WEAPONS OF MASS DECEPTION: RUSSIA'S INFORMATION OPERATIONS AND THEIR IMPACT ON DEMOCRACY

A Case Study Using the 2016 United States Presidential Election

ARMES DE DÉCEPTION MASSIVE: LES OPÉRATIONS D'INFORMATION DE LA RUSSIE ET LEUR IMPACT SUR LA DÉMOCRATIE

Une étude de cas avec les élections présidentielles des États-Unis en 2016

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ABSTRACT

The research question in this thesis will focus on Russia's undermining of democracy with the use of information operations. As such, the thesis will seek to answer the question: How do Russian information operations qualitatively undermine democracy? To do so, the thesis will analyze Russian information operations' impact on components of democracy as conceptualized by Robert A. Dahl, using the 2016 United States presidential election as a case study. The proposed methodology involves juxtaposing Russian information operations tactics in the 2016 elections with elements of democracy Dahl deems essential or very favorable, and assess impact. The overall finding is that malign information operations do indeed have a negative impact on democracy, but more so on specific aspects of it.

RÉSUMÉ

La question de recherche de cette thèse portera sur les effets des opérations d'information russes sur la démocratie. La thèse cherchera donc à répondre à la question : Comment les opérations d'information russes minent-elles la démocratie de façon qualitative? Pour ce faire, la thèse propose d'analyser les opérations d'information russes et leur impact sur les composantes de la démocratie telles qu'envisagées par Robert A. Dahl, en utilisant les élections présidentielles américaines de 2016 comme étude de cas. La méthodologie proposée consiste à juxtaposer les tactiques des opérations d'information russes à ces éléments de la démocratie que Dahl juge essentiels, ou très favorables, et d'évaluer l'impact, le cas échéant. La plus importante constatation est que ces opérations d'information ont bel et bien eu un impact néfaste sur la démocratie en utilisant les critères de Dahl, mais pas de façon uniforme.

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1 INTRODUCTION

"Our friends in Moscow call it 'dezinformatsiya'. Our enemies in America call it 'active measures', and I, dear friends, call it 'my favorite pastime'."

- *Col. Rolf Wagenbreth, director of Department X (disinformation) of East German foreign intelligence[1]*

Robert A. Dahl once wrote that, if one were to plot the numerous rises and falls of democratic governments throughout history – even if allowing considerable latitude in how 'democratic' is defined – democracy's trajectory would look little like a steady upwards climb. Rather, "the course of democratic history would like the path of a traveler crossing a flat and almost endless desert broken only by a few hills, until the path finally begins the long climb to its present heights"[2]. But, despite such a haphazard historical progression, dotted with almost as many reversals as progresses, modern observers still opine democracy is currently at somewhat of an ebb. In Eastern and Central Europe, democratic indicators – in many ways similar to those enumerated by Dahl several decades prior – have slipped at such an alarming pace and breadth that "there are fewer democracies in the region than at any point since the annual [Freedom House Nations in Transit] report was launched in 1995"[3]; several recent reports highlight similar findings. The latest from the Economist's Intelligence Unit, the Democracy Index 2020, despondently stated that "[t]he global average [Democracy Index] score hit an all-time low"[4] in 2020, with a score that was "by far the worst global score since the index was first produced in 2006"[5]; Freedom House's 2021 edition of their Freedom in The World annual report – titled Democracy Under Siege – echoes those concerns. Among the report's highlights: 2020 saw the most drastic decline in democracy worldwide since the report's inaugural in 2005; India, the world's largest democracy, was downgraded from 'Free' to 'Partly Free'; and the United States, home country of the think-tank authoring the report, suffered a precipitous decline in its democracy rating in the last decade, going from 94 to 83[6].

There certainly exists a range of potential cause factors for this backsliding. One thread that is relatively common in explanatory attempts has to do with perception and retention of information – that is, with the importance of a shared set of facts from which to build discussion

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[1] Quote from: Thomas Boghardt, "Soviet Bloc Intelligence and Its AIDS Disinformation Campaign," *Studies in Intelligence* 53, no. 4 (December 2009): p. 1, https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol53no4/pdf/U- Boghardt-AIDS-Made in the USA-17Dec.pdf, last accessed December 2, 2020.

[2] Robert Alan Dahl, *On Democracy*, 2nd Ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 21.

[3] Zselyke Csaky, "Dropping the Democratic Facade," 2020, https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/2020/dropping-democratic-facade, last accessed April 12, 2021 n.p. Last accessed April 12th, 2021.

[4] Economist Intelligence Unit, "Democracy Index 2020 - In Sickness and in Health?," 2021, p. 4, https://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/democracy-index-2020.pdf, last accessed February 24, 2021.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] Sarah Repucci and Amy Slipowitz, "Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy under Siege," Freedom House, 2021, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege, last accessed March 8, 2021. Such a drop places the United States in rather unsavory company, "placing it among the 25 countries that have suffered the largest declines in this period".

and argumentation, both of which are essential for the proper functioning of a democratic system[7]. The events of the 6th of January 2021 (the storming of the United States capitol in Washington) vividly illustrate the magnitude of the differences in world view of two American population subsets, but also how such differences in perceived realities can have profound, real-world echoes. As Joan Donovan writes, "[t]he events of January 6 [2021 – the storming of the Capitol] illustrate why no democracy can survive without a commitment to truth"[8]. One thing almost universally agreed on by the various commentators is that the existence of these widely disparate – and in most aspects, entirely incompatible – senses of reality represents a grave if not existential threat to democracy. Such are this threat's presence and breadth of repercussions that it has even been termed a "major public health crisis"[9]; President Biden made it ('an attack on truth and democracy') one of his administration's top priorities, on the same footing as fighting the pandemic or climate change[10]. And indeed, as Anne Applebaum has written, "American politics, Polish politics, French politics, Italian politics, Ukrainian politics […] now have this in common: In each of these countries, deep informational divides separate one part of the electorate from the rest"[11]; in the United States especially, the populace "faces a divide between those who inhabit a common world of truth, and those who are willing to proclaim a fantasy universe of conspiratorial illusion"[12]. And if those ills of democracy are related to information, social media are often identified as one of the most prominent[13] cause factors of this state of affairs.

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[7] As former United States president Barack Obama said, "[i]f we do not have the capacity to distinguish what's true from what's false, then by definition the marketplace of ideas doesn't work. And by definition our democracy doesn't work. We are entering into an epistemological crisis." Jeffrey Goldberg, "Why Obama Fears for Our Democracy," *The Atlantic*, November 16, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/11/why-obama-fears-for-our-democracy/617087/, last accessed November 18, 2020.

[8] Robert C. Post, "The Other Tragedy of January 6," *The Atlantic*, January 16, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/the-other-tragedy-of-january-6/617695/, last accessed January 21, 2021.

[9] Aymann Ismail, "Trump Election Violence: A Counterextremist Expert Says 'All Bets Are off the next Few Weeks' for Violent Rallies after the Capitol Attack.," *Slate*, January 13, 2021, https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2021/01/trump-supporter-violence-capitol-attack-inauguration.html, last accessed January 15, 2021. The quote comes from the interviewee, Dr. John Horgan, a Georgia State University professor and director of the Violent Extremism Research Group.

[10] David Leonhardt, "Biden's First Day," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/21/briefing/executive-orders-biden-climate-proud-boys.html, last accessed January 21, 2021. For reference, the others were: growing inequality, racism, and America's global standing.

[11] Anne Applebaum, "The Facts Just Aren't Getting Through - How to Beat Populists When the Facts Don't Matter," *The Atlantic*, August 9, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/08/how-beat-populists-when-facts-dont-matter/615082/, last accessed November 10, 2020.

[12] Post, "The Other Tragedy of January 6."

[13] Samantha Bradshaw and Philip N Howard, "The Global Disinformation Order 2019 - Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation 2019," 2019, 2, https://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/93/2019/09/CyberTroop-Report19.pdf, last accessed January 15, 2021. One of the key findings: "We found evidence of organised social media manipulation campaigns in 70 countries, up from 48 countries in 2018 and 28 countries in 2017." See also: Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2019 - The Crisis of Social Media," *Freedom House*, 2019, 1, https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/11042019_Report_FH_FOTN_2019_final_Public_Download.pdf, last accessed April 14, 2021. On the

The 2016 United States presidential election in particular seemed to galvanize public attention on the role of social media in elections and in democracy in general, and quite often with a focus on the Russian interference in those processes. Although Russian information operations are frequently depicted as having had a deleterious effect on democracy, that proposition is often simply treated as a given; and on the whole, one can find little scholarly work to date dedicated to effectively demonstrating – inasmuch as such an endeavour is possible – that democracy was undermined by the Russians' information operations. By way of example[14], Kathleen Hall Jamieson's *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*[15] is one of the few that did venture into those largely uncharted waters; yet even Hall Jamieson's work does not address how the Russians' information operations impacted democratic functions. Her basic premise is instead that, although the Russian efforts did impinge on the election – and did tilt the results in Trump's favor – such an outcome was not necessarily attributable to the direct effects of the Russians' troll armies and bots per se (and although Hall Jamieson strongly believes so, she acknowledges the near-impossibility of proving it). Rather, she asserts that the cause is a three-pronged failure by the American media: failure to properly contextualize delicate information released through Russian efforts (the Democratic National Committee's stolen material is the standout example), failure to remind the public of such data's provenance, and failure to properly vet dubious content. That combination, according to Hall Jamieson, shifted the contents of the media landscape sufficiently to change the electoral outcome[16].

But one need not influence actual election results to compromise democracy. Indeed, many of the works on the topic thus far seem to treat the idea of Russian information operations as a major threat to democracy as a *fait accompli*, a fundamental truth that needs no further explanation, amplification or demonstration.

1.1 Thesis Statement

This thesis thus proposes a more deliberate, academic – if pointed – look at this question, albeit not from the standpoint of whether or not election results were actually impacted, but rather if democratic mechanisms themselves were hindered by Russian information operations. Thus, the principal question this thesis will seek to answer, in broad terms that will of course need to be refined in the following sections, is the following: *How do Russian information operations qualitatively undermine democracy?* As is, the question is quite broad; the proposed model for answering this question (or rather, of providing an element of the response) is to use the 2016 United States presidential election, along with the sprawling Russian information operation that surrounded it, as a case study – a microcosm of sorts. The intent is to use a well-known and generally agreed-upon set of characteristics of democracy, those of Robert H. Dahl, and examine how, if at all, those were affected by the Russian campaign. The hypothesis is that the Russian

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first page of the report: "Political leaders employed individuals to surreptitiously shape online opinions in 38 of the 65 countries covered in this report—a new high."

[14] The upcoming Literature Review section will of course discuss many more works.

[15] Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know* (Oxford University Press, 2018) n.p.

[16] An excellent summary of Hall Jamieson's findings can be found at: Timothy Frye, "Inside Job: The Challenge of Foreign Online Influence in U.S. Elections," *War On The Rocks*, October 6, 2020, https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/inside-job-the-challenge-of-foreign-online-influence-in-u-s-elections/, last accessed October 9, 2020.

information operations surrounding the 2016 election did undermine the American democratic process in a negative way, throughout a large portion of Dahl's characteristics of democracy; but that said effect is also not uniform – or even present, in some cases – across all of them. As such, the thesis provides an answer that, while narrower in scope, is still thorough – and that also offers a methodological model for further analysis.

2 METHODOLOGY / CONTEXT

This portion of the dissertation will seek to circumscribe, and set terms for, the research question. The first step will be to acknowledge the thesis' limitations; the next will be to properly define the term 'information operations' as it is to be used in the thesis. The section will then offer a closer look at the Russian information surrounding the United States presidential elections of 2016, before pivoting to a short overview of Dahl's definition of democracy as seen in one of his later works, *On Democracy*[17]. This portion will mirror Dahl's delineation by first discussing democracy's *criteria*, then *institutions*, and finally *conditions*.

2.1 Assumptions / Limitations

The first step is thus to clearly state the thesis' assumptions and limitations. To begin, the thesis will take for granted an acceptance from the reader that the Russian information operation of 2016 did indeed occur. The writer's point of view is that various United States government-produced, bipartisan reports (the Mueller report and the five-part Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's report are the standouts), along with a considerable volume of scholarly literature, have sufficiently proven the existence and magnitude of said campaign to obviate the need for further elaboration. That said, the writer also acknowledges that such a conclusion remains contested among some subsets of the American population. The second is that the thesis will quite deliberately avoid discussion on whether or not Russian information operations impinged on actual votes. Quantifying or measuring the impact of Russian information operations on American voting behavior is nigh impossible, and in any case is not required for the research question. As for the third, the writer acknowledges that, simply by virtue of having interfered in the American democratic process, and thus contravening American laws on elections, the Russians can already be said to have undermined (American) democracy – a state of affairs that, while acknowledged as true, does not preclude the proposed analysis. Finally, the writer does not speak or read Russian, and for those sources whose originals are in Russian, therefore had to rely on translations – the accuracy of which is assumed – for use in this thesis.

2.2 Definitions

This section will first define and offer context on the major terms found in the proposed question, namely 'information operations', 'compromised', and 'democracy' – which are to be addressed in this same order. With regards to information operations[18], the thesis will in fact make use of the Russian definition of the term, the primary reason for which being that the Western and Russian conceptions of information operations, while sharing some commonalities with regards to activities and objectives, differ markedly in scope and time scale. Indeed,

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[17] Dahl, *On Democracy*, n.p.
[18] Another term routinely encountered to describe the same phenomenon is 'influence operations', more particularly in military doctrinal publications; the 'information operations' nomenclature will however be retained in this thesis, simply due to its preponderance in academic literature.

[t]he entry for "Information war" (*informatsionnaya voyna*) in a glossary of key information security terms produced by the Military Academy of the General Staff makes a clear distinction between the Russian definition – all-encompassing, and not limited to wartime – and the Western one – limited, tactical information operations carried out during hostilities[19].

To be abundantly clear, the above passage refers to information *war* (or *warfare*), and not information *operations* – the latter of which is the focus of this thesis. However, in Russian doctrine, information operations are (in a rather obvious fashion) considered a part of the information warfare toolkit, and as such, the general philosophy on information warfare also extends recursively to information operations (and other sub-components of information warfare). This information warfare toolkit is considerably broader in the Russian understanding than in the Western one, as the Russian version also includes such components as computer network operations, electronic warfare and psychological operations[20], and even more tangible tactics such as corruption, kidnappings and assassinations[21]. The Russian definition also presents information operations as an ongoing, permanent phenomenon; information operations have strategic relevance and never truly stop. The Western conception of information operations, by contrast, is more often than not focused on a particular theater; in this understanding, information operations are more of a tactical, time-limited tool deployed to support specific operational objectives, as opposed to the Russian view, in which information operations, while certainly employed as required at the tactical or operational levels, are more of a strategic tool, used to further strategic/national objectives and interests.

In any case, the above definition for 'information warfare', while still a useful starting point, encompasses a much wider range of activities than the material to be covered in this thesis. One helpful reference in further circumscribing the term comes from General Valery V. Gerasimov, who is often portrayed as one of the foremost architects of Russia's current information operations and hybrid warfare strategy. Gen. Gerasimov's article on the topic is frequently referred to as a foundational element of Russian information operations doctrine since its publication in 2014[22], and will be helpful in further demarcating the term for use in this thesis. "Gerasimov described information operations as 'military means of a concealed nature'"[23]. While still broad,

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[19] Keir Giles, "The Next Phase of Russian Information Warfare," *NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence* 20 (2016): 1–16; p. 1.

[20] Daniel P. Bagge, *Unmasking Maskirovska: Russia's Cyber Influence Operations*, ed. Defence Press (New York, 2019), p. 38. Alternatively, one could turn to p. 47 of the same work and read the following amplification, more closely related to the book's titular premise but still highlighting the much broader Russian view of information warfare: "Also, the term 'cyber' seems to be used in Russian literature mainly as a description of U.S. or Chinese activities. The Russian perception includes cyber implicitly with electronic warfare, psychological operations, strategic communications, and influence."

[21] Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev, "Winning the Information War - Techniques and Counter-Strategies to Russian Propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe," August 2016, p. 11, https://li.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/winning-the-information-war-full-report-pdf.pdf, last accessed December 1, 2020.

[22] Mark Galeotti, "The 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Russian Non-Linear War," In Moscow's Shadows, July 6, 2014, https://inmoscowsshadows.wordpress.com/2014/07/06/The-Gerasimov-Doctrine-And-Russian-Non-Linear-War/, last accessed April 19, 2021.

[23] Valery V. Gerasimov, "Ценность Науки В Предвидении ('The Predictive Value of Science')," Военно-Промышленный Кур'ер [Online Russian Edition], 2013, http://vpk-news.ru/sites/default/files/pdf/VPK_08_476.pdf; as quoted in: John R . Haines, "Russia's Use of

the statement is usefully clarified in the follow-on text: "[t]he aim is to manipulate information and exert psychological influences on another state's political and military leaders, soldiers, and civilian population"[24]. Those two definitional elements – information operations as all-encompassing and perpetual; and the objective of information operations being to influence another state's inhabitants' behavior – are complementary, and taken as a whole, will form the definition of 'information operations' as used in this thesis. The specific information operations elements retained for closer examination are media-centric operations and information-related cyber operations, with a particular – but not exclusive – focus on social media activity.

Although it was briefly mentioned in the above paragraphs, the relevance of cyber operations to our definition of information operations deserves a touch more coverage before moving on. Cyberspace is in many ways an ideal platform through which to deploy information operations. It offers speed, low cost, and ubiquity[25] (particularly in social media[26]), while also allowing the bypassing of traditional journalistic gatekeepers[27]. Additionally, attribution in the realm of cyber operations is notoriously difficult, allowing plausible deniability – and further enhancing their attractiveness to a malicious actor. Russian doctrine does indeed consider cyber operations an integral part of information operations:

> The hostile use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) is a Russian conceptualization meant to influence or damage an adversary-state's information resources and telecommunication systems. It includes disseminating disinformation and creating virtual depictions in cyberspace that misrepresents reality, all geared toward disorienting, destabilizing and demoralizing a civilian population[28].

Russia's approach to information warfare is thus "holistic, and includes both cyber strikes and information operations as cohesive elements that work in tandem to achieve Russian foreign policy goals"[29]. Therefore, this dissertation shall also adopt the same stance. In short, the Russian view of information operations is a long-term affair, with a plethora of potential facets for deployment; some were not even yet discussed here (GONGOs, the Russian Orthodox Church, and

Disinformation in the Ukraine Conflict," Foreign Policy Research Institute, no. February 2015 (2015), https://www.fpri.org/article/2015/02/russias-use-of-disinformation-in-the-ukraine-conflict/.

[24] *Idem (Gerasimov).*

[25] As Edward Lucas says at one point in the video: "The internet […] brought […] anonymity, ubiquity and immediacy in a combination that we didn't have" prior to its advent. In: Adam B. Ellick, Adam Westbrook, and Andrew Blackwell, *Operation Infektion: A Three-Part Video Series on Russian Disinformation*, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/12/opinion/russia-meddling-disinformation-fake-news-elections.html, last accessed December 2, 2020.

[26] Lena Surzhko-Harned and Andrew J. Zahuranec, "Framing the Revolution: The Role of Social Media in Ukraine's Euromaidan Movement," *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 5 (2017): 758–779, https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2017.1289162. p. 759.

[27] Markus Ojala, Mervi Pantti, and Jarkko Kangas, "Professional Role Enactment amid Information Warfare: War Correspondents Tweeting on the Ukraine Conflict," *Journalism* 19, no. 3 (September 2018): 297–313, https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916671158. p. 301.

[28] Haines, "Russia's Use of Disinformation in the Ukraine Conflict." p. 6.

[29] Conor Cunningham, "A Russian Federation Information Warfare Primer" (Washington: The Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies - University of Washington, November 12, 2020), https://jsis.washington.edu/news/a-russian-federation-information-warfare-primer/#_ftnref5, last accessed November 26, 2020.

a host of others[30]) but still fit within the bounds of Gerasimov's definition. These will however be out of scope for this dissertation, which shall focus on, as said earlier, media-centric operations and information-related cyber operations.

The research question aims to determine whether or not Russian information operations compromised democracy, through a case study. By 'compromised', the writer is largely relying on the relevant dictionary definitions of the term[31]. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *compromised* as: "made vulnerable (as to attack or misuse) by unauthorized access, revelation, or exposure", or: "impaired or diminished in function: weakened, damaged, or flawed"[32]. The Collins dictionary defines the word as "unable to function optimally"[33]; the Cambridge dictionary, "to risk having a harmful effect on something"[34]; and the Macmillan dictionary, "to risk harming or losing something important"[35]. The common element of relevance to the research question is the notion of effectiveness being reduced, harm being inflicted, or the risk of such. An important distinction, a form of which was voiced earlier, nevertheless requires being contextualized. The intended use of the word 'compromised' in the dissertation is not, and will never be, meant to imply or connote any manner of proof of behavioral change on the part of voters. The intended methodology is as follows: The varied components of democracy as envisioned by Dahl will be explained, then juxtaposed to Russian information operations actions (if applicable). In this dissertation, a component of Dahl's will be considered compromised if Russian information operation actions related to the 2016 United States election run counter to said component's precepts. It is also anticipated that some of Dahl's components will not fall neatly in either Compromised or Not Compromised columns, for a variety of reasons – for those, a third classification, Undetermined, will also be included.

The other remaining term from the research question needing to be defined is 'democracy', and the search for an answer will represent the thesis' first turn towards Dahl. The endeavour to define the term has led to many an impassioned debate due to the inherent difficulties of the task: the very word 'democracy', in addition to having had its meaning evolve and shift significantly throughout its history, also carries a heavily emotional connotation. As George Orwell wrote in the early 1950s, "[i]n the case of a word like 'democracy', not only is there no agreed definition,

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[30] A significant portion of Van Herpen's book is dedicated to covering these various means. Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putin's Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015) n.p.

[31] In other words, those definitions that center on 'compromised' as meaning 'harmed' or 'undermined', as opposed to those that have to do with lowering one's demands to reach an agreement with another party.

[32] Merriam-Webster, "Compromised," Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/compromised, last accessed March 30, 2021.

