

# The Wolves in Sheep's Clothing: How Russia's Internet Research Agency Tweets Appeared in U.S. News as Vox Populi

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## Abstract

The Russian-sponsored Internet Research Agency's (IRA) use of social media to influence U.S. political discourse is undoubtedly troubling. However, scholarly attention has focused on social media, overlooking the role that news media within the country played in amplifying false, foreign messages. In this article, we examine articles in the U.S. news media system that quoted IRA tweets through the lens of changing journalism practices in the hybrid media system, focusing specifically on news gatekeepers' use of tweets as vox populi. We find that a majority of the IRA tweets embedded in the news were vox populi. That is, IRA tweets were quoted (1) for their opinion, (2) as coming from everyday Twitter users, and (3) with a collection of other tweets holistically representing public sentiment. These findings raise concerns about how modern gatekeeping practices, transformed due to the hybrid media system, may also unintentionally let in unwanted disinformation from malicious actors.

## Keywords

journalism, journalistic norms, state-media relations, United States

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Scholars are closely scrutinizing the performance of the U.S. political communication system during the 2016 presidential election, including news media's treatment of disinformation: intentionally misleading messages designed to garner a specific political effect (Phillips 2018). In this article, we focus on one aspect of this phenomenon: the operation of Twitter accounts run by Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) and the uptake and reproduction of IRA Twitter messages by news media influential to U.S. politics.

It is now well established that the IRA operated thousands of Twitter accounts posing as Americans to weigh in on U.S. political discussions on social media between 2014 and 2017. Special Counsel Robert Mueller's indictment of the IRA noted that the campaign's goal was to "[spread] distrust towards the candidates and the political system in general" (*U.S. v. Internet Research Agency LLC*). Since then, considerable scholarly work has explored the reach and performance of IRA content online. But social media discourse does not operate in a vacuum. In several instances, IRA-produced content moved from social media into the U.S. news environment where it undoubtedly enjoyed larger reach, demonstrating susceptibilities of the press, which has long been a target of foreign intelligence operations (Abrams 2016). Journalists' accounts have thus far pointed to the presence of IRA messages in news stories across many countries.<sup>1</sup> Despite the acknowledged relationship between news media and platforms like Twitter, we know little about the journalistic routines that unintentionally allow disinformation to be embedded in news stories.

We focus on news media's uptake of IRA tweets around the time of the 2016 U.S. election as an opportunity to explore how disinformation enters journalism content in the context of a hybrid media system (Chadwick 2017). Our aim is to understand how IRA messages made their way through the news gate and consider what that process reveals about the workings of the current (and rapidly changing) U.S. press system. We analyze 314 news stories that quoted at least one tweet posted by an IRA-controlled account. We find that these tweets were often embedded as *vox populi*, sharing opinions as if they were regular U.S. citizens. The emerging hybrid practice of Twitter *vox populi*, therefore, operated as a loophole that allowed state-sponsored disinformation content to pass news gates during and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

## Literature Review

### *News Gates and Their Gatekeepers*

The notion of *gatekeeping* is now somewhat contested. Its use in mass communication research originated from a particular time and place: looking at how news organizations, mainly editors, selected the information that became news (White 1950). From this perspective, mass communicators could only convey a small portion of the available messages reflecting social realities. Correspondingly, gatekeepers were perceived as having considerable power and responsibility over the news selection and production process (Shoemaker and Reese 2013: 165).

This rich research tradition has been foundational to understanding how news is produced and shaped, and how information “passes” through news gates. In the multimodal digital environment, gatekeeping is more nuanced than a binary inclusion/exclusion: Now, information can “pass” a news gate when it is quoted, amplified, referenced, cited, retweeted, or otherwise promoted by journalists. Information enjoying this sort of recognition are effectively highlighted for “transmission to one or more audiences” (Shoemaker et al. 2009: 73).

The original conceptualization of gatekeeping was as a centralized, top-down process. However, digital media poses significant problems for gatekeeping’s central premise (Dylko et al. 2012). We posit that journalistic gatekeeping remains important not because journalists have anything like White’s (1950) wire services editor’s power to determine “what 30,000 families will read on the front page of their morning newspapers” (p. 384), but because selecting news content still shapes public discourse (Entman and Usher 2018). Our focus remains on *journalistic* gatekeeping processes, but we situate these routines in the wider hybrid media system, where new and old actors coproduce messages (Chadwick 2017; Tandoc 2014).

### *Watching Digital Gates in the Hybrid Media System*

Though studies have primarily looked into on how digital technology impacts news gatekeeping (Karidi 2018; Meraz and Papacharissi 2016), the reality is that modern gatekeeping routines and the digital media ecosystem bidirectionally influence one another. Digital technology has undeniably transformed news production routines (Dimitrova et al. 2003). However, the online ecosystem grew within an already-established media system. Hybrid journalistic routines are not completely “new,” they are modifications of traditional norms that help the industry withstand the expectations of a faster, more competitive media ecosystem.

