All the World is Staged:
An Analysis of Social Media
Influence Operations against
US Counterproliferation
Efforts in Syria

Jack O. Nassetta and Ethan P. Fecht

Middlebury Institute *of*
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James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies

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Executive Summary

Though much of the scrutiny into foreign interference in US political debates focuses on long-term election operations, foreign actors have now turned to social media to conduct short-term tactical operations. These operations aim to affect American attitudes toward specific US foreign and military policy, and ultimately affect the policy itself. In recent years, state actors and loosely affiliated patriotic operators have inorganically inserted themselves into the political discussion surrounding US intervention in Syria following the use of chemical weapons. Through continually evolving techniques, these "synthetic actors" are likely the main driving force behind shaping the character of the counternarrative discussion surrounding the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

Aims

This paper seeks to analyze the tradecraft, trends, themes, and possible effects of disinformation produced by suspected synthetic actors (i.e., bots, trolls, and cyborgs) on Twitter concerning chemical weapons use in Syria.[1] Although it is highly likely these synthetic actors exist on other social media platforms as well, this analysis focuses exclusively on Twitter, since the open nature of the platform allows for study without special access. Furthermore, we aim to improve public and academic awareness of foreign, inorganic disinformation efforts against our domestic decision-making processes. We hope that this text contributes to the efforts to prevent the erosion of the integrity of the political conversations that matter most.

Definitions

For the purposes of this paper, the following terms[2] are defined as:

- **Troll** – A Twitter user that operates as an undeclared state actor, usually masquerading as an average westerner expressing personal political opinions, while participating in some level of coordination to circulate state-sponsored narratives.
- **Bot –** A fully automated Twitter account, engaging in content creation or perpetuation solely based on a software script.
- **Cyborg –** A Twitter account that mostly operates based on automated script behavior, but that is taken over and operated by a human user occasionally.
- **Synthetic actor –** A Twitter account fitting into any of the above categories; an actor masquerading under false pretenses in order to accomplish a political end.
- **Commercial bot account –** A Twitter account that is engaging in automated posting in order to generate profit for its owner. This can be through posting links to items for sale or by posting links to fake news in order to drive web traffic. Crucially, the posting of fake news by commercial bots is

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[1] Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard, "Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation," Working paper no. 2017.12, Computational Propaganda Research Project, University of Oxford. 2017. http://blogs.oii.ox.ac.uk/politicalbots/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2017/07/Troops-Trolls-and-Troublemakers.pdf.
[2] Ibid.

not for political purposes, but rather to drive traffic. Synthetic actors who are bots often operate as commercial accounts when there is no salient political event for which they are needed.

Findings

- A significant minority (16–20%) of Twitter counternarrative messaging in the immediate aftermath of and regarding Syrian chemical weapons attacks is **disseminated by a well-coordinated, narrowly focused state actor, almost certainly the Russian Federation.**
    - We did not, however, find evidence that the Syrian government maintains its own independent apparatus for extensive counternarrative messaging on Twitter.

- A network of highly message-disciplined synthetic actors was activated in the days following the April 7, 2018, chemical attack in Douma, Syria. **Nearly half of the counternarrative accounts created in the week between the Douma chemical attack and the Western strike against the Syrian regime were observed to be synthetic actors.**
    - After the messaging attempt "failed," many counternarrative accounts became immediately inactive, bolstering our assessment that they were synthetic actors.

- The single **most common procedural tactic employed by our observed synthetic actor accounts was threatening not to vote for President Donald Trump again**. We assess that this tactic is especially effective because the president's political base is less likely to immediately discount the interlocutor as an unconditional "Trump critic."

- The synthetic actors primarily utilize several thematic tactics. Most notably, they:
    1. attempt to **defame Western institutions in order to discredit their claims** about Syrian use of chemical weapons;
    2. **suggest jihadist responsibility** for the attacks;
    3. hint that a destructive (often nuclear) **escalation would result from a Western retaliatory strike**;
    4. **prey on Western religious and cultural sympathies** for supposedly besieged Syrian Christians and the secular Bashar al-Assad regime.

- While the majority of the synthetic actors seemed to target the American political discourse, **we also observed counternarrative messaging to Western European audiences**. This may suggest that Russia correctly expected that any strike against Syria would be a coalition effort.

- **The vast majority of all users** (synthetic and genuine) **propagating Syrian chemical weapons counternarratives masqueraded as members of the American ideological right.**

- Russia probably views bot and cyborg accounts as long-term resources which can be commercialized when necessary, while **troll accounts are often disposable, short-term, and created ad hoc.**

Recommendations

The goal of preventing information manipulation on social networks is one that policy makers will be forced to grapple with for years to come. Based on our study, we have compiled a set of recommendations for both policy makers and social network companies, focusing on how they can prevent synthetic actors from abusing their platforms for influence operations.

- Our research showed that a plurality of accounts that were created following the April 2018 Douma attack and used counternarrative keywords were synthetic. Social networks should take care to **scrutinize accounts that were created immediately after controversial events** if the accounts only engage in discussion about that event.

- The simplest step social networks can take to prevent manipulation by synthetic actors is to **find and ban scripted bot accounts**. These accounts are the easiest to distinguish from organic accounts in that their fully automated content typically consists of large, abnormal degrees of repetition. This repetitive nature creates easily recognizable patterns which are likely detectable via metadata analysis.
  - Twitter has already started this process, claiming to have banned 70 million accounts in the first half of 2018, however our dataset includes bots that are still active, indicating there is still work to be done.[3]

- High influence individuals (HIIs), such as the US president, should **avoid making contentious statements on social networks.** Salient statements, such as the announcement of an upcoming missile strike, provide a breeding ground for synthetic actors.
  - The synthetic accounts we examined typically have a very low number of followers, making it difficult for their content to spread under normal circumstances. However, when HIIs tweet, it becomes possible for synthetic actors to reply to them and potentially be seen by the millions of users who view the HII's tweet. **Contentious statements, such as military plans, should be reserved for more formal channels.**

- Twitter currently "verifies" many HIIs by placing a blue check mark next to their name. **We recommend the addition of an intermediate level of verification for normal users**. This type of verification could be as simple as verification by phone number to as stringent as uploading a photo ID. This type of intermediate verification could allow typical users to spot those in the conversation who may be synthetic.

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[3] Craig Timberg and Elizabeth Dwoskin, "Twitter Is Sweeping out Fake Accounts like Never Before, Putting User Growth at Risk," *Washington Post*, July 6, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2018/07/06/twitter-is-sweeping-out-fake-accounts-like-never-before-putting-user-growth-risk/?utm_term=.7b45c8680ea6.

Methodology

Our analysis was conducted from a targeted dataset extracted from Twitter, one of the largest social media platforms on the internet and a cornerstone of public online political discourse. Through this lens, we principally focused on tweets posted in the wake of and discussing the April 7, 2018, chemical weapons attack in Douma, Syria.

Factors Indicating Synthetic Actor Activity

When analyzing a Twitter user for possible synthetic actor activity, many factors can indicate inorganic control of the account. If the account exhibits the below characteristics, it may suggest that the user is actually controlled by a state actor or a loosely associated organization with a specific propagandistic agenda. Nevertheless, care should be taken not to conclude such a connection based on just one or two factors; rather, the account should fulfill several of these characteristics before being classified as a synthetic actor.

The following list is organized in descending order, with the most definitive features of synthetic Twitter accounts near the beginning and the least conclusive traits toward the end.

1. ***Synthetic actors often have bizarre, seemingly random alphanumeric usernames.*** Trolls can employ this unusual naming convention, but it is most frequently observed with bot accounts. Examples include entirely random usernames such as "@12wewvT5dWLwtyK" (a likely bot) and partially random usernames such as "@Christo04083985" (a likely troll).
2. ***Synthetic actors often use spurious images as their own profile pictures.*** A common tactic among bots, trolls, and cyborgs alike is their use of stock images, photos of little-known foreign public figures, or images appropriated from private individuals' social media accounts. An analyst can fairly reliably expose the use of this tactic by conducting a reverse image search of a suspected image.
3. ***Synthetic actors may be active only sporadically.*** Oftentimes, such accounts will leave weeks or months between periods of high-tempo posting. For example, one discovered troll account was active in February 2017 before falling silent until April 2017. Then, its inactivity returned until posting continued in November 2017.
4. ***Synthetic actors often post extremely frequently when active***. Typical Twitter users tend to tweet several to a dozen times per day, but inorganic accounts may generate dozens or hundreds of posts in a single day.
5. ***Synthetic actors often only generate one narrow category of post.*** Bots, for example, will generally only "retweet" other users or will post only links (e.g., to "fake news" articles). We assess that the software behind these bot accounts may attempt to mask this tactic by recycling the article's headline and using it as the tweet's caption. Meanwhile, trolls often only tweet messages replying to other prominent Twitter users and may rarely generate non-targeted, more general posts (e.g., discussing their day or activities).
6. ***Synthetic actors often generate out-of-place or unexpected political commentary.*** For example, a bot account masquerading as an American conservative may post a link challenging the credibility of a Russian domestic opposition leader.

7. ***Synthetic actors sometimes post similar content in multiple languages, generally with poor translations.*** For example, in April 2018, a troll generated content in three languages — English, French, and Italian; its English and French content was likely not written by native speakers of the respective languages and may have been created by translation software.