[33] Collins, "Compromised Definition and Meaning," Collins English Dictionary, https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/compromised, last accessed March 30, 2021. This particular definition is qualified by saying "esp. with regard to immune response"; but the dictionary does give an example sentence of the word in use, with the thesis' intended meaning: "It meant that the intellectual poise of the programme was compromised".

[34] Cambridge Dictionary, "COMPROMISE | Meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary," https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/compromise?q=compromised, last accessed March 30, 2021.

[35] Macmillan Dictionary, "COMPROMISE (Verb) Definition and Synonyms," https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/compromise_2, last accessed March 30, 2021.

but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides"[36]. Compounding these difficulties is the fact that, as Dahl says, "[w]hen we discuss democracy perhaps nothing gives rise to more confusion than the simple fact that 'democracy' refers to both an ideal and an actuality. We often fail to make the distinction clear"[37]. Certain definitional elements seem common: liberty, equality, freedom of expression. However, for this thesis' purpose, the attempt to define democracy will limit itself to a rather humble "a form of government where the citizenry has the possibility of changing their government through regular elections". While this last may seem woefully lacking to any theoretician of democracy, it is this writer's opinion that, for the purposes of this dissertation, a bulletproof definition of the word is not, strictly speaking, required. The reasoning for this statement is that the aim, as per the research question, is to ascertain whether or not components of democracy as envisioned by Dahl were impacted by Russian information operations. Those components –which, when taken together, can be argued to form a definition of sorts for 'democracy' – will be individually and rigorously delineated in their respective sections before any argumentation begins; and those definitions are what Russian information operations actions will be juxtaposed to in order to answer the research question. Thus, the aim of this dissertation does not necessarily require the term 'democracy' to be rigorously defined; and Dahl would implicitly seem to agree, as he himself refrains from offering a concise definition of the word – which, he says, is "used in a staggering number of ways" and is saddled with a "hopeless variety of definitions"[38] – in the 1998 work used throughout this thesis. The closest he comes to such a definition is in his fourth chapter, entitled 'What is Democracy?', where he writes:

> Within the enormous and often impenetrable thicket of ideas about democracy, is it possible to identify some criteria that a process for governing an association would have to meet in order to satisfy the requirement that all the members are equally entitled to participate in the association's decisions about its policies?[39]

His answer to his own question buttresses our argument above: "There are, I believe, at least five such standards"[40] – before turning to list the very criteria to be used during this thesis' argumentation.

In order to properly round out the definitions of terms to be encountered during the thesis, 'disinformation' should be addressed before moving on. This thesis will rely on the definition given in a 2018 report from the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation of the European Commission, which states: "Disinformation […] includes all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit"[41]. This definition has been re-affirmed in more recent research, with a 2020 special issue of the *Political Communication* journal used it as is, stating that this definition

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[36] George Orwell, *Politics & The English Language*, Kindle Ed. (Prabhat Prakashan, 2017). Location 1002.

[37] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 40.

[38] *Ibid.*, 51.

[39] *Ibid.*

[40] *Ibid.*, 40. This thesis' section on Dahl's criteria will mention that he sometimes calls them 'standards'; but in the interests of accuracy, it should be said that the quote above is practically the only time Dahl conflates 'criteria' and 'standard'. For the remainder of the book, the word 'standard' is used in its regular meaning.

[41] European Commission, "A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation - Report of the Independent High Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation," 2018, p. 5, https://doi.org/10.2759/739290.

"unites three critical criteria: 1) deception, 2) potential for harm, and 3) an intent to harm"[42]. A 2021 collection of essays on the topic largely agreed, stating that disinformation is, first and foremost, "falsehoods and rumors knowingly distributed"[43]. The authors do include "falsehoods and rumors propagated […] even if not the product of a [*sic*] malice or a coordinated campaign" as part of their definition for 'disinformation', but do acknowledge that disinformation "has acquired the flavour of something more subversive and coordinated"[44]. In any case, for the purposes of this thesis, the question of intent is rather moot; the IRA's and GRU's activities as part of the 2016 United States presidential election were clearly willful and intentional. Therefore, the definition for 'disinformation' proposed by the 2018 European report highlighted above will be retained.

2.3   Literature Review

With the thesis' core themes defined, a roughly equivalent thematic delineation will be adopted for the literature review. That is, the surveyed literature will be discussed in terms of operation operations – especially of the Russian sort – followed by literature that examines the symbiosis between Russian disinformation and social media, and finally democratic theory. One point before beginning the literature review per se: as has been earlier mentioned, there was surprisingly (to this writer, anyhow) little literature on the specifics of how Russian information operations actually harmed democracy. Search strings comprised of various combinations of 'Russian information operations' and 'democracy' yielded, to be sure, a treasure trove of research, along a wide variety of themes: Russian tactics in the information space; the role of social media in the spread of information operations; the geopolitics of a resurgent Russia waging below-threshold campaigns using, among other tools, information operations; and how to combat information operations, to name but a few. However, there seemed to be little in the way of describing the manner in which democracy in the wider sense is compromised by those same information operations. The closest that was found in the research process was a 2018 paper from the Belfer Center, with the promising title of *Can Democracy Survive in the Information Age?*[45] However, with regards to the topic of interest for this thesis, the authors devote three pages to a sub-chapter titled 'The Vulnerabilities of Democracy'. Further honing in to the thesis' central question, the second (of four) of those vulnerabilities is stated to be that "elections, the heart and soul of a democracy, are vulnerable to both information operations and cyberattacks"; but each of the four vulnerabilities, including this one, gets a mere single paragraph of amplification. Therefore, to this writer's knowledge, this thesis represents one of the first attempts to provide a more thorough analysis on the topic, although no strict claims of novelty are here being made.

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[42] Deen Freelon and Chris Wells, "Disinformation as Political Communication," *Political Communication* 37, no. 2 (2020): p. 145, https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2020.1723755.

[43] Benjamin Ang, Nur Diyanah Anwar, and Shashi Jayakumar, "Disinformation and Fake News: Meanings, Present, Future," in *Disinformation and Fake News*, ed. Shashi Jayakumar, Benjamin Ang, and Nur Diyanah Anwar (Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), p. 7, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-5876-4.

[44] Both quotes: *Ibid.*

[45] Eric Rosenbach and Katherine Mansted, "Can Democracy Survive in the Information Age?," October 2018, https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/files/publication/CanDemocracySurvive_0.pdf, last accessed April 20, 2021, n.p.

2.3.1 Russian Information Operations

Mark Galeotti's 2014 short article on the Gerasimov Doctrine[46] is still useful despite its age, in that it provides not only a translation of General Valery Gerasimov's seminal article, but also features Galeotti's comments interspersed throughout. A particular portion of the article is, according to Galeotti, "probably the most important line in the whole piece", which has also been quoted (albeit from a different translation) earlier in this thesis: "The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness"[47]. That line can indeed be considered somewhat of a synecdoche for the article's contents. Marcel van Herpen's 2015 *Putin's Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy*[48] is a helpful – if perhaps a tad dated, though much of the contents still apply – starting point to understand the breadth of the Kremlin's propaganda effort. In the book, van Herpen discusses Russian soft power (such as it is – the author rather calls it "hard power in a velvet glove"[49]), the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia's propaganda efforts, and Russia's push to erect strategic alliances – specifically, a Moscow-Berlin-Paris triangle. The first section is of particular relevance to the thesis: the author astutely details how Russia has managed to leverage the open character of Western society through a variety of means to advance its strategic interests, highlighting examples such as the recruitment of some of the West's most prestigious lobbyists and public relations firms to enhance its image[50], or even more pertinently for the thesis, Russia's initiative to penetrate Western media – which, since the fall of communism, it could now buy itself a place into. The well-known Keir Giles' *The Next Phase of Russian Information Warfare*, albeit from 2016, is still relevant. Although the author acknowledges that following Crimea, "Western understanding of Russian information warfare techniques has developed beyond all recognition"[51], the problem laid in Russia's fast-evolving information operations doctrine and how a current understanding of Russia's information operations tactics might lead one to, in a sense, fight the last war – in the informational realm, at least. Therefore, Giles' objective is to examine some of those (at the time) new developments that, in his opinion, had not received sufficient coverage in the literature to date. Although a rather pointed goal, the paper is still effective in providing a Russian information operations primer, but also in reminding researchers of a very important lesson regarding the fluidity of Russian information operations tactics. (Although not directly related to the thesis' topic, Giles' *Moscow Rules*[52] was invaluable in providing cultural context to Russian information operations towards the West; the same can be said of Fiona Hill's *Putin: The One-Man Show the West Doesn't*

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[46] Galeotti, "The 'Gerasimov Doctrine' and Russian Non-Linear War." Interestingly, Galeotti mentions that the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine is neither Gerasimov's ("if any [Chief of the General Staff] deserves the 'credit' it would be his predecessor Makarov, but even so it is really an evolutionary, not revolutionary, process") nor a 'doctrine', "which is in the Russian lexicon a truly foundational set of beliefs as to what kinds of war the country will be fighting in the future and how it will win them". Nevertheless, the moniker has endured to this day.

[47] Both quotes: *Ibid.*

[48] Van Herpen, *Putin's Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy*, n.p.

[49] *Ibid.*, 45.

[50] The most notable of those firms detailed in the book was Kissinger Associates, helmed by none other than the namesake former Secretary of State.

[51] Giles, "The Next Phase of Russian Information Warfare," 1.

[52] Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russian to Confront the West* (Brookings Institution Press, 2019), n.p.

Understand[53].) Daniel Bagge's 2019 *Unmasking Maskirovska: Russia's Cyber Influence Operations*[54] is also excellent reading for those wishing to obtain background on Russian information operations in general (despite the title seeming to indicate a narrower focus), as the author's goal was quite simply for the book to serve as "background reading for policy and decision makers with limited time to conduct their research"[55]. Bagge first presents historical background on Russian information operations; this section also offers a fairly robust look at the theory of Russian information operations (active measures and reflexive control, for example). The second – and arguably core – section focuses on key Russian doctrinal documents, spanning the early 2000s to 2016, where the author quotes selected key passages from said documents, and then comments on the significance of those contents while offering context, amplification and potential interpretations as he deems appropriate.

Several think tanks have published reports on the topic of Russian information operations, the contents of which were often referred to in the thesis; a few examples include the RAND Corporation's *The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model*[56], the European Commission's *A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation*[57] and the Computational Propaganda Research Project's *The Global Disinformation Order*[58]. Nina Jankowicz's *How to Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News, and the Future of Conflict*[59] was regularly consulted. Jankowicz, currently the Wilson Center's Disinformation Fellow until May 2021, discusses select countries' (among others: Estonia, Georgia, Poland, the Czech Republic, and the United States) responses to Russian information operations. Jankowicz attempts to weave a blueprint of sorts as to how to combat disinformation, but as the title of her work alludes to, analyzing other countries' responses offers just as many – if not more – actions *not* to take as it yields potentially beneficial ones. Regardless, the book offered a useful and relatively recent summary of the Russian actions during the 2016 United States presidential elections. An even more recent, and concise, source for an introduction to the topic of Russian information operations can also be found on the web[60].

Although the field of literature and scholarship on Russian information operations is of a significant breadth, one can still extract a few conclusions that permeate most of the material. The first is that, as stated in the introduction – and indirectly through the research question itself – those information operations do indeed represent a grave threat to democracy, albeit with typically little amplification to be found as to how. The second is that although the means by which those

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[53] Fiona Hill, "Putin: The One-Man Show the West Doesn't Understand," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 72, no. 3 (2016): 140–144, https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2016.1170361.

[54] Bagge, *Unmasking Maskirovska: Russia's Cyber Influence Operations*, n.p.

[55] *Ibid.*, 19.

[56] Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It," 2016, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE198/RAND_PE198.pdf, last accessed March 21, 2021, n.p.

[57] Commission, "A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation - Report of the Independent High Level Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation," n.p.

[58] Bradshaw and Howard, "The Global Disinformation Order 2019 - Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation 2019", n.p.

[59] Nina Jankowicz, *How to Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News and the Future of Conflict* (I.B. Tauris, 2020), n.p.

[60] Cunningham, "A Russian Federation Information Warfare Primer."

information operations are propagated do indeed display elements of novelty – the unprecedentedly direct link between emitter and receiver that social media provides and the ideological agnosticism, to mention a few – the overriding tactics and strategy deployed in current Russian information operations contain many more elements of continuity with their Soviet forbears than they do distinct breaks. One facet that is also common to the vast majority of the literature, with the rare exception[61], is a very deliberate attempt to shy away from making any manner of quantitative statement regarding the influence of said Russian information operations.

2.3.2   Disinformation and Social Media

With regards to social media in particular, Eli Pariser's *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web is Changing What We Read and How We Think*[62] was one of the first works to discuss the echo chamber effect that social media can create (an effect which can considerably amplify disinformation); its titular metaphor became widely adopted to describe the phenomenon. One article that is often cited in literature is Jonathan Albright's *Instagram, Meme Seeding, and the Truth about Facebook Manipulation*[63], in which the author discussed the power of only a few, key social media accounts with large followings in disseminating a message. Another article frequently encountered in citations is *The Spread of True and False News Online*[64], which demonstrates that false news propagates faster – much faster, in some cases – than true items; indeed, in some instances, false news were disseminated six times faster than the factually correct ones. A 2018 article, *Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature*[65], presents a useful literature review on social media and disinformation; if the field of disinformation research does move briskly, and the article is going on three years old, it is still useful as a starting point. The authors of *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media* discuss the dynamics of modern-day social media usage and how the platforms were weaponized. Although not directly related to Russian information operations, the book offers many precepts that are nevertheless of considerable relevance to those information operations; for example, portions on the use of anger and on audience-building will reverberate through parts of this thesis. (Of more direct relevance to the thesis, the book also discusses in some depth the 2016 Russian campaign in and of itself.) Think tank reports were also useful in this area; witness, for example, Freedom House's *Freedom on the Net – The Crisis of Social Media*[66]. Finally, although not directly related to Russian information operations, a few articles regarding the spread of COVID-related disinformation on social media were also quickly perused to further flesh out the author's

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[61] The most notable of those few exceptions is the previously-referred work by Hall Jamieson: Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*, n.p.

[62] Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think.* (Penguin, 2011), n.p.

[63] Jonathan Albright, "Instagram, Meme Seeding, and the Truth about Facebook Manipulation, Pt. 1," *Medium.Com*, November 8, 2017, https://medium.com/berkman-klein-center/instagram-meme-seeding-and-the-truth-about-facebook-manipulation-pt-1-dae4d0b61db5, last accessed March 1, 2021.

[64] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online," *Science* 359, no. 6380 (March 9, 2018): 1146–1151, https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559.

[65] Joshua A Tucker et al., "Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature," March 2018, https://www.hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Social-Media-Political-Polarization-and-Political-Disinformation-Literature-Review.pdf, last accessed April 4, 2021, n.p.

[66] Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2019 - The Crisis of Social Media", n.p.

understanding of the phenomenon. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Russian handiwork was also found to be present in this sphere, as seen for example in *Russian Twitter Accounts and the Partisan Polarization of Vaccine Discourse, 2015-2017*[67] or last year's *Coronavirus Misinformation: Quantifying Sources and Themes in the COVID-19 'Infodemic'*[68].

       The topic of modern Russian information operations, and their links with social media, constituted the bulk of the literature consulted as part of the research effort. The most obvious sources constituted of government-issued reports of rather significant fame like the Mueller report[69] and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's five-part report (of which only parts one[70] and two[71] were used for this thesis). Other government-produced sources were also consulted; two standouts in this respect are reports that were both commissioned as part of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's investigation: *The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency*[72] featured writers such as Renee Diresta (Stanford Internet Observatory) and Jonathan Albright (previously referred), while *The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018*[73] counted Philip N. Howard (Oxford Internet Institute) and John Kelly (CEO of social media analysis company Graphika) amongst its authors. Also amongst government sources consulted were various manner of indictments and criminal complaints against the IRA and its agents[74]. Investigative journalists provided quality material that was used frequently throughout the thesis. A prime example is Adrian Chen's *The Agency*, published in *The New York Times Magazine*. The substantial article discusses the IRA, and is almost seminal on the

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[67] Dror Walter, Yotam Ophir, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Russian Twitter Accounts and the Partisan Polarization of Vaccine Discourse, 2015--2017," *American Journal of Public Health* 110, no. 5 (2020): 718–724.

[68] Sarah Evanega et al., "Coronavirus Misinformation: Quantifying Sources and Themes in the COVID-19 'Infodemic,'" October 1, 2020, https://int.nyt.com/data/documenttools/evanega-et-al-coronavirus-misinformation-submitted-07-23-20-1/080839ac0c22bca8/full.pdf, last accessed March 29, 2021.

[69] Robert S. Mueller III, "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election - Volume 1," March 2019, https://www.justice.gov/storage/report.pdf, last accessed November 19, 2020, n.p.

[70] United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2," 2020, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume2.pdf, last accessed November 27, 2020, n.p.

[71] United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 1: Russian Efforts Against Election Infrastructure," 2020, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Report_Volume1.pdf, last accessed March 17, 2021, n.p.

[72] Renee Diresta et al., "The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 2018, https://disinformationreport.blob.core.windows.net/disinformation-report/NewKnowledge-Disinformation-Report-Whitepaper-121718.pdf, last accessed March 11, 2021, n.p.

[73] Philip N. Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018," *Computational Propaganda Research Project*, October 2018, 2012–2018, https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=senatedocs, last accessed February 19, 2021, n.p.

[74] United States District Court for the District of Columbia, "Indictment," February 15, 2018, https://www.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.dcd.193579/gov.uscourts.dcd.193579.1.0_3.pdf, last accessed October 21, 2020, n.p.; United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, "Criminal Complaint - United States of America v. Elena Alekseevna Khusyaynova," September 28, 2018, https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1102316/download, last accessed March 11, 2021, n.p.

topic as it was published in 2015; it has often been used as a reference since (in the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's report, for example[75]). A key source for several sub-sections of the thesis was the previously-referenced work by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*[76]. With regards to Russian advertisement purchases in particular, Young Mie Kim's 2018 article[77] is particularly relevant.

As in the previous section, one overwhelming area of consensus on this topic in literature is the gravity of the threat to democracy represented by the ease with which disinformation can be spread through social media; a corollary to the above, that is also widely accepted, is that the social media companies themselves should be held to much more pronounced accountability. Predictably, the consensus ends there; which specific role those companies should play in regulating their content – if any – and the level of control and oversight the government should provide – again, if any – is still hotly debated, and is likely to remain so for quite some time. Regardless, just about every commentator – academic, press, or otherwise – agrees that the status quo cannot remain if the threat posed by information operations is to be properly addressed.

2.3.3   Democratic Theory

To conclude this section, works on democratic theory were also consulted, albeit to a lesser extent than the topics above. Some reports from think-tanks specializing in democracy were consulted, both to obtain insights on their measurement criteria, but also for their assessment of the status of democracy in the world. Examples include Freedom House's annual reports[78], as well as the Economist Intelligence Unit's[79]. With regards to democratic theory, Robert A. Dahl's 1998 *On Democracy*[80] was the most consulted, but his *Polyarchy*[81] work from 1973 was also cross-referenced at times; Dahl's democratic theory will be given expanded coverage in a later portion of this thesis. A useful work for comparing democratic models was Frank Cunningham's *Theories of Democracy: A Critical Introduction*[82]; David Held's *Models of Democracy*[83] was also invaluable in providing insight as to the various classifications of democratic models and their broad outlines. More insight as to the reasoning behind the choice of Dahl's model over other models of democracy will be provided in the section detailing possible alternative models of democracy.

Within the surveyed literature in the field of democratic models – which by no means pretends to be exhaustive of the field, but was nonetheless deemed sufficient to justify the selection

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[75] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 1: Russian Efforts Against Election Infrastructure," 19.
[76] Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*, n.p.
[77] Young Mie Kim, "Uncover: Strategies and Tactics of Russian Interference in US Elections" (Madison, September 4, 2018).
[78] Csaky, "Dropping the Democratic Facade"; Repucci and Slipowitz, "Freedom in the World 2021: Democracy under Siege."
[79] Intelligence Unit, "Democracy Index 2020 - In Sickness and in Health?"
[80] Dahl, *On Democracy*, n.p.
[81] Robert Alan Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), n.p.
[82] Frank Cunningham, *Theories of Democracy: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge, 2008), n.p.
[83] David Held, *Models of Democracy*, 3rd Ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), n.p.

of the chosen model – the most notable agreement is that, in fact, the very notion of democracy still remains difficult to define. As will be seen, Dahl himself refrains from giving the word 'democracy' a concise set of terms that would normally pass muster as a 'definition', opting instead to define it in terms of its various components as he elaborates them. Further reinforcing the point is the very title of a work that was encountered in various manner of citations and references throughout the reference process: *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey, 508 BC to AD 1993*[84]. Winston Churchill's quip about democracy being the worst kind of government except for all the others that have been tried regularly came to mind during research for this particular portion. That said, Dahl's eminence was also a point of agreement in the vast majority of the works surveyed.

2.4   The 2016 Russian Information Operations Campaign

> *"Over the past three years, Russia has implemented and run the most effective and efficient influence campaign in world history." – Clint Watts*

> *"The great Active Measures campaign of 2016 will be studied in intelligence schools for decades to come, not just in Russia of course but in other countries as well." – Thomas Rid*[85]

If the Russian information operation in the Ukrainian theater in 2014 represented an information operation of a scope and magnitude rarely seen in the West – witness General Philip Breedlove's assertion that Russia was then waging 'the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare'[86] – the West was to once again be surprised by the scale and scope of the Russian information operation associated with the 2016 presidential election. Indeed, "the 2016 campaign marked a radical shift in both tactics and impact"[87]. This section will aim to detail the various facets of the Russian influence campaign during the 2016 United States presidential election. It should be acknowledged from the outset that two sources will figure more prominently: of course, the Mueller report[88], as it is still one of the references that covers the widest range of topics related to Russian interference in US elections; and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's 2020 report[89], which can be mentioned in the same breath as the Mueller report in terms of references on the scope of Russian activities in 2016.