One lens through which we can analyze how hybrid media logic has altered journalism practices is gate-watching (Bruns 2005), which adapts gatekeeping theory. Because any user can create and promote content now, news organizations no longer have primary control over the information disseminated process (Bruns, Highfield and Lind 2012). This implies a shift at the core of the press’ function, from determining what passes through the news gate to watching the news gate to sort valuable and verifiable information from junk. The process of gate-watching is collaborative (Bruns, Highfield and Lind 2012), involving many actors aside from journalists.

This highlights another major change in news production, also brought on by hybrid media logics: more opportunities for audience members to contribute to news.

*Digital audiences.* Traditionally, scholars conceptualized the relationship between journalists and citizens to be top-down, with journalists providing information to the public (Entman 2003), but this dynamic has also changed. Journalists perceive audiences to be increasingly influential in gatekeeping practices (Strömbäck and Karlsson 2011). Audiences, both individually and in the aggregate, have become essential to the

journalism assemblage, a “contingent set of relationships to accomplish shifting social objectives” (Reese 2016: 820).

Previous work suggests that news media account for audiences in two ways, both of which inform our study. The first is the use of audience metrics to evaluate the popularity of the content or as a proxy of public attention to a news piece (Vu 2014). This is akin to the use of ratings and circulation rates, but on a granular scale (Webster 2014). The accessibility of these audience metrics—particularly through newsroom tools like DataMinr (McGregor and Molyneux 2018)—can impact a newsroom’s editorial decision-making process, intentionally or not (Tandoc 2014).

The second is more overt: the use of audience-produced messages in news. Here, audiences provide free labor by voluntarily contributing to, producing, and disseminating news content. They share, link to, and comment on news materials, potentially affecting other people’s news consumption. These audience practices are a different form of earned media wherein news consumers are also news disseminators (Tandoc and Vos 2016). Citizens have also become more involved in news production, as seen in the rise of citizen journalism and the embedding of social media messages in news stories (Goode 2009).

The pronounced role of audiences in the journalism assemblage shape digital gate-watching practices and subsequent news content. For example, news organizations have relied on sensationalizing stories to increase audience engagement and combat market pressures (Wang 2012). Kilgo et al. (2018) show that sensationalist content is on the rise among all news topics. One niche of this is hyper-partisan news media content (Hasell and Weeks 2016), which can rile up politically engaged citizens.

Audience-journalist collaborations occur on many online platforms. However, social media—and Twitter in particular—constitutes one especially pivotal space for interaction between members of the journalism assemblage. Through Twitter, journalists reach out to sources, engage in gate-watching, and make themselves available to audience feedback.

### *Social Media and Journalism*

Journalists have long interacted with one another, audience members, and elite actors (e.g., celebrities, billionaires, and politicians) to “make the news”; today, an integral component of that communication involves social media. Of the many available platforms, journalists are especially reliant on Twitter (Barnard 2016). In fact, journalists constitute the largest plurality of verified Twitter accounts.<sup>2</sup>

Most research looking at the interaction between journalism and social media content has focused on journalism within social media (e.g., Coddington et al. 2014; Hermida 2013). Only a handful of studies analyze social media *in* news content (e.g., Paulussen and Harder 2014), despite journalists sourcing information from Twitter (Vergeer 2015); ours falls into this category. As social media users themselves, journalists’ Twitter activity can substantively influence their news production routines.

There are two common reasons for journalists to source information from Twitter content (these are not mutually exclusive). First, journalists find tips and stories on Twitter (Barnard 2016). Second, journalists write stories *about* social media activity, embedding Twitter content directly as a reflection of opinion, either from the public (as we discuss subsequently) or from politicians and other elites (Beckers and Harder 2016; Paulussen and Harder 2014). These two rationales for incorporating social media content into news highlight social media not only as a platform to disseminate information, but a platform to *seek* information. While in the past, journalists expressed skepticism over the validity and representativeness of Twitter (Bosch 2014), evidence shows that journalists are also more likely to quote regular people when they are tied to a news story (Vliegenthart and Boukes 2018). This trend is especially pronounced with the construction of *vox populi*.

### *Vox Populi in Digital Journalism*

In news production, *vox populi* (“voice of the people”) refers to a set of journalistic practices that involve presenting the opinions or expressions of ordinary citizens (Beckers and Harder 2016). *Vox populi* has three manifest features. First, *vox populi* is meant to represent *public opinion* (McGregor 2019).<sup>3</sup> Second, the assumption of *vox populi* is that it represents the views of *everyday citizens*, not elites. Finally, it is a *collection* of messages, sometimes portraying a set of similar beliefs, and sometimes representing opposing viewpoints (Ross and Dumitrescu 2019). *Vox populi* is one of the few ways laypeople are directly quoted in news media (Broersma and Graham 2013).