8. ***Synthetic actors often post only about one or two specific political or societal topics.*** For example, if most or all of a user's activity is dedicated to refuting the "official Western narrative" of the Russian annexation of Crimea, it may be a synthetic actor.

9. ***Synthetic actors often use awkward phrases or sayings that are not present in common English.*** Because such accounts are often controlled by non-native English speakers, their posts may include poorly translated idioms from their managers' native languages. For example, a Russian-controlled account may write that someone is "making an elephant out of a fly" — the literal translation of a Russian idiom meaning "to exaggerate."

10. ***Synthetic actors frequently make grammatical mistakes which are not typically made by native English speakers.*** For example, a suspected Russian-controlled cyborg account wrote "I thought you were against the wars" instead of the more natural "I thought you were against wars/war." This mistake was likely due to the absence of indefinite (or definite) articles in the Russian language.

11. ***Synthetic actors often have little to no interaction with genuine users.*** Humans have friends, whereas trolls and bots do not. Genuine Twitter users will occasionally mention real-life friends or colleagues in posts, typically by linking to their profiles (i.e., "tagging" them). Synthetic actor accounts do not represent real people and thus lack the social connections which are indicative of legitimate profiles.

12. ***Synthetic actors often do not have a profile picture at all.*** Genuine users typically upload profile photos to their accounts. Synthetic users, probably in an attempt to save time and effort, regularly lack such a photo entirely.

13. ***Synthetic actors are almost always extremely partisan.*** There is no room for moderation in the world of bots and trolls—their job is to convince the target audience that their opinion is the only valid one. It is, however, worth noting that this factor is the least indicative of synthetic actor behavior, since tens of millions of genuine users are also zealously politically one-sided on social media.

Collection Methods

Collection was undertaken using DiscoverText, which conducted a raw pull from the Twitter API. The raw pull of the Twitter API includes 31 categories of data; our research focused primarily on the Tweet text, the date the Tweet was posted, the user who posted the Tweet, and that user's creation date. From a collection of over 850,000 tweets, we closely analyzed 3,740 from 3,081 unique users, between the dates of March 28 and May 5, 2018.[4] Tweets analyzed met two filters—they were in reply to "@realDonaldTrump" and they contained one or more of the following terms: "chemical attack fake," "chemical attack false flag," "chemical attack staged," "chlorine," "douma fake," "douma false flag," "douma staged," "soros false flag," "soros syria," "soros white helmets," "syria false flag," "syria staged," "trump false flag," or "white helmets."

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[4] Data from before the April 7, 2018, attack date is the result of DiscoverText's broad collection. Only six tweets in the dataset were posted before April 7.

Analytical Methods

After exporting the data, we conducted several quantitative queries looking for any significant trends or outliers that would point to inorganic activity. The most conspicuous of these was a timeline of account creation dates, which was generated by importing all unique users and their creation dates into the data visualization software Tableau.

We then created a 10% randomized sample of all unique Twitter users from our dataset and coded them into the following typology:[5]

1. ***Troll*** – A Twitter user that operates as an undeclared state actor, usually masquerading as an average westerner expressing personal political opinions, while participating in some level of coordination to circulate state-sponsored narratives.
2. ***Bot*** – A fully automated Twitter account, engaging in content creation or perpetuation solely based on a software script.
3. ***Cyborg*** – A Twitter account that mostly operates based on automated script behavior, but that is taken over and operated by a human user occasionally.
4. ***Suspended*** - An account permanently suspended based on Twitter terms of use violations.
5. ***Uncertain*** - An account that has either been deleted, made private, or has a tweet history which is too ambiguous to confidently classify.
6. ***Typical User*** - An account that engages in organic behavior on Twitter. Typical users participate in the conversation by their own will and express their personal political opinions.

Limitations

- In May and June 2018, Twitter purged an estimated 70 million accounts that it suspected to be bots or to be generating spam.[6] By the time of our analysis in June and July 2018, many accounts that we classified as "Suspended" probably would have otherwise been classified as synthetic actors. Therefore, we believe that our synthetic actors figures may be slightly conservative.
- Classifying our sample dataset into the synthetic actor typology is an intrinsically subjective task. Because of the ambiguous nature of coding these accounts, we assess that our synthetic actor figures have a non-negligible margin of error.

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[5] Bradshaw and Howard, *Troops, Trolls and Troublemakers: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation.*
[6] Craig and Dwoskin, "Twitter Is Sweeping out Fake Accounts like Never Before, Putting User Growth at Risk."

Trends and Statistics

Breakdown of Collected Accounts
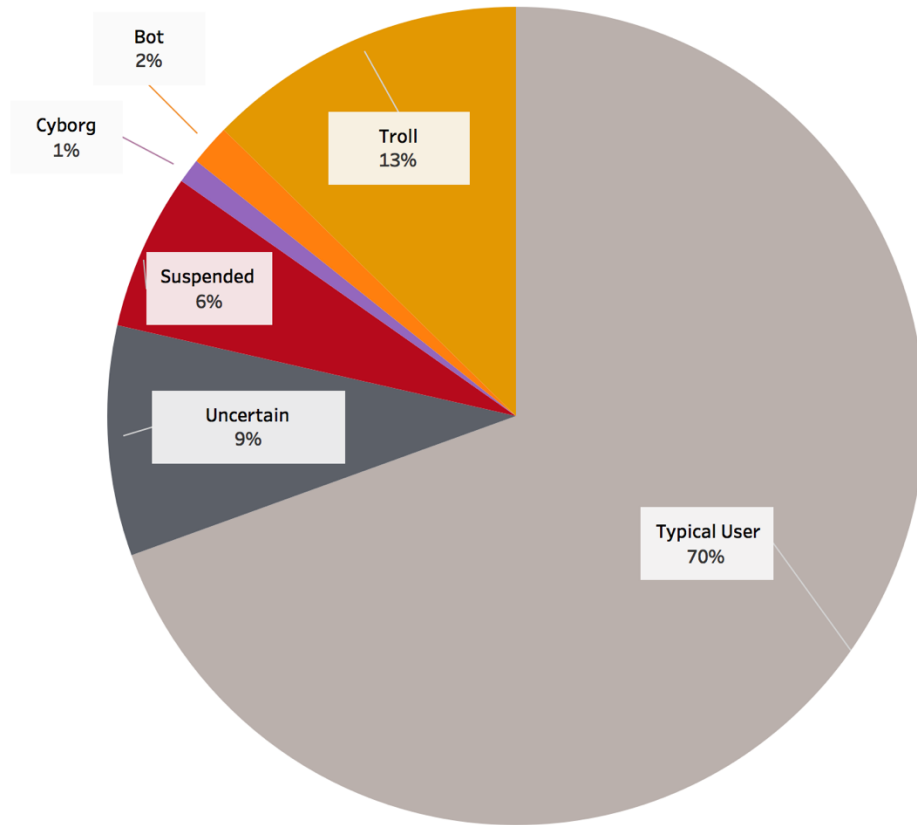Based on 10% Randomized Sample, Percentages Rounded.

Figure 1. Ratio of synthetic actors present in the general Syrian chemical weapons counternarrative conversation.

Creation Dates for Users Tweeting at "@realDonaldTrump"

Collected from users tweeting counter-narrative keywords regarding the Douma chemical attack between 3/29/18-5/16/18.
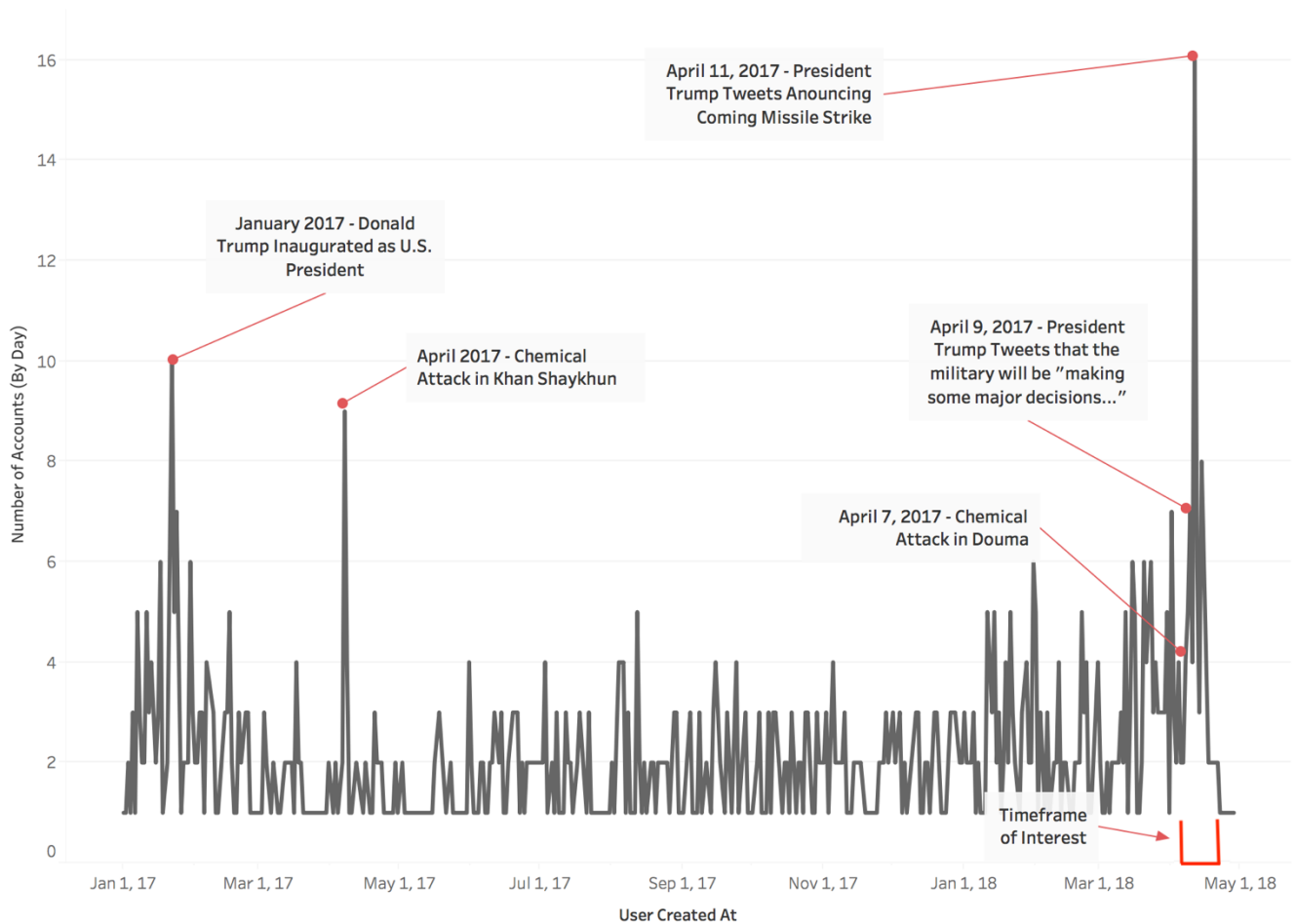Graph trimmed to 2017-2018.

