# Discovery and Analysis of Russian Misinformation Network

March 15, 2021 | Media Forensics Creative Inquiry

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In this report, we identify a number of accounts that we conclude with a high degree of certainty are from an inauthentic network, and based on communication patterns and message content, conclude that they are operating in support of the Russian government to promote a pro-Putin narrative within the Russian Federation. In this network, we observe interconnectedness between accounts, similarities in narratives, and inauthenticity of the account identities. The initial investigation began with studying the degree of interconnectedness across a sample of 53 accounts. Analysis shows them to have 2812 retweets, mentions, or replies carried out between them. Next, the narratives that the accounts use are very similar and concentrate on the promotion of pro-Russian state, anti-Navalny, and anti-Western narratives. These narratives are often promoted with similar or even identical content. Finally, these accounts are inauthentic as the accounts have little-to-no identifying information, often stolen profile images, and provide no means of verifying their identity.

Through analysis of the network's history, one can observe specific changes in network narratives across topics. The messaging content, themes, and rhetoric complemented the major news stories and stances promoted by Russian media. In order to maximize following and credibility, this network shares a common aesthetic among profiles as well as common messaging patterns and schedules. These accounts frequently include links to Russian media platforms and bolster network strength through the retweeting of other accounts within the network. This network of accounts is characterized by a high degree of interconnectedness in many of its activities, including retweets, use of the same media/messaging, and cross-network promotion.

**BACKGROUND & CONTEXT**

This network has concentrated on several different topics, including the coronavirus vaccine and anti-west sentiment. The primary narrative across the network, however, at the time of our research (February and March 2021), was an anti-Navalny narrative. In order to more fully understand the context in which these accounts are operating, it is necessary to understand the current political environment in Russia and primarily the Alexei Navalny narrative, specifically.

Alexei Navalny is a Russian lawyer and opposition leader. His career has been built around fighting corruption and exposing autocratic tendencies in the Russian government. He is widely regarded as the only person that Putin fears due to the wide sphere of influence he has over large swaths of Russia as well as internationally[1]. His approximately 2 million Twitter followers and 6 million YouTube subscribers[2] provide clear evidence of this fact. He works to fight and expose corruption through investigations and publishing his findings; however, his reach has been hindered due to censorship by the Russian government. He has also organized or inspired many large-scale protests over corruption, Putin's leadership, and autocratic policies. Despite the efforts by the Putin regime, namely two sham trials and convictions for embezzlement to bar him from running for office in the future, Navalny still holds influence across Russia and speaks out against the Putin regime.

For his work against the Putin regime, on January 17th, 2021, Navalny was arrested for violating parole conditions from his second embezzlement arrest upon his return to Russia. Before his trial, it is widely believed that Putin and the Federal Security Service put a nerve agent, Novichok (which was used by the KGB in the former Soviet Union), in his underwear, and as a result, he was airlifted to Berlin for treatment. After surviving a nerve agent attack and receiving suspended sentences in sham trials in the past, he still took on the regime and their practices undeterred. As such, he stood trial and was convicted for violating the parole stemming from his prior conviction for embezzlement. Despite the original suspended sentence, he is now subjected to over two years of manual labor in a penal colony for violating his parole conditions. His arrest and conviction sparked large-scale protests across the country, diplomatic condemnations against

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[1] https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323309404578614210222799482
[2] https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2018/02/08/584369719/banned-from-election-putin-foe-navalny-pursues-politics-by-other-means

Russia, and widespread demands for his release. And, as of February 27th, Navalny has been transferred to a penal colony to carry out his 32-month sentence; the exact location of the colony has not been released by the Kremlin.

The Kremlin's use of disinformation presents an onerous aspect to an already bleak string of events. By employing false narratives and disinformation, the Kremlin is seeking to slander the reputation of the opposition leader and diminish his influence. This is one of many examples of the Kremlin's use of disinformation, troll accounts, and networks to further their own narrative and discredit facts. There are other examples of these tactics, for more information, see Figure 1 or the footnoted link.[3] However, this example is one of importance, and the analysis of how Putin is employing disinformation and a coordinated network can shed light on how he seeks to exert influence over large segments of the population. By understanding how and why Putin and his affiliates use these tactics, we can begin to understand their tactics further, learn their hallmarks in the hopes to stop these events from happening in the future, and can help spread the truth about the Stalin-like treatment of Alexei Navalny.

