

# How Russian Hackers and Trolls Exploited U.S. Media in 2016<sup>1</sup>

KATHLEEN HALL JAMIESON

Director, Annenberg Public Policy Center  
Elizabeth Ware Packard Professor, Annenberg School for Communication  
University of Pennsylvania

As Election Day approached in 2016, up to one in eight prospective voters had not yet decided for whom to ballot for president.<sup>2</sup> The factors accounting for that atypical state of affairs included dissatisfaction with the candidacies of Republican nominee Donald J. Trump and his Democratic counterpart Hillary Rodham Clinton and large scale defection from the two major political parties.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, nearly four in ten respondents told pollsters they considered themselves Independents.<sup>4</sup>

These phenomena made the electoral outcome especially hospitable to cues in the communication environment in the campaign's final month. Among those signals were some originating with Russian operatives bent on sowing discord in the body politic and undercutting the candidacy of the first female presidential nominee of a major U.S. political party. Explaining how those Kremlin-tied operatives exploited susceptibilities within the social media platforms and mainstream U.S. press is my goal here.

The notion that the public sphere can be a locale in which rational individuals calmly engage each other in elevating argument is utopian.<sup>5</sup> Even in the best of times, neither Jeffersonian nor Habermasian ideals

---

1 Read 27 April 2018 as part of the *Democracy Today: Ancient Lessons, Modern Challenges* symposium.

2 Aaron Blake, "How America Decided, at the Last Moment, to Elect Donald Trump," *Washington Post*, November 17, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/17/how-america-decided-at-the-very-last-moment-to-elect-donald-trump/>.

3 Louis Nelson, "Trump Hits New Low in Public Opinion—but He's Still Beating Hillary Clinton," *Politico*, September 6, 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/06/trump-public-opinion-better-than-hillary-clinton-242398>.

4 Jeffrey M. Jones, "Americans' Identification as Independents Back Up in 2017," *Gallup*, January 8, 2018, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/225056/americans-identification-independents-back-2017.aspx>.

5 Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

are attained in political campaigns.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, players in these contests more often than not engage in “personalities,” a practice banned in Jeffersonian spheres. At the same time, instead of the rational argumentation valued by Habermas, these contests incubate the irrational kind. As I demonstrate at greater length elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> in 2016 the minions of Russian president Vladimir Putin upped the level of invective and sophistry and, in so doing, weighted the social and mass media environments against the candidacy of Hillary Clinton in that election’s final month.

The process by which communication affects audiences is well understood. Media not only tell us what to think about,<sup>8</sup> an effect known as agenda setting, but they also frame or contextualize how we think about those topics.<sup>9</sup> Agenda setting’s power has been confirmed in studies demonstrating the relationship between the most-often-covered issues and what the audience considers important.<sup>10</sup> In the process, the issues highlighted in news help determine the ones prioritized by the citizenry and the ones undecided voters weigh as they determine for whom to ballot.<sup>11</sup> If a topic such as immigration or a scandal involving one of the contenders is dominating the news, that issue is likely to figure in the decisions of both individuals not tightly anchored to a political party and those disaffected with both major party nominees.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, as research that my colleagues and I conducted in the 2000 and 2008 U.S. presidential elections confirmed, when there is an imbalance in messages, for example when one side has more negative

---

6 Thomas Jefferson, *A Manual of Parliamentary Practice: Composed Originally for the Use of the Senate of the United States* (Philadelphia: Parrish, Dunning, and Mears, 1853); and Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

7 Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

8 Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 13.

9 Dietram A. Scheufele and David Tewksbury, “Framing, Agenda Setting, and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models,” *Journal of Communication* 57, no. 1 (2006): 9–20, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0021-9916.2007.00326.x>.

10 Yue Tan and David H. Weaver, “Agenda Diversity and Agenda Setting from 1956 to 2004,” *Journalism Studies* 14, no. 6 (2013): 773–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2012.748516>. As press scholars Yue Tan and David Weaver showed, the average agenda-setting correlation (i.e., the association between the issue featured in news and the audience’s assessment of its relative importance) was 0.51, which indicates that 26 percent of the variance was explained by the theory.

11 Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News that Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

12 Iyengar and Kinder, *News that Matters*, 4.

media coverage, its nominee is likely to lose voter support.<sup>13</sup> All of this matters because, had 78,000 votes shifted to Clinton in three key states, she would not only have won the popular contest (which she did handily) but would have carried the Electoral College as well.

