THREAD BY MATT TAIBII

‹ TWITTER FILES ›

#12 WHY TWITTER LET THE INTELLIGENCE COMMUNITY IN

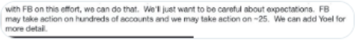
@UNGATHEGREAT

1.THREAD: The Twitter Files

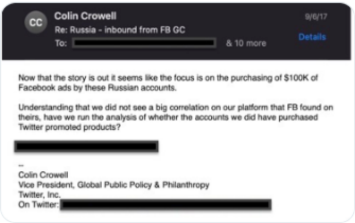
How Twitter Let the Intelligence Community In

2.In August 2017, when Facebook decided to suspend 300 accounts with “suspected Russian origin,” Twitter wasn’t worried. Its leaders were sure they didn’t have a Russia problem.

3.“We did not see a big correlation.”
“No larger patterns.”
“FB may take action on hundreds of accounts, and we may take action on ~25.”



with FB on this effort, we can do that. We'll just want to be careful about expectations. FB may take action on hundreds of accounts and we may take action on ~25. We can add Yoel for more detail.



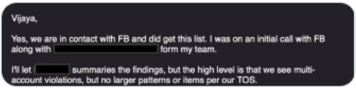
Colin Crowell 9/6/17
Re: Russia - inbound from FB GC
To: [redacted] & 10 more

Now that the story is out it seems like the focus is on the purchasing of $100K of Facebook ads by these Russian accounts.

Understanding that we did not see a big correlation on our platform that FB found on theirs, have we run the analysis of whether the accounts we did have purchased Twitter promoted products?

[redacted]

--
Colin Crowell
Vice President, Global Public Policy & Philanthropy
Twitter, Inc.
On Twitter: [redacted]

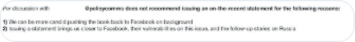


Vijaya,

Yes, we are in contact with FB and did get this list. I was on an initial call with FB along with [redacted] form my team.

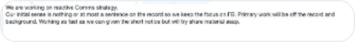
I'll let [redacted] summaries the findings, but the high level is that we see multi-account violations, but no larger patterns or items per our TOS.

4.“KEEP THE FOCUS ON FB”: Twitter was so sure they had no Russia problem, execs agreed the best PR strategy was to say nothing on record, and quietly hurl reporters at Facebook:



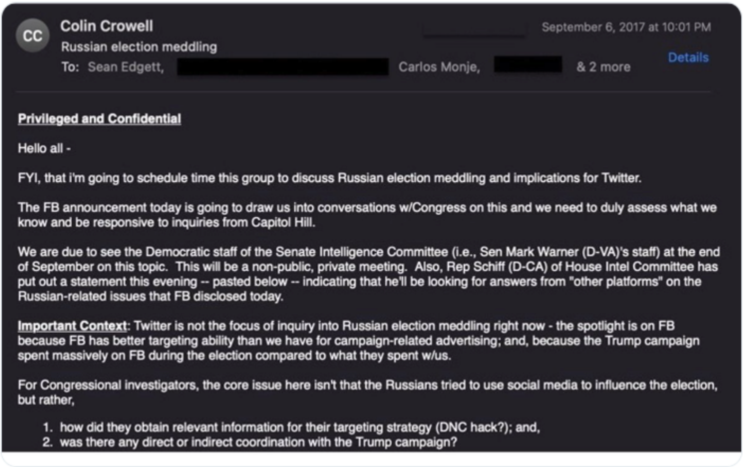
Per discussion with @policycomms does not recommend issuing an on-the-record statement for the following reasons:

1) We can be more candid pushing the book back to Facebook on background
2) Issuing a statement brings us closer to Facebook, their vulnerabilities on this issue, and the follow-up stories on Russia



We are working on reactive Comms strategy.
Our initial sense is nothing or at most a sentence on the record so we keep the focus on FB. Primary work will be off the record and background. Working as fast as we can given the short notice but will try share material asap.

5.“Twitter is not the focus of inquiry into Russian election meddling right now - the spotlight is on FB,” wrote Public Policy VP Colin Crowell:



CC **Colin Crowell** [redacted] September 6, 2017 at 10:01 PM

Russian election meddling

To: Sean Edgett, [redacted] Carlos Monje, [redacted] & 2 more

Privileged and Confidential

Hello all -

FYI, that i'm going to schedule time this group to discuss Russian election meddling and implications for Twitter.

The FB announcement today is going to draw us into conversations w/Congress on this and we need to duly assess what we know and be responsive to inquiries from Capitol Hill.

We are due to see the Democratic staff of the Senate Intelligence Committee (i.e., Sen Mark Warner (D-VA)'s staff) at the end of September on this topic. This will be a non-public, private meeting. Also, Rep Schiff (D-CA) of House Intel Committee has put out a statement this evening -- pasted below -- indicating that he'll be looking for answers from "other platforms" on the Russian-related issues that FB disclosed today.