### Initial Discovery of Network

We first began our investigation into this network of accounts following a tweet posted by Ben Nimmo, the current head of Global Threat Intelligence Strategy at Facebook Inc and a prominent Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) analyst. According to Graphika, Nimmo "specializes in analyzing patterns of online disinformation and influence operations across varying platforms and geographical regions."[4] On January 25, 2021, Nimmo tweeted about a hashtag (#ДетиВнеПолитики; meaning "kids out of politics") which seemed to be linked to a series of accounts with pro-Kremlin news sources and anti-Navalny stances and which was inauthentically promoted.[5] Accounts included in our current network were found to be promoting this hashtag.

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[3] https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/twitter-takedown-october-2020
[4] https://archive.vn/c2Zmx
[5] https://archive.is/SbK8F

# NETWORK OF ACCOUNTS

## Generalization of Network

Research on this network is ongoing, so all data in this section should be regarded as preliminary. This network is characterized by the messaging described above in general. A specific signature of this network is its high degree of interconnectedness in many of its activities. We have identified approximately 250 accounts that have similar signatures in the same contextual network. To better analyze this network, we used NodeXL, a software that pulls and compiles the interactions between specified accounts or hashtags. From the data, the software creates different network portrayals based on the specified criteria.

Through initial examination of the accounts, we observe a high level of interactions and shared messaging, thus creating the initial assumption that variation of a network exists among these profiles. These profiles make up a highly contextual network of accounts or clusters of accounts that exist only in one context and have no other logical reason to be connected. Examples of contextual networks would be groupings of accounts that only discuss sports, all favor the same team, and do nothing else. The accounts in this network have the appearance of an extremely contextual grouping, to the point of appearing inauthentic (see Figure 1).

Common among all networks across social media, there are some core members who are constantly engaging and promoting content, and there are other accounts that do not often interact or engage with the group of accounts. Figure 1 depicts the network interactions in a Fruchterman Reingold graph. This type of modeling places accounts with the highest quantity of network interactions at the center and those with a decreasing number of interactions farther away from the center. The graph shown below is a network that includes a sample of 53 of the core accounts in this network. (Although we identified over 200 accounts in this network, due to the high tweet volume and dense interconnectivity of the accounts, most network graphs show the interactions of around 50 accounts.)

| Figure 1: Node XL Graph |
| :--- |
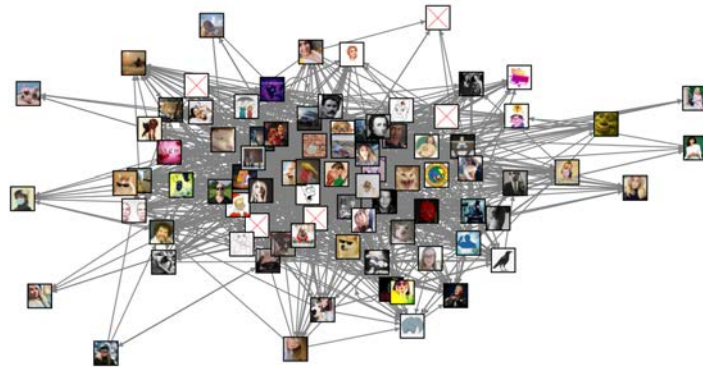


When observing this graph, we observe a high degree of interconnectedness and interactions among accounts. Across 53 accounts, there have been approximately 2812 retweets, mentions, or replies carried out between them. NodeXL only requests the last 3200 tweets an account has made. These 53 accounts are each averaging just over 16.5 interactions between each other per account per 1000 tweets. This rate of engagement is many times higher than a typical network of accounts engaging in a genuine manner on shared topics of interest.

## ACCOUNT MESSAGING

### Message Content

A. Published content

The issue that we have looked into is the disinformation surrounding the arrest of Navalny and Navalny's portrayal in general. Following are exemplar tweets that show the types of disinformation and narratives surrounding Alexei Navalny and his arrest. (We have attached both the original Russian text as well as an English translation of the tweets.) Largely, he is portrayed as a disingenuous opportunist who is a puppet of the West and is an enemy of the state.

| Figure 2: | Figure 3 |
|---|---|
|  |  |

[6] This is an example of the type of disinformation that drew us to this network of accounts: Propaganda, vaccine nationalism, and disinformation in the narrative of COVID-19.

