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TECH

Russian Trolls Weigh In on Roseanne Barr and Donald Trump Jr.

Newly identified Twitter accounts were until recently still tweeting out politically divisive messages as midterm elections approach



From left, General Counsel for Twitter Sean Edgett, Vice President and General Counsel for Facebook Colin Stretch, and Senior Vice President and General Counsel for Google Kent Walker testify during before the House (Select) Intelligence Committee on Nov. 1, 2017. The hearing was called "Russia Investigative Task Force: Social Media Companies." PHOTO: ALEX WONG/GETTY IMAGES

By *Georgia Wells, Rob Barry and Shelby Holliday*

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With U.S. midterm elections approaching, Russian trolls found ways to remain active on Twitter [TWTR +3.92%▲](#) well into 2018, trying to rile up the American electorate with tweets on everything from Roseanne Barr's firing to Donald Trump Jr.'s divorce, a Wall Street Journal analysis found.

Newly identified Russian trolls posted politically divisive messages on Twitter as recently as last month, hitting on a wide array of hot-button issues, according to a Journal analysis of recently revealed investigative documents and Twitter data.

The new tranche of about 1,100 account names, released Monday by Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee, brings the total number of publicly known Russian troll-farm-operated accounts to more than 3,800. Last month, the Journal reported that the identities of many of the Russian accounts hadn't been publicly revealed.

The newly identified users posted more than 2.9 million tweets and retweets, bringing the total amount of Russian troll farm content on the platform to more than 8 million tweets and retweets, the Journal's analysis found.

"By releasing this Twitter data, we hope that researchers will continue their important work exposing any additional Russian operators who used similar tactics and themes," Rep. Adam Schiff (D., Calif.) said in a statement.

Republican Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said Russia interferes in elections and spreads propaganda internationally "to create instability and doubt in governments, because they believe they benefit from the chaos

and the loss of confidence in U.S. institutions.” He added: “It is important for social-media companies to publicize this content so the American people know it’s fake. I’d rather the government not take the responsibility to expose this.”

At least 17 of the Twitter accounts revealed by investigators were active this year, the Journal found. Several targeted politically and racially charged issues consistent with the way other trolls also attempted to stoke division inside the U.S.

For instance, KaniJJackson, which featured #Impeach45, #Resist and #GunReformNow in its profile, and had more than 33,000 followers, posted several messages about Roseanne Barr, whose ABC sitcom was canceled last month after the star sent a racist tweet about an aide of former President Barack Obama. “Has Trump congratulated Roseanne on her tweets yet ?” the account wrote on May 29. Minutes later, it wrote: “I wonder if Trump now plans to nominate Roseanne Barr fo Fed chair.”

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The account wokeluisa, which had more than 55,000 followers, repeatedly tweeted about the controversy over certain NFL players kneeling during the national anthem. Last September it wrote: “Trying to figure out how #TakeAKnee is

un-American but letting people die because of lack of health insurance is patriotic.” That message was retweeted more than 29,000 times.

Foreign interference on social-media platforms has been a flashpoint since the 2016 election. The Kremlin-aligned Internet Research Agency ran a propaganda campaign in an attempt to sow discord in the U.S. before and after Election Day, prosecutors say. While many of the posts favored Republican candidate Donald Trump and targeted his opponent, Democrat Hillary Clinton, they covered the political spectrum, and intelligence officials believe the larger goal was to stoke division within the U.S. and weaken the country’s institutions.

People connected to the IRA have previously denied ties to election interference efforts. An entity accused of funding the organization, Concord Management, pleaded not guilty in May. Moscow has denied any government effort to influence the 2016 election.

Twitter and other tech companies, like Facebook Inc., and Alphabet Inc.’s YouTube, have said they are cooperating with federal probes and taking steps to combat foreign interference campaigns.

The efforts are ongoing. Twitter has continued to find and suspend IRA accounts in recent months, including 41 since January, according to a person familiar with the matter.

The platform has now suspended all of the IRA-linked handles that were released this week for violating its rules against spam. It declined to comment on when those accounts were suspended.

“Twitter has long said we would welcome committees releasing the information we have shared with them,” a spokeswoman for Twitter said. The company didn’t release the information earlier, she said, because the tweets were part of an investigation.

The persistence of Russian accounts provides an extreme example of Twitter’s struggle to consistently and accurately police its more than 330 million monthly users. Twitter only discovered many of the IRA accounts on its platform after cross-checking IRA-backed accounts that other platforms, such as Facebook, found on their sites, according to a person familiar with the matter.

Investigators and researchers say it is hard to quantify the scope of Russian influence efforts on Twitter and other platforms. But it affected even Twitter Chief Executive Jack Dorsey, who between late 2016 and mid-2017 shared at least 17 tweets from a Russian troll who went by CrystalJohnson on Twitter, the Journal’s analysis found.

The tweets from the Russian account that Mr. Dorsey shared touched on topics including Bob Marley's son converting a prison into a place to grow marijuana and former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who first sparked the anthem controversy to make a statement on the treatment of African-Americans in the U.S.

Many of the accounts tweeted tens and even hundreds of thousands of times, the Journal found. CovfefeNationUS, which went by the name Trump Nation, posted more than 166,000 messages and retweets to the platform.

Not all IRA posts mentioned political issues; some included feel-good content and local news articles that academics say were likely an effort to attract followers.

Dozens of the newly flagged accounts also participated in disinformation efforts detailed in a February Page One article in the Journal.

The Journal's analysis stemmed from a review of about 7,000 tweets and retweets by the users controlled by the IRA. Most of the messages reviewed by the Journal aren't publicly available. Before the accounts' names were released, Twitter suspended them, effectively wiping most of their messages from the internet.

—Robert McMillan and Samarth Bansal contributed to this article.

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Corrections & Amplifications

The Twitter account wokeluisa was misspelled as wokelisa in an earlier version of this article. (June 19, 2018)

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