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The New Social-Media Battleground

Has Russia's disinformation campaign in the U.S. threatened democracy?

By Lina Mai | December 4, 2017

Teacher's Guide

- Lexile**
- Main article (current view): 1100L
 - Alternate reading level: 950L

Focus on News Literacy

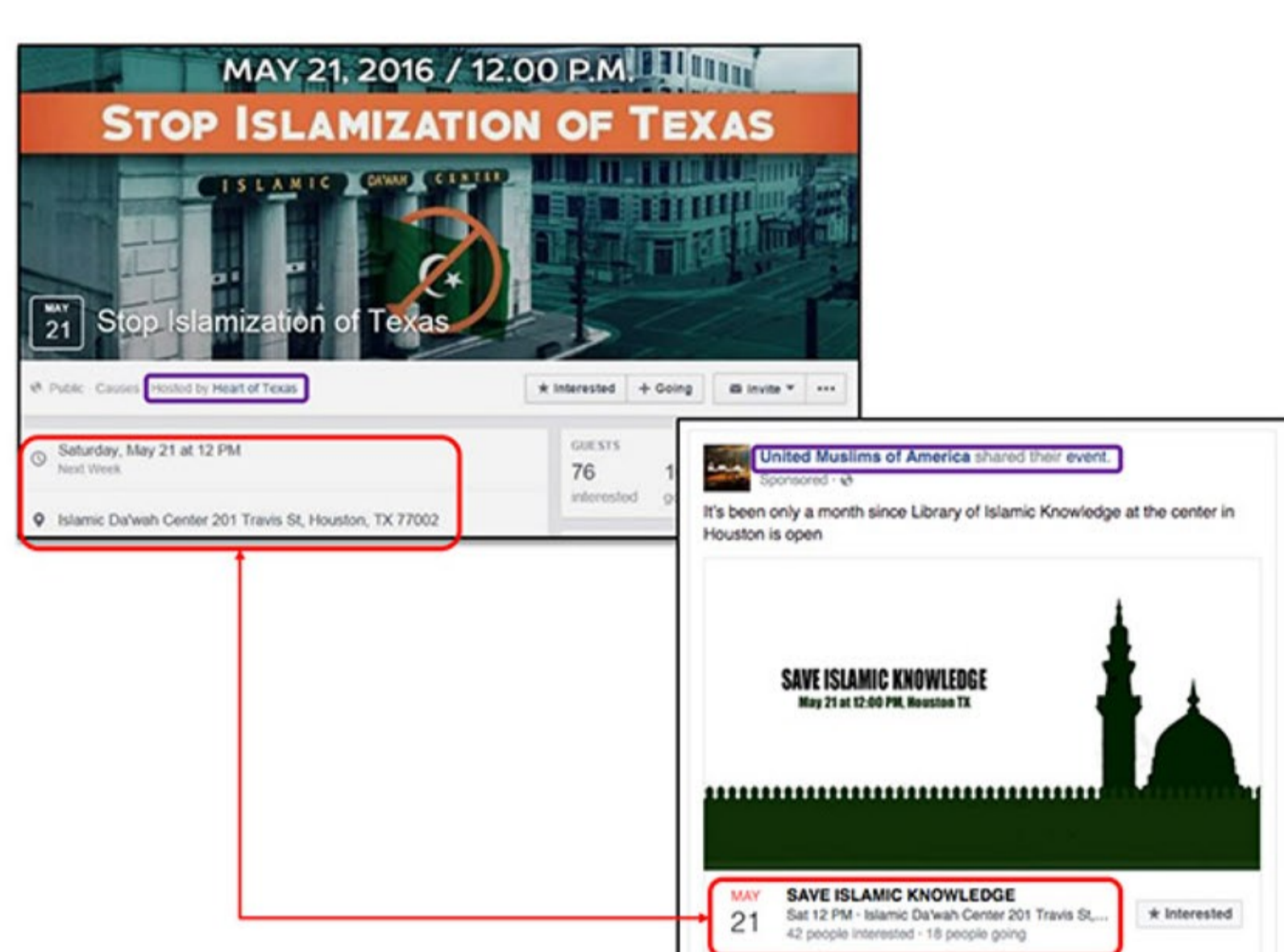
Students research a widespread disinformation campaign on social media in order to infer its intent.