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[84] John Dunn, ed., *Democracy: The Unfinished Journey, 508 BC to AD 1993* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), n.p. To be clear, this particular work was not consulted as part of the research process per se, although this writer was made aware of the broad contours of its contents through various referrals in other media; however, its title was thought evocative enough to be used as illustration for this particular point.

[85] Both quotations are from expert testimony to the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2."

[86] Peter Pomerantsev, "How Russia Is Revolutionizing Information Warfare," Defense One, September 9, 2014, https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2014/09/how-russia-revolutionizing-information-warfare/93635/, last accessed December 3, 2020.

[87] Darren L. Linvill et al., "'THE RUSSIANS ARE HACKING MY BRAIN!' Investigating Russia's Internet Research Agency Twitter Tactics during the 2016 United States Presidential Campaign," *Computers in Human Behavior* 99, no. May (2019): p. 292, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2019.05.027.

[88] Mueller, "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election - Volume 1", n.p.

[89] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2". n.p.

However, in large part due to both of those documents' redacted nature (most notably in the case of the Mueller report's section of interest for this dissertation, Section II on Russian social media use), they will not be the only sources on the subject.

The goals of Russia's campaign against the West are generally understood to have been to sow discord, chaos and distrust in democratic institutions; but most of all, to erode belief in the concept of truth itself[90]. Aims more specific to the United States were to further polarize a bitterly divided electorate, as well as helping then-candidate Trump secure the Republican party nomination (initially – and as the electoral process unfurled, the election itself). This campaign involved several facets. Some were isolated, or of a shorter duration. One of the more prominent examples of those would be the hacking of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) servers[91], their e-mail contents then having been forwarded for widespread distribution via WikiLeaks – a gambit which, for reasons that will be explored at a further point in the dissertation, proved quite damaging to the Democrats[92].

But without a doubt, one of the prime foci of the Russian operation was social media. Actions of Russian social media actors were typically aimed at hijacking conversations, manipulating public opinion, and creating an appearance of consensus. Many of Russia's tactics leveraged a characteristic of the human psyche whereby we are more likely to believe – and, in the case of social media, to share – something that has either been forwarded to us by friends or trusted individuals[93], or something that has already amassed a significant amount of approval (a prominent example of which is the 'Like' system on Facebook, or the re-tweet on Twitter)[94].

In keeping with the strategic, long-term Russian view of information operations, the Russian campaign in the 2016 United States presidential elections was most certainly not a short-lived initiative. Indeed, it ended up being a two-and-a-half-year affair, beginning in 2014 and continuing through the election[95], even intensifying afterwards[96]. Some sources even mention that Russia's disinformation campaign against United States voters began as early as 2012, "using some of the techniques it had deployed on its own citizens and those of neighboring countries in Eastern Europe"[97]. (Moscow's uncanny skill in weaponizing social media is rooted in even earlier times – that is, in the early 2000s, when it quickly learned that restricting dissenting political speech on the

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[90] Peter Warren Singer and Emerson T. Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media.* (Eamon Dolan Books, 2018), p. 50.

[91] Although Russia denied its role in the affair, Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller III filed an indictment specifically for 13 Russian military intelligence ("G.R.U.") agents and their specific role in the hack. District Court for the District of Columbia, "Indictment", n.p.

[92] Scott Shane and Mark Mazzetti, "The Plot to Subvert an Election: Unraveling the Russia Story So Far," *New York Times*, September 18, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/09/20/us/politics/russia-interference-election-trump-clinton.html, last accessed March 1, 2021.

[93] Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media.*, 135.

[94] Further enabling this phenomenon is the fact that false news have been shown to spread more quickly – up to six times faster in some cases. See: Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online." n.p.

[95] Jankowicz, *How to Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News and the Future of Conflict*, 27.

[96] Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018." The study contains several charts and figures showing the growth of IRA content from 2015 through 2017. See, for example, pp. 16, 17, and 28.

[97] *Ibid.* The authors state the IRA even started posting on Twitter (in Russian) as early as 2009, mainly targeting Russia's own populace; p. 9.

nascent but fast-growing internet would be a fool's errand; thus, the strategy of crowding out or overpowering the opposition was born[98].) Interestingly, even with such a long-running campaign, the work of the Russians did not achieve much penetration of the Western consciousness before 2016, with a few exceptions from investigative journalists[99] – the significance of whose work would only be realized later.

The principal[100] – though not exclusive[101] – organ used by the Kremlin to create and propagate this social media influence campaign was the St.-Petersburg-based Internet Research Agency (IRA). One of the IRA's favored tactics was what is often referred to as 'sockpuppeting' – that is, creating and assuming a fictitious identity online. In the earlier phases of the operation, the IRA focused mainly on creating and running individual Facebook accounts that purported to represent United States citizens' personal accounts[102], often posing as "seemingly trustworthy individuals: a grandmother, a blue-collar worker from the Midwest, a decorated veteran, providing their own heartfelt take on current events (and who to vote for)"[103]. But the onus gradually shifted, starting in early 2015, to the creation and curation of group accounts and/or public social media pages claiming affiliation with various political and grassroots organizations in the United States. By February 2016, the organization was clearly favoring then-candidate Trump[104], not only by

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[98] Michael Connell and Sarah Vogler, "Russia's Approach to Cyber Warfare," March 2017, p. 25, https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/DOP-2016-U-014231-1Rev.pdf, last accessed March 8, 2021.

[99] Adrian Chen, "The Agency," *New York Times Magazine*, June 2, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/magazine/the-agency.html; Shaun Walker, "The Russian Troll Factory at the Heart of the Meddling Allegations ," *The Guardian*, April 2, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/02/putin-kremlin-inside-russian-troll-house, last accessed March 8, 2021.

[100] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2," 8.

[101] The United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia's criminal complaint regarding a defendant's involvement in Project Lakhta, the broader Russian information warfare campaign against the West, lists several of the Russian entities used by the project to conduct its operations; the IRA is prime amongst them, but there are several others. See: United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, "Criminal Complaint - United States of America v. Elena Alekseevna Khusyaynova," September 28, 2018, p. 4, https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1102316/download, last accessed March 11, 2021. See also: Adam Entous, Elizabeth Dwoskin, and Craig Timberg, "Obama Tried to Give Zuckerberg a Wake-up Call over Fake News on Facebook," *The Washington Post*, September 24, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/obama-tried-to-give-zuckerberg-a-wake-up-call-over-fake-news-on-facebook/2017/09/24/15d19b12-ddac-4ad5-ac6e-ef909e1c1284_story.html, last accessed March 5, 2021. The authors state how the GRU, Russia's military intelligence unit most known for its cyber attacks, also manipulated social media in the run-up to the 2016 election, though to a far lesser extent than its infamous cousin.

[102] Mueller, "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election - Volume 1," 22.

[103] Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media.*, 124. In an interesting perspective, the authors interviewed some former IRA employees, one of which stated that navigating such a high number of starkly different identities (itself reflective of the breadth of the IRA effort) could be "exhausting to manage": "First you had to be a redneck from Kentucky, then you had to be some white guy from Minnesota who worked all his life, paid taxes and now lives in poverty; and in 15 minutes you have to write something in the slang of [African] Americans from New York." (also p. 124)

[104] This finding was echoed in most, if not all, of the literature. One example among many: Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2," 4. Relevant quote: "The Committee found that the IRA sought to influence the 2016

supporting his campaign but also by lambasting Hillary Clinton[105], and even undermining Trump's Republican primary opponents such as Ted Cruz, Marco Rubio and Jeb Bush[106]. (The IRA also supported Bernie Sanders, before the conclusion of the Democratic primaries[107].) Those individual and group accounts occupied a smattering of positions on the political spectrum, and the ideologies they espoused can usually be fairly accurately gleaned from the names their creators chose for them. The IRA created and maintained, amongst others, conservative groups ("Being Patriotic", "Stop All Immigrants", "Secured Borders" and "Tea Party News"), left-leaning Black social justice groups ("Black Matters", "Blacktivist" and "Don't Shoot Us"), groups favoring LGBTQ causes ("LGBT United"), and groups with a more religious focus ("United Muslims of America")[108].

The IRA also had a wide-reaching Twitter presence. Its strategy on the platform was broadly two-fold: traditional sockpuppeting via individual accounts, and bots. Individual accounts included the @Ten_GOP[109], which posed as the "unofficial Twitter account of Tennessee Republicans", and was staunchly pro-Trump[110]; @jenn_abrams (who claimed to be a Trump supporter from Virginia; 70,000 followers), @Pamela_Moore13 (purportedly a Trump supporter from Texas; also 70,000 followers), @MissouriNewsUS (an account that posted pro-Sanders, anti-Clinton material; 3.800 followers) and @America_1st (supposed anti-immigration individual; 24,000 followers)[111]. In addition to individual accounts, the 2016 United States presidential election saw widespread usage of bots by the Russians, with a view to inflating the apparent popularity or following of stories. In this context, bots and botnets can be used to automate a process by which a network of such bots will 'like' or interact with each other's stories or links[112]. Once those have amassed several thousand such artificial 'likes', they are now ready to be picked up by more mainstream sockpuppet accounts for more widespread distribution – but now with a

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U.S. presidential election by harming Hillary Clinton's chances of success and supporting Donald Trump at the direction of the Kremlin.".

[105] Mueller, "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election - Volume 1," 24. From an internal IRA document whose provenance is redacted: "It is imperative to intensify criticizing Hillary Clinton." To be clear, the IRA's animus towards Hillary Clinton pre-dated her electoral campaign – see Mueller, p. 22.

[106] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2," 7.

[107] Mueller, "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election - Volume 1," 23. The report cites an internal IRA document, the specifics of which are redacted, that states: "Main idea: Use any opportunity to criticize Hillary [Clinton] and the rest (except Sanders and Trump – we support them)."

[108] *Ibid.*, 25. The report also lists Facebook account IDs for some of those accounts. See: Facebook ID 1479936895656747 (United Muslims of America); Facebook ID 1157233400960126 (Don't Shoot); Facebook ID 1601685693432389 (Being Patriotic); Facebook ID757183957716200 (Secured Borders).

[109] *Ibid.*, 34. The account was eventually disabled by Twitter, but it was able to keep posting using its backup handle, @10_gop.

[110] *Ibid.*, 22. @TEN_GOP, 4/3/16 Tweet ("Tennessee GOP backs @realDonaldTrump period #makeAmericagreatagain #tngop #tennessee #gop")

[111] *Ibid.*, 27.

[112] An alternative, and quite representative, term for these bots and processes would be 'False Amplifiers', taken from Facebook's own (otherwise rather sterile) report on information operations using its platform, from 2017. Jen Weedon, William Nuland, and Alex Stamos, "Information Operations and Facebook," 2017, https://www.mm.dk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/facebook-and-information-operations-v1.pdf, last accessed October 8, 2020.

veneer of popularity, which confers authenticity and/or authority. The IRA was a particularly prolific user of the tactic, with over 400,000 Twitter bot accounts[113].

While the overall number of higher-profile accounts may still seem low, or their contributions (such as they were) appear to be a drop in the proverbial social media ocean, that conclusion would not withstand close scrutiny. A 2017 work by a well-known analyst, Jonathan Albright, demonstrated that a few key, well-known accounts can act as 'super-spreaders'[114]; the researcher determined that 28 of the most high-profile Instagram (a Facebook sister property) IRA accounts, for example, received a projected 145 million interactions – likes, comments or video plays – with their contents[115]. This pattern also applies to Facebook, as confirmed by a later study that showed that, with regards to organic IRA posting activity, "[a]lmost all the engagement by users, that is, shares, likes, and comments, was received by only 20 pages, representing 99.6% of all engagement"[116]. The same still holds true today, for example with regards to vaccine hesitancy in 2021: a Facebook study found that, after dividing US users, groups and pages into 638 population segments (no data on how Facebook defined those segments), "[j]ust 10 out of the 638 population segments contained 50 percent of all vaccine hesitancy content on the platform"; and even more tellingly, in that small segment, "just 111 users contributed half of all vaccine hesitant content"[117]. It would thus be a mistake to dismiss an information campaign's reach based solely on a purportedly low number of high-engagement accounts.

In any case, the most prominent of those IRA accounts were engaged with quite frequently. Blacktivist, who urged left-leaning[118] voters to "choose peace and vote for Jill Stein. Trust me, it's not a wasted vote"[119], had his various Facebook posts shared a staggering 103.8 million times before the account was shut down by the company[120], having generated 11.2 million engagements with Facebook users[121]. The Twitter account @Ten_GOP mentioned earlier in the thesis had ten times (136,000) as many followers as the *actual* Tennessee Republican Party account, and its 3,107 messages were retweeted 1,213,506 times[122]. On Election Day 2016, "it was the seventh most retweeted account across *all* of Twitter"; and perhaps just as consequentially, some of its tweets

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[113] Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media.*, 155.

[114] Term taken from Singer & Brooking. The term is used multiple times throughout the book – see p. 278 as an example. Interestingly, the use of language related to epidemiology is quite common in the book when it comes to describing the characteristics and actions of social media's questionable actors.

[115] Albright, "Instagram, Meme Seeding, and the Truth about Facebook Manipulation, Pt. 1."

[116] Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018," 32.

[117] Both quotes from: Elizabeth Dwoskin, "Facebook Is Studying Vaccine Hesitancy, New Documents Show," *The Washington Post*, March 14, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/03/14/facebook-vaccine-hesistancy-qanon/, last accessed March 17, 2021.

[118] This is demonstrative of the drive to sow chaos; although the majority of the Russian activity during the 2016 campaign (exact proportions depend on the platform and the date) has been shown to support right-leaning political causes, and in particular Trump's candidacy, there was also significant activity targeting the left as in this example, so as to exacerbate extant polarization.

[119] The idea here was to hurt Hillary Clinton's chances by diluting the Democratic vote, siphoning potential Democratic voters away to the Green Party's Jill Stein.

[120] Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media.*, 124.

[121] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2," 6.

[122] Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media.*, 124. It bears repeating that every one of those retweets likely engendered more propagation.

even enjoyed a retweet by prominent Trump orbit figures like Donald Trump Jr., Kellyanne Conway, and Michael Flynn[123]. An account masquerading as a trusted news source, @tpartynews (Tea Party News, mentioned earlier), was followed by 22,000 people; certainly not an earth-shattering number, but Trump's adviser Sebastian Gorka figured among them[124]. Twitter's own analysis determined that in the final three months of the election, IRA bots sent out 2.2 million election-related tweets, and that in the final six weeks of the campaign, Russian propaganda had been delivered on its platform a staggering 454.7 million times, using 50,258 automated (bot) accounts[125].

Individual IRA accounts – of which 3,841 were identified by Twitter[126] – also enjoyed a respectable amount of media presence, social or otherwise. One tweet from the @Jenn_Abrams account received over 40,000 responses[127]; other IRA tweets were retweeted, or responded to, by several high-profile United States figures such as Ambassador Michael McFaul, Roger Stone, Sean Hannity and Michael Flynn Jr[128]. In an even greater display of influence, a study demonstrated that most major news outlets in the United States used or even quoted IRA material at some point in the study's timeframe (from early 2015 to September 2017); indeed, "[w]e found at least one tweet from an IRA account embedded in 32 of the 33 outlets – a total of 116 articles"[129]. Those articles included some published in old-guard media institutions (*The Washington Post,* NPR, *Detroit Free Press*) as well as in some of the more recent, digitally native outlets like Buzzfeed and Salon[130]. As the Mueller report states, "[c]ollectively, the IRA's social media accounts reached tens of millions of U.S. persons"[131], a conclusion reached independently by other studies as well[132]. A few examples, with the numbers taken at the accounts' peak – that is, at the time of their deactivation by Facebook in mid-2017:

- "United Muslims of America": 300,000 followers;
- "Don't Shoot Us": 250,000 followers;
- "Being Patriotic": 200,000 followers;

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[123] *Ibid.* (Quotation and subsequent data in sentence.)
[124] *Ibid.*
[125] Twitter, "United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Crime and Terrorism - Update on Results of Retrospective Review of Russian-Related Election Activity," January 19, 2019, p. 4, https://www.judiciary.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Edgett Appendix to Responses.pdf, last accessed March 1, 2021.
[126] Twitter, "Update on Twitter's Review of the 2016 US Election," January 31, 2018, https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2018/2016-election-update.html, last accessed March 2, 2021.
[127] Mueller, "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election - Volume 1," 27. The tweet in question: "To those people, who hate the Confederate flag. Did you know that the flag and the war wasn't about slavery, it was all about money." @Jenn_Abrams, 24 April 2017 (14:37.)
[128] *Ibid.*, 28.
[129] Josephine Lukito and Chris Wells, "Most Major Outlets Have Used Russian Tweets as Sources for Partisan Opinion: Study," *Columbia Journalism Review*, March 8, 2018, https://www.cjr.org/analysis/tweets-russia-news.php, last accessed March 2, 2021.
[130] *Ibid.*
[131] Mueller, "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election - Volume 1," 26.
[132] Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018," 32.

- "Secured Borders": 130,000 followers[133].

One of the more arresting aspects of the Russian information operation against the United States 2016 presidential election was the amount of time Russian disinformation actors spent building online personas in a variety of American communities, to ensure the avatars they created were credible. To this end, two IRA employees, Anna Bogacheva and Aleksandra Krylova[134], traveled to the United States in mid-2014 on an intelligence-gathering mission to several states[135]. Russian IRA operatives are also known to have fleshed out their manufactured personas prior to the election by tweeting either support or opposition to vaccines, thus burnishing the political orientation credentials of the profiles they had created, starting in 2015[136]. In addition to the time invested in building online identities, IRA employees formed a professionalized cadre of internet posters held to strict, written standards: 12-hour shifts ("9 P.M. sharp"[137]) in which agents were expected to post on various news articles 50 times, post a minimum of three posts a day on each of their six Facebook accounts, discussing news in groups at least twice a day, and tweet at least 50 times a day through their 10 different accounts[138]. Operatives were expected to have gathered 500 subscribers to their Facebook accounts and 2000 Twitter followers by the end of the first month of their employment[139]. IRA agents operated on varied day- and night-shift schedules, and were to post in accordance with the American time zone their social media account holders would purportedly live in[140]; operatives were also instructed to familiarize themselves with landmark United States dates and holidays, in order to write thematically-appropriate posts in their various social media aliases[141]. The overarching goal of such deliberate, painstaking and wide-ranging online identity fabrication (or theft) was to enable more organic interaction with US voters at the time of the election – an investment of sorts – and, in a Machiavellian twist, inject political nudges at just the right time. As Adrian Chen of *The Times* writes in his study of the IRA, "[t]he point was to weave propaganda seamlessly into what appeared to be the nonpolitical musings of an everyday person"[142]. The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's report offers a particularly fitting moniker for such targeted, strategically timed material: 'payload content'. The IRA's basic *modus operandi* was to build credibility with frequent innocuous postings in order to make sure that, with time, the crafted persona was to be trusted and taken seriously by its audience, until "the opportune moment arrived when the account was used to deliver tailored 'payload content' designed to

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[133] All numbers above taken from Mueller, "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election - Volume 1," 26.

[134] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2," 29.

[135] Mueller, "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election - Volume 1," 4. The Mueller report has the names of the two employees redacted, but the restriction preventing the publication of those names appears to have been lifted by the time the Senate report was released.

[136] Walter, Ophir, and Jamieson, "Russian Twitter Accounts and the Partisan Polarization of Vaccine Discourse, 2015--2017", n.p.

[137] Chen, "The Agency."

[138] Max Seddon, "Documents Show How Russia's Troll Army Hit America," *Buzzfeed*, June 2, 2014, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/maxseddon/documents-show-how-russias-troll-army-hit-america, last accessed March 9, 2021.

[139] *Ibid.*

[140] District Court for the District of Columbia, "Indictment," 14.

[141] *Ibid.*

[142] Chen, "The Agency."

influence the targeted user"[143]. One important takeaway from this finding is that the number of postings alone from a given individual or group account is not an effective metric to evaluate the effectiveness of the IRA's information operations (again, inasmuch as such an endeavour is possible).

The IRA employed this pattern of "character development, followed by confidence building and audience cultivation, punctuated by deployment of payload content" throughout its content history[144]. A representative illustration of the phenomenon described above can be found in content from the IRA's "Army of Jesus" Facebook group. For background, the group had managed to amass 216,000 followers at the moment the account was removed by the company; by and large, the postings found on the group's page fell squarely in line with what one could reasonably expect from a group bearing such a name. However, as demonstrated by the sample postings below, all is not always as it seems:

- 26 October 2016: "There has never been a day when people did not need to walk with Jesus."

- 29 October 2016: "I've got Jesus in my soul. It's the only way I know…Watching every move I make, guiding every step I take!"

- 31 October 2016: "Rise and shine-realize His blessing!"

- 31 October 2016: "Jesus will always be by your side. Just reach out to Him and you'll see!"

- 01 November 2016: "HILLARY APPROVES REMOVAL OF GOD FROM THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE."

- 02 November 2016: "Never hold on [*sic*] anything tighter than you holding unto God!"[145]

As is likely to have been deduced by the reader, the posting from the 1st of November was the one constituting what the Senate report deemed 'payload content', and deftly weaves anti-Clinton messaging into a posting that is almost certain to appeal to its target audience, without appearing too overtly directive. Whatever else may be said of the Russians and their campaign, it is almost impossible to deny that they operated with a keen understanding of American society, its fault lines, and how to exploit and exacerbate them[146].

There does seem to be one exception to that observation, however. Any overview of the IRA's subversive activities during the 2016 United States presidential election would be remiss not to discuss advertisements. Indeed, in addition to its organic social media posting operations, the IRA also delved in advertisement purchases[147], as was extensively covered in traditional media

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[143] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2," 32.

[144] *Ibid.*, 33.

[145] *Ibid.*

[146] Shane and Mazzetti, "The Plot to Subvert an Election: Unraveling the Russia Story So Far."

