**The United States of Vulnerability: Russian Meddling in Public Opinion**

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**Abstract**

Did Russia use social media to influence public opinion in the US around the 2016 election, why would it, and why would it be an especially effective strategy? This paper argues that Russia used social media platforms as a means to pursue information warfare strategies with which they could sow discord and spread misinformation in the U.S., both before and after the 2016 election, with the ideal end result of a Trump presidency and a more authoritarian friendly populace. Russia is no stranger to using hybrid warfare to prevent further diffusion of democracy and to protect its interests in its own region, however past uses of its information warfare have not been as publicly documented as the latest interference in the United States. After social media giant Facebook’s testimony before congress specific examples of the types of misinformation and propaganda that were spread and their reach are now widely accessible. This paper will analyze these attempts at influencing the average American citizen for their potential to stir up authoritarianism through their use of group threat and other strategies for provoking the response. The significance of this research lies not in some exaggerated spin of the facts that paints the Trump victory as a consequence of Russian meddling, which no facts suggest, but in the revelation that despite being painted as some bastion of democracy the United States is more vulnerable to anti-democratic influence than we would like to believe.

**Introduction**

The 2016 U.S. Presidential election was a spectacle. As candidates battled for the chance to be a nominee there was no shortage of commentary on social media, and when it came down to Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton there seemed to be even more vitriol and coverage than at the start of the race. Social media users at this time saw the meteoric rise of false news stories that were generally not intended as parody, and political internet memes which were typically pictures of a relevant topic with disparaging or positive remarks about a certain idea or person. After the alarm bells were rang by government officials at the Department of Homeland Security about probable Russian interference in the election through hacking and influencing public opinion there started to be some scrutiny of the origin of content on social media (Joint Statement, 2016). There was then a question of whether or not many of the people and pages encountered on social media were of Russian origin.

Over time the question of Russian interference started to become a hot topic. People on social media sites like Twitter were making accusations about Russian “bots” infiltrating the site, and others on Facebook were speculating wildly about what was fake news and what were legitimate links. The conversation about possible election interference was politicized and almost turned into a partisan issue entirely because sensationalism seemed to frame it as Russia being at fault entirely for the outcome of the election. It was thought that the Russian government was pursuing information warfare by operating a business whose employees pretended to be Americans on sites like Facebook and Twitter. There were endless theories about why they would be stirring up trouble. There was denial, sensation, and misinformation flooding the internet. In summation, at the time things were very muddled for a variety of reasons.

In this paper I seek to clear things up. Having the benefit of hindsight, we are able to discern a number of details that were not easily recognized during the election. This paper will serve to answer a three-part question: Did Russia use social media to influence public opinion in the US around the 2016 election, why would it, and why would it be an especially effective strategy?

I will start by providing the evidence of interference that was presented by social media companies. To provide much needed context I will review some important details and concepts. I will discuss authoritarian regimes to give some background on Russia’s state and interests in comparison to democracies, and then define authoritarianism as well as discuss the ways it can be activated so as to prime a later discussion of the concept in relation to the weakening of democratic institutions. I will then look at why Russia would interfere based upon its tendency to utilize information warfare and history of interference in places like Ukraine. Finally, I will analyze the specific advertisements used for their ability to sow discord and to awake a latent tendency in many Americans that makes their strategy so effective, authoritarianism, and why doing so would be beneficial for Russia. There is no aim to assess whether it won or lost the presidency of any party, but the ultimate find is that while positive posts were made for both candidates, this strategy could have been only beneficial to one candidate and has the potential to influence citizens towards authoritarian attitudes.

**Evidence of Social Media Interference**

On November 1st, the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence held an open hearing with several social media companies on the subject of Russian interference in U.S. public opinion, mostly regarding the 2016 election. While not the first public confirmation that Russian operatives were attempting to influence social media (Facebook had publicly confirmed and gave some details before the hearing), it was by far the most telling in terms of the scope of this operation. This highly anticipated hearing not only was important in that it included a list of over 2,500 Twitter handles that had been deactivated for their links to the infamous Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) and information about their reach/content, but that it released a trove of actual Facebook advertisements used and their metadata as well. It was finally officially confirmed; Russians had infiltrated the U.S. social media sphere.