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On May 21, 2016, 10 people turned out to protest the opening of a library at an Islamic center in Houston, Texas. The rally was organized by a group called Heart of Texas, which had posted inflammatory comments on its Facebook page, including one that read "No more mosques in America." Across the street, about 60 counterprotesters with the United for Muslims of America group gathered to support the Islamic center. The atmosphere grew tense. Houston police were on hand to maintain order. Both Heart of Texas and United for Muslims in America had announced and promoted their demonstration on Facebook.

What protesters on either side could not have known was that the dueling protests had been organized by Russia's Internet Research Agency, which has links to the Kremlin. Both rallies in Houston were part of a widespread Russian campaign to interfere in last year's presidential election and widen divisions among U.S. voters, according to Republican senator Richard Burr.

"[Russian President Vladimir Putin] conducted an information operation intended to divide our society along issues like race, immigration, and Second-Amendment rights," said Burr on November 1, during a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing about Russian interference.



COURTESY OF U.S. SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON INTELLIGENCE

Russia created Facebook pages for two rival groups: Heart of Texas (left) and United Muslims of America, according to the Senate Intelligence Committee. Russian organized opposing protests on May 21, 2016. Dozens of Americans attended the rallies. Now Congress is looking to enact stricter restrictions on social media to stop such foreign intervention

Leading up to the election, Russia set up thousands of fake social-media accounts—like United for Muslims of America. These accounts may have reached up to 126 million users. On Twitter, Russians promoted pro-Trump news and rumors. Ads on Twitter spread stories about Hillary Clinton's supposed poor health and legal problems.

The effects of Russia's effort to sow division have lasted well beyond the election. "All Americans need to worry about this, regardless of their political persuasion," Katherine Haenschen told TIME Edge. She is a digital-media professor at Virginia Tech.

Congress Takes Action

During the November hearings, lawmakers examined the role social media played in allowing Russia to spread divisive messages. They also warned Facebook, Twitter, and Google that they must do more to stop Russian manipulation of their platform.

"Simply put, you must do better to protect the American people, and frankly, all of your users, from this kind of manipulation," Senator Burr told lawyers from Facebook, Twitter, and Google during the hearing.



ANDREW HARRER—BLOOMBERGGETTY IMAGES

Senator Richard Burr speaks about Russian manipulation of social media during a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing on November 1. Burr criticized Facebook, Twitter, and Google for not doing enough to secure their platform against foreign intervention.

All three social-media companies said they would build artificial-intelligence tools to block malicious content. But they could not guarantee that they could prevent future intrusions.

In an effort to protect the U.S. from Russian meddling, members of Congress have introduced the Honest Ads Act. The legislation would regulate online political advertising. It would require social-media companies to reveal the identity of those buying political ads on their platform. Congress has yet to vote on the act.

"In this new era, where over half of Americans get their [news] from social media, if you advertise politically on social media, you need to [reveal] what group is advertising," Democratic senator Mark R. Warner, who cosponsored the bill, told National Public Radio.



ANDREW HARRER—BLOOMBERGGETTY IMAGES

Senator Richard Blumenthal presents a Russian-backed Twitter post during a Senate hearing on October 31. The post shows a fake photo of comedian Aziz Ansari holding a sign that improperly encouraged people to vote by sending a tweet to "ClintonKaine."

Tackling Foreign Interference

Professor Haenschen believes the Honest Ads Act is a "good start." But, she adds, social-media giants like Facebook are not used simply for traditional ads. "Facebook has a range of paid features that can be used to promote political pages, Facebook posts, and other content," she said. "So disclosure needs to focus on the use of paid features, rather than narrowly on advertising content."

What's more, certain Russian-backed groups, like Heart of Texas, could still have their ads and posts show up on feeds. That's because only ads related to U.S. elections would fall under the Honest Ads Act. For example, Twitter accounts suspected of links to Russia fueled the 2017 conflict over whether NFL players should stand for the national anthem. Russian-backed accounts pushed both sides of the debate, using competing hashtags. Those included #boycottnfl and #takeaknee. Under the proposed Honest Ads Act, this sort of content would not be regulated.

For Democratic congressman Eric Swalwell, limiting Russian interference in social media is challenging for yet another reason. The difficulty, he told ABC News, is tackling foreign intervention without limiting individual rights. The internet is an open forum. Many Americans exercise their right to free speech by posting opinions on social media. "Russia was able to use our greatest strength, freedom of speech," Swalwell said, "and turn it into a weakness."

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