[147] For a thorough list, the House of Representatives' Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence maintains an archive of Russian advertisement material from 2015 to 2017, grouped in quarters. See: Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, "Social Media Advertisements," United States House of Representatives, https://intelligence.house.gov/social-media-content/social-media-advertisements.htm, last accessed March 9, 2021.

when public awareness of the IRA's nefarious activities first started blossoming[148]. But despite the considerable attention initially lavished on the phenomenon, and as insidious an act as a hostile foreign power purchasing politically-minded advertisements during an election can appear, these early analyses tended to overstate the impact of said advertisements. Indeed, during a period of roughly two years, the IRA purchased approximately 3,400 Facebook and Instagram advertisements worth about $100,000; but to appreciate the relative size (or lack thereof) of such an amount, one only need look at the IRA's operational costs, which have been estimated to have been around $1.25 million dollars *per month*[149]; or, at the overall volume of IRA activity during the same period, which amounted to over 61,500 Facebook posts, 116,000 Instagram posts, and 10.4 million tweets "that were the original creations of IRA influence operatives, disseminated under the guise of authentic user activity"[150]. In both cases (money spent and output), the numbers for advertisements are minuscule fractions of the sum total of IRA resources directed at those respective spheres. Additionally, those advertisements occasionally constituted some of the more ham-fisted attempts at social penetration of the IRA's. Indeed, some of the ads were just "odd"[151], contained several English mistakes, or in an out-of-character twist for the IRA, were rather tone-deaf[152]. That being said, dismissing the IRA advertisements outright based solely on those numbers would also be a mistake. Facebook itself estimated that no less than 11.4 million US residents were exposed to at least one of those ads between 2015 and 2017[153]. As Nina Jankowicz writes, "contrarians chuckling at the IRA's alleged ineffectiveness ignored that the promoted posts performed well on their own, completely organically, without help from ads, *thanks to the engaged communities that the IRA built over a period of several years*"[154]. This conclusion was borne out by independent research; analysts found that across a wide swathe of IRA social media accounts, organic content figured much more prominently in the IRA's activity and engagement metrics than advertisements did[155].

By contrast, and quite consequential with regards to the resiliency of democracy[156], is the fact some of those IRA accounts managed to translate social media interactions, amorphous and intangible, into actual, real-world actions by their followers – constituting, as former FBI special

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[148] For an example of early coverage, see: Scott Shane, "These Are the Ads Russia Bought on Facebook in 2016," *The New York Times*, November 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/01/us/politics/russia-2016-election-facebook.html; The same author covered the material in much more depth a year later: Shane, "Some of the Popular Images and Themes the Russians Posted on Social Media"; Shane and Mazzetti, "The Plot to Subvert an Election: Unraveling the Russia Story So Far."

[149] All figures in this sentence from: Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2," 40.

[150] *Ibid.* (For all figures, and quote, in sentence.)

[151] Jankowicz, *How to Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News and the Future of Conflict*, 31.

[152] *Ibid.*

[153] Facebook, "Facebook Counsel Responses to Committee Questions," p. 5, https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/documents/Facebook Response to Committee QFRs.pdf, last accessed March 11, 2021.

[154] Jankowicz, *How to Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News and the Future of Conflict*, 31. Emphasis ours; this goes to further highlight the point made in the preceding paragraphs regarding the IRA's return on investment with regards to the time and resources it poured into building and cultivating communities of followers.

[155] Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018," 32. The study quotes 67,502 organic Facebook posts across eighty-one different pages, and 116,205 organic Instagram posts across 133 accounts.

[156] More on this in the argumentation section.

agent and expert Senate witness Clint Watts said, "the next level" of election interference[157]. An early (2017) *Wall Street Journal* investigation found that "[a]t least 60 rallies, protests and marches were publicized or financed by eight Russia-backed Facebook accounts from Los Angeles to Washington, D.C."[158]. In a further sign of their reach, those eight accounts were reportedly 'liked' nearly two million times[159]. (In actual fact, those numbers ended up being quite conservative[160].) The Mueller report's earliest evidence of a rally organized via social media for was a "confederate rally" in November 2015, organized through Instagram[161]. This aspect of the IRA's activities actually began even earlier, and even less auspiciously: as a simple experiment. In the spring of 2015, a group of IRA employees wanted to determine whether they could successfully organize a live event on United States soil solely through social media interaction. The experiment took the guise of a Facebook event targeting New Yorkers, promising a free hot dog to anyone who would attend. As it turns out, the 'event', such as it was, attracted a sufficient number of live people for the IRA to consider the experiment a success[162] – even though, in the end, not a single hot dog was served.

       The IRA tended to follow a template when organizing and promoting these events from abroad. The first step involved using one of the manufactured social media identities to announce and promote the event, followed by several direct messages to that persona's followers prompting them to attend. An event coordinator was selected from amongst those followers who expressed interest; and in a rather cavalier move, the IRA even contacted local media to promote the event – then proceeded to direct their queries to the coordinator. In the vast majority of cases, the 'person' from the IRA social media account who initiated the whole of the proceedings would ultimately announce to the coordinator his/her inability to attend said event, usually due to a purported scheduling conflict, an emergency, or simply due to being somewhere else in the country. The event's promotion continued after it ended; indeed, the IRA tended to post photos and videos from the event to its social media pages[163].

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[157] Kevin Poulsen et al., "Exclusive: Russians Appear to Use Facebook to Push Trump Rallies in 17 U.S. Cities," *Daily Beast*, September 25, 2017, https://www.thedailybeast.com/russians-appear-to-use-facebook-to-push-pro-trump-flash-mobs-in-florida, last accessed March 11, 2021.

[158] Deepa Seetharaman, "Russian-Backed Facebook Accounts Staged Events Around Divisive Issues," *The Wall Street Journal*, October 30, 2017, https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-backed-facebook-accounts-organized-events-on-all-sides-of-polarizing-issues-1509355801, last accessed March 1, 2021.

[159] *Ibid.*

[160] Craig Timberg and Elizabeth Dwoskin, "Russians Got Tens of Thousands of Americans to RSVP for Their Phony Political Events on Facebook," *The Washington Post*, January 25, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2018/01/25/russians-got-tens-of-thousands-of-americans-to-rsvp-for-their-phony-political-events-on-facebook/, last accessed March 1, 2021.

[161] Mueller, "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election - Volume 1," 29. The term 'confederate rally' was itself quoted in the report, as it was IRA terminology.

[162] Hannah Levintova, "Russian Journalists Just Published a Bombshell Investigation About a Kremlin-Linked 'Troll Factory,'" *Mother Jones*, October 18, 2017, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/10/russian-journalists-just-published-a-bombshell-investigation-about-a-kremlin-linked-troll-factory/, last accessed March 11, 2021. The investigation in question was carried out by a Russian newspaper, RBC, which is known for its willingness to publish pieces critical of the Kremlin and the Putin regime.

[163] Contents of this paragraph: Mueller, "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election - Volume 1," 29. Many of the report's sources for this particular section are redacted and/or no longer available, but are archived in the report's footnotes.

The IRA ended up spending approximately $80,000 to support 100 'activists', who organized 40 distinct events across the United States[164]. For example, the IRA "Being Patriotic" page, which could claim over 216,000 followers, attempted to instigate a "patriotic state-wide flash mob"[165] on 20 August 2016, which would unfold simultaneously in 17 cities and towns throughout the state of Florida in order to support Donald Trump, at the time the Republican nominee[166]. "Being Patriotic" organized several other events: a July "Down With Hillary!" event outside Clinton's campaign headquarters in New York; a 9/11 pro-Trump event in Manhattan; simultaneous demonstrations in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh under the guise of "Miners for Trump"; and a pro-Trump rally outside Trump Tower in November following his election victory[167].

Some of the events could skirt the boundaries of propriety. In one of the more daring – but illustrative in how it was administered – examples, IRA agents posed as UCLA students from Texas to con a Florida couple into impersonating Bill and Hillary Clinton, the latter to appear in a cage built by the couple themselves at a cost of about $800 dollars (of which "about $500"[168] was reimbursed by the Russians). One of the more interesting takeaways from the event is the direction the Russian agents gave their unwitting helpers, which again displayed impressive command of American politics. The two participants were supplied a script, of sorts – the woman, impersonating Hillary Clinton in a cage, "was supposed to say, 'Where are my emails?'"; the man, impersonating Bill Clinton, "was supposed to try to grope all the attractive young ladies I could find", with his 'spouse' also carrying "a black-iron skillet in her purse that she was going to use to hit me with"[169]. Another revealing facet is the administration of the payments; in fact, the Bill Clinton impersonator recalls that his contact "had real problems paying me"[170]. When the contact offered to pay for the jail materials, the man suggested to have the contact pay via credit card over the phone at the hardware store, only to be rebuffed and told "'No, we don't do that'"; the Russian contact instead "made me go to one of those check cashing places to get the money" [171].

One event in particular received – and deservedly so – more pronounced coverage in traditional media, and is also quite illustrative of the IRA's knowledge of American politics and fault lines, its ideological fluidity, as well as the occasional daring nature of its activities. In May

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[164] Levintova, "Russian Journalists Just Published a Bombshell Investigation About a Kremlin-Linked 'Troll Factory.'"

[165] Poulsen et al., "Exclusive: Russians Appear to Use Facebook to Push Trump Rallies in 17 U.S. Cities." The excerpt is itself quoted in the source article, as it was the wording used by the Russian event organizers.

[166] *Ibid.* "On August 20, we want to gather patriots on the streets of Floridian towns and cities and march to unite America and support Donald Trump!", one could read on the Facebook event page for the event; "Our flash mob will occur in several places at the same time; more details about locations will be added later. Go Donald!" As per the article, determining the actual number of attendees at these events has been made quite difficult due to the fact Facebook deleted hundreds of Russian accounts.

[167] *Ibid.*

[168] Frank Cerabino, "Local Trump Supporters Shrug off Being Paid and Played by Russians," *The Palm Beach Post*, February 23, 2018, https://www.palmbeachpost.com/news/local-trump-supporters-shrug-off-being-paid-and-played-russians/3WCytHAHy3PodLVePU1PMK/, last accessed March 11, 2021.

[169] *Ibid.*

[170] *Ibid.*

[171] *Ibid.* As per the article, the woman was offered payment in the form of either wired money transfer (MoneyGram) or Walmart gift cards.

2016, the IRA-run Facebook page "Heart of Texas", which could claim 250,000[172] followers, and which enjoyed the highest number of shares of all IRA Facebook accounts (4.8 million[173]), promoted an event called "Stop Islamization of Texas" (the IRA Facebook group "had wrongly alleged that the Islamic library had received public funding"[174]). The promotion was carried out via targeted advertisements; the event was scheduled to occur the 21st of May at the Islamic Da'wah Center in Houston, Texas. Concurrently, IRA agents also used the agency's "United Muslims for America" group, which could boast of 325,000[175] followers, to promote a simultaneous event, to occur at the exact same time and place, which was to be called "Save Islamic Knowledge". The tactics used for both events were almost mirror images of one another, down to the targeted advertisements used for promotion[176]; and interestingly, promotional materials – from both sides – conveniently failed to mention any manner of counter-protest. The two clashing events were covered live by local news agencies; and for the whole effort, the IRA spent a grand total of $200 in promotional materials on Facebook[177].

2.5   Dahl's Democracy

> *"At the bottom of all the tributes paid to democracy is the little man, walking into the little booth, with a little pencil, making a little cross on a little bit of paper—no amount of rhetoric or voluminous discussion can possibly diminish the overwhelming importance of that point."*

> -   *Winston Churchill*

The aim of this section is to offer an overview of those aspects of democracy that will be used in evaluating the impact of Russian information operations for this dissertation. The method chosen to do so is to use Dahl's characteristics of democracy – or, as he called it, polyarchy – as detailed in one of his most recent writings on the topic, *On Democracy*[178], published in 1998[179]. In

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[172] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2," 47.

[173] Diresta et al., "The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 21.

[174] Tim Lister and Clare Sebastian, "Stoking Islamophobia and Secession in Texas -- from an Office in Russia," *CNN Politics*, October 6, 2017, https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/05/politics/heart-of-texas-russia-event, last accessed March 11, 2021.

[175] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2," 47.

[176] *Ibid.*

[177] Donie O'Sullivan, "Russian Trolls Created Facebook Events Seen by More than 300,000 Users," *CNN*, January 26, 2018, https://money.cnn.com/2018/01/26/media/russia-trolls-facebook-events/index.html, last accessed March 11, 2021.

[178] Dahl, *On Democracy*, n.p. Although published in 1998, the version used was released in 2015, with a preface and additional chapters by Ian Shapiro. Shapiro owns the copyright only to the text added in the 2015 version, which will largely go unused in this thesis. Shapiro also explicitly states that "Dahl's original text has not been altered" (p. 14); therefore, the original publication date of 1998 is retained here for bibliography and citation purposes.

[179] The most recent work of Dahl's on the topic is an article published in *Political Science Quarterly*, although the contents appear to be an almost word-for-word copy of the eighth chapter of *On Democracy*. See: Robert A. Dahl, "What Political Institutions Does Large-Scale Democracy Require?," *Political Science Quarterly* 120, no. 2 (2005): 187–197, https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1538-165x.2005.tb00543.x.

the realm of political sciences, Robert Dahl holds a quasi-titanic stature. Indeed, as Ian Shapiro[180], a onetime student of Dahl's, notes in his 2015 preface to *On Democracy*, Dahl "might well have been the most important political scientist of the twentieth century, and he was certainly one of its preeminent social scientists"[181]. Shapiro goes further: "[Dahl] received strings of awards and honorary degrees, including the first Johan Skytte Prize, created in 1995 to remedy the lack of a Nobel Prize in Political Science. Citations to Dahl's work run to the tens of thousands"[182].

One of his most well-known contributions is his codification of the requirements for a functional representative democracy, first seen in 1973's *Polyarchy*[183]. As previously stated, this dissertation will mostly rely on Dahl's *On Democracy* as a reference for Dahl's thinking on democracy's essential building blocks, as it is the most recent of his works on the topic. One more methodological note needs to be stated from the onset: democracy as described below by Dahl is of course an ideal, and in many ways aspirational; Dahl himself would agree, and so states at many points in the book. Speaking of the criteria, he says that they "describe an ideal or perfect democratic system. None of us, I imagine, believes that we could actually attain a perfectly democratic system, given the many limits imposed on us in the real world"[184]; or, more broadly, "[i]n every democratic country a substantial gap exists between actual and ideal democracy"[185] and that "in practice democracy has always fallen far short of its ideals"[186]. Such an admission could lead one to point out that, given democracy is in practice far from perfect, the addition of Russian information operations (on top of those arguably deployed by domestic actors) to what is already a caustic electoral cacophony can do little more to further erode its foundations. The answer to this potential criticism is twofold. The first portion is, simply, to turn the argument on its head. Indeed, if democracy is *already* doomed to be imperfect; if it is *already* far removed from its ideals; if it is *already* weak or struggling, or displays several significant shortcomings: it is then not particularly resilient, and thus *any* attack on its foundations, even if vectored through information operations, could – and should – be seen as potentially quite destructive. The second is to return to the definition of 'compromised' as used in this thesis, which is to say that, if Russian information operations output runs counter to Dahl's precepts, that in and of itself represents undermining. Seen in this light, the discussion of democratic theory vs. practice is rather moot – only in this context, of course.

An oft-cited[187] portion of Dahl's work revolves around the institutions that are required for democracy to function (to be enumerated shortly). However, to limit oneself to only these is to somewhat oversimplify Dahl's conceptualization. This section will thus present a distilled version

[180] Yale University, "Ian Shapiro, Sterling Professor of Political Science,"
https://shapiro.macmillan.yale.edu/, last accessed March 16, 2021.
[181] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 7.
[182] *Ibid.*
[183] Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*, n.p.
[184] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 43.
[185] *Ibid.*, 45.
[186] *Ibid.*, 74.
[187] For example: Anna Lührmann and Staffan I. Lindberg, "A Third Wave of Autocratization Is Here: What Is New about It?," *Democratization* 26, no. 7 (2019): p. 1096, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1582029. "Our notion of democracy is based on Dahl's famous conceptualization of electoral democracy as "polyarchy".

of the components Dahl views as essential or near-essential for a properly functioning representative democracy, by first listing and briefly expounding on the following:

- Dahl's five *criteria* (he also calls them 'standards') for democracy;

- The six *institutions* he deems essential (the part that is often referenced);

- The *conditions* for a successful transition to (in the case of a non-democratic country), or maintenance of, democracy[188].

Such an approach will lead to a fuller appreciation of the Russian impact on democracy by allowing a deeper analysis than would be possible with only one of those three components – because, as will be seen, several of the above components do indeed house portions that have been compromised by Russian information operations.

The first, the criteria, aim "to identify some criteria that a process for governing an association would have to meet in order to satisfy the requirement that all the members are equally entitled to participate in the association's decisions about its policies"[189]. They are:

- *Effective Participation*: All members must have "equal and effective opportunities" to air their views before a policy is adopted;

- *Voting Equality*: Every member must have an "equal and effective opportunity" to vote – and no vote is superior to any other;

- *Enlightened Understanding*: Every member must be afforded "equal and effective opportunities" to educate themselves on alternative policies and their consequences – given a reasonable timeframe;

- *Control of the Agenda*: The members must have the "exclusive opportunity" to decide not only how, but even what, matters are to be added to the association's agenda. Importantly, "the democratic process required by the three preceding criteria is never closed" – in other words, the association's policies are never set in stone, and are open to change by the members;

- *Inclusion of Adults*: Inclusion and equality figure prominently in Dahl's book. "All, or at any rate most, adult permanent residents should have the full rights of citizens that are implied by the first four criteria"[190].

To the inevitable question "Why these criteria?", Dahl responds that "each is *necessary* if the members […] are to be politically equal in determining the policies of the association"[191]. Or, "to the extent that any of the requirements is violated, the members will not be politically equal"[192]. With regards to the research question in this dissertation, if it can be shown that even one of those criteria has been undermined by Russian information operations, we will be able to state that

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[188] Throughout this dissertation, the word 'component' will be used when referring to the ensemble of the three categories.
[189] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 51.
[190] For contents and quotes in the five above bullet points: *Ibid.*, 51–52.
[191] *Ibid.*, 53. Emphasis ours.
[192] *Ibid.*

democracy has indeed been compromised, due to the fact that, as has just been quoted, "each is necessary". Some could object that Dahl only states that should any of the above criteria be violated, members *will not be politically equal* – that he doesn't specifically say such a condition is fatal to *democracy*. However, such a hypothetical criticism would run counter to a substantial portion of Dahl's book, and indeed wider theory. Political equality – which includes, but is not limited to, universal suffrage – figures prominently at several points in his conceptualization and is specifically named as one of democracy's six required political institutions (Inclusive Citizenship – which will be discussed shortly). Therefore, an attack on any of the criteria compromises political equality, which, as will be seen shortly, is itself is a requirement for Dahl's democracy.

In addition to the criteria enumerated above, Dahl identifies six political institutions of modern representative democracy as the "*minimal requirements* for a democratic country"[193]. The point is made again later when concluding the chapter, when Dahl says of the institutions: "[b]ecause they are all necessary for modern representative democracy (polyarchal democracy), we can […] view them as establishing a *minimum level for democratization*"[194]. Thus, again, for the purposes of the research question, all six institutions need not be compromised in order for democracy to have been undermined. Indeed, having simply *one* of those institutions compromised (according to how the word was stated to be used in the *Definitions* portion of the thesis, which is to say that Russian information operations outputs run counter to Dahl's precepts) is sufficient to achieve that effect. According to Dahl, these 'institutions' are necessary even to nascent democracies: "As a country moves from a non-democratic to a democratic government, the early democratic *arrangements* gradually become *practices,* which in due time turn into settled *institutions*"[195]. And so, the institutions:

- *Elected Officials.* "Control over government decisions about policy is constitutionally vested in officials elected by citizens.", thereby making those modern, large democratic governments "*representative*";

- *Free, Fair, and Frequent Elections.* Officials accede to positions of power via "frequent and fairly conducted elections" – with little to no coercion deployed;

- *Freedom of Expression.* "Citizens have a right to express themselves without danger of severe punishment on political matters broadly defined" which includes critiquing "elected officials, the government, the regime, the socioeconomic order, and the prevailing ideology";

- *Access to Alternative Sources of Information.* "Citizens have a right to seek out alternative and independent sources of information from other citizens, experts, newspapers, magazines, books, telecommunications and the like." Dahl goes on to say that there must exist alternative sources of information not under the thumb of the government, or of any group attempting to influence public discourse; those alternative sources must also be protected under law;

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[193] *Ibid.*, 99. Emphasis ours.
[194] *Ibid.*, 113. Emphasis in original.
[195] *Ibid.*, 97–98. Italicized words are in the original, and refer to words Dahl has used at previous points in the book.

- *Associational Autonomy.* Citizens have the right to "form relatively independent associations or organizations, including independent political parties and interest groups" in order to achieve and exercise their other various rights – including those necessary for the effective functioning of democratic political institutions;

- *Inclusive Citizenship.* "No adult permanently residing in the country and subject to its laws can be denied the rights that are available to others and are necessary to the five political institutions just listed." These include – but are not limited to – the right to vote in free and fair elections, to run for public office, to freely express oneself, to freely associate with or participate in political organizations, and to retain access independent sources of information[196].

Of further significance to the research question, specifically with regards to how focusing on institutions alone would be a disservice to Dahl's theory, Figure 7 from *On Democracy* will be reproduced below. In it, Dahl presents in a table format the relationship between the two components so far discussed, criteria and institutions, and how the institutions in the left column are necessary to ensure the criteria in the right column are satisfied. The figure, aptly titled "Why the institutions are necessary" in the book, thus bolsters the case for expanding the demonstration beyond Dahl's institutions[197]:

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[196] Again, contents for all six of the items above either paraphrased, or quoted, from: *Ibid.*, 99–100. Any italics or emphasis are in original.
[197] All text in the table directly quoted from: *Ibid.*, 105–106.