For some context, the IRA is a mysterious company from St. Petersburg that has been the subject of several undercover journalistic operations, but itself has never revealed what its purpose is. Special Counsel for the United States Department of Justice Robert Mueller, however, identified it in his indictment of the agency on February 16th, 2018 as being a group tasked with the purpose of interfering in the political workings and elections of other countries. Mueller has, at this time, presented no direct discernable ties to the Russian government, and it is unlikely that it would admit to any. The agency has been rumored to be under the control of close Putin ally Yevgeniy Prigozhin, and in the indictment Mueller directly identifies Prigozhin as the one who funds the agency. The Russian nationals charged in the indictment are alleged to have interfered in electoral processes, traveled to the US to gather information, and use their social media accounts to address divisive social issues (U.S v. IRA, 2017).

Twitter has become a staple in the social media lives of many American citizens. The short word count allows for meaningful updates and is useful to disseminate political messages in a quick and concise fashion. According to Twitter, during the ten-week period preceding the 2016 election it identified 50,258 automated accounts that were Russian-linked and posting about what they deemed election-related content, producing about 2.12 million automated tweets that were visible on the feeds of 454.7 million accounts (2018). The biggest find, however, is the accounts whose tweets were not entirely automated. Although these accounts are fewer, now sitting at 3,814 as of the latest official Twitter blog update on the situation, they were more believable because of their legitimate content (Twitter, 2018). These accounts posed as activist Americans, new outlets, Americans with strong beliefs, and they interacted with (some even harassed) other members of Twitter like journalists and celebrities/politicians (Twitter, 2018).

It is entirely possible that an avid political Twitter user came across one of these “trolls” as they are so affectionately called now. They had usernames ranging from BlacktivistDave to March\_For\_Trump, 30ToMarsFandom to Pati\_Cooper (Russia Investigative Task Force, 2017). While many of the names sound valid enough, they give themselves away to the discerning eye often times by their singular focus on one issue, generally not tweeting about anything else outside of the topic range. Their replies are typically interactions with whatever side of the ideological spectrum they intend to represent, but they have also caused a stir with those who oppose their “views”. Some of the suspended accounts participated in voter suppression behaviors such as encouraging voters to send in their votes by text, which was and is not a valid form of voting (Testimony of Sean J. Edgett).

Although it is impossible verify without the credentials to access Twitter data, it is possible there are still many more of these trolls out there that have not been caught in the net. It is possible to go through the replies to popular political tweets and find accounts who possess many of the same characteristics the suspended accounts had. Twitter acknowledges that this could be the case. They have downplayed the overall effect of these fake accounts on the overall volume of election tweets, but they have acknowledged publicly that their algorithms are not perfect. When it comes to the internet, finding where accounts originate is not always a simple task. It is fairly easy for an average person to use a VPN, or Virtual Private Network, to obscure their location from companies. Several commercial companies offer this as an option to users now at low cost. The issue of what exactly “election related content” is presents another problem for identifying trolls. The exact criteria for what constitutes election related content has not been made clear at this time.

Facebook is a massive platform that was used in a variety of ways like Twitter, but the primary use was through paid advertisements and the creation of Pages given the restricted nature of communication through the platform. Regular user profiles make it chore to seek out posts by people who are not connected with the user or one of their connections. Facebook Pages, unlike the typical account, are generally for things like bands, companies, activist groups, and are a great way to reach a larger number of people than a typical user profile allows because their posts can be shared to anyone and advertise to anyone. Anyone can create a page, and anyone can buy advertisements so long as they are not found to be in violation of the rules, one of which is that to buy an advertisement the real identity of the advertiser must be used when purchasing it.

Fake accounts have been made on every type of online site, and Facebook is no stranger to this. The type of fake accounts they were used to dealing with, however, had never been accounts used by foreign agents to sow discord in another country and had not been created to buy advertisements (Russia Investigative Task Force, 2017). It would seem that fake identities were not on the radar of concern to the company in regard to advertisements and pages of a political nature, and would explain how they were overlooked in Facebook’s advertisement vetting process. Facebook’s representative admitted that from June of 2015 to August of 2017 the fake pages of the Internet Research Agency had created roughly 3,300 advertisements with a budget of around $100,000 to promote these pages to a select audience based on certain criteria of their choosing (Russia Investigative Task Force, 2017). These advertisements were shown on the site to users as they had not been detected to be fraudulent. Their reach was determined by the aforementioned criteria which could be anything from a geographic location, age range, or specific interest as well as the budget allotted for each advertisement. They were able to select the type of engagement they wanted to pay for, set a maximum amount of money they paid for each engagement, and see the analytics behind the advertisement’s performance (Buying Facebook ads, 2018). These options allowed the fake pages to edit their choices and perfect their strategy to grow the page’s audience. There were more than 80,000 pieces of content posted across the roughly 120 pages created by the Internet Research Agency (Russia Investigative Task Force, 2017). Any piece of content was able to be advertised and promoted on other users’ newsfeed.