#### THE RUSSIAN STRATEGY: TILT THE MESSAGE BALANCE AGAINST THE CLINTON CANDIDACY

Since my focus will be on the wiles that trolls and hackers worked on would-be voters, let me take a moment to define terms. Unlike the otherworldly creatures in Norse mythology, the Russian Internet agents of interest here (i.e., the trolls) were employed by the Kremlin-tied Internet Research Agency (IRA) in St. Petersburg. To influence U.S. voters, these interlopers assumed guises that shielded their true identity as they marauded about in cyberspace creating the illusion that they were grassroots activists while posting provocative, often inflammatory content. One hundred and twenty-six million Americans were exposed to Russian-trafficked content on Facebook.<sup>14</sup> At least 1.4 million Twitter users were subjected to the appeals of Kremlin-tied trolls and bots feigning allegiance to American values,<sup>15</sup> while, according to an assessment by the U.S. intelligence agencies, bent on fomenting dissent among U.S. citizens and defeating one of the two major party candidates.<sup>16</sup>

As the July 2018 indictments issued by Special Counsel Robert Mueller confirmed, the Russian hackers who stole content from the email accounts of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and Clinton campaign director John Podesta were Russian military operatives. After capturing the material, they released it through two front groups, DCLeaks and Guccifer 2.0, before enlisting an established organization—WikiLeaks—which from October 7 through Election Day became the dominant player feeding illegally gotten content into the U.S. electoral dialog.

13 Richard Johnston, Michael G. Hagen, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *The 2000 Presidential Election and the Foundations of Party Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Kate Kenski, Bruce Hardy, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *The Obama Victory: How Media, Money, and Messages Shaped the 2008 Election* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

14 Mike Isaac and Daisuke Wakabayashi, “Russian Influence Reached 126 Million through Facebook Alone,” *New York Times*, October 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/30/technology/facebook-google-russia.html/>.

15 Natasha Bertrand, “Twitter Will Tell Congress that Russia’s Election Meddling Was Worse than We First Thought,” *Business Insider*, October 30, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/twitter-russia-facebook-election-accounts-2017-10/>.

16 United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A (D.D.C. 2018), <https://www.justice.gov/file/1035477/download/>.

The hackers and trolls accomplished their ends by exploiting vulnerabilities in the U.S. social media platforms and news to change the agenda, the communication frames, and the balancing of messages against the candidacy of the Democratic nominee. Four examples illustrate their means. First, hacked content was deployed dexterously to alter the media agenda. The effects were clear on October 7. At 3:00 p.m. on that Friday, two days before the second general election presidential debate, a joint statement from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) declared that the Russian government had directed the “recent compromises of e-mails from U.S. persons and institutions.”<sup>17</sup> That story dominated cable news “from 3:30 to 4:00 P.M.”<sup>18</sup> At about 4:05 p.m., a new narrative displaced the old when the *Washington Post* posted both the story of the so-called *Access Hollywood* tape and the hot mic recording that catapulted the phrase “grab ‘em by the pussy” into the media lexicon and the history books.<sup>19</sup>

As breathless cable commentary and replays of Trump’s claims of celebrity entitlement were displacing the intelligence assessment, a third Russian-driven seismic shift then produced the most long-lived effect on press coverage of the three. In an apparent attempt to deflect attention from Trump’s salacious remarks, at 4:32 p.m.,<sup>20</sup> WikiLeaks released a first cache of emails stolen by Russian operatives from the account of Clinton campaign director John Podesta. Reporting on that find then replaced the intelligence community’s conclusions in the national news agenda and in so doing blunted the effects that the revelation of the Russian origins of the hacking otherwise might have had on the campaign dialog. At the same time, WikiLeaks’ release of the supposed Clinton speech segments offset the *Access Hollywood* story with one damaging to the Democratic nominee.

17 U.S. Department of Homeland Security, “Joint Statement from the Department of Homeland Security and Office of the Director of National Intelligence on Election Security,” October 7, 2016, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2016/10/07/joint-statement-department-homeland-security-and-office-director-national/>.