FIGURE 1 - Links between Dahl's Institutions and Criteria

"In a unit as large as a country, these political institutions of polyarchal democracy…"	"…are necessary to satisfy the following democratic criteria:"
Elected representatives	Effective Participation Control of the Agenda
Free, Fair, and Frequent Elections	Voting Equality Control of the Agenda
Freedom of Expression	Effective Participation Enlightened Understanding Control of the Agenda
Alternative information	Effective Participation Enlightened Understanding Control of the Agenda
Associational Autonomy	Effective Participation Enlightened Understanding Control of the Agenda
Inclusive Citizenship	Full inclusion

   The final component of Dahl's vision of democracy to be covered is *conditions*. Dahl describes these as such: "certain underlying or background conditions in a country are favorable to the stability of democracy and where these conditions are weakly present or entirely absent democracy is unlikely to exist, or if it does, its existence is likely to be precarious"[198]. Exactly what those *conditions* are is informed by Dahl's analysis of "a large body of relevant experience provided by the twentieth century"[199]. Said experience consists of "countries that have undergone a transition to democracy, consolidated their […] institutions, and retained them […]; countries where the transition has been followed by collapse; and countries that have never made the transition"[200]. Dahl further sub-divides *conditions* into two sub-categories, that he calls 'Essential conditions for democracy' and 'Favorable conditions for democracy'. As per the previous two components, below is a list, along with a short paraphrased/quoted summary, of each condition:

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[198] *Ibid.*, 161.
[199] *Ibid.*
[200] *Ibid.*, 162.

- Essential conditions for democracy:

  o *Control of Military and Police by Elected Officials*: Dahl says that perhaps the greatest internal threat to a democratic government comes from "leaders who have access to the major means of physical coercion: the military and the police"; without civilian control of the police and military, "prospects for democracy are dim"[201];

  o *Democratic Beliefs and Political Culture*: All governments will eventually face crises. During those inevitable tumultuous times, "[t]he prospects for stable democracy in a country are improved if its citizens and leaders strongly support democratic ideas, values, and practices"; stated differently, "the country possesses a democratic political culture"[202];

  o *No Strong Foreign Control Hostile to Democracy*: "Democratic institutions are less likely to develop in a country subject to intervention by another country hostile to democratic government in that country"[203]. Dahl uses the examples of how Soviet intervention in Poland and Hungary prevented the development of democratic institutions in those countries;

- Favorable conditions for democracy:

  o *Modern Market Economy and Society*: This particular condition is rather complex, due to the relationship between democracy and capitalism itself being both mutually beneficial, but also fraught (worthy of two independent chapters in Dahl's book). Without veering too far off-course, we can say that a market economy increases the odds of a transition to (or maintenance of) democracy, but also undermines it in that it creates inequality. But despite the tension between democracy and market-capitalism, for the purposes of this dissertation, Dahl's conclusion remains: "we cannot escape the conclusion that a market-capitalist economy, the society it produces, and the economic growth it typically engenders are all highly favorable conditions"[204] for the development and maintenance of democratic political institutions. The above being said, this condition is unlikely to be of much use to the demonstration at hand;

  o *Weak Subcultural Pluralism*: the section header's title on this particular condition, "Cultural conflicts weak or absent", is perhaps slightly more revealing of its meaning. Indeed, Dahl states that those institutions he deems essential to democracy are "more likely to develop and endure in a country that is culturally fairly homogeneous and less likely in a country with sharply differentiated and conflicting subcultures"[205]. Some of Dahl's further comments on this are particularly germane to this thesis' research question, and will be further explored in the relevant Argumentation section.

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[201] *Ibid.*
[202] *Ibid.*, 171.
[203] *Ibid.*, 161.
[204] *Ibid.*, 173.
[205] *Ibid.*, 163.

Dahl sums up his chapter on conditions by drawing the following three conclusions: first, "a country that enjoys all five of these conditions is almost certain to develop and maintain democratic institutions"[206]; second, "a country that lacks all five conditions is extremely unlikely to develop democratic institutions, or, if it somehow does, to maintain them"[207]; and third, for a country "that lacks one or several but not all of the five conditions that favor democracy, democracy is chancy, perhaps improbable, but not necessarily impossible"[208]. Those conclusions will inform how Dahl's conditions are to be used with regards to the research question at hand. Taking a closer look at Dahl's wording above, possessing all five conditions makes it "almost certain" that democratic institutions will be developed and maintained in a country; in contrast, a country that "lacks one or several but not all of the five conditions" finds its odds considerably downgraded, to "chancy", perhaps even "improbable"[209]. Thus, although an anticipated finding of this dissertation is that the 2016 Russian campaign has indeed lobbed projectiles at more than one of those conditions, the fact remains that, according to Dahl, the disappearance or compromise of only one of those conditions is enough to significantly impact – negatively – a country's chances of attaining and/or maintaining democracy.

2.6 Possible Alternative Models of Democracy

Dahl is of course not the only eminent democratic theoretician. This section will quickly detail some of the other typologies of democracy which were encountered as part of the research process, and provide a fuller justification as to the reasoning behind the selection of Dahl's model for this thesis. For the purposes of the proposed analysis, this writer sought a model that offered sufficient breadth in its definition of democracy (i.e., whose focus was not overly narrow), but which also contained an adequate amount of tactical-level content to aid in the analysis per se.

Dahl's model was the first to be closely examined because of its author's eminence, but also because of its prominence in methodologies of organizations who regularly assess democracy's status in the world, such as Freedom House or V-Dem. While those think-tanks use modified, and in some cases vastly expanded, versions of Dahl's components of democracy, Dahl's imprimatur is still evident. Thus, at the very least, it was quickly determined that Dahl's model should not present many operationalizing difficulties, if any. But to ensure the selection was more rigorous, a search was conducted to assess whether better – or, at the very least, similarly suitable – theories could be found. One of the first approaches in this vein consisted of focusing on one of the broader categories of democracy one encounters in political science literature – deliberative democracy, participatory democracy, catallaxy, and so on[210]. One of the works more frequently consulted with regards to the various democracy models was David Held's aptly-titled *Models of Democracy*[211]. Held's categorization saw two broad branches of democracy. The first is classical models, such as Athens', the various early forms of republicanism (i.e., protective democracy) and liberal democracy. The second details the variants that emerged during the twentieth century, such as competitive elitism and pluralism – the latter of which Dahl falls under, in Held's classification. Broadly speaking, and in a statement that is acknowledged to be a vast generalization, the classical

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[206] *Ibid.*, 173.
[207] *Ibid.*
[208] *Ibid.*, 177.
[209] All quotations: *Ibid.* Emphasis ours.
[210] Cunningham, *Theories of Democracy: A Critical Introduction*, n.p.
[211] Held, *Models of Democracy*, n.p.

models certainly had the level of breadth that was sought for this thesis, but did not offer sufficient minutiae to be properly operationalized for the needs of the analysis at hand; conversely, those twentieth century variants of Held's were largely the reverse. In any case, another issue that was quickly found with the latter models is that each of those sub-categories of democracy itself plays host to a variety of well-known authors. By way of example, Giovanni Sartori is often mentioned in the same breath as Dahl when discussing the giants of political science and democratic theory. He is well known for his work on comparative politics, methodology and constitutional engineering; but with regards to democracy, he is most recognized for his work on political parties. His book on the topic, *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*, published in 1976, lays out his theory on the topic. Sartori "wanted to build a comprehensive theory of parties and party systems"[212]. Broadly speaking, Sartori proposed six 'types' of potential political parties in a democracy: 'one-party', 'hegemonic', 'two-party', 'moderate pluralism', 'polarised pluralism' and 'predominant party'[213]; and, "for decades Sartori's typology of party systems […] was a generally accepted 'framework'"[214]; in fact, his democratic party system types "became tenets in the party systems literature"[215]. This model is further refined in Sartori's 1987 work *The Theory of Democracy Revisited,* where he posits that democracy "permits leaders, as citizen representatives, to make and to enforce policies for the society as a whole" and that in order to attain the position of leader, "one must compete with others before an electorate who decides who is best suited to be placed in this role"[216]. Thus, Sartori espouses a view of democracy centered around what could be seen as a more extreme version of Schumpeter's "classic elitist conception of democracy as 'competitive leadership'"[217]; or, in any case, places a significant amount of importance on the quality of leadership within a democracy. Jean Blondel is another name that is often referenced amongst the creators of, or in this case contributors to, theories of democracy. Blondel's signature contribution is what he called the 'two-and-a-half' party system, reflecting what was often seen in three-party systems; namely, that those three-party systems "all have two major parties and a much smaller party […] there are in fact no three-party systems of this kind [three significant parties of about equal size] among Western democracies"[218].

This writer will readily admit the summary above is woefully lacking in attempting to convey the depth of Sartori's or Blondel's work, but it is nonetheless sufficient to illustrate the difficulties in

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[212] Klaus von Beyme, "Giovanni Sartori and Party Theory," in *Giovanni Sartori - Challenging Political Science*, ed. Michal Kubat and Martin Mejstrik (Rowan & Littlefield, 2019). Location 1544 (Kindle edition).
[213] Zim Nwokora and Riccardo Pelizzo, "Sartori Reconsidered: Toward a New Predominant Party System," *Political Studies* 62, no. 4 (2014): p. 824, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.12078.
[214] Beyme, "Giovanni Sartori and Party Theory." Location 1543.
[215] With the notable exception, the authors say, of his 'predominant party' system – hence the article. Nwokora and Pelizzo, "Sartori Reconsidered: Toward a New Predominant Party System," 824.
[216] Both quotes: Steven Delue, "Sartori, 'The Theory of Democracy Revisited' (Book Review)," *Social Science Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (June 1, 1988): p. 503.
[217] Danilo Zolo, "The Theory of Democracy Revisited (Book Review)," *Ethics* 99, no. 2 (1989): p. 431.
[218] Jean Blondel, "Party Systems and Patterns of Government in Western Democracies," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 1, no. 2 (1968): 180–203. Blondel's assertion was doubtless accurate at the time of his writing it, but no claims are made here as to the veracity of the statement today or for the intervening period. Text taken from: http://janda.org/c24/Readings/Blondel/blondel.html; therefore, page numbers are not available. The web page's author states that the text is "excerpted from 'Party Systems and Patterns of Government in Western Democracies'", and that it is "[r]eprinted by permission of the author and the Canadian Political Science Association".

operationalizing such models for the purposes of this thesis. In particular, Sartori's example is indeed useful in illustrating the dilemma encountered when poring through the more modern authors on democracy. While Sartori certainly offered the depth required for the proposed analysis, concentrating solely on political parties during said analysis would have considerably hobbled the final product due to having too narrow of a focus. Thus, Sartori's typology, while enormously influential, does not lend itself to the type of analysis this thesis requires, as it does not offer a concrete set of basic requirements a democracy must possess,to which Russian information operations could then be compared. Additionally, selecting any of those modern authors would have led us right back to square one in trying to justify Dahl, and with a model potentially much more difficult to operationalize than Dahl's; combining aspects of two or more authors' thinking into a model that could potentially be operationalized for this thesis seemed even more daunting, as this writer does not feel qualified in the least to embark on such syncretism.

In summary, and in what is again a considerable generalization, classical models possessed the breadth, but not the depth, required for use in this thesis' analysis; modern models – or, perhaps more accurately, their championing authors – were essentially the reverse. Dahl's model offered more than sufficient amounts of both; it had also demonstrated its viability for operationalization through various think-tanks like Freedom House and V-Dem, and was therefore ultimately retained.

2.7   Potential Criticisms

Before proceeding with the demonstration, potential criticisms towards it – or the dissertation in general – will first be addressed. The first potential criticism, already alluded to in previous parts of the dissertation, is that it is exceedingly difficult to concretely prove that real-world votes were actually, tangibly influenced by information campaigns. This writer will heartily acknowledge the nigh-impossibility of such a demonstration – but will simply state that such empirical evidence is not necessary to sustain the thesis' question. The question at hand aims to explore whether democratic system criteria as elaborated by one of political science's foremost visionaries were compromised by Russian information operations; not whether or not actual votes were switched as a result, which is not a prerequisite for establishing that criteria of democracy have been undermined.

A second potential criticism is that the Russians were (and are!) far from alone in operating in the information operations realm, be it in the 2016 US presidential elections or other democratic theaters worldwide. This would be difficult to dispute; indeed, one of the most salient illustrations of this state of affairs is the evolution of the provenance of disinformation from the 2016 US presidential election to the 2020 one. In fact, domestic disinformation far outstripped any manner of Russian content in the latter election[219] – which, however, is not to say the Russians weren't involved at all in 2020 (far from it[220]). One of the most striking illustrations of such is the Stop the

[219] Richard Stengel, "Domestic Disinformation Is a Growing Menace to America," *Time*, June 26, 2020, https://time.com/5860215/domestic-disinformation-growing-menace-america/, last accessed February 17, 2021. As the author tersely puts it, "I have news for you: the majority of disinformation is domestic, most of it is made right here in the USA."

[220] Julian E. Barnes, "Putin Authorized Russian Interference in 2020 Election, Report Says," *The New York Times*, March 16, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/16/us/politics/election-interference-russia-2020-assessment.html, last accessed March 17, 2021. For the actual report: National Intelligence Council, "Foreign Threats to the 2020 US Federal Elections," March 10, 2021,

Steal movement, which emerged following the 2020 United States presidential election. According to Joan Donovan, director of the Technology and Social Change Research Project at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School, Stop the Steal is nothing less than "a coordinated disinformation campaign that brings together an all-star cast of Trump's most loyal supporters"[221]. Trump himself played an absolutely outsize role in the spread of disinformation, to the point that, according to a widely-circulated statistic[222], his mere absence from Twitter (imposed, of course) led to a staggering 73% drop in the spread of online misinformation about election fraud[223]. A similar conclusion was reached by Cornell University researchers with regards to the spread of COVID-19 related disinformation[224]. Disinformation conduits need not even be state-sponsored[225]. So, while the author plainly acknowledges that the Russians are far from the only players in democracy-inhibiting disinformation, the thesis statement does not require them to be. Indeed, it only requires that they did compromise (as earlier defined) democracy's functioning as per Dahl's components of democracy listed earlier.

The final factor, which will be discussed here but will otherwise not be extensively covered in this dissertation, is acknowledged to have played – and continues to play – an outsize role; and that factor is the very business model of social media. Facebook, a company that started with an

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https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ICA-declass-16MAR21.pdf, last accessed March 17, 2021.

[221] Joan Donovan, "MAGA Isn't a Typical Protest Movement," The Atlantic, January 15, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/01/maga-isnt-a-normal-protest-movement/617685/, last accessed January 21, 2021.

[222] Lexi Lonas, "Election Misinformation Dropped 73 Percent Following Trump's Suspension from Twitter: Research," The Hill, January 16, 2021, https://thehill.com/policy/technology/534587-internet-misinformation-dropped-73-percent-following-trumps-suspension-from, last accessed January 21, 2021; Uncredited, "Study from Zignal Labs: Online Misinformation down 73 Percent since President Trump Was Blocked by Social Media Platforms - CBSN Live Video" (CBS News, January 18, 2021), https://www.cbsnews.com/live/video/20210118123944-study-from-zignal-labs-online-misinformation-down-73-percent-since-president-trump-was-blocked-by-social-media-platforms/, last accessed January 21, 2021; Dan Avery, "Misinformation about Election Fraud Plummeted 73 Percent a Week after Twitter Banned Trump," *The Daily Mail*, January 18, 2021, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-9161221/Misinformation-election-fraud-plummeted-73-percent-week-Twitter-banned-Trump.html, last accessed January 21, 2021; Aaron Rupar, "Trump's Twitter and Facebook Ban Is Already Working. One Stat Shows It.," *Vox*, January 16, 2021, https://www.vox.com/2021/1/16/22234971/trump-twitter-facebook-social-media-ban-election-misinformation-zignal, last accessed January 21, 2021.

[223] Elizabeth Dwoskin and Craig Timberg, "Misinformation Went down after Twitter Banned Trump," *The Washington Post*, January 16, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/16/misinformation-trump-twitter, last accessed January 21, 2021. "The new research by the San Francisco-based analytics firm [Zignal Labs] reported that conversations about election fraud dropped from 2.5 million mentions to 688,000 mentions across several social media sites in the week after Trump was banned from Twitter."

[224] Evanega et al., "Coronavirus Misinformation: Quantifying Sources and Themes in the COVID-19 'Infodemic.'"

[225] See, for example: Kevin Roose, "How The Epoch Times Created a Giant Influence Machine," *New York Times*, October 24, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/24/technology/epoch-times-influence-falun-gong.html, last accessed February 17, 2021. This, of course, is to say nothing of the behemoth that is Fox News; see, among others: Alex Wagner, "The Militia That Fox News Built," *The Atlantic*, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/10/the-militia-that-fox-built/616788/, last accessed October 24, 2020.

aim to 'move fast and break things'[226], is now compared to a literal Doomsday Machine[227]. Its relentless drive to prioritize scale and growth above all else[228], even to the detriment of accurate information[229], is now seen to be reverberating – in a decidedly negative manner – in a broad swathe of domains, not the least of which is the healthy functioning of democracies worldwide[230]. Facebook's corporate culture, in particular, seems to view veracity as an unfortunate – but nonetheless acceptable – casualty of its ferocious growth: "Everything the company does and chooses not to do flows from a single motivation: Zuckerberg's relentless desire for growth"; and, perhaps even more damning (or frightening, to those wishing to curb disinformation): "Facebook leadership has […] repeatedly weakened or halted many initiatives meant to clean up [disinformation] on the platform because doing so would undermine that growth"[231]. The debate of whether – of even if – social media companies should adopt more of an active editorial stance[232], and should be held liable for the content published through their platforms, has garnered impassioned coverage since the 2016 United States presidential elections. That discussion has experienced renewed intensity since the 2020 presidential election – where, to their credit, social media companies did begin to take (somewhat of) a more active stance, especially following the Capitol riots of January 2021. Although that debate's eventual resolution is most absolutely germane to countering disinformation, and therefore to the proper functioning of democracies worldwide, it will not be further discussed in this dissertation, as it is beside the point of the central question of the thesis, which is only to assess what role, if any, Russian information operations played in a scenario that occurred over four years ago. The aim here is only to highlight that it is entirely acknowledged that social media companies, most pointedly their financial structures and incentives, might very well be a part of the problem[233], and that there are numerous ways they could change their *modus operandi* – through regulation or otherwise – that could significantly hinder the spread of harmful information operations. Regardless, the choice of whether to use a

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[226] Hemant Taneja, "The Era of 'Move Fast and Break Things' Is Over," *Harvard Business Review*, January 22, 2019, https://hbr.org/2019/01/the-era-of-move-fast-and-break-things-is-over, last accessed January 27, 2021.

[227] Adrienne Lafrance, "Facebook Is a Doomsday Machine," *The Atlantic*, December 15, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2020/12/facebook-doomsday-machine/617384/, last accessed December 17, 2020.

[228] Karen Hao, "He Got Facebook Hooked on AI. Now He Can't Fix Its Misinformation Addiction," *MIT Technology Review*, March 11, 2021, https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/03/11/1020600/facebook-responsible-ai-misinformation/, last accessed March 17, 2021.

[229] It is wholeheartedly acknowledged that the accuracy of the information posted on platforms is of little to no relevance and/or import to them.

[230] The phenomenon even has a name: the "attention economy". Tristan Harris, "How to Reform the Attention Economy Business Model of Big Tech | MIT Technology Review," *MIT Technology Review*, January 10, 2021, https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/01/10/1015934/facebook-twitter-youtube-big-tech-attention-economy-reform/, last accessed March 17, 2021.

[231] Both quotes from: Hao, "He Got Facebook Hooked on AI. Now He Can't Fix Its Misinformation Addiction". See also: Jeff Horwitz and Deepa Seetharaman, "Facebook Executives Shut Down Efforts to Make the Site Less Divisive," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 26, 2020, https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-it-encourages-division-top-executives-nixed-solutions-11590507499, last accessed March 17, 2021.

[232] To be clear, doing nothing constitutes an editorial decision in and of itself.

[233] Some newer models even include the platforms as one of the three core components of online disinformation, in a model that can be summarised as: Bad Actors -> Platforms -> Audiences. See: Eileen Culloty and Jane Suiter, *Disinformation and Manipulation in Digital Media: Information Pathologies* (Routledge, 2021), p. 10.

social media platform for good or ill still rests with the end user. As Anne Applebaum and Peter Pomerantsev write (otherwise not mincing words about the status of American democracy and its relationship with social media – "How to Put Out Democracy's Dumpster Fire"), "Not that Facebook bears sole responsibility. Hyper-partisanship and conspiracy thinking predate social media, and message manipulation is as old as politics"[234].

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[234] Anne Applebaum and Peter Pomerantsev, "How to Put Out Democracy's Dumpster Fire," *The Atlantic*, March 8, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/04/the-internet-doesnt-have-to-be-awful/618079/, last accessed March 17, 2021.

3 ARGUMENTATION

As previously discussed, this portion will endeavour to establish links between Russian information operations and Dahl's components of democracy – specifically, how the former potentially ran counter to the latter – using the 2016 United States presidential election as a case study. The section will follow the same order as Dahl did in his book, which was also replicated in this dissertation's section on Dahl: *criteria*, followed by *institutions*, and then *conditions*.

A few additional methodological notes before proceeding: First, it is expected that some of Dahl's components will be found to have been only minimally impacted, if at all, by Russian information operations, the anticipated cause being that in most of those cases, a particular element is enshrined in law, and therefore unassailable – directly, anyhow – by information operations. Second, the reader might also notice some overlap between the various components, in the sense that some of the Russian information operations examples used in the demonstration would seem to echo across more than one of Dahl's components. Such an observation is to be expected, especially in the case of criteria and institutions. Recall that, in Dahl's vision, institutions exist to ensure criteria are met. A second glance at Fig. 2 will serve to confirm two things: the first is that there are indeed several commonalities in concept between institutions and criteria, and that criteria are often associated with more than one institution; in other words, an attack on a criterion would also, by definition, constitute an attack on the associated institution(s), as the former undergirds the latter. The second is that some of the IRA's actions could thus be interpreted to impact more than one institution and/or criteria concurrently, and could be recycled between components throughout the demonstration. Therefore, while it is acknowledged that there can be some instances in which a given IRA action could be seen to impact more than one component, the examples used below will have constituted, to the best of this writer's ability, the most appropriate choices for the selected component. That said, examples will not be recycled, but only quickly cross-referenced as applicable. Another related point is that, despite the risk of repetition, every one of Dahl's components discussed above will be analyzed – if only quickly in some cases – in the interests of maintaining a systematic, thorough approach. Finally, it should be reiterated[235] that the numerous differences between theory and practice with regards to democracy and its models are entirely acknowledged. Dahl himself indeed states that "[i]n every democratic country a substantial gap exists between actual and ideal democracy"[236]; however, while acknowledging said gap, the reader should know that this thesis will in any case remain firmly planted in the theoretical realm. Venturing beyond theory would not only be of little relevance to the methodology adopted for this thesis, but would introduce a slew of variables that would render the analysis vastly out of scope.

