

Facebook turns over information on Russia-linked accounts to Special Counsel Mueller

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19 September 2017

Facebook has turned over detailed information on political ad purchases by accounts allegedly linked to Russia to special counsel Robert Mueller, according to a report Friday by the *Wall Street Journal*, confirmed in further media reports over the weekend.

Mueller is heading the Justice Department investigation into claims of Russian interference in the 2016 US election and collusion by the Trump campaign. He has hired more than a dozen top-level attorneys, including experts in financial crimes such as money-laundering.

The probe has focused recently on a handful of top former Trump aides, such as one-time campaign chairman Paul Manafort, who have well known ties to Russian investors. Last month, FBI agents staged an extraordinary pre-dawn raid on Manafort's residence in Alexandria, Virginia, armed with a search warrant for documents and other materials.

The special counsel has told the White House that he intends to interview former chief of staff Reince Priebus; former press spokesman Sean Spicer; White House Counsel Don McGahn and his deputy, James Burnham; the new White House communications chief, Hope Hicks; and Josh Raffel, an aide and spokesman for Trump's son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner.

Mueller's investigators apparently obtained another search warrant for information about several hundred Facebook accounts, purportedly set up by individuals linked to Russian companies, which engaged in forwarding political messages over a two-year period. According to Facebook's public assurances to users, it will hand over information about accounts only in response to a judicially approved warrant.

The scale of this alleged Russian operation, in an election cycle that encompassed millions of online participants sending hundreds of millions, if not

billions, of messages, is trivial. According to the *New York Times*, which first made public the existence of the Facebook accounts, the total expenditure on political ads was about \$100,000, compared to the billions spent by the Democrats and Republicans in the course of the campaign.

Facebook itself estimated that information operations like those allegedly mounted by Russia, all combined, accounted for less than one-tenth of 1 percent of the total "civic content" on its platform related to the US elections.

Moreover, the bulk of the messages sent by the Russian-linked accounts, according to Facebook's chief security officer, Alex Stamos, did not refer to either Trump or his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton, or make any mention of the election, but rather focused on "divisive social and political messages" related to abortion, immigration, gay rights and similar issues.

Despite the ominous language in media reports reiterating that it is illegal for non-residents of the United States to make contributions to US election campaigns, the bulk of the Facebook messages described in these reports were perfectly legal.

Foreign governments lobby the US government, various state governments and the American population as a whole on countless political and social issues. Only a direct financial contribution from a foreign source to a US candidate is barred by American campaign finance laws, which reserve for US billionaires the privilege of buying and selling American politicians.

This has not stopped prominent Democrats such as Representative Adam Schiff, the ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, and their media acolytes from suggesting that these Facebook ads could become a key link in a chain demonstrating illegal

collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia. Schiff cited the finding by Facebook that about 25 percent of the ads allegedly purchase by Russian entities “were geographically targeted” as an indication that individuals in the Trump campaign had to be supplying information for the targeting.

This contention is absurd, given that the existence of “battleground states,” key “swing” counties and even precincts was not a state secret, but the stuff of endless commentary in the media. Any literate observer of the US campaign could identify dozens of such potential targets for advertising.

The US media seeks to promote the “Russian intervention” narrative as part of the campaign by the military-intelligence apparatus and the Democratic Party to compel the Trump administration to take a harder line on Syria, Ukraine and the broader range of US-Russian conflicts.

Largely covered up is the genuine threat to democratic rights in the collaboration of giant social media and telecommunications companies like Facebook with the American government and its vast intelligence-gathering operations.

The quantity of information handed over by Facebook to Mueller and the Justice Department in recent weeks is comparatively limited, reflecting the small scale of the alleged ad purchases by Russia-linked individuals and organizations. But Facebook’s positive response to the federal subpoena raises warning flags. If the company is prepared to do this, in the case of an investigation targeting the president of the United States and his 2016 campaign, what are they doing in relation to other targets of US government surveillance, who have neither Trump’s power nor his ability to retaliate?

A lengthy report in the *New York Times* Monday details Facebook’s assiduous collaboration with demands by authoritarian governments, including China, Vietnam and Kenya, which has included exposing dissidents to arrest and imprisonment for anti-regime postings as well as the systemic removal of such “offending” material from Facebook pages.

The *Times* report glosses over the demands placed on Facebook by US authorities, but the company functions in practice as an instrument of the US military-intelligence apparatus. Facebook, Google and other giant IT companies are engaged in an increasingly

brazen campaign of political censorship against publications and organizations identified by the CIA, NSA and Pentagon as threats.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has exposed the censorship of our site by Google, which announced a change in its search algorithms last April aimed at reducing the audience for antiwar and left-wing web sites, with the WSWWS seeing a two-thirds reduction in traffic from Google search results. Facebook announced a similar revamping of search algorithms in June.

The alliance of giant corporations and the US military-intelligence apparatus, not the comparatively paltry activities of Russian entities, is the main threat to the democratic rights of the American people.



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