

# THE TWITTER EXPLOIT:

HOW RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA  
INFILTRATED U.S. NEWS



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## Executive Summary

Researchers have begun to describe the behavior of social media accounts associated with Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA). The bulk of this work, including public statements by social media platforms Twitter and Facebook, has focused on the impact these accounts had *within the social media sphere*, and estimated that American exposure to IRA content numbered in the hundreds of millions of impressions.

We describe a new dimension to the reach of IRA accounts, demonstrating that it extended beyond social media and into American journalistic media.<sup>1</sup> Searching 33 major media outlets during and after the 2016 election, *we found 32 outlets with at least one story that embedded a tweet from IRA accounts: a total of 116 articles*. These findings suggest that projections of IRA reach based on social media metrics are likely underestimated. Moreover, the deep penetration of IRA content into news media is indicative of the extent to which the Russian information operation affected American political discourse, and points to significant challenges facing journalism in the social media age.

In this study, we describe the nature of the IRA content that appeared in news media, and what it was doing there—what role it played in the construction of journalistic content. We also discuss how American journalism must respond in the face of intentional information manipulation in the political sphere. Here, we summarize our key findings.

### Main empirical findings:

- News outlets that quoted IRA-linked accounts included major journalistic outlets such as *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post* and NPR, and they spanned the political spectrum. However, the greatest concentration of articles mentioning IRA-linked accounts came from online-only and partisan outlets like the HuffPost, the Daily Caller and the Blaze.
- Most quoted IRA tweets were *not* conveying “fake news” or other misinformation (only 5% of the tweets we identified did so). Most of the time (64.40% of articles), IRA-linked tweets were used as sources of opinion, because news outlets portrayed “Twitter discussion” as an insight into public opinion or outrage. The succinct, evocative opinions conveyed by many IRA-linked tweets, of both liberal and conservative types, made these tweets well suited for news stories about political discourse.
- We identified a genre of news media reporting consisting entirely or almost entirely of quoted messages from Twitter. More than a third (37%) of the news stories in our dataset depended exclusively on information from Twitter. In a third of those news stories (12% of our full sample), the IRA-linked account was the sole source of news information. We note that this kind of reporting (often based on accounts of unknown intent or veracity) is especially susceptible to

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Romm & Molla. (2017, November 3). The Washington Post, Miami Herald, InfoWars and other U.S. sites spread Russian propaganda from Twitter. *Recode*. Retrieved from: <https://www.recode.net/2017/11/3/16599816/washington-post-mcclatchy-miami-herald-ap-russian-propaganda-twitter>

forms of information manipulation.

- The outlets that most frequently embedded IRA account tweets were partisan outlets that frequently used Twitter messages to cheer on political compatriots and deride opponents. We found IRA accounts portraying a conservative perspective to be most embedded in news articles, a pattern shared in both liberal and conservative outlets: liberals quoted the tweets to criticize them, conservatives did so to celebrate them. In this way, IRA accounts and news content combined to magnify existing partisan divisions in the American political discourse environment.
- News stories quoting IRA-linked tweets did not appear as frequently during the 2016 election as after the election period; the greatest attention to IRA accounts occurred during the early months of 2017, as Donald Trump transitioned from president-elect to president.
- Most appearances of IRA-linked Twitter content came from five handles: @ten\_gop, @jenn\_abrams, @pamela\_moore13, @crystal1johnson and @southlonestar, which collectively made up 77.97% of all references to IRA-linked accounts in news media.
- Our findings raise major questions about the practice of journalism in the hybrid media system, and in particular the use of Twitter by journalists as a source of both information and opinion. Journalists and news producers should be cautious when using social media content such as tweets, as they are particularly vulnerable to external manipulation. In particular, the use of unverified social media content with partisan purposes of either agreement or criticism, appears to be especially fraught. Recognizing the difficulty of vetting sources found digitally, journalists should make every attempt to contact users of tweets being embedded to verify their identity, including reaching out beyond the Twitter communication system.

## Introduction

On October 31, 2017, lawyers from Twitter, Facebook, and Google appeared before members of a U.S. House Intelligence Committee to give statements and answer questions about Russia's interference with the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election.<sup>2</sup> All three companies acknowledged that significant Russian-directed activity took place on their platforms during the election period, and that the activity was oriented around both the election itself and other divisive issues in the country, most of all immigration, Islam, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Their statements added further weight and urgency to the conclusion of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, who concluded in January 2017 that Russia had directly attempted to influence the election in favor of Donald Trump, using a variety of media, including social media.<sup>3</sup>

Further reinforcing this assessment, on February 16, 2018, the U.S. Department of Justice brought charges against thirteen Russian individuals and three organizations, offering detailed allegations of the "information warfare" (of which social media played a major role) that they had engaged in from 2014 to 2017.<sup>4</sup> Just days earlier, the United States' top intelligence leaders warned the Senate Intelligence Committee that Russia was certain to reprise its earlier disruption in the 2018 midterm elections.<sup>5</sup>

Analyses of the behavior and interactions of Russian-controlled accounts are now being published. We are developing a picture of the kind of information they produced, and how they interfaced with other accounts. We know that the campaign was multi-faceted, involving at least thousands of individual accounts on multiple social media platforms. The accounts used both organic content and advertising to reach Americans, and did so, reaching audiences in the hundreds of millions.<sup>6</sup>

Their behavior also appears to have been coordinated around moments of high activity such as conventions, debates, and the election. Most of the content appears not to have been directly election-related, but rather designed to kindle existing social divisions within American society for the purpose of causing discord and reducing trust in American democratic institutions. Accounts were created to espouse ideas associated with

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<sup>2</sup> Kang, C., Fandos, N. & Isaac, M. (2017, October 31). "Tech executives are contrite about election meddling, but make few promises on Capitol Hill." *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/31/us/politics/facebook-twitter-google-hearings-congress.html>

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Director of National Security. (2017, January 6). Intelligence report on Russian hacking. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/01/06/us/politics/document-russia-hacking-report-intelligence-agencies.html>

<sup>4</sup> United States of America v. Internet Research Agency et al. (2018). United States District Court for the District of Columbia. Retrieved from: <https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download>

<sup>5</sup> Rosenberg, M., Savage, C., & Wines, M. (2018, Feb. 13). Russia Sees Midterm Elections as Chance to Sow Fresh Discord, Intelligence Chiefs Warn. *New York Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/13/us/politics/russia-sees-midterm-elections-as-chance-to-sow-fresh-discord-intelligence-chiefs-warn.html>

<sup>6</sup> Lee, C.E. & Kent, J.L. (2017, Oct. 30). Facebook Says Russian-Backed Election Content Reached 126 Million Americans. *NBC News*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/russian-backed-election-content-reached-126-million-americans-facebook-says-n815791>; Timberg, C. (2017, Oct. 5). Russian propaganda may have been shared hundreds of millions of times, new research says. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2017/10/05/russian-propaganda-may-have-been-shared-hundreds-of-millions-of-times-new-research-says/?utm\\_term=.1241afd58e15](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2017/10/05/russian-propaganda-may-have-been-shared-hundreds-of-millions-of-times-new-research-says/?utm_term=.1241afd58e15); Twitter PublicPolicy. (2018, January 19). "Update on Twitter's review of 2016 U.S. election." Retrieved from [https://blog.twitter.com/official/en\\_us/topics/company/2018/2016-election-update.html](https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/topics/company/2018/2016-election-update.html)

the political left, political right and Black Lives Matter.<sup>7</sup> However, the IRA campaign did have the specific election intention of harming the candidacy of Hillary Clinton.<sup>8</sup>

We also have early evidence that the Russian campaign efforts extended beyond the confines of social media, interacting with American news media. One analysis suggests Russian accounts themselves used real news media stories in their tweets, to add legitimacy to them and amplify stories with partisan potency.<sup>9</sup> And an analysis from Recode, using data from Meltwater, has demonstrated that a number of messages from IRA accounts themselves appeared in American news media as part of its reporting.<sup>10</sup>

Our analysis is focused on this intrusion of the IRA accounts' content into news because of the significance of this process for American political discourse. For one thing, the appearance of that content in U.S. news media clearly extends the reach of that content simply because of the large audiences' major media outlets reach; moreover, news media coverage added credibility, which suggests that some of the accounts may have enjoyed a perception of legitimacy unattainable through social media-exclusive strategies.

Equally important, as we show, IRA accounts were often used by partisan American media in a way that served the purposes of both: the IRA accounts were able to enhance perceptions of division and partisan mean-spiritedness, and partisan media were provided with evocative examples of online discourse for stories about opposing partisan extremists and righteous allies. This finding extends previous research showing that partisan elites, particularly those on the right, retweeted this content often.<sup>11</sup>

In all of these ways, the appearance of IRA account content in U.S. news media constitutes success on the part of the Russian operation's desire to penetrate and disrupt American political communications, perhaps even above and beyond the success some of those accounts enjoyed in social media. Our analyses have implications not only for understanding of foreign interference in American politics, but also how journalism must take responsibility for its role and respond with improved practices and understandings for the future.

Our analyses offer a descriptive view of the impact of IRA-linked accounts on news coverage from 2015 to September 30, 2017. We especially analyze what kinds of IRA content were picked up by news media, and why, and what role IRA accounts served in news discourse. We also attend to questions of partisanship and polarization, the temporal dynamics of IRA posts' appearance in news, how IRA posts offering both opinion and fact and (on occasion) misinformation were incorporated into news; we also examine how news organizations have responded to the revelation of IRA content in their stories.

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<sup>7</sup> Popken, B. (2018, Feb. 13). Russian trolls went on attack during key election moments. NBC News. Retrieved from: <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/russian-trolls-went-attack-during-key-election-moments-n827176>

<sup>8</sup> United States of American v. Internet Research Agency et al., Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Albright, J. (2018). Trolls on Twitter: How mainstream and local news outlets were used to drive a polarized news agenda. Medium. Retrieved from: <https://medium.com/berkman-klein-center/trolls-on-twitter-how-mainstream-and-local-news-outlets-were-used-to-drive-a-polarized-news-agenda-e8b514e4a37a>

<sup>10</sup> Romm & Molla, Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> O'Brien, L. (2017, November 1). Twitter ignored this Russian-controlled account during the election. Team Trump did not. *HuffPost*. Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/twitter-ignored-this-russia-controlled-account-during-the-election\\_us\\_59f9bdcb4b046017fb010b0](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/twitter-ignored-this-russia-controlled-account-during-the-election_us_59f9bdcb4b046017fb010b0)

## What is a Russian-sponsored Propaganda Account?

As part of its 2017 testimony, Twitter identified 2,752 accounts that it said were “potentially connected to a propaganda effort by a Russian government-linked organization known as the Internet Research Agency (IRA).”<sup>12</sup> On January 19, 2018, Twitter announced it had identified an additional 1,062 accounts, bringing the total of alleged IRA-linked accounts to 3,814. (The original 2,752 accounts were posted on the website of the Democrats on the committee; the further 1,062 have not been publicly identified.)<sup>13</sup>

According to Twitter, as many as 1.4 million people may have interacted with one of the 3,814 IRA-linked account on their social medium during the election period.<sup>14</sup> It is worth noting that Twitter itself distinguishes between IRA-linked accounts (the 3,814), which it appears to consider more human-controlled, and a further 50,258 Russian-linked automated accounts, i.e., bots. However, the public knows little about exactly how Twitter has made its determinations regarding which accounts are linked to Russia, and which are associated with the IRA—as opposed to which are automated. Further, researchers speculate that there could be as many as 150,000 Twitter handles linked to the Russian government.<sup>15</sup>

More colloquially, accounts suspected of having been sponsored by the Russian government have been referred to as “bots,” “trolls,” “sockpuppet,” or “propaganda” accounts. But what are these really? While there is a great deal we still do not know, it is likely that Russian-sponsored accounts on Twitter exist in a spectrum between fully automated and human-controlled. At one extreme are automated accounts, colloquially referred to as “bots.” At the other, there are human-run accounts with false identities, often described as “sockpuppets” or “trolls.”<sup>16</sup> In between, there are probably semi-automated accounts encompassing features of both (e.g., a human-filtered account that automatically posts to the internet). These go by the names “semi-automated bot,” “personas” or “cyborgs.”<sup>17</sup> Some combination of accounts, of all three types, may be connected in a network that engages with one another to amplify propagandizing messages.

Out of necessity, our study is agnostic as to the level of automation of the accounts: we analyze the set of 2,752 handles given by Twitter to U.S. House Intelligence Committee and linked to the Internet Research Agency (IRA), infamously known as Russia’s troll army. The IRA has typically used a combination of sockpuppets and bots to spread false information and fuel anger on social media networks in a number of

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<sup>12</sup> Twitter PublicPolicy. (2018, January 19). “Update on Twitter’s review of 2016 U.S. election.” Retrieved from [https://blog.twitter.com/official/en\\_us/topics/company/2018/2016-election-update.html](https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/topics/company/2018/2016-election-update.html)

<sup>13</sup> House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence Minority (2017, November 1). Exhibit B [List of IRA-linked Twitter accounts]. Retrieved from: [https://democrats-intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/exhibit\\_b.pdf](https://democrats-intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/exhibit_b.pdf) ; See full memo here: [https://democrats-intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hpsc\\_minority\\_exhibits\\_memo\\_11.1.17.pdf](https://democrats-intelligence.house.gov/uploadedfiles/hpsc_minority_exhibits_memo_11.1.17.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Twitter PublicPolicy. (2018, January 19). “Update on Twitter’s review of the 2016 U.S. election.” Retrieved from [https://blog.twitter.com/official/en\\_us/topics/company/2018/2016-election-update.html](https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/topics/company/2018/2016-election-update.html)

<sup>15</sup> Hern, A. (2017, November 15). “Russian troll factories: Researchers damn Twitter’s refusal to share data.” *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/15/russian-troll-factories-researchers-damn-twitters-refusal-to-share-data>

<sup>16</sup> Morgan, J. Shaffer, K. (2017, March 13). “Sockpuppets, Secessionists, and Breitbart.” *Data for Democracy*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/data-for-democracy/sockpuppets-secessionists-and-breitbart-7171b1134cd5>

<sup>17</sup> DiResta, R., Little, J., Morgan, J., Neudert, L., & Nimmo, B. (2017, November 2). “The bots that are changing politics.” *Vice*. Retrieved from [https://motherboard.vice.com/en\\_us/article/mb37k4/twitter-facebook-google-bots-misinformation-changing-politics](https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/mb37k4/twitter-facebook-google-bots-misinformation-changing-politics)



countries.<sup>18</sup> Employees are sometimes called “trolls” or “troll soldiers.” The purpose of the IRA appears to be to promote Kremlin interests domestically and overseas. Though their tactics have been well documented in news for years,<sup>19</sup> actions by the company were not definitively linked to the U.S. presidential election until October 2017.