One of the more difficult things to track for Facebook was the actual reach of the content of IRA- created pages. In a testimony before the House Intelligence Committee at the Russia Investigative Task Force Open Hearing with Social Media Companies, Facebook representative Colin Stretch explained that due to the ability of users to like, follow, and most importantly share content that the IRA created posts may have reached roughly 126 million people (2017). Information shared from the posts in person or posts created about the information presented by these pages is impossible to track.

**Literature Review**

There are many authoritarian regimes surviving in the contemporary world, but the most notable as of late are Russia and China. Authoritarian regimes are easily identified by a monopolization of authority in the hands of a powerful figure, no accountability to the people, and by the use of censorship or force to control the populace (Vaillant, 2012). Russia and China particularly have modernized and continually advanced their authoritarian regimes to keep up with the changing world. Their economies are growing, and they are becoming ever more integrated into the global community through trade and technological advancements.

Given the continual expansion of technology and modernization of Russia and China, it does come as a surprise for some that these states have not experienced more democratization than they have. President George W. Bush and President Bill Clinton both were proponents of the idea that the internet is essentially a force that brings about democracy (Kalathil and Boas, 2003). It is a popular and widespread sentiment. The spread of information combats the stranglehold authoritarian regimes usually have on information, so many people believe that the more people have access to the internet the faster democracy will come about around the world. This popular idea has, however, not been the truth.

Authoritarian regimes are quite sensitive to the way that democracies around the world diffuse their norms into them. Domestic politics are very often affected by societies that have proximity to them, and it has been shown that there is a strong link between the level of democracy in a surrounding region and a state’s institutions (Gleditsch and Ward, 2006). Regimes know this well, and institute policies to combat democratic diffusion by managing their news and the public’s access to information (Geddes and Zaller, 1989). Regimes often also put effort into supporting other authoritarian regimes nearby in order to keep their sphere of influence non-democratic, so as to further insulate themselves from democracy (Ambrosio, 2009).

The kind of manipulation seen on today’s internet is little different than propaganda of the past with forged documents meant to distort the Soviets’ views of situations abroad and at home (Agursky, 1989). To prevent diffusion in the internet age these regimes use things like censorship, blocking sites outright, using internet police, and promoting state-sponsored bloggers. Authoritarian states defend their use of these measures by claiming that this blocked information is spread by people who only intend to cause chaos within their countries, so they attempt to stir up nationalistic feelings and skepticism of the information (Koesel and Bunce, 2013). When manipulated and censored, the internet is changed from a force of supposed democratization into a tool to promote the interests of the authoritarian state.

There has been an enormous amount of research on the diffusion of democracy, how democracy has been exported to other countries, and how the internet is used as a tool of democracy, but comparatively little research on how authoritarian regimes interfere with democracy to protect their own interests. It is, as previously noted, in the best interest of authoritarian regimes to prevent democracy from spreading to them. Regimes actively work to undermine the stability of democracies through various means, and gaining an understanding of the related concept authoritarianism is vital to understanding a later assertion in this paper that it can be used to achieve Russian interests.

**Authoritarianism**

The study of authoritarianism as a characteristic has been a hot topic in political science for quite some time now. From Nazi Germany to the rise of Donald Trump it has been used to explain many interesting phenomena. One of the original studies in authoritarianism began in the 1930’s, when a large-scale pauperization of the people in Germany was not leading to the socialist revolt that people like Marx would have predicted. Erich Fromm (as cited in Baars and Scheepers, 1993) found that, after categorizing the people into several subtypes, there was an incredible presence of authoritarian types voting for the National Socialist Party (Nazi Party). One of the more popular studies of authoritarianism was the famous study by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson and Sanford (1950) that was intended to measure the authoritarian personality amongst things like ethnocentrism and anti-Semitic beliefs to understand how Nazi Germany became Nazi Germany. It was from this study that we got the now somewhat obsolete F scale, which really only measures right-wing manifestations of authoritarianism and is seen by some as measuring conservatism. Although not particularly in use now because of its flaws, this scale was the starting point for many scales like the RWA scale which measures specifically right-wing authoritarianism.