To create *vox populi*, gatekeepers seek out and curate expressions from members of the public, selecting an illustrative set of messages for inclusion. This practice was popularized during the television era with “man on the street” interviews (Beckers 2017). However, digital technology has altered *vox populi* production. Social media—particularly Twitter—have made it easier for journalists to find and curate opinions that are then embedded into news stories (Broersma and Graham 2013). The professional “normalization” of Twitter has also lowered the cost of collecting voices from ordinary citizens (McGregor and Molyneux 2018), despite the fact that only a fraction—in some countries a very small fraction—of citizens are on Twitter (see Lewis et al. 2004). Therefore, journalists’ reliance on Twitter users implies an outsized influence of these accounts on what “public opinions” are represented through *vox populi*. Studies have also shown that journalists embed or quote tweets as *vox populi* when the tweet expresses a strong opinion or has many retweets (Beckers and Harder 2016), suggesting that more moderate or unamplified voices are less likely to be embedded as *vox populi*.

The emerging study of how often *vox populi* appear in news media suggests some cross-national variation in the practice. Studying the use of Twitter as a source in Dutch and British journalism, Broersma and Graham (2013) found that around 14 percent of the tweets used in Dutch news constituted *vox populi*; this was higher in British news, where around 25 percent of the tweets used were *vox populi*. Paulussen

and Harder (2014) find a larger percentage for Finnish newspapers: nearly half of the tweets used in stories came from everyday citizens. Studying news about the 2016 U.S. election, McGregor (2019) found that, of the stories with social media posts, 26 percent used this content to convey public opinion; of these, 55 percent of the articles did so qualitatively (with individual posts, as opposed to polling data). Studies have also shown that vox populi representations of public opinion tend to be slanted to one political ideology or issue position (Beckers et al. 2018). This is troubling given that vox populi in news has an indirect effect on people's perceptions of political issues: people who consume more positive vox populi toward issue tend to perceive public opinion toward that issue to be positive; the reverse is true for negative vox populi (Ross and Dumitrescu 2019).

Vox populi operates as a mechanism through which nonelite actors can appear in news, and potentially influence perceptions of the public. Given that editors have encouraged journalists to include individual posts in political news stories (McGregor 2019), it is worth examining how disinformation actors can take advantage of this practice.

### *Sneaking Past the Gatewatchers: Russian IRA Messages in American News Media*

The ease by which disinformation—intentionally deceptive messages—can spread through digital media has garnered significant scholarly and public concern. Though we tend to think of disinformation as false information, true messages created by a false identity (i.e., sockpuppetry) also constitute disinformation. Actors creating and sharing disinformation rely on a variety of digital platforms to spread falsehoods, including social media like 4chan, Reddit, and Twitter.<sup>4</sup> Though we focus on one example of state-sponsored disinformation, we contend that the media mechanics studied here are relevant to studies of other disinformation campaigns.

The evidence is clear that Russia waged a multifront disinformation campaign to affect American politics, particularly during the 2016 election. The wider influence campaign included hacking attempts, information theft,<sup>5</sup> and digital advertisements. Russia's IRA also created social media accounts posing as Americans; the campaign began as early as 2014 and constituted what the IRA itself referred to as “information warfare against the United States of America” (*U.S. v. Internet Research Agency*). IRA “specialists” were instructed to intensify political disunity by supporting political extremist groups, social movements, and “users dissatisfied with [the] social and economic situation” (p. 14). Specialists were also told to “use any opportunity to criticize Hillary and the rest (except Sanders and Trump—we support them)” (p. 17).

Key to the success of the Russian-backed IRA campaign was the ability for these accounts to convincingly present themselves as authentic actors of U.S. civil society, including everyday citizens and media organizations (Thomas et al. 2012; Zannettou et al. 2018). By embodying these personas, IRA actors utilized media engagement strategies such as activating likeminded digital networks, artificially boosting a post's

popularity via automation, and “trading up the chain” (Marwick and Lewis 2017: 38–9): tricking underresourced outlets to produce a story and using that story to convince larger outlets to pile on.

To date, researchers have sought to quantify the scope of the IRA campaign’s success, mainly within Facebook and Twitter.<sup>6</sup> For example, Twitter has estimated that 1.4 million people interacted with an IRA account during the election.<sup>7</sup> But what previous analyses have neglected is the degree to which social media are intertwined with the professional news media system (Kreiss 2019). We argue that journalistic “uptake” practices unintentionally facilitate the amplification of Russian-produced messages in the U.S. public sphere.

