

The Weaponization of Social Media

Honors Thesis by David Serri

Was the Kremlin-funded Internet Research Agency misinformation campaign in 2016 successful at polarizing the U.S. citizenry?

The Experiment:

I gathered a sample of around 90 liberal-leaning UCSB students and had them view Facebook feeds which I personally designed. I divided my sample into 5 groups. Two groups viewed feeds which contained IRA content: one viewed liberal and the other viewed conservative. Two groups viewed feeds containing posts from American mainstream political media: one with FOX News another with MSNBC + CNN. Finally, the last group viewed feeds containing solely apolitical and entertainment posts. Each of these groups viewed three feeds over three days.

I measured and valuated each subject's attitudinal and affective polarization levels before and after treatment to observe any potential changes

The Results:

Subjects who viewed the IRA-ridden Facebook feeds exhibited levels of affective polarization which were significantly higher than those observed before treatment ($p\text{-value} = 0.01$, $\alpha = 0.05$ in one measure, and $\alpha = 0.05$, $p\text{-value} = 0.0001$ in my second measure). This indicates a decrease in emotional favorability toward Republicans and an increase in favorability toward Democrats. This polarization was not exhibited among the groups that viewed the mainstream and apolitical feeds ("Non IRA" on the displayed graph).

Additionally, these polarizing effects were not limited by attitudinal congruence. Both viewers of the conservative IRA and those of the liberal IRA feeds, showed significant polarizing effects.

Crucially, no similar significant increase occurred for the sample's attitudinal polarization. This indicates that the IRA content can change viewers' feeling toward the opposing party without altering their ideological opinions.



Mean Change of Polarization (Pre- to Post-treatment)