Figure 2. Graph mapping the creation dates for unique users who were collected as part of our filter. Several important dates annotated with correlated peaks. Timeframe of interest indicates the 10 days following the chemical attack in Douma.

Breakdown of Accounts Created Following the Attack in Douma
Accounts collected based on use of counter-narrative terms. Accounts Created between April 7, 2018 - April 17, 2018. Percentages Rounded.

Troll
42%

Typical User
27%

Uncertain
18%

Suspended
11%

Cyborg
2%
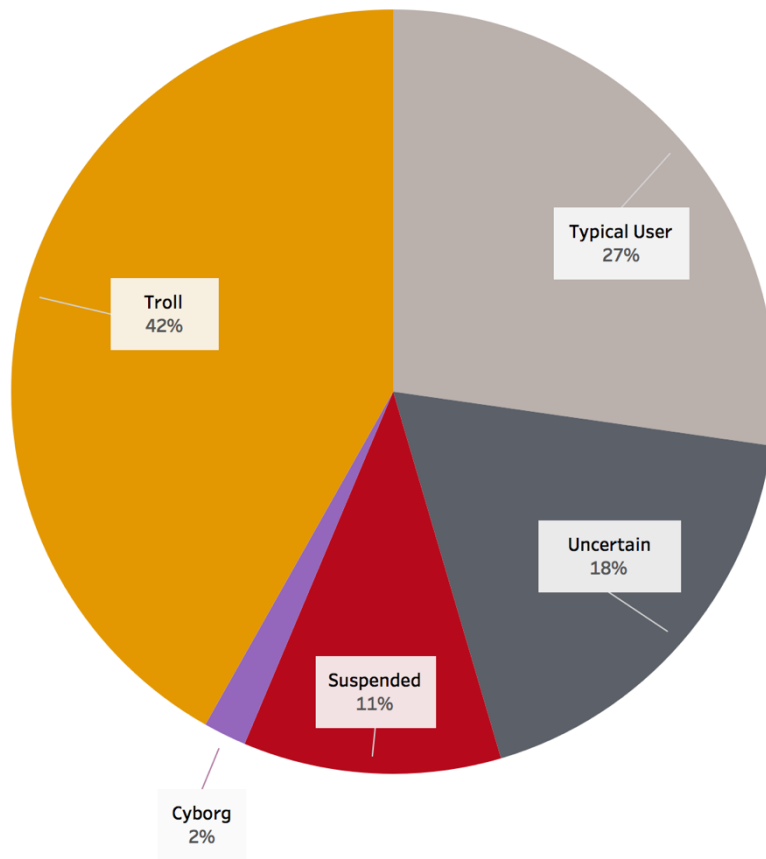
Figure 3. Ratio of synthetic actors in accounts created during time frame of interest, the period directly following the chemical attack in Douma. Note the large ratio of suspended accounts only three months post-creation.

User Descriptions Word Frequency

The below tables and word cloud represent the most frequently used words in the Twitter user descriptions of users promoting a counternarrative to Syrian chemical weapons nonproliferation issues during the relevant collection timeframe.

Rank	Text	Word Count	Rank	Text	Word Count
1	MAGA	170	26	Retired	53
2	Love	163	27	Time	53
3	Trump	145	28	Lover	51
4	Politics	123	29	People	51
5	Truth	107	30	Father	50
6	Life	94	31	Liber[7]	49
7	God	91	32	Human	47
8	Anti	85	33	Veteran	46
9	Patriot	83	34	Twitter	45
10	American	79	35	Anime	45
11	Conservative	79	36	Fan	43
12	New	78	37	America	41
13	World	76	38	Resist	40
14	Christian	76	39	Up	39
15	Live	75	40	President	39
16	Proud	73	41	Make	38
17	Pro	73	42	Man	38
18	Right	71	43	Work	38
19	Country	70	44	Freedom	38
20	Support	69	45	Free	37
21	Follow	66	46	Constitution	37
22	Family	56	47	Thing	37
23	Believe	55	48	Writer	37
24	Music	54	49	Stand	37
25	One	53	50	Against	36

Table 1. Most frequently used words.

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[7] We assess that this phrase was improperly parsed by the word count analysis software. It was most likely part of "liberty," "libertarian," and/or "liberal."

Figure 4. Word cloud of most frequently used words. Generated with Wordart.com/create.

The vast majority of words and phrases found in the description sections of counternarrative Twitter users' profiles are typically associated with ideologically right-leaning Americans. It is worth noting that we encountered very few left-leaning users (genuine or synthetic) who engaged in counternarrative discourse in the Syrian chemical attack context.

Tactics

We identify several tactics as relates to tweet content, procedure, and audience that synthetic actors use in their efforts to undermine the prevailing narrative.

Content Themes[8]

Distort - *Selectively including pieces of evidence to enhance your narrative over a competing one. Alternatively, creating evidence that gives a false representation of reality.*
Example: ● The Assad regime has always been transparent in calling for chemical weapons inspections at the alleged attack sites.

Charles Williams
@Olakunle73

Follow

@realDonaldTrump @10DowningStreet @FrenchPresident Bombing Syria just hours before International Inspectors were arriving, who would be able to provide conclusive proof as to who or if a chemical attack took place. Shows what CROOKS you all are. #TheHague

12:39 AM - 14 Apr 2018

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[8] Ben Nimmo, "Anatomy of an Info-War: How Russia's Propaganda Machine Works, and How to Counter It," Stop Fake.org, May 19, 2015. https://www.stopfake.org/en/anatomy-of-an-info-war-how-russia-s-propaganda-machine-works-and-how-to-counter-it/.

Charles M
@CharlesMorgn

Replying to @MaxBlumenthal @RT_com

"Trust me, we got proof" worked in the iraq war.
Turned out to be a lie.
"Trust me" wont work again, so unless they SHOW proof, I will assume they have NONE.
They are a bunch of warmongers blind to the fact that a full scale WW3, which they are pushing for, will KILL US ALL!

11:08 AM - 15 Apr 2018

Blake Minger
@MingerBlake

Replying to @realDonaldTrump @Cabinet @WhiteHouse

What the hell are you doing? This was another false flag attack by our rebels not Assad. Wake up people they are trying to start WW3. This war would be an extinction level event. No more ISIS False Flags. Take us out of Syria!! #Vets4PeaceInSyria #FakeWars #TrumpIsANeoCon #EndWar