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<sup>18</sup> Hern, A. (2017, November 14). “How a Russian ‘troll soldier’ stirred anger after the Westminster attack.” *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/nov/14/how-a-russian-troll-soldier-stirred-anger-after-the-westminster-attack>

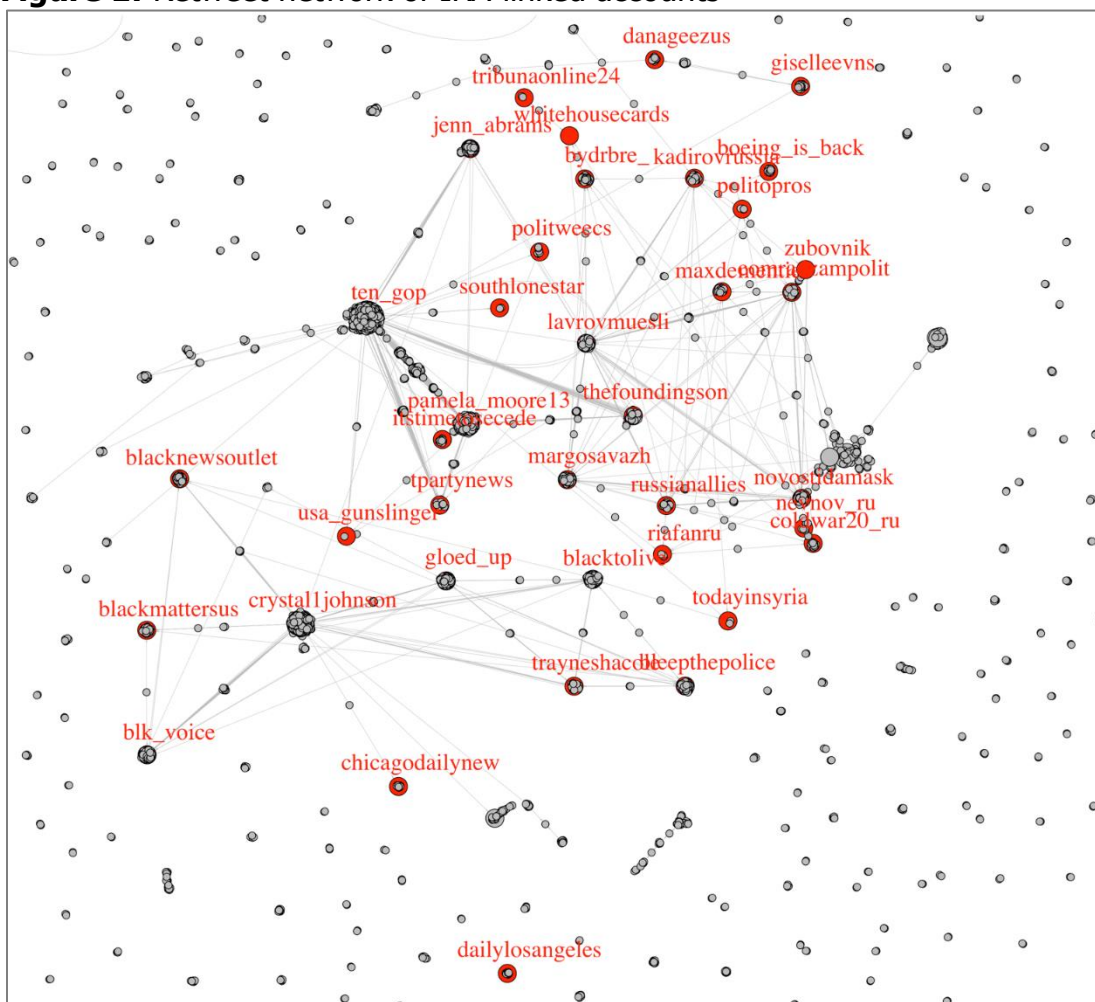
<sup>19</sup> Subbotovska, I. (2015, May 29). “Russia steps up propaganda push with online ‘Kremlin trolls.’” *NBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/internet/russia-steps-propaganda-push-online-kremlin-trolls-n366606>

## Identifying the Top 100 IRA-linked Accounts

To make our data collection and processing manageable, we ran a preliminary analysis to identify the most active and best-connected IRA-linked accounts. We compiled all retweets, tweets, and mentions related to at least one of the 2,752 accounts identified by the U.S. House Intelligence Committee for one month: October 2016. We gathered the Twitter data from an archive of a “gardenhose,” a 1% random sample from Twitter’s streaming API. The majority of tweets, 12,724 (90.74%), were retweets starting with “RT” or “RT @”; only 1299 tweets (9.26 %) were original tweets, i.e., non-retweets.

We next analyzed the accounts-based retweet relationships, which yielded 11,763 links (e.g., @A retweets @B: A—B) between 11,422 unique handles.<sup>20</sup> Figure 1 displays the full network graph; IRA-accounts with in-degrees greater than nine are labeled.

**Figure 1:** Retweet network of IRA-linked accounts



<sup>20</sup> This analysis includes link weights (represented by the thickness of an edge).

To define our sampling frame for exploring news media, we identified the 100 IRA-linked handles that were retweeted most in our network. We then searched for these handles in 33 popular news outlets between the dates of January 1, 2015 and September 30, 2017, using MediaCloud, an open source catalogue of media content from thousands of sources.<sup>21</sup> (For more detail on our method, including outlet selection, please see the Methodology section [p. 42].) This search yielded 133 articles. After removing duplicates and articles that were about the IRA-linked accounts *being* IRA-linked accounts, we were left with the 116 articles that make up our full sample.<sup>22</sup>

As a check, a random sample of 20 IRA-linked accounts outside of this list returned no media results, suggesting that less-popular IRA-linked handles received little to no press attention. We also searched for article links in the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, which allowed us to view previous versions of website pages. We used the Wayback Machine to find previously-linked tweets that were embedded in news stories but were no longer available on the article's static page.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> <https://mediacloud.org/>

<sup>22</sup> Our sample includes one article about an IRA-linked Facebook page with an associated Twitter account and one article about an IRA-linked account posting in Russian regarding Russian-Turkish relations.

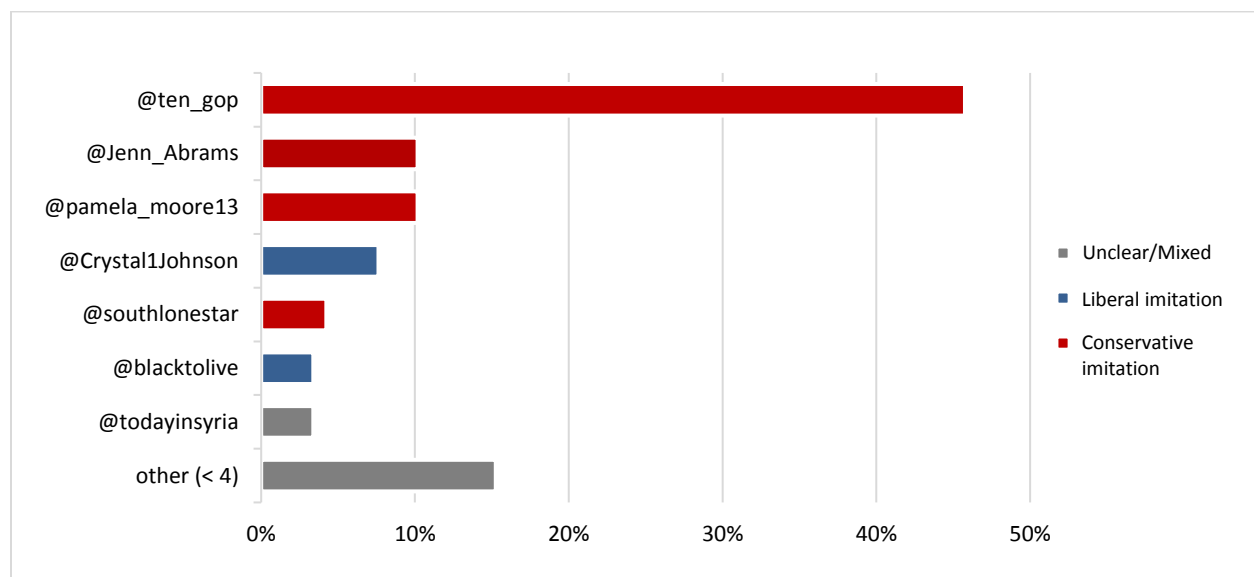
<sup>23</sup> <http://archive.org/web/>

## Appearances of IRA-linked Accounts in U.S. News Media

Our sample consists of 116 articles posted between January 1, 2015 and September 30, 2017 that referenced a tweet from one of 19 IRA-linked accounts. As indicated by Figure 2, the most prominent IRA-linked handles (@ten\_gop, @crystal1johnson, @pamela\_moore13, and @jenn\_abrams), accounted for more than two-thirds of the total references in news articles (75.0%). IRA-linked handles emulated both activist group accounts (e.g., @blacktolive) and accounts of individual Americans (e.g., @pamela\_moore13). Most IRA-linked accounts posted either liberal-supporting or conservative-supporting tweets, but not both. A small number, such as @todayinsyria, were more topic-focused, rather than ideologically-oriented.

While we found multiple examples of IRA-linked accounts that supported either liberal or conservative issues, right-leaning handles—particularly @ten\_gop—received significantly more news attention than left-leaning handles. Notably, both of the top “liberal” accounts, @crystal1Johnson and @blacktolive, tweeted primarily about the Black Lives Matter movement.

**Figure 2:** Percentage of articles that quoted a specific IRA-linked account. Colors indicate the political perspective the IRA account purported to espouse.

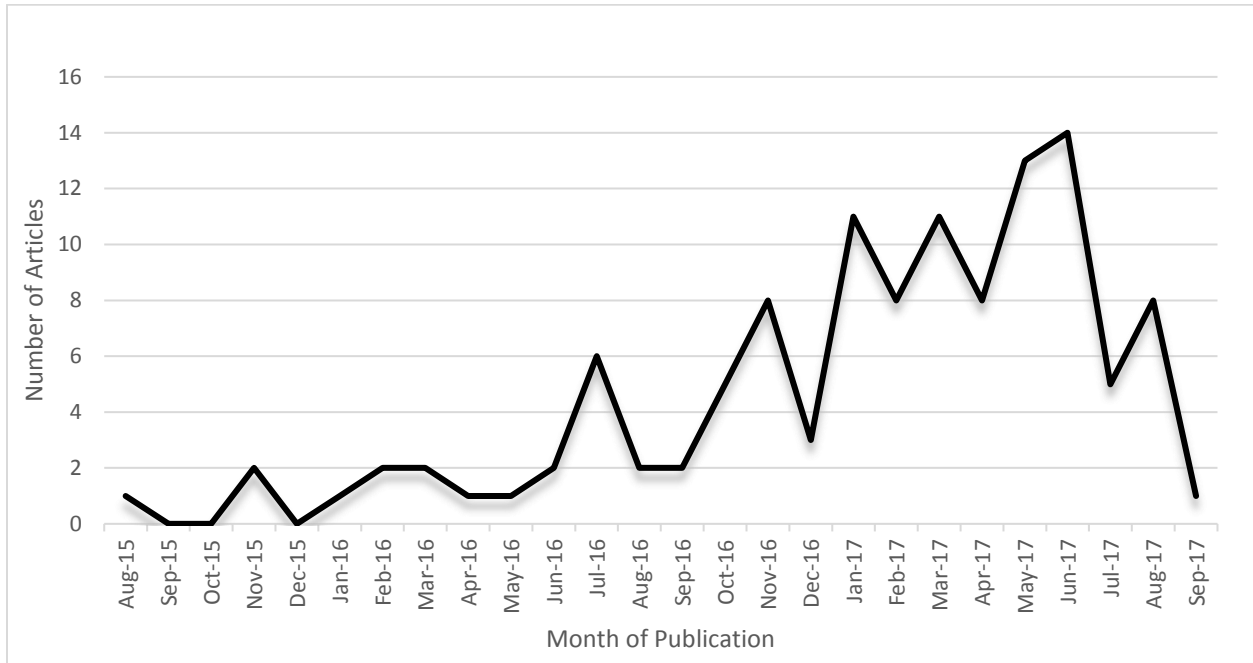


Following this extraction, a team of eight researchers coded each article for 33 features about both the article and the IRA-linked tweet used in the article. Variables included the topic of the article, whether the IRA-linked account was used as a source of information or opinion, and the ideological position of the IRA-linked tweets. For a full list of variables, please see the methodology section (p. 32).

## When did IRA-linked Tweets Appear in our News Stories?

Interestingly, the 118 articles we identified are neither evenly distributed across our timeframe, nor concentrated on the 2016 election (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3:** Number of articles containing at least one IRA-linked tweet, by month



Only 23.28% of the stories identified were written during the 2016 U.S. presidential election cycle (January 2015 - November 2016). In comparison, 11.21% of the sample was written while Donald Trump was President-elect, and a strong majority, 65.51%, were written after President Trump took office in January 2017. Moreover, during the election, only a small percentage (15.38% of the 26 election cycle articles) actually discussed one of the election candidates. Instead, articles quoting IRA-linked accounts focused on political issues and trending twitter topics. Across the entire timeframe, racially-motivated incidents were the most prominent topic (7 stories, described in more detail below) followed by articles about ISIS (5 stories).

The outlets with the most articles that embedded an IRA-linked account were: HuffPost (13.79%), the Daily Caller (12.93%), the Blaze (9.48%), and *USA Today* (7.75%). A full list of the outlets can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1:** List of outlets and number of articles with IRA-linked tweets

Outlet	n (x%)	Outlet	n (x%)
HuffPost	16 (13.79%)	Buzz Feed	1 (0.86%)
Daily Caller	15 (12.93%)	Conservative Treehouse	1 (0.86%)
The Blaze	11 (9.48%)	Daily Beast	1 (0.86%)
USA Today	9 (7.75%)	Daily Mail	1 (0.86%)
Elite Daily	7 (6.03%)	Detroit Free Press	1 (0.86%)
mlive	7 (6.03%)	LA Times <sup>24</sup>	1 (0.86%)
Russia Today	7 (6.03%)	New York Times <sup>25</sup>	1 (0.86%)
nj.com	5 (4.31%)	NPR	1 (0.86%)
Washington Post	5 (4.31%)	NY Daily	1 (0.86%)
Independent	4 (3.44%)	Slate	1 (0.86%)
Mashable	3 (2.58%)	The Guardian	1 (0.86%)
Salon	3 (2.58%)	Time	1 (0.86%)
Fox News	2 (1.72%)	Upworthy	1 (0.86%)
Mic	2 (1.72%)	US News	1 (0.86%)
Mirror.co	2 (1.72%)	Vox	1 (0.86%)
sfgate	2 (1.72%)	al.com	1 (0.86%)

**Note:** The outlets without IRA-linked tweets was Vice

<sup>24</sup> The news story published by *LA Times* contained two IRA-linked tweets, one from @pamela\_moore13 and one from @ten\_gop

<sup>25</sup> The news story published by *The New York Times* contained an IRA-linked account tweeting in Russian about Russian-Turkish relations. The article can be found [here](#).

