



DISINFORMATION: DEMOCRACY DISRUPTOR

What?

Disinformation - False information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth

Origin: Russian

Source: Miriam Webster

Who?

Sock Puppet – Fake online “people” that exist solely for the purpose of influencing, disrupting and pushing views. Sock puppets are created and maintained by people and often referred to as trolls.

Russia's IRA (Internet Research Agency)

The IRA is a state-sponsored digital marketing company based in St. Petersburg, Russia. Founded in 2009 the IRA formalized operations, and by 2017 had an operational budget of \$12.2 million, which included a staff of 1000+ paid bloggers who worked around the clock as sock puppets.



Extensive IRA Reach

- ✓ 126 million Facebook users
- ✓ 20 million Instagram users
- ✓ 10.4 million tweets posted
- ✓ Over 1,000 videos distributed via YouTube

Source: New Knowledge, The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency, 2018.



Thirteen Russian nationals in connection with the IRA were indicted by the Special Counsel on 2/16/2018. This includes oligarch, Yevgeniy Prigozhin, also known as "Putin's Chef."

How? The IRA Toolkit for Disruption

Create Content

IRA staff create Facebook pages, Instagram, Twitter accounts that **mimic activist groups** from across the political spectrum. In 2016, some of the most shared accounts were Blacktivist, Army of Jesus and LGBT United. None of these groups were real. They existed as **social media ecosystems**, each with 10's if not 100's of thousands of American followers who thought they were interacting with other like-minded people.

Target Audiences

IRA staff continuously monitor American **news and culture** to identify **volatile events**. Sock puppets then propagate social media pushes, targeting specific audiences on **divisive issues** such as gun rights, immigration and incidents of police brutality.

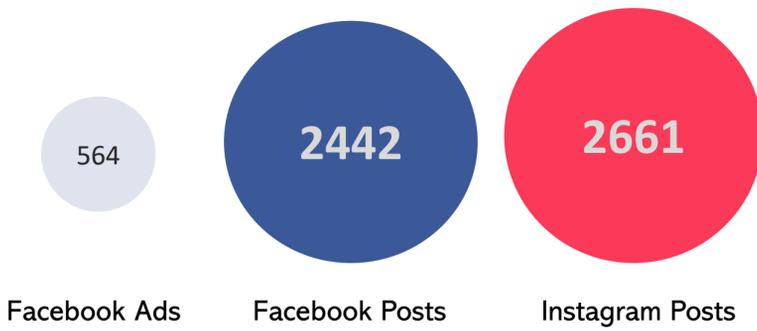
Reach Millions

IRA-created Facebook pages and posts were shared **31 million times**, liked **39 million times**, and generated **3.5 million** comments.

Source: Computational Propaganda Project, "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the US, 2012-2018", 2018.

Beware the Rise of Instagram!

In 2016, there were more IRA disinformation posts on Instagram than Facebook. Instagram is fertile ground for viral spreading of sensational images that appeal to our emotions. And visuals are easier for non-English speaking agents (Russian sock puppets) to create.



Monthly Posts by IRA Staff in 2016

Source: Computational Propaganda Project, "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the US, 2012-2018", 2018.

Why? Incite, Divide, Suppress

- ✦ Identify and intensify divisions among more liberal audiences
- ✦ Push pro-Trump messages to conservative audiences
- ✦ Sow distrust of government among Black and Latino audiences
- ✦ Reinforce voter apathy or voting for 3rd party candidates
- ✦ Spread disinformation on election day about polling days and times, vote-by-text



Russia-based sock puppets raised money and planned live rallies in US locations. Often IRA-coordinated events were planned and timed so that members of rival groups would physically collide.

Source: Sam Harris, "Making Sense Podcast", "#145 - The Information War, A Conversation with Renee DiResta", 2019.



What can we do?

As individuals...

- Educate ourselves – the technology is moving at a rapid pace and is becoming more sophisticated every day.
- Promote digital literacy among our friends, families and neighbors.
- Learn to recognize fake accounts and report them.
- **PAUSE** before sharing.

As activists...

- Inform group members to the realities and dangers of disinformation.
- Engage state legislators and pursue state-level protections against election disinformation, such as California's Office of Elections Cybersecurity.
- Advocate for the passage of HR 5919, Defend Against Disinformation and Aggression Act.
- Insist that candidates for 2020 talk about solutions and their plans for America to address Russia's "warm war" of disinformation.
- Demand that the topic of disinformation gets "on the table" for candidate platforms and priorities.