18 The Aspen Institute, “Active Measures: The Kremlin Plan to Beat the West without Firing a Shot,” transcript, Aspen Security Forum, July 20, 2017, [http://aspensecurityforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Active-Measures\\_The-Kremlin-Plan-to-Beat-the-West-without-Firing-a-Shot.pdf](http://aspensecurityforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Active-Measures_The-Kremlin-Plan-to-Beat-the-West-without-Firing-a-Shot.pdf).

19 David A. Fahrenthold, “Trump Recorded Having Extremely Lewd Conversation about Women in 2005,” *Washington Post*, October 6, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.8236ce534fa5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eed4_story.html?utm_term=.8236ce534fa5).

20 I am relying on the timeline created by *Yahoo!* authors. See: Yahoo! News Staff, “64 Hours in October: How One Weekend Blew Up the Rules of American Politics,” *Yahoo!*, October 6, 2017, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/64-hours-october-one-weekend-blew-rules-american-politics-2-162827162.html>.

The Russians were active in altering the message terrain on social media as well. One of their masterworks was “Hilltendo,” a game designed with the look of such 1970s and 1980s classics as *Donkey Kong* and *Mario*. Appropriating the positive affect associated with the pioneering gaming company Nintendo, Hilltendo featured a missile-straddling cartoon representation of Democratic Party nominee Hillary Rodham Clinton, who in level one deleted “as many classified emails as possible before she is caught.” In level two, the game player guiding her malfeasance was tasked with navigating obstacles to determine how much money Hillary could get from the Arab states, and in level three with helping her “throw the Constitution as far as possible.”<sup>21</sup>

The Kremlin-tied intrigue reframed campaign content in mass media channels as well. So for example, RT, the state-sponsored English language broadcast outlet formerly known as Russia Today, carried a story supposing that the U.S. media were covering up the complicity of the Clinton campaign in the death of a young DNC staff member alleged by the story to be the culprit behind the hacking of the Democratic email accounts. “Let’s talk a little bit about why the media blackout and the silence from Washington on the Seth Rich case should scare the hell out of you,” noted one report preserved on that Russian network’s YouTube channel. “You have a DNC staffer shot dead in the streets of Washington; not only that, you have a mountain of evidence suggesting that he is the WikiLeaks source.”

Importantly, in social media, Russian trolls and their automated bots directed audience attention not only to the stories on the Russian outlets RT and Sputnik but also to the hacked content. Reinforcing their message that Rich was the hacker and that his death was suspect were tweets such as one from the Russian troll account @TEN\_GOP that linked to a video from YouTube entitled “Why the Seth Rich ‘Investigation’ Should Terrify Everyone.”<sup>22</sup> Retweet (RT) “the hell out of” the video, urged that post. “This is probably the most important video to watch for anyone concerned about our democracy.”<sup>23</sup> In troll world, the Democrats’ alleged complicity in the death of that young

---

21 Jose Pagliery and Donie O’Sullivan, “Russians Released Anti-Clinton Video Game Weeks before Election,” CNN, March 8, 2018, <https://money.cnn.com/2018/03/08/technology/hilltendo-russians-anti-clinton-video-game/index.html>.

22 YouTube user Black Pilled, “Why the Seth Rich ‘Investigation’ Should Terrify Everyone,” YouTube video, May 24, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3GnMx31BJA>.

23 Twitter user @TEN\_GOP, “This is probably the most important video to watch for anyone concerned about our democracy,” Twitter post, May 2017, archived by: Ben Nimmo, Digital Forensic Research Lab, Atlantic Council, *Medium*, November 14, 2017, <https://medium.com/dfirlab/how-a-russian-troll-fooled-america-80452a4806d1>.

DNC staffer was not the only Clinton “scandal” being covered up by the mainstream press. So too, they suggested, were Clinton’s terminal illness and the “fact” that she was about to be indicted and jailed.

These four examples illustrate efforts to amplify anti-Clinton themes in social media and to deflect blame for the hacking away from Russia. Exposure to such instances increased the likelihood that the content would play a role in the audience member’s assessment of the candidacy of the Democratic nominee. In disseminating this content to intended audiences, the Russians exploited capacities built into the social media platforms. At the same time, by seeding hacked Democratic content into the U.S. mainstream and conservative media, they exploited deeply rooted tendencies in the U.S. press.