## Topics of News Stories that Embedded IRA-linked Tweets

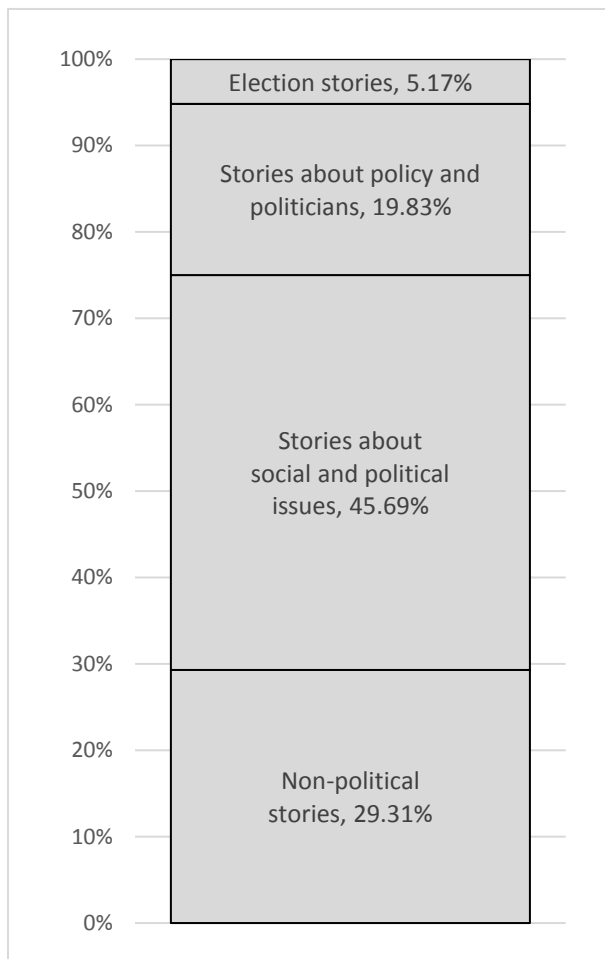
Having established when and where IRA-linked accounts appeared in news media, we turn to the question of what they were doing there: when news media quoted IRA-linked accounts, what function did they serve? We especially explore the following questions: What kinds of topics did IRA accounts appear with? Did they convey explicit political stances? Did they promote calls to action?

### Overall Topics

As shown in Figure 4, a majority of stories that quoted IRA-linked tweets were not about the 2016 Presidential Election or U.S. governance or policy (75.00%). Only 5.08% of stories were about the 2016 Presidential Election. Occasionally this would focus on candidates; for example, one mirror.co story reported on Twitter users who thought Hillary Clinton had a body double while campaigning.<sup>26</sup> However, election stories also included stories about rallies and endorsements. Nj.com, for example, reported on the rocky relationship between then-candidate Trump and New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie [R], despite the latter endorsing the former for President.<sup>27</sup>

About a fifth of the stories in the sample discussed public policy or specific politicians (who were not running for office). This included discussion of both liberal and conservative politicians and policies, such as Sen. Bernie Sanders' [I] post-primary purchase of a vacation home,<sup>28</sup> and President Trump's immigration policy<sup>29</sup> and foreign policy.<sup>30</sup>

**Figure 4:** Percentage of articles by news topic category



<sup>26</sup> Evans, N. (2016, September 14). "Hillary Clinton body double conspiracy theory sends the internet into meltdown" *mirror.co*. Retrieved from <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/hillary-clinton-body-double-conspiracy-8830110>

<sup>27</sup> Ivers, D. (2016, February 29). "Go home: Did Trump diss Christie at campaign event?" *nj.com*. Retrieved from [http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2016/02/go\\_home\\_did\\_trump\\_diss\\_christie\\_at\\_campaign\\_event.html](http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2016/02/go_home_did_trump_diss_christie_at_campaign_event.html)

<sup>28</sup> Young, A. (2016, August 15). "The internet can turn quickly – even on Bernie Sanders" *npr*. Retrieved from <https://www.npr.org/2016/08/12/489787309/the-internet-can-turn-quickly-even-on-bernie-sanders>

<sup>29</sup> Estepa, J. (2017, August 2, 2017). "White House adviser Stephen Miller, CNN reporter Jim Acosta clash over immigration" *USA Today*. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/CKcC4E>

<sup>30</sup> Hohmann, J. (2016, December 20). "The Daily 202: Donald Trump embraces the risky 'Madman Theory' on foreign policy" *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/XiHV7n>

## Case Study 1: NPR uses an IRA-linked tweet in a story about Bernie Sanders

On August 12, 2016, NPR published a story about Twitter reaction to a recent beachfront house purchase by Bernie Sanders. The story, entitled “The Internet Can Turn Quickly – Even on Bernie Sanders,” focused specifically on Twitter’s outrage, with three tweets embedded in the story.

A tweet from IRA-linked account @jenn\_abrams was embedded as one of two examples of frustration towards Sanders. The article also included one tweets that “came to Sanders’ defense.”

The purchase makes this Sanders' third home, and after the news broke of his recent purchase, the Internet became a breeding ground for complaints.

<https://t.co/3VSPBIL0lg> Hard to put into words disappointment in this man @SenSanders you used my donations to buy 3rd home? #NeverSanders  
— Sylvie Beaudreau (@MissCanadaK12) August 12, 2016

Bernie Sanders just bought a vacation home on Lake Champlain -the family's 3rd home - for \$575,000. Is it how Bernie's Socialism looks like?  
— Jenna Abrams (@Jenn\_Abrams) August 12, 2016

***Pictured above:** Embedded tweet from @Jenn\_Abrams in a NPR story. This tweet was found using the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine, as the original tweet is no longer present on the article’s static page.*

Though some context was provided about why Sanders bought the house, this was done after these comments. Additionally, the headline of the story reflects journalists’ use of Twitter as a proxy for “internet outrage.”

The plurality of stories (45.69%), meanwhile, were about more general “social and political news stories.” This included coverage of public opinion about political issues (e.g., LGBTQ rights), issues of racism, and different forms of public action (e.g., boycotts). For example, many stories focused on criticisms about President Trump by celebrities such as Stephen Colbert.<sup>31</sup> This corresponds to previous findings that IRA-linked accounts tweet more about other aspects of American society, such as pop culture or human-interest stories, than they do explicitly about politics. Furthermore, when IRA-linked tweets were referenced in relation to a political issue, the issue tended to be personal, simple to understand, and polarizing (e.g., military, immigration, LGBTQ rights).

Aside from stories about the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and social and political issues, IRA-linked accounts were also covered for tweeting about other non-political topics. In fact, 29.31% of the stories that

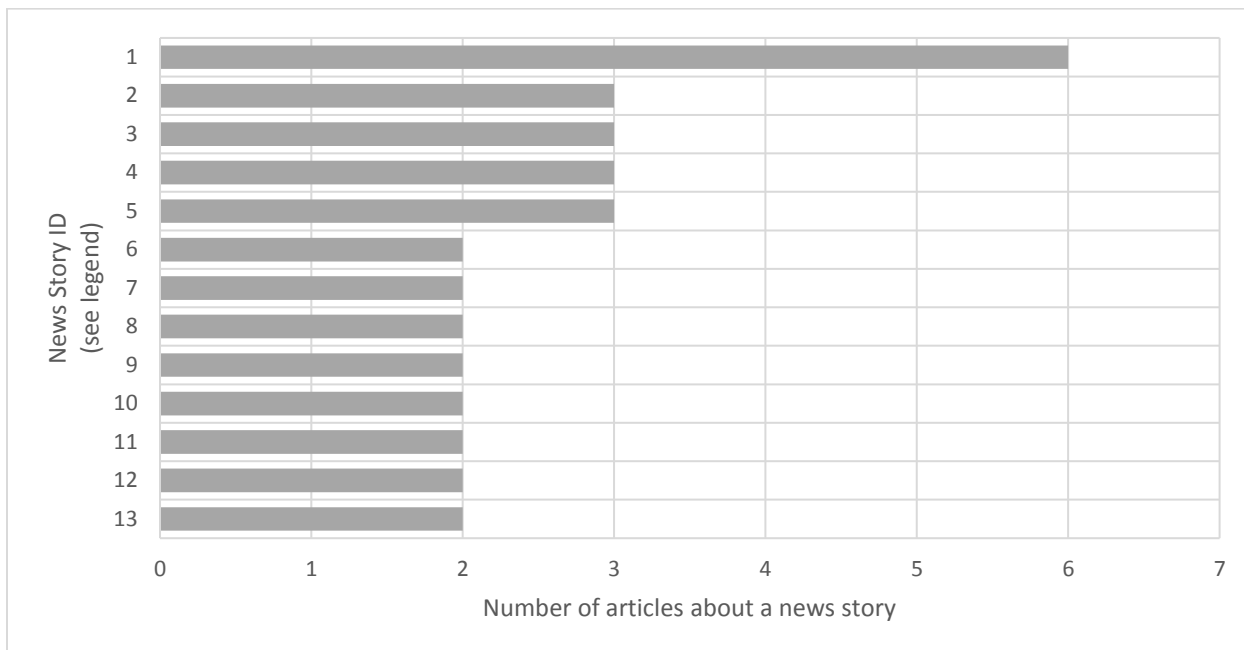
<sup>31</sup> Kuperinsky, A. (2017, May 3). “Stephen Colbert’s Trump joke ignites #FireColbert on Twitter. *Nj.com*. Retrieved from [http://www.nj.com/entertainment/index.ssf/2017/05/stephen\\_colbert\\_trump\\_firecolbert.html](http://www.nj.com/entertainment/index.ssf/2017/05/stephen_colbert_trump_firecolbert.html)



referenced a Russian account were not political stories, but human-interest stories. For example, one article from news outlet *Independent* covered a “singer-songwriter beagle.”<sup>32</sup>

Figure 5 displays the specific *stories* covered most in our dataset. While most news stories were only reported on once (70.68%), these thirteen news stories appeared in more than one news outlet.

**Figure 5:** Number of articles covering top individual news stories



**Legend:** Each number corresponds with one of the following topics:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. Healthcare Comment at Miss USA Pageant (5/2016)   | 8. Muslim Woman vs. (alt-right) Twitter trolls (3/2017)  |
| 2. Kellogg’s (12/2016) & Starbucks Boycott (1/2017)  | 9. Reactions to President Trump’s Travel Ban (3/2017)    |
| 3. False Trump Rally picture (8/2017)                | 10. Fox Host Shepard Smith criticizes President (2/2017) |
| 4. Public opinion about sanctuary cities (3/2017)    | 11. SS Agent won’t take bullet for President (1/2017)    |
| 5. Johnny Depp’s assassination comment (6/23/2017)   | 12. “Homeschool shooter” Barron Trump remark (1/2017)    |
| 6. Black Lives Matter Rallies (7/2016)               | 13. CNN accidentally air a half-hour of porn (11/2016)   |
| 7. NYC Major de Blasio criticizes President (7/2017) |  |

As shown in Figure 5, while some news stories focused on political policy (e.g., Reactions to President Trump’s travel ban), more stories focused on topics such as public figures’ comments regarding President Trump (e.g., Johnny Depp’s comments about presidential assassinations), social justice rallies (e.g., Black Lives Matter rallies), or non-political topics (e.g., CNN airing a half hour of porn).

<sup>32</sup> Hooton, C. (2017, May 5). “Singer-songwriter beagle plays avant-garde ballad” Retrieved from *Independent* <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/piano-playing-beagle-definite-good-boy-a7720221.html>

## Case Study 2: HuffPost covers Miss USA Pageant

On May 15, HuffPost published a story about the winner of Miss USA 2017, entitled "Government Scientist Crowned Miss USA in Pageant Trump Used to Own."<sup>33</sup> Though the first part focused on the pageant, a majority of the article was actually about the recent winner's remarks about feminism and healthcare.

McCullough was also asked if she considered herself a feminist.

"I don't really want to consider myself — try not to consider myself like this diehard, you know, like, 'Oh, I don't really care about men.' But one thing I'm gonna say, though, is women, we are just as equal as men when it comes to opportunity in the workplace," she said.

**Pictured above:** HuffPost quotes recent Miss USA pageant winner on her opinions of feminism. They also embedded a video from Twitter with McCullough's remarks about healthcare.

The news story contained 10 tweets, most of which conveyed positive and negative opinions about Miss USA's remarks. The third of these was from IRA-linked account @ten\_gop (presented below). This event was the most heavily reported story with IRA-linked tweets embedded (6 stories were about Miss USA 2017).

Many on Twitter criticized her responses while others rushed to McCullough's defense.

*After Miss DC replied Healthcare is a privilege and not a right ☐ #MissUSA*  
[pic.twitter.com/W6AeQzg01Y](https://pic.twitter.com/W6AeQzg01Y)

— Courtney Blakely (@Court\_Blakely) May 15, 2017



*New #MissUSA says healthcare is a privilege and not a right, and that she's an "equalist" not a feminist! Beauty and brains. She is amazing!*  
[pic.twitter.com/O4iyaY67xr](https://pic.twitter.com/O4iyaY67xr)

— Tennessee (@TEN\_GOP) May 15, 2017

<sup>33</sup> Shapiro, R. (2017, May 15). Government scientist crowned Miss USA in pageant Trump used to own. *HuffPost*. Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/kara-mccullough-miss-usa-district-of-columbia\\_us\\_5919176de4b00f308cf6396a](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/kara-mccullough-miss-usa-district-of-columbia_us_5919176de4b00f308cf6396a)

## Topics of Post-Election Stories

Looking more specifically at stories posted after the election, we see that articles citing an IRA-linked tweet began reporting on recently-elected President Trump's policies. Importantly, our sample suggests that, despite the current focus on the IRA-linked accounts during the election, these accounts were actually "picked up" by news media after that time period. Of the 91 stories posted after election night (78.45%), 32 were about President Trump, someone in his administration, or a specific policy (e.g., when President Trump imposed travel restrictions). However, this also included more light-hearted, human interest stories, such as when President Trump crashed a wedding at Mar-a-Lago. There were also many stories about public figures criticizing President Trump, particularly politicians such as Rep. Maxime Waters [D] and NYC Mayor Bill de Blasio [D], and politically active celebrities, like Johnny Depp (11.20% of the 91 post-election stories).

