

WHITE HOUSE MARCH 20, 2017 5:05 PM

FBI's Russian-influence probe includes a look at Breitbart, InfoWars news sites



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BY PETER STONE AND GREG GORDON
McClatchy Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — Federal investigators are examining whether far-right news sites played any role last year in a Russian cyber operation that dramatically widened the reach of news stories — some fictional — that favored Donald Trump’s presidential bid, two people familiar with the inquiry say.

Operatives for Russia appear to have strategically timed the computer commands, known as “bots,” to blitz social media with links to the pro-Trump stories at times when the billionaire businessman was on the defensive in his race against Democrat Hillary Clinton, these sources said.

The bots’ end products were largely millions of Twitter and Facebook posts carrying links to stories on conservative internet sites such as Breitbart News and InfoWars, as well as on the Kremlin-backed RT News and Sputnik News, the sources said. Some of the stories were false or mixed fact and fiction, said the sources, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the bot attacks are part of an FBI-led investigation into a multifaceted Russian operation to influence last year’s elections.

Investigators examining the bot attacks are exploring whether the far-right news operations took any actions to assist Russia’s operatives. Their participation, however, wasn’t necessary for the bots to amplify their news through Twitter and Facebook.

The investigation of the bot-engineered traffic, which appears to be in its early stages, is being driven by the FBI’s Counterintelligence Division, whose inquiries rarely result in criminal charges and whose main task has been to reconstruct the nature of the Kremlin’s cyber attack and determine ways to prevent another.

ADVERTISING

The advertisement shows three bottles of Centrum Silver supplements: one large bottle and two smaller ones. The Walgreens logo is prominently displayed in red script on the right side of the ad. A small 'x' icon is visible in the top right corner of the ad box.

An FBI spokesman declined to comment on the inquiry into the use of bots.

Russia-generated bots are one piece of a cyber puzzle that counterintelligence agents have sought to solve for nearly a year to determine the extent of the Moscow government’s electronic broadside.

“This may be one of the most highly impactful information operations in the history of intelligence,” said one former U.S. intelligence official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter.

Bureau director James Comey confirmed Monday at a House Intelligence Committee hearing what long has been reported: t’hat the FBI is investigating possible links between individuals in the Trump presidential campaign and the Russian campaign to influence the election and whether there was any coordination between the two.

The ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, one of multiple congressional panels examining Russia’s intervention, said on NBC’s “Meet the Press” Sunday that there was “circumstantial evidence of collusion.” There also is “direct evidence . . . of deception, and that’s where we begin the investigation,” said Rep. Adam Schiff of California.

U.S. intelligence agencies charged in January that Russian President Vladimir Putin had ordered the offensive, in which cyber operatives also hacked tens of thousands of emails from Democratic National Committee staff, Clinton campaign Chairman John Podesta and other Democrats.

A top priority of investigators is to determine who delivered those hacked emails to WikiLeaks, a London-based transparency site that published them online, the sources said. News stories about the emails embarrassed Clinton at key points in the campaign. WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has denied that the Russian government was the source of the email dump.

As for the bots, they carried links not only to news stories but also to Democratic emails posted on WikiLeaks, especially those hacked from Podesta and made public in October, said Philip Howard, a professor at the Oxford University Internet Institute who has researched the bot attacks.

Howard said that, as an example, bots had spread links to fictional stories that accused Clinton of involvement in running a child-sex ring in the basement of a Washington pizza parlor. The posts inspired a North Carolina man to drive to Washington and fire an assault weapon in the restaurant, according to police reports.

Howard’s study of bot-generated Twitter traffic during last fall’s Trump-Clinton campaign debates showed that bot m significantly outnumbered those sympathetic to Clinton.

He said his research showed that Americans who call themselves “patriotic programmers” also activated bots to aid T described coding the computer commands in their spare time, Howard said.

Unlike counterintelligence investigators with more cyber-sleuthing capabilities, Howard has not established that Russ attacks he studied.

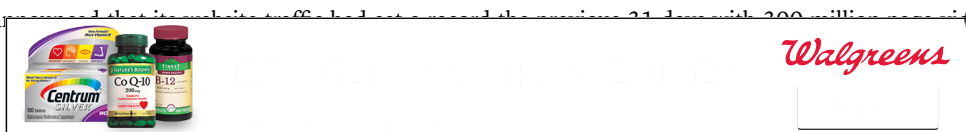
Russia also used “trolls,” hundreds of computer operatives who pretended to be Trump supporters and posted stories or comments on the internet complimentary to Trump or disparaging to Clinton. Sources close to the inquiry said those operatives likely worked from a facility in St. Petersburg, Russia, dedicated to that tactic.