But what constitutes an authoritarian type? This has remained highly consistent even as the literature has evolved. Authoritarians in general are identified as having a personality type that is indicated by submission to powerful figures and being fearful of unfamiliar groups and change (Kirscht and Dillehay, 1967). Oesterreich (2005) uses a similar description but adds in rigid behavior that is intended to minimize risk and avoid change as well as conformation to established values. One might see now how it is related to the German case. A strong authority came to the German people when they were economically downtrodden and promised to restore the Germans to their rightful place as well as punish the “outsiders” who were deemed responsible for the situation. It fits well with the authoritarian description.

Authoritarians, in a state of powerlessness, naturally respond positively to strong authority that promises a sense of security they are otherwise lacking due to ambiguity and uncertainty (Oesterreich, 2005). Oesterreich calls this reaction a “flight into security”. In Oesterreich’s work the authoritarian reaction, this flight into security, results in an individual internalizing the norms and values of the authority they find security in. It could be assumed that this is a typical reaction of human beings to stressors. Children run into their parent’s arms at the slightest discomfort. Children, however, often overcome this behavior by a certain age. Authoritarians behave like this with authorities through adulthood because they cannot adequately cope with the ambiguity of life. Neel (1959) showed that in general people scoring higher on authoritarian measures have more difficulty understanding ambiguous material. Duncan and Peterson (2014) added to existing literature on the basic cognitive rigidity of authoritarians, finding support for previous studies about the intolerance to ambiguity of authoritarians. Anything that has potentially conflicting sides is often disregarded by authoritarian types so as not to provoke internal conflicts.

Although Fromm found a widespread support of authoritarians for the Nazi party, it cannot be said that authoritarians have a strong relationship with political interest. Peterson, Duncan, and Pang (2002) found that those scoring higher on the RWA scale of authoritarianism generally have less political interest, less political knowledge, and trusted less the sources that non-authoritarians viewed as more trustworthy. This seems to indicate that those scoring higher on the RWA scale do not care much about politics until a substantial perceived threat arises. Lavine, Lodge, and Freitas (2005) found that a threatened authoritarian is far more likely to choose a partisan message affirming their point in one study. Peterson et al. (2002) suggested that perhaps two things are necessary for an authoritarian’s interest in politics to peak: a social threat, and a strong leader who activates latent aggressive sentiment against this threat.

The interesting thing about threat and authoritarians is that the perceived threat does not have much to do with a real threat to their personal lives. As I will discuss later on, this is what makes authoritarianism very easy to activate in the public. Research by Feldman and Stenner (1997) indicated that authoritarianism is activated not just by threats to the self, but threats to the social and political order in general. Feldman and Stenner’s study made careful note that one’s predisposition to authoritarianism might not change, but its manifestations will be much more pronounced when they are faced with threatening conditions. If high scoring authoritarians perceive a greater ideological distance between themselves, presidential candidates, and parties they become more intolerant and in favor of harsher punitive measures than when this threat is not felt (Feldman and Stenner, 1997). People are also more likely to accept authoritarian rule if faced with not only social threats, but economic inequality as well (Przeworski, 2008). One comforting thing about the type is that those with this tendency can override the tendency when having commitment to democratic institutions, ideals, and conflicting social attachements (Kirscht and Dillehay, 1967).

**Russian Interference: Ukraine vs. U.S.**

When thinking of Russia and its dealings with other countries one often thinks of things like the notorious agents of the KGB. Vladimir Putin, the Russian leader who has alternated between being Prime Minister and President since his rise to power, was even a member of the KGB (Vladimir Putin, 2012). As exciting as spy stories are, the KGB morphed into new organizations after the fall of the Soviet Union. A more relevant example of Russia foreign interference is the recent foray into Ukraine. The details of the struggle between Russia and its former member of the Soviet Union could fill a book, so the most relevant events and details will be presented here. There are several instances of Russia overtly and covertly interfering in the elections of other countries (much like the United States) but Ukraine is the most recent example as of 2018 (Besemeres, 2016).