#### HOW THE RUSSIANS EXPLOITED VULNERABILITIES IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Vulnerabilities inherent in the U.S. social media structure include an ability to:

- Obscure identity and thereby mask the sources of information
- Aggregate the likeminded into echo chambers
- Agitate by eliciting strong emotion with posts eliciting anger, fear, and prejudice
- Amplify memes by linking and alerting the aggregated audiences to the existence of congenial content
- Target by addressing appeals to susceptible, demographically isolable groups

In essence, the platforms are designed as a delivery mechanism to turn likeminded users into consumers sold to advertisers. Because of the United States’ disposition to protect both forms of expression and channels of political communication, the capacity of these outlets to shield identity, harvest personal data, facilitate sharing, and target advertising is largely unregulated. In this congenial environment, the trolls were able to maximize the impact of their handiwork by harnessing the data analytics and search-engine maximization tools built into the social media platforms in order to amplify appeals to fear, anger, and prejudice. The Kremlin-tied operatives amassed those platform users susceptible to these messages. As Election Day approached, evangelicals and veterans who had been clustered received messages designed to drive them toward the voting booth; by contrast, African Americans and Sanders’s supporters were the object of communication intended to drive them from it.

After reverse engineering the activities of the trolls and hackers, Facebook offered this outline of their processes and interrelations:

- Private information was hacked and stolen—Guccifer 2.0/Russian hackers posted this information
- Sites hosting the data were registered (DCLeaks), and then they began to work through WikiLeaks
- Fake personae were created to draw attention to hacked content (that's the social media piece)
- Social media accounts were created to amplify the news reports of the hacked content
- Peer groups and networks then shared the hacked content and the news media publicized it<sup>24</sup>

#### HOW THE RUSSIAN TROLLS EXPLOITED THE VULNERABILITIES OF U.S. SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS TO REACH VOTERS THE TRUMP CAMPAIGN NEEDED TO INFLUENCE

The troll messaging focused on five voting groups that Trump needed to influence. In his February 2018 indictment, Mueller flagged Russian efforts to affect three of them—blacks, Bernie Sanders's supporters, and those who could be shifted to Green Party candidate Jill Stein.<sup>25</sup> The playbook apparent in the Russian-generated social media streams also reveals actions to increase participation by white working-class Americans in general and, among them, evangelicals and veterans, in particular.

Initially, troll overtures to evangelicals and conservative Catholics were benign and even whimsical. Some, for example, urged viewers to "like" if they wanted Jesus to win a boxing match with Hillary Clinton. After appeals insinuating that they shared both the viewers' faith in the Bible and their desire to protect the right to wish others a Merry Christmas, the Russian poseurs segued to messages such as "Type Amen if you want Texas to Stay Christian."<sup>26</sup> The attacks that followed escalated to vilify women wearing burqas. More extreme content followed. One "Heart of Texas" troll post asked, "[G]uess what top Evangelical leaders said about Hillary Clinton's positions?" The

24 Jen Weedon, William Nuland, and Alex Stamos, "Information Operations and Facebook," *Facebook*, April 27, 2017, <https://fbnewsroomus.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/facebook-and-information-operations-v1.pdf>.

25 *Internet Research Agency*, 18 U.S.C. §§ 2, 371, 1349, 1028A.

26 U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Open Hearing: Foreign Influence Operations and Their Use of Social Media Platforms*, 115th Cong. (2018) (Exhibits, 9), <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/hearings/open-hearing-foreign-influence-operations-and-their-use-social-media-platforms>.

answer? “They are wicked and evil. . . . There is no way, a true Texan can vote for that lying murderer and criminal.”

At the same time, to mobilize those who had served in the military, a Russian meme contrasted the plight of veterans with the treatment of refugees or illegal immigrants. A group styling itself “Being Patriotic,” for example, drew 723,750 engagements on Facebook with an appeal to “Like and Share if you think our veterans must get benefits before refugees.” These words were tied to the picture of a bearded male in a pea coat wearing a stocking cap bearing a U.S. Navy logo.<sup>27</sup> Another Russian account titled “american.veterans” proclaimed, “Killary Clinton will never understand what it feels like to lose the person you love for the sake of your country.” The attached image of a grieving widow was viewed 17,654 times.<sup>28</sup> Not to be outdone, a September 8, 2016, post that engaged 737,178 users (the sum of “likes,” “reactions,” and comments) alleged without evidence that, “Hillary Clinton has a 69 percent disapproval rating among all veterans.”<sup>29</sup> Signaling approval or disapproval by respected peers is, of course, a potent means of persuasion.<sup>30</sup>

