The IRACopyPasta Campaign

Russian accounts posing as Americans on Instagram targeted both sides of polarizing issues ahead of the 2020 election

10.2019

By Camille François, Ben Nimmo, C. Shawn Eib
Executive Summary

On October 21, 2019, Facebook announced the takedown of 50 Instagram accounts posting about US social and political issues and the 2020 election. Facebook concluded that the operation “originated from Russia” and “showed some links to the Internet Research Agency (IRA),” the Russian “troll farm” that previously targeted US audiences and the United States presidential election in 2016.¹

These accounts, all linked to the same operation, claimed to represent multiple politically active US communities: black activist groups, advocates speaking out against police violence, police supporters, LGBTQ groups, Christian conservatives, Muslims, environmentalists, gun-rights activists, southern Confederates, and supporters of Senator Bernie Sanders and President Donald Trump. A minority of posts focused directly on the 2020 election. Multiple accounts praised Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump. Accounts from both sides of the political spectrum attacked Joe Biden; some also attacked Kamala Harris and Elizabeth Warren. Almost half the accounts claimed to be based in “swing states,” especially Florida.

This choice of targets and content echo the campaigns previously deployed by the IRA. Additionally, a few of the posts in this set reused or recreated IRA memes: this is why we named this campaign “IRACopyPasta”. That these accounts reused and recreated IRA content is insufficient grounds on its own to provide a firm attribution, but it aligns with Facebook’s own analysis that the operation showed some links to the IRA.

The operators went to great lengths to hide their origins, prioritizing operational security (OPSEC) over audience growth. Many of their posts consisted only of memes, without accompanying text. Posts that included text were usually sourced from viral posts made by American accounts. Facebook noted of this operation that it “had the hallmarks of a well-resourced operation that took consistent operational security steps to conceal their identity and location.”

Most of these accounts had low numbers of followers: over half had fewer than 5,000 followers, and only one, focused on environmental issues, had over 20,000. The total number of posts for this operation was just under 75,000. The campaign appeared to be a recent creation, using purpose-made accounts rather than accounts compromised from real users. Some posts gained hundreds of likes but typically obtained orders of magnitude fewer than the American personalities they copied. The operation appears to have been active almost exclusively on

Instagram. Nevertheless, it made heavy use of Twitter by posting screenshots of tweets from genuine American users to Instagram.

**IRACopyPasta Assets: Posing as Americans, Posting on Divisive Issues**

These accounts posed as supporters of specific US social or political groups:

- 11 Conservative accounts focused on praising President Donald Trump
- 9 "black activism" accounts, with a focus on police violence
- 4 liberal accounts, with a focus on praising Senator Bernie Sanders
- 3 Conservative accounts focused on gun rights
- 3 LGBTQ+ accounts
- 3 "feminist" accounts
- 2 "thin blue line" pro-police accounts
- 2 "Confederate" accounts
- 1 environmentalist account
- 1 "Muslim" account
- 1 "Christian" account

The majority of posts by each account was not directly election related but focused on general news and political commentary. These posts were most likely used for persona development and branding. Multiple accounts in each subgroup repeatedly shared the same content over the space of a few hours or days, reinforcing the impression that they were part of a network.

---

2 The environmental focus here appears somewhat new, but reminiscent of a previous Russian operation uncovered on Instagram and Facebook and targeting French audiences. See: Ben Nimmo and Camille Francois, “#TrollTracker: Glimpse Into a French Operation” DFRLab, November 28, 2018, https://medium.com/dfrlab/trolltracker-glimpse-into-a-french-operation-f78dcae78924.
Posts by black.slayzz and bernie.2020__. Neither account posted text alongside the memes. All screenshots were taken in September 2019 unless indicated otherwise. Graphika has blanked the reactions of users not associated with the operation on all screenshots.

Posts by __everything_black__ and blacks_only__
Posts by confederate_florida and rebel.va, several weeks apart. Note the minimal use of language alongside the memes, other than hashtags.

Divisive Content

Much of the content posted by these accounts was divisive and served to reinforce each target group's hostility toward other groups or individuals. Often, the sets of accounts posted on both sides of divisive issues. For instance, police violence was a topic addressed by accounts in the set, some of them posting with hashtags such as #policebrutality and #blacklivesmatter and others with #bluelivesmatter and #backthecblue.
Accounts across the “progressive” spectrum attacked President Donald Trump; accounts across the “conservative” spectrum attacked Democratic congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio Cortez (“AOC”) and Ilhan Omar.
This practice of targeting both sides on divisive issues is characteristic of the campaigns initially conducted by the IRA to target American audiences in 2014-2018.³

Leveraging Authentic Content from American Users

These accounts primarily reposted political content produced by American users on social media rather than creating their own. This is likely to have served two ends: it allowed the accounts to embed more firmly into their target audiences by sharing in-group content, and it reduced the amount of language they would have to produce, thereby reducing the scope for telltale language errors like the one shown in the screenshot above.