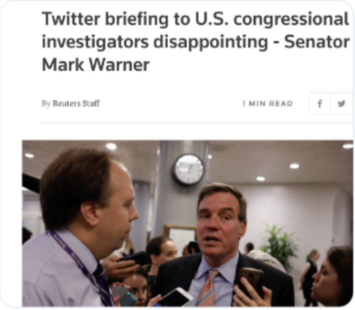
Important Context: Twitter is not the focus of inquiry into Russian election meddling right now - the spotlight is on FB because FB has better targeting ability than we have for campaign-related advertising; and, because the Trump campaign spent massively on FB during the election compared to what they spent w/us.

For Congressional investigators, the core issue here isn't that the Russians tried to use social media to influence the election, but rather,

1. how did they obtain relevant information for their targeting strategy (DNC hack?); and,
2. was there any direct or indirect coordination with the Trump campaign?

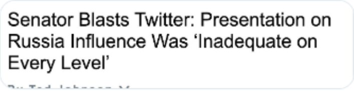
6.In September, 2017, after a cursory review, Twitter informed the Senate it suspended 22 possible Russian accounts, and 179 others with “possible links” to those accounts, amid a larger set of roughly 2700 suspects manually examined.

7.Receiving these meager results, a furious Senator Mark Warner of Virginia – ranking Democrat on the Intelligence Committee – held an immediate press conference to denounce Twitter’s report as “frankly inadequate on every level.”



Twitter briefing to U.S. congressional investigators disappointing - Senator Mark Warner

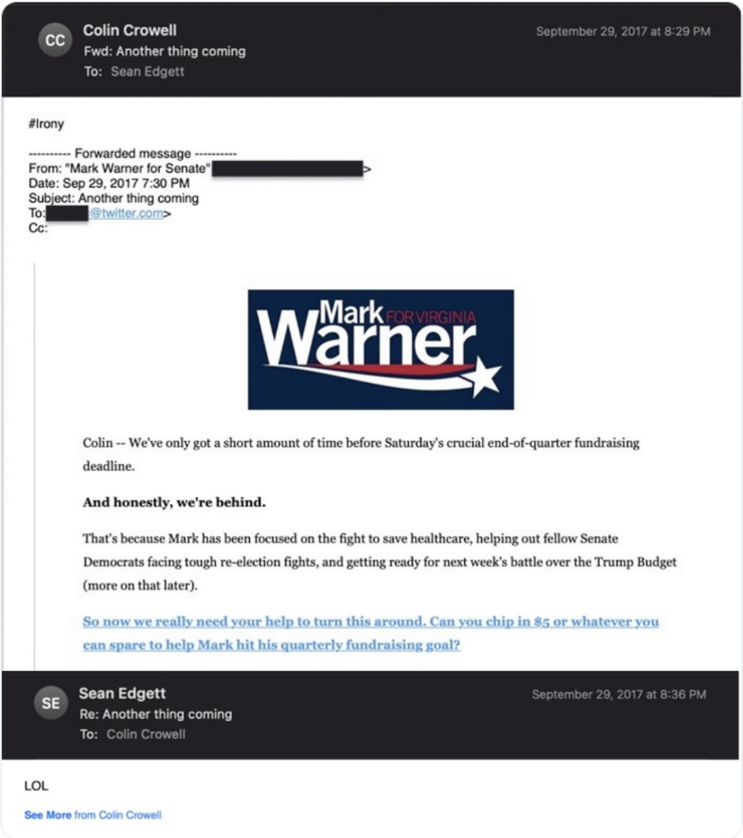
By Reuters Staff



Senator Blasts Twitter: Presentation on Russia Influence Was ‘Inadequate on Every Level’

8.“#Irony,” mused Crowell the day after Warner’s presser, after receiving an e-circular from Warner’s re-election campaign, asking for “$5 or whatever you can spare.”

“LOL,” replied General Counsel Sean Edgett.



Colin Crowell
Fwd: Another thing coming
To: Sean Edgett

September 29, 2017 at 8:29 PM

#Irony

---------- Forwarded message ----------
From: "Mark Warner for Senate"[redacted]>
Date: Sep 29, 2017 7:30 PM
Subject: Another thing coming
To:[redacted]@twitter.com>
Cc:

Colin -- We've only got a short amount of time before Saturday's crucial end-of-quarter fundraising deadline.

And honestly, we're behind.

That's because Mark has been focused on the fight to save healthcare, helping out fellow Senate Democrats facing tough re-election fights, and getting ready for next week's battle over the Trump Budget (more on that later).

So now we really need your help to turn this around. Can you chip in $5 or whatever you can spare to help Mark hit his quarterly fundraising goal?

