

Russian trolls tried to distract voters with music tweets in 2016

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In a finding that has implications for the 2022 midterm elections, Cornell researchers found Russia tried to distract liberal voters during the 2016 presidential campaign with a seemingly innocent

weapon—tweets about music and videos—taking a page from its domestic disinformation playbook.

The strategy resembles techniques used by autocratic governments that control their national media, such as Russia and China, which "flood" [social media](#) with entertainment content to distract their citizens from domestic events like protests that they don't want covered.

"We've seen flooding as a social media strategy in both China and Russia; for example, in the past decade Russia has frequently manipulated social media with respect to Ukraine," said political economist Alexandra Cirone, an assistant professor of government in the College of Arts and Sciences (A&S) who teaches a class on fake news and disinformation. "But an autocratic country, trying to do it to a democratic country in the midst of an election—we're in new territory. It's surprising how well these strategies transplant."

Cirone and Will Hobbs, assistant professor of psychology in the College of Human Ecology and government in A&S, co-authored the paper, "Asymmetric Flooding as a Tool for Foreign Influence on Social Media," which published March 25 in *Political Science and Research Methods*.

Previous research has shown that the Kremlin-affiliated Internet Research Agency (IRA) used thousands of troll accounts on Twitter and other [social media platforms](#) to overwhelmingly support former President Donald Trump's campaign over the campaign of Hillary Clinton, in an attempt to amplify social divisions between conservatives and liberals. That work has focused on partisan messaging.

But in 2018, Twitter released an important dataset of more than 10 million tweets sent by 3,841 IRA accounts. (These accounts represent human-controlled Russian operators, or "trolls," as opposed to computer-

controlled accounts, or "bots.") The dataset included apolitical content, which hasn't been studied as much as the partisan messaging.

The researchers asked, what was the apolitical content doing there?

To analyze the data, the authors used a new text analysis method Hobbs developed, pivoted text scaling, that can categorize short tweets and the themes of that content over time. He also leveraged his expertise in digital politics and autocratic regimes to recognize a pattern he and others have seen autocratic regimes use in the past: flooding users' feeds with apolitical content, Hobbs said.

"In China, government-affiliated users might flood social media feeds with Chinese history or inspirational quotes," Hobbs said. "So what might Russian trolls use in the U.S.? Entertainment content popped out of the automated analysis method."

Key words in those tweets included "hiphop," "remix," "rapstationradio," "nowplaying" and "indieradioplay."

By constructing a timeline of the IRA messages, they found left-leaning IRA trolls posted large volumes of entertainment content in their artificial liberal community and shifted away from political content late in the campaign. Simultaneously, conservative trolls were targeting their community with increases in political content. The effort would have encouraged the right to vote and the left to ignore politics.

Hobbs notes that the mechanism doesn't mean a Twitter user sees a music tweet and automatically stops thinking about politics. Rather, if a troll suddenly posts a significant amount of music tweets to a feed, it displaces other content.

"If someone posts a ton of entertainment content, and your feed only

shows 10 posts at a time, then having eight posts that are now unrelated to politics pushes everything else down in the feed," Hobbs said.

The findings underscore that entertainment content is not as innocuous as we might think. "They have a lot of strategies to draw on, and entertainment content can be useful for some goals," Hobbs said.

Added Cirone: "You might think you're clicking on a cat meme, but really you're potentially putting a troll network into your feed that could later start posting divisive content, or monetize their following."

More important are the implications for the upcoming [midterm elections](#), they said.

"There are going to be all sorts of bad actors trying to interfere in the midterms, especially in the contested races. All of them could be using entertainment content to distract, or to pose as regular users," Cirone said. "The fact that the [average person](#) would not associate music with Russian trolls means that they're doing a good job."

More information: Alexandra Cirone et al, Asymmetric flooding as a tool for foreign influence on social media, *Political Science Research and Methods* (2022). [DOI: 10.1017/psrm.2022.9](https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2022.9)

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