Although it would not be too off the mark to guess that Russia’s interference in former Soviet Union states is a step towards restoring some sort of control over the former Union, it would be more apt to say that it is a retaliation against the expansion of NATO, and thus the encroachment of Western institutions (Larrabee, Wilson and Gordon, 2015). Returning to the idea of democracy prevention, as previously mentioned, this potential encroachment of democracy is dangerous to the Russian state. To mitigate this possibility the Russian government decided to take overt action. Russia backed their preferred candidate, Viktor Yanukovych, with financial and rhetorical support as well as supplying consultants to assist the very pro-Russia campaign (Freedom House, RFE/RL, and Radio Free Asia, 2009). Yanukovych “won” but was subsequently ousted as the Orange Revolution took place, transparency was demanded, and Viktor Yushchenko was elected (Larrabee et. al, 2015). Without their candidate in power, Russia used alternate means of control to protect their interests in the region. It was not uncommon for Russia to halt oil flow to countries to get what it wanted, having done so in Belarus and Lithuania, so in hindsight when they did it to Ukraine in 2005 it is possible to see that it could have been because of pricing disputes but more likely was a punishment for their candidate being ousted (Freedom House et. al, 2009).

An important activity Russia has engaged in both in Ukraine and other former Soviet states has been the support of Russian language movements, appealing to a Russian heritage in order to get support for pro-Russia policies (Freedom House et. al, 2009). As time went on things continued relatively peacefully, until the Russian annexation of former Ukrainian region Crimea. As far as invasions and annexations of other countries go, Russia did this well. Their combination of propaganda, disinformation, and bloodless takeover was impressive. Unmarked troops crossed the border and took over Ukrainian posts before the rest of the world could react and enact countermeasures, and their propaganda helped to increase support from the Crimean Russian-speakers (Larrabee et. al, 2015). This hybrid warfare, also referred to by some as non-linear warfare, showed the new Russian strategy for dealing with threats in the changing world. While still using traditional tactics, hybrid warfare combines traditional overt and covert military operations with complex online propaganda and disinformation that is spread by people made to look as if they’re not Russian (Larrabee et. al, 2015). Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Geramisov outlined this almost exactly in a speech from 2013, and Putin has made similar remarks about the West possibly attempting this type of warfare by promoting hatred in social media amongst other things (Meister, 2016). Unfortunately, the examples of propaganda and disinformation used in Ukraine and their sources are hard to verify (and in Russian), so I cannot present them here as fact to compare.

After the downing of the plane MH17 in 2014 brought scrutiny on Russia for arming the separatists accused of being at fault, Russia held firm and supplied even more support in an effort to secure Eastern Ukraine. Larrabee et. al (2015) suggest that this was done with an end goal of converting Ukraine into a Federation whose regions could veto NATO membership. The hybrid war continues still.

**Differences in the U.S.**

The situation of Russia’s interference in the U.S. presents many differences from the case of Ukraine, and for very good reasons. Most situations in life are under vastly different circumstances, and this especially holds true for the U.S. and Ukraine. The United States is not a former territory of Russia. While it would not be accurate to say that Russia has little interest here, we are not the most present threat or even one that would be sensible to meet with force. The diffusion of democratic norms and ideals from Ukraine as it moves towards a less managed democracy than Moscow’s are a clear and present danger to the Kremlin’s status quo according to diffusion theory (Gleditsch and Ward, 2006). As such, it would make sense that the Russian government would act in whatever way it could.

Russia’s use of money to influence the Ukrainian election towards a candidate who would maintain the status quo was something they could not really do the same way in the United States. Their overt funding of Yanukovych would have simply not been legal in the United States. The Federal Election Commission on their website clearly and extensively details how U.S. law dictates that foreign nationals cannot donate to any candidate, political committee, or help manage a campaign in any election in any way (Foreign Nationals, 2017). Working around these laws to some extent is possible, I would imagine, but any such convoluted scheme would involve a lot of risk to whichever American would be responsible for the end donation. Funding candidates in the U.S. like in Ukraine is too risky, so this strategy was not (to our knowledge) used.

The military strategies employed in Ukraine were fairly overt. Any sort of military action is hard to conceal, and even the covert employment of unmarked soldiers to take over Ukrainian barracks was not something that would remain concealed after the fact. Concealment was barely necessary regardless. As Ukraine is not a member of NATO it is not protected by Article 5, so the rest of NATO is not bound to fight for it (NATO, 2016). There was no required international defense of Ukraine. Launching the same sort of invasion and annexation of the U.S. would not be possible. The United States is protected under Article 5 of the NATO treaty, and a war upon the United States would pit Russia against much of the West. It is very unlikely that a war like this would be bloodless, and the enormous costs both to life and finances would be too catastrophic to be an option absent a major threat.