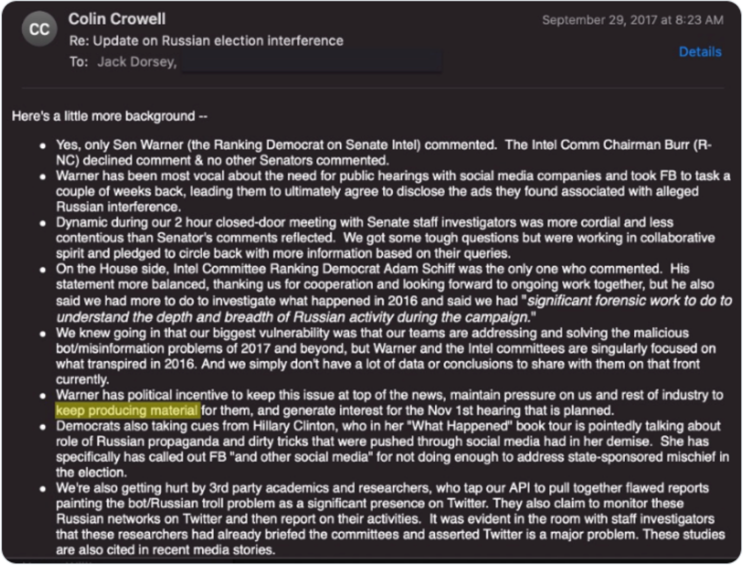
Sean Edgett
Re: Another thing coming
To: Colin Crowell

September 29, 2017 at 8:36 PM

LOL

See More from Colin Crowell

9.“KEEP PRODUCING MATERIAL” After meeting with congressional leaders, Crowell wrote: “Warner has political incentive to keep this issue at top of the news, maintain pressure on us and rest of industry to keep producing material for them.”

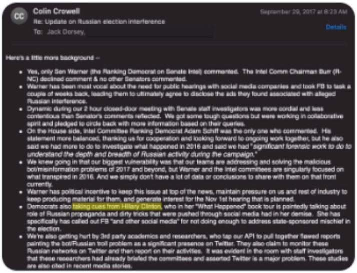


Colin Crowell
September 29, 2017 at 8:23 AM
Re: Update on Russian election interference
To: Jack Dorsey, [redacted]

Here's a little more background --

- Yes, only Sen Warner (the Ranking Democrat on Senate Intel) commented. The Intel Comm Chairman Burr (R-NC) declined comment & no other Senators commented.
- Warner has been most vocal about the need for public hearings with social media companies and took FB to task a couple of weeks back, leading them to ultimately agree to disclose the ads they found associated with alleged Russian interference.
- Dynamic during our 2 hour closed-door meeting with Senate staff investigators was more cordial and less contentious than Senator's comments reflected. We got some tough questions but were working in collaborative spirit and pledged to circle back with more information based on their queries.
- On the House side, Intel Committee Ranking Democrat Adam Schiff was the only one who commented. His statement more balanced, thanking us for cooperation and looking forward to ongoing work together, but he also said we had more to do to investigate what happened in 2016 and said we had "*significant forensic work to do to understand the depth and breadth of Russian activity during the campaign.*"
- We knew going in that our biggest vulnerability was that our teams are addressing and solving the malicious bot/misinformation problems of 2017 and beyond, but Warner and the Intel committees are singularly focused on what transpired in 2016. And we simply don't have a lot of data or conclusions to share with them on that front currently.
- Warner has political incentive to keep this issue at top of the news, maintain pressure on us and rest of industry to keep producing material for them, and generate interest for the Nov 1st hearing that is planned.
- Democrats also taking cues from Hillary Clinton, who in her "What Happened" book tour is pointedly talking about role of Russian propaganda and dirty tricks that were pushed through social media had in her demise. She has specifically has called out FB "and other social media" for not doing enough to address state-sponsored mischief in the election.
- We're also getting hurt by 3rd party academics and researchers, who tap our API to pull together flawed reports painting the bot/Russian troll problem as a significant presence on Twitter. They also claim to monitor these Russian networks on Twitter and then report on their activities. It was evident in the room with staff investigators that these researchers had already briefed the committees and asserted Twitter is a major problem. These studies are also cited in recent media stories.

10.“TAKING THEIR CUES FROM HILLARY CLINTON” Crowell added Dems were taking cues from Hillary Clinton, who that week said: “It’s time for Twitter to stop dragging its heels and live up to the fact that its platform is being used as a tool for cyber-warfare.”



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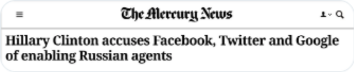
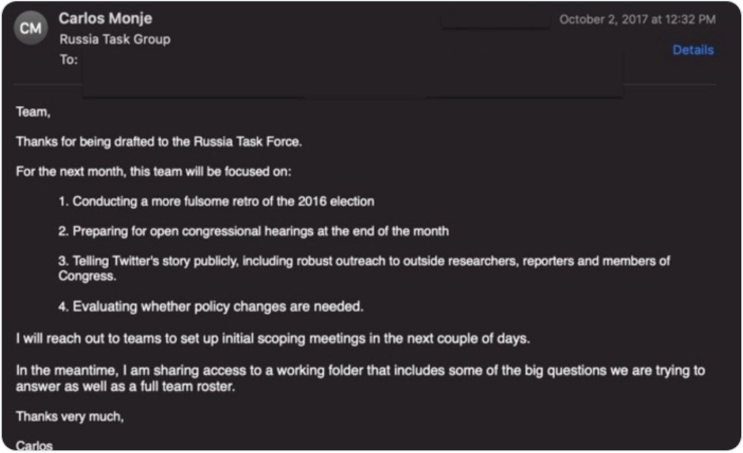


The Mercury News

Hillary Clinton accuses Facebook, Twitter and Google of enabling Russian agents

11. In growing anxiety over its PR problems, Twitter formed a “Russia Task Force” to proactively self-investigate.



Carlos Monje
[redacted] October 2, 2017 at 12:32 PM
Russia Task Group
To: [redacted]

Team,

Thanks for being drafted to the Russia Task Force.