[7]This is an explicit example of the anti-American narrative. This was posted in Russian like the other examples, but for editing purposes, only the translation is shown. <u>The original tweet in Russian is visible in the archive link in footnote 7</u>.

| Figure 4 | Figure 5 |
|---|---|
|  |  |

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[6] https://archive.is/k9afg
[7]https://archive.is/LpIgq

| Figure 6 | Figure 7 |
|---|---|
|  слабым. А слабый народ – это слабая страна! Translated from Russian by Google Navalny, by order of the West, is deliberately injecting the brains of our youth. It makes the population degrade, destroys all established values, moral norms and makes our people weak. A weak people is a weak country! 8:03 AM · Feb 8, 2021 · Twitter Web App |  В Москве начался суд над Навальным и его западные коллеги тут как тут появились возле зала суда. Но он конечно "точно" не работает на них, прям от слова совсем😂 #Навальный #Суд #ДелоВетерана Translated from Russian by Google The trial of Navalny began in Moscow, and his Western colleagues immediately appeared near the courtroom. But of course he "definitely" does not work for them, straight from the word at all 😂 #Навальный#Суд#ДелоВетерана |
| Figure 8 | |
|  @ussspenvas Снова тут как тут нарисовались возле суда не могут оставить своего без присмотра Translated from Russian by Google Again, right there they drew near the court can't leave theirs unattended 4:48 AM · Feb 12, 2021 · Twitter Web App 6 Likes | |

## Rhetoric Type

These exemplars show the types of narratives that are being pushed by state propaganda organizations. The common theme employs either out-of-context visuals, like a scowling Navalny or two black western sedans, to further a Russian narrative that is biassed against the West. Often the same images are used in different posts or with different captions but convey similar messaging. Another common attribute in account messaging is a form of "us-vs-them" rhetoric where the narrative that Navalny is an instigator who came into Russia to westernize it or that he himself is an arrogant and corrupt opportunist. This is of importance as it seeks to discredit Navalny's work by making it look like it was done at the behest of the West. It also seeks to make the public more hostile towards Navalny by stoking the feeling that he is furthering his own interests at their expense.

**Narrative Conclusions**

    A. <u>Changes in Narrative</u>

        It appears that the content of the tweets has followed developments in the trial and imprisonment of Navalny using recent pictures of him or statements from the Judge or evidence used. There are several examples of this where these accounts have tweeted that the judge called Navalny arrogant or criticized him. The developments regarding the protests are important as there has been lots of disinformation regarding protesting. Specific narratives include the claim that marching in unorganized protests will result in injuries and that if people allow their children to protest, they will be brainwashed. There have also been tweets from these accounts that advocated the Kremlin's position ignoring politics and going for a walk in the park. This is an attempt by the Kremlin to get the public to ignore the events and to dissuade them from trying to seek out more information or forming their own opinions; it comes across as a wholesome recommendation to spend time with family members but is an onerous attempt to sew ignorance in public.

    B. <u>Similarities with Russian Media</u>

        These narratives are similar to the narratives prevalent in Russian state-owned media RT (Russia Today), Sputnik, and Tass. This media network presents a biased and discrediting perspective of the events to cast doubt on Navalny's credibility. Below are examples of these types of headlines, two of which show more recent developments since the trial and one in relation to the downgrading of Navalny's status as a 'prisoner of conscience.'



Figure 9

Maria Butina, once jailed in US, visits Navalny's prison & calls it 'exemplary,' but allies of Russian opposition figure cry foul

The facility housing Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny, described by one former convict as "inhumane" and "real hell," is more like a "scout camp" than a jail. That's according to Maria Butina, a former prisoner herself.

Apr 2, 2021 15:41
Russia & Former Soviet Union

Jailed Russian opposition figure Navalny announces he will go on hunger strike, demands medication & doctor of his own choosing

Russian opposition figure Alexey Navalny has announced that he will begin a hunger strike to protest his prison conditions. He claims his health is deteriorating due to the refusal of proper medical care and "sleep deprivation."

Mar 31, 2021 17:11
Russia & Former Soviet Union

Russian media outlets linked to British state conjure up false story blaming RT for Amnesty's downgrading of Navalny's status

After leaked documents, reported on by RT, exposed how both Meduza and MediaZona received illicit support from the UK government, the pair fired back with a vicious, and obviously fake, news story – and Western media fell for it.

Feb 26, 2021 12:43

Russia & Former Soviet Union

For a complete and more recent list of headlines, see the link in the accompanying footnote.[8]

C. Russia Today Navalny Stories

Common in Russia Today, and presumably smaller state-affiliated or sympathetic news channels, is the portrayal of Navalny as a criminal guilty of embezzlement and that he tweeted a disparaging tweet regarding a WWII soldier[9] and as such, he is anti-Russia and shows Western sympathies. It also pushes the narrative that Russia is the victim of outside influence from the west and that the pressures to free Navalny are meddling by the west to influence Russian sovereignty. One of the first news articles is one that appears to be sympathetic to the cause of the protestors by saying that there are over 100 investigations into improper use of force. However, the article is filled with quotes attributed to the Kremlin that warns more protests are to come and that the protestors are "provocateurs and hooligans," and that since the west is appealing for sanctions proves that the protestors are western agents.[10]

While the rhetorical style and narrative structures that we analyzed in this article were in relation to the trial and sentencing of Alexei Navalny, however, these methods and motifs are common and widely used by the Kremlin and Russian disinformation networks across different contexts. While this report is narrowly focused on just one example, these findings and details can be applied to other cases and can be used to help recognize Russian state disinformation.

