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<https://www.wsj.com/articles/only-a-fraction-of-russian-troll-accounts-have-been-made-public-by-social-media-giants-1525448056>

TECH

Much Remains Unknown About Russian-Troll Accounts on Social-Media Giants

Facebook, Twitter, others have wiped Russian content off their platforms, but they have disclosed few details amid legal, privacy risks



Representatives for Facebook, Twitter and Google appeared in congressional hearings last fall. PHOTO: YIN BOGU/ZUMA PRESS

By *Shelby Holliday and Rob Barry*

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Major U.S. tech companies have yet to provide to the public all the details of Russian troll activity on their platforms despite their pledge to tackle the problem and pressure from some lawmakers, *The Wall Street Journal* has found.

Six months after social-media firms agreed in congressional hearings to work with lawmakers investigating Russian efforts to interfere in U.S. politics, many specifics about the foreign interference operation remain undisclosed.

“We know something happened, but the public doesn’t know exactly what,” said Clint Watts, a former FBI counterterrorism agent who now tracks Russian propaganda.

The companies said they have largely wiped the Russian content from the internet—an effort that included deleting from their platforms thousands of social-media accounts, photos, videos and podcasts tied to an alleged Russian influence operation. Facebook Inc. [FB 1.34% ▲](#) created a tool allowing users to find out whether they liked or followed accounts backed by Russian trolls, and Twitter Inc. [TWTR 1.11% ▲](#) notified over one million users who had engaged with Kremlin-linked handles. Social-media firms also turned over reams of information to authorities, they said.

Releasing details publicly, however, carries privacy and legal risks, in part because many ordinary Americans were caught up in the Russian efforts, legal experts said. The companies could also be subject to defamation lawsuits if they wrongly claim accounts are Russia-linked, the experts added.

Facebook, Twitter and Alphabet Inc.'s [GOOGL](#) Google said they are working with investigators probing the alleged election interference, and the companies pointed to their previous statements on the issue, including Congress' role in the matter.

“We think Congress is best placed to use the information we and others provide to inform the public comprehensively and completely,” Facebook’s general counsel said last September.

Some lawmakers say the companies are uniquely qualified to release the information, which comes from the platforms they own and control.

“It is deeply in the public interest and it’s in the technology companies’ own interest to be proactive and transparent and not wait until the government comes calling or hounds them for information,” said Rep. Adam Schiff (D., Calif.)—whose House panel has investigated the Russian campaign—in an interview.



A display showing a social media post stands during a Senate hearing last fall. PHOTO: ANDREW HARRER/BLOOMBERG NEWS

Well over 100 million Americans were likely exposed to Kremlin-aligned propaganda online, the major tech companies have said. In February, the U.S. indicted 16 people and organizations associated with the Internet Research Agency, a St. Petersburg-based troll farm with ties to the Kremlin, for meddling in the American election. Russia has denied having interfered in the election.

Much of the propaganda was removed from social media sites before those moves were made.

Sen. James Lankford (R., Okla.), who serves on a committee investigating Russia’s interference effort, said in an interview that Americans needed to see the propaganda so they could learn to tell it apart from legitimate news.

The identities of many of the Russian-linked accounts remain unknown to the public. Twitter said it found more than 50,000 “Russian-linked” accounts, but the names of fewer than 3,000 have been revealed. Facebook said it shut down 470 Russian troll accounts, but only about 20 have been named by Congress. Google hasn’t publicly revealed any Russia-linked channels it says posted 1,108 videos to YouTube.

Facebook in December set up a tool allowing users to check whether they liked or followed Russian troll accounts, and Twitter said it notified 1.4 million people who interacted with Russian-controlled handles.

While Facebook’s tool shows users if they liked or followed Russian-backed Facebook pages and Instagram accounts, it excludes other relationships, like friendships and messages—as well as information about as many as 180 fake profiles set up by the troll farm, the Journal found.

For example, the tool doesn't show anything about alleged black activist Erika Dixon, according to several people who communicated with the account—which used Facebook to drum up support for pages and groups now believed by investigators to be Russian-controlled.

The Dixon persona also emailed from an address at Black4Black.info, a defunct website once registered to a Moscow street address, according to a message reviewed by the Journal and records from cyberforensics company DomainTools. A Twitter account in Dixon's name using her Facebook profile picture was identified by Congress as controlled by the troll farm. Both the Twitter and Facebook accounts have been closed.

A Facebook spokesman said the company never claimed the tool detailed every interaction and relationship. "We've always been explicit that the tool would show people the [Internet Research Agency] pages and accounts they liked or followed," he said. He declined to comment further.

The Facebook tool's limits leave "the public in the dark about the actual accounts through which they were being targeted," said Jonathan Albright, research director of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University.

Accounts belonging to Skwad55, a podcast group whose racially charged episodes encourage blacks to protest and form their own "authority," were taken down by Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and social blogging service Tumblr, which publicly said the group was tied to a "state-sponsored" campaign in March. Tumblr confirmed to the Journal that the account was connected to the Internet Research Agency. Operators of the account couldn't be reached for comment.

As recently as last month, Skwad55's episodes were still available on the group's accounts on YouTube and music-sharing platform SoundCloud.

One Charlotte, N.C. hip-hop artist who communicated with Skwad55 said he had no idea the podcast was linked to Russian propaganda.

"Wow, this is news to me," said Jason Watkins, who gave the group permission to use his music in 2016. He said he was skeptical about the claimed ties to the Kremlin, however, because the man he spoke with didn't have a Russian accent.

Both SoundCloud and Google, which owns YouTube, removed the podcast for violating their terms of use after the Journal inquired about them.

Not all firms wiped the Russian material off their platforms. Instead of deleting the 944 accounts suspected of ties to the troll farm, Reddit Inc. is allowing users to browse their roughly 14,000 posts.

"We are doing this to allow moderators, investigators, and all of you to see their account histories for yourselves," CEO Steve Huffman wrote in a post.

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