The Russian trolls also disseminated sponsored content designed to discourage or redirect minority voting. After initially targeting users identified by Facebook as interested in African American history, Martin Luther King, Jr., the civil rights movement, and Malcolm X with a Russian Facebook ad featuring a photo labeled “Black girl magic!” of Beyoncé’s backup dancers, the trolls addressed the same demographic group with an appeal near Election Day claiming, “No one represents Black people. Don’t go to vote.”<sup>31</sup> Fake ads (one

27 U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Open Hearing*.

28 Georgia Wells and Deepa Seetharaman, “New Facebook Data Shows Russians Targeted Users by Race, Religion, Politics,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 1, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-ads-targeted-facebook-users-by-profile-1509563354>.

29 Kurt Wagner, “These Are Some of the Tweets and Facebook Ads Russia Used to Try and Influence the 2016 Presidential Election,” *Recode*, October 31, 2017, <https://www.recode.net/2017/10/31/16587174/fake-ads-news-propaganda-congress-facebook-twitter-google-tech-hearing>.

30 Michael J. Brzozowski, Thomas Sandholm, and Tad Hogg, “Effects of Feedback and Peer Pressure on Contributions to Enterprise Social Media,” Hewlett-Packard Laboratories, 2009, <https://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1531684>; Daphne Van de Bongardt, Ellen Reitz, Theo Sandfort, and Maja Deković, “A Meta-Analysis of the Relations between Three Types of Peer Norms and Adolescent Sexual Behavior,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 19, no. 3 (2015): 203–34, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868314544223>; and Linda R. Tropp, Thomas C. O’Brien, and Katya Migacheva, “How Peer Norms of Inclusion and Exclusion Predict Children’s Interest in Cross-Ethnic Friendships,” *Journal of Social Issues* 70, no. 1 (2014): 151–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/josi.12052>.

31 Natasha Singer, “‘Weaponized Ad Technology’: Facebook’s Moneymaker Gets a Critical Eye,” *New York Times*, August 16, 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2nFUIMm>; the *New York Times* piece is referencing research by Young Mie Kim: Young Mie Kim, “Beware: Disguised as Your



featuring actor Aziz Ansari;<sup>32</sup> another showing a black woman in front of an “African Americans for Hillary” sign) also encouraged voters of color to “Avoid the line. Vote from Home.”<sup>33</sup> Viewers were instructed to text or tweet their support for Clinton instead. In August 2018, the Senate Intelligence Committee confirmed that the websites to which the Russians most frequently posted and with which they most often engaged were right wing partisan sites and “fake sites created by the IRA that targeted African-Americans.”<sup>34</sup> Of the 40 troll-generated Facebook ads that garnered over 10,000 impressions in October 2016, 28 sought out those in the black community. In November, 27 of the 28 ads that exceeded that number did the same.<sup>35</sup>

A parallel effort by the trolls worked to shift votes to Green Party candidate Dr. Jill Stein. One such move urged the target audience to “Choose peace and vote for Jill Stein.” The ad reads, “Trust me, it’s not a wasted vote. The only way to take our country back is to stop voting for the corporations and banks that own us. #GrowASpineVoteJill-Stein.”<sup>36</sup> A search of the archives of the Russian English-language outlets RT and Sputnik located more than 100 pro-Stein or pro-Green Party stories.<sup>37</sup>

#### HOW THE RUSSIAN HACKERS AND THEIR AGENT WIKILEAKS EXPLOITED THE SUSCEPTIBILITIES OF THE U.S. PRESS

In the United States, the press is drawn to: scandal; revelations; appearance vs. reality as a trope; and campaign strategy and tactics rather than issue substance. As you might infer from my earlier analysis, these press dispositions were at play when the *Access Hollywood* tape went online on October 7, the same day the U.S. Intelligence Agencies

---

Community, Suspicious Groups May Target You Right Now for Election Interference Later,” University of Wisconsin-Madison, [https://journalism.wisc.edu/wp-content/blogs.dir/41/files/2018/08/nonwhite-recruitment-and-suppression.Russia.Kim\\_.v.3.080818.pdf](https://journalism.wisc.edu/wp-content/blogs.dir/41/files/2018/08/nonwhite-recruitment-and-suppression.Russia.Kim_.v.3.080818.pdf).