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[8] https://www.rt.com/trends/russian-opposition-leader-navalny/

[9] This is in reference to a June 2020 tweet where Navalny criticized the 95 year old veteran and others who appeared in a pro-Kremlin propaganda film as "traitors," "corrupt lackies," and "the shame of the country." Moscow Today story mentioning the tweet in context to the trial

[10] The RT article discussed can be found here: https://www.rt.com/russia/515835-police-probes-officers-navalny-protests/

**ACCOUNT TYPES AND MOTIFS**

Because this network is operating through social media, a primary method of how it attracts viewers and followers to its messaging is the visual appeal and wording of its content. In this, we see the use of aesthetically pleasing profile images across accounts (see Figures 8 and 9), unified content, and the frequent use of media within its messaging.

**General Account Motifs**

Aesthetics: These accounts often have an aesthetic quality with appealing colors and images like this account, whose cover image shows a wave washing up on a pink beach and a profile image of a conventionally attractive woman with brown hair kissing a Greek statue (see Figure 10).[11] Another account has a profile image of a baby pig lying with its hooves up against a blue backdrop and a cover image of a sand dune at sunset (see Figure 10). Other accounts will choose a certain theme and model all of its content around this theme.[12]



Figure 10: The aesthetic quality of @martovainessa and @Makkkrusha
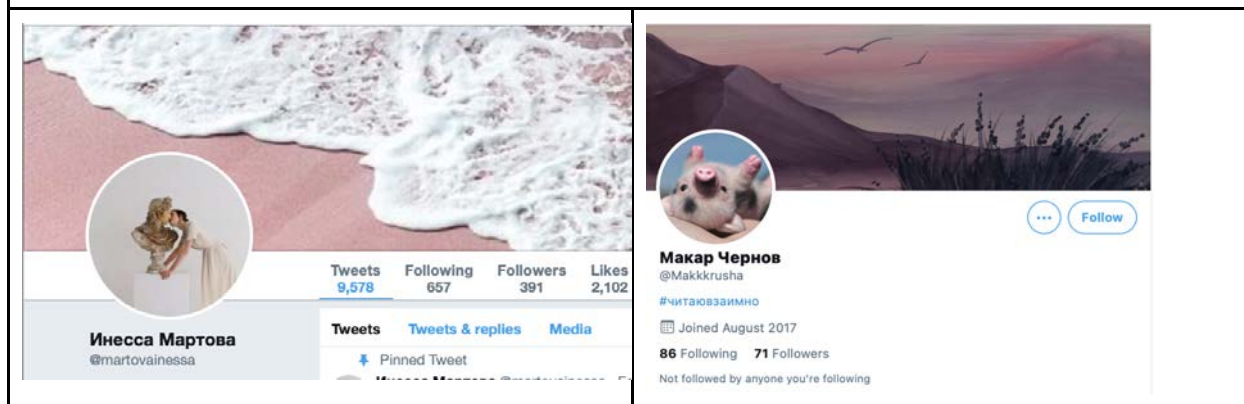
Timing/Sources: Many accounts recycle content which is easier than always creating original content and links the network even more closely together (see Figures 7 and 8).
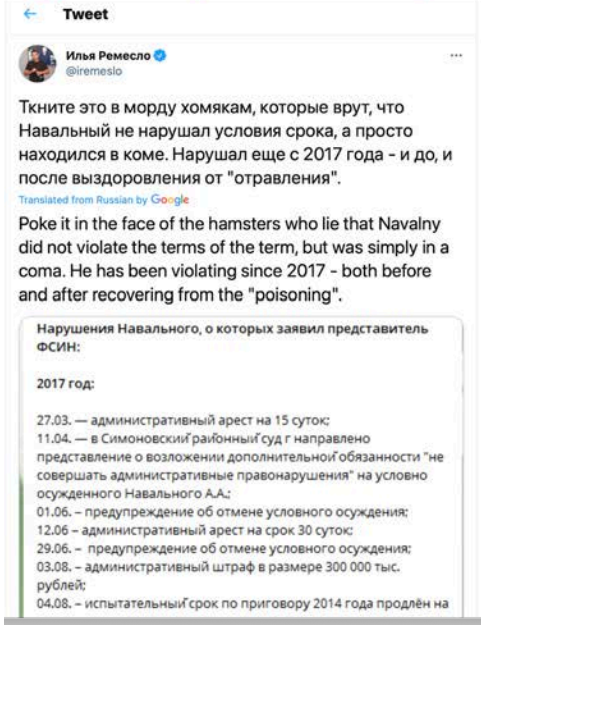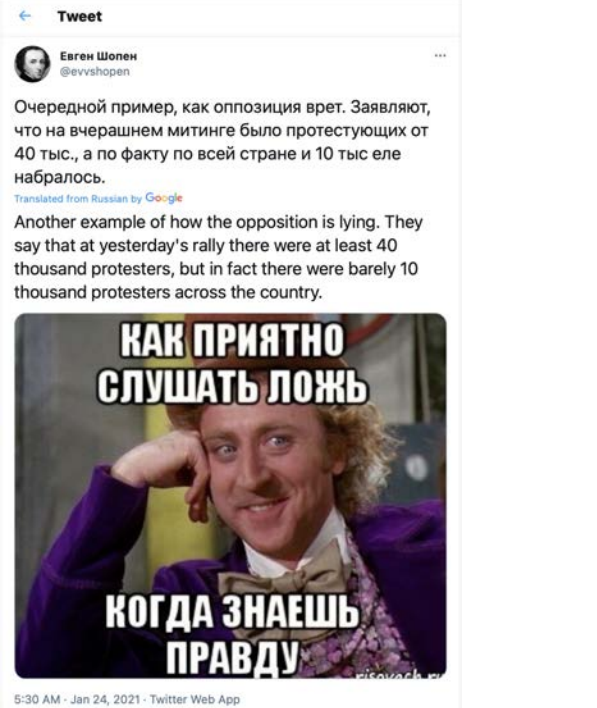
Additionally, many of these accounts tweet in correspondence with what the Russian media shares. For example, an account that seems to be in the network, @Troshechkiin had not tweeted since January 24, 2021, until Alexey Navalny was sentenced to prison on February 2, 2021, and protests followed.[13] On this day, after the sentence was handed down, this account retweeted a series of anti-Navalny tweets. One of these stated, "Poke it in the face of the hamsters [translation unclear; could be homus] who lie that Navalny did not violate the terms of the term but was simply

