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## Russia social media, Republicans influence efforts target African Americans ongoing, report says

By Mary Clare Jalonick

WASHINGTON (AP) - Russia's sweeping political disinformation campaign on U.S. social media was more far-reaching than originally thought, with troll farms working to discourage black voters and "blur the lines between reality and fiction" to help elect Donald Trump in 2016, according to reports released Monday, Dec. 17, by the Senate intelligence committee.

And the campaign didn't end with Trump's ascent to the White House. Troll farms are still working to stoke racial and political passions in America at a time of high political discord.

The two studies are the most comprehensive picture yet of the Russian interference campaigns on American social media. They add to the portrait investigators have been building since 2017 on Russia's influence - though Trump has equivocated on whether the interference actually happened.

Facebook, Google and Twitter declined to comment on the specifics of the reports.

The reports were compiled by the cybersecurity firm New Knowledge and by the Computational Propaganda Research Project, a study by researchers at the University of Oxford and Graphika, a social media analysis firm.

The Oxford report details how Russians broke down their messages to different groups, including discouraging black voters from going to the polls and stoking anger on the right.

"These campaigns pushed a message that the best way to advance the cause of the African-American community was to boycott the election and focus on other issues instead," the researchers wrote.

At the same time, "Messaging to conservative and right-wing voters sought to do three things: repeat patriotic and anti-immigrant slogans; elicit outrage with posts about liberal appeasement of 'others' at the expense of US citizens, and encourage them to vote for Trump."

The report from New Knowledge says there are still some live accounts tied to the original Internet Research Agency, which was named in an indictment from special counsel Robert Mueller in February for an expansive social media campaign intended to influence the 2016 presidential election. Some of the accounts have a presence on smaller platforms as the major companies have tried to clean up after the Russian activity was discovered.

"With at least some of the Russian government's goals achieved in the face of little diplomatic or other pushback, it appears likely that the United States will continue to face Russian

interference for the foreseeable future," the researchers wrote.

The New Knowledge report says that none of the social media companies turned over complete data sets to Congress and some of them "may have misrepresented or evaded" in testimony about the interference by either intentionally or unintentionally downplaying the scope of the problem.

The Senate panel has been investigating Russian interference on social media and beyond for almost two years. Intelligence committee Chairman Richard Burr said in a statement that the data shows how aggressively Russia tried to divide Americans by race, religion and ideology and erode trust in institutions.

"Most troublingly, it shows that these activities have not stopped," said Burr, a North Carolina Republican.

One major takeaway from both studies is the breadth of Russian interference that appeared on Instagram, which is owned by Facebook and was not frequently mentioned when its parent company testified on Capitol Hill. The study says that as attention was focused on Facebook and Twitter in 2017, the Russians shifted much of their activity to Instagram.

The New Knowledge study says that there were 187 million engagements with users on Instagram, while there were 77 million on Facebook.

"Instagram was a significant front in the IRA's influence operation, something that Facebook executives appear to have avoided mentioning in congressional testimony," the researchers wrote. They added that "our assessment is that Instagram is likely to be a key battleground on an ongoing basis."

The Russian activity went far beyond the three tech companies that provided information, reaching many smaller sites as well. The New Knowledge report details sophisticated attempts to infiltrate internet games, browser extensions and music apps. The Russians even used social media to encourage users of the game Pokemon Go - which was at peak popularity in the months before the 2016 presidential election - to use politically divisive usernames, for example. The report discusses even more unconventional ways that the Russian accounts attempted to connect with Americans and recruit assets, such as merchandise with certain messages, specific follower requests, job offers and even help lines that could encourage people to unknowingly disclose sensitive information to Russia that could later be used against them.

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Ms. Ernesha Ballard, mother of senior DeAndre Ballard who died tragically in September, accepts posthumous degree for son. (NCCU Photo)

## NCAA appeals panel upholds penalties against NC Central

(AP) - An NCAA appeals committee has upheld a ruling requiring North Carolina Central to vacate football, baseball and men's basketball records due to certification errors that allowed ineligible athletes to compete.

The NCAA announced the decision Wednesday, Dec. 12. An infractions committee panel had issued penalties in May, including two years of probation for the errors involving 22 athletes in seven sports from 2012-15.

In an email Wednesday, Dec. 12, athletics spokesman Kyle Serba said the school will vacate 19 football wins, including co-championships in the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference for 2014 and 2015. The baseball program will vacate 19 wins for 2013 and two for 2014, while the men's basketball program will vacate 16 wins for the 2012-13 season.

Administrative errors in the certification process led to the violations, which were determined to be unintentional.

## How Zip Codes Relate to Achievement Gaps

By: Akil Wilson

There's no question that education quality has an extraordinary impact on the future lives of students. As a parent of a new middle school student, I can personally attest to the importance of dedicated teachers, early childhood education and a focused, personalized approach to education. In numerous studies it has been shown that the quality of education, especially within the country's public school system, varies widely by location.

There are several factors that contribute to success in adulthood. However, routinely we find that early childhood education and the empowerment of excellent teachers plays a pivotal role.

Students from economically-disadvantaged areas of inner-city school districts have a plethora of obstacles to overcome, including but not limited to: lack of economic mobility, reduced health care options, and exposure to crime.

Where schools should provide some relief from these challenges, they often serve as a grim reminder of how difficult it can be to escape difficult circumstances.

Harvard University Economist Raj Chetty has researched this topic extensively, compiling data from millions of Americans, he found that education quality relates to economic and social mobility. According to Mr. Chetty's research, on average, "only about 7.5% of ch

children from the bottom 1/5th of incomes will reach the top 1/5th of incomes nationwide. However, those odds tend to rise to 14-15% in rural areas and places with higher social capital. They sometimes decrease to below 5% in impoverished or socioeconomically-disadvantaged places."

Children in lower income brackets disproportionately tend to be the recipients of sub-par educational resources. As Mr. Chetty points out on NPR's 'Hidden Brain' Podcast, larger class sizes and less experienced teachers are all indicators that students are much less likely to obtain the cognitive and social skills necessary to advance themselves and their families.

The fact that these lower-performing public schools tend to be found in more impoverished or socially/culturally isolated areas is not a coincidence.

Prior to the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in the 2017-2018 school year, education standards were largely determined by federal standards outlined in No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This structure did very little to address the specific needs of the most disadvantaged communities.

ESSA seeks to improve students' chances at success by encouraging a more personalized approach to students' needs, strengths and interests as well as improving and decreasing the emphasis on standardized

testing. Much of the research suggests this approach will do more to advance specific, individual state school system goals and impact students' lives.

It's very important that parents, teachers, administrators and community members take strategic steps to address factors contributing to the educational shortcomings in some of our schools while working with policy makers to equitably utilize all the tools and resources available.

The future is now, and if our community ever hopes to eliminate the disparities that are at the root of many of the issues we are often confronted with (i.e. poverty, mass incarceration, chronic unemployment) we have to begin with education.

By requiring states to identify and intervene with their lowest-performing schools and take a more tailored approach to their improvement, ESSA is poised to have a significant and measurable impact on the state of public education in America.

There is a very real correlation between underperforming schools and generational poverty. If we wish to eliminate the latter, we must tackle education with a focus and energy that is specifically tailored to the needs of our communities.

Akil Wilson is a native Washington, DC-based, podcaster, and parent. He is a contributing writer for the Washington Informer in addition to providing broadcast commentary for a variety of media outlets.



WHERE YOU LIVE HAS AN ECONOMIC IMPACT

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