The propaganda and disinformation strategies, however, are being used in the United States like they were in Ukraine as we have seen from Facebook and Twitter’s admission. Although there is denial around whether the government directed the Internet Research Agency to conduct its operations, this type of denial and secrecy is very typical of intelligence operations. Despite their denial the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB, successor to the KGB) and several other organizations were implicated by the Obama administration in altering material and information to undermine democratic processes (Fact Sheet, 2016). The Internet Research Agency’s activities did much of the same. It has been acknowledged by Russian officials that information warfare strategies are ideal for disorganizing the people and the state, and are an acceptable psychological tool (Gvosdev, 2012).

With this strategy being the only similar method to those used in Ukraine it is important to distinguish that in Ukraine Russia has been waging a hybrid war, but in the U.S. the warfare is through information. Using social media in this way has no visible drawbacks or great financial cost. This type of interference is deniable, it is easy, and requires no force. Without defectors to provide confirmation it is very unlikely that the Russian government’s involvement could be proven. The Russians would most likely never extradite anyone implicated in Mueller’s indictment, and they can forever deny involvement.

**Advertisements and Authoritarianism**

The wide variety of propaganda and disinformation spread before, during, and after the 2016 election all served the purpose of spreading discord in the United States well. The Facebook pages cited in Facebook’s testimony all spread content that was meant to provoke either pride or mistrust in something, and were made for consumption for both sides of the American political spectrum. The posts blended in amongst the typical political posts by Americans and have the statistics to prove it. As I will demonstrate there were advertisements for and against each candidate. This in itself shows that the effort was not, *at face value*, trying to help one specific candidate. The underlying motivations could present another story when analyzed for their ability to activate authoritarian tendencies in an attempt to undermine democracy in the long run. As mentioned previously the authoritarian reaction requires a fear of social change, unfamiliar groups, and submission and conformation to the values of a strong leader (Kirscht and Dillehay, 1967; Oesterreich, 2005). This can be activated easily through advertisements and spread media as it was during the 2016 election, and we will examine how several advertisements accomplished this. The advertisements released by Facebook represent a typical post by the fake pages, and we will examine them in relation to how they can provoke discord and authoritarianism in their own ways. These two specific advertisements were released during the Russia Investigative Task Force Open Hearing with Social Media Companies and were representative of the advertisements placed overall (2017).

Figure 1 below shows an advertisement by the Facebook page Black Matters, a page created to imitate the Black Lives Matter movement and attract supporters who care about black issues. The movement is heavily associated with the issue of police brutality, and is so because of its involvement in the protests surrounding the killings of unarmed black men by police. Overall, blacks are more likely to see the police killings of black men as evidence of racism than whites (Pew Research Center, 2016). This movement is a movement of change, and it faces criticism because some Americans do not see the need for more. According to the Pew Research Center 49% of Americans think that there does not need to be any more change in regard to racial rights because things are already equal in their eyes. The advertisement is an event, a protest to be specific, against President Trump. It appeals to the fear of Trump’s opposition by saying that racism, ignorance, and sexual assault have won over what is right. It was incredibly effect - 16,760 people confirmed that they would be attending. While this ad is targeted at those on the left, it really serves to aggravate the right with every new supporter it gains.

It is at this point that we can start to see where authoritarianism plays into this advertisement. The violence that had erupted at protests and riots around these types of situations like in Ferguson, Missouri after the death of Michael Brown had already left an impression on the political right. Radical change, which is what many people see Black Lives Matter as wanting, strongly activates the fear of change that Kirscht and Dillehay (1967) note as a defining characteristic of authoritarianism. These situations are also ambiguous to those who are not black and have not experienced these types of events, and throw into question the righteousness of the authorities that people have been raised to trust. This internal conflict leads the authoritarian type to disregard the conflicting information entirely. It becomes easy to think that protestors have nothing to complain about when the brain makes the unconscious decision to close itself off to the ambiguous information presented, and a greater ideological distance between oneself and the one experiencing these events is perceived. As discussed previously, Feldman and Stenner (1997) note that this distance can promote the openness of the individual to support harsher punishments for those on the opposite side of the ideological spectrum, which as I will discuss later could facilitate more restrictive laws on freedom of assembly. This further amplifies the flight into security that Oesterreich (2005) described, which in this particular election leads one towards Donald Trump and his rule of law strongman image. At the very least, it aggravates people who do not see the value in protest.