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[11] https://archive.is/dqHkh
[12] https://archive.vn/hLyBP
[13] https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/02/europe/alexey-navalny-russia-court-hearing-intl/index.html

in a coma. He has been violating since 2017 - both before and after recovering from the 'poisoning'" (see Figure 11).[14]

| Figure 11: Anti-Navalny Tweets | Figure 12: Tweets against widespread protests about Navalny |
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Overall, @Troshechkiin tweeted seven times between 0:00 and 3:00 am Moscow Time (UTC +3). And this pattern continued, another account, @evgeshapetr, tweeted three times between 0:00 and 2:00 am Moscow Time (UTC +3) following the widespread protests for Navalny's release.[15] One of the retweets from @evgeshapetr stated, "Another example of how the opposition is lying. They say that at yesterday's rally there were at least 40 thousand protesters, but in fact, there were barely 10 thousand protesters across the country," and the meme that accompanied the tweet reads, "So glad [to] listen to lies when you know the truth (see Figure 12).[16]

Messaging/Interactions: These accounts all had very similar messaging, ranging from anti-Nalvany to COVID vaccine content and also general news in Russia. Additionally, there is a large amount of cohesion across the network, which can be demonstrated by a consistent switch in messaging from COVID-19 content to Anti-Navalny content. This switch predominantly occurred from the week of February 7, 2021, to February 13, 2021, when Navalny announced he would be

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[14] https://archive.vn/v3J9k
[15] Protests Erupt Across Russia Demanding Release Of Alexei Navalny
[16] https://archive.is/DFVpn

returning to Russia (see Figure 13).[17] This also mirrors the shift within the Russian media, which can be seen in the state-controlled RT site, which only begins focusing on Navalny on February 8, 2021 (see Figure 14).[18] While this switch was most likely also occurring across much of Russian Twitter, the close connections between the accounts show that this is an intentional switch.

