1% interacted with the far larger group of people spreading fake stories.

As I say over and over, some of this is definitely Russian. But the underlying activities – the ratfucking being led by people who were ratfucking while Putin was still in law school – are also things Republicans do and have been doing for decades.

Let's understand if Kushner served as a pivot between data stolen by Russians and fake news targeted at Michigan (among other states). But let's be clear that some of the trolling was done by red-blooded Americans.