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Facebook ads show Russian effort to stoke political division

By Mary Clare Jalonick

WASHINGTON (AP) - Democrats on the House intelligence committee have released more than 3,500 Facebook ads that were created or promoted by a Russian internet agency, providing the fullest picture yet of Russia's attempt to sow racial and political division in the United States before and after the 2016 election.

Most of the ads are issue-based, pushing arguments for and against immigration, LGBT issues and gun rights, among other issues. A large number of them attempt to stoke racial divisions by mentioning police brutality or disparaging the Black Lives Matter movement. Some promote President Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders, who ran against Hillary Clinton in the Democratic presidential primary. Few, if any, support Clinton.

The intelligence committee Democrats released a sampling of the ads purchased by Russia's Internet Research Agency last year, but they are now releasing the full cache of ads that Facebook officials turned over to the panel after acknowledging in September they had discovered the Russian efforts. The release of ads from early 2015 through mid-2017 does not include 80,000 posts that the agency also shared. Some of the ads are partially redacted, part of an effort by Facebook and the committee to protect unsuspecting people whose names or faces were used.

An Associated Press review of the thousands of ads and their data shows how precisely - and sometimes randomly - the agency targeted them.

Some ads designed to appeal to critics of immigration were targeted to users who liked specific Fox News hosts, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, "Old Glory" and the United States Constitution, among other words.

Others were more narrowly targeted. Facebook users within 12 miles of Buffalo, New York, were directed to an event supporting justice for a black woman who died in a county jail. Another ad criticizing a Texas school teacher who lost her job after making racist remarks was aimed at adults living in Cleveland, Baltimore, St. Louis and Ferguson, Missouri.

One ad that targeted African-Americans concerned about discrimination was only to be shown to users accessing Facebook on Wi-Fi, rather than cellular. There was no explanation as to why that was.

Sometimes the targeting appeared to work - after a try or two. A January 2016 ad that promised news on "bad" refugees got five clicks when targeted at those interested in immigration or conservatism. But the same ad got 163 clicks when targeted at those interested in Syria, the Republican Party or politics.

Others got many more clicks. A pro-patriotism ad created on June 23, 2015 featuring a stylized drawing of a bald eagle was viewed nearly 530,000 times and was clicked on 72,000 times.

As the Russians attempted to pose as Americans, their language sometimes hinted at their origin. One ad railed against immigrants who "should prove that they are deserved to stay in the United States." Another read: "Your life matter. My life matter. Black matters."

Facebook revealed in September that it had discovered the divisive ads, which were paid for in rubles. Ads were still running in July and August of 2017, weeks before Facebook made the effort public.

In February, special counsel Robert Mueller indicted 13 Russians of an elaborate plot to disrupt the 2016 presidential election, charging several people associated with the Internet Research Agency with running a huge but hidden social media trolling campaign aimed in part at helping Trump defeat Clinton. The indictment was part of Mueller's larger investigation into Russian intervention in the election and whether Trump's campaign was involved. There has been no evidence that Trump's campaign was in any way associated with the social media effort.

The trove of ads released May 10 appears to back the assertion that the Russians wanted to hurt Clinton. Some spread rumors about her husband, former president Bill Clinton, or promote lies about her. Several depict Clinton behind bars.

Hundreds of the ads ran after the election, continuing the effort to sow discord. A series of ads posted two days after Trump was elected urge his supporters to show up at Trump Tower in Manhattan to respond to the "massive crowds of libtards" who protested him. It targets people within 50 miles of New York City and provides the street address.

That was one of many ads that attempted to set up events - sometimes on opposing sides of an issue.

In May 2017, the fake group "United Muslims of America" ran seven ads promoting two June 3 protests against the war in Syria - one at Trump Tower, the other at the White House. One of those ads targeted people with interests in peace, human rights, feminism and pacifism and those who were "likely to engage with political content (liberal)."

Facebook has said that more than 10 million people in the United States saw the ads, more than half of which ran after the election. Under fire from Congress, the social media giant has pledged improvements to its ad policies and enforcement. Facebook has made it easier to see the origins of ads, is forcing buyers to be more transparent about who they are and has worked to find more fake accounts, among other changes.

California Rep. Adam Schiff, the top Democrat on the intelligence committee, said he was releasing the ads so it doesn't happen again.

"The only way we can begin to inoculate ourselves against a future attack is to see firsthand the types of messages, themes and imagery the Russians used to divide us," he said.