Some articles that referenced IRA-linked accounts after the election showed pop culture and politics coming together (20.68% of the post-election stories). We identified lifestyle stories, celebrity gossip, and collective attitudes towards businesses or companies as "pop culture"-type stories. These stories were often related to political issues, such as a celebrity's comments about President Trump or political issues. Some received widespread attention by multiple outlets. For example, six stories in our sample focused on comments made by recently crowned Miss USA regarding healthcare (see Figure 5), making it the news story covered most with IRA-linked tweet. We will return to this specific case later when we discuss the IRA-linked tweet that was frequently cited in stories about Miss USA (originating from @ten\_gop). These types of stories showed the relevance of politics in news events that were not inherently political.

IRA-linked tweets were also used in a variety of post-election stories about everyday people, especially when they involved race (e.g., racial harassment, black excellence) or immigration. Though many of these stories talked about social justice issues, not all stories were inherently about injustice. For example, one article discussed a new poster for the movie *Black Panther* as a tribute to the Black Panther Party. Another story profiled four Black brothers who were recently accepted into Harvard and/or Yale. However, other stories called out vandalism of civil rights monuments, racially insensitive advertising campaigns, or blackfacing in public schools. The prominence of race as a topic reflects the divisive polarization surrounding race-related political issues. In these stories, IRA-linked accounts simplified perceptions of race groups by focusing on racially-charged anecdotes and stories. While some of these stories embedded IRA-linked accounts during the election (see Case 3 [p. 18]), a majority of them were found in news stories after November 8, 2016.

### Case Study 3: A racial topic covered by Elite Daily

On May 16, 2017, popular women-oriented website “Elite Daily” published a story about discrimination against black women for wearing their natural hair. This article described 8 examples of such discrimination (all of which had been reported previously), which were presented in tandem with 8 tweets that supported various opinions made by the article’s author. There were also five GIFs and one YouTube video.

The IRA-linked tweet embedded in this story provided unverified information about a 9-year-old who was told by her school district that she had to change her hair. However, the story following this tweet talked about a 12-year-old, suggesting that the tweet was used only for illustrative purposes and not as a primary source of information. Though the IRA-linked tweet was not in a current version of the story (as of February 2018), a copy of it was found on the Internet Archive.<sup>34</sup>



*Pictured above:* Headline of the Elite Daily story.

*Pictured Below:* The IRA-linked tweet (obtained via Internet Archive), as embedded in the story.

#### **4. A third-grader in Belton, Texas was pulled out of class for her “frohawk.”**

School district tells black 9-year-old to change her hair <https://t.co/DMAZhcQCgk> [pic.twitter.com/UYcvMmawCo](https://pic.twitter.com/UYcvMmawCo)

— Crystal Johnson (@Crystal1Johnson) May 7, 2016

In 2013, a then 12-year-old Vanessa Vandyke, was being bullied about her puffy hair by classmates at Faith Christian Academy. According to [Local 6 News](#), Instead of putting a stop to the bullies, the private school suggested to her mother, Sabrina Kent, that she straighten her hair or cut it.

<sup>34</sup> Battle, M. (2017, May 16). Times black girls were suspended for their hairstyles. *Elite Daily*. Retrieved from <https://www.elitedaily.com/life/culture/black-girls-natural-hair-racism-schools/1953497>

### Case Study 4: A racial topic covered by Daily Caller

On November 18, 2016, 10 days after the election, right-leaning online news outlet “The Daily Caller” published an article entitled “School Official Dons Black Face, Dresses Like 1930s Caricature of Slave for Halloween.” This article covered the backlash against a school official’s racially offensive costume. It contains only one tweet, which was posted by IRA-linked account @BlackToLive. This tweet, positioned at the front end of the story, appears to have been used as a source of information from Twitter, as well as offering colorful (sarcastic) commentary. It was also corroborated with statements from the school district and interviews with parents.



*Pictured above: Headline of a Daily Caller story.*<sup>35</sup>

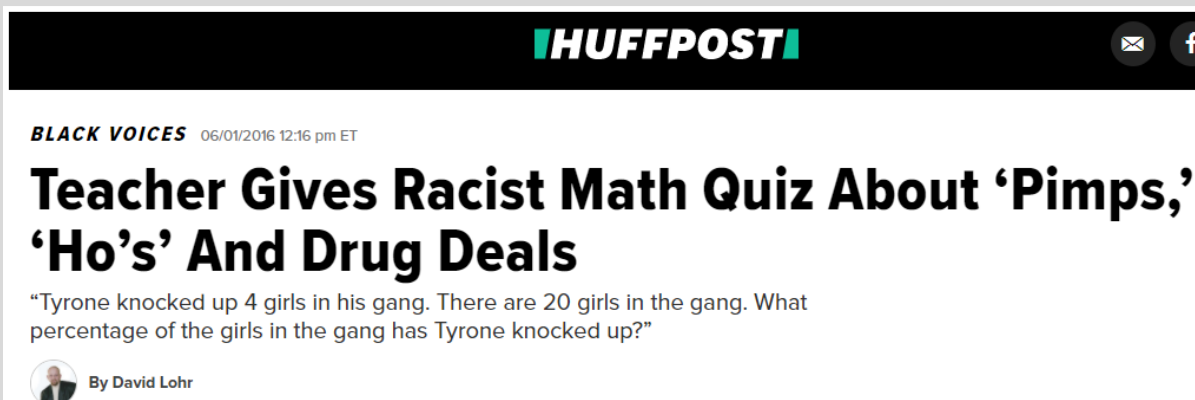
The tone of the tweet (screenshot below) appears to be sarcastic, as the IRA-link account remarked that Ted “finds it very funny” to perform blackface. Because the account has been suspended, the image link provided is dead.

*This is a Blevins School Board member, Ted Bonnet. Ted finds it very funny to wear a blackface. School says there is no law to recall him.*  
[pic.twitter.com/VUGefvXhwY](http://pic.twitter.com/VUGefvXhwY)  
— Black To Live (@BlackToLive) *November 17, 2016*

<sup>35</sup> Randall, A. (2016, November 18). School official dons black face, dresses like 1930s caricature of slave for Halloween. *Daily Caller*. Retrieved from <http://dailycaller.com/2016/11/18/school-official-dons-black-face-dresses-like-1930s-caricature-of-slave-for-halloween/>

## Case Study 5: A racial topic covered by HuffPost

On June 1, 2016, left-leaning online news outlet HuffPost (formerly "Huffington Post") ran a story in its "Black Voices" section entitled "Teacher Gives Racist Math Quiz About 'Pimps,' 'Ho's' And Drug Deals." This story was about a "racist" and "offensive" quiz given to students by a teacher and reactions from the school and parents. While this article included quotes from people at stake, it also embedded a tweet by @gloed\_up, which serves to emphasize the opposition of a user of Twitter to the teacher's actions.



*Pictured above:* Headline of a HuffPost story, published in the "Black Voices" section.

*Pictured below:* The IRA-linked tweet embedded. Note the profile name is: "1-800-WOKE-AF".<sup>36</sup>

In a brief statement released to the newspaper [Lagniappe](#) on Tuesday, Mobile County Public School Superintendent Martha Peek said she regretted that the incident occurred "during the last few days of school."

*Alabama teacher busted for assigning 'math test' based on 30-year-old racist meme*

*[#racism pic.twitter.com/fBdQ5ZDG3C](#)*

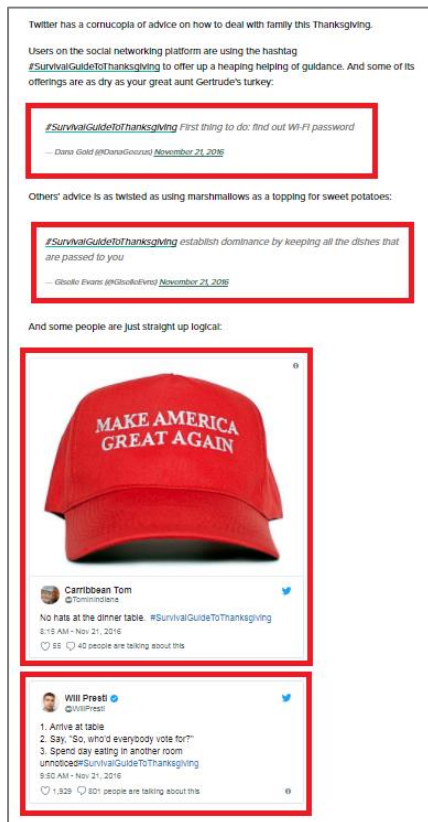
*— 1-800-WOKE-AF (@gloed\_up) [June 1, 2016](#)*

The identity of the teacher has not been released. School officials did not respond to a request for comment on Wednesday.

<sup>36</sup> Randall, A. (2016, November 18). School official dons black face, dresses like 1930s caricature of slave for Halloween. *Daily Caller*. Retrieved from <http://dailycaller.com/2016/11/18/school-official-dons-black-face-dresses-like-1930s-caricature-of-slave-for-halloween/>

## IRA-linked Tweets as Sources of Opinion and Information

Interestingly, a strong majority (65.51%) of articles referencing IRA-linked accounts were reporting on events that occurred within Twitter, such as the use of a hashtag, or backlash to a specific online comment. For example, one Russia Today story discussed the use of the hashtag #IfIWereACop, which was used both describe both support for and opposition towards the police.<sup>37</sup> Another, from HuffPost, had the following headline: "Twitter lets 'hilarity ensue' with #SurvivalGuideToThanksgiving."<sup>38</sup> These Twitter-oriented stories relied heavily on embedded tweets for content. Articles about new stories that did not originate on Twitter mainly used Twitter discourse to convey public opinion.



*Pictured to the left: A screenshot of the beginning of HuffPost's story on the hashtag #SurvivalGuideToThanksgiving. The beginning of the story starts with a short description of the hashtag's use. It is followed by four tweets (marked in red boxes), occasionally separated by some author-provided commentary. This news story contained a total of 16 tweets.*

In a majority of the news stories (68.96%), IRA-linked accounts were used as sources of opinion, often as an example of an ongoing Twitter discussion. However, about 37% of our articles also used IRA-linked tweets as sources of information. For example, the account @crystal1johnson was attributed as sharing a viral video that showed a flower vendor being arrested. Another IRA-linked account, @todayinsyria, tweeted about an unverified ISIS coloring book, which was later picked up by The Daily Caller (it is unclear whether the coloring book actually exists or not).

<sup>37</sup> Russia Today. "Twitter uses #IfIWereACop hashtag to take jabs at law enforcement." *Russia Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.rt.com/usa/328565-twitter-ifiwereacop-users/>

<sup>38</sup> Wanshel, E. (2016, November 16). "Twitter lets 'hilarity ensue' with #SurvivalGuideToThanksgiving" *HuffPost*. Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/twitter-thanksgiving-survival-guide-advice\\_us\\_583325cce4b099512f83e6af](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/twitter-thanksgiving-survival-guide-advice_us_583325cce4b099512f83e6af)

Unsurprisingly, given that a majority of the articles focused on Twitter activity, 37.93% of the articles in the sample exclusively quoted Twitter content. In other words, these stories did not cite, quote or reference individuals outside of the Twitter-sphere, even when a story was about real-world events. Often, this appeared as “string of tweets” stories, and the IRA account simply appeared as one among a stream of other tweets, presumably from real Twitter users. For example, when reporting on a Trump Rally in Florida, The Blaze only used Twitter content to verify the event’s attendance; no other individuals were quoted. The reporter notes that Trump’s campaign event would likely not be covered by ‘mainstream’ media, despite its importance: “One Twitter user posted a video of the crowd streaming in, saying that “the media will never show you this.” Here, the IRA-linked account perpetuates distrust of the media by implying mainstream news outlets do not cover important topics.

### Case Study 6: The Blaze draws on @TEN\_GOP as a source

On February 18, 2017, conservative news outlet “The Blaze” published a story entitled “Epic line forms for Trump rally in Florida, reaches a mile outside the gate.” The article consisted mainly of tweets regarding the size of the crowd attending a Trump rally, with brief commentary on the content of the tweets. The author wrote two sentences: One indicated Trump’s possible 2020 run, the other quoted then-White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer, who called the rally “a campaign event.” The tweets were the sole source of information regarding crowd size in this case. However, it was later revealed (by other news outlets) that the image was actually of a Cleveland Cavaliers parade.<sup>39</sup> The IRA-linked tweet from @ten\_gop, fourth and last in the article, presumably shared a picture of the crowd, and tweeted that “media will never show you this.”

*Pictured below: A @ten\_gop tweet which was embedded in The Blaze’s news story about a post-election Trump Rally.<sup>40</sup> This turned out to be a falsely identified image.*

One Twitter user posted a video of the crowd streaming in, saying that “the media will never show you this.”

Huge lines in #Melbourne, Florida today of those waiting to get into the Trump's rally. Media will never show you this, RT.#NotTheEnemy [pic.twitter.com/qWUm4c9Xk5](https://pic.twitter.com/qWUm4c9Xk5)

— Tennessee (@TEN\_GOP) February 18, 2017

In a few cases (12.07%), an IRA-linked tweet was the **sole** source of news in a story. One example of this was a false story purporting that CNN had broadcasted a half hour of pornographic content in the Boston area. This story, shared by @jenn\_abrams, received widespread attention. In some instances, outlets did not even appear to ask CNN for comment, relying instead on the tweet as a source. To provide another

<sup>39</sup> This discovery is discussed in our “An in-depth look at @ten\_gop” section (p. 27).

<sup>40</sup> Randall, A. (2016, November 18). School official dons black face, dresses like 1930s caricature of slave for Halloween. *Daily Caller*. Retrieved from <http://dailycaller.com/2016/11/18/school-official-dons-black-face-dresses-like-1930s-caricature-of-slave-for-halloween/>



example: IRA-linked account @todayinsyria was the only source of information regarding an ISIS propaganda coloring book.