I do not know with what weapons World War III will be fought, but World War IV will be fought with sticks and stones. -Einstein
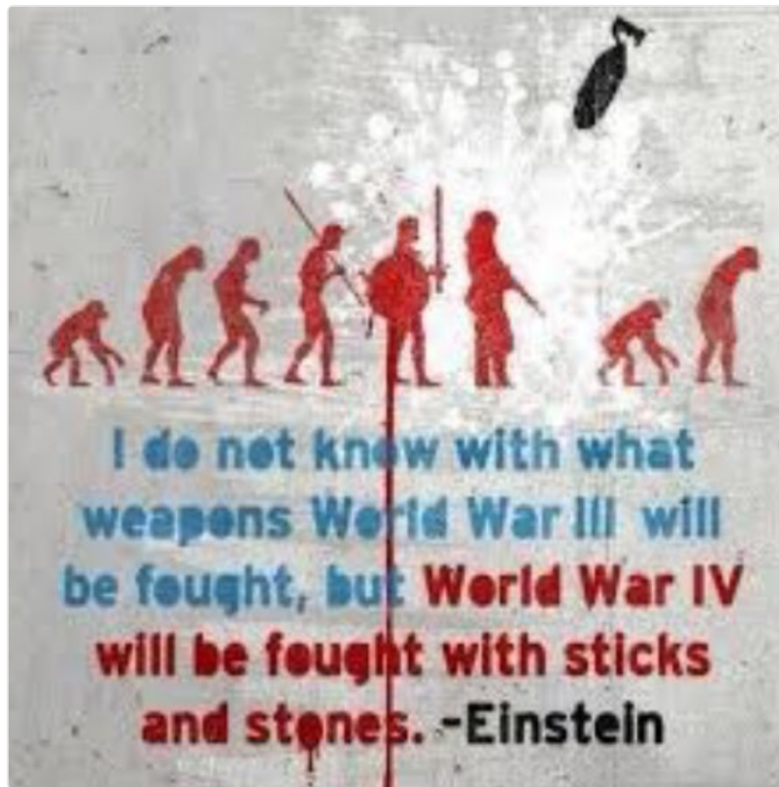
3:13 PM - 9 Apr 2018

John Boltoncriminal @usa1st2018 · Apr 13

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

UK faked the attack. Now Russian Nuke subs heading towards US coasts, media censoring it. DEEP STATE CRIMINALS back in control

John Boltoncriminal @usa1st2018 · Apr 13

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

TRUMP to Reinstate DRAFT because of Syria War!!!!!!! male and female

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Dismiss - *Rejecting the allegations by attacking the critic as opposed to the substance of their argument.*

Examples:

- The White Helmets staged the attack in order to bait an attack against the Syrian regime.
- The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons is a Western-dominated organization that will be biased against the Syrian regime in its inspections.
- The West is not interested in verifying these allegations as it was waiting for a reason to launch a war.

Jella Cole
@jellazod

Follow

@realDonaldTrump Syria is being staged by CIA as a pretext for war. Assad has no reason to use chemical weapons when he's winning

4:14 AM - 10 Apr 2018

Clearly, a single piece of disinformation may be classified into several of these categories; an effective synthetic actor will employ two, three, or four of them. In the context of the Syrian chemical weapons attack disinformation campaign, the synthetic actors have integrated these themes into a broad strategy to ensure that their messaging takes root and proliferates.

Procedural Tactics

Synthetic accounts employ a number of methods to best convey their messages. These strategies that seek to exploit the platform most effectively are referred to here as "procedural tactics."

- ***Synthetic actors primarily attempt to enter the conversation by responding to high-influence individuals***, such as Donald Trump, Emmanuel Macron, or popular political commentators. In doing this, their content is seen by those who are most interested in these figures' posts and thus they are able to most effectively influence specific political bases.
    - Moreover, **synthetic actors are useful in swaying the *perception* of public opinion** as observed by outside analysts seeking to understand political discourse on a given topic. For example, a news agency, political consultant, or pollster may be misled by synthetic actors after reading the comments under the president's tweets in order to gauge his base's views on a matter.
- ***Synthetic actors often attempt to create influential content by participating in popular internet culture***, such as by creating "memes" that contain their messages. This tactic makes it more likely that their content will "go viral" and be seen by a significantly larger audience than would see it otherwise.
- ***Synthetic actor bot accounts often engage in commercial activity until a salient political event occurs*** for which they can be utilized. In this context, these bot/cyborg accounts can be understood as long-term resources which can be activated at a convenient time.
- ***Synthetic actors* frequently purport to be US military active duty troops or veterans**, almost certainly in order to elicit sympathy and build credibility among a broad swath of the American public. We assess that the managers of these accounts have correctly determined that the US military has very high favorability ratings across the country and that many Americans believe that those with a past or current military affiliation are an authoritative voice on issues of foreign conflict.[9]
- Synthetic actors that can be classified as **troll accounts are often short-term resources deployed for breaking political situations**. They may only tweet less than a dozen times and then go dormant with no further activity.
- When discussing political events, **synthetic actors generally masquerade as reluctantly disillusioned supporters of President Trump** who disagree with his stance on launching strikes.
    - We assess that they do this in order to overcome the initial mental barrier that political supporters have when reading critical content. They believe that the synthetic actor is "one of them" and not "liberal," who only seeks opportunities to criticize the President.
- **Synthetic actors can engage in a mix of domestic and foreign propaganda on their accounts.** We observed that they promote pro-Vladimir Putin domestic Russian news stories while claiming to be genuine Western Twitter users.
- **Bots demonstrate a symbiotic relationship with each other.** In order to generate the impression of engagement, they will retweet and "like" each other's posts.

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[9] Jim Norman, "Americans Give Military Branches Similar High Marks," Gallup, May 26, 2017. https://news.gallup.com/poll/211112/americans-give-military-branches-similar-high-marks.aspx.

Target Audiences

- **The synthetic actors' target audience was most often supporters of the president** in an attempt to undermine the domestic political support for a strike against the Syrian regime.

- **We occasionally identified synthetic actors targeting Western European political audiences,** such as in attempts to dissuade a coalition strike.

- In our sample of Syria-related tweets responding to President Trump, **we found no significant attempt to engage with left-leaning political audiences.**
  - This is consistent with our assessment that the synthetic actors' goal in this context was to discourage a strike by agitating the president's base.

- **The synthetic actor accounts had significant engagement and narrative cross-over with accounts promoting Infowars.com content**. The content was specifically from Alex Jones, the main personality of Infowars, and Paul Joseph Watson, the Infowars editor-in-chief.
  - Infowars has previously been shown to repackage and distribute Kremlin narratives that originated on explicitly state-controlled sites.[10]

- **Synthetic accounts can also be seen responding to actors in the media or policy circles** who promote the mainstream Western narrative of Assad's culpability for the attack. Synthetic actors introduce a counternarrative in an attempt to sow doubt.

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[10] Ben Nimmo, "How the Alt-right Brought #SyriaHoax to America," Digital Forensic Research Lab, April 07, 2017. https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-the-alt-right-brought-syriahoax-to-america-47745118d1c9.

Profiles

The below profiles are examples of accounts that have, based on our analysis, an extremely high likelihood of being synthetic actors.

@12wewvT5dWLwtyK
-Likely Cyborg
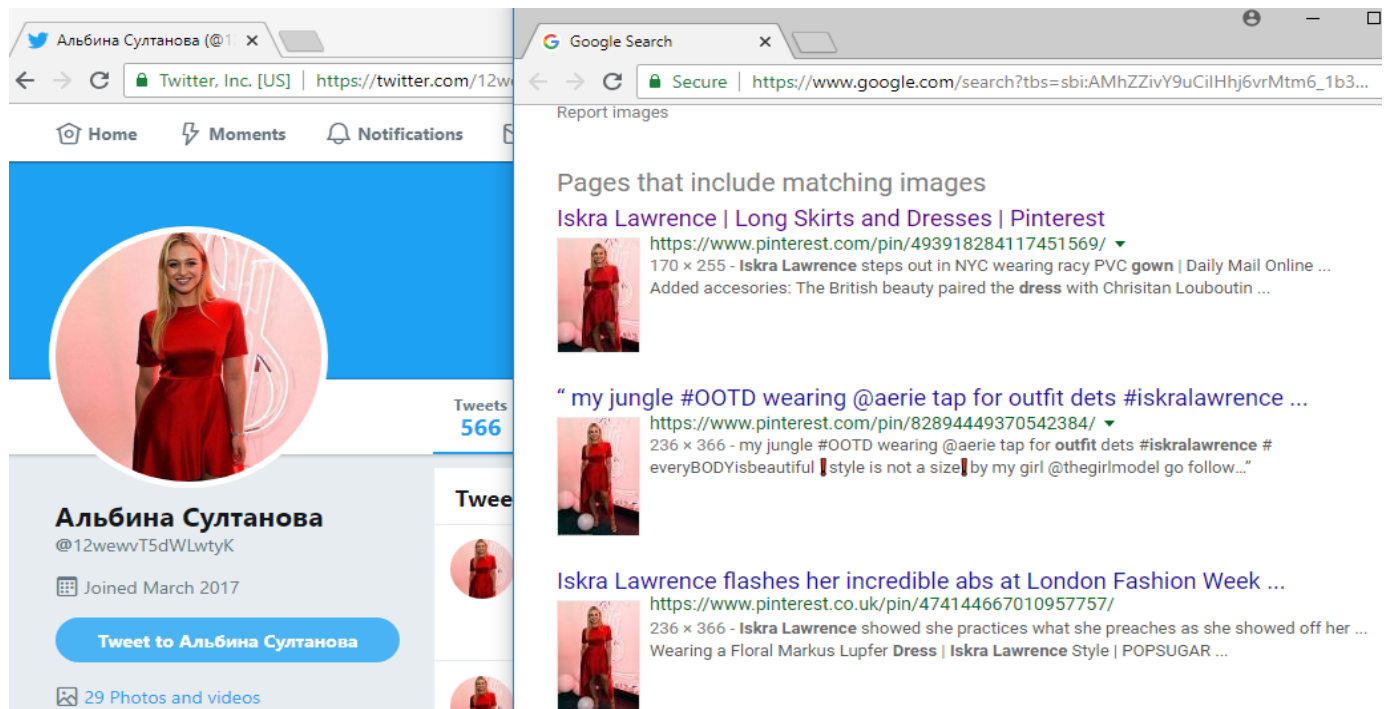
The random alphanumeric username of this account is the primary indicator of its synthetic nature. A reverse image search of its profile image reveals that it was taken from a photo of a UK fashion model, another strong indicator that this account warrants further examination.