Any news dissemination of IRA messages suggests that disinformation actors can use the U.S. news as disinformation amplification machines, disseminating polarizing messages into the marketplace of ideas. News also has the potential to increase the popularity of the IRA account, as being quoted in news media reflect some form of credibility. Finally, the presence of IRA tweets in news media suggests a loophole in journalistic routines, particularly if these tweets appear in systematic patterns. Therefore, one must ask themselves: what role did vox populi journalistic practices play in passing IRA content through a news gate?

## *Hypotheses*

The overarching research question of this study is: To what degree did digital vox populi practices contribute to IRA tweets appearing in news stories from digital and legacy news media during and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election?

The review above suggests several propositions about how the appearance of IRA tweets in news stories was likely to occur. First, we suspected that “digital-first” and legacy news media would differ in their incorporation of IRA content because digital-first outlets have developed different gatekeeping practices compared with legacy outlets. Legacy or traditional outlets, maintaining some prestige but also pressured to engage in newer digital practices (Chadwick 2017), may be hesitant to use social media content as sources. Comparatively, digital media outlets rely more on social media content (Vliegenthart and Boukes 2018). Because digital and legacy news platforms utilize social media content differently, we hypothesize that IRA tweets will appear more often in digital-first news stories than in news stories from outlets with legacy platforms (Hypothesis 1 [H1]).

Second, if we are right that Russian IRA tweets appeared in American news media by being quoted as vox populi, there should be some identifiable features to their presentation. Following the discussion above, vox populi can be operationalized as messages within news products that (1) express an opinion, (2) presented as coming from an everyday citizen, and (3) be part of a broader collection of tweets. Correspondingly, we hypothesize that IRA tweets in news stories will be quoted more for their opinion than for information (Hypothesis 2 [H2]); that IRA tweets in news stories will be quoted as everyday people rather than authoritative sources (Hypothesis 3 [H3]); and that an IRA tweet will often be embedded in news story alongside at least two other

tweets (Hypothesis 4 [H4]). Combined, these three would provide evidence for the argument that journalists embedded IRA tweets as vox populi.

## **Method**

### *Data Collection*

We began by identifying a sample of IRA accounts that may have appeared in American news media. To make the study feasible in scale, we opted to search news media content for the account names of the 100 most successful IRA accounts in terms of the number of Twitter retweets they accumulated from January 1, 2015 to September 30, 2017, before the IRA activity was disclosed. To identify this set, we began with the set of 2,752 handles and user IDs identified by Twitter in October 2017 as controlled by the IRA.<sup>8</sup> Though Twitter's method for identifying the accounts has not been made public, this list has served as ground truth for several studies analyzing IRA Twitter disinformation (e.g., Badawy et al. 2019; Duh et al. 2018). Next, using an archive of the Twitter API Gardenhose, we collected all tweets in the archive that originated from each IRA user ID, and all retweets of those user IDs. With these data, we identified the 100 most retweeted IRA Twitter handles (for more information, see Supplemental Appendix A). Aiming to identify all or nearly all instances of IRA account appearance within our news sample, we assumed that more retweeted accounts would be more likely to appear in news media; in concordance with this assumption, we searched all media outlets for 100 randomly selected accounts from the remaining sample and found no news stories. Moreover, 75.4 percent of media mentions of IRA tweets are of the top 25 most-retweeted handles, indicating that we have identified the preponderance of appearances. Consequently, we used the 100 most retweeted of the IRA Twitter handles as keywords in our news media search.

We constructed our sample of news outlets by combining multiple lists. The goal was to identify a sample of outlets with substantial audiences in the United States at the time of the 2016 presidential election (not all outlets were U.S.-based, but all had significant audiences in the United States), which varied along partisanship and medium-type (e.g., print vs. online vs. broadcast television). In addition to mainstream outlets, we consider highly partisan news outlets because of their increasing importance in the media ecology. We began our sample with several outlet lists created by MediaCloud<sup>9</sup>: "U.S. mainstream media"; "2015 and 2016 U.S. top digital native news"; and any outlet that appeared on MediaCloud's "U.S. top online news" list from 2015 to 2017. We also searched outlets that other studies had previously identified as containing IRA content; the most extensive list was from MeltWater/Recode.<sup>10</sup> Finally, to ensure a suitable sample of hyperpartisan media, we used BuzzFeed's list of hyperpartisan outlets. Once compiled, duplicate outlets, blogs, and nonnews sources (e.g., "anncoulter.com," "4threvolutionarywar.wordpress.com") were removed.

All media outlets in our final sample were searched using MediaCloud, an archive of news stories that uses RSS feeds to collect articles as they are published to

thousands of news websites.<sup>11</sup> Developed in 2014, it has become increasingly popular in journalism research because of its extensive collection of online news media in addition to websites of legacy news media (e.g., McGregor 2019; Waisbord 2018).<sup>12</sup> MediaCloud contains a mechanism for identifying RSS feeds that are defunct or unhealthy; we removed outlets that were not collected by MediaCloud, were identified as unhealthy at the time of our data-collection, or were “inactive,” defined as publishing fewer than two articles a day. (This was exclusively low-circulation hyperpartisan outlets. All mainstream outlets had active RSS feeds for the timespan we searched within.) The MediaCloud archive contained active RSS feeds for 117 outlets. For a list of all the news outlets, see Supplemental Appendix B.

