

State-Sponsored Trolls as An Emerging Threat

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The digital public square has transformed how Americans encounter information, debate ideas, and form political identities. Social media platforms promise open dialogue, but their algorithms often reward emotionally charged content, amplifying voices that confirm what users already believe. In this environment, misinformation spreads quickly, and communities increasingly cluster around shared narratives rather than shared facts. Foreign actors have recognized the strategic value of this fragmented information ecosystem. Among them, Russian influence operations—often described as “Kremlinbot” networks—have drawn particular attention for their efforts to inflame existing social and political tensions within the United States.

Kremlinbots, Russian state-sponsored bots and trolls, manipulate public opinion through fake accounts to skew social media comments and manufacture a false sense of consensus. While inauthentic, bombarding the comments section of social media threads is an effective tactic to manipulate public opinion. This tactic can lead to two outcomes: supporters of the narrative are more likely to follow aligned pages, creating an echo chamber; while dissenters are often intimidated or discouraged from posting, fearing online conflict. Even if users recognize the commenters as bots, false consensus bias discourages them from joining public debates.

False Consensus Bias

False consensus bias and manufactured consensus bias are similar but differ in how they develop and their purpose. False consensus bias happens when people favor information that seems supported by the majority. This information can be true, false, or misleading. Regardless, if it looks widely accepted, it is considered accurate. Simply put, people believe something because it appears that everyone else does. This is like in-group thinking. On the other hand, manufactured consensus bias involves intentionally manipulating social media to create the illusion of broad agreement. When Kremlinbots succeed in manufacturing consensus, they also generate a false consensus bias, making people think their views are in line with the mainstream.

The Battleground

Manufactured consensus often forms in the comments sections of major news outlets, government officials, institutions, celebrities, universities, world leaders, CEOs, and athletes on social media. Whenever any of these entities, organizations, or high-profile individuals post an article, statement, or video, the comments thread beneath the post becomes the battleground for Russian state-sponsored bots and trolls to create biased perceptions.

Additionally, Kremlinbot-manufactured consensus bias is often seen on threads where the entire article post is fake. False information from a single fake account or multiple fake accounts

pretending to be real people or organizations has become quite common. For example, a Russian state-sponsored troll farm based in St. Petersburg, Russia, called the Internet Research Agency (IRA), created the Twitter account EN_GOP named “Tennessee GOP” during its attempt to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election, gaining over one hundred thousand followers.

The IRA was founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a former Russian oligarch who led the Wagner Group and was a close ally of Vladimir Putin with direct ties to Russian intelligence. The agency created fake accounts on major social networks to promote Kremlin interests in domestic and foreign policy, especially concerning Ukraine and the Middle East. More than 1,000 employees worked in a single agency building in 2015. The reach and impact of the IRA were enormous. By 2019, the IRA’s troll farm influence operation caused unprecedented divisions and discord within Western democracies. For perspective, if 500 people each manage at least 30 fake profiles in a troll farm, which totals 15,000 state-sponsored troll accounts, all targeting comment threads on various social media pages.

The comments thread is a clear example of manipulation, deceit, and illusion. Russian Kremlin bots and trolls function as illusionists, working overtime to make followers believe they are part of the club if they agree, and outside if they do not accept the false consensus. This constitutes a social media psychological operation, or psyops campaign. Benjamin A. Valentino, Professor of Government at Dartmouth College, [explains](#) in his analysis co-authored by computer scientist Soroush Vosoughi, “Bias arises not from who is on a platform, but from who among them are active, vocal participants on that platform. This varies based on the topics being discussed. Even if you have everyone on Twitter, they may only participate in topics they find interesting or feel comfortable discussing in public, says Vosoughi. So, when a small group is very vocal about a particular issue, their opinions get over-represented in the data.”

Conclusion

Kremlinbot-manufactured consensus is not the only reason Americans live in two conflicting realities. Still, consensus bias is a key cause of division among Americans, many of whom now only inhabit isolated echo chambers of alternate worlds. Within their echo chambers, cognitive biases are often reinforced, especially on social media platforms that are manipulated to bolster pre-existing beliefs. These tactics turn social media into breeding grounds for hatred and tools for foreign adversaries. Russian security agencies have perfected methods to exploit these divisions, which now pose a serious threat to U.S. national security.

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