A cursory examination of the user's tweets reveals that the user almost solely engages in posting links and retweeting domestic Russian political content. These links lead to a number of questionable commercial sites and fake news articles. The vast majority of the content has no relation to foreign influence operations and the account appears to primarily be a commercial bot account.

Альбина Султанова @12wewvT5dWLwtyK · Feb 7
Польза зеленого чая zen.yandex.ru/media/oldlekar…

🌐 Translate Tweet

💬   🔁 1   ♡   ✉

Альбина Султанова @12wewvT5dWLwtyK · Feb 7
Польза ананаса zen.yandex.ru/media/oldlekar…

🌐 Translate Tweet

💬   🔁 1   ♡   ✉

Альбина Султанова @12wewvT5dWLwtyK · Jan 19
malahov-plus.com/user/mitsmafre…
massage.ru/forum/memberli …
krasotulya.ru/love/user/3566…

Альбина Султанова @12wewvT5dWLwtyK · Apr 11

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

Donald, show that you are a leader! Better a bad world than a good war! We do not want war, but we know how to fight! You know that there was no chemical attack!

💬   ↻   ♡   ✉

Альбина Султанова @12wewvT5dWLwtyK · Apr 11

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

Donald, show that you are a leader! Better a bad world than a good war! We do not want war, but we know how to fight! You know that there was no chemical attack!

💬 3   ↻   ♡ 2   ✉

Альбина Султанова @12wewvT5dWLwtyK · Apr 11

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

Donald, show that you are a leader! Better a bad world than a good war! We do not want war, but we know how to fight! You know that there was no chemical attack!

💬   ↻   ♡   ✉

Альбина Султанова @12wewvT5dWLwtyK · Apr 11

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

Donald, there was no chemical attack and you know it. You know how to make sure there's no war!

💬   ↻   ♡ 1   ✉

Альбина Султанова @12wewvT5dWLwtyK · Apr 11

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

Donald, there was no chemical attack and you know it. You know how to make sure there's no war!

💬   ↻   ♡   ✉

Upon examination of the user's account during the time frame surrounding the chemical attack in Douma, it can be seen that the user's operating behavior shifts entirely. The account engages in commercial activity up to February 7, 2018, at which point the account "goes dark" and posts no content until April 11, 2018, immediately following President Trump's tweet announcing his intention to launch a missile strike against Syria. The account begins to post numerous tweets responding to the president and introducing a counternarrative.

The rapid switch from evidently automated link posting to tailored political responses in English indicates that this account is a synthetic actor of the cyborg type. The account operates as a bot for the majority of its

lifespan, but switches to tailored content following a salient event. This suggests that the owner of the account likely took over control from the automated script in an attempt to influence US political discourse. It is possible that whoever is controlling these accounts keeps a large number of bots ready for deployment when needed. In the interim, the owner makes use of them by exploiting them for commercial purposes.
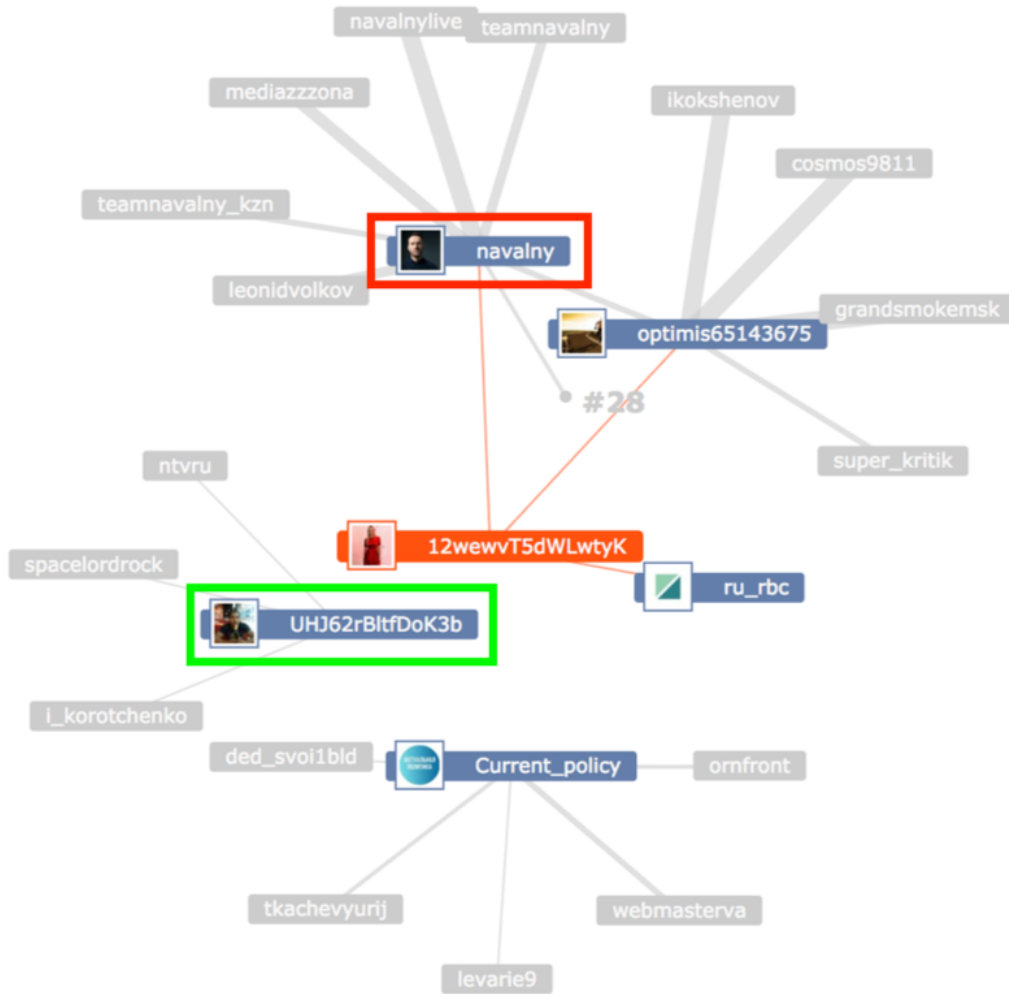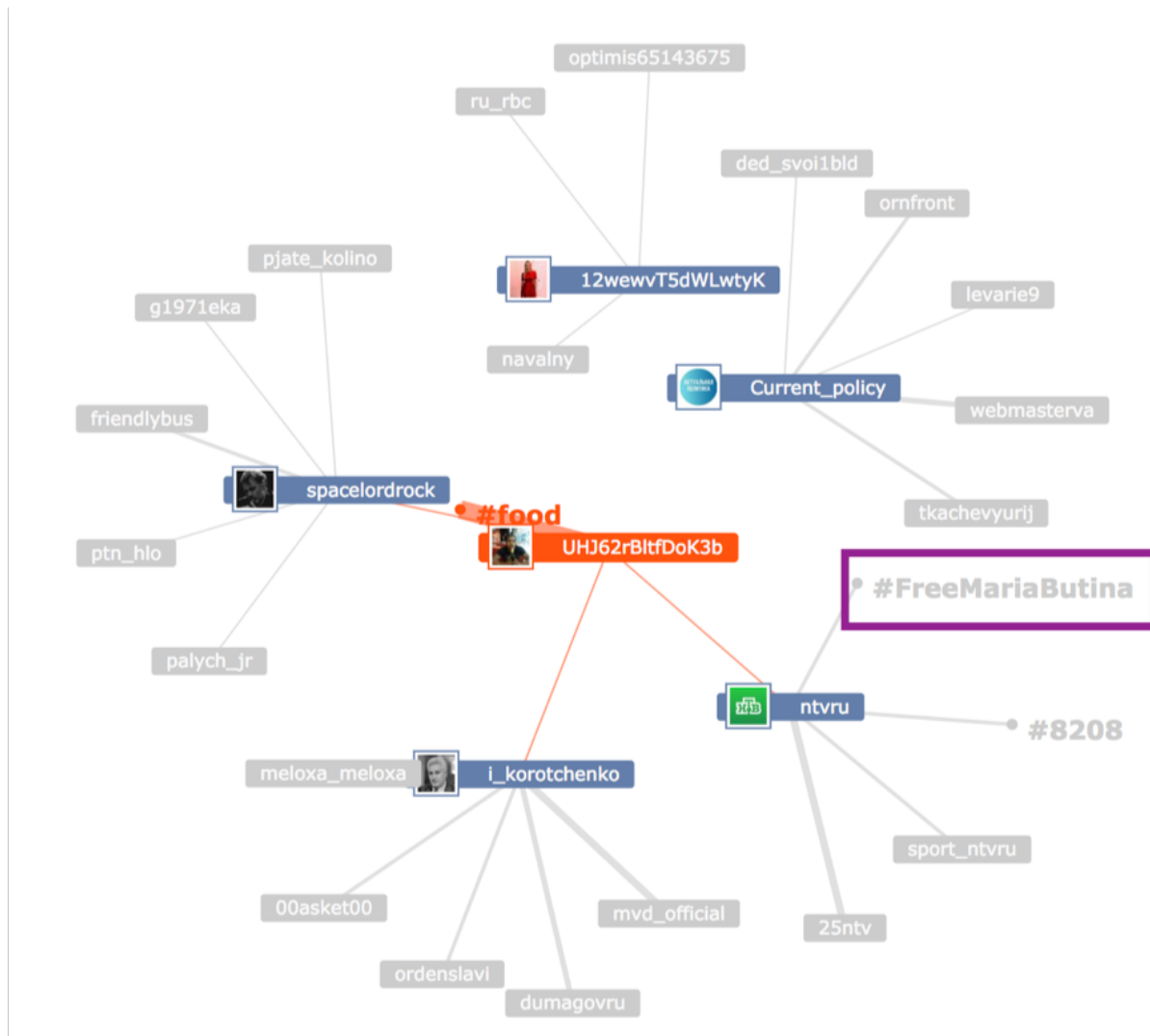
Figure 5. Network maps, created with Mentionmapp.com.

