

Facebook Removes Iranian Based Accounts for Spreading Falsehoods in Misinformation Campaign

By John Runkel, J.D. Candidate 2020 | November 9, 2018

On October 26th Facebook removed 82 “[Pages, Groups and accounts](#)” that originated primarily in Iran. These Pages, Groups and accounts represented an organized effort to spread disinformation in the United States as a means of influencing public opinion and US midterm election results. While this particular network was seemingly minor, Facebook revealed that about 1 million accounts followed these Pages, 25,000 accounts joined one of the Groups, and 28,000 accounts followed one of the Instagram accounts. These figures indicate that these efforts may have affected a far wider swath of the American population than the limited number of Pages and Groups would suggest.

This coordinated effort is only the latest instance of the social media behemoth’s war on the weaponization by foreign agents seeking to subvert or undermine the US democratic process. Facebook similarly deleted [652 accounts](#), Pages and Groups originating primarily in Iran and Russia in late August of this year for similar reasons. Such policing is largely conducted by Facebook’s new misinformation “[war room](#).” The “war room,” led by Facebook head of cyber security Nathaniel Gleicher, seeks to root out such “false content.”

Facebook’s new unit aims to counteract the use of its platform to “sow discord” through circulating false information and disruptive or [divisive content](#). Facebook’s “war room” also seeks to make political advertising more transparent and to eliminate fake or “spam” accounts. All of Facebook’s efforts serve a role in preventing the use of Facebook as a weapon designed to achieve dubious political objectives through propaganda and misinformation. Further, Facebook’s “war room” personnel work in conjunction with the FBI, Homeland Security and the Associated Press to curb abuses arising from [domestic](#) and [foreign](#) attempts to influence public opinion and action.

The impetus of Facebook’s “war room” is largely a response to the [particular revelations](#) following the 2016 presidential elections. One revelation was the large-scale Russian influence in the campaign which lasted at least two years prior to the election. These efforts have since been linked to [Russian Intelligence](#). In conjunction with the indictments carried out by the Department of Justice following Russian attempts to commit election fraud, Facebook revealed that Russian backed companies with ties to the Kremlin used more than [\\$100,000 to develop false or misleading advertising](#). The purpose of the ads was to tamper with US election results, cause chaos and disseminate Russian propaganda.

In a press release in September 2017, Facebook’s CEO Mark Zuckerberg also revealed that the Kremlin-linked Internet Research Agency (IRA) had influence over American campaigns. Such



influence included a number of designs to harm Secretary Clinton's candidacy through fake or "troll" accounts, fictional news and purposely misleading advertisements. This media was estimated to have been viewed by [150 million Americans](#). Further, although it is difficult to determine the impact this media had on the 2016 election results, it is clear that this information manipulation was far from immaterial.

The consequences of misinformation are readily apparent from the deaths and mob lynching in India. These actions were sparked by [fake stories propagated through WhatsApp](#), a Facebook subsidiary. Further, consequences were also unveiled in Myanmar. There, an explosion of hate speech on WhatsApp resulted in violence and genocide. In addition, the continued presence of [unsubstantiated rumors and innuendo has caused similar harms in Sri Lanka](#).

Although Zuckerberg has pledged to do better, seeking to head off influence campaigns before they gain traction, many critics feel that Facebook's recent efforts remain [ineffectual](#). Critics are primarily concerned that other actors have adopted Russia's strategy of using Facebook and its subsidiaries to spread misinformation and false news stories. The most recent account of this was in Brazil and the UK. During the [UK's exit](#) from the European union, anonymous and factually dubious information was presented through a Facebook based ad campaign. The ads, which have reached up to 11 million British citizens, have continued to be released through this last October and appear to operate with the primary objective of sewing conflict and cementing divisions during a politically precarious time for the UK.

Facebook has already suffered a notable decline in its stock price over the past year due to the unauthorized release of user's personal data to Cambridge Analytica. This scandal left many analysts and shareholder's disillusioned with [Facebook's apparent disregard for transparency in its own practices](#). Further, this scandal caused many investors to question Facebook's dedication to protecting its users' privacy and well-being, let alone its dedication to insuring greater transparency. The breach of trust has left many critics asking if Facebook is truly doing everything in its power to root out pernicious false information and political manipulation through suspect ad campaigns and news stories.