Figure 13: Accounts switch from COVID-19 to Anti-Navalny content

17 https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/13/europe/navalny-russia-return-intl/index.html
18 https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/08/world/europe/russias-rt-network-is-it-more-bbc-or-kgb.html

Figure 14: Content Switch in RT
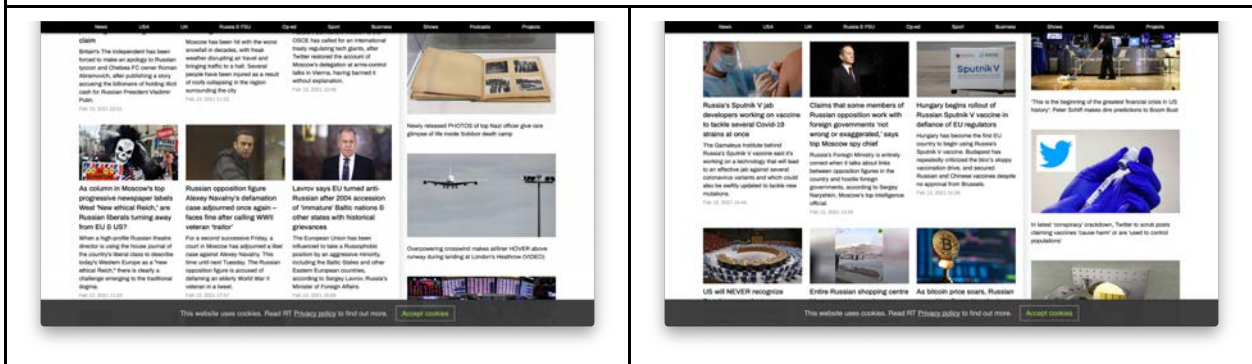


Content Type *(i.e., use of pictures, hashtags, mentions, links, etc.)*: Commonalities within the content is that most tweets include some kind of media (either pictures or videos), common tweets of Russian news sources (like Yandex, Kommersant, the Kremlin Official Site, etc.), and retweets from others within the network (see Figure 15, 16, and 17).

Figure 15: Tweets including media content

Figure 16: Tweets including Russian News Sources



Figure 17: The frequency of retweeting within the network by those within the network

**Account Commonalities**

    A.  <u>Themed Accounts</u>

Several accounts were crafted around a central aesthetic theme, examples being Homer Simpson, Cat memes, and News Accounts have a specific functioning within the network. Many of these accounts simply appear to be normal people, but others have thematic elements. This allowed these accounts to attract and appeal to their audience in a unique way. It also shows a level of mastery in profile and content creation by the account operators.

One example of this is a Homer Simpson page whose content includes clips of the show, Simpson-themed memes, and tweets.[19] These accounts vary in their subject area but are meant to capture consumers with the Simpson content and then add the intended political opinion. For example, in a tweet from Feb 16, 2021, the account shares a gif of a character from the show making a chef's kiss motion accompanied by the tweet "Russia refused to release Navalny at the request of the European Union" (see Figure 18).[20] Other accounts will present as cat memes, etc., and riff off of this style of creating a theme for the accounts. These methods show both an intent to grow an audience and a level of sophistication for the account styling.

| Figure 18: Tweet from Homer Simpson themed account | Figure 19: Tweet from a "news" account |
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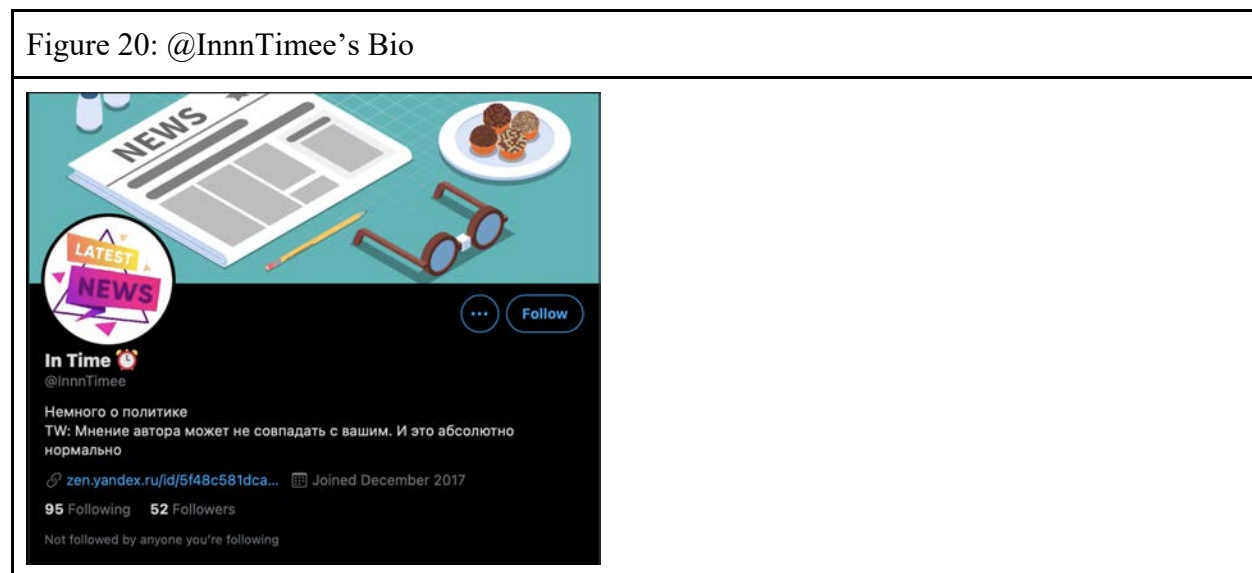---