Based on the MediaCloud “source” label, we categorized these outlets into five “media types.” MediaCloud’s “digital native” outlets were grouped into (1) “digital first” news websites and (2) news aggregators. There were three legacy news groups: (3) radio outlets, (4) broadcast television outlets, and (5) print media (newspapers and magazines). All the stories analyzed were published online.

For each outlet, we searched for references to each of the 100 IRA Twitter handles in a news story from January 1, 2015, to September 30, 2017. For any article containing the text of one or more of the Twitter handles, we visited the webpage and manually scraped the content. (Where a link was defunct, we used the Wayback Machine [web.archive.org] to confirm the presence of an IRA tweet in a story and obtain the article’s text.) There were 12 cases where the tweet’s original content could not be obtained from the website or the Wayback Machine.<sup>13</sup> After removing duplicate articles, our corpus consisted of 314 online stories, with 316 references to IRA accounts, published by 71 of the 117 outlets (two stories quoted two different IRA tweets). As our sampling period ends with the revelation of the accounts’ true identities, no articles raise questions about the IRA accounts’ veracity.

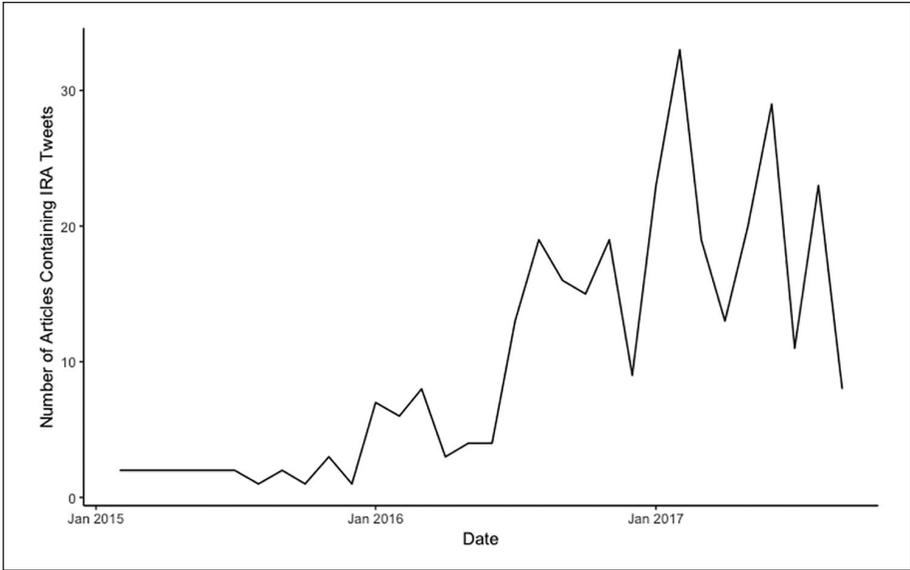
## Content Analysis

Using the news article as our unit of analysis, we coded each article with an IRA tweet for thirty-two features in three categories: (1) the general content of the news article; (2) in-text references made by the author about the embedded IRA tweet; and (3) the content of embedded tweet.

Eight coders analyzed the news articles and the tweets within the news articles. After three rounds of training, intercoder reliability was established using a 15 percent ( $n = 35$ ) random sample; Fleiss’ kappa (FK; Fleiss 1971) for all variables was above 0.7 (see Supplemental Appendix C and D for codebook and example tweets).

Each article in the corpus was coded by one coder and reviewed by a second coder. Disagreements between the two coders were brought to the group and resolved by discussion.

Coders assessed the purpose tweets served in stories: (1) whether journalists used IRA tweets as sources of fact (FK = 0.71) or as sources of opinions (FK = 0.73) and (2) whether the tweet appeared in a “string-of-tweets,” defined as three tweets or more in succession with little or no journalistic content in between (FK = 0.82). If the user



**Figure 1.** Monthly count of articles that quoted an IRA tweet.

Note. IRA = Internet Research Agency.

was explicitly mentioned individually or as part of a group ( $FK = 1.0$ ), we coded for whether it was described as an (4) authoritative source ( $FK = 0.75$ ) or (5) as ordinary people ( $FK = 0.71$ ).