### Case Study 7: The Daily Caller draws on @todayinsyria as a source

On September 29, 2016, conservative news outlet “The Daily Caller” published a story about ISIS’ use of coloring books as propaganda for children. As noted in the article, the coloring books contained images of “a suicide vest and AK-47.”<sup>41</sup> The IRA-linked tweet, from @todayinsyria, was one of the two tweets embedded in the article. Although there was an image link provided, the image could not be collected as the account had been suspended. Presumably, it showed pictures of the “allegedly #IS-published ‘Alphabet Tutor 2’ ABC and coloring book.” This tweet was the sole source of information regarding the existence of this coloring book.



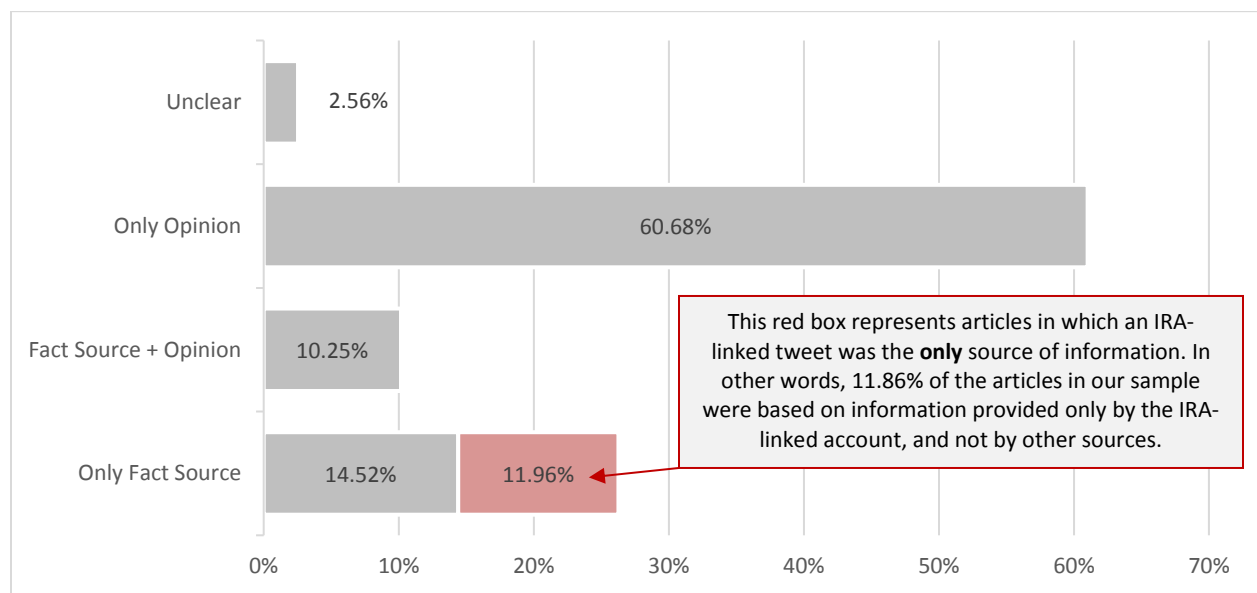
**Pictured above:** The headline and embedded tweet in a Daily Caller news story. The IRA-linked account being quoted, @todayinsyria, was only referenced in news stories about ISIS or terrorism (2 stories in our sample).

<sup>41</sup> Read, R. (2016, September 29). “ISIS has a new coloring book for kids, featuring a suicide vest and AK-47.” *Daily Caller*. Retrieved from <http://dailycaller.com/2016/09/29/isis-has-a-new-coloring-book-for-kids-featuring-a-suicide-vest-and-ak-47/>

In most cases, IRA-linked accounts were treated as everyday people or politically active groups. Most tweets were embedded without comment or reference to them in the surrounding paragraphs. Tweets that were “dropped in” often contained opinions rather than claims, though there were three instances where IRA-linked accounts were sources of information and were inserted without comment.

In 12 incidents (10.34% of the time), tweets were used as both opinion and information sources. Occasionally, news covered IRA-linked accounts that tweeted calls to action (15.38%). For example, #FireKushner and #FireColbert hashtags were both propagated by IRA-linked accounts. The proportional use of IRA-linked tweets as sources of opinion and information is shown in Figure 6.

**Figure 6:** Percentage of articles that used IRA-linked tweets as a source of opinion, fact (i.e., information) or both



## Case Study 8: The Daily Caller presents opinion from @Pamela\_Moore13

On April 7, 2017, conservative news outlet “The Daily Caller” published a story entitled “#FireKushner Takes Over Twitter.” The article was about Twitter outrage against Jared Kushner, top advisor to President Trump, regarding the decision to strike Syria. Tweets in this story were placed in the middle of the article, with two author-provided paragraphs above, and three more below the tweets.

The IRA-linked tweet, from @pamela\_moore13, was the last among the string of tweets, all of which conveyed negative opinions about Kushner. Two embedded tweets, including the IRA-linked tweet, also positively referenced Bannon. No sources other than the tweets were used in the article.

*Bannon: base favorite, enemies don't like him.*

*Kushner: enemy's favorite, base doesn't like him. [#FireKushner](#)*

*— Pamela Moore (@Pamela\_Moore13) [April 8, 2017](#)*

**Pictured above:** Example IRA-linked tweet which was embedded in a news story about the #FireKushner hashtag in the Daily Caller.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Greer, S. (2017, April 7). #FireKushner takes over Twitter. *Daily Caller*. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20170411054845/http://dailycaller.com/2017/04/07/firekushner-takes-over-twitter/>

## Case Study 9: HuffPost reports on Twitter opinion and outrage

During the Oscar season, HuffPost published a story headlined “An Iranian Won An Oscar And Right-Wingers Had A Twitter Meltdown.”<sup>43</sup> In the story, the author described conservatives as “flipping out” in response to Oscar-winning Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi’s acceptance speech, which remarked on President Trump’s recent travel ban.

The story included 17 tweets, presented as a string with little to no commentary. 10 tweets were embedded consecutively, without any remarks from the author. Among them was an IRA-linked tweet by account @ten\_gop (presented below in the red box.)

That sent conservatives over the edge. Here are some of their messages:

*So a guy from Iran just lectured America about human rights and democracy, to lousy applause from Hollywood. Too perfect.*

— Noah Pollak (@NoahPollak) [February 27, 2017](#)

*Did an Iranian just lecture Americans on inclusivity & tolerance when they ban Jews, kill gays and stone women?*

[#Oscars](#)

— Tennessee (@TEN\_GOP) [February 27, 2017](#)



**Lauren Cooley**   
@laurenacooley



We give an Iranian film maker an award & he writes us a lecture on our government. How about he go lecture his own Iranian leaders? #Oscars

9:01 PM - Feb 26, 2017

 13K  5,537 people are talking about this 





**Claudine Abraham**  
@claudinelouise



Replying to @Cosmopolitan

Hahaha! A lecture on tolerance from an Iranian filmmaker!! Where they want to wipe Jews off the map and execute gays. #Oscars

10:14 PM - Feb 26, 2017

 8  36 people are talking about this 

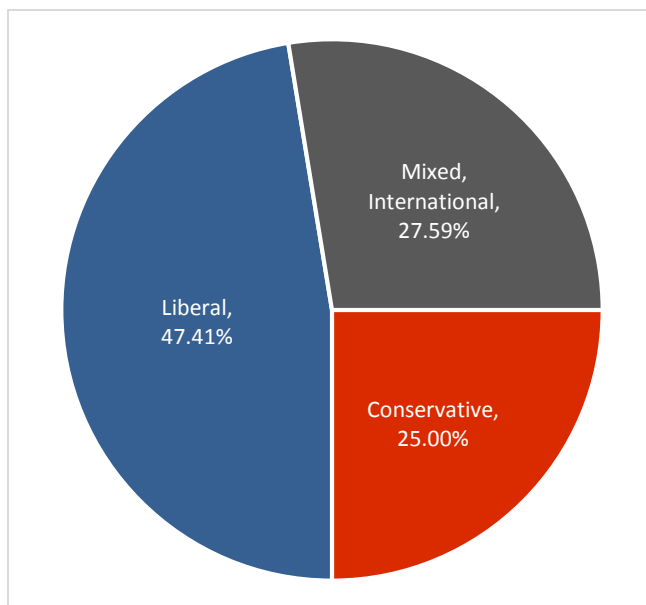
<sup>43</sup> Mazza, Ed. (2017, February 27). An Iranian won an Oscar and right-wingers had a Twitter meltdown. *HuffPost*. Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/asghar-farhadi-oscar-right-wing\\_us\\_58b3c58ce4b0780bac2ad22d](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/asghar-farhadi-oscar-right-wing_us_58b3c58ce4b0780bac2ad22d)

## IRA-linked Tweets in Partisan Media

Most tweets (74.35%) included in news stories expressed an overt liberal or conservative stance (coded as either support for one’s own party, or opposition towards another party). Conservative-slanted IRA-linked tweets appeared to be referenced in 72 articles (62.07%), while liberal-slanted tweets appeared in only 16 (13.79%).<sup>44</sup> One explanation for this skew is the excessive attention given to @ten\_gop. When @ten\_gop references were excluded, conservative-slanted tweets were referenced 23 times (19.82%). Of the tweets selected for the articles, no account appeared to espouse both liberal and conservative views.

However, it was liberal outlets that embedded the most IRA-linked tweets. As indicated by Figure 7, 47.41% of the articles that used IRA-linked tweets were from liberal-leaning news organizations.

**Figure 7:** Percentage of articles with IRA-linked tweets that were (1) liberal, (2) conservative, or (3) mixed/international



As seen in Figure 8, outlets of all partisan types (liberal, conservative, centrist) were likely to embed supportive tweets from conservative-slanted IRA-linked handles, especially from @ten\_gop. Among conservative outlets, only three articles (10.34%) referenced liberal-slanted IRA-linked accounts for the purpose of criticizing and “calling out” liberals. For example, one story from The Blaze had the following headline, “Muslim Woman Lauded as ‘Fearless’ and a ‘Hero’ for Spreading ‘Joy and Peace’ at Anti-Islam Demonstration — but There’s One Big Problem.” In this story, the IRA-linked account served as an example of liberal incompetence or misinformation.

<sup>44</sup> One article had both a liberal-slanted sockpuppet and a conservative-slanted sockpuppet.

## Case Study 10: The Blaze calls out @TrayneshaCole—but there’s one big problem

On May 23, 2016, conservative outlet The Blaze published a news story about social media controversy surrounding Zakia Belkhiri, a Muslim woman who “trolled the haters” by taking a selfie in front of anti-Islam protesters in Belgium. The article described how Zakia faced backlash after her previous anti-Semitic comments on social media were found. The article contained a list of six tweets, one of which was from an IRA-linked account, @TrayneshaCole. The tweet was embedded in the middle of the article as a source of public opinion on Twitter.

***Pictured below:** headline of a Blaze news story with an IRA-linked account. The lead of the story was: “Zakia Belkhiri instantly became the darling of the left when the hijab-wearing Muslim woman — lips puckered and offering a peace sign with her fingers — was photographed taking a selfie in front of an anti-Islam demonstration in Belgium last week.”*



***Pictured below:** A screenshot of where the IRA-link was embedded, as available on the article’s static page in February 2018. The original tweet, from IRA-linked account @trayneshaCole, was found using the Internet Archive.<sup>45</sup>*

The story of Belkhiri “trolling” the haters was picked up by many outlets. [ChristianToday](#) said the protest “backfired” due to the her presence. [Mashable](#) noted Belkhiri’s “defiant selfies,” [Huffington Post UK](#) described her actions in the face of “hostility,” and the [BBC](#) highlighted her “cheeky selfie.”

<https://twitter.com/TrayneshaCole/status/732706067625431040>

Case is continued on next page.

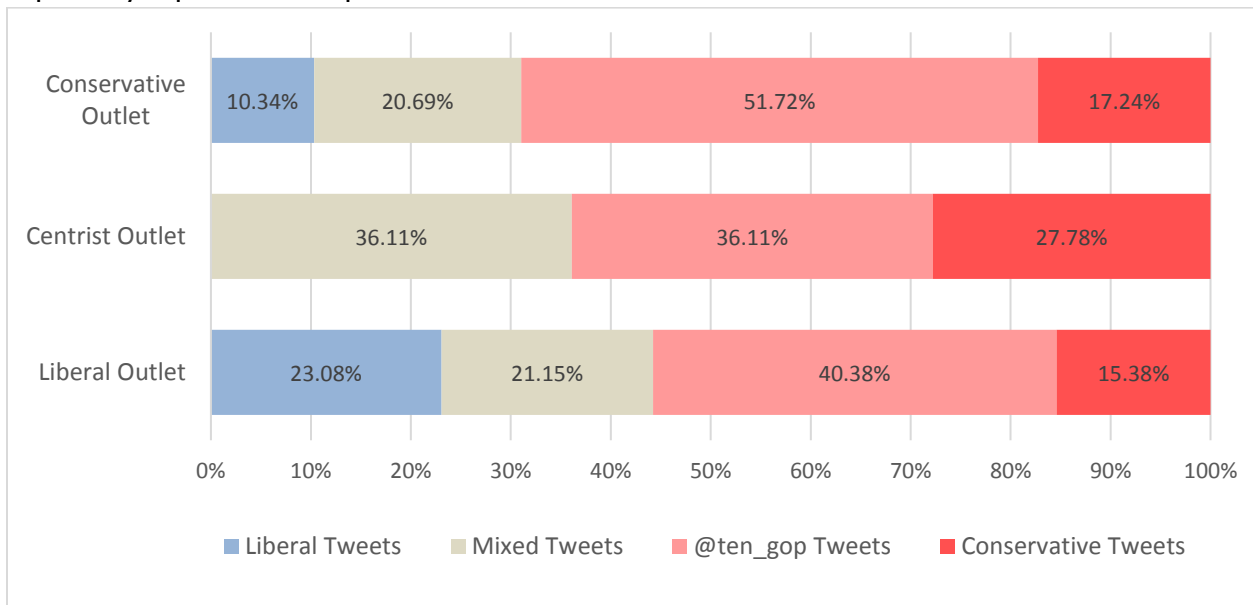
<sup>45</sup> Urbanski, D. (2016, May 23). “Muslim woman lauded as ‘fearless’ and a ‘hero’ for spreading ‘joy and peace’ at Anti-Islam Demonstration – but there’s one big problem. *The Blaze*. Retrieved from <https://www.theblaze.com/stories/2016/05/23/muslim-woman-lauded-as-fearless-and-a-hero-for-spreading-joy-and-peace-at-anti-islam-demonstration-but-theres-one-big-problem>

The woman is #ZakiaBelkhiri and — the response to her photos has been wonderfully encouraging.  
 #EqualityAndDiversity pic.twitter.com/dWKhYlmpf  
 — Traynesha Cole (@TrayneshaCole) May 17, 2016

**Pictured Above:** The original tweet from @TrayneshaCole, found on the Internet Archive. The Blaze appeared to have chosen to use this tweet because it reflected stereotypical liberal sentiments regarding Zakia Belkhiri.