For the next month, this team will be focused on:

1. Conducting a more fulsome retro of the 2016 election
2. Preparing for open congressional hearings at the end of the month
3. Telling Twitter's story publicly, including robust outreach to outside researchers, reporters and members of Congress.
4. Evaluating whether policy changes are needed.

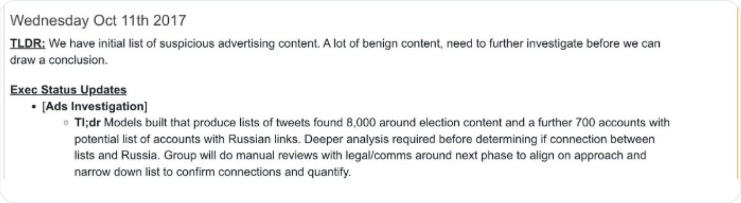
I will reach out to teams to set up initial scoping meetings in the next couple of days.

In the meantime, I am sharing access to a working folder that includes some of the big questions we are trying to answer as well as a full team roster.

Thanks very much,

Carlos

12.The “Russia Task Force” started mainly with data shared from counterparts at Facebook, centered around accounts supposedly tied to Russia’s Internet Research Agency (IRA). But the search for Russian perfidy was a dud:



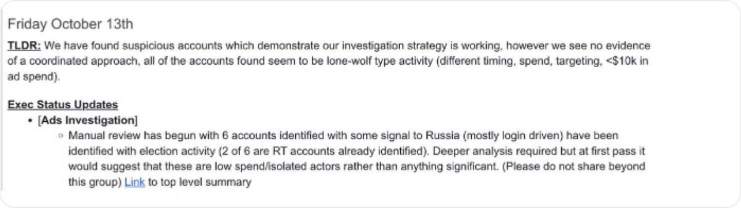
Wednesday Oct 11th 2017

TLDR: We have initial list of suspicious advertising content. A lot of benign content, need to further investigate before we can draw a conclusion.

Exec Status Updates

- **[Ads Investigation]**
  - **Tl;dr** Models built that produce lists of tweets found 8,000 around election content and a further 700 accounts with potential list of accounts with Russian links. Deeper analysis required before determining if connection between lists and Russia. Group will do manual reviews with legal/comms around next phase to align on approach and narrow down list to confirm connections and quantify.

13. OCT 13 2017: “No evidence of a coordinated approach, all of the accounts found seem to be lone-wolf type activity (different timing, spend, targeting, <$10k in ad spend).”



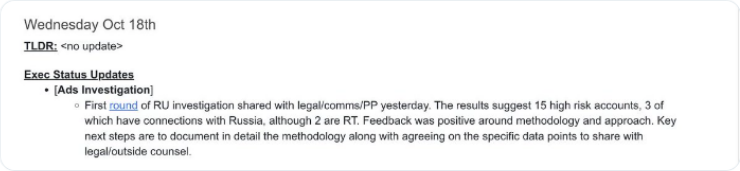
Friday October 13th

TLDR: We have found suspicious accounts which demonstrate our investigation strategy is working, however we see no evidence of a coordinated approach, all of the accounts found seem to be lone-wolf type activity (different timing, spend, targeting, <$10k in ad spend).

Exec Status Updates

- **[Ads Investigation]**
  - Manual review has begun with 6 accounts identified with some signal to Russia (mostly login driven) have been identified with election activity (2 of 6 are RT accounts already identified). Deeper analysis required but at first pass it would suggest that these are low spend/isolated actors rather than anything significant. (Please do not share beyond this group) Link to top level summary

14.OCT 18 2017: “First round of RU investigation… 15 high risk accounts, 3 of which have connections with Russia, although 2 are RT."



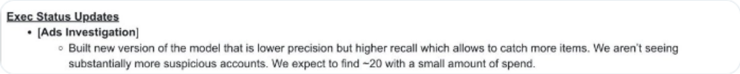
Wednesday Oct 18th

TLDR: <no update>

Exec Status Updates

- **[Ads Investigation]**
    - First round of RU investigation shared with legal/comms/PP yesterday. The results suggest 15 high risk accounts, 3 of which have connections with Russia, although 2 are RT. Feedback was positive around methodology and approach. Key next steps are to document in detail the methodology along with agreeing on the specific data points to share with legal/outside counsel.

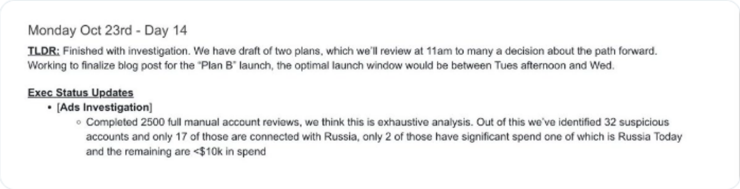
15.OCT 20 2017: "Built new version of the model that is lower precision but higher recall which allows to catch more items. We aren't seeing substantially more suspicious accounts. We expect to find ~20 with a small amount of spend."