## Results

### *IRA Tweets' Penetration into News Media*

In total, we found 314 news stories that quoted at least one IRA tweet from 71 of the 117 outlets we searched within (60.68%), published between 2015 to 2017.<sup>14</sup> Most stories (68.15%) were about sociopolitical topics such as race relations, sanctuary cities, Trump rallies, or military action in Syria. The most quoted IRA account in our dataset was @TEN\_GOP, which described itself as the unofficial account of Republicans in Tennessee and accounted for more than a third of news media quotes of IRA accounts ( $n = 111$ , 35.35%). Interestingly, though attention has focused on IRA influence during the 2016 presidential election, the majority of articles in our sample were published after November 8, 2016. News media embedded IRA tweets most often in February 2017 ( $n = 33$ ; see Figure 1).

### *Hypothesis Testing*

Our first hypothesis (H1) considered differences across media according to their institutional origins as either digital-native digital news outlets or legacy news

media. Within our sample, digital outlets produced 250 stories with IRA tweets, and traditional outlets produced 64 stories. To compare these groups, we created measures of the number of stories with IRA tweets *per outlet* in each category. For digital news platforms, the mean number of stories with an IRA tweet was 5.21; for traditional news platforms, the mean was 2.78. A two-sample *t* test showed that this difference was statistically significant ( $M_{\text{difference}} = -2.45, p < .01$ ).

Our second hypothesis (H2) predicted that the IRA tweets embedded in news stories are likely to convey opinion as opposed to information-only. In our corpus, we found 177 cases where IRA tweets were quoted for sharing an opinion (56.4%, e.g., opinions about a presidential candidate), 102 cases where IRA tweets were quoted for sharing information (32.5%, e.g., tweets about military actions in Syria), and 34 cases where IRA tweets contained both information and opinion (10.8%, e.g., tweets about a Secret Service agent that “wouldn’t take a bullet for Trump” and also call for that agent’s dismissal). Excluding cases in which tweets were quoted for both fact and opinion, a one-sample proportions test found the difference to be statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 7.04, p = .01$ ), providing some support for our second hypothesis. Somewhat notably from the perspective of disinformation, of the 136 articles that employed tweets as sources of factual information, only 17 involved information that was factually incorrect (12.5% of tweets drawn on for information, and 5.4% of our total sample of 314 articles).

Our third hypothesis (H3) proposed that when IRA tweets were embedded, IRA users were more likely to be described as everyday citizens than as authoritative sources. In our corpus of 314 articles, 198 (63.1%) articles referenced an IRA account as an average American or social media user. In this category, journalists typically described IRA tweets as representative of “Twitter” opinion or backlash (using phrases like “Twitter trolls,” the “Twitterati” “The Internet,” or simply as “Twitter”)<sup>15</sup> or representative of supporters for a politician or political issue (e.g., “Trump supporters,” “Leftists,” or “LGBT users”). Only seven articles referenced an IRA account as an authoritative source (2.22%), and 109 (34.7%) articles made no specific reference to the IRA account they quoted. A one-sample proportions test found that the proportion of articles quoting IRA accounts as regular people was statistically significant from that of articles quoting IRA accounts as authoritative sources ( $\chi^2 = 8.32, p < .01$ ). Our findings are in contrast to other scholarship that shows journalists typically embed tweets from elite sources (Von Nordheim et al. 2018); this contrast lends support to our assertion that the practice of vox populi was underlying a substantial part of IRA message uptake.

Our fourth hypothesis (H4) predicted that IRA tweets would appear alongside many other tweets. And indeed, a majority of stories that embedded IRA tweets had at least two other embedded tweets ( $n = 197$ ; 63.1%), and only 117 (37.5%) stories in our corpus quoted as few as one or two tweets. A one-sample proportions test also found this difference to be statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 19.88, p < .001$ ). While most articles had five or fewer tweets, a small subset of the stories in our sample had over 25; the story with the most tweets embedded 36.

Summarizing across Hypotheses 2 to 4, 161 articles contained all three conditions proposed for vox populi, representing 51.2 percent of the corpus. This is substantively larger than other studies analyzing journalists' use of vox populi Twitter content (Beckers and Harder 2016; Broersma and Graham 2013; Paulussen and Harder 2014). To contextualize these results, we present two qualitative cases to illustrate how IRA tweets were embedded in news stories: one case focuses on IRA tweets as a source of opinion, often embedded with other opinionated tweets. The second case focuses on an IRA tweet that was used as a source of information.

### Case 1: @TEN\_GOP and Miss USA 2017

To illustrate the relationship between IRA accounts as vox populi and news, we turn to a qualitative case examining the IRA account @TEN\_GOP, who tweeted about the 2017 Miss USA Pageant. Two of the account's tweets were embedded in six stories. All these articles focused on Miss District of Columbia Kara McCullough, who was crowned Miss USA 2017. While acknowledging her victory, the articles also noted McCullough's responses to questions about health care and feminism during the pageant. When asked about health care, McCullough stated that she believed health care was a privilege granted by having a job. Later, McCullough was asked if she identified as a feminist; she responded, "So as a woman scientist in the government, I'd like to lately transpose the word feminism to equalism."