Similarly, while referencing mainly conservative-slanted IRA-linked tweets (see Figure 8), liberal outlets often used the tweets to criticize conservatives. For example, one story headline from liberal-leaning HuffPost stated, “An Iranian Won an Oscar And Right-Wingers Had A Twitter Meltdown.” Within the story, the author embedded a tweet from @ten\_gop, who said, “Did an Iranian just lecture Americans on inclusivity & tolerance when they ban Jews, kill gays and stone women?”<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, less than a quarter (23.08%) of articles from liberal-leaning outlets cited liberal-leaning IRA-linked accounts.

**Figure 8:** Percentage of articles with liberal, mixed, and conservative-leaning IRA-linked accounts. Colors represent the partisan slant of the IRA accounts quoted, with @ten\_gop separately represented in pink.



Such results also reflect the significant presence of @ten\_gop in coverage of U.S. politics and political issues, particularly within partisan media news.

<sup>46</sup> Mazza, E. “An Iranian won an Oscar and right-wingers had a Twitter meltdown.” *HuffPost*. Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/asghar-farhadi-oscar-right-wing\\_us\\_58b3c58ce4b0780bac2ad22d](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/asghar-farhadi-oscar-right-wing_us_58b3c58ce4b0780bac2ad22d)

## Deception and Trolling

One of the greatest concerns regarding these Russian-controlled Twitter handles is the likelihood that they will share deceptive or false information. A secondary concern is that these accounts “troll” U.S. citizens. In other words, IRA-linked accounts may tweet with the intent of angering different political groups within the United States. We considered trolling behavior as making “incendiary comments with the intent of provoking others into conflict.”<sup>47</sup>

Within our dataset, seven articles were about information that was identified as false (6.03%). Example include two news stories about CNN airing a half hour of porn, and one story about a fake sanctuary city sign. Many of these stories also falsely portray specific individuals, groups, or companies in news stories, such as when IRA-linked account @southlonestar implied that a woman in a hijab was “paying no mind” despite witnessing a terrorist attack.

Nearly one in five articles included IRA-linked tweets that exhibited “trolling” behavior (19.82%). Interestingly, we found that IRA-linked accounts that trolled and were covered in news media were conservative-leaning, rather than liberal-leaning. On occasion, outlets would also explicitly identify the behavior as troll-like. Activities that news outlets identified as trolling ranged from the use of intentionally inciteful hashtags or words, such as #HeterosexualPrideDay (see Case Study 1, presented earlier), to examples of online harassment, particularly of private individuals. However, we also identified behavior that news outlets did not explicitly say was “trolling.” For example, one story about an accident involving a migrant embedded a tweet where the IRA-linked account used the term “rapefugee” (see Case Study 12 below).

Given that the IRA-linked accounts’ trolling behavior was attributed exclusively to conservative-leaning tweets, it is unsurprising that conservative-leaning news outlets tended to celebrate this strategy, while liberal-leaning outlets criticized it. For example, outlets like The Blaze and the Daily Caller celebrated Trump supporters for “outsmarting” Twitter and “triggering” liberals (the use of “triggering” is particularly evocative given its salience as a political term).<sup>48</sup> In contrast, liberal outlets such as Washington Post and Salon described pro-Trump tweets as “deranged,” and criticized conservative Twitter trolls.

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<sup>47</sup> Hardaker, C. (2010). Trolling in asynchronous computer-mediated communication: From user discussions to academic definitions. *Journal of Politeness Research*, 6(2), 215-242.

<sup>48</sup> Garcia, C. (2017, June 13). “Liberals triggered by Sessions’ ‘mansplaining’ to Democrat Kamala Harris. *The Blaze*. Retrieved from <http://www.theblaze.com/news/2017/06/13/liberals-triggered-by-sessions-mansplaining-to-democrat-kamala-harris/>



## Case Study 11: The Daily Caller and @Pamela\_Moore13

On June 29, 2017, conservative outlet The Daily Caller published a news story about a car accident caused by migrants placing tree trunks on the highway.<sup>49</sup> The article contained an IRA-linked tweet from @Pamela\_Moore13. The tweet was used in the article as both a source of information linking to a news story, and a source of opinion.

Importantly, the tweet used the word “rapefugee” to describe migrants in the Calais area. The portmanteau “rapefugee” (from “rape” and “refugee”) frames refugees as inherently dangerous and would likely incite supporters of refugees to respond to the tweet. Presumably the tweet was selected by Daily Caller because its evocative language might appeal to readers, and because its readers might share this sentiment.

A [British van driver died](#) in a massive crash a week ago after migrants placed tree trunks on the highway to stop motorists in an attempt to get a ride from France into the United Kingdom, Breitbart News reports.

When the van was unable to slow down before the barrier, it caught fire and the driver was killed. Nine Eritrean migrants have been arrested, suspected of planting the wooden blockade, and are now in police custody.

*Van driver killed in fireball crash after rapefugees block Calais road with tree trunks. #WorldRefugeeDay*<https://t.co/BoHz4TDM6X>  
[pic.twitter.com/B1bNCzfSZX](https://pic.twitter.com/B1bNCzfSZX)

— Pamela Moore (@Pamela\_Moore13) [June 20, 2017](#)

**Pictured Above:** The lead and second paragraph of a Daily Caller story. @Pamela\_Moore13 is the first of three tweets in the news story.

<sup>49</sup> Congdon, G. (2017, June 29). “British van driver dies after migrants block road” *The Daily Caller*. Retrieved from <http://dailycaller.com/2017/06/29/british-van-driver-dies-after-migrants-block-road/>

## Case Study 12: The Blaze cites @TEN\_GOP's attack on Kamala Harris

**theblaze** TV Channels Radio

### Liberals triggered by Sessions 'mansplaining' to Democrat Kamala Harris

*Pictured above: Headline of a Blaze news story with an IRA-linked account.<sup>50</sup>*

On June 13, 2017, conservative online outlet "The Blaze" published a news story about public reactions to the combative exchange between Attorney General Jeff Sessions and Senator Kamala Harris [D] during a Senate Intelligence Committee testimony. The article began with a back and forth exchange between the two, in which both Attorney General Sessions and Senator Harris were interrupting one another. It was followed by social media commentary, introduced by the following paragraph:

"The exchange was immediately picked up on social media and excoriated as yet another example of a white male in power talking down to a person of color, or 'POC,' as many on the left call the non-white demographic. 'WOC' refers to 'women of color.'"

The article followed with a list of 15 comments from both the left and the right. The author noted that "some on the right struck back at the narrative unfolding on social media," and the IRA-linked tweet by @ten\_gop was published as part of the latter. This tweet is provided below as a screen shot.

Dear Democrats, please nominate this rude, arrogant, hyper-leftist Kamala Harris as your candidate. She will guarantee a Trump reelection.

— Tennessee (@TEN\_GOP) June 13, 2017

<sup>50</sup> Garcia, C. (2017, June 13). "Liberals triggered by Sessions 'mansplaining' to Democrat Kamala Harris." *The Blaze*. Retrieved from <https://www.theblaze.com/news/2017/06/13/liberals-triggered-by-sessions-mansplaining-to-democrat-kamala-harris>

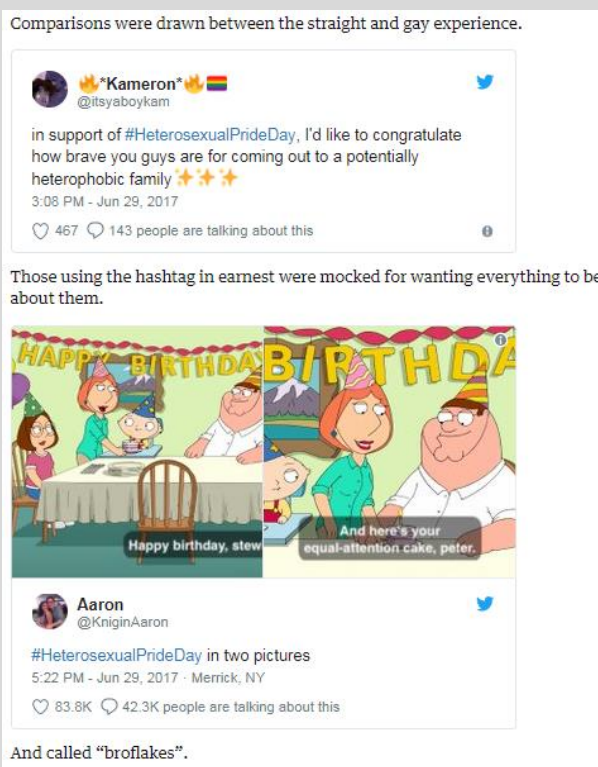
### Case Study13: A LGBTQ topic covered by The Guardian

British daily newspaper *The Guardian* published a story on June 30, 2017 about controversial hashtag #HeterosexualPrideDay.<sup>51</sup> The article covered the initial use of this hashtag, and its subsequent “hijacking” by LGBT advocates. A total of 14 tweets were embedded in the story, including one from IRA-linked account @usa\_gunslinger. This specific tweet was used to represent conservative “attempts to troll the LGBT community.”

The hashtag started as a homophobic attempt to troll the LGBT community, and those offering support to it.



Though there was some commentary between the tweets, these comments were predominantly used to guide the reader between different uses of the hashtag.



*Pictured above: Part of a string of tweets, separated by a sentence*

<sup>51</sup> Belam, M. (2017, June 30). “#HeterosexualPrideDay backfires as LGBT users subvert it on Twitter.” *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/30/heterosexualprideday-backfires-lgbt-users-subvert-twitter>

## An In-Depth Look at @TEN\_GOP

Of the many IRA-linked accounts that permeated American news discourse, @ten\_gop was far and away the most successful. Not only did it receive widespread attention on Twitter, but it was referenced more by news outlets, both liberal and conservative, than any other handle (accounting for 46.15% of all references).<sup>52</sup> Previous coverage of @ten\_gop has shown that the account was central to many right-leaning discussions during the Summer of 2017.

The IRA-linked account @ten\_gop was also the only handle treated as an “authoritative” source in news stories. Unlike many other tweets, which were unceremoniously dropped into an article without reference to the author or handle, several @ten\_gop stories (14.81% of articles referencing @ten\_gop) explicitly mentioned the handle and referenced it as a prominent right-wing account. Many of these articles attributed the account to the Tennessee Republican Party, despite the IRA-linked account self-identifying as an “unofficial” account.

### Case Study 14: Salon attributes @TEN\_GOP to Tennessee Republicans

On June 23, 2017, left-leaning news outlet “Salon” published a news article about public comments made by Johnny Depp’s regarding presidential assassination attempts by actors; a jab directed towards President Trump. This short, 254-word article included only one tweet, from IRA-linked account @ten\_gop. The tweet was the only source of opinion in the article. The author described the account as “a Twitter account that claims to come from the Tennessee Republican Party.”

Nevertheless, Depp's comments have sparked the predictable outrage from the right, with a Twitter account that claims to come from the Tennessee Republican Party even calling for a Secret Service investigation of Depp due to his harsh words about Trump.

Hi @SecretService, we have video evidence of Johnny Depp threatening to assassinate President Trump. Please do something! [pic.twitter.com/CRvnpzZsef](https://pic.twitter.com/CRvnpzZsef)

— Tennessee (@TEN\_GOP) June 23, 2017

**Pictured Above:** Section of a Daily Beast news story about Johnny Depp that contained an IRA-linked account. Note the description above the tweet.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Woodruff, B., Collins, B., Poulsen, K., & Ackerman, S. (2017, Oct. 18). Trump campaign staffers pushed Russian propaganda days before election. *Daily Beast*. Retrieved from: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-campaign-staffers-pushed-russian-propaganda-days-before-the-election>

<sup>53</sup> Rozsa, M. (2017, June 23). “Johnny Depp jokes about Donald Trump assassination during Glastonbury Festival” *Salon*. Retrieved from <https://www.salon.com/2017/06/23/johnny-depp-jokes-about-donald-trump-assassination-during-glastonbury-festival/>

Within our sample, there were two news events that especially amplified @ten\_gop's attention. The first was the 2017 Miss USA pageant, when a contestant remarked that healthcare was a privilege and not a right.<sup>54</sup> One @ten\_gop tweet was quoted in five stories (a second tweet was quoted in a sixth story).

New [#MissUSA](#) says healthcare is a privilege and not a right, and that she's an "equalist" not a feminist! Beauty and brains. She is amazing! [pic.twitter.com/O4iyaY67xr](http://pic.twitter.com/O4iyaY67xr)

-- Tennessee (@TEN\_GOP) [May 15, 2017](#)

**Pictured Above:** This @ten\_gop tweet was embedded in five news stories about Miss USA's remarks on healthcare in 2017.

Nearly every article covering this story focused on Twitter's "confused" responses to the Miss USA contestant. HuffPost, for example, described the contestant as "sparking some controversy."<sup>55</sup> Conservative outlets like the Daily Caller were more celebratory, stating that the contestant "blew everyone away Sunday night with her answers on healthcare and feminism."<sup>56</sup> From this perspective, @ten\_gop's tweet may have been seen as newsworthy because it conveyed a specific, and evocative, viewpoint on the story. The tweet is unambiguous in its position on an issue that everyone felt like they could talk about.

The second news story to feature @ten\_gop prominently focused on the handle's promotion of a Trump rally in Phoenix; three outlets wrote about this story (including the article discussed in Case 4). In August 2017, @ten\_gop shared an image of a Trump rally, which turned out to actually be a photo of a parade for the Cleveland Cavaliers basketball team. The four news stories that covered this Twitter controversy quickly identified this as an example of "fake news" that "duped" conservative Twitter users. Ironically, what these stories did not realize was that the Twitter handle being reported on was an IRA-linked account. In these stories, @ten\_gop was, again, frequently referred to as "an influential pro-Trump Twitter account" and "unofficial account for Republicans in Tennessee."