Exec Status Updates

- **[Ads Investigation]**
    - Built new version of the model that is lower precision but higher recall which allows to catch more items. We aren't seeing substantially more suspicious accounts. We expect to find ~20 with a small amount of spend.

16.OCT 23 2017: "Finished with investigation… 2500 full manual account reviews, we think this is exhaustive… 32 suspicious accounts and only 17 of those are connected with Russia, only 2 of those have significant spend one of which is Russia Today...remaining <$10k in spend."



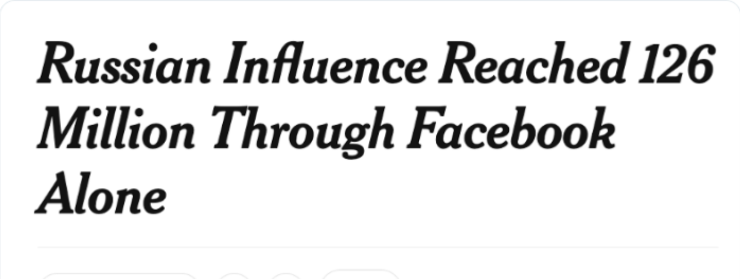
Monday Oct 23rd - Day 14

TLDR: Finished with investigation. We have draft of two plans, which we'll review at 11am to many a decision about the path forward. Working to finalize blog post for the "Plan B" launch, the optimal launch window would be between Tues afternoon and Wed.

Exec Status Updates

- **[Ads Investigation]**
    - Completed 2500 full manual account reviews, we think this is exhaustive analysis. Out of this we've identified 32 suspicious accounts and only 17 of those are connected with Russia, only 2 of those have significant spend one of which is Russia Today and the remaining are <$10k in spend

17.Twitter's search finding "only 2" significant accounts, "one of which is Russia Today," was based on the same data that later inspired panic headlines like "Russian Influence Reached 126 Million Through Facebook Alone":



Russian Influence Reached 126 Million Through Facebook Alone

Give this article 437

Honest
Ads Act

18.The failure of the “Russia task force” to produce “material” worsened the company’s PR crisis.

19.In the weeks after Warner’s presser, a torrent of stories sourced to the Intel Committee poured into the news, an example being Politico’s October 13, “Twitter deleted data potentially crucial to Russia probes.”

POLITICS

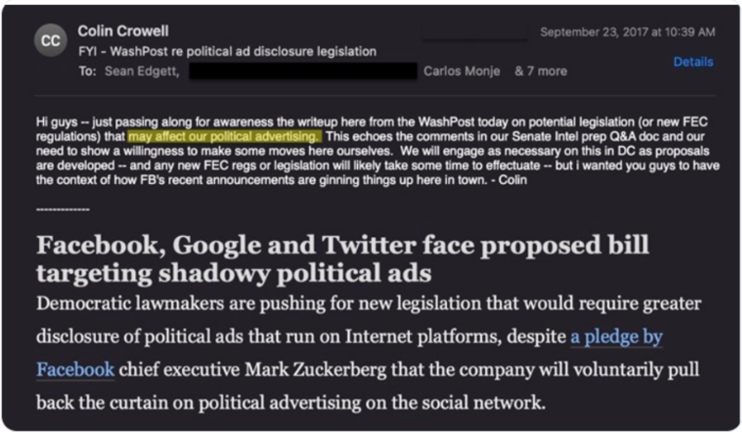
Twitter deleted data potentially crucial to Russia probes

20.“Were Twitter a contractor for the FSB… they could not have built a more effective disinformation platform,” Johns Hopkins Professor (and Intel Committee “expert”) Thomas Rid told Politico.

> “Were Twitter a contractor for the FSB,” the Russian intelligence agency involved in the 2016 campaign to meddle in the U.S. election, Rid said, “they could not have built a more effective disinformation platform.”

21.As congress threatened costly legislation, and Twitter began was subject to more bad press fueled by the committees, the company changed its tune about the smallness of its Russia problem.

22.“Hi guys.. Just passing along for awareness the writeup here from the WashPost today on potential legislation (or new FEC regulations) that may affect our political advertising,” wrote Crowell.



Colin Crowell [redacted] September 23, 2017 at 10:39 AM
FYI - WashPost re political ad disclosure legislation
To: Sean Edgett, [redacted] Carlos Monje & 7 more

Hi guys -- just passing along for awareness the writeup here from the WashPost today on potential legislation (or new FEC regulations) that may affect our political advertising. This echoes the comments in our Senate Intel prep Q&A doc and our need to show a willingness to make some moves here ourselves. We will engage as necessary on this in DC as proposals are developed -- and any new FEC regs or legislation will likely take some time to effectuate -- but i wanted you guys to have the context of how FB's recent announcements are ginning things up here in town. - Colin

----

Facebook, Google and Twitter face proposed bill targeting shadowy political ads

Democratic lawmakers are pushing for new legislation that would require greater disclosure of political ads that run on Internet platforms, despite a pledge by Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg that the company will voluntarily pull back the curtain on political advertising on the social network.