In order to more easily tally the results, each of Dahl's component will be assessed as Compromised, Not Compromised[237], or Undetermined, with results compiled at the end of each

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[235] See *supra* p. 28.

[236] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 44. A corollary is however highlighted in the very following line, where Dahl exhorts readers to think about how to make democratic countries *more* democratic, by hewing them closer to the ideal than they already are.

[237] To be clear, a Not Compromised verdict only indicates that no evidence was found showing that the IRA's actions during their campaign as part of the 2016 elections compromised the associated component of Dahl's; it should not, however, be interpreted to mean the author is stating unequivocally that the component in question was left entirely intact.

respective component. The method for determining whether a component was Compromised or otherwise will simply consist of taking the respective component of Dahl's and juxtaposing it to Russian information operations tactics in the same realm; the final step will then be to ascertain if Russian actions as part of their information operations campaign during the 2016 United States presidential election went against said component's precepts or contents. The Russian campaign was generally quite consistent, so the examples of Russian actions retained for use throughout the thesis can be considered representative of the broader spectrum; few, if any, countervailing examples were found through the research process.

3.1   Dahl's Criteria for democracy

To recap, Dahl's criteria aim to identify those characteristics an association would have to possess if said association is to ensure all members can equally participate in its decision-making process. In short, democracy must provide opportunities for Effective Participation, Voting Equality, Enlightened Understanding, Control of the Agenda, and Inclusion of Adults; they will also be examined in this order.

3.1.1   Effective Participation

This criterion states that all members must have equal and effective opportunities to make their views known before a policy is adopted. Therefore, its essence is largely legal, and thus difficult to directly challenge via information operations (other than by attempting to convince a given population of said criterion's obsolescence or irrelevance); that said, some elements of IRA material and actions can be said to have weakened it. The most egregious examples have to do with the normative effect Russian propaganda – specifically troll messaging – had on the public discourse; in other words, how Russian messaging through various means (not exclusive to social media, in this case) made more extreme or hard-line viewpoints seem more mainstream than they actually were by artificially boosting their online presence. "By increasing the visibility or salience of some messages but not others in the ecosystem, the trolls produced an amplifying effect […] By signaling social media users that some sentiments were more widely endorsed than was actually the case, they invited a normative effect"[238]. Reinforcing this effect is what is called 'illusory truth' in psychology – that is, the tendency for repetition to foster belief in a given statement's veracity[239]. There is indeed evidence of this exact phenomenon occurring, which Hall Jamieson calls "reweight[ing] the communication environment"[240]. Russian trolls and bots effected such a reweighting by "increasing the visibility of existing anti-Clinton messages and heightening perceptions that content congenial with their aims was 'liked' and 'shared'"[241], which in concrete terms usually meant that recipients of Russian messaging would overestimate the extent and intensity of anti-Clinton sentiment in their communities.

Where such a phenomenon comes into play with regards to the criterion at hand is that increasing the *perceived* popularity and/or accuracy of a given viewpoint can lead susceptible

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[238] Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*, 69.

[239] Lisa K Fazio et al., "Knowledge Does Not Protect Against Illusory Truth," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 144, no. 5 (2015): 993–1002, https://doi.org/10.1037/xge0000098.supp.

[240] Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*, 54.

[241] *Ibid.*

individuals to self-censor. "Changing the relative amount of anti-Clinton content or negative emotion in the feeds of susceptible individuals would have created weighting, contagion, and *spiral-of-silence effects*"[242]. Such an outcome would thereby restrict – or eliminate altogether – those individuals' ability to meaningfully participate in the public discourse, thereby violating the first of Dahl's criteria. That said, it is acknowledged that, while scholarly research on the impact of communications would seem to indicate such an outcome is likely (or, at the very least, certainly within the realm of the possible)[243], *proving* such an outcome did occur is nigh impossible. Hall Jamieson, in *Cyberwar*, introduces the reader to communications concepts that could have affected the election result in the second chapter, introducing and discussing priming, agenda setting, framing and contagion, among others. But ultimately, even she doesn't attempt to get into the minds of voters who, according to the analysis above, could have self-censored due to different opinions' seeming popularity. And so, some aspects of the IRA's campaign would seem to run counter to this criterion of Dahl's, in that the very presence of online actors inflating a given viewpoint's perceived popularity could lead to self-censorship; however, any concrete impact on self-censorship – or indeed, self-censorship in itself – is exceedingly difficult to measure. Therefore, this criterion is to be slotted in the Undetermined column.

3.1.2 *Voting Equality*

This criterion states that all members of an association must be provided with an "equal and effective opportunity"[244] to vote, and that all votes must be counted as equal (i.e. no one vote weighted more heavily than any other). If the second portion of that definition (all votes counted as equal) was not – and arguably could not realistically be – targeted by the IRA, the first portion, 'equal and effective opportunity', most certainly could. Evidence indicates that it indeed was, by way of a combination of voter mobilization (in the case of conservatives) and, perhaps more relevant to this criterion, voter suppression. Those efforts were significant enough to lead a report to note that while conservative voters "were actively encouraged to get behind Trump's campaign", most other voters targeted by the IRA "were encouraged to boycott the election, abstain from voting for Clinton, or to spread cynicism about participating in the election in general"[245]. (This last also strongly impacts one of Dahl's conditions, and will thus be revisited.) Another report indicated that the IRA "deliberately targeted nonwhite voters, particularly African Americans, by promoting their racial/ethnic identity, then suppressing their votes when closer to the elections"[246]. The most egregious IRA bias was towards African-Americans; "[t]he Committee found that no single group of Americans was targeted by IRA information operatives more than African-Americans. By far, race and related issues were the preferred target"[247] of the IRA's campaign. The IRA Facebook group Blacktivist's social media success – one of the IRA's top-performing, in fact – was already discussed; recall the previously-cited 11.2 million engagements it generated. But the IRA's focus on African-Americans extended to other platforms as well; five out of the IRA's top ten Instagram accounts pandered to African-American audiences; Twitter content often

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[242] *Ibid.*, 69. Emphasis ours.

[243] See the whole second chapter of Jamieson, titled "A Theory of Communication That Posits Effects".

[244] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 51.

[245] Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018," 19.

[246] Kim, "Uncover: Strategies and Tactics of Russian Interference in US Elections," 8.

[247] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2," 6.

focused on divisive issues of racial significance, and a full 96 per cent of the IRA's YouTube activity focused on issues of racial significance and police brutality[248].

A great portion of those messages, especially as the election drew near, were sent with the aim of suppressing the African-American vote, along with the votes of other traditionally left-leaning communities. "It is evident that the campaigns sought to demobilize African Americans, LGBT, and liberal voters"[249]. One of the manners in which this was attempted was through attacks on Hillary Clinton via organic posts. One of the streams of content for the LGBT community was intended to push a narrative that Hillary Clinton supported Muslims (who were insinuated to be anti-gay)[250]; Muslims themselves were also on the receiving end of IRA vote suppression messages at times, with the "United Muslims of America" Facebook account posting: "American Muslims [are] boycotting elections today, most of the American Muslim voters refuse to vote for Hillary Clinton because she wants to continue the war on Muslims in the middle east and voted yes for invading Iraq"[251]. But again, the bulk of the voter demobilization message was aimed at the African-American community, particularly through the Blacktivist account, in the last three months of the election. Some of the statements from Blacktivist included "NO LIVES MATTER TO HILLARY CLINTON. ONLY VOTES MATTER TO HILLARY CLINTON" (29th of October 2016); the aforementioned Jill Stein endorsement; or most strikingly, "NOT VOTING is a way to exercise our rights" (3rd of November 2016)[252]. Another manner in which voter suppression was enacted (albeit not exclusively towards the African American community, in this case) consists of what researchers call "malicious misdirection": "Twitter-based text-to-vote scams […] tweets designed to create confusion about voting rules"[253], for example by encouraging people to text their votes[254].

The Senate-commissioned report by Howard et al offers more granular information on the tailored messages the IRA pushed to each constituency. The ones most relevant to the criterion at hand are found below:

- African-Americans: The IRA's effort with this group concentrated on "divert[ing] their political energy" by stoking anger at the structural inequalities suffered by African-Americans, including "police violence, poverty, and disproportionate levels of incarceration"[255]. In the majority of the content in the dataset examined by the researchers, the IRA's consistent message was that the best way to advance African-American interests was to boycott the election and invest the time and resources elsewhere[256]. This is significant in that, historically, black voters will overwhelmingly vote for the Democratic Party. According to a Pew review of voting data from 1992 –

[248] *Ibid.*, 6–7.
[249] Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018," 34.
[250] *Ibid.*
[251] District Court for the District of Columbia, "Indictment," 18.
[252] Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018," 34.
[253] Diresta et al., "The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 8.
[254] Nicholas Thompson and Issie Lapowsky, "How Russian Trolls Used Meme Warfare to Divide America," *WIRED*, December 17, 2018, https://www.wired.com/story/russia-ira-propaganda-senate-report/, last accessed April 1, 2021.
[255] Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018," 19.
[256] *Ibid.*

2016, "87% of black voters identify with the Democratic Party or lean Democratic"[257]. This statistic alone goes a long way towards explaining the IRA's unrelenting focus on African-Americans. The IRA's goal with the community was to dissuade them from voting by stoking anger at race-related issues, and then encouraging them to focus on those issues instead of voting;

- Conservative voters: As a general rule, the IRA's actions towards this group can be divided in three categories: pushing patriotic, anti-immigrant content; eliciting outrage "with posts about liberal appeasement of 'others' at the expense of US citizens"; and encouraging the group to vote for Trump[258].

With regards to advertisements in particular, research by a digital advertisement expert determined that the IRA ran no less than three separate voter suppression campaigns on Facebook and Instagram: "a) turnout suppression/election boycott; b) third-candidate promotion; c) candidate attack, all targeting nonwhites or likely Clinton voters"[259]. The sentence immediately following the one just quoted is especially indicative of IRA bias: "No evidence suggests the voter suppression was employed on the other side of the political spectrum, however"[260].

It is worth noting that another aspect of Voting Equality very well could have suffered a further, significant impact had it not been for Russian benevolence (such as it is). Recall that the scope of 'information operations' retained for this thesis was two-fold: first, media-centric operations, but also information-related cyber operations, thus adopting a more comprehensive view – akin to Russian doctrine's – of information operations. As previously stated, the Russian information warfare toolkit is much broader than the West's, and cyber attacks constitute a perfectly legitimate application of information warfare according to Russian doctrine. And viewed in this light, actual votes, vote tallies, or voting access very well could be compromised by information operations – of the cyber kind, that is.

As it happens, the Russians did indeed target voting infrastructure, in all 50 states no less[261] – although much of those activities were more akin to reconnaissance than actual compromise. But some could have had significantly greater impact. For example, the state of Illinois experienced in June 2016 what is the first known breach of state election infrastructure by Russian actors during the 2016 election[262]. Illinois election officials revealed in August 2016 that Russians had managed to access the voter registration records of up to 200,000 voters[263], and further investigation revealed

[257] Pew Research Center, "Party Affiliation among U.S. Voters: 1992-2016," September 13, 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/09/13/2-party-affiliation-among-voters-1992-2016/, last accessed March 23, 2021.
[258] Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018," 19.
[259] Kim, "Uncover: Strategies and Tactics of Russian Interference in US Elections," 2.
[260] *Ibid.*
[261] David E. Sanger and Catie Edmondson, "Russia Targeted Election Systems in All 50 States, Report Finds," *The New York Times*, July 25, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/25/us/politics/russian-hacking-elections.html, last accessed March 17, 2021.
[262] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 1: Russian Efforts Against Election Infrastructure," 22.
[263] Rick Pearson, "Illinois Election Officials Say Hack Yielded Information on 200,000 Voters," *Chicago Tribune*, August 29, 2016, https://www.chicagotribune.com/politics/ct-illinois-state-board-of-elections-hack-update-met-0830-20160829-story.html, last accessed March 17, 2021.

"Russian cyber actors were in a position to delete or change voter data"[264]. This is of considerable consequence to the criterion at hand, given that American voters must be – correctly – registered in order to cast a ballot. "A functioning registration system is central to American elections"[265], according to Lawrence Norden, deputy director of the Brennan Center for Justice at the NYU School of Law. In addition, Vol. 1 of the Senate report offers some details regarding a second Russian breach during the summer of 2016, in an unidentified state (referred to as State 4 in the report), where the actor was successful at obtaining a county employee's credentials through a phishing scam. Those credentials were then used in June 2016 to infiltrate the voter registration database of the State. In this case, "[t]he actor used the credentials to access the database and was in a position to modify county, but not statewide, data"[266]. Russians also penetrated the network of a company whose software and devices are used to confirm voter registration (and therefore access) in eight states, including Florida, New York, Virginia and Illinois[267]. A change to voter registration records at the state level could significantly compromise access to voting for those affected, and thus undermine Voting Equality.

Expert testimony confirmed that one of the intelligence community's greatest worry with regards to these Russian cyber activities was precisely the potential for the scrambling of voter registration databases. While individual voting machines are infamously vulnerable[268], effecting a wholesale change in voting outcomes is still "incredibly difficult"[269]; therefore, a vector more likely to succeed in disrupting elections, specifically Voting Equality, lies in tampering with voter registration databases. Granted, in cases where a voter's documentation and voter registration are mismatched, most states would likely supply a provisional ballot[270], but such a disruption on a larger scale could significantly undermine both the process of voting, as well as voters' confidence in its integrity.

The issue with such an argument, of course, is that it remains, as far as is known, purely in the hypothetical realm (with regards to the 2016 US presidential election). Despite having had the option available to them – in some states, anyway – there is currently no evidence the Russians tampered with voter registration records, changed votes or tallies, or compromised actual voting machines[271]. In summary: The Russians manoeuvred so that they were in a position to carry out

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[264] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 1: Russian Efforts Against Election Infrastructure," 22.

[265] Matthew Cole et al., "Top-Secret NSA Report Details Russian Hacking Effort Days Before 2016 Election," The Intercept, June 5, 2017, https://theintercept.com/2017/06/05/top-secret-nsa-report-details-russian-hacking-effort-days-before-2016-election/, last accessed March 18, 2021.

[266] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 1: Russian Efforts Against Election Infrastructure," 34. The quoted sentence is itself quoted in the report, and is indicated as originating from a Cyber Threat Intelligence Integration Center (CTIIC) document from the 2nd of November 2016. Efforts to locate said document were unsuccessful.

[267] Cole et al., "Top-Secret NSA Report Details Russian Hacking Effort Days Before 2016 Election." The name of the company is VR Systems, based in Florida.

[268] Ben Wofford, "How to Hack an Election in 7 Minutes," *POLITICO Magazine*, August 5, 2016, https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/08/2016-elections-russia-hack-how-to-hack-an-election-in-seven-minutes-214144/, last accessed March 19, 2021.

[269] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 1: Russian Efforts Against Election Infrastructure," 36.

[270] *Ibid.*, 37.

[271] *Ibid.*, 3. See also the whole of Section VI in the report, appropriately – and conspicuously – titled: "NO EVIDENCE OF CHANGED VOTES OR MANIPULATED VOTE TALLIES."

what could have been a crippling attack on Dahl's Voting Equality through voter registration in at least two states and in seven more through software – but all available evidence indicates they refrained from posing any such action. An even graver attack on Voting Equality (than had already been executed through voter suppression/mobilization efforts) could have been carried out; the only reason it wasn't – and this can hardly be overstated – is because of Russian restraint in using capabilities they did possess. However, even if potentially crippling cyber attacks were not carried out, the very perception that information operations have been deployed can also have a deleterious effect[272]. In the case of perceived tampering with election machinery (irrespective of the veracity of said perception), that effect can go so far as to compromise trust in the integrity of elections. This last, while not necessarily affecting the criterion at hand, does impact other components of democracy as envisioned by Dahl – and thus will be revisited in a later section.

In summary, due to wide-ranging voter suppression and mobilization efforts, this criterion finds itself Compromised.

3.1.3   Enlightened Understanding

Of all of Dahl's various components of democracy, this one is undoubtedly one of the most liable to be affected by information operations. Dahl defines this criterion as: affording every member, within reasonable time constraints, "equal and effective opportunities" to learn about alternative policies and their likely consequences[273]. Such terrain is fertile ground for disinformation, and this indeed is one of the arenas in which the Russians were most active.

The most obvious manner in which Russian information operations compromised American citizens' Enlightened Understanding is through the widespread dissemination of falsehoods. Every news consumer only has a finite amount of time to dedicate to news consumption (a readily accessible means of fulfilling the criterion's obligation to "learn […] about the relevant alternative policies and their likely consequences"[274]). Injecting a significant quantity of patently false or half-true material into the news stream can only make access to reliable news sources more difficult – and this is certainly something the Russians did aplenty. A RAND corporation report memorably called the Russian propaganda model a "Firehose of Falsehood", and for good reason; two (of four) of the distinctive features the researchers ascribe to the modern Russian model are "High-volume and multichannel", and "Rapid, continuous, and repetitive"[275]. The report lists several reasons this high volume severely compromises a target audience's perception of the truth (or, Enlightened Understanding): "experimental psychology literature suggests that, all other things being equal, messages received in greater volume and from more sources will be more persuasive"[276]; but there are several other benefits for Russia in adopting such a strategy. First, "high volume can consume the attention and other available bandwidth of potential audiences, drowning out other competing messages"; high volumes can also overwhelm

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[272] Aleksandr Fisher, "Perceptions of Russian Interference in U.S. Elections Matter as Much as the Actual Involvement" (Foreign Policy Research Institute, May 9, 2019), https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/05/perceptions-of-russian-interference-in-u-s-elections-matter-as-much-as-the-actual-involvement/, last accessed November 19, 2020.

[273] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 51.

[274] *Ibid.*

[275] Paul and Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It," 2.

[276] *Ibid.*, 3.

undesired messages in a "flood of disagreement"; a variety of channels increases the chances that a message is transmitted to a targeted audience; and as has been mentioned previously, "receiving a message via multiple modes and from multiple sources increases the message's perceived credibility, especially if a disseminating source is one with which an audience member identifies"[277]. The researchers also note that, as per experimental psychology literature, "first impressions are very resilient: An individual is more likely to accept the first information received on a topic and then favor this information when faced with conflicting messages"; additionally, "repetition leads to familiarity, and familiarity leads to acceptance." Other findings that buttress the idea that a firehose of falsehoods compromises Enlightened Understanding include that if an audience member is only distantly interested in a topic, that member is more likely to accept oft-repeated messaging ("familiarity brought about by repetition") as correct; and when processing information, "consumers may save time and energy by using a frequency heuristic, that is, favoring information they have heard more frequently"[278]. The IRA also conducted Search Engine Optimization, with a full department dedicated to the task[279], which further contributed to its material's accessibility and spread. Further poisoning the well is the fact that, as has been discussed earlier, false news tends to spread faster – much faster, in some cases[280] – and will regularly produce significantly higher levels of social media engagement[281]. All of the above illustrate why a Russian strategy of mass propaganda production can distort, in several ways, an audience's Enlightened Understanding.

Although this dissertation has focused a great deal on the IRA, in this case a closer look at RT's activities is also warranted. For context, RT is no slouch in the media scene. It is – generously – funded by the Russian government: its budget went from $23 million in 2005 (year of its founding – back when it was called Russia Today, the origins of its current acronym), to $80 million in 2007; then $120 million in 2008, and $380 million in 2011[282]. RT's budget remained at $300 million per year as of 2016[283]. It was the first news outlet to reach one billion views on YouTube, a feat it achieved in 2003; it could boast of 2.2 million subscribers to its YouTube channel in 2018 (4.19 million at the time of this writing), and of a weekly TV viewership in the United States numbering 11 million[284]. And spew falsehoods it did: for example, its television arm broadcast segments to the effect that "Clinton and ISIS [were] funded by [the] same money"[285], which was viewed 1.3

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[277] *Ibid*. All material and quotations in this sentence from p. 3 of the report.

[278] *Ibid.*, 4. (Both quotes)

[279] District Court for the District of Columbia, "Indictment," 5.

[280] Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, "The Spread of True and False News Online"; Craig Silverman, "This Analysis Shows How Viral Fake Election News Stories Outperformed Real News On Facebook," *BuzzFeed News*, November 16, 2016, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook, last accessed March 21, 2021.

[281] Miles Parks, "Misleading Facts Fuel COVID-19 Misinformation, Evade Social Media Moderation," *NPR*, March 25, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/03/25/980035707/lying-through-truth-misleading-facts-fuel-vaccine-misinformation, last accessed March 31, 2021.

[282] Van Herpen, *Putin's Propaganda Machine: Soft Power and Russian Foreign Policy*, 89. YouTube now applies a disclaimer to RT's videos stating that "RT is funded in whole or in part by the Russian government."

[283] Paul and Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It," 2.

[284] Statistics in this sentence from: Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*, 62.

[285] RT, "'Clinton & ISIS Funded by Same Money' - Assange Interview w/John Pilger (Courtesy Darthmouth Films)," November 4, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9xbokQO4M0, last

million times on RT's YouTube channel as of this writing; or that, following her bout with pneumonia during the campaign, Clinton's health was failing[286]. In fact, its bias is so blatant that it was forced to register as an agent of the Russian Government with the United States Department of Justice[287].