To better understand the operation of this cyborg account, we created a network map of the user's interactions. It revealed that the account frequently mentioned the Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny. Further examination showed these mentions to be antagonistic. The map also revealed that the account was in a symbiotic relationship with another bot/cyborg account. These accounts frequently engaged with each other's content in order to cross-promote. A map of the second user revealed that it was tied to the hashtag "FreeMariaButina," a campaign currently being promoted by official Russian sources.[11]

---

[11] Maria Butina, a Russian national residing in the United States, was arrested in July 2018 on charges of acting as unregistered foreign agent. Accounts officially attached to the Russian government have launched an online campaign, including the hashtag, alleging her innocence and calling for her release.

@dbavydb
 -Likely Bot

Both the random character user name and the fake profile image indicate a high likelihood of the user being synthetic.

This user engages in generic commercial activity posting addresses through which funds can be routed.

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Apr 8

Видео "Cardi B, Rihanna, Nicki Minaj Bartier Cardi Remix" (youtu.be/BlwhWnm5unI?a) на @YouTube добавлено в

> **Cardi B, Rihanna, Nicki Minaj Bartier Cardi Remix**
> God's Plan PayPal - paypal.me/dbavydb BTC - 12a2PsWdSCe5ibBGyBYMEkifEAAsPbcGKc Payeer - P34481213 WebMoney - WMZ - Z625057429878 Succ...
> youtube.com

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Apr 8

Мне понравилось видео "Cardi B, Rihanna, Nicki Minaj Bartier Cardi Remix" (youtu.be/BlwhWnm5unI?a) на @YouTube.

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Apr 8

Видео "The Chainsmokers Everybody Hates Me 1" (youtu.be/XBtVh9FH_a0?a) на @YouTube добавлено в плейлист.

> **The Chainsmokers Everybody Hates Me 1**
> God's Plan PayPal - paypal.me/dbavydb BTC - 12a2PsWdSCe5ibBGyBYMEkifEAAsPbcGKc Payeer - P34481213 WebMoney - WMZ - Z625057429878 Succ...
> youtube.com

The account reposts popular music videos with requests for money in the description of the videos.

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Apr 9
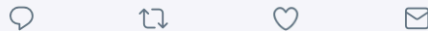Replying to @realDonaldTrump
SYRIANGIRL Reveals Full Truth About The Latest 'Chemical Attack' In Douma, Syria youtu.be/rBsb8VzxmJ0YRI... Reveals Full Truth About The Latest 'Chemical Attack' In Douma, Syria youtu.be/rBsb8VzxmJ0

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Apr 9
Replying to @StateDept @realDonaldTrump @POTUS
BREAKING SYRIANGIRL Reveals Full Truth About The Latest 'Chemical Attack' In Douma, Syria
youtu.be/rBsb8VzxmJ0

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Apr 9
BREAKING SYRIANGIRL Reveals Full Truth About The Latest 'Chemical Attack' In Douma, Syria: youtu.be/rBsb8VzxmJ0?a на @YouTube

Following the chemical attack in Syria, the user transitioned to posting counternarrative content. However, unlike the previously examined cyborg account, the content posted is not a tailored message. It reposts a link to counternarrative YouTube videos multiple times.

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Apr 9

Мне понравилось видео "BREAKING SYRIANGIRL Reveals Full Truth About The Latest 'Chemical Attack' In Douma, Syria"

🌐 Translate Tweet

💬   ♻   ♡   ✉

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Apr 9

Replying to @ECA_AS @StateDept and 7 others

SYRIANGIRL Reveals Full Truth About The Latest 'Chemical Attack' In Douma, Syria youtu.be/rBsb8VzxmJ0

💬   ♻   ♡   ✉

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Apr 9

Replying to @JulianAssannge @StateDept and 3 others

SYRIANGIRL Reveals Full Truth About The Latest 'Chemical Attack' In Douma, Syria youtu.be/rBsb8VzxmJ0

💬   ♻   ♡   ✉

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Apr 9

Replying to @StateDept @POTUS

SYRIANGIRL Reveals Full Truth About The Latest 'Chemical Attack' In Douma, Syria youtu.be/rBsb8VzxmJ0

💬   ♻   ♡   ✉

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Apr 9

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

SYRIANGIRL Reveals Full Truth About The Latest 'Chemical Attack' In Douma, Syria youtu.be/rBsb8VzxmJ0

💬   ♻   ♡   ✉

The user continues posting links to the same video, responding to different users—President Trump and the US State Department for example—in order to maximize exposure. This type of counternarrative behavior is indicative of full automation. The change to Syria-related content was likely done when the account's owner wrote a new script for this video to be posted in response to certain HIIs' tweets.

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Apr 20

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

youtu.be/sAQMlzLgt9c BREAKING Boy in Douma 'Chem Attack' Video Says He Was Lured With Cookies, Then Sprayed With Water

BREAKING Boy in Douma 'Chem Attack' Video S...
The film crew of Evgeny Poddubny, the military correspondent in Syria, was able to find the people responsible for fabricating footage of the alleged c...
youtube.com

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Apr 20

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

BREAKING Boy in Douma 'Chem Attack' Video Says He Was Lured With Cookies, Then Sprayed With Water youtu.be/sAQMlzLgt9c

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Apr 20

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

youtu.be/sAQMlzLgt9c BREAKING Boy in Douma 'Chem Attack' Video Says He Was Lured With Cookies, Then Sprayed With Water

A continuation of automated, Syrian themed posting activity.

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Jul 11

Top Russian Novichok Expert Exposes UK Ludicrous Claims Against Russia In The Midst Of The World Cup –...

Top Russian Novichok Expert Exposes UK Ludicro…

Top Russian Novichok Expert Exposes UK Ludicrous Claims Against Russia In The Midst Of The World Cup Поделиться ссылкой: https://dai.ly/x6oazo9

dbavydb.tumblr.com

The user would later go on to engage in counternarrative activity following the Russian Novichok incident in Salisbury, England.

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Jul 29

Navy Day parade in St Petersburg streamed live
youtu.be/9LbOgkF6x5k empowr.com/dbavydb?p=CU6GJ

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · Jul 1
THE PRESIDENT- Putin Decorates More Than 30 Russians, From Celebrities To Modest Workers
По empowr.com/dbavydb?p=CT6C3
Translate Tweet

OUR COUNTRY IS LIKE AN ORCHESTRA, EVERYONE HAS A ROLE TO PLAY

Here we see a transition to a new strategy in which the bot reposts links that are aimed as framing Russia and Putin in a favorable light. Throughout the middle of 2018, the user posted high volumes of content that purport to demonstrate the strength and prestige of the Russian Federation.

ALIAKSANDR @dbavydb · May 6
Putin and FIFA's Infantino Receive Their World Cup Fan IDs- Let's Play Some Football In Russia!
dai.ly/x6iyzdd

Building on the above strategy, the user promoted content that showed Putin's successful preparation and execution of the 2018 FIFA World Cup.

@RJD641
-Likely Troll

In many ways, this user exemplifies a large subset of foreign troll profiles on Twitter. Its description, as well as its header and profile photos, suggest that the owner lives in the American South and demonstrates extreme patriotism, including themes of gun rights activism and religiosity. The account's final non-reply tweet, posted three months before our July 2018 analysis, is a simple pro-Putin message. It is worth noting that the account was created in March 2018 and became inactive in April 2018, indicating that the manager disposed of the account after it was no longer politically useful.

An examination of this account's history led us to discover that the user had changed its profile photo multiple times over the course of the account's short history, each time posting a tweet with the caption "#NewProfilePic." One of these changes stood out to us: a picture of man's legs facing outward from a camping tent.

Back to top ↑

The user was clearly attempting to convey that he was the one behind the camera in the camping image, lending legitimacy to his account. A reverse image search of the profile picture revealed it first appeared on the Instagram account "igorcibulsky." The account appears to belong to a Russian nature photographer with a substantial, primarily Russian, following.

igorcibulsky • Follow

igorcibulsky Скоро лето, а значит палаточный сезон не за горами⛰
igorcibulsky .
.
.
.
#earhtpix #earthofficial #инстаграмнедели #roamtheplanet #featuremeinstagood #aov #folkgood #bestvacations #beautifuldestinations #natureaddict #livefolk #liveauthentic #artofvisuals #neverstopexploring #campvibes #canonrussia #welltravelled #instamood #vscorussia #madrussians #folkscenery #vsco #stayandwander #instamood #exploretocreate #natgeoru #russianexplorers #madrussians #agameoftones #ourcamplife #stayandwander #rhpfreetime

2,185 likes

MARCH 18, 2017

Add a comment...