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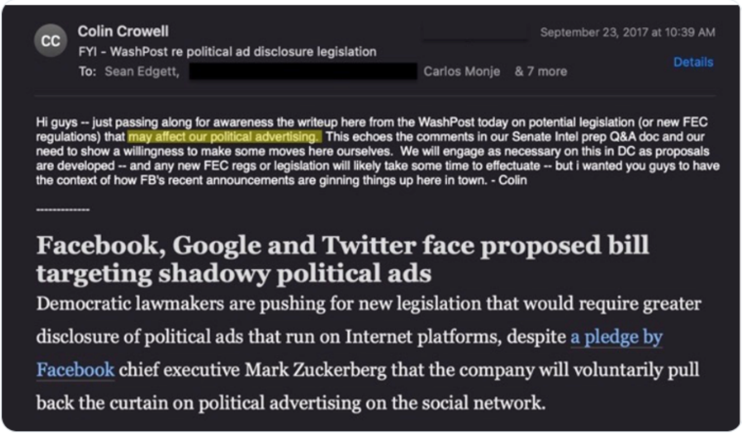

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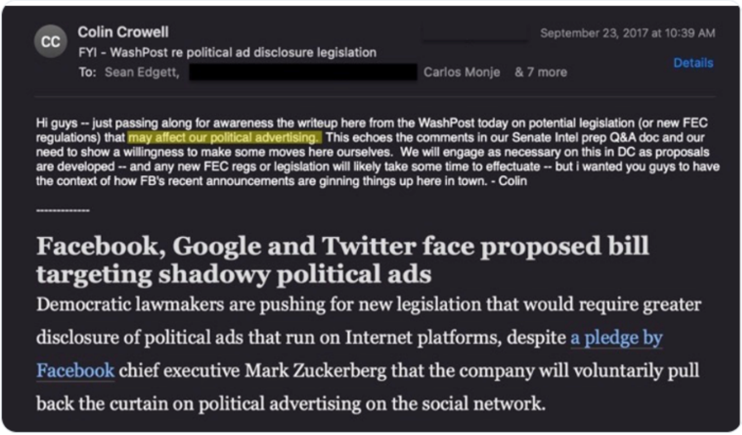

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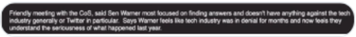
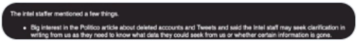
23. In Washington weeks after the first briefing, Twitter leaders were told by Senate staff that "Sen Warner feels like tech industry was in denial for months." Added an Intel staffer: "Big interest in Politico article about deleted accounts."



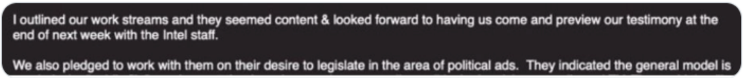
Friendly meeting with the CoS, said Sen Warner most focused on finding answers and doesn't have anything against the tech industry generally or Twitter in particular. Says Warner feels like tech industry was in denial for months and now feels they understand the seriousness of what happened last year.



The intel staffer mentioned a few things.

- Big interest in the Politico article about deleted accounts and Tweets and said the Intel staff may seek clarification in writing from us as they need to know what data they could seek from us or whether certain information is gone.

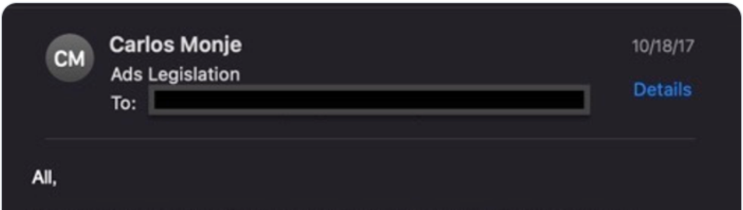
24.Twitter "pledged to work with them on their desire to legislate":



I outlined our work streams and they seemed content & looked forward to having us come and preview our testimony at the end of next week with the Intel staff.

We also pledged to work with them on their desire to legislate in the area of political ads. They indicated the general model is

25."Knowing that our ads policy and product changes are an effort to anticipate congressional oversight, I wanted to share some relevant highlights of the legislation Senators Warner, Klobuchar and McCain will be introducing," wrote Policy Director Carlos Monje soon after.

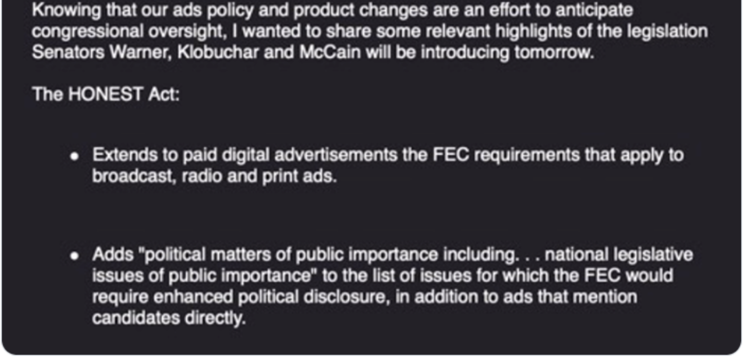


Carlos Monje 10/18/17

Ads Legislation

To: [redacted]

All,



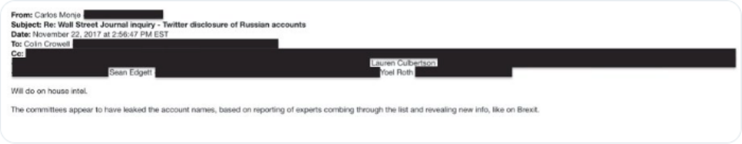
Knowing that our ads policy and product changes are an effort to anticipate congressional oversight, I wanted to share some relevant highlights of the legislation Senators Warner, Klobuchar and McCain will be introducing tomorrow.

