

FACEBOOK'S GLOBAL DATA: A PARALLEL INTELLIGENCE SOURCE RIVALING NSA

In April, Facebook released a laudable (if incredible) report on Russian influence operations on Facebook during the election; the report found that just .1% of what got shared in election related activity go shared by malicious state-backed actors.

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.

[snip]

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.

Facebook also rather coyly confirmed they had reached the same conclusion the Intelligence Community had about Russia's role in tampering with the election.

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.

While skeptics haven't considered this coy passage (and Facebook certainly never called attention to it), it means a second entity with access to global data – like the NSA but private – believes Russia was behind the election tampering.

Yesterday, Facebook came out with another report, quantifying how many ads came from entities that might be Russian information operations. They searched for two different things. First, ads from obviously fake accounts. They found 470 inauthentic accounts paid for 3,000 ads costing \$100,000. But most of those didn't explicitly discuss a presidential candidate, and more of the geo-targeted ones appeared in 2015 than in 2016.

- The vast majority of ads run by these accounts didn't specifically reference the US presidential election, voting or a particular candidate.
- Rather, the ads and accounts appeared to focus on amplifying divisive social and political messages across the ideological spectrum – touching on topics from LGBT matters to race issues to immigration to gun rights.
- About one-quarter of these ads were geographically targeted, and of those, more ran in 2015 than 2016.
- The behavior displayed by these accounts to amplify divisive messages was consistent with the

techniques mentioned in the white paper we released in April about information operations.

Elsewhere Facebook has said some or all of these are associated with a troll farm, the Internet Research Agency, in Petersburg.

The Intelligence Community Report on the Russia hacks specifically mentioned the Internet Research Agency – suggesting it probably had close ties to Putin. But it also suggested there was significant advertising that was explicitly pro-Trump, which may be inconsistent with Facebook’s observation that the majority of these ads ran policy, rather than candidate ads.

Russia used trolls as well as RT as part of its influence efforts to denigrate Secretary Clinton. This effort amplified stories on scandals about Secretary Clinton and the role of WikiLeaks in the election campaign.

- *The likely financier of the so-called Internet Research Agency of professional trolls located in Saint Petersburg is a close Putin ally with ties to Russian intelligence.*
- *A journalist who is a leading expert on the Internet Research Agency claimed that some social media accounts that appear to be tied to Russia’s professional trolls—because they*

previously were devoted to supporting Russian actions in Ukraine—started to advocate for President-elect Trump as early as December 2015.

The other thing Facebook did was measure how many ads that might have originated in Russia without mobilizing an obviously fake account. That added another \$50,000 in advertising to the pot of potential Russian disinformation.

In this latest review, we also looked for ads that might have originated in Russia – even those with very weak signals of a connection and not associated with any known organized effort. This was a broad search, including, for instance, ads bought from accounts with US IP addresses but with the language set to Russian – even though they didn't necessarily violate any policy or law. In this part of our review, we found approximately \$50,000 in potentially politically related ad spending on roughly 2,200 ads.

Still, that's not all that much – it may explain why Facebook found only .1% of activity was organized disinformation.

In its report, Facebook revealed that it had shared this information with those investigating the election.

We have shared our findings with US authorities investigating these issues, and we will continue to work with them as necessary.

Subsequent reporting has made clear that includes Congressional Committees and Robert

Mueller's team. I'm curious whether Mueller made the request (whether using legal process or no), and Facebook took it upon themselves to share the topline data publicly. If so, we should be asking where the results of similar requests to Twitter and Google are.

I'm interested in this data – though I agree with both those that argue we need to make sure this advertising gets reviewed in campaign regulations, and those who hope independent scholars can review and vet Facebook's methodology. But I'm as interested *that* we're getting it.

Facebook isn't running around bragging about this; if too many people groked it, more and more might stop using Facebook. But what these two reports from Facebook both reflect is the global collection of intelligence. The intelligence is *usually* used to sell highly targeted advertisements. But in the wake of Russia's tampering with last year's election, Facebook has had the ability to take a global view of what occurred. Arguably, it has shared more of that intelligence than the IC has, and in the specific detail regarding whether Internet Research Agency focused more on Trump or on exacerbating racial divisions in the country, it has presented somewhat different results than the IC has.

So in addition to observing (and treating just as skeptically as we would data from the NSA) the data Facebook reports, we would do well to recognize that we're getting reports from a parallel global intelligence collector.