<sup>54</sup> Kuperinsky, A. (2017, May 14). "Miss N.J. runner-up to Miss USA after winner slammed for health care comment." *nj.com*. Retrieved from [http://www.nj.com/entertainment/index.ssf/2017/05/miss\\_nj\\_second\\_place\\_miss\\_usa\\_2017.html](http://www.nj.com/entertainment/index.ssf/2017/05/miss_nj_second_place_miss_usa_2017.html)

<sup>55</sup> Shapiro, R. (2017, May 15). "Government scientist crowned Miss USA in pageant Trump used to own." *HuffPost*. Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/kara-mccullough-miss-usa-district-of-columbia\\_us\\_5919176de4b00f308cf6396a](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/kara-mccullough-miss-usa-district-of-columbia_us_5919176de4b00f308cf6396a)

<sup>56</sup> Jerkovich, K. (2017, May 15). "Meet Miss USA 2017: Her answers on healthcare and feminism blew everyone away." Retrieved from <http://dailycaller.com/2017/05/15/meet-miss-usa-2017-her-answers-on-health-care-and-feminism-blew-everyone-away/>

## Case Study 15: AZ Central News calls out @TEN\_GOP for fake news

On August 23, 2017, digital news outlet "AZ Central" (which is part of the USA Today network) published a news story entitled "Fake news? Trump supporters circulate photo of Phoenix rally crowds...but it's not." The article mainly focused on the spread of fake photo by IRA-linked account @ten\_gop. In addition to @ten\_gop's initial tweet, the news story contained four other tweets. Two of these tweets "called out" the falsely identified image in @ten\_gop's original tweet. The second half of the news story focused on another false photo used, this time by the Arizona GOP.

The Twitter account @TEN\_GOP, which says its an unofficial account for Republicans in Tennessee, tweeted the photo with the caption: "Massive crowd waiting outside for the Trump rally in Phoenix!"

The account is not affiliated with the Tennessee Republican Party.

It was re-tweeted more than 800 times and liked more than 1,000 times. The tweet has since been deleted.

The Twitter account also used the photo for a side-by-side comparison of the anti-Trump crowd versus the pro-Trump crowd, with the "anti-Trump" photo showing a significantly smaller crowd.

weets Tweets & replies Media



Tennessee @TEN\_GOP · 29m  
Anti-Trump crowd vs pro Trump crowd  
#PhoenixRally #TrumpinPhx



69 284 377

The @TEN\_GOP account has deleted this Tweet, which showed a photo that was not taken in Phoenix. (Photo: Twitter)

**Pictured above:** AZ Central news story about @ten\_gop's falsely published image.

Case is continued on next page.

# 1.3 million people are in Cleveland for the Cavs parade, and the city can't handle it

By **Attitude Sports**

(PHOTO BY: GETTY IMAGES)



**RESIST** **tramosUSA**  
@voteblue16

Replying to @TEN\_GOP  
Just did a reverse search and the image on the left is from 2016 Cavs parade. Liars!  
5:39 PM - Aug 22, 2017

♥ 172 💬 77 people are talking about this

**Pictured above:** Another tweet embedded in the news story, revealing that @ten\_gop had falsely attributed the picture to a Trump Rally, when it really was from a parade for the Cleveland Cavaliers.

It is important to note here that @ten\_gop was not the original producer of this “fake news.” Instead, Daily Beast attributed the story to Columbus-based social media marketer Chris McNeil, who regularly “trolls” Twitter by mis-identifying sports celebration images as political rallies. However, this particular case was given additional credibility once it was shared by “prominent” conservative accounts such as @ten\_gop. One article noted that, at the time of the story, @ten\_gop had 73,000 followers.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Hwang, K. & Mitchell, G. (2017, August 22). “Fake news? Trump supporters circulate photo of Phoenix rally crowds? ... but its not. *AZ Central*. Retrieved from <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/phoenix/2017/08/22/trump-phoenix-rally-fake-photo-cleveland/592199001/>

## Journalism: Post-Discovery of IRA-linked Accounts

Though it had been reported on as early as July and August of 2017,<sup>58</sup> in September, Twitter announced that they had found at least 200 handles associated with the Russian propaganda group “Internet Research Agency” (IRA). During the month of October, Facebook, Google, and Twitter admitted that they had accepted money from Russian government-linked groups to post ads related to the U.S. Presidential election.<sup>59</sup> As these stories unfolded, news media reported widely on potential Russian influences in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election. On January 19, 2018, Twitter reported that over 675,000 users had interacted with a tweet from a Russian account associated with Internet Research Agency (IRA). Because information is shared regularly between Twitter and journalists, writers and editors in mainstream media, many reporters noted that Twitter would have been an especially effective tool for making it through news gatekeepers.<sup>60</sup>

Many reporters expressed concern about how IRA-linked accounts made their way into mainstream news. Profiles of IRA-linked accounts such as Jenna Abrams, Crystal Johnson and ten\_gop highlighted their large followings and repeated references in news stories.<sup>61</sup> They also noted when celebrities and verified users followed these accounts, including Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey.<sup>62</sup> Journalists and news organizations were also critical of Twitter’s inability to “curb the spread of Russian misinformation,” noting that the social media corporation may have deleted data that could be relevant to future investigations surrounding Russian interference.<sup>63</sup>

News coverage of these IRA-linked accounts focused largely on the 2016 election cycle, and on conservative news sources. Articles noted that it was Clinton supporters who had been repeatedly harassed on Twitter, and that Russian meddling was decidedly anti-Clinton.<sup>64</sup> Stories have also focused on the activity of these

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<sup>58</sup> Arnsdorf, I. (2017, August 23). Pro-Russian bots take up the right-wing cause after Charlottesville. *ProPublica*. Retrieved from <https://www.propublica.org/article/pro-russian-bots-take-up-the-right-wing-cause-after-charlottesville>

<sup>59</sup> Issac, M. & Shane, S. (2017, October 2). Facebook’s Russian-linked ads came in many disguises. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/02/technology/facebook-russia-ads.html>

<sup>60</sup> Scola, N. & Meyer, J. (2017, September 28). “Twitter takes its turn in the Russian probe spotlight.” *Politico*. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/28/twitter-russia-probe-spotlight-243239>; Kim, Y., Kim, Y., Lee, J. S., Oh, J., & Lee, N. Y. (2015). Tweeting the public: journalists’ Twitter use, attitudes toward the public’s tweets, and the relationship with the public. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(4), 443-458.

<sup>61</sup> Link, T. (2017, November 15). Alt-right Twitter darling Jenna Abrams turns out to be Russian bot. *Salon*. Retrieved from <https://www.salon.com/2017/11/05/alt-right-twitter-darling-jenna-abrams-turns-out-to-be-russian-bot/>; Prokop, A. (2018, February 16). 23 tweets from @ten\_gop, one Russian-run Twitter account mentioned in Muller’s new indictment. *Vox*. Retrieved from <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/10/19/16504510/ten-gop-twitter-russia>.

<sup>62</sup> Clifton, D. (2018, January 30). Russian trolls stoked anger over Black Lives Matter more than was previously known. *Mother Jones*. Retrieved from <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2018/01/russian-trolls-hyped-anger-over-black-lives-matter-more-than-previously-known/>

<sup>63</sup> Glaser, A. (2017, October 2). “Twitter could do a lot more to curb the spread of Russian misinformation.” *Slate Magazine*. Retrieved from

[http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future\\_tense/2017/10/twitter\\_could\\_do\\_more\\_to\\_stop\\_its\\_russian\\_bot\\_problem\\_and\\_defend\\_democracy.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2017/10/twitter_could_do_more_to_stop_its_russian_bot_problem_and_defend_democracy.html); Meyer, J. (2017, October 13). “Twitter deleted data potentially crucial to Russian probes.” *Politico*. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/10/13/twitter-russia-data-deleted-investigation-243730>

<sup>64</sup> Shane, S. (2017, September 7). “The Fake Americans Russians created to influence the election.” *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/07/us/politics/russia-facebook-twitter-election.html>



handles during the first few months of Donald Trump's candidacy.<sup>65</sup> In reality, however, Russian-sponsored Twitter handles impersonated both Trump supporters and advocates of the Black Lives Matter movement, and they continued to polarize Twitter discourse long after the election. This shows that the goals of Russian disinformation campaigns does not stop at elections, but rather persists indefinitely. In fact, following the discovery of these IRA-linked accounts, researchers and journalists continue to speculate as to how Russians continue to engage in U.S. political affairs and discussion.<sup>66</sup> One explanation for this may be that IRA-linked stories were more easily shared through conservative Twitter networks than in other networks.

## Journalistic Responses to the Unmasking of IRA-linked Accounts

In addition to reporting on the Congressional meeting, a few news outlets tried to revise or correct stories that cited IRA-linked accounts (12.06%). This often appeared as a disclaimer at the beginning or end of a news story, stating that the news story contains or contained a tweet from a handle impersonating a U.S. citizen or advocacy group. Outlets also occasionally removed embedded tweets written by IRA-linked accounts (5.17%). For example, some Daily Caller articles included this note: "Editor's note: A tweet from an account suspended by Twitter has been removed from this article."<sup>67</sup>

***Pictured below:*** An example of an editor's note from *The Daily Caller*. This was placed at the bottom of news stories (though it did not appear in all news stories in our sample).

*Editor's note: A tweet from an account suspended by Twitter has been removed from this article.*

Other news outlets identified the Twitter account more specifically, and some websites opted not to remove the IRA-linked account's tweet. One example of this is HuffPost, which issued the following corrections at the top of several news stories: "Note: In November 2017, Twitter identified during congressional testimony more than 2,000 accounts that it had disabled for being fraudulent as part of Russian propaganda efforts during the 2016 presidential election. The article below includes or cites an embed of a post from one of those accounts. The article has been preserved as originally published."<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Maremont, M. & Barry, R. (2017, November 6). "Russian Twitter support for Trump began right after he started campaign." *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-twitter-support-for-trump-began-right-after-he-started-campaign-1509964380>

<sup>66</sup> One example of this is coverage of #ReleaseTheMemo, a popular hashtag in January 2018. An example of news coverage of this can be found in [USA Today](#).

<sup>67</sup> Greer, S. (2017, April 7). #FireKushner takes over Twitter. *Daily Caller*. Retrieved from <http://dailycaller.com/2017/04/07/firekushner-takes-over-twitter/>

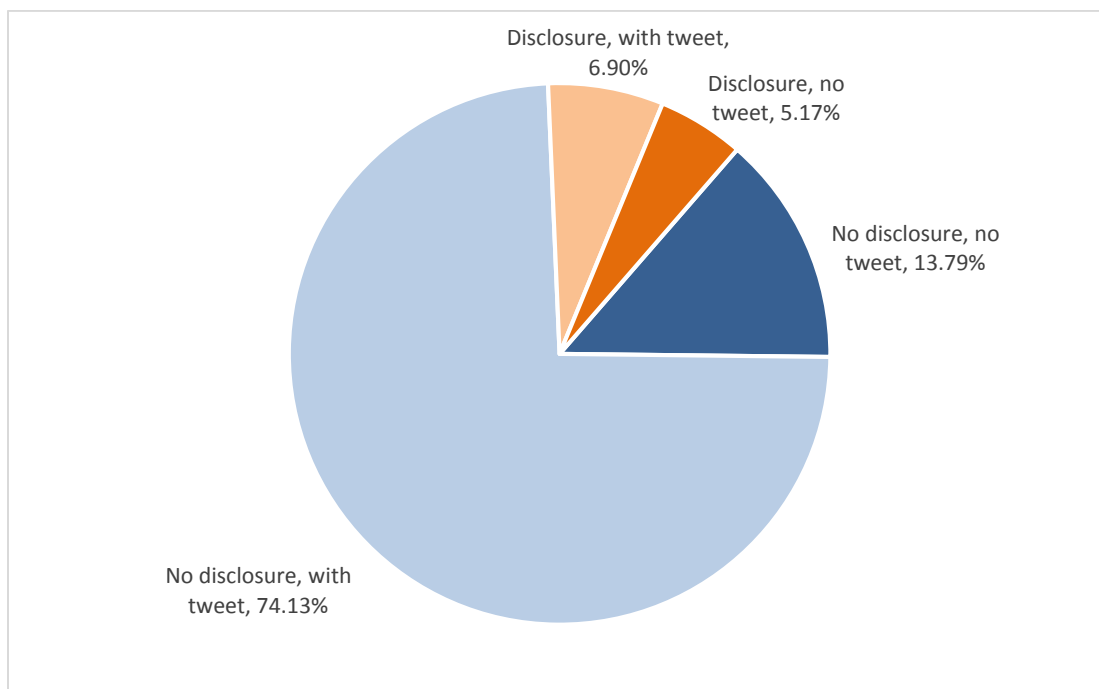
<sup>68</sup> Wanshel, E. (2017, November 8). "Quadruplets accepted to 59 colleges combined decide to attend Yale together." *HuffPost*. Retrieved from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/quadruplets-yale-together-wade\\_us\\_5908e166e4b0bb2d0872963d](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/quadruplets-yale-together-wade_us_5908e166e4b0bb2d0872963d)

**Pictured below:** The editor's note provided in HuffPost articles. These notes, placed at the top of the news story, noted that the outlet opted to preserve the article as originally published (i.e., with the IRA-linked tweet retained).

**Note:** In November 2017, Twitter identified during congressional testimony more than 2,000 accounts that it had disabled for being fraudulent as part of Russian propaganda efforts during the 2016 presidential election. The article below includes or cites an embed of a post from one of those accounts. The article has been preserved as originally published.

As Figure 9 shows, several stories were missing their IRA-linked tweets without a disclaimer (13.79%); in these cases, outlets appeared as if they had never used a tweet from a Russian account at all. For example, though Elite Daily published seven stories with embedded tweets written by Russian IRA-linked accounts, all seven stories did not include those IRA-linked tweet by December 2017. On a whole, however, most stories did not issue corrections, nor did they remove tweets from IRA-linked accounts (74.13%). In other words, that IRA-linked misinformation, without correction, continues to sit on servers, indexed by Google and other search engines, and a possibly misleading record to someone investigating the history of 2016-2017.

**Figure 9:** Percentage of articles that disclosed embedding an IRA-linked tweet, and/or no longer have the IRA-linked tweet in their news story



## Case Study 16: Washington Post replaces IRA tweet with one from Richard Spencer

*Washington Post* published a story on March 25, 2017 about a woman who appeared to be walking past a man injured from a terrorist attack.<sup>69</sup> The initial version of the article included a tweet from IRA-linked account @southlonestar; the tweet included an image link that has since been deactivated.

*Muslim woman pays no mind to the terror attack, casually walks by a dying man while checking phone #PrayForLondon #Westminster #BanIslam pic.twitter.com/B83Jwno65t*

— Texas Lone Star (@SouthLoneStar) March 22, 2017

**Pictured above:** The IRA-linked account from the original version of *Washington Post*'s news story, retrieved using the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. This tweet included three hashtags, including #BanIslam

However, when the account was identified as linked to Russia's Internet Research Agency, the article was revised to replace @SouthLoneStar's tweet with one from white supremacist Richard Spencer.