The HONEST Act:

- Extends to paid digital advertisements the FEC requirements that apply to broadcast, radio and print ads.

- Adds "political matters of public importance including. . . national legislative issues of public importance" to the list of issues for which the FEC would require enhanced political disclosure, in addition to ads that mention candidates directly.

26.“THE COMMITTEES APPEAR TO HAVE LEAKED” Even as Twitter prepared to change its ads policy and remove RT and Sputnik to placate Washington, congress turned the heat up more, apparently leaking the larger, base list of 2700 accounts.

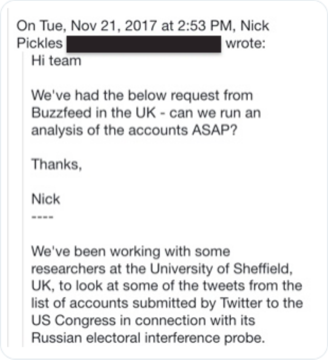


From: Carlos Monje [redacted]
Subject: Re: Wall Street Journal inquiry - Twitter disclosure of Russian accounts
Date: November 22, 2017 at 2:56:47 PM EST
To: Colin Crowell [redacted]
Cc: [redacted] Lauren Culbertson [redacted]
[redacted] Sean Edgett [redacted] Yoel Roth [redacted]

Will do on house intel.

The committees appear to have leaked the account names, based on reporting of experts combing through the list and revealing new info, like on Brexit.

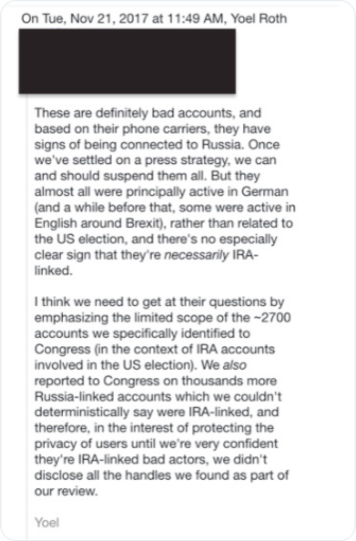
27.Reporters from all over started to call Twitter about Russia links. Buzzfeed, working with the University of Sheffield, claimed to find a “new network” on Twitter that had “close connections to… Russian-linked bot accounts.”



On Tue, Nov 21, 2017 at 2:53 PM, Nick Pickles [redacted] wrote:

> Hi team
>
> We've had the below request from Buzzfeed in the UK - can we run an analysis of the accounts ASAP?
>
> Thanks,
>
> Nick
> ----
>
> We've been working with some researchers at the University of Sheffield, UK, to look at some of the tweets from the list of accounts submitted by Twitter to the US Congress in connection with its Russian electoral interference probe.

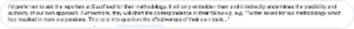
28.“IT WILL ONLY EMBOLDEN THEM.” Twitter internally did not want to endorse the Buzzfeed/Sheffield findings:



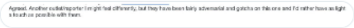
On Tue, Nov 21, 2017 at 11:49 AM, Yoel Roth

[redacted]

> These are definitely bad accounts, and based on their phone carriers, they have signs of being connected to Russia. Once we've settled on a press strategy, we can and should suspend them all. But they almost all were principally active in German (and a while before that, some were active in English around Brexit), rather than related to the US election, and there's no especially clear sign that they're *necessarily* IRA-linked.
>
> I think we need to get at their questions by emphasizing the limited scope of the ~2700 accounts we specifically identified to Congress (in the context of IRA accounts involved in the US election). We *also* reported to Congress on thousands more Russia-linked accounts which we couldn't deterministically say were IRA-linked, and therefore, in the interest of protecting the privacy of users until we're very confident they're IRA-linked bad actors, we didn't disclose all the handles we found as part of our review.
>
> Yoel

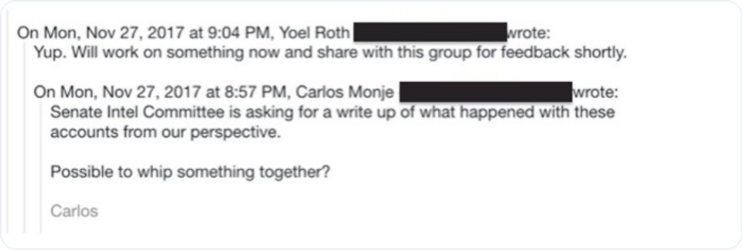


I'd prefer not to ask the reporters at BuzzFeed for their methodology. It will only embolden them and it indirectly undermines the credibility and authority of our own approach. Furthermore, they will chart the correspondence in their follow-up, e.g. "Twitter asked for our methodology which has resulted in more suspensions. This calls into question the effectiveness of their own tools..."