“Russian bots and internet trolls sought to propagate stories underground,” said Mike Carpenter, a former senior Pentagon official during the Obama administration whose job focused on Russia. “Those stories got amplified by fringe elements of our media like Breitbart.”

“They very carefully timed release of information to shift the news cycle away from stories that clearly hurt Mr. Trump, such as his inappropriate conduct over the years,” he said, referring to the October release of a video in which Trump bragged about grabbing women’s genitals. That event corresponded with a surge in bot-related traffic spreading anti-Clinton stories.

An additional Russian tool was the news from its prime propaganda machine, Russia Today, with a global television and digital media operation and a U.S. arm, RT America.

Last Nov. 19, Breitbart a driven substantially by social media.



Breitbart, which has drawn criticism for pursuing a white nationalist agenda, was formerly led by Stephen Bannon, who became chief executive officer of Trump's election campaign last August and now serves as Trump's strategic adviser in the White House. The news site's former national security editor, Sebastian Gorka, was a national security adviser to Trump's campaign and presidential transition team. He now works as a key Trump counterterrorism adviser.

Breitbart's chief executive officer, Larry Solov, did not respond to phone and email requests seeking comment.

Bannon and Gorka have controversial profiles. Bannon has been accused of taking anti-immigrant and racist positions. Last week, the Jewish newspaper Forward reported that Gorka had taken a lifelong loyalty oath to a Hungarian far-right group that for decades was allied with the Nazi Party.

The White House declined to respond to questions about Gorka.

Breitbart is partially owned by Robert Mercer, the wealthy co-chief executive of a New York hedge fund and a co-owner of Cambridge Analytica, a small, London-based firm credited with giving Trump a significant advantage in gauging voter priorities last year by providing his campaign with at least 5,000 data points on each of 220 million Americans.

InfoWars is published by Alex Jones, a Texas-based conservative talk show host known for embracing conspiracy theories such as one asserting that the U.S. government was involved in the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. During the 2016 campaign, InfoWars.com was a loyal Trump public relations tool. Trump was on Jones' show and praised his reporting.

"It's the major source of everything," Roger Stone, a longtime Trump confidant and campaign adviser, said last fall. Stone, who has regularly appeared on Jones' show and was on Monday, has said he invites an FBI investigation into his campaign role. The Senate Intelligence Committee has asked Stone to preserve documents in connection with the Russian election inquiry.

Jones responded to questions from McClatchy on his talk show.

"I'm not gonna sit here and say, 'I'm not a Russian stooge,' because it's a (expletive) lie," he said, denying any contact with the Kremlin operatives about bots. He said this issue stemmed from "this whole ridiculous narrative of the bitching left."

"It's as if we didn't build InfoWars," he said. "It's as if we don't have a huge audience."

Noting he had appeared on RT "probably 100 times or more," he said sarcastically, "There's my Russian connection."

Boosted by bots, the surge in readership for such websites amplified Clinton's negatives. Some stories falsely described her health problems as dire. Jones said Monday that people gravitated to his website "because we were the first to report Hillary Clinton falling down." He referred to Clinton appearing to collapse last Sept. 11 after visiting the World Trade Center memorial. She was diagnosed with pneumonia.

"The full impact of the bots was subterranean and corrosive," Podesta, Clinton's campaign chairman, told McClatchy in an interview. "The distribution channels were being flooded with this information. . . . We perhaps underestimated the strategy of pushing fake news out through social media and how it impacted the race."

Donna Brazile, the former interim director of the DNC, said that neither the party committee nor the Clinton campaign had used bots to widen the reach of their anti-Trump messages.

At least one of the congressional committees investigating the Russian meddling is looking into the bots.

The Senate Intelligence Committee "intends to look actively at 'fake' news and the ways that Russian bots and trolls were used to influence the election," said Rachel Cohen, a spokeswoman for Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia, the panel's ranking Democrat.

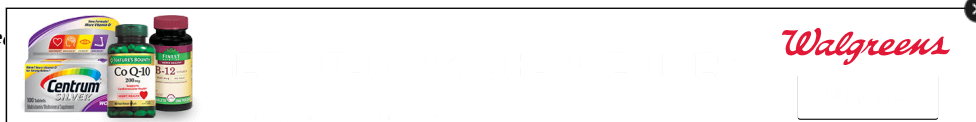
Russia's offensive might have been anticipated from a speech a top Kremlin official made in February 2016.