32 Josh Modell, “Russian Hackers Used a Secret Weapon: Aziz Ansari,” *AV Club*, November 2, 2017, <https://www.avclub.com/russian-hackers-used-a-secret-weapon-aziz-ansari-1820076677>.

33 Don Caldwell, “Vote from Home,” *Know Your Meme*, last modified November 3, 2016, <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/vote-from-home>.

34 U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, *Open Hearing*.

35 Jamieson, *Cyberwar*, 104.

36 Facebook user Blacktivist, “Choose peace and vote for Jill Stein,” Facebook post, November 3, 2016, archived by: U.S. House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, Ad ID 1183, <https://democrats-intelligence.house.gov/facebook-ads/social-media-advertisements.htm>.

37 Robert Windrem, “Senate Russia Investigators Are Interested in Jill Stein,” *NBC News*, December 20, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/why-are-senate-russia-investigators-interested-jill-stein-n831261>.

released the information that the hacking was done by Russians, and WikiLeaks posted the content stolen from Podesta's email account. Across time, as public interest in the *Access Hollywood* narrative faded, interest in "WikiLeaked" material persisted (see Figure 1).

The success of the Russian "steal and release" strategy depended on reporters and editors who not only invested the content hacked from Democratic accounts with significance unmerited by its substance but in the process obscured its Russian origins. "Every major publication, including the *Times*, published multiple stories citing the D.N.C. and Podesta emails posted by WikiLeaks, becoming a de facto instrument of Russian intelligence," concluded the *New York Times*' Pulitzer Prize-winning team of Eric Lipton, David E. Sanger, and Scott Shane, whose assessment I share. "Mr. Putin, a student of martial arts, had turned two institutions at the core of American democracy—political campaigns and independent media—to his own ends."<sup>38</sup>

The terms in which journalists cast the Russian involvement in the election made it unlikely that Clinton's assertion that the Russians wanted Trump in the White House would gain traction. In the parlance of the legacy media, the materials siphoned from Democratic email accounts by hackers were "leaks," not "thefts," and sourced to "WikiLeaks," not the Russians. These choices obscured the perpetrator as well as that culprit's intent. At the same time, the hacking of the Democratic content by the Russians increased the likelihood both that the media would put anti-Clinton content into the agenda and that they would frame it through the traditional media lenses of scandal, hypocrisy, and campaign tactics and intrigue. The results of their machinations are reflected in the spike in anti-Clinton press after October 7 (see Figure 2) and before October 28 when FBI Director James Comey made it known that his agency had re-opened its investigation of Clinton's use of emails while Secretary of State.

Post-election confessions reveal that some reporters were aware that news hyping of the hacked content was unjustified. For example, an opinion piece in *The New York Times* by David Leonhardt noted, "The dominant feature of the emails was their ordinariness. They contained no evidence of lawbreaking, major hypocrisy or tawdry scandal."<sup>39</sup>

Because there was no comparable "leaked" content about Trump, the press uses of the stolen Democratic material created a disequilibrium. To level the balance beam in 2016, imagine that interlopers

---

38 Eric Lipton, David E. Sanger, and Scott Shane, "The Perfect Weapon: How Russian Cyberpower Invaded the US," *New York Times*, December 13, 2016, <https://nyti.ms/2jASgpt>.

39 David Leonhardt, "A French Lesson for the American Media," *New York Times*, May 9, 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2pq5Jjn>.

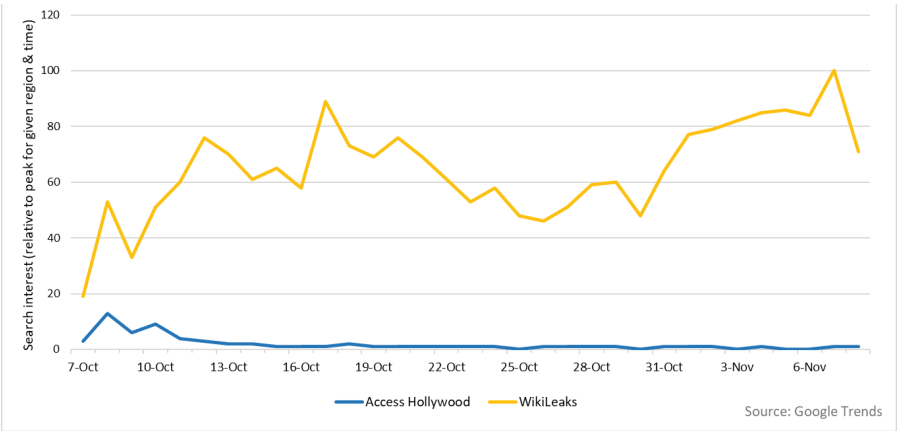


FIGURE 1. Google Trends for “Access Hollywood” and “WikiLeaks” from October 7 to November 8, 2016, United States.