If RT was poisoning the traditional news streams, the IRA certainly did the same on social media channels – though not necessarily through outright lying, but rather through deceit and manipulation. The IRA has often been called a 'troll factory', and the systematic way in which the agency approached the dissemination of falsehoods does seem to vindicate the use of the moniker. One former employee called the atmosphere Orwellian: "I immediately felt like a character in the book '1984' […] a place where you have to write that white is black and black is white. Your first feeling […] was that you were in some kind of factory that turned lying, telling untruths, into an industrial assembly line"[288]. In the early phases of its campaign, the IRA certainly did push outright false content. On the 11th of September 2014, the IRA used Twitter and YouTube videos to spread a hoax about a supposed fire at the Columbian Chemicals plant in Centerville, Louisiana, for which ISIS had purportedly claimed responsibility[289]. The hoax was well coordinated, in typical IRA fashion; "[d]ozens of journalists, media outlets and politicians, from Louisiana to New York City, found their Twitter accounts inundated with messages about the disaster"[290]. A few months later, on the 13th of December, several of the same IRA Twitter accounts used in the chemical plant fire hoax pushed a (false) story about an Ebola outbreak in Atlanta, while a different set of IRA Twitter accounts pushed a (just as false) story about a police shooting an unarmed black woman, also in Atlanta[291]. The stories even featured coordinated hashtags: #EbolaInAtlanta for the former (which did trend in the city, albeit briefly) and #shockingmurderinatlanta for the latter[292]. The above being said, by and large, the IRA adopted a different strategy for the 2016 United States elections – it played the long game, starting early and cultivating audiences that in some cases grew to considerable sizes. As has been discussed in a previous section of the thesis, such a strategy implied largely – though not entirely! – veering away from the serial lying that typically characterized the IRA's output[293]. IRA agents instead aimed to build credibility and grow

accessed March 18, 2021. Note the date of broadcast, which was the 4th of November; in other words, four days before the 2016 election.

[286] RT, "US Media Accused of Burying Concerns over Clinton Health," September 13, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjATqbDcvFY, last accessed March 18, 2021.

[287] Devlin Barrett and David Filipov, "RT Agrees to Register as an Agent of the Russian Government," *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/rt-agrees-to-register-as-an-agent-of-the-russian-government/2017/11/09/bd62f9a2-c558-11e7-aae0-cb18a8c29c65_story.html, last accessed March 18, 2021; Josh Gerstein, "DOJ Told RT to Register as Foreign Agent Partly Because of Alleged 2016 Election Interference," Politico, December 21, 2017, https://www.politico.com/story/2017/12/21/russia-today-justice-department-foreign-agent-election-interference-312211, last accessed March 18, 2021.

[288] Anton Troianovski, "A Former Russian Troll Speaks: 'It Was like Being in Orwell's World,'" *The Washington Post*, February 17, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/17/a-former-russian-troll-speaks-it-was-like-being-in-orwells-world/, last accessed March 18, 2021.

[289] Chen, "The Agency."

[290] *Ibid.*

[291] *Ibid.*

[292] *Ibid.*

[293] Of course, this last statement sidesteps the one central, blatant lie of the IRA's, which enabled this whole arm of the campaign: the multiple manufactured personae.

audiences by appearing as everyday citizens posting mostly innocuous, inoffensive material – all the better to deliver strategically-timed payload content.

One way the IRA undermined Dahl's Enlightened Understanding is by slowly ensnaring audience members into consuming more of its content by stoking outrage, thereby warping their perspectives by inflaming passions, but also by same token discouraging consumption of information from alternative sources by building informational echo chambers. "The IRA influence operatives […] created fake online personas with a specific, readily discernible social agendas in order to attract similarly minded Facebook users. The operatives then used divisive content to anger and enrage the curated audience"[294]. The strategy generally consisted of "appealing to the narratives common within a specific group, such as supporting veterans and police, or pride in race and heritage, as a clickbait strategy to drive traffic to the Facebook and Instagram pages the IRA [had] set up"[295] – at which point the audience was further cultivated with material intended to elicit outrage.

In the world of social media, anger can be quite potent – researchers found that of all emotions, anger was far and away the one that spread the fastest and farthest through a social network[296]. Anger is a strikingly effective social media audience builder[297], and the IRA made considerable use of it. Even more problematic for Dahl's Enlightened Understanding is the fact that, on social media, anger often begets anger: in a different study, researchers partnered with Facebook and surreptitiously tweaked the newsfeeds of nearly 700,000 users for a week – unbeknownst to them. The tweaks in question consisted of increasing the number of positive stories some of the participants were exposed to, while others were exposed to more negative stories. The interesting finding is that, in every case, "Facebook users altered their own behavior to match their new apparent reality, becoming cheerier or angrier in the process. But the effect was most pronounced among those whose newsfeeds had turned negative"[298].

In addition to the use of anger to build and cultivate audiences, the IRA shrewdly developed brands by building presences across several social media channels, steadily growing audiences through a combination of paid ads, partnerships, influencers, and link-sharing. With regards to Enlightened Understanding, the key point here is that these *media mirages*, as a report prepared for the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence calls them, are "interlinked information ecosystems designed to *immerse and surround* targeted audiences"[299]. The report uses the IRA's Black Matters brand – or, as the report refers to it, property – to illustrate how such media mirages function. The brand, launched on June 8th, 2015, had a presence on several social media platforms: Google+ (along with Google Ads), YouTube, Facebook (along with Facebook Ads and Facebook Stickers), Instagram (28,466 followers, 1,929,855 engagements – a not-insignificant number), Twitter, and even Soundcloud, where they hosted a podcast called "SKWAD 55"[300]. (It is worth pointing out that all of the above was borne out of one of the IRA's

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[294] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2," 46.

[295] Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018," 19.

[296] Singer and Brooking, *LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media.*, 174.

[297] *Ibid.*, 175.

[298] *Ibid.*, 174.

[299] Diresta et al., "The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 42. Emphasis ours.

[300] *Ibid.*

"midsize efforts"[301].) According to the report, Black Matters was but one of the IRA's *thirty* properties aiming to engage with the Black community. But the key point with regards to the criterion being examined is how those properties were linked, and how they surrounded their audiences. The researchers who authored the report compiled a map of all those cross-linked properties aimed at African-Americans, seen below.

FIGURE 2 – An IRA "media mirage"[302].
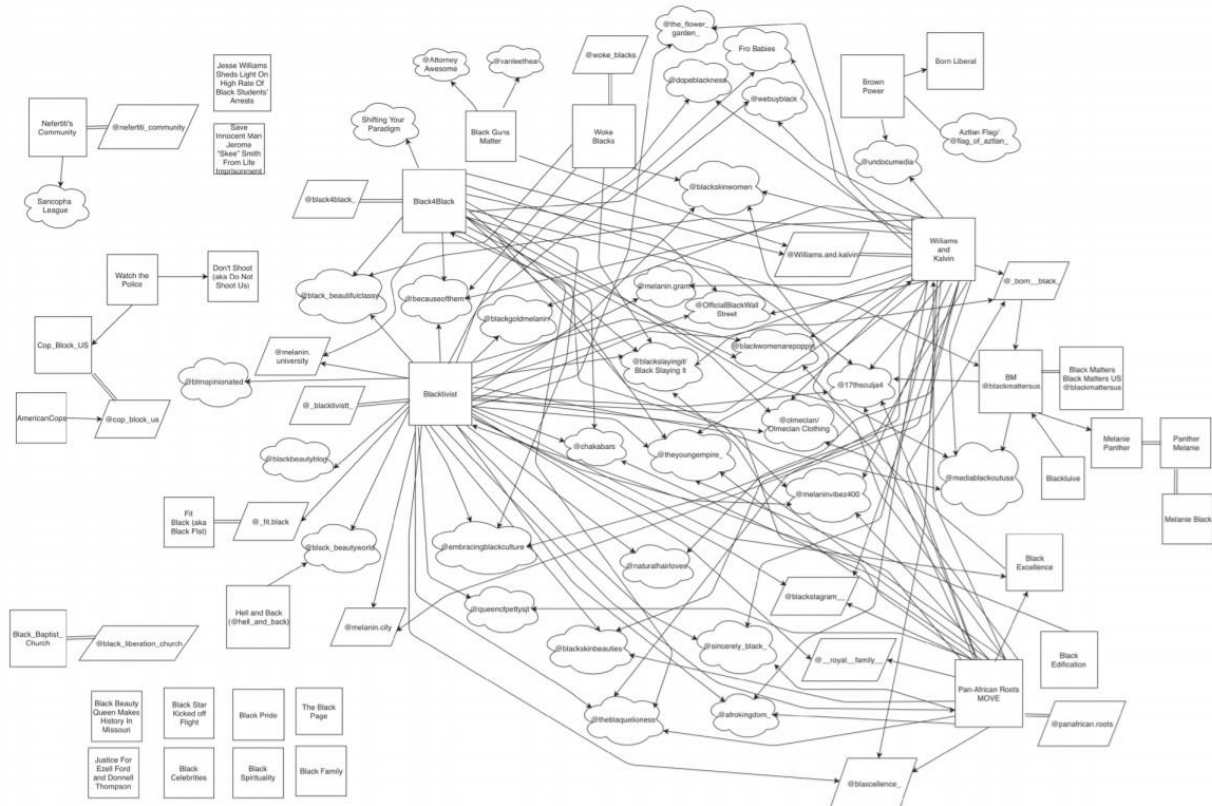
A "media mirage" of interlinked Facebook Pages and Instagram accounts targeting Black Americans. Squares are IRA-owned Facebook Pages, parallelograms are IRA-owned Instagram accounts. Cloud shapes indicate non-IRA-attributed accounts including authentic Black media. A larger version with easily-readable page names is available online at newknowledge.com/IRAfigures

The URL above is no longer active, and a higher-quality version of the image could therefore not be procured. However, reading the actual names of the IRA properties is not a requirement for appreciating how complex the web of direction and redirection was. And so, "[a]n individual who followed or liked one of the Black-community-targeted IRA Pages would have been exposed to content from dozens more, as well as *carefully-curated* authentic Black media

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[301] *Ibid.*

[302] *Ibid.*, 45.

content that was *ideologically or thematically aligned with the Internet Research Agency messaging*"[303].

The principal takeaway from this section is that the IRA had a significant impact on its audience's ability to broaden its perspectives – or at least, its avenues for seeking alternative sources of information. It did so by manipulating its audience through entirely fabricated identities, preying on aspects of the human psyche (the power of anger), injecting angst in conversations and stoking outrage in its followers, and developing elaborate online brands with intricate cross-referencing webs. The end result towards Dahl's Enlightened Understanding is that audiences ensnared by the IRA's social media properties found themselves at a disadvantage with regards to access to different sources of information, due to the increasing silo effect they would find themselves subjected to. This silo effect, to say nothing of those audiences' warped states of mind due to their artificially enflamed emotions, can do little but to compromise their ability to educate themselves as per the criterion under review (at any rate, the combination of silo effect and enflamed emotions certainly won't *improve* said ability); Enlightened Understanding is thus found to be Compromised.

3.1.4   Control of the Agenda

Dahl defines this criterion as such: members of an association must have the "exclusive opportunity"[304] to decide what and how matters get added to the association's agenda, and that the democratic process never ends: members always have the option to change the association's policies, as dictated by the preceding three criteria. Like the Voting Equality criterion above, this one at first glance would appear to reside more in the realm of the legal, and therefore difficult to impinge on through the use of information operations. Indeed, a representative democracy rests on a system whereby voters elect fellow citizens to act in their best interests at a central institution where all such representatives regularly convene. Erecting and maintaining such a system implies drafting and enacting innumerable laws, starting with a country's constitution. In other words, exactly which matters are brought up and discussed at those meetings of the representatives is in theory decided by the voters via proxy, and the process for selecting those representatives is enshrined in laws – some of which are foundational at that – and therefore, rather out of the reach of information operations.

The above being said, there still is a case to be made for how information operations could impact agenda-setting, and that is through manipulation and redirection of a target audience's attention, thereby constituting an attack on the 'exclusive' portion of the 'exclusive opportunity' (of an audience to dictate the agenda) Dahl was referring to. The IRA's prolific sockpuppeting activity discussed in the theory portion is one manner in which this particular attack was carried out; the IRA "used a variety of fake accounts to infiltrate political discussion in liberal and conservative communities, including black activist communities, in order to exacerbate social divisions and influence the agenda"[305]. There is, however, one set of examples that even more powerfully illustrates how Russian intervention manipulated the public's attention in favor of the Trump campaign.

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[303] *Ibid.* Emphasis ours.
[304] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 51.
[305] Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018," 39.

One of the better-known activities of the Russian campaign during the 2016 election is the theft and subsequent (strategically staggered) release of Clinton Campaign, Democratic National Committee (DNC), and Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DNCC) e-mails and data by the Russian Federation's Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff, often referred to as the GRU[306]. The DNC spearphishing operation was wide-ranging, beginning in March 2016[307]. Keylogging software captured passwords, banking information, and various other manners of personal information; a sophisticated operation of layered servers relayed compressed and exfiltrated stolen data (a considerable 70 gigabytes' worth in the case of the DCCC's shared file server) to GRU headquarters; and thousands of e-mails and attachments were stolen from the DNC[308]. The various files and data were released through a combination of fabricated identities, such as the DCLeaks property (dcleaks.com web site, Facebook page, @dcleaks_ Twitter account) and the Guccifer 2.0 persona (which mostly communicated through a Wordpress blog), and web sites such as Wikileaks[309].

The first tranche of those e-mails was released by Wikileaks founder Julian Assange on the 22nd of July 2016; it contained 19,252 emails and 8,034 attachments that had either been sent or received by seven Democratic National Committee staff members[310]. The emails covered substantial chronological ground – a period of sixteen months, from January 2015 to the 25th of May 2016 – and were from influential figures in the DNC: among others, Communications Director Luis Miranda (10,770 emails), National Finance Director Jordan Kaplan (3,797 emails) and Finance Chief of Staff Scott Comer[311]. The trove of emails revealed several items potentially damaging to the DNC, such as various perks the party handed out to donors attending the convention, and even more consequentially, the depth of the animosity that had been brewing inside the party regarding Senator Bernie Sanders' (D-Vt) bid for the nomination. "It was well known that there had been friction between the Sanders campaign and an ostensibly impartial party apparatus. The emails detail how bitter the relationship became"[312], especially after Sen. Sanders "refused to abandon his bid as it became clear [Clinton] was going to win".[313] Several subsequent tranches were released in the upcoming weeks, several strategically timed to inflict maximum damage to the former First Lady's campaign, as will be seen shortly.

The fallout was considerable: DNC chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz felt compelled to resign[314]; her interim successor, Donna Brazile, was forced to resign her post as a

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[306] Mueller, "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election - Volume 1," 36. The Mueller report clearly identifies the GRU, specifically Military Units 26165 and 74455, as the perpetrators of the operation.

[307] *Ibid.*, 37.

[308] All data in this sentence from: *Ibid.*, 40–41.

[309] *Ibid.*, 37.

[310] Tom Hamburger and Karen Tumulty, "WikiLeaks Releases Thousands of Documents about Clinton and Internal Deliberations," *The Washington Post*, July 22, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2016/07/22/on-eve-of-democratic-convention-wikileaks-releases-thousands-of-documents-about-clinton-the-campaign-and-internal-deliberations/, last accessed March 19, 2021.

[311] *Ibid.* The exact number of Comer's leaked e-mails was not included in the sources consulted.

[312] *Ibid.*

[313] *Ibid.*

[314] Jonathan Martin and Alan Rappeport, "Debbie Wasserman Schultz to Resign D.N.C. Post," *The New York Times*, July 24, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/25/us/politics/debbie-wasserman-schultz-dnc-wikileaks-emails.html, last accessed March 19, 2021.

CNN contributor following controversy over allegedly leaking debate questions to the campaign[315]. Some of the DNC's donors were exposed to potential identity theft when personal information such as credit card numbers, social security numbers and passport numbers were made public through the leaks[316]; staffers were subject to a "brutal stripping" of their privacy[317] due to some of the caches including their personal information; and even Clinton herself was subject to threats in one instance due to her private contact information having been made temporarily available[318]. Most germane to this current criterion, however, the leaks "created a countervailing narrative to the one emanating from the release of the *Access Hollywood* tape […] changed the contour of two presidential debates […] and […] fostered an anti-Clinton agenda and frame in news"[319] at a critical juncture of the election.

One interesting aspect of the leaks is the propitious timing of several of their public releases. The hacking campaign's first phishing e-mails were sent on the 10th of March 2016[320]; and "[w]ithin nine days, some of the [Democratic] campaign's most consequential secrets would be in the hackers' hands"[321]. Yet the very first tranche, as detailed above, was not made available until the 22nd of July. That date was no accident, for two reasons. The first is that the Democratic National Committee's convention was scheduled to begin on the 25th, so three days later; the second, somewhat tied to the first, is that some of the most damning material in that particular cache "offered undeniable evidence of what Mr. Sanders' supporters had complained about for much of the senator's contentious primary contest with Mrs. Clinton: that the party was effectively an arm of Mrs. Clinton's campaign"[322]. This is significant in that the very convention where Mrs. Clinton was slated to accept the party's nomination, the very convention that was intended to begin the "delicate healing process that followed the contentious fight between Mr. Sanders and Hillary Clinton"[323], the very convention that was supposed to "showcase the Democratic Party's optimism and unity"[324], instead generated intense media coverage about the multiple unfavorable revelations contained in the leaked emails, especially in this case regarding the DNC's fractured internal dynamics. (This is also a prime example of the IRA sowing division.) The DNC's messaging strategy for the convention was thus thrown into disarray shortly before the convention was to begin, as the party found itself on the defensive with little to no time to prepare a counter-messaging strategy – representing a change in media agenda precipitated by Russian (and Wikileaks, in this case) actions. As Anne Applebaum wrote on the convention's first day, confirming the story had

[315] Dylan Byers, "Donna Brazile out at CNN amid Leaks to Clinton Campaign," *CNN Business*, October 31, 2016, https://money.cnn.com/2016/10/31/media/donna-brazile-cnn-resignation/index.html, last accessed March 19, 2021.

[316] Andrea Peterson, "Snowden and WikiLeaks Clash over Leaked Democratic Party Emails," *The Washington Post*, August 28, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2016/07/28/a-twitter-spat-breaks-out-between-snowden-and-wikileaks/, last accessed March 19, 2021.

[317] Raphael Satter, Jeff Donn, and Chad Day, "Inside Story: How Russians Hacked the Democrats' Emails," *Associated Press News*, November 4, 2017, https://apnews.com/article/hillary-clinton-phishing-moscow-russia-only-on-ap-dea73efc01594839957c3c9a6c962b8a, last accessed March 20, 2021.

[318] Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*, 68.

[319] *Ibid.*

[320] Satter, Donn, and Day, "Inside Story: How Russians Hacked the Democrats' Emails."

[321] *Ibid.*

[322] Martin and Rappeport, "Debbie Wasserman Schultz to Resign D.N.C. Post."

[323] *Ibid.*

[324] *Ibid.*

hijacked the media (to the detriment of other consequential stories), "most of those covering this story, especially on television, are not interested in the nature of the hackers, and they are not asking why the Russians apparently chose to pass the emails on to Wikileaks at this particular moment"[325] – that is, just before the Democratic National Convention – instead "focusing […] on the content of what were meant to be private emails"[326]. *The Washington Post*'s Philip Bump agrees, stating that "[t]he information stolen from the Democratic National Committee […] that was later released by WikiLeaks was a staple of media coverage around the conventions in July 2016"[327].

Another potent example of audience redirection occurred around the *Access Hollywood* tape mentioned earlier. The 7th of October 2016 – two days before the second presidential debate – ended up being a very busy day for the media, with several highly consequential stories being released at a rapid-fire pace. The first was at 3 P.M., when a joint statement from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) was released, stating "[t]he U.S. Intelligence Community (USIC) is confident that the Russian Government directed the recent compromises of e-mails from US persons and institutions, including from US political organizations"[328]. The story, explosive as it was, did not occupy viewers' attention for long – it didn't have the time, as it would quickly get "emasculated", in the words of then-Director of National Intelligence James Clapper[329]. At around 4:05 P.M.[330], *The Washington Post* published the story about, and the recording of, the infamous *Access Hollywood* tape[331]. Contemporary news consumers who thought the damning recording could hardly be topped were to be surprised yet again, this time by a trove of Wikileaks e-mails stolen from Clinton campaign director John Podesta, which included contents of some of Clinton's private speeches,

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[325] Anne Applebaum, "Connecting the Dots: How Russia Benefits from the DNC Email Leak," *The Washington Post*, July 25, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2016/07/25/connecting-the-dots-how-russia-benefits-from-the-dnc-email-leak/, last accessed March 20, 2021. Although it has previously been mentioned in the thesis, it bears repeating that Applebaum is correct in stating it was indeed the Russians who released the e-mails, with WikiLeaks being a conduit. See: Mueller, "Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election - Volume 1," 41.

[326] Applebaum, "Connecting the Dots: How Russia Benefits from the DNC Email Leak."

[327] Philip Bump, "No, Russian Twitter Trolls Didn't Demonstrably Push Trump's Poll Numbers Higher," *The Washington Post*, July 1, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/07/01/no-russian-twitter-trolls-didnt-demonstrably-push-trumps-poll-numbers-higher/, last accessed April 1, 2021.

[328] US Department of Homeland Security, "Joint Statement from the Department Of Homeland Security and Office of the Director of National Intelligence on Election Security," October 7, 2016, https://www.dhs.gov/news/2016/10/07/joint-statement-department-homeland-security-and-office-director-national, last accessed March 20, 2021.

[329] Yahoo News Staff, "How One Weekend Blew up the Rules of American Politics," *Yahoo! News*, October 6, 2017, https://news.yahoo.com/64-hours-october-one-weekend-blew-rules-american-politics-043617217.html, last accessed March 20, 2021.

[330] Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*, 162.