A high proportion of the content posted by these accounts were screenshots of tweets. These often featured an aspect ratio inappropriate for Instagram, reducing their visual impact. Despite a heavy use of Twitter content, the Instagram accounts in this operation did not have equivalent accounts on Twitter.

Profile page of progressive.voice shortly before the takedown: note how all its most recent posts were screenshots of tweets. The image also shows the followers to following ratio: the account had 2,255 followers but followed 5,197, suggesting an ongoing audience-building effort.
The “conservative” accounts in the set had a particular fondness for the conservative partisan group Turning Point USA, often sharing its memes and comments (a trait also observed in previous campaigns run by the Internet Research Agency). “Progressive” accounts in the set drew from a wider range of sources.

Again, the selection of content appears to have been designed to push both sides of divisive issues and to inflame supporters and detractors of American political figures.
Posts attacking and defending AOC (or “OAC”). Top, free.dom.choice; bottom, progressive.voice. Note the numbers of likes. The original posts performed far better than these reproductions, perhaps because the operators looked for viral posts to copy from.

Election Messaging

Interspersed with these general audience-building and divisive posts, the accounts posted memes and comments about the 2020 elections. The overall alignment of these posts paralleled
the IRA’s strategic messaging in 2016, especially by expressing support for Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, while attacking other presidential candidates.

Among the accounts focused on black activism, there was strong support for Bernie Sanders along with a moderate amount of content opposing Kamala Harris. Education reform and student debt relief were two of the most commonly mentioned reasons for supporting Sanders, while Harris’s record as a California DA was mentioned as a reason to oppose her candidacy. Mixed in with these was a small amount of content attacking Joe Biden, primarily due to gaffes related to his previous handling of racial issues.

Post by support_black_fl on Bernie Sanders

---

On the progressive side of the spectrum, considerably more accounts attacked Joe Biden. This contrasted starkly with IRACopyPasta’s support for Sanders and is reminiscent of the original IRA’s strategy of attacking Clinton while they supported Sanders.⁷ On the other side of the political

---


spectrum, the “conservative” accounts routinely praised and supported Trump and his family. They, too, focused their attacks on Biden.

Post explicitly contrasting Biden and Sanders, by bernie.2020__
Anti-Biden posts by law.abiding.citizen and free.dom.choice
Overall, election-related content made up a minority of IRACopyPasta’s posts, but the accounts’ geographical targeting also suggest a focus on electoral dynamics. Of the 40 accounts that Graphika reviewed, 19 gave a location in a state: Arizona (1), Colorado (2), Florida (5), Iowa (1), Michigan (3), Nevada (1), Ohio (3), Pennsylvania (1), Virginia (1), and Wisconsin (1). It is noteworthy that all of these have been reported online as “swing states” that will be critical in the 2020 presidential election. The focus on “purple” states, specifically Colorado, Florida, and Virginia, is also consistent with the instructions received by the IRA in July 2016 and their subsequent election targeting in the 2016 election, per the Mueller IRA indictment.8

Recreating Content

The parallels between the IRACopyPasta campaign and previous campaigns attributed to the Internet Research Agency go beyond a similarity of targeted communities, tactics, and issues. Memes originally posted by accounts attributed to the IRA’s previous campaigns are reused (or recreated) throughout this set.9 The examples below illustrate this, with the IRACopyPasta account “wisconsin.blue.family” posting a meme watermarked to the original IRA account “Veterans US” and with the IRACopyPasta “rebel.va” account posting a meme watermarked to the original IRA account “South United.”

---

9 For more data points, see www.io-archive. The Information Operation Archive hosts publicly available and rigorously attributed data points from known Information Operations on social media platforms.
IRA watermarked meme posted by wisconsin.blue.family. Posts by “Veterans US” can be seen in the “UsHadrons” archive.  🟌

https://medium.com/@ushadrons/this-space-is-a-repository-for-content-from-the-russian-social-media-account-veterans-us-8c1beb0aa607
Sharing original IRA memes is a weak signal on its own: a number of spam operations are known to have done the same, since IRA memes have been preserved online in various archives. On a handful of occasions, however, these assets went further: two ostensibly “Confederate” accounts, rebel.va and confederate_florida, posted memes that were almost identical to memes shared by known IRA account South United, but recreated them rather than simply copying them, taking steps to delete the original watermark.

Such memes featured the same background image and wording as the earlier IRA posts, but with a different font or layout, and without the South United watermark originally present when used by the IRA in previous campaigns. To make them, the operators must have found the original source photo and rebuilt the meme on it, a more labor-intensive process than a simple “copy-paste.”