[19] https://archive.vn/hLyBP
[20] https://archive.vn/1wjjQ

Some of these accounts purport to be News Agency and spread disinformation via an official-looking Twitter account. One of these accounts is @Laliipopps, whose bio stated, "Do not let yourself be fooled, read HERE reliable news from trusted and reliable sources, and not from the garbage dump #mutualfollowing #readmutually" (see Figure 19).[21] This account retweets a lot of others within the network and shares other "news sources" and information about the Navalny proceedings, graphics, and other tweets.[22]

Another account that purports to be a "news" site's Twitter is @InnnTimee.[23] The bio of this twitter states, "A little bit about politics / TW: The author's opinion may not be the same as yours. And that's perfectly normal" (see Figure 20). Additionally, the profile picture and banner are attempting to convey that Twitter is a source of accurate news. The account shares a lot of Yandex articles which is a technology company "under Kremlin pressure to give the Russian government more influence over its decisions."[24] Additionally, according to the Moscow Times, "since 2014, Yandex has had to restrict the results it shows on its news page — the Russian equivalent of Google News — to media which has been registered with the state's media watchdog".[25] This Twitter account often criticizes the mainstream media, Navalny, and protests, spreading false information about these topics in particular.[26,27,28]

| Figure 20: @InnnTimee's Bio |
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[21] https://archive.is/V3N8d
[22] https://archive.is/sd4cZ
[23] https://archive.vn/2c6Fv
[24] https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/26/russia-internet-freedom-kremlin-tech/
[25] https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/09/27/yandex-a-russian-success-story-and-putins-high-tech-tiger-a59029
[26] https://archive.vn/BIMrq
[27] https://archive.vn/NDgq2
[28] https://archive.vn/notSY
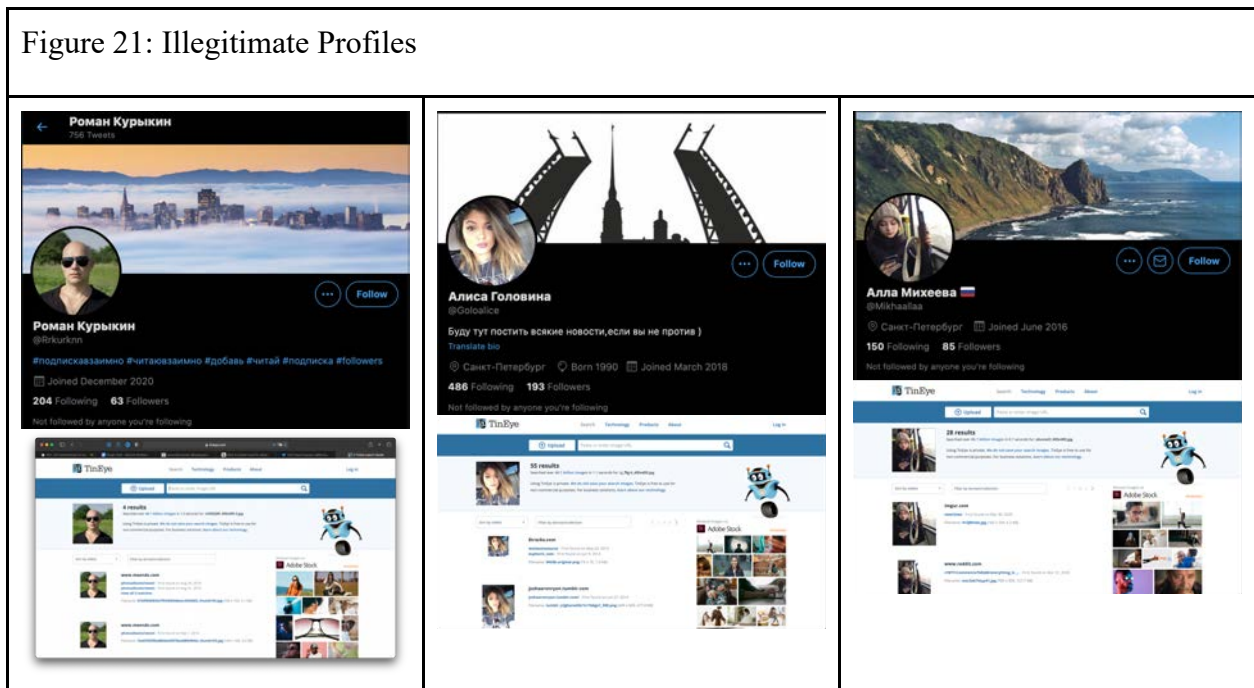
Presenting this disinformation in the format of an "official news" account provides credibility and increases the likelihood that consumers will doubt what is being shared. However, these accounts present a very specific side of the news causing avid consumers to be easily influenced regarding their opinions on these breaking stories. Additionally, when other accounts in the network retweet these "news" accounts, it adds credibility to the whole network of accounts.