Agreed. Another outlet/reporter I might feel differently, but they have been fairly adversarial and gotcha on this one and I'd rather have as light a touch as possible with them.

29. “SENATE INTEL COMMITTEE IS ASKING… POSSIBLE TO WHIP SOMETHING TOGETHER?” Still, when the Buzzfeed piece came out, the Senate asked for “a write up of what happened.” Twitter was soon apologizing for the same accounts they’d initially told the Senate were not a problem.

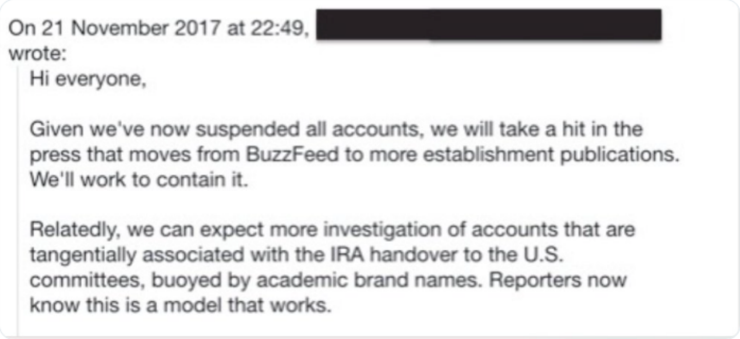


On Mon, Nov 27, 2017 at 9:04 PM, Yoel Roth [redacted] wrote:

> Yup. Will work on something now and share with this group for feedback shortly.
>
> On Mon, Nov 27, 2017 at 8:57 PM, Carlos Monje [redacted] wrote:
>
> > Senate Intel Committee is asking for a write up of what happened with these accounts from our perspective.
> >
> > Possible to whip something together?
> >
> > Carlos

30.“REPORTERS NOW KNOW THIS IS A MODEL THAT WORKS”

This cycle – threatened legislation, wedded to scare headlines pushed by congressional/intel sources, followed by Twitter caving to moderation asks – would later be formalized in partnerships with federal law enforcement.



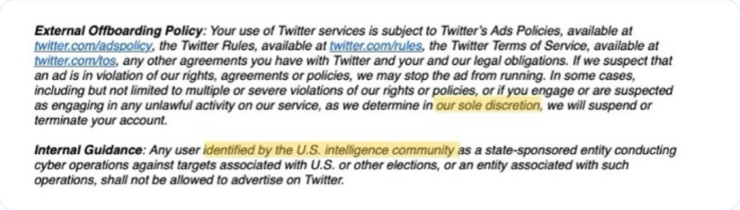
On 21 November 2017 at 22:49, [redacted] wrote:

> Hi everyone,
>
> Given we've now suspended all accounts, we will take a hit in the press that moves from BuzzFeed to more establishment publications. We'll work to contain it.
>
> Relatedly, we can expect more investigation of accounts that are tangentially associated with the IRA handover to the U.S. committees, buoyed by academic brand names. Reporters now know this is a model that works.

31.Twitter soon settled on its future posture.

In public, it removed content "at our sole discretion."

Privately, they would "off-board" anything "identified by the U.S.. intelligence community as a state-sponsored entity conducting cyber-operations."



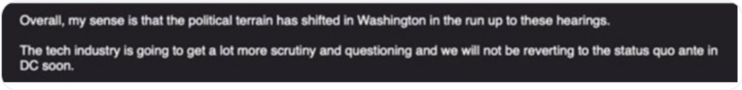
***External Offboarding Policy**: Your use of Twitter services is subject to Twitter's Ads Policies, available at twitter.com/adspolicy, the Twitter Rules, available at twitter.com/rules, the Twitter Terms of Service, available at twitter.com/tos, any other agreements you have with Twitter and your and our legal obligations. If we suspect that an ad is in violation of our rights, agreements or policies, we may stop the ad from running. In some cases, including but not limited to multiple or severe violations of our rights or policies, or if you engage or are suspected as engaging in any unlawful activity on our service, as we determine in our sole discretion, we will suspend or terminate your account.*

***Internal Guidance**: Any user identified by the U.S. intelligence community as a state-sponsored entity conducting cyber operations against targets associated with U.S. or other elections, or an entity associated with such operations, shall not be allowed to advertise on Twitter.*

32.Twitter let the "USIC" into its moderation process. It would not leave.

Wrote Crowell, in an email to the company's leaders:

"We will not be reverting to the status quo."



Overall, my sense is that the political terrain has shifted in Washington in the run up to these hearings.

The tech industry is going to get a lot more scrutiny and questioning and we will not be reverting to the status quo ante in DC soon.

33.For more on the #TwitterFiles, check out @bariweiss, @ShellenbergerMD, @lhfang, and @davidzweig.

Watch this space shortly for another thread…