In all the articles, journalists quoted @TEN\_GOP for supporting McCullough. One tweet was in five stories: "New #MissUSA says healthcare is a privilege and not a right, and that she's an 'equalist' not a feminist! Beauty and brains. She is amazing!" The second @TEN\_GOP tweet was in two stories: "That awkward moment when Miss USA sounds smarter and more reasonable than the entire Democrat party. Congrats, Kara McCullough!" In this tweet, @TEN\_GOP both praises McCullough and portrays Democrats as an object of derision.

Sometimes, these tweets were dropped in without commenting on the account. For example, one nj.com article placed the tweet in the middle of two paragraphs without directly referencing it (this article embedded seven tweets).<sup>16</sup> However, @TEN\_GOP was also described as "some conservative accounts"<sup>17</sup> or as "many on Twitter." These descriptions cast @TEN\_GOP as representative of U.S. conservatives or of everyday people on Twitter.

In five of the six stories, @TEN\_GOP's tweet was embedded in a collection of tweets, reinforcing the perception that @TEN\_GOP is one among many opinions on Twitter. One *USA Today* article had eleven tweets, embedding nine tweets and quoting two tweets in-text.<sup>18</sup>

This case is a good illustration of how IRA tweets entered U.S. news. While previous research has found that IRA accounts shared both opinion and information (Jensen 2018), opinions were more likely to be embedded in news stories. Furthermore, opinionated IRA tweets were quoted as part of a collection representing "Twitter users" or partisan Americans, with the collection constituting "Vox Twitterati" journalistic practices (Beckers and Harder 2016). At no time did anyone question @TEN\_GOP's identity as an American Twitter user.

## Case 2: @lgbtunitedcom in a Story about Security at Pride Events

Though a majority of the IRA tweets we found appeared as vox populi, some IRA tweets also appeared as sources of information ( $n = 136$ ). This information was often political or related to political issues. And contrary to some popular discourses about the functions and effects of the IRA disinformation operation, the preponderance of IRA tweets drawn on for their informational content (119 of 136 stories, 87.5%) contained information that was factually correct. To illustrate this, we turn to an NBC story from an AP news wire from June 18, 2016: “Gay Pride events festive but some concerned after Orlando.”<sup>19</sup> This story focused on increased security at the Chicago Pride Fest and subsequent Pride Parade a week after the Pulse nightclub shooting. In this story, a tweet from the IRA account @lgbtunitedcom was embedded with an image and the following text, “Security will be dramatically increased at Chicago’s gay pride parade” (the source of the image is unknown). The tweet also included a link to their Facebook page, “LGBT United.”

In this case, the IRA tweet was the only social media message embedded in the story, presumably because it provided visual evidence of increased security at the Chicago Pride events. This is similar to other stories quoting IRA accounts as a source of information: most of these articles had fewer than three tweets (84 of 102 articles, 82.4%). In contrast, the majority of articles that used IRA tweets as a source of opinion had three or more tweets (141 of 177 articles, 81.35%).

Aside from the IRA tweet, the article also contained quotes from six individuals at various Pride events (Syracuse, Providence, and Chicago). Stories using IRA tweets as a source of information also often quoted authorities and nonsocial media sources. Therefore, in these instances, IRA tweets were rarely the only source of information.

## Conclusion

These findings detail a consequence of the Russian IRA’s 2015–2017 U.S. campaign with substantial implications for the study of disinformation. Whereas a great deal of attention is paid to various nonmainstream sources of disinformation (4Chan, InfoWars, etc.), those outlets have minute audiences compared with the news outlets in our study. We have shown that certain practices in the contemporary American news media system make news gates susceptible to reproducing disinformation messages and spreading them to their audiences.

The prevalence of these messages was not particularly deep, but it was broad; most of the outlets we searched had at least one tweet. Journalists often, though not always, embedded IRA tweets in news as vox populi—that is, as opinion rather than fact; average citizens, rather than experts; and grouped with other tweets. There was proportionally more vox populi tweets in our sample compared with a typical study of social media in news, which finds that everyday people constitute between 14 and 26 percent of all social media mentions in news (Broersma and Graham 2013; McGregor 2019). This leads us to conclude that when disinformation tweets are unintentionally

embedded in news media, it is often in the service of vox populi. Given features of contemporary vox populi practices previously discussed, this calls for several points of caution on the part of journalists and other newsmakers, as we detail below.

To a lesser degree, journalists also embedded IRA tweets as sources of factual information. However, contrary to most conceptions of disinformation or “fake news,” much of the IRA content we studied was not disinformation in the sense of being factually false. Most of the IRA messages quoted were not assertions of facts, and most factual tweets were true. Thus, it was not typical for false information to enter news media content via embedded tweets. Rather, disinformation in our sample came in the form of individuals who portrayed themselves as something other than what they were, with the intent of exacerbating polarization through incendiary content (*U.S. v. Internet Research Agency LLC*).