---

11 https://medium.com/@ushadrons this-space-is-a-repository-for-content-from-the-russian-social-media-group-south-united-35bcdea6f29
12 See for instance that of researcher “@USHadrons” on Twitter, available at https://medium.com/@ushadrons
Left, post by South United, watermarked, from the US Hadrons archive. Right, post by confederate_florida without the watermark and in a different font, March 2019.

Left, post by South United, watermarked, from the US Hadrons archive. Right, post by rebel.va without the watermark, September 2019. Graphika has blurred the faces of the individuals in the picture.

---

13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
Yet another account, @islamination, posted a meme arguing that there is no racism in Islam. This was an IRA-watermarked meme from an account called United Muslims of America, but the @islamination post blurred out the lettering almost completely, leaving the final -a in place.

Posts by "United Muslims of America" (top left) and @islamination (top right), together with detail boxes showing the placement of the original watermark and the blurred area with final -a in the recreated meme. Graphika has blurred the faces of the individuals in the picture.

Throughout this investigation we identified almost 20 instances in which different accounts in the target set shared images and memes that had also been posted and watermarked by the IRA, but without the watermark. This represents only a tiny proportion of the total volume of content posted, but it nonetheless provides a clear indication that the operation was trying to repeat the IRA’s performance, without looking like it was doing so.

**Copy-Paste-Hide**

The operation went to remarkable lengths to hide its presence and reduce its online footprint, perhaps at the expense of efforts that would have yielded higher engagement with the content posted.

The accounts posted very little in the way of linguistic content. Many posts consisted of nothing but a meme; others included a meme and a string of hashtags. Some had one or two sentences of colloquial text. Very few included more substantial passages. This may have been an attempt to reduce the volume of original language posted and therefore to reduce the risk of grammatical English errors betraying the operation’s Russian origin.

A few accounts did post longer texts, but these were usually copy-pasted from other online sources. The copy-pasting was done with some care: often, posts would select paragraphs from separate sections of their sources and rearrange their order or omit large sections, rather than copying the entire text.

Left, blog post from 2016 on black hairstyles; right, post by michigan_black_community_
The Mark II was the most common variant, with two million units produced. It was a much rougher weapon than the Mk I. The flash eliminator and the folding handle (the grip) of the Mk I were omitted. A removable barrel was now provided which projected 3 in (76 mm) beyond the barrel sleeve. Also, a special catch allowed the magazine to be slid partly out of the magazine housing and the housing rotated 90 degrees counter-clockwise (from the operator's perspective), together covering the ejection opening and allowing the weapon and magazine both to lie flat on its side.

The barrel sleeve was shorter and rather than having small holes on the top, it had three sets of three holes equally spaced on the shroud. To allow a soldier to hold a Sten by the hot barrel sleeve with the supporting hand, an insulating lace-on leather sleeve guard was sometimes issued. Some Mk IIIs were fitted with a wooden stock so this part was detachable and interchangeable with the Mk V. Also, the GPz-40 assault rifle uses the receiver and components from the Sten Mk II.

Regular Mark II:
- Overall length: 762 mm (30.0 in)
- Barrel length: 197 mm (7.8 in)
- Weight: 3.3 kg (7.3 lb)

Mark II (Canadian) [edit]

During World War II a version of the Sten gun was produced at the Long Branch Arsenal in Long Branch, Ontario now part of Toronto, Ontario. This was very similar to the regular Mark II, with a different stock (‘skeleton’ type instead of strut type) and improved quality of manufacture. It was first used in

Top, post by gun.toting.tom on the STEN gun. Bottom, the original on Wikipedia. The Instagram post copied passages from the Wikipedia article verbatim, but in abridged form.

Left, Facebook post on a genuine page. Right, the identical wording posted by IRACopyPasta asset gun.toting.tom. The text originally appeared in "The Atlantic" in 2018, written by David French.\(^{17}\) The woman in the photo was featured on a separate Facebook page belonging to a gun instructor in January 2019.

This plagiarism extended to political campaigns, especially that of Bernie Sanders. On a number of occasions, “progressive” accounts in the cluster copy-pasted both memes and comments originating directly from Sanders’ own Instagram account.

Left, post by Bernie Sanders.\(^{18}\) Right, the same post by IRACopyPasta asset bernie.2020___. Note that the IRACopyPasta account gathered 105 likes, while Sanders’ posts gathered over 65,000 likes.

---


Left, post by a genuine guns-focused account; right, the identical post from Florida-focused IRACopyPasta account mygunshinestate.

As noted earlier, the accounts also posted a high proportion of screenshot tweets, significantly more than in any other operation we previously analyzed.

19 Post by fromtheguncounter, Instagram, July 29, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B0ghqVJg0PA/.
Posts by feminismdomination, from the account’s profile page. Note that seven of the nine posts are screenshots of tweets.