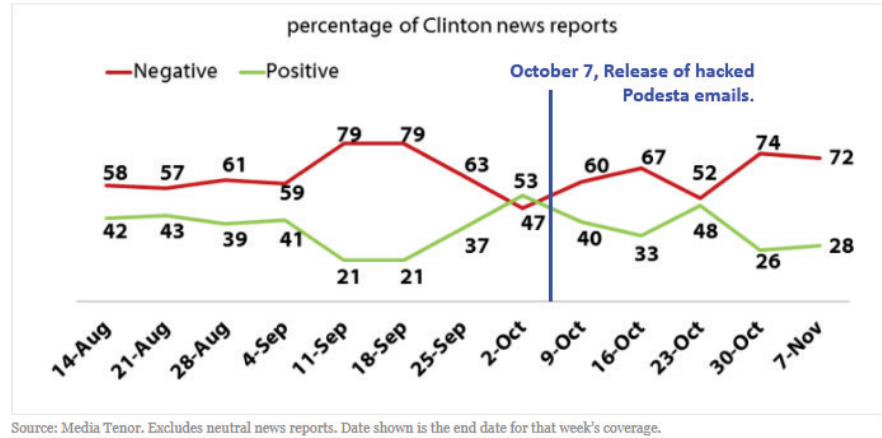


FIGURE 2. Tone of Clinton’s coverage, by week. Reprinted with permission from: Thomas E. Patterson, “News Coverage of the 2016 General Election: How the Press Failed the Voters,” Shorenstein Center, Harvard Kennedy School, December 7, 2016. I have added the vertical line signaling October 7.

uncovered and released all of the 2015–2016 emails found in the account of Donald Trump, Jr. Under these circumstances, in the final debate, voters would have learned that an “executive at Vkontakte, or VK, Russia’s equivalent to Facebook, emailed Donald Trump Jr. and social media director Dan Scavino in January [2016] and again in November [2016] . . . , offering to help promote Trump’s campaign to its nearly 100 million users.”<sup>40</sup> Russian ties could have become a dominant narrative with the revelation that Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner, Donald Trump, Jr., and then-Trump-campaign-chair Paul Manafort met with a Russian government–tied lawyer at Trump Tower in June 2016 after being promised information hostile to Clinton, a promise that elicited an emailed response from the Republican nominee’s namesake that enthused, “If it’s what you say I love it.”

#### RESPONSES OF THE SOCIAL AND LEGACY MEDIA TO THEIR 2016 MISTAKES

The fact that it took the social media platforms more than a year to figure out what went wrong in 2016 does not inspire confidence in their ability to prevent a sequel. Nonetheless, in the intervening period, they have undertaken a number of reforms. By blocking troll access to the platforms and notifying users of their past exposure to accounts, a first change prevents illegitimate sources from aggregating the like-minded and amplifying congenial content. So for example, in addition to shutting down known IRA troll accounts, Facebook reports that it “now block[s] millions of fake accounts each day as people try to create them—and before they’ve done any harm,”<sup>41</sup> and Twitter “notified all 1.4 million affected users that they saw election disinformation.”<sup>42</sup> The latter platform has shut down known IRA troll accounts as well.

By requiring disclosure, a second reform makes it more difficult for a source to obscure her identity. Accordingly, Facebook is requiring that those who manage pages with a large U.S. audience undergo a two-factor authentication process that confirms their primary home

---

40 Rosalind S. Helderman, Anton Troianovski, and Tom Hamburger, “Russian Social Media Executive Sought to Help Trump Campaign in 2016, Emails Show,” *Washington Post*, December 7, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/russian-social-media-executive-sought-to-help-trump-campaign-in-2016-emails-show/2017/12/07/31ec8d90-db9a-11e7-b859-fb0995360725\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.f3f9490e2f7b](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/russian-social-media-executive-sought-to-help-trump-campaign-in-2016-emails-show/2017/12/07/31ec8d90-db9a-11e7-b859-fb0995360725_story.html?utm_term=.f3f9490e2f7b).