The fact that the deceptive profile picture was taken from a Russian account strongly indicates that @RDJ641 is a synthetic actor.

RJD64 @RJD641 · Apr 12

1. Assad did not gas his people.
2. His people are not the invading islamic militants or isis.
3. Islamic militants set off the gas canisters.
4. You have NO evidence to prove who set off the chem weapons, if there were any at all.
5. Putin,Assad are the only ones fighting isis.

💬 2   🔁   ♡   ✉

RJD64
@RJD641   Follow

Replying to @RJD641 @nikkihaley and 4 others

Stop believing globalist lies. We are not buying them anymore.

The top tweet in this combined example interweaves several counternarrative themes mentioned earlier in this text. The lower tweet in this example demonstrates another common theme: the use of US armed forces or veteran identity to lend credibility to counternarratives in the context of military action.

RJD64
@RJD641

Follow

@BulletinAtomic You can probably move the hand closer to midnight. Actually go ahead and set it at midnight. Nuclear war looking imminent.

6:57 PM - 11 Apr 2018

This tweet falls under the "Dismay" tactic. The tweet's recipient—the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*—releases updates of its "Doomsday Clock," a symbolic measure of how close civilization is to destruction. This troll is thus alluding to an apocalyptic nuclear war which would result from US intervention in Syria.

RJD64
@RJD641

Follow

Replying to @FoxNews

If Trump attacks Syria, he is a globalist puppet just like obama or bush.

Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump

Following

The President must get Congressional approval before attacking Syria-big mistake if he does not!

RETWEETS 16,046   LIKES 8,918

7:02 PM - 30 Aug 2013

1.2K   16K   8.9K

11:40 AM - 11 Apr 2018

This tweet exemplifies a tactic which we occasionally observed in our analysis. The likely troll exploits President Trump's 2013 tweet advocating Congressional approval for a would-be Syria strike to frame the president as a hypocrite. Moreover, it touches on another common theme—that the Trump administration is controlled by "globalists" who actually determine White House decision making. A final consideration is that this tweet is in reply to Fox News, a popular right-leaning American news network. This tactic of addressing right-leaning audiences is in line with our finding that in the Syrian chemical weapons context, managers of troll accounts prefer to address conservative Americans to increase the chance that their messages affect change.

Donald J. Trump ✔ @realDonaldTrump · Apr 11

Speaker Paul Ryan is a truly good man, and while he will not be seeking re-election, he will leave a legacy of achievement that nobody can question. We are with you Paul!

💬 22K   🔁 9.6K   ♡ 61K   ✉

RJD64
@RJD641

Follow ⌄

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

If you remove Assad from power. Are you willing to take in the millions of refugees this will create? No Assad= Al-Qaeda and isis will control Syria. Remember what happened when Gaddafi was removed from Libya.

7:43 AM - 11 Apr 2018

This April 11, 2018, tweet again falls into the "Dismay" category, as well as suggesting that the Assad regime acts as a bulwark against jihadism in Syria. Moreover, it invokes the consequences of past US military policy failures to deter similar regime change efforts in Syria.

RJD64
@RJD641

Replying to @infowars
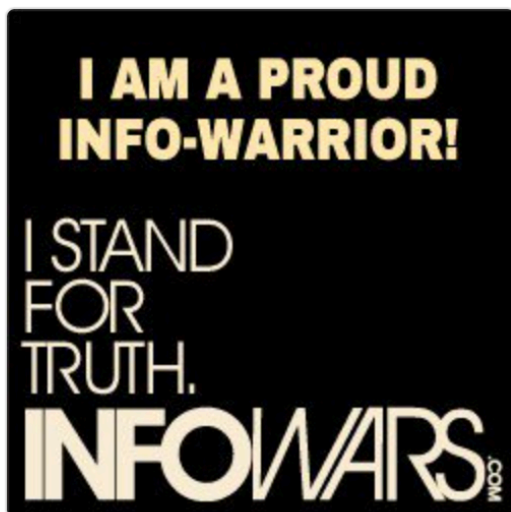
7:18 AM - 11 Apr 2018

Finally, this tweet demonstrates the connection between Russian troll networks and Infowars, which we frequently observed, as mentioned previously.
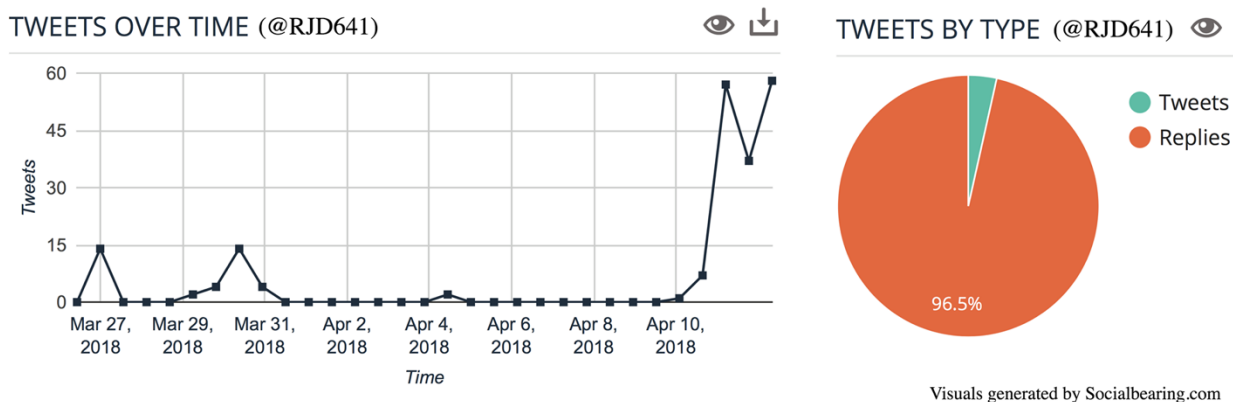
Figure 6. Tweets over time and by type. Generated by Socialbearing.com

It is important to note that this account began tweeting at exceptionally high volumes in the wake of President Trump's announcement of a planned missile strike in Syria. Moreover, the account almost

exclusively tweets replies rather than standard tweets, suggesting that the user is attempting to engage with HIIs to have its counternarrative messages gain traction.

The user's tweets also led us to identify another likely troll that we determined to be within the user's same network. On April 12, the user quoted a tweet by user @Migxp1. This user claimed to be from Michigan and frequently posted zealously religious, Christian content. However, the user's full history made us question his purported location and legitimacy. During the week following the chemical attack in Douma, the user posted over 100 pro-Assad tweets. Including:
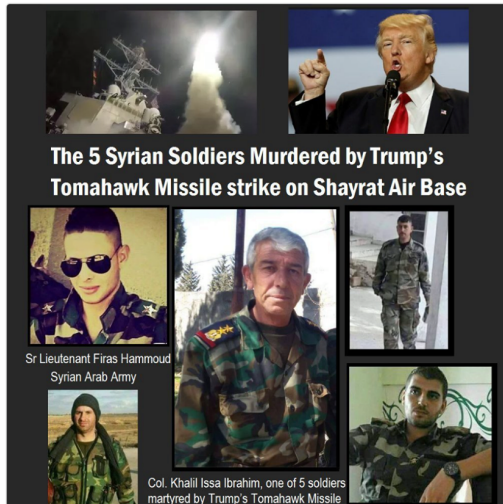
These tweets, combined with other factors in his account, led us to conclude the user was a likely synthetic actor. The fact that the @RJD641 was promoting him, indicated they were likely in one troll network.

@Christo04083985
-Likely Troll

Christopher Arteaga @Christo04083985 · 13 Apr 2017

@realDonaldTrump

Mr. Trump your son in law Kushner is playing you for a fool.

Christopher Arteaga @Christo04083985 · 8 Apr 2017

@realDonaldTrump

YOU RAN AS A NO WAR PRESIDENT. THATS WHY I VOTED FOR YOU.
#firekushner

1   3

Christopher Arteaga @Christo04083985 · 8 Apr 2017

@realDonaldTrump

Trump your base does not want a war with Syria. Please don't do this.
#firekushner

This user who was captured in our collection met some characteristics for a troll: his name is more random than one would expect from a genuine user, and he lacks a profile image. The user's first tweets immediately followed the chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun, Syria, in April 2017.

Christopher Arteaga @Christo04083985 · 2 Oct 2017

Replying to @Brian_Tallerico

Government's since the beginning of time have carried out false flag attacks since the beginning of time.

💬   🔁   ♡   ✉

Christopher Arteaga @Christo04083985 · 2 Oct 2017

Replying to @Brian_Tallerico

I don't think their os anything wrong with questioning the official narrative . The MSM does lie.

💬   🔁   ♡   ✉

Christopher Arteaga @Christo04083985 · 14 Sep 2017

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

If Trump does this I will not vote for him again. This is a betrayal to everyone who voted for him.