Figure 1. Figure 2.

A screenshot of a social media post

Description generated with very high confidenceA screenshot of a cell phone

Description generated with very high confidence

Figure 2 is the advertisement for an event by Heart of Texas, a Facebook page that serves content to the conservative side of the spectrum. This page is very Texas specific, but the message is one that resonates with many conservatives who have strong beliefs about the issue of immigration. It had around 3,000 reactions and was shared over a thousand times. This advertisement again promotes a flight into security. The advertisement uses fear, in this case of an immigrant who had previously committed rape sneaking back in, to cause a reaction that helps awaken authoritarianism. The fear of unfamiliar groups in this case is heightened, and the overall issue of immigration becomes one of societal safety to the authoritarian type. It also becomes a threat to the social order that more of “these people” will outnumber citizens. Some fear that the more foreigners that are in the U.S., the more things might change in order to accommodate them. It is not uncommon to hear people expressing irritation by even having the option to dial another number for a Spanish speaker on a phone call. This is the kind of potential change and small accommodation that contributes to the perceived threat to the societal and political order that Feldman and Stenner (1997) indicate activates authoritarianism.

**Towards an Authoritarian Populace**

The usefulness of a population with an activated tendency towards authoritarianism is that it will generally trend towards voting for a candidate that exudes strength, certainty, and a desire to maintain the social order. In this particular election that candidate happened to be Donald Trump. Authoritarians place their trust almost entirely in their authority, and generally do not listen to anything that conflicts with their views which could be useful to Russian goals of helping to undermine democratic institutions in the long term. If the authority in this election has expressed interest in eroding institutions to suit themselves, this could in turn help restrict the diffusion of democratic norms onto Russia. As previously discussed it is not in the interests of the Russian government to be constantly impressed upon by democratic norms and they take great precautions against outside influence (Koesel and Bunce, 2013). Attempting to influence another nation in a subtle way that makes its population more willing to do away with these norms is thus an attractive plan. The awakening of authoritarianism is a mechanism through which a subtle breakdown of institutions could be achieved without overwhelming opposition from the nation or costly armed conflict. With the necessary type of candidate and strategies like those used on social media platforms to prime the public a pathway to a hybrid authoritarian-democratic regime can be pursued with considerable public support.

Constitutional retrogression is described by Huq and Ginsberg (2017) as the decay of competitive elections, rights to free speech and association, and administrative as well as adjudicative rule of law with an endpoint of quasi-authoritarian or even authoritarian government. This decay differs from an outright collapse of democracy into autocracy; it is an incremental process. The process naturally depends on the situation to be right, and on the right leaders to be in power at the time. The changes made to elections, free speech and rule of law need not be dramatic or drastic. With the right amount of subtle decay in each of the three categories retrogression can be achieved, and sometimes the changes can be seen as defensible depending on the context (Huq and Ginsburg, 2017). A “defensible” change could be something like prohibiting protest after riots (like some occurring at the police brutality protests) or prohibiting a particular candidate from running for election if they were classified as dangerous. This can be especially simple if the public is directed to fear this social threat by a strong leader and receptive to this type of authoritarian punishment of those with ideological differences (Peterson et. al, 2002; Feldman and Stenner, 1997). Generally, these changes can be relatively small and framed in a way that hides their true purpose. The usefulness of small and innocuous changes is that they can be downplayed, and can especially be accepted by authoritarian types. When a threat does not present itself as a threat those who raise the alarm can be painted as dramatic or fanciful, which can placate those who generally disagree with the alarmists to start with. Accusing criticism as being part of a conspiracy theory can provide the cover necessary to pacify most of the population.

Huq and Ginsberg (2017) identified five pathways which can be used to create constitutional retrogression; amendments, eliminating institutional checks on power, the centralization/politicization of executive power, shrinking the public sphere, and eliminating political competition. Amendments are not a simple way to make change and are unlikely to be used in the U.S. for this purpose. The amount of checks and balances involved with the process of introducing a new amendment make it an unattractive option until an authoritarian regime has solidified their support in congress and in most state governments. The other avenues of retrogression are far easier to manipulate.