This technique blurred the operation’s fingerprint by reducing the scope for linguistic errors and maintaining a high stock of genuine American content appropriate to the political groups it targeted. However, it also gave each asset less of a discernible personality and therefore may have reduced the IRACopyPasta asset’s ability to build audiences. It is not the first time that the platforms and researchers have exposed information operations that prioritized operational security over audience. The “Secondary Infektion” operation that emanated from Russia went to extreme lengths to hide its traces, but as a result, almost none of its stories gained traction.

---

Linguistic and Cultural Clues

Despite the lengths the operators went to to obscure their linguistic footprint, both texts and memes posted by the operation employed grammatical constructions and idioms uncharacteristic of speakers whose native language is American English.

"Do you also do same?" The correct idiom would end "do the same." Post by IRACopyPasta asset "myblackohioblog."
“What a bullshit”: the idiom would be “what bullshit!” Post by IRACopyPasta asset law.abiding.citizen.

“What the future for their children will be?” Note the inaccurate word order. Post by IRACopyPasta asset rebel.va.
In addition to odd linguistic constructions, this operation also echoed specific cultural references favored by the IRA in previous campaigns to target Southern Pride/pro-Confederate audiences. For instance, an abundance of content referenced the early-80’s TV show “Dukes of Hazzard” (also previously frequently shared by the formerly active IRA account South United) and showed an over-reliance on content borrowed from accounts and websites operated by the Redneck Nation network.

The IRA Connection

Facebook attributed IRACopyPasta to operators “originating from Russia” who showed “some links” to the IRA.

Previous analyses of the IRA’s campaigns targeting American audiences between 2014 and 2018 pointed to a set of issues and communities similar to those targeted by the IRACopyPasta campaign. "Socially divisive issues, such as race, immigration, and Second Amendment rights," which were the focus of the IRA’s previous campaigns, appear clearly throughout this set. The targeting, the language and content clues, and the recreation of original IRA content, all underscore the resemblance between the original IRA and IRACopyPasta.

If IRACopyPasta was, indeed, the work of the IRA or an affiliated group, they have continued evolving, placing an ever greater emphasis on remaining undetected. The high level of operational security throughout this campaign stands in sharp contrast to the various non-Russian clickbait and spam operators who have recycled known IRA content since 2017, blatantly, in high volume, and with no attempt at disguise. The operation tried hard to hide, even at the expense of building its audience, and took the trouble to rebuild some of its earlier memes, rather than simply reusing them. Facebook concluded that the operation “had the hallmarks of a well-resourced operation that took consistent operational security steps to conceal their identity and location”. The open-source evidence supports that conclusion.


23 See for instance the recently discussed and Ukraine-based “I Love America” Facebook page.
Appendix: List of Assets

Assets in this set are listed below. If you have been in touch with one of the accounts in this set, or have additional context to share, feel free to reach out at info@graphika.com

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Username</th>
<th>Target Community</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em><strong>everything_black</strong></em></td>
<td>Black Activism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>michigan_black_community_</td>
<td>Black Activism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>support_black_fl</td>
<td>Black Activism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>myblackohioblog</td>
<td>Black Activism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black.queen.chloe</td>
<td>Black Activism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blacks_only_</td>
<td>Black Activism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black.slayzz</td>
<td>Black Activism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alpha.union</td>
<td>Black Activism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blackenterprisemi</td>
<td>Black Activism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rebel.va</td>
<td>Confederate</td>
<td>Southern heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>confederate_florida</td>
<td>Confederate</td>
<td>Southern heritage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protect.environment</td>
<td>Environmentalism</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>power_to_women_</td>
<td>Feminist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feminist_agenda_</td>
<td>Feminist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feminismdomination</td>
<td>Feminist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>islamination</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Islamic unity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lgbt_foxes</td>
<td>LGTBQ+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lgbt.florida</td>
<td>LGTBQ+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>equality_state_</td>
<td>LGTBQ+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>progressive.voice</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stop.trump2020</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Anti-Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bernie.2020__</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Pro-Bernie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>progressiveview</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Pro-Bernie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jesus.by.my.side</td>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>Inspirational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gun.toting.tom</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Gun rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iowa.patriot</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Gun rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mygunshinestate</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Gun rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Username</td>
<td>Tag</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rightwing__memes</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Pro-Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>_conservative.minds</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Pro-Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nofreeload</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Pro-Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>right_fl</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Pro-Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>law.abiding.citizen</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Pro-Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ad0rable_depl0rable</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Pro-Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>freedom_first_1776</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Pro-Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>arizonan.american</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Pro-Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ohio_conservative_</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Pro-Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>free.dom.choice</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Pro-Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conservative.pa</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Pro-Trump</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nevada_blue_line</td>
<td>Thin blue line</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wisconsin.blue.family</td>
<td>Thin blue line</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>