💬   🔁   ♡   ✉

In these tweets, the user masquerades as a disillusioned supporter of President Trump and lays the foundation for continued introduction of counternarratives.

Evan McMurry ✅ @evanmcmurry · 12 Dec 2017

African-American women (18% of electorate) went for Jones 97-3, per preliminary exit polls.

💬 26   🔁 172   ♡ 500   ✉

Christopher Arteaga
@Christo04083985

[Follow]

Replying to @evanmcmurry

how many of those women were on welfare and bussed in by the Democratic machine.

8:01 PM - 12 Dec 2017

In this tweet the user engages in contentious political discussion around a domestic political issue with no apparent relation to Russia's foreign interests. This is in line the with other studies that found many Russian troll accounts are primarily focused on sowing divisions surrounding racial identity.[12]

---

[12] Darren Linvill and Patrick Warren, "*Troll Factories: The Internet Research Agency and State-Sponsored Agenda Building*," Working Paper, Resource Centre on Media Freedom in Europe, July 2018, https://www.rcmediafreedom.eu/Publications/Academic-sources/Troll-Factories-The-Internet-Research-Agency-and-State-Sponsored-Agenda-Building.

Christopher Arteaga @Christo04083985 · Apr 15

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

Won't be voting for this idiot again. He really fooled us. Another Bush.

💬 ⟲ ♡ ✉

Christopher Arteaga @Christo04083985 · Apr 11

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

We have no evidence Assad did this. Every thing points to this being a false flag to keep us in Syria

💬 1 ⟲ 1 ♡ 17 ✉

Christopher Arteaga @Christo04083985 · Apr 11

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

Very dissapointed. I voted for Trump because he was against the wars. Won't be voting for him again.

💬 ⟲ ♡ ✉

Christopher Arteaga @Christo04083985 · 12 Dec 2017

Replying to @evanmcmurry

how many of those women were on welfare and bussed in by the Democratic machine.

💬 ⟲ ♡ ✉

After the above tweet, the user fell dormant for four months before re-emerging to join the counternarrative conversation about potential strikes on Syria. As of our analysis in August 2018, the April 15, 2018, tweet was the user's last.

@raf89230428

-Likely Troll

> **raffaele**
> @raf89230428
>
> Replying to @realDonaldTrump
>
> now you must attack Israel that uses chemical weapons against the Palestinians! Otherwise you are not credible
>
> 5:04 PM - 14 Apr 2018

This user provides another strong candidate for a synthetic actor. The user engages in the strategy of distraction by attempting to divert attention to another matter. His name also lines up with our indicative factors in that it includes a high degree of randomness. Furthermore (but least conclusively), the user lacks a profile image.

> **raffaele**
> @raf89230428
>
> Replying to @EmmanuelMacron
>
> alors vous devez également attaquer Israël qui utilise des armes chimiques sur les Palestiniens, sinon cette attaque contre la Syrie est un abus
>
> Translated from French by ◼ Microsoft
>
> Then you must also attack Israel that uses chemical weapons on the Palestinians, otherwise this attack against Syria is an abuse
>
> 5:10 PM - 14 Apr 2018

In this tweet, the user repeats the last message but in French, this time directed towards French President Emmanuel Macron. A native French speaker on our team concluded that the French in this tweet is "unnatural," and almost certainly written in another language and then translated into French.

raffaele
@raf89230428

Follow

Attacco Usa in Siria, quali saranno le conseguenze e cosa succede adesso

Translated from Italian by ■■ Microsoft

US attack in Syria, what will be the consequences and what happens now
tpi.it/2018/04/14/att…

Attacco in Siria Trump | E ora cosa succede? Scenari e pos…

Attacco in Siria, quali conseguenze e cosa succede adesso | Trump attacco in Siria | Donald Trump | Attacco alla Siria | Attacco Usa in Siria | Bombardamenti in Siria | Bombardamenti Siria per...

tpi.it

11:38 PM - 14 Apr 2018

The user also engaged in reposting counternarratives in Italian, suggesting that he was attempting to engage in influence operations across Western Europe.

Results

Counternarratives surface on official US platforms

Richard N. Haass ✔ @RichardHaass · Mar 23

.@realDonaldTrump is now set for war on 3 fronts: political vs Bob Mueller, economic vs China/others on trade, and actual vs. Iran and/or North Korea. This is the most perilous moment in modern American history-and it has been largely brought about by ourselves, not by events.

💬 2.2K   🔁 18K   ♡ 35K

Jackson County GOP
@JacomoGOP

[Follow]

Replying to @RichardHaass @realDonaldTrump

Where's the"Wow"button! The past 70 years of bullying everyone around world under the auspices of the new world order has brought us to this place. In fact @RichardHaass and the CFR are responsible for pushing propaganda that has created unrest. Destroy the Deep State! #Trump2020

8:42 PM - 11 Apr 2018

Donald J. Trump ✔ @realDonaldTrump · Apr 11

Russia vows to shoot down any and all missiles fired at Syria. Get ready Russia, because they will be coming, nice and new and "smart!" You shouldn't be partners with a Gas Killing Animal who kills his people and enjoys it!

💬 63K   ⟲ 64K   ♡ 169K

Jackson County GOP
@JacomoGOP

Follow

Replying to @realDonaldTrump

With all due respect sir, the chemical weapons in Syria was a false flag effort from the swamp to trap and pull you into another war. I'm getting better at recognizing the public negotiation. Indictments, tribunals, bring it on home!

3:34 PM - 12 Apr 2018

In our collection, we discovered two tweets from an account claiming to represent the Republican Committee of Jackson County, Missouri. The tweets contained counternarratives similar to those spread by our synthetic actors of interest. We reached out to the Committee to confirm authenticity of the account and a senior official verified that it was the official account of the Committee. While it is impossible to trace how the counternarratives entered official discourse, it cannot be discounted that synthetic actors, who, during this timeframe, composed a significant portion of counternarrative discussion, may have been the origin.

Concluding Remarks

Social media has transformed the modern political information environment. While previously, citizens were two to three steps away on the information cascade from influencing the administration's narrative, now a linear plane exists.[13] The administration can bypass the media to transmit its narrative directly to citizens, and citizens can reply directly with their own. Consequently, this has created opportunities for information and media manipulation that were unimaginable a decade ago. It is now possible to infiltrate domestic political discourse through the mass creation of disposable, synthetic accounts. This study has illuminated one example of this new strategy in operation. It is evident that, following the suspected use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime, their ally, the Russian Federation, acted in an attempt to deter the use of military force by the United States. Although ultimately unsuccessful, their operational narratives abounded in the discourse among the American political right.

Synthetic actors, potentially making up to 16% of all Syrian chemical attack counternarrative users, were fairly prolific in the counternarrative conversation on Twitter in the wake of the April 2018 chemical attack in Douma, Syria. However, nearly *half* of Twitter accounts created in the immediate aftermath of this attack propagated counternarratives about it, and thus were likely synthetic actors. Without further research, it is not possible to know the extent these synthetic actors incited a wider Syrian chemical attack counternarrative conversation among genuine Twitter users and citizens more broadly. However, it seems reasonable to assume that at least some sectors of the domestic Western populace were affected by the discourse.

The analyzed synthetic actors employed a number of tactics to disseminate their messages, which typically followed a seemingly standardized set of themes. Tweets were addressed to prominent public figures and politicians to garner a wide audience and used popular internet culture and a purported military affiliation to increase share potential and credibility. Moreover, when disapproving of President Trump's actions, these synthetic actors posed as supporters who disagreed on an individual policy decision, likely in an attempt to seem like "one of us" to members of the president's political base. On several occasions, we observed synthetic actors joined in reciprocal relationships in which accounts would retweet and/or "like" other synthetic actor accounts' posts, suggesting the existence a network of coordinated activity.

Synthetic actors' counternarrative tweets surrounding the Douma attack fell into a relatively narrow set of themes. Many posts focused on domestic concerns through discrediting Western (especially US) government institutions by alluding to past intelligence failures and suggesting the existence of a "Deep State" that manipulates the president. Other tweets sought to deter a US strike on Syria by raising fears that jihadists (especially Islamic State and Al-Qaeda) would benefit or that such jihadists were the true culprits of the chemical attack. More still attempted to intimidate by suggesting that "World War III" would erupt after continued escalation between Russia and the United States over a strike on Syria.

---

[13] Robert M. Entman, "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame After 9/11," *Political Communication* 20, no. 4 (2003): 415–32.

Social media has become a weapon of political conflict. In recent years, news and research about influence operations aimed at sowing discord and division in populations has become ubiquitous. However, government social media manipulation is not restricted to such strategic operations. Our research has revealed an example of a more narrow, short-term, and tactical online influence campaign; since they were no longer useful, many discovered synthetic actors' accounts fell dormant nearly immediately after the joint US–UK–French strike against Syrian chemical weapons facilities. Due to its relatively modest cost and potentially massive payoff, we assess that states and even non-state actors will be highly incentivized to employ such platforms and techniques. Therefore, we can expect more of such short-term, ad hoc influence campaigns as new political events transpire.

Author Bios

Jack O. Nassetta is a student of political communication and history at The George Washington University. He focuses on the transformation and manipulation of communication on the internet. During 2018, he was a visiting fellow at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies in their Summer Undergraduate Nonproliferation Program.

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