The U.S. Constitution is not known for its striking clarity. The ambiguity present has proven itself useful throughout the years with the advance of technology, but in terms of emergency powers the ambiguous nature of the document lends itself useful to letting things go that do not explicitly violate existing rules (Huq and Ginsburg, 2017). There are little protections against an executive and their party trying to eliminate safeguards that are not present in the constitution. Removing institutional checks, the second pathway, is an enticing option to eliminate for the potential authoritarian regime. Something that could be done to reduce institutional checks on power would be packing the courts with judges friendly to the regime’s aims. Weakening the courts is simpler and less overt than changing well known protections. In Poland the PiS (Law and Justice) party swept the presidential and parliamentary elections and used this to put the legitimacy of the Constitutional Tribunal into question and subsequently introduce rules that gave them the ability to ignore their further rulings claiming that the will of the people supersedes the court (Huq and Ginsburg, 2017). The courts would be painted as a threat to the social and political order, which prompts authoritarians to side with the authority (Feldman and Stenner, 1997).

The third pathway of constitutional retrogression involves bureaucracy and the centralization of executive power. Bureaucracy is oft noted to be a restrictive and slow to change force, and one that can maintain a status quo far longer than anyone should want it to. Huq and Ginsberg (2017) describe it as a hinderance to rapid change in such a way that it could protect a democracy from receding. The unfortunate aspect of a bureaucracy is that it can be converted into an institution made completely by patronage. When an executive is in control of the appointments of bureaucratic heads they could install people who are not only opposed to the very nature of the organization but of its existence as well. The installation of hostile actors to lead an organization can have a neutralizing effect on the agency they are made to lead if it was considered to be resistant to the aims of the regime (Huq and Ginsburg, 2017).

The fourth of Huq and Ginsberg’s pathways, and one that works especially well with a bolstering of authoritarian tendencies in the public is attempting to degrade the public sphere. Inhibiting the public’s ability to access accurate information about policy and acts of officials inhibits their ability to make informed choices when it comes time to vote. The degradation of the public sphere by a regime involves the withholding of information as well as the distortion of it, which could be done through manipulation of the news media and libel laws (Huq and Ginsburg, 2017). This incremental stripping of the rights of the public can be used to silence those who expose governmental failures and rights violations.

The final pathway Huq and Ginsberg (2017) identify is that of the elimination of political competition. This avenue of change could be seen as more overt, does not necessarily have to be. Restricting democratic competition can be as subtle as making the requirements for a party to be viable just a bit too hard and continual police harassment of opposition leaders to the point of annoyance, or as overt as assassination disguised as random acts of violence (Bunce and Wolchik, 2010; Huq and Ginsberg, 2017). Artificially depressing the turnout of areas that would be supporters of the opposition is another, more covert strategy to do this (Pop-Eleches, Robertson, 2015). If the other pathways towards retrogression are successfully taken the elimination of opponents is not as necessary to ensure victory. Like the other paths this would be simpler if the populace had activated authoritarian tendencies, so that when trying to enact policies to restrict competition there would be a base of support.

**Conclusion**

In a short summation, Russians did use social media to influence public opinion in the 2016 U.S. election, and did so because it was easy to do so. Was this directed by the Russian government specifically? That is less clear and remains in the realm of possibility, but at this time there is little concrete evidence of the connection between the Internet Research Agency and the Kremlin. Due to the secretive nature of intelligence operations and a Russia unwilling to extradite those implicated in the Mueller indictment those behind this operation will remain anonymous for quite some time. The social media posts and advertisements this mysterious company created were an especially effective strategy because they touched upon things that activated a latent tendency towards authoritarianism that many of the current social issues in the U.S. are tied to. This tendency is defined by fear of social change and its pull towards a strong authority, so given that the only strong authority capitalizing on social fear in the 2016 election was Donald Trump it served to promote his campaign, but more realistically Russian interests. Promoting authoritarianism could serve as a central strategy to inhibit the democratic norms of the U.S. from impressing upon Russia by increasing the likelihood of American citizens to inadvertently support the stripping of institutions in the coming years of the Trump presidency. Though this operation was not on an enormous scale, helping the population trend towards authoritarianism continues to make constitutional retrogression an ever-present possibility. It does not take a war, coup, or assassination to change a democratic system of government to a quasi-authoritarian regime with democratic features, and someday it could be something so simple as the right leader with a lot of social media.

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