In the speech in Moscow, Andrey Krutskikh told a conference of Russian computer security officials that the Putin government would be unleashing a cyber nuclear attack reminiscent of Russia's 1949 development of the atom bomb. Krutskikh, whose speech was first reported by Washington Post columnist David Ignatius and independently confirmed by McClatchy, also reportedly said the offensive would cause U.S. officials to gain respect for Russia's cyber capabilities.

"Russia has again figured out from its old Soviet playbook that its greatest weapon in the world is information," said Lauren Goodrich, senior Eurasia analyst at the Stratfor Corp., a global intelligence firm based in Austin, Texas. "Its information and disinformation campaigns have skyrocketed."

She said the Kremlin's budget for "public information" had quadrupled this year as it mounted similar cyber attacks on behalf of right-wing candidates in France, Germany and other European countries.

Stone is a McClatchy spe





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Chester Rockwell

The fact that Peter Stone and Greg Gordon quote that pedopizza lover Podesta makes this article even more of a complete joke. This is fake news!

Even a 5 minute investigation into Pedogate will show all kinds of crazy links. Keep trying to kill that strawman using your fake news lines. Maybe if you jokers were actual journalists you would ask Podestapedo exactly what a "pizza map on a handkerchief" means. Pathetic losers. If you have kids Peter Stone and Greg Gordon, I hope they get kidnapped by Podesta's criminal friends. Look up the youtube video "#PizzaGate / #PedoGate - The UnAnswered Questions Documentary"

Like · Reply · 2 mins



Zen Shaman · Works at Self-Employed

Hahahaha. Really. Did you get paid for writing this? peter stone and greg gordon, what does it feel like to be a presstitute? Do you have Any self respect in that meat suit you are wearing. Do you have ANY affinity to truth?

Like · Reply · 3 mins



John Mele

THEY SHOULD ALSO INVESTIGATE ME FOR HAVING A BUMPER STICKER WITH INFOWARS!!..I AM A PUTIN'S BROTHER IN LAW

Like · Reply · 6 mins



Gw Redone

If the Infowars style anti liberal propaganda wasn't so appalling I'd laugh at the idiots posting the pro Trump lies here...you boobs have poisoned the American body politic better than the Kremlin could ever have hoped for. Shame about your treason.

Like · Reply · 8 mins



Chester Rockwell

I bet you crave cheese pizza, scum.

Like · Reply · Just now



Greg Copeland · Remote Desktop Support at Support.com

This is by far the dumbest shit I've ever read. #FakeNews

Like · Reply · 8 mins · Edited



Michael Hoovler · Data Analysis Engineer at !NO_DATA_FOUND

This is pretty horrible reporting. The author doesn't even bother to hide bias and intentional lack of research when he makes unfounded statements like they're forgone conclusions:

"bots had spread links to fictional stories that accused Clinton of involvement in running a child-sex ring in the basement of a Washington pizza parlor."

The fact of the matter is that there is NO EVIDENCE of ANY Russian influence, whether by bot or otherwise, in any aspect of the election. Comey literally stated that yesterday during the open intel committee hearing. Yes, investigations are ongoing, but the... [See More](#)

Like · Reply · 1 · 16 mins



Chester Rockwell

I can't find that quote in the article. Did the pedo protectors from McShitty self censor or did Podoesta call them up?

Like · Reply · 1 min



Erik Fecher

so...lemme get this straight...if a bunch of us retweet or share Breitbart stories that criticize liberals, we're defacto Russian spies, and if we criticize liberals online, we're "trolls"...gotcha. The separation from logic on the left is more than just a few degrees

Like · Reply · 2 · 20 mins



Michael Hester · Pe

When you use Donn

Like · Reply · 3 · 21 m

Walgreens



Adrian Vance · Illinois State University

If Russia really wanted Donald Trump to be President then why were all eight of RTV's commentators boosting Hillary? This is total BS and Comey is only continuing the investigation to keep his job. Now Trump cannot can him without being accused of covering up. It is just that simple.

Google "Two Minute Conservative" for more.

Like · Reply · 2 · 23 mins



Cara Edwards · Rochester, Minnesota

So many comments-"hey look over there" or the ever intelligent comment of " fake news" must be feeling the heat.