[331] David A. Fahrenthold, "Trump Recorded Having Extremely Lewd Conversation about Women in 2005," *The Washington Post*, October 8, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/trump-recorded-having-extremely-lewd-conversation-about-women-in-2005/2016/10/07/3b9ce776-8cb4-11e6-bf8a-3d26847eeed4_story.html, last accessed March 20, 2021.

released at 4:32 P.M[332]. In the immediate aftermath of the Wikileaks dump, Russian trolls were actively working to redirect public attention away from the *Access Hollywood* revelations. An *Associated Press* investigation revealed that "[t]weets by Russia-backed accounts […] on Oct. 7, 2016, actively pivoted away from news of an audio recording […] and instead touted damaging emails hacked from Clinton's campaign"[333]. The Russian trolls also worked to deflect potential damage to the Trump campaign from the *Access Hollywood* revelations by focusing instead on "a discredited characterization of Hillary Clinton's activities as a young trial lawyer"[334]. The IRA's America_1st_ (25,045 followers at its peak) account posted, mere hours after *The Washington Post* first published the story about the *Access Hollywood* recording: "MSM (the mainstream media) is at it again with Billy Bush recording […] what about telling Americans how Hillary defended a rapist and later laughed at his victim?"[335] But more striking is the pronounced effect the e-mail leaks had on the national conversation at the time. *The Washington Post*, which also wrote that "the material stolen from John Podesta swamped other coverage for much of October 2016, despite there being relatively little information in the documents that offered much insight into Clinton's candidacy"[336], produced a telling animation to this effect. The animated graphic, which is not downloadable in its original form, details the mentions of "Access Hollywood", "Clinton", "Wikileaks" and "Comey" on news shows from the 1st of October 2016 until Election day (8th of November 2016) according to analysis of closed captioning content compiled by the Internet Archive's TV News Archive[337]. The results, posted below using screen captures of the rotating animation, clearly show that "Clinton" and "Wikileaks" roundly eclipsed "Access Hollywood" in media mentions[338].

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[332] Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*, 162. Jamison states she's relying on the timeline built by the Yahoo staff and spelled out in the Yahoo article cited above: Yahoo News Staff, "How One Weekend Blew up the Rules of American Politics."

[333] Ryan Nakashima and Barbara Ortutay, "AP Exclusive: Russia Twitter Trolls Deflected Trump Bad News," *Associated Press*, November 7, 2017, https://apnews.com/article/fc9ab2b0bbc34f11bc10714100318ae1, last accessed March 21, 2021.

[334] Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*, 164.

[335] Nakashima and Ortutay, "AP Exclusive: Russia Twitter Trolls Deflected Trump Bad News."

[336] Philip Bump, "Trump Briefly Acknowledges That Russia Aided His Election — and Falsely Says He Didn't Help the Effort," *The Washington Post*, May 30, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/05/30/trump-briefly-acknowledges-that-russia-aided-his-election-falsely-says-he-didnt-help-effort/, last accessed April 1, 2021.

[337] Philip Bump, "Actually, the Mueller Report Showed That Russia Did Affect the Vote," *The Washington Post*, April 19, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/04/19/actually-mueller-report-showed-that-russia-did-affect-vote/, last accessed April 1, 2021.

[338] *Ibid.*

FIGURE 3 – "Access Hollywood" Mentions

Mentions of "Access Hollywood" on news shows

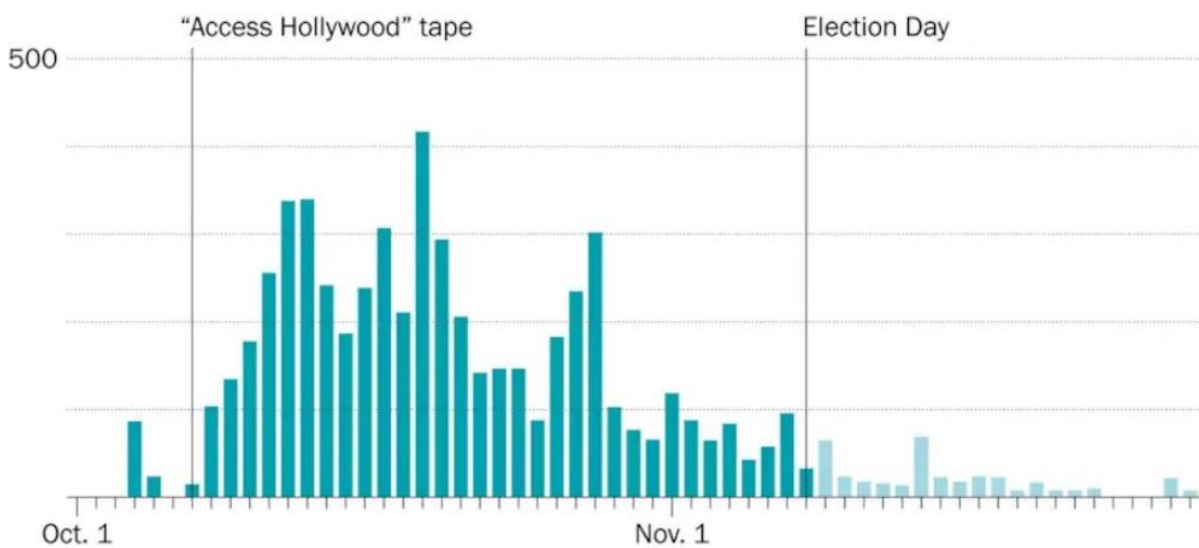Analysis of the contents of closed captioning compiled by the Internet Archive's TV News Archive.
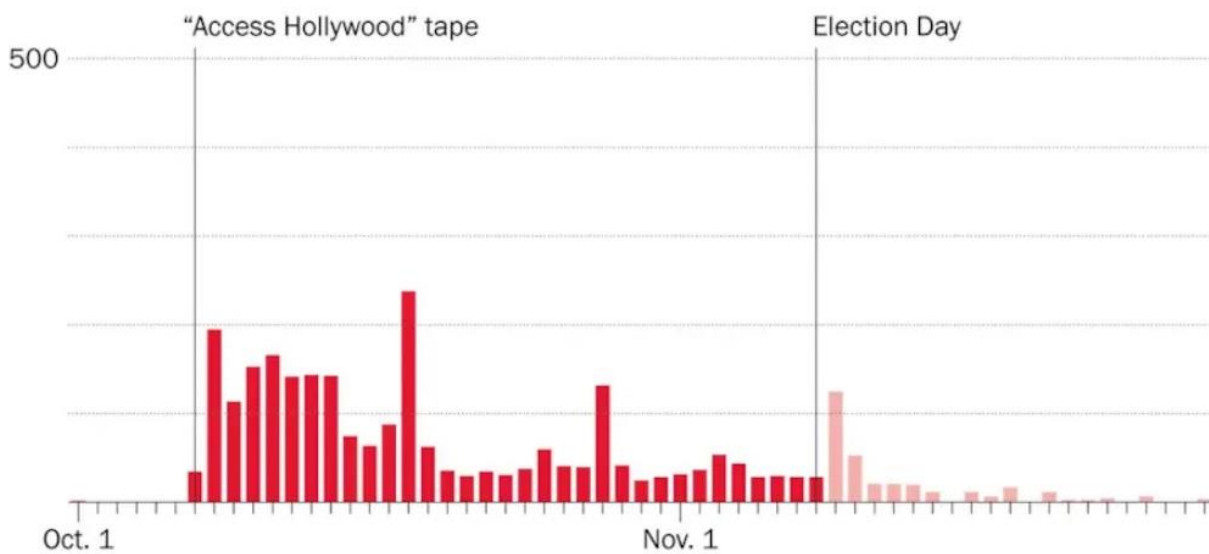
(Philip Bump/The Washington Post)

FIGURE 4 - "Clinton" and "WikiLeaks" Mentions

Mentions of "Clinton" and "Wikileaks" on news shows

Analysis of the contents of closed captioning compiled by the Internet Archive's TV News Archive.

(Philip Bump/The Washington Post)

In other words, the Wikileaks e-mail leaks both displaced the story of the DNC hack's Russian origin, but also deflected public attention from a potentially damaging story about the Republican candidate to that of revelations harmful to Clinton. As Hall Jamieson asserts of the two discarded stories, "[n]either advantaged Trump"[339]. The sequence of events thus represents another episode where Russian intervention successfully redirected media and public attention away from information potentially harmful to the Trump campaign.

In summary for the Control of the Agenda criterion: At first sight, this criterion would appear to be entirely grounded in law. Although it would be nearly impossible for Russian information operations – or information operations in general – to directly effect change to a country's laws (in the short-term, at least), the agenda is ultimately decided by the voters[340], who elect citizens to be their representatives and act on their behalf and who have the 'exclusive opportunity' to dictate the agenda. Thus, capturing and directing – or redirecting – the public's attention, leads to a measure of control over the agenda; or, at the very least, impinging on an audience's point of focus compromises that audience's own control on the agenda. Infiltrating political discussion on social media achieved much the same goal. In the case of the 2016 US presidential election, Russian injections contributed to reshaping the media landscape sufficiently to avert the public's gaze from news items damaging to the Russians' preferred candidate (or to Russia itself). Control of the Agenda thus finds itself Compromised.

3.1.5   Inclusion of Adults

This criterion states that all – or most – permanent adult residents "should have the full rights of citizens that are implied by the first four criteria"[341]. Inclusion of Adults is the criterion that Inclusive Citizenship is meant to fulfill as an institution – a glance at Fig. 2 will confirm that the two are in fact exclusive to one another. This criterion, as worded, rests on rights, and thus has more of a legalistic tone, which would seem to preclude vulnerability to information operations. However, Dahl's wording ("the full rights of citizens that are implied by the first four criteria"[342]) does suggest that having the other four criteria compromised could lead to this one also being affected; and indeed, three of the four remaining criteria were assessed as being Compromised, with the other Undetermined. In other words, none have so far been deemed Not Compromised; and while this thesis' methodology does not allow this criterion to be deemed Compromised, a number of its underlying criteria have been; therefore, the prudent selection is to consider Inclusion of Adults Undetermined.

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[339] Jamieson, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President: What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*, 167.
[340] In theory, of course – but Dahl's *theory* is what the dissertation is discussing, as previously mentioned.
[341] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 51.
[342] *Ibid.* Emphasis ours.

3.1.6   Summary

FIGURE 5 – Impact of Russian information operations on Dahl's Criteria for democracy;
2016 United States Presidential Election

Compromised	*Not Compromised*	*Undetermined*
Enlightened Understanding	-	Effective Participation
Control of the Agenda		Inclusion of Adults
Voting Equality		

Three of the five criteria – Enlightened Understanding, Control of the Agenda and Voting Equality – have been shown to have been compromised. The two remaining criteria, Inclusion of Adults and Effective Participation, are both deemed Undetermined due to several Russian actions *potentially* compromising the criteria, but not *demonstrably* so. Recall however that Dahl, when describing his criteria, states that "*each* is *necessary* if the members […] are to be politically equal in determining the policies of the association"[343]; therefore, one can indeed say that, as a whole, Dahl's criteria for democracy were compromised by Russian information operations during the 2016 United States presidential election.

3.2   Dahl's democratic Institutions

The thesis now turns to Dahl's institutions, which consist of Elected Officials; Free, Fair, and Frequent Elections; Freedom of Expression; Access to Alternative Sources of Information; Associational Autonomy; and Inclusive Citizenship. As in the previous section, each institution below will be individually discussed in the interests of thoroughness, in the order just stated.

3.2.1   Elected Officials

To recap, Dahl defines this institution as requiring that "[c]ontrol over government decisions about policy is constitutionally vested in officials elected by citizens. Thus, modern, large-scale democratic governments are representative"[344]. For this thesis' purposes, a key word in this definition is "constitutionally". Indeed, Dahl sees this institution as flowing directly from one of the – if not the – most foundational legal documents of a country: its constitution. Therefore, information operations hold little sway here; indeed, abandoning the notion of elected officials would be, in a country that is democratic to begin with, tantamount to a revolution or a regime change. One could say that given population could be nudged, via information operations, towards modifying a constitution to make it less democratic, or to make it more amenable to authoritarian rule, or towards other such anti-democratic outcomes. However, even if such a scenario were to be enacted, the end result would only have been achieved because some other of Dahl's criteria were affected: likely the Enlightened Understanding and Control of the Agenda criteria, and

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[343] *Ibid.*, 52. Emphasis ours.
[344] *Ibid.*, 99. Emphasis in original.

possibly the Access to alternative information institutions. But either way, one could easily argue that compromising the Elected Officials institution on its own is difficult to begin with, and almost impossible solely with the use of information operations. Therefore, this institution finds itself Not Compromised[345].

3.2.2   Free, Fair, and Frequent Elections

According to Dahl, this criterion requires that "[e]lected officials [be] chosen in frequent and fairly conducted elections in which coercion is comparatively uncommon"[346]. Much like the previous one, this institution's foundation rests in large part on the law, and thus is rather unassailable via information operations (other than by proxy, also as stated above – a very unlikely scenario in any case). The "free" and "frequent" portions are especially impervious to any manner of information operations assault; however, the "fair" portion merits further scrutiny.

The expanded version of "fair" in the definition above is "fairly conducted elections". The structure of the elections – in other words, how they're conducted – is also enshrined in law. Dahl also says that for elections to be free "means that citizens can go to the polls without fear of reprisal; and if they are to be fair, then all votes must be counted as equal"[347] – the second part of which is already fatal to our erroneous conclusion above. When Dahl is speaking about votes being counted as equal, what he has in mind is not the weighting of the votes ('no vote is worth more than any other' – this notion is in fact captured in the Voting Equality criterion), but rather, he is referring to the various ways of tallying votes and interpreting the totals, such as proportional representation or first-past-the-post. The relevant point for the analysis at hand is that regardless of the system chosen by a citizenry, said system will also be captured in foundational legal documents, and thus will be nigh impervious to direct assault by information operations. This institution is thus Not Compromised.

3.2.3   Freedom of Expression

Dahl here says "[c]itizens have a right to express themselves without danger of severe punishment on political matters broadly defined", including critiquing "elected officials, the government, the regime, the socioeconomic order, and the prevailing ideology"[348]. This particular institution would be difficult to assail directly with the use of information operations, as it is yet another whose basis is grounded in laws – likely even in a country's constitution (or its amendments). There could be a case to be made that Russian information operations created appearances of false consensus, as has been previously discussed, and that vulnerable individuals could self-censor as a result. But such a conclusion would ignore the core aspect of this institution

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[345] To be clear, this is certainly not to say that Russia does not harbour the objective of disrupting the United States' electoral system. In fact, the literature is almost unanimous to the effect that the IRA's campaign extended well beyond the one election. As John Kelly, founder and CEO of the social media analysis firm Graphika, told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence: "[i]t's a far more sophisticated an [*sic*] attack than just caring about an election. And it's not just one election they care about. They care about the electoral system." See: Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2," 37. The thesis will return to this aspect.

[346] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 98.

[347] *Ibid.*, 109.

[348] *Ibid.*, 99.

as envisioned by Dahl: that freedom of expression is a right, and as such, at the very least captured in law, if not (again) in foundational legal documents.

In an attempt to build a case regardless, many if not most of the examples discussed in the Effective Participation criterion would be just as fitting here; Fig. 2 will once again confirm this reasoning to be sound, as Effective Participation is the very first criterion listed as being buttressed by Freedom of Expression. However, there is little need to regurgitate the material from Effective Participation – most of which, to recap, had to do with how some individuals might succumb to spiral-of-silence effects – as the conclusion is the same here as it is there: although there are some possible ways in which Russian information operations *could* have impacted this institution, actually *proving* such is a different proposition altogether. One could even advance a proposition – tenuous, but not altogether impossible – that the Russian information operations discussed in this thesis actually *helped* the Freedom of Expression criterion, in a perverse sort of way, by making more extreme viewpoints appear more widespread than they actually were (the normative effect). As such, the argument would go, people harboring those views felt more at ease in expressing and propagating them, thereby enhancing Freedom of Dxpression. But such a case would be no easier to prove than the spiral-of-silence hypothesis – and more importantly, neither can be proven in any meaningful manner to have impacted Freedom of Expression as an institution of Dahl's. Therefore, this institution is deemed Not Compromised.

3.2.4   *Access to Alternative Sources of Information*

Dahl defines this institution as ensuring that "[c]itizens have a right to seek out alternative and independent sources of information from other citizens, experts, newspapers, magazines, books, telecommunications and the like"[349]. Additionally, according to Dahl's definition, "alternative sources of information actually exist that are not under the control of the government or any other single political group attempting to influence public political beliefs and attitudes"[350]; finally, those alternative sources must be protected by law. This is yet another example whereby information operations are exceedingly unlikely to have an effect. Granted (and as demonstrated earlier, in fact), the Russians could certainly be said to have polluted the news streams and social media in a manner and quantity sufficient to suffocate legitimate news sources out of viewers' feeds; and some of their tactics, like Search Engine Optimization, could be said to tamper with what sources were more readily available to an audience (although such a case would be precarious). However, Dahl's institution here refers not to the number or quality of available news sources, but rather to citizens of a country having the right to consult as many as desired, and to those sources actually existing (and, crucially, not under the control of a single entity). A contrast helpful in grasping the difference is offered by Dahl himself, when he says that, for example, in a country where the contents of news sources, or even their number, are controlled by the government – one could think of North Korea as a most flagrant case – this institution can be said to be compromised, or even not extant[351].

And so, for the purposes of this dissertation, this institution is to be considered Not Compromised.

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[349] *Ibid.*
[350] *Ibid.*
[351] *Ibid.*, 111.

3.2.5 Associational Autonomy

This institution speaks to citizens' right to "form relatively independent associations or organizations, including independent political parties and interest groups" in order to "achieve their various rights, including those required for the effective operation of democratic political institutions"[352]. Dahl's focus here is mostly on political parties. "Forming an organization, such as a political party, gives a group an obvious electoral advantage. And if one group seeks to gain that advantage, will not others who disagree with their policies? And why should political activity cease between elections?"[353] Although some of the earlier examples on voter suppression could potentially be used here to argue that some groups' Associational Autonomy was compromised, such an argument would again miss Dahl's point somewhat. The key word in Dahl's definition is once more 'right', which requires a legal foundation in order to be called such. In what is now a familiar refrain, information operations are rather impotent in a direct assault on laws (in the short term), and this institution thus finds itself Not Compromised.

3.2.6 Inclusive Citizenship

This particular institution is especially important in Dahl's thinking. He describes it as such: "No adult permanently residing in the country and subject to its laws can be denied the rights that are available to others and are necessary to the five political institutions just listed"[354]. Those 'rights that are available to others' include, in Dahl's telling, the five institutions just discussed, but also the right "to run for elective office", as well as the "rights to other liberties and opportunities that may be necessary to the effective operation of the political institutions of large-scale democracy"[355]. Simply by the fact that information operations were assessed as not having had an effect on the other institutions, this institution's status as Not Compromised was likely easy to divine. The reasoning is largely the same in this case as for the other institutions: although Russian information operations could certainly be said to have undermined citizens' perceptions with regards to these various institutions, they did not – and could not realistically – erode the legal bedrock upon which those institutions are founded. And so, the final institution also finds itself Not Compromised.

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[352] *Ibid.*, 99.
[353] *Ibid.*, 112.
[354] *Ibid.*, 99.
[355] *Ibid.*, 100.

3.2.7 Summary

FIGURE 6 – Impact of Russian information operations on Dahl's Institutions of democracy; 2016 United States Presidential Election

Compromised	Not Compromised	Undetermined
-	Elected Officials	-
	Free, Fair, and Frequent Elections	
	Freedom of Expression	
	Access to Alternative Sources of Information	
	Associational Autonomy	
	Inclusive Citizenship	

The results appear rather dismal for Russian information operations (but encouraging for democracy's resilience!). However, is the conclusion so simple as to say that Russian information operations offered a particularly poor showing with regards to Dahl's institutions? There are two parts to the answer to this question.

The first is that such a final result is not entirely unexpected – and revisiting Dahl's comments on institutions in general can shed some light on the reason why. Indeed, before even discussing his institutions, Dahl offers one of his 'Words about Words' sidebars found throughout the book. This particular one discusses the difference between political *arrangements*, political *practices*, and finally the political *institutions* themselves. In Dahl's words, "[a]s a country moves from a non-democratic to a democratic government, the early democratic *arrangements* gradually become *practices*, which in due time turn into settled *institutions*"[356]. In other words, institutions are only likely to be present in a long-standing democracy – and although not specifically stated as such, the implication is that institutions, by virtue of having been present for several generations[357], are much more likely to be codified and enshrined in law. Indeed, every one of Dahl's institutions is predicated on citizens having a 'right'; by contrast, Dahl's criteria often required citizens be afforded 'equal and effective opportunities'. The former is much more difficult for information operations to impinge on than the latter. As has been seen at several points in the dissertation, laws in general are outside the (direct) reach of information operations, and thus, seeing as democratic institutions as envisioned by Dahl will often – if not always – have legal basis, one could reasonably expect those institutions to also be beyond information operations' reach.

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[356] *Ibid.*, 97.
[357] *Ibid.*

The second portion of the answer is that the table above is somewhat misleading, in that the picture it presents is incomplete. As previously stated, institutions are the means by which the criteria are satisfied. A criterion being violated would mean that the institution that is intended to support it (or ensure it is satisfied) would essentially be made irrelevant, as institutions exist only to ensure the criteria are met. Thus, an attack on a criterion would automatically mean that the corresponding institutions were also stricken. Dahl himself would agree, in a passage that also highlights the hierarchy between criteria and institutions: "For even if the institutions are necessary to democratization, they are definitely not *sufficient* for achieving fully the democratic criteria"[358]. Therefore, the ultimate goal lies in meeting the criteria; the institutions are rendered moot if the criteria themselves are not satisfied. Recall that the Enlightened Understanding, Control of the Agenda and Voting Equality criteria were deemed Compromised, and Effective Participation was deemed Undetermined (in other words, could not satisfactorily be slotted in the Not Compromised column). Reproduced below for convenience is Fig. 2, which will confirm that several institutions of Dahl's can be said to have been compromised:

FIGURE 7 – Reproduction of Fig. 2

"In a unit as large as a country, these political institutions of polyarchal democracy…"	"…are necessary to satisfy the following democratic criteria:"
Elected representatives	Effective Participation Control of the Agenda
Free, Fair, and Frequent Elections	Voting Equality Control of the Agenda
Freedom of Expression	Effective Participation Enlightened Understanding Control of the Agenda
Alternative information	Effective Participation Enlightened Understanding Control of the Agenda
Associational Autonomy	Effective Participation Enlightened Understanding Control of the Agenda
Inclusive Citizenship	Full inclusion

Under this reasoning – which is consistent with Dahl's vision – every one of Dahl's institutions save one (Inclusive Citizenship) has been compromised; and, of the five that were, four

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[358] *Ibid.*, 112.

(Free, Fair and Frequent Elections; Freedom of Expression; Alternