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How Russian Trolls Used Higher Ed to Sow Discord Online

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8–10 minutes

Employees at the Internet Research Agency, which U.S. authorities have said whipped up online outrage about issues in American society, also tweeted about issues in higher education. Above, the building in St. Petersburg, Russia, where the propaganda outfit was based.

Boarding a flight in March 2017, George Ciccariello-Maher saw a passenger trade his first-class seat with a uniformed soldier.

"People are thanking him. I'm trying not to vomit or yell about Mosul," the then-Drexel University professor wrote on Twitter, referring to the Iraqi city where American airstrikes just days earlier had reportedly left up to 200 civilians dead.

From the local *Philly Voice* to the couch at Fox and Friends, observers expressed their disdain for Ciccariello-Maher's words. Twitter users were equally incensed. John Davis, whose Twitter bio described him as a "Business Owner, Proud Father, Conservative," tweeted three times about the incident to his 41,900 followers over the course of 24 hours. But Davis differed from his American counterparts in one important way: His was a sockpuppet account created by a Russian troll factory, tied to the Kremlin, that worked to exacerbate partisan tensions within American society. Known by the handle "@TheFoundingSon," Davis would be the second high-profile Russian sockpuppet to target Ciccariello-Maher online for his comments.

At least 129 Twitter accounts associated with a Kremlin-aligned propaganda outfit, the Internet Research Agency, or IRA, tweeted and retweeted about issues pertinent to higher education from 2015 to 2017, according to a *Chronicle* analysis of IRA-associated tweets made available by NBC News (tweets now deleted by Twitter along with the troll accounts). Some accounts, like @TheFoundingSon, generated original and hostile commentary directed at aspects of American higher ed. Other accounts mostly amplified the opinions of legitimate American critics of academe in the United States, including high-profile outlets and figures like the conservative news site Campus Reform, the former Milwaukee County sheriff David A. Clarke Jr., and the Fox News personality Tucker Carlson.

[The 597 tweets screened by *The Chronicle*](#) represent a very small segment of the more than 200,000 made available by NBC News. But they offer clues about higher ed's place in the bitter partisan wars that take place online but often have [real-world ramifications.](#) Here are a few takeaways:

Russian-linked accounts worked to amplify talking points shared by right-wing media outlets.

@TheFoundingSon's antagonism toward academe and its perceived values was nothing new in March 2017. Following Election Day 2016, the account had predicted college students would cheer for the raising of an ISIS flag on campuses. Another tweet from 2016 mocked the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor's pronoun policy, through a story about a conservative student's demand that he be referred to as "his Majesty." The account's [final archived tweet](#) referred to a self-published post on Medium titled "Shoving Title IX Down Your Throat." [*Wired* reported](#) that the overall subject matter of the Medium post concerned "indoctrination at U.S. colleges." Medium has since scrubbed the account and associated articles from its platform.

A screenshot of @TheFoundingSon's account

@TheFoundingSon and @TEN_GOP, the account that targeted Ciccariello-Maher in December 2016, were two of the three most robust accounts used by Russian trolls, according to an analysis by researchers at the University of Southern California's Information Sciences Institute.

However, most of the acrimonious rhetoric and caricatures of higher education associated with the IRA trolls came from homegrown commentators, thereafter amplified by Russian-linked accounts. Sockpuppet accounts repeatedly tweeted segments from Fox News programs that spotlighted incidents of liberalism run amok at colleges. One account drew attention to an InfoWars writer's tweet about a petition signed by University of Virginia students to eliminate Christmas.

CAMPUS (((C))) REFORM

▶ 21.2K views   0:00 / 2:55 🔊 ⤢

5:18 AM - 19 Dec 2016

522 Retweets 485 Likes

💬 231   �recycle 522   ♡ 485   ✉   ⮟

The sockpuppet accounts @AmelieBaldwin, @GarrettSimpson_, and @JacquelinIsBest each retweeted links to individual stories from Campus Reform. And when content from known quantities wasn't available, the accounts found similar Twitter commentary from relative unknowns and amplified it as well.

According to the special counsel Robert S. Mueller III's indictment of the Internet Research Agency and associated individuals last week, the alleged motives of the 80-person operation boiled down to "supporting the presidential campaign of then-candidate Donald J. Trump ('Trump Campaign') and disparaging Hillary Clinton." Such aims are evident in the nearly 600 tweets analyzed by *The Chronicle.* The sockpuppet account @AmelieBaldwin retweeted commentary reflecting positively on the Republican nominee ("@washingtonpost: Trump is headed for a win, says professor who has predicted 30 years of presidential outcomes correctly") and poorly on his opponent's campaign ("@Lagartija_Nix: Clinton campaign demanded $500 from college kids to attend 'Conversation with Chelsea'").

But aside from that, messaging by the IRA operation on higher-education issues spanned the political spectrum. Russian-linked accounts tweeted and retweeted divergent opinions on topics related to campus life like diversity, sexual assault, immigration, and Israel. The only constant among the nearly 600 messages that were examined seemed to be discord.

Troll accounts didn't just attempt to inflame. They also worked to establish credibility in higher ed.

Rhetoric aimed against academe very likely helped Russian trolls build credibility within certain networks of social-media groups. Indeed, the choice by trolls to use mainstream American sources to buoy their commentary was a wise tactical move, according to research by a Columbia University scholar, Jonathan Albright.

But the accounts also used more general aspects about higher education to establish their bona fides as American citizens. For instance, on Martin Luther King's Birthday in 2017, the sockpuppet account @ChrixMorgan tweeted "#IHaveADreamThat I will finally pay off all my student loans and start making money just for myself." Likewise, another sockpuppet, using the hashtag "#My911Story," recalled when the commenter's college instructor flipped on the television in class after the terrorist attack began. And the dummy account @MichelleArry tweeted "Counselors on campus, candlelight vigil set at Delta State" in the wake of a professor's murder there, giving the impression the user was a concerned Mississippi resident.

In late January, Twitter announced it had informed 1.4 million users that they had interacted in some way with the overall Russian propaganda action on its platform. But as Fast Company reported

last December, Russia's influence operation has hardly subsided. On the eve of the special election that month in Alabama to fill a U.S. Senate seat, the hashtag #VoteForRoyMoore was a favorite among Russian-propaganda accounts tracked by the nonpartisan Alliance for Securing Democracy.

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