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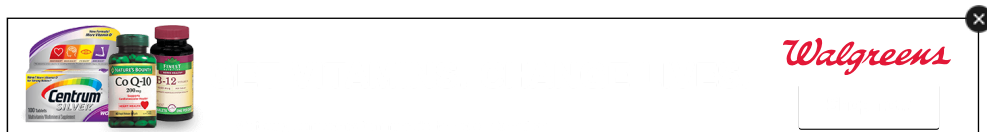
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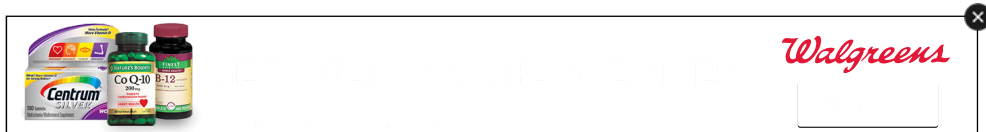
Veteran Homeowners Get A Huge Reward In 2017

If you own a home, you should read this. Thousands with VA benefits have done this. Do this now before your next mortgage payment...

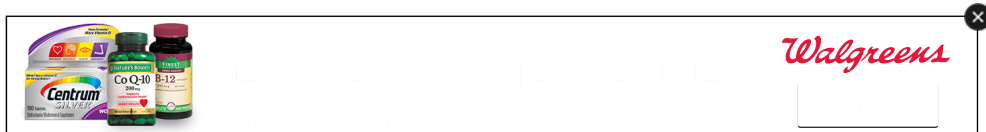
By MorningFinance

Advertisement for Walgreens featuring various vitamins (Centrum Silver, Co Q-10, B-12) and the Walgreens logo.



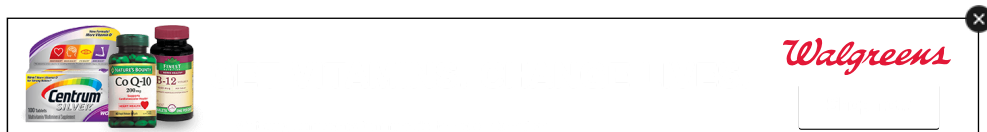


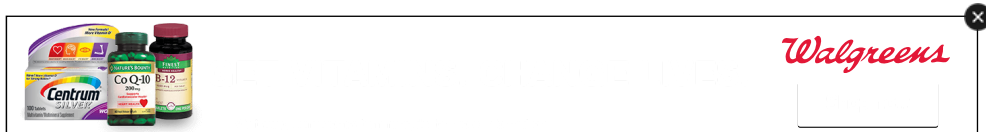






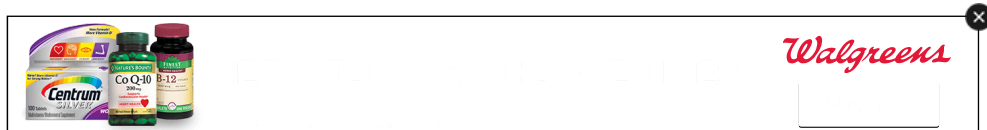
A horizontal banner advertisement for Walgreens. On the left, there are three medicine bottles: a box of Centrum Silver, a bottle of Co Q-10, and a bottle of B-12. The text "Walgreens" is written in its signature red script font on the right side of the banner. A small black circle with a white 'x' is in the top right corner of the banner area.







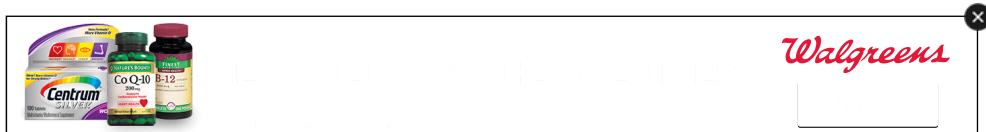


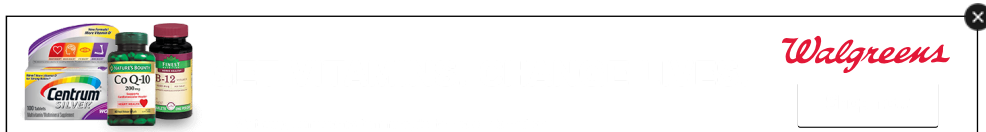


A horizontal banner advertisement for Walgreens. On the left, there are three product images: a box of Centrum Silver, a bottle of Co Q-10, and a bottle of B-12. In the center, the text "Walgreens" is written in a large, light-colored, serif font. On the right, the Walgreens logo is displayed in its signature red script. A small black circle with a white 'x' is located in the top right corner of the banner.









A horizontal banner advertisement for Walgreens. On the left, there are three product images: a box of Centrum Silver, a bottle of Co Q-10, and a bottle of B-12. The text "CENTRUM SILVER" is written in large, light-colored letters across the middle of the banner. On the right, the Walgreens logo is displayed in red script. Below the logo is a white rectangular box, likely a placeholder for a coupon or promotional code. A small black circle with a white 'x' is located in the top right corner of the banner.

