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U.S.

Russian Twitter Support for Trump Began Right After He Started Campaign

In three months after Mr. Trump announced his candidacy, tweets from Russian accounts offered far more praise for the businessman than criticism



A staff member arranges a display showing a social-media post during a House Intelligence Committee hearing Nov. 1 in Washington. PHOTO: ANDREW HARRER/BLOOMBERG NEWS

By Mark Maremont and Rob Barry

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Kremlin-backed support for Donald Trump's candidacy over social media began much earlier than previously known, a new analysis of Twitter data shows.

Russian Twitter accounts posing as Americans began lavishing praise on Mr. Trump and attacking his rivals within weeks after he announced his bid for the presidency in June 2015, according to the analysis by The Wall Street Journal.

A U.S. intelligence assessment released early this year concluded the Kremlin developed a "clear preference" for Mr. Trump over his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton, but cited December 2015 as the earliest suspected time that Russian social-media accounts advocated for Mr. Trump.

The earlier starting point of pro-Trump tweets highlights the breadth of the Russian effort to manipulate social media during the 2016 election. Kremlin-paid actors sowed division among Americans with fake pages and accounts, inflammatory postings and thousands of paid ads aimed at both liberal and conservative audiences, according to testimony before Congress last week.

The Journal analyzed 159,000 deleted tweets from accounts that Twitter identified to congressional investigators as operated by the Kremlin-backed Internet Research Agency.

Twitter said it has suspended all 2,752 of the accounts, which removes their tweets from its platform. Congress released the names of the accounts on Nov. 1, during hearings on Russian interference in the 2016 elections.

In the three months after Mr. Trump announced his presidential candidacy on June 16, 2015, tweets from Russian accounts reviewed by the Journal offered far more praise for the real-estate businessman than criticism—by nearly a 10-to-1 margin. At the

same time, the accounts generally were hostile to Mrs. Clinton and the early GOP front-runner, Jeb Bush, by equal or greater margins.

The Journal pieced together the deleted tweets from data it has collected as well as that provided to the Journal by several researchers. The records contain at least one tweet from more than 2,000 of the accounts.

A Twitter Inc. spokeswoman declined to comment. In Senate testimony last week, a Twitter attorney said the company takes seriously “that the power of our service was misused by a foreign actor for the purpose of influencing the U.S. presidential election,” and said Twitter is beefing up its efforts to combat such activities.

Mr. Trump, a regular user of Twitter himself, has called claims that the Russians manipulated the 2016 election via social media “a hoax.”

“BOOM! DOWN GOES @jebbush,” wrote @DorothieBell, three weeks after Mr. Trump entered the race. The account, claiming to be run by an American “Conservative wife, mother” who wanted to “take this once great country back!!!,” linked to a Breitbart News article about Mr. Trump attacking Mr. Bush for being soft on immigration.

In August, @TamaFlan, claiming to be an American named Tamar Flanagan, tweeted: “#TrumpBecause It’s time for @BarackObama and @HillaryClinton to go quietly into the night #MakeAmericaGreatAgain.”

Other accounts criticized Mr. Bush for being a “RINO” (Republican in name only). One offered a succinct put-down: “@JebBush ewwww.”

The numerous Russian Twitter attacks on Mrs. Clinton during this three-month period included a tweet comparing her treatment of the press to Adolf Hitler’s, adding: “Heil Hillary.” Another account tweeted links to an editorial—published months earlier—criticizing Mrs. Clinton’s “Culture of Corruption.”

Many political messages were sent out word-for word by multiple Russian-backed accounts, often within minutes of each other, suggesting a coordinated campaign.

Of the Russian-backed accounts that tweeted about Mr. Trump in the summer of 2015, at least 40 served up positive sentiment; just one account captured by the Journal data expressed strong negative opinions.

The exception was @Jenn_Abrams, an account that pretended to be run by an opinionated American blogger that eventually attracted 71,000 followers and many media mentions. “I’d rather join #ISIS than have Donald Trump as my president,” that account tweeted on the day Mr. Trump announced his candidacy.

It isn’t clear whether the Russian accounts truly backed Mr. Trump from the start, or viewed support for the upstart candidate as an opportunity to disrupt U.S. politics.

As the November 2016 election approached, the Kremlin preference for Mr. Trump became even more pronounced. Pro-Trump tweets—either favoring him or attacking his opponent—outnumbered those for Mrs. Clinton by a 30-to-1 ratio in the two weeks before the election, the Journal analysis found. There were about 236 pro-Trump or anti-Clinton tweets captured in the Journal data during those two weeks compared with seven that were pro-Clinton or anti-Trump.

Much of the Russian social-media disinformation campaign has been linked to the St. Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency, a shadowy, so-called troll farm that spread Russian propaganda across the Internet.

Twitter has said the 2,752 Internet Research Agency-operated accounts sent out 131,000 messages on its platform in a 2 1/2-month period around the November election. Messages from a much broader network of automated bot accounts were viewed about 288 million times in that period.

Nearly all of that activity has vanished, because Twitter removes all tweets from suspended or deleted accounts and requires its vendors to do the same. That makes it

difficult to analyze past behavior; the tweets captured by the Journal represent only a slice of the messages sent out by the troll farm-operated accounts.

The Kremlin social-media operation didn't always favor one U.S. political party, and spanned the ideological spectrum.

A Facebook account called Blacktivist claimed to push the Black Lives Matter movement, while an account called Heart of Texas agitated for that state's secession.

The Russian-backed Twitter accounts were so successful at imitating Americans that they were frequently followed and retweeted by prominent people, including Trump campaign insiders, and quoted in mainstream media publications.

One such account, @Pamela_Moore13, which claimed to be operated by a Texan who was "Conservative. Pro God. Anti Racism," amassed an impressive 70,000 followers—including retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn and Fox News commentator Sean Hannity — before being suspended by Twitter in the purge of Russian accounts.

An attorney for Mr. Flynn and spokeswoman for Fox didn't respond to requests for comment.

Between the time Mr. Trump entered the race and Election Day, at least 104 of the Russian-controlled accounts, including many of those with tens of thousands of followers, posted hashtags supporting Mr. Trump, including variations of the campaign catchphrase Make America Great Again. More than 90 accounts posted negative messages about Mrs. Clinton's health, emails and alleged corruption. The Russian accounts posted only a handful of pro-Clinton hashtags.

For the GOP debate on Dec. 15, 2015 in Las Vegas, dozens of the accounts live-tweeted using the hashtag #VegasGOPDebate. Many showed a clear preference for Mr. Trump.

"Trump is a real leader, I believe debates will help to see it," six of the accounts wrote.

"Only Trump can deal with #ISIS," wrote @MarissaImStrong to its 413 followers.

One, @Cheese_Monay, disagreed, tweeting: "We need real debates not this clown show on #Fox."

On Election Day, the accounts warned of rigged voting machines and called for an indictment of Mrs. Clinton.

As voting wound down that day, @JacquelinIsBest tweeted to its 2,100 followers: "I can't believe I was able to experience our potential president speak at his very last rally. #HillaryForPrison2016 #TrumpForPresident."

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