Patterns & Conclusions: These accounts are similar to accounts previously attributed to the Internet Research Agency (IRA).[29] None of the account profiles are real, and they provide very little information about themselves, which could be used to verify identity (see Figure 21). They are promoting Pro-Putin, Anti-Navalny, anti-West points of view and are also strongly promoting the Sputnik V vaccine (see Figures 22, 23, 24, and 25). As most of these accounts are in Russia, the target audience is clearly more Russian-speaking people rather than English-speaking people.



Figure 21: Illegitimate Profiles

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[29] https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/02/russia-troll-farm/553616/

| Figure 22: Pro-Putin content common in the network |
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| Figure 23: Anti-Navalny sentiments common in the network |
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Figure 24: Anti-West content common in the network



Ложка дёгтя
@Yuumakka

Replying to @Yuumakka

Любопытно что они бы нам сказали, если бы наш дипломат по нелепой случайности оказался рядом с Капитолием во время волнений

Translated from Russian by Google

It is curious what they would have told us if our diplomat, by an absurd accident, was near the Capitol during the unrest

7:57 AM · Feb 8, 2021 · Twitter Web App

Светлана Елисеева
@Svvvelisseeava

ЕС решил ввести в течение недели новые санкции против России из-за Навального

Навальный всей стране НАСРАЛЬНЫЙ

Translated from Russian by Google

EU decided to impose new sanctions against Russia within a week over Navalny

Bulk all over the country NASSAL

10:02 AM · Feb 23, 2021 · Twitter Web App

Figure 25: Sputnik V Vaccine promotion



Инесса Мартова
@martovainessa

Новую партию вакцины "Спутник V" доставили в Сербию
Министр инноваций республики Ненад Попович отметил, что 11 февраля ожидается прибытие российских экспертов, которые вместе с сербскими специалистами оценят условия и рассмотрят возможные варианты для запуска производства вакцины

Translated from Russian by Google

New batch of Sputnik V vaccine delivered to Serbia
The Minister of Innovation of the Republic, Nenad Popovic, noted that on February 11, Russian experts are expected to arrive, who, together with Serbian specialists, will assess the conditions and consider possible options for starting vaccine production.

3:49 AM · Jan 29, 2021 · Twitter Web App

Максим Кошелев
@Maaaxxkoshell

С чем поздравляю их!! Приятно видеть когда люди заботятся о своих гражданах, сразу видно, молодцы! Многие страны уже закупили нашу вакцину, вот кто по настоящему заботится о людях 💜

Translated from Russian by Google

On what I congratulate them !! It's nice to see when people care about their citizens, you can see right away, well done! Many countries have already purchased our vaccine, this is who really cares about people 💜

РИА Новости @rianru · Jan 10
Государственное издание, Россия
Анонсировано произ8одст8о "Спутника V" в Бразилии
ria.ru/20210111/sputn…

8:26 AM · Jan 11, 2021 · Twitter Web App

**Conclusions, implications, and degree of certainty**

Throughout the course of our research, we identified approximately 250 accounts to which we can conclude with a high degree of certainty that it is operating as a network. Based on network messaging and content, we can also conclude with a high degree of certainty that this network's purpose is to spread pro-Kremlin, anti-opposition, anti-West, and pro-Sputnik-V Vaccine content. The inauthenticity of the account profiles coupled with the extreme-sentiment, incorrect information, and unified agenda across accounts show a network promoting disinformation. Additionally, there was some information shared that was intentionally incorrect and misleading. The high degree of connection between the accounts in the network demonstrates that these accounts are intentionally connected and are meant to make up a full network.

With a relative degree of certainty, these accounts seem linked to the Russian government and are advancing issues that are important to the Kremlin. Additionally, these accounts are very similar to accounts of the Internet Research Agency.