Our primary contribution is therefore toward understanding of how disinformation enters content produced by news organizations. To the press, embedding tweets may be considered an everyday occurrence. Some news stories in our sample had as many as ten or twenty embedded tweets. But, to nonelite actors who traditionally cannot access news attention (e.g., laypeople and disinformation actors), being quoted can signal relevancy and importance; digital vox populi has been shown to affect people’s perception of public attitudes (Ross and Dumitrescu 2019). Thus, vox populi can be a useful mechanism for disinformation actors to influence public opinion if they can convincingly pretend to be U.S. citizens. Scholars should study the impact of social media in news further; for example, an account may benefit from having their social media message embedded in news (e.g., gaining more followers).

For news organizations, the implications of these results highlight an Achilles’ heel in the digital gatekeeping/gatewatching process. Because attention is given to sensational content that can draw in audiences, journalists are incentivized to curate messages from social media with strong and highly polarizing opinions. One way to identify opinions worth quoting is to rely on metrics such as likes and retweets, a practice that at least one journalist, in retrospect, described as salient in this context.<sup>20</sup> This aligns with previous scholarship showing that journalists tend to rely on partisan, negative vox populi (Beckers and Harder 2016). Thus, unknown, perhaps even malicious, voices can get into news media as vox populi if they convey popular and highly salient opinions, as our qualitative case analysis reveals.

With this in mind, we strongly encourage news organizations to adopt practices to verify the tweets that they are embedding into news stories. Journalists should attempt to reach out to all the users of tweets that are embedded into news stories, *especially* unverified users, either by direct message or email. Unlike man-on-the-street interviews, where a journalist is directly interviewing a person face-to-face, Twitter users can easily obfuscate their identity on the internet.<sup>21</sup> When using a tweet for factual information or an image, journalists should also request permission to re-publish that image or information and ask about its source. While time-consuming, this is an essential verification step to ensure accurate information and honest opinions are sourced from Twitter.

The issue of false vox populi is also not limited to the United States: many countries' media use social media as vox pop, whether on Twitter or another platform (Broersma and Graham 2013; Hladík and Štětka 2017). In addition, the IRA actively targets other countries, including the United Kingdom (Howard and Kollanyi 2016) and Ukraine (Mejias and Vokuev 2017). But even if the IRA was not active in a country, other malicious actors are just as likely to engage in these practices. For example, digital access in Bangladesh has facilitated the spread of false information as vox populi (Al-Zaman 2019). Therefore, our findings have significant implications for those studying disinformation beyond the U.S. context.

Future studies can build upon this one by exploring the impact of being quoted in news stories for the IRA accounts, and by examining the network dynamics between fake IRA account and other U.S. actors. In order to perform this work, however, it is necessary for social media platforms to continue giving access to researchers for the study of disinformation content.

### *Limitations*

While our study provides important insights into how Russian-backed IRA accounts penetrated the U.S. news, it does so with some limitations. First, this is not a study of effects. We have demonstrated the presence of IRA messages in news media, and some of the distribution of that media, but we do not make any claims about the effects of such messages. Second, this study focused on the recent experience of the United States with Russia's IRA's disinformation campaign. We hope that future research may build on our techniques to study the (unintended and intended) dissemination of disinformation through journalism in comparative contexts and at other points in time.

Nevertheless, we argue that this work expands our understanding of how IRA accounts appeared in news stories about U.S. politics. We tie this issue to the broader journalistic practice of vox populi, which has transformed as a result of economic subsystem pressures and the hybrid media system's emphasis on competition and speed. If our goal is to prevent malicious actors from taking advantage of this uptake process, scholars and journalists will need to work together to come up with solutions for verifying and validating vox populi opinions in stories.

### **Authors' Note**

Larissa Doroshenko is now affiliated with Northeastern University, Boston, MA, USA.

### **Acknowledgments**

This study extends our preliminary work on IRA activity in news. What began as a 30-outlet search and research report grew into a 100-plus outlet hunt for Internet Research Agency messages in news. To do research as the news you are studying unfolds is no easy feat, requiring public engagement in tandem with rigorous scholarly research. We are grateful to IJPP for the opportunity to advance this work on an important, current issue.

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## Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

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13. In all instances where the original IRA tweet could not be found, there was "residual" content indicating the former presence of an IRA tweet (e.g., dead hyperlinks). These were retained in the analysis.
14. It should be noted that, unlike the BuzzFeed and MediaCloud lists, the outlets from the Meltwater list were preemptively known as have IRA tweets. However, if we only consider outlets from the MediaCloud and BuzzFeed lists, we find a similar rate of 59.8 percent (70 of 117).
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