Associated Press writers Chad Day, Eric Tucker, Tom LoBianco and Desmond Butler in Washington, Mae Anderson and Nick Jesdanun in New York, David Hamilton and Michael Liedtke in San Francisco, Frank Bajak in Boston and Matt O'Brien in Providence, Rhode Island contributed to this report.



Photos of R.Kelly. From the R. Kelly Website

R. Kelly stages racy performance amid protest, allegations



By Tom Foreman Jr.

GREENSBORO (AP) - With demonstrators standing outside his concert protesting his presence, R. Kelly summoned his passionate fans to carry him through what has been a difficult week.

Interspersing references to God with his suggestive lyrics and salty language, Kelly stirred up a crowd inside the Greensboro Coliseum on May 11 to buoy him as he encountered longstanding allegations of mistreatment of women and an effort to get coliseum officials to cancel the concert.

"Sometimes, some storms ain't gonna stop," Kelly told the audience during his nearly one-hour performance. "As long as my fans are calling for me, I'm gonna be on that stage, singing these songs."

Well after his performance, however, the storms that started before he arrived continued to roil.

Women's groups had urged the Greensboro Coliseum to cancel, days after Kelly was disinvented from a concert in Chicago. Spotify announced it would no longer stream his music in its curated playlists.

Although it didn't announce the move, Apple's music-streaming service also has stopped promoting Kelly's music on some of the featured playlists that it shows its 40 million subscribers. Like Spotify, Apple Music still carries an extensive selection of Kelly's songs in its library.

Apple declined to further comment Saturday, May 12.

Pandora also declined to discuss how it is now treating Kelly's music in its curated playlists, but said it has decided not to promote "artists with certain demonstrable behavioral, ethical or criminal issues. We approach each of these scenarios on a case-by-case basis."

But before the latest moves, Kelly took the stage, inviting some audience members to join him. Stage hands also passed out t-shirts that read "Turn Up R. Kelly."

"I've been through a lot of (expletive)" this week, he said. He thanked his fans, "for y'all to fight for me all these years."

Kelly said he was approached backstage to tone down his songs and language because there were families in attendance.

"Let me ask y'all something," he said to the crowd. "Can I do my show tonight?"

Kelly then launched into his sexually suggestive repertoire. At one point, he rubbed a fan's cell phone between his legs. He persuaded another to wipe his face, tongue and crotch with a towel.

Kelly denies abusing anyone and faces no current criminal charges, and his fans weren't giving up on their R&B superstar.

"Everybody has some skeletons in the closet. I'm not going to tear him down, every good thing he does, because of something negative in his life," said Clarissa Kelley of Lancaster, South Carolina.

The Greensboro concert was among the R&B singer's first performances since the (hash)MuteRKelly movement accelerated boycott efforts in recent weeks, with help from the Time's Up campaign against sexual harassment and assault.

Protesters stood on the sidewalk outside the Greensboro Coliseum and criticized arena officials for declining to meet with a coalition of women's groups that signed a letter citing a "long term history of sexual misconduct" by Kelly.

"It's important for the black community to stand up and hold him accountable for his actions," said Omisade Burney-Scott, with the Sistersong, a reproductive rights group.

R. Kelly is one of pop music's best-selling artists, with hits including "Ignition," "I Believe I Can Fly," "Step in the Name of Love," "Same Girl" and "Bump N' Grind." He's also written hits for Celene Dion, Michael Jackson and Lady Gaga.

He's written classic love songs and even gospel music, but he's defined by sexually explicit songs such as "Feelin' on Yo Booty," "Your Body's Calling Me," and "Sex Me."

He was acquitted in 2008 of child pornography after a video circulated appearing to show him having sex with a teenage girl. But as he continued to score hits and sell out stadiums, more women have come forward in recent years accusing him of sexual misconduct.

Kelly had been scheduled to be among the performers at a May 5 concert in Chicago, but was dropped as efforts by organizers of (hash)MuteRKelly gained attention with support from Hollywood's Time's Up campaign.

Spotify, citing its new policy against hateful content and conduct, announced Thursday, May 10 that Kelly's music is no longer available on the service's owned and operated playlists and algorithmic recommendations. His music can still be found by those who search for it, but Spotify will not promote it.

Kelly's management protested the move in a statement to The Associated Press.

"R. Kelly never has been accused of hate, and the lyrics he writes express love and desire," the statement read. "Mr. Kelly for 30 years has sung songs about his love and passion for women. He is innocent of the false and hurtful accusations in the ongoing smear campaign against him, waged by enemies seeking a payoff. He never has been convicted of a crime, nor does he have any pending criminal charges against him."

AP reporter Michael Liedtke contributed from San Francisco.