

Beware: Disguised as Your Community, Suspicious Groups May Target You Right Now for Election Interference Later

Russian Voter Suppression Began with the Promotion of Racial Identity and Cultural Affinity
08/08/2018 (Memo)

Project DATA (Digital Ad Tracking & Analysis)
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Just a day before the Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on foreign interference on social media, Facebook removed 32 Pages and accounts involved in coordinated actions. One of the groups, *Resisters*, was connected to the Facebook Pages of legitimate groups for coordination and built interest in “No Unite Right 2-DC,” a counter-rally against the “Unite Right” event scheduled on August 10 (Gleicher, July 31, 2018).



Event coordination by Resisters

However, Facebook and others viewed this as another example of a disinformation campaign designed by malicious actors to deepen division in the public; perhaps that is correct.

However, was the sole purpose to sew discord? Perhaps not.

We observed that malicious actors' Event Promotions on Facebook were used to identify targets, especially nonwhite voters. Later, malicious actors attempted to suppress their votes by targeting the same people with candidate attacks, third-party candidate promotions, and turnout demobilization.

Project DATA examined groups and targets of about 3,500 Facebook/Instagram ads paid by the Internet Research Agency, a Kremlin-linked Russian political operative. The data was released by the House Intelligence Committee on May 10, 2018.

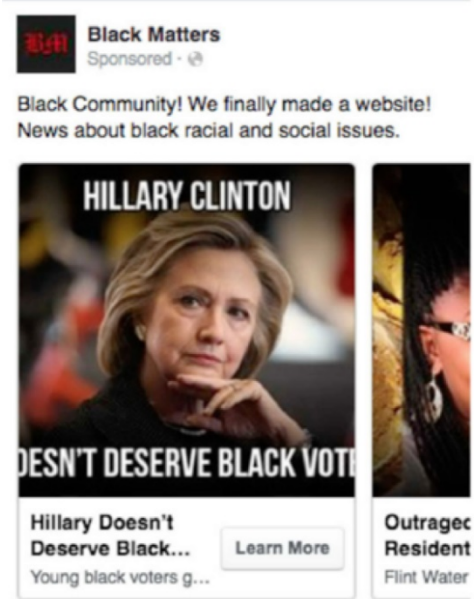
This memo highlights the patterns of voter suppression tactics utilized by Russians on Facebook. (A full report of the analysis of Russian ads on Facebook/Instagram will be available soon)

Key Findings

- **Event Promotion, such as organizing rallies or counter-rallies, overwhelmingly targeted nonwhites, liberals, or likely-Clinton voters.**

If Russian disinformation campaigns are solely designed to divide the public and demonstrate instability in the American democratic system, we should observe that these campaigns targeted both extremes; thus, the target of ads for rallies or counter-rallies would be randomly distributed along both ideological extremes. However, this is *not* the case.

Out of 234 unique events linked to Russian Facebook ads, 205 events targeted nonwhite liberals or likely-Clinton voters generating 1,262,068 impressions. Most of the ads—1,037,072 impressions—were bought before the 2016 election. On the other hand, 29 events targeted whites, conservatives, or likely-Trump voters, generating 225,088 impressions.



For example, Black Matters promoted a counter-rally against the group White Power’s Confederate Rally at Stone Mountain. Later, targeting African Americans, the same group ran anti-Clinton campaigns and promoted news stories on their Facebook Page.

- **Russian groups appeared to promote racial identity and affinity with benign messages targeting nonwhites. However, closer to the election, the same groups ran campaigns to suppress their votes.**

Months before the November 2016 election, Russian groups appeared to identify and target nonwhite voters with benign messages promoting racial identity, community, and affinity. Williams and Calvin, for example, allegedly promoted black media and culture while groups like Nefertiti’s Community promoted art and design and Blacktivist focused on racial affinity.

However, these groups later appeared to interfere in the elections with voter suppression messages and targeted the *same* individuals.

Voter suppression works by dividing a candidate’s coalition by attacking the candidate they generally support (candidate attack), sending messages meant to demobilize turnout, or by promoting a third-party candidate.

Examples below illustrate how Russian groups early on promoted racial identity, community, and affinity and then later engaged in voter suppression campaigns that targeted nonwhite voters.

Candidate Attack



[Left] Black is beautiful!
Created: 01/14/16

[Right] A word of truth
Created: 08/04/16

Targets: African American (US); National Museum of American History, Maya Angelou, Mumia Abu-Jamal, The Raw Story or Mother Jones

Turnout Suppression

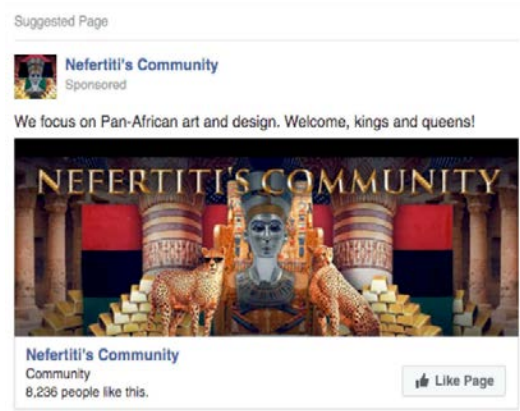


[Left] Black girl magic!
Created: 11/01/16

Targets: Martin Luther King, Jr; African-American Civil Rights Movement (1954-68); African American history or Malcom X



[Right] Boycott the election. Don't go to vote.
Created: 11/08/16



[Left] We focus on Pan-African art and design.
Created: 10/17/16



[Right] He didn't vote
Created: 11/15/16

Target: Pan-Africanism, Black Enterprise or Black

Third Party Candidate Promotion



[Left] Guinness record for largest male afro
Created: 10/18/16

[Right] Vote Stein
Created: 11/03/16

Targets: Pan-Africanism, African-American Civil Rights Movement (1954-68), African-American history or Black

- **Our analysis also indicates that overall, the volume of seemingly non-political ads was roughly twice as large as the number of political ads run between February and July 2016. However, non-political ads drastically dropped after the primaries were over and replaced by political ads.**

This trend also indicates that non-political ads were perhaps used to identify, recruit, and organically engage with targets. Voter suppression tactics were deployed later, closer to the elections.

* A full report of the analysis of Russian ads on Facebook/Instagram will be available soon. Contact Young Mie Kim at ymkim5@wisc.edu for questions.