41 Facebook Newsroom, “Russian ads released by Congress,” *Facebook*, May 10, 2018, <https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2018/05/russian-ads-released-by-congress/>.

42 Twitter Public Policy, “Update on Twitter’s review of the 2016 U.S. election,” *Twitter*, January 31, 2018, [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).

location. And in late 2017, the Federal Election Commission began requiring that political ads containing images or videos on Facebook include disclaimers indicating who paid for them.<sup>43</sup>

A third change attempts to minimize the capacity to target susceptible users with posts that elicit baser emotions such as anger, fear, and prejudice. Although Facebook has not revealed which terms have been removed from its system, it reports having sunset one-third of the targeting categories exploited by the trolls to sow discord in the populace.<sup>44</sup>

A fourth reform prevents foreign nationals from buying candidate ads. Google, for instance, will ask prospective advertisers to submit their IRS employer identification numbers, in the case of political action committees, and, in the case of individuals, to provide government-issued identification and a Social Security number. A final change entails offering supplementary contextual information about problematic posts. Toward this end, Facebook now algorithmically surfaces fact-checks alongside popular content that has been debunked by one of its partnering organizations, among them FactCheck.org, which I co-founded.

Because they do not appear to be backed by government resolve, the adequacy of these efforts has been called into question by Facebook's former chief security officer, Alex Stamos, who noted in late August 2018 that "America's adversaries believe that it is still both safe and effective to attack U.S. democracy using American technologies and the freedoms we cherish. . . . [T]he United States has broadcast to the world that it doesn't take these issues seriously and that any perpetrators of information warfare against the West will get, at most, a slap on the wrist."<sup>45</sup>

At the same time, on the journalistic front, there is little publicly available evidence that major news outlets have engaged the question, "What should reporters and editors have done differently?" Some, notably writers at *The New York Times*, including Leonhardt, Lipton, Sanger, Shane, and Amy Chozick, have acknowledged the ways in which U.S. journalists did Russia's bidding. Chozick, for example, recalls about the *Times*' decision to "confirm" and "contextualize" the hacked Podesta emails on October 7, 2016: "I didn't argue that it

---

43 April Glaser, "Political Ads on Facebook Now Need to Say Who Paid for Them," *Slate*, December 17, 2017, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/future\\_tense/2017/12/18/political\\_ads\\_on\\_facebook\\_now\\_need\\_to\\_say\\_who\\_paid\\_for\\_them.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2017/12/18/political_ads_on_facebook_now_need_to_say_who_paid_for_them.html).

44 Facebook Newsroom, "Russian ads."

45 Alex Stamos, "It's Too Late to Protect the 2018 Elections. But Here's How the U.S. Can Prepare for 2020," *Lawfare*, August 22, 2018, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/its-too-late-protect-2018-elections-heres-how-us-can-prepare-2020>.

appeared the emails were stolen by a hostile foreign government that had staged an attack on our electoral system. I didn't push to hold off on publishing them until we could have a less harried discussion. I didn't raise the possibility that we'd become puppets in Putin's shadowy campaign. I chose the byline."<sup>46</sup> She was not alone. As the *Times*' Leonhardt noted, "The overhyped coverage of the hacked emails was the media's worst mistake in 2016—one sure to be repeated if not properly understood."<sup>47</sup> I agree. Unfortunately, there is no publicly available evidence that in 2020 the press is prepared to prevent a repeat of its ill-fated 2016 performance.

## CONCLUSION

Although "forewarned is forearmed" is a truism that has been around since the 16th century when it took the form of the Latin injunction "praemonitus, praemunitus," like many axioms, it carries a useful caution. A convincing body of evidence suggests that the 2016 election climate was fundamentally changed by imbalances in messaging created by Russian exploitation of the vulnerabilities within social media and mainstream journalism. Whether the United States is susceptible to a rerun in 2020 depends on the vigilance of the social media platforms, journalists, and the U.S. citizenry. Each needs to find the wherewithal to translate forewarned into forearmed.

---

46 Amy Chozick, *Chasing Hillary* (New York: Harper, 2018), Kindle Loc 5237 of 6078.

47 Leonhardt, "French Lesson."