**Editor's note:** An earlier version of this article cited a tweet shared on Twitter via an account, @SouthLoneStar, that was *identified in October* as being linked to the Russian government. That tweet has been deleted and replaced with a tweet from @RichardBSpencer.

**Pictured Above:** After the revision, *Washington Post* included this editor's note at the top of the article's page.



**Pictured Above:** In the article's current version, *Washington Post* embedded a tweet from Richard Spencer, who included the same image as the one posted by the IRA-linked account.

<sup>69</sup> Erickson, A. (2017, March 25). "The far right turned this Muslim woman into a 'monster' online. That's despicable." *Washington Post*. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/03/25/the-far-right-turned-this-muslim-woman-into-a-monster-online-thats-despicable>

## Conclusion: What Role did IRA-linked Accounts Play in News Coverage about U.S. Politics?

Our evidence reveals widespread news content presenting propaganda from Russian supported, IRA-linked Twitter accounts, during 2016 and 2017. While 116 articles clearly represent a tiny fraction of the content produced by outlets during our sample period, the fact that the accounts appeared in articles of 32 of the 33 outlets most significant to American social and political discourse is remarkable.<sup>70</sup>

Especially, these findings suggest that the focus on the influence of the IRA accounts within social media spaces—such as the attention given to how many million Americans were exposed to IRA-backed advertisements on Facebook, or interacted with an IRA post on Twitter—is incomplete: the appearance of IRA content in media widely used by Americans for political information represents their circulation among larger audiences, audiences not reached in social media, and potentially with a level of perceived legitimacy higher than in social media.

Notably, this was not mainly a story of “fake news” entering the press. We did identify a few instances in which false information entered the news media via IRA accounts. However, it was much more common to see IRA accounts offering opinions about news events that actually had happened, often emphasizing particular, often polarizing, angles.<sup>71</sup> In this way, the IRA accounts’ role might be seen less as substantially *changing* the existing discourse of American politics and media, than of *amplifying* controversy and deepening political divisions. As we showed, this happened in tandem with news outlets who often were writing stories intended to criticize opponents or describe the heatedness of online debate: this often took the form of conservative outlets celebrating the views of outspoken “conservative” Twitter users, and liberal outlets deriding them.

In a sense, this made some U.S. media into unwitting accomplices, amplifying messages that the IRA wished to disseminate within American public discourse, and distributing them to new and wider audiences. Such findings raise questions about how journalists and news organizations should take up the challenge of information gatekeeping in the face of information campaigns on the part of foreign powers and others. In what follows, we elaborate on each of our conclusions.

**Sustained interference.** Contrary to popular belief, attention to IRA-linked Twitter accounts was not primarily focused on propagating misinformation during the 2016 election. We found that news media covered these Twitter accounts far more after the election than before, possibly reflecting more intense effort on the part of the IRA during that period—a finding further research needs to examine.

**Elaborate tactics.** We also saw that the IRA’s efforts to interfere with U.S. politics was a simple matter of circulating false information: rather than creating false information themselves, IRA-linked accounts took

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<sup>70</sup> This comports with the findings of an analysis by Recode and Meltwater, which found a much greater of articles citing IRA accounts when searching a much larger corpus; Romm & Molla, *ibid*.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Alford, *ibid*.

false information and amplified it.<sup>72</sup> These accounts seem to cherry-pick particularly outrageous falsehoods and inserted their own frames to attract attention and create political division. Although not included in our timeframe, the amplification aspect is obvious in instances such as accounts; promulgation of Trump's divisive tweets about the 2017 Virginia Governor's race.<sup>73</sup>

Further, IRA-linked accounts took advantage of the fragmented information system to create pervasive and dispersed influence. Their reach spans a range of major political topics, including healthcare, media, race, criminal justice, and pop culture. In doing so, IRA-linked accounts were featured in stories about salient and emotionally charged political issues or semi-political issues, which may have exacerbated political polarization. Though the content of tweets shared by Russian-sponsored accounts **touches on** important issues, the **reason** they do so is not to educate or express genuinely-felt political opinions, but to sow seeds of discord.

This is particularly problematic in light of the *third* feature, that these accounts intentionally choose to masquerade as politically-active American citizens. Thus, their ability to deceive legitimate U.S. news organizations is an important tactic to consider, as it reflects the ease by which other countries can falsely imitate U.S. citizens in social media.

**Journalism.** Our results vividly expose challenges facing journalism in the digital era. We find that while conservative-leaning IRA-linked accounts (particularly @ten\_gop) gained the most news attention, outlets from both partisan camps often that took this bait and embedded Russian propaganda tweets. While conservatives may have been tricked by false information more often—likely because more of the content favored their view—liberal outlets also took IRA-linked accounts' fake identities at face value, presuming that they represented real, albeit extreme conservative citizens. No ideological camp was immune to disinformation.

As readers of online news will be aware, there is now an entire genre of news media reporting that consisted entirely or almost entirely of quoted messages from Twitter (and to a lesser extent, other social media). This type of reporting appeared frequently in our dataset, simply because such reporting includes so many Twitter messages: in those, an IRA account's tweets was often swept up.

This practice is surely a function of low cost and outlets' incentives to rapidly produce content that is timely in a rapid news cycle and will draw clicks, including through social media. However, our evidence demonstrates that it is also error-prone and susceptible to information manipulation. It was clear that much of the information-gathering and reporting on such stories was minimally verified: the individual Twitter users being quoted were clearly lightly investigated, if investigated at all, and in some cases false information about the accounts was conveyed (e.g., that @ten\_gop was an official Republican party account). These findings call for much greater caution on the part of news organizations reporting on communications in social media.

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<sup>72</sup> Weedon, J. Nuland, W. & Stamos, A. (2017, April 27). Information operations and Facebook. Retrieved from: <https://fbnewsroomus.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/facebook-and-information-operations-v1.pdf>

<sup>73</sup> Schneider, G. S. & Portnoy, J. (2017, November 4). Did 'bots' inflame online anger over controversial ad in Va governor's race? *Washington Post*. Retrieved from: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/did-bots-inflame-online-anger-over-controversial-ad-in-va-governors-race/2017/11/04/e2127c30-c186-11e7-959c-fe2b598d8c00\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/did-bots-inflame-online-anger-over-controversial-ad-in-va-governors-race/2017/11/04/e2127c30-c186-11e7-959c-fe2b598d8c00_story.html)

## Recommendations

Social media is integral to journalism in the digital era because it provides a valuable window into emerging public opinion trends, which, once properly incorporated in news coverage, increases journalistic responsiveness to the public and their interests.<sup>74</sup>

However, given the deluge of information coming from a variety of sources that can be elusive to identify in Twitter, journalists are up against three challenges, on which we offer our recommendations. *First*, Sourcing from Twitter can be a hazardous task. Some basic investigation of the background information of the Twitter source, and even direct messages and other forms of electronic communication, is likely not to be enough in an environment of active information manipulation. Metrics such as likes and favorites, whether as an indicator of an account's validity or a message's popularity, should be interpreted with caution, as these metrics can be manipulated. In this environment, journalists will need to be inventive in finding new ways to verify speakers' identities, particularly ones found through social media.

*Second*, this new operating structure requires journalists to be more transparent about the source of their information than ever.<sup>75</sup> There are increasingly more occasions when journalists have to write their stories with information from unknown and unverified sources. Being transparent about what they know and do not know about their sources helps enhance journalists' credibility and integrity in the digital era.

*Third*, as this IRA-linked account revelation demonstrates, what we know about information obtained from Twitter can change. This requires a new journalistic or institutional practice of keeping track of such information over time. Specifically, we need institutional-level policies in place that stipulate what journalists should do when they find out a source of information in news stories has misrepresented itself. They might experience a tension between two ethical choices of removing the problematic content to maintain the quality of the story and keeping it not to edit already-published news stories. What is critical, however, is a transparency ethic in treating such unreliable source of information. According to our results, news organizations dealt quite inconsistently with their published news stories that contained IRA-linked accounts, with a majority of them appearing to simply not revisit IRA-linked accounts in their news stories. There is a long tradition in quality American journalism of issuing corrections to misreported information, which is inevitable; the industry needs to adapt such an ethic to the digital era in which our knowledge of the topics of reporting may change, even as the product of our reporting remains a permanent and universally accessible record.

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<sup>74</sup> Kim et al., Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Kovach, B. & Rosenstiel, T. (2008). *Blur: How to know what's true in the age of information overload*. New York: Bloomsbury.

## Method

For this analysis, we wanted to examine how active IRA-linked Twitter accounts made their way into U.S. news media. We focused on the accounts most central to the retweet network by identifying the 100 IRA-linked accounts with the highest in-degree.

Our researchers then used the database MediaCloud to collect all news references to at least one of these 100 handles between January 1, 2015 and September 30, 2017. There were 33 news outlets in our sample, culled from Faris et al.'s report, "Partisanship, Propaganda & Disinformation," which also uses MediaCloud as its news database,<sup>76</sup> and the "U.S. Top Online News" collection within MediaCloud, which is a dynamic collection of the top 50 online news sites according to Pew.<sup>77</sup> There were 330 searches in all (33 news outlets by 100 handles). Handle search terms excluded the "@" sign, though a parallel search with the "@" symbol produced identical results.

Our search yielded 133 results. Several were removed because they were news stories about IRA-linked accounts being discovered. In total, there were 118 articles in our sample. Following this data collection procedure, the researchers coded each article for variables categorized into the following five groups:<sup>78</sup>

1. Topic of the news story
  - a. Whether the story was about the presidential election or not
  - b. Whether the story referred to a presidential candidate (and which one)
  - c. Whether the story was about a political issue
  - d. Whether the story involved Twitter
  - e. Whether the story originated from Twitter (i.e., not instigated by an external event)
  - f. Tone of the story (positive, neutral/mixed, negative)
  - g. Whether the story reported on competing positions about an issue/topic
  - h. Two-word description
2. How the news story used tweets
  - a. Number of tweets in the article
  - b. Whether a verified account (e.g., an account of a celebrity) was referenced in the story
  - c. Whether non-Twitter content (e.g., quotes and paraphrased statements from real life people) was used
3. How the news story used the IRA-linked tweet
  - a. Position of the IRA-linked tweet (top, middle, bottom)
  - b. Number of the IRA-linked tweet (e.g., 3rd of 7)
  - c. Whether the IRA-linked handle was referenced outside of the embedded tweet (e.g., if the tweet was "dropped" into the story, there is no reference)

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<sup>76</sup> Faris, R. et al. (2017, August). Partisanship, Propaganda & Disinformation: Online media & the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. Retrieved from: <https://cyber.harvard.edu/publications/2017/08/mediacloud> . This paper also identifies the partisan orientation of each outlet; this was done by examining the partisanship of the news outlet's audience

<sup>77</sup> Visit the current MediaCloud collection here: <https://sources.mediacloud.org/#/collections/9139487>

<sup>78</sup> Intercoder reliability between the eight coders was achieved for all variables (Fleiss' Kappa > 0.7).

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- d. If [3c] is true, whether the IRA-linked handle was referenced as an authoritative source (e.g., references to the handle as “prominent”, “popular”, “expert”, or “representative” of some group)
- e. Whether the IRA-linked tweet was used as a source of information (conveying concrete information)
- f. Whether the IRA-linked tweet was used as the **sole** source of information
- g. Whether the IRA-linked tweet was used as a source of opinion (conveying a stance) [it is possible that [3e] and [3g] are both true]
4. Post-Hoc IRA-linked tweet discovery
  - a. Whether the story issued a correction or disclaimer about a tweet from an IRA-linked account
  - b. Whether the story contained the IRA-linked accounts’ original tweet or not
5. Content of the IRA-linked tweet
  - a. Whether the topic of the tweet matched the topic of the news story
  - b. Whether the tweet conveyed a positive or negative tone toward the topic of the news story
  - c. Whether the tweet conveyed liberal, conservative, or mixed ideology
  - d. Whether the tweet contained incorrect information (validation of the information outside the story was necessary)
  - e. Whether the tweet attempted to “troll” people (use of inflammatory language, e.g., “rapefugees”)
  - f. Whether the tweet had a call to action (e.g., use of modals)
  - g. Whether the tweet was sarcastic
  - h. Whether the tweet included hashtags, and if so, what they were
  - i. Whether the tweet was saved as a screenshot or embedded in an article

In addition to this, we identified the “slant” of each news outlet using Faris et al.’s aforementioned research. Based on this information, we determined whether each IRA-linked tweet had an ideological position that was congruent or incongruent with the news outlet that had embedded the tweet.



## List of Cases

Below is a list of cases presented in this research paper.

Case #	Date	Article Headline	Source	Page #
1	8/12/2016	The Internet Can Turn Quickly – Even on Bernie Sanders	NPR	14
2	6/23/2016	Government Scientist Crowned Miss USA in Pageant Trump Used to Own	HuffPost	16
3	3/16/2017	Times Black Girls Were Suspended for Their Hairstyles	Elite Daily	18
4	11/18/2016	School Official Dons Black Face, Dresses Like 1930s Caricature of Slave for Halloween	The Daily Caller	19
5	6/1/2016	Teacher Gives Racist Math Quiz About 'Pimps,' 'Ho's' And Drug Deals	HuffPost	20
6	2/18/2017	Epic line forms for Trump rally in Florida, reaches a mile outside the gate	The Blaze	22
7	9/29/2017	ISIS has a new coloring book for kids, featuring a suicide vest and AK-47	The Daily Caller	23
8	4/7/2017	#FireKushner Takes Over Twitter	The Daily Caller	25
9	2/27/2017	An Iranian Won an Oscar And Right-Wingers Had A Twitter Meltdown	HuffPost	26
10	5/23/2016	Muslim woman lauded as 'fearless' and a 'hero' for Spreading 'joy and peace' at Anti-Islam Demonstration - but there's one big problem	The Blaze	28
11	6/29/2017	British Van Driver Dies After Migrants Block Road	The Daily Caller	31
12	6/13/2017	Liberals triggered by Sessions 'mainsplaining' to Democrat Kamala Harris	The Blaze	32
13	6/30/2017	#HererosexualPrideDay backfires as LGBT users subvert it on Twitter	The Guardian	33
14	6/23/2017	Johnny Depp jokes about Donald Trump assassination during Glastonbury Festival	Salon	34
15	8/23/2017	Fake news? Trump supporters circulate photo of Phoenix rally crowds...but it's not	AZ Central	36
16	3/25/2017	The far right turned this Muslim woman into a 'monster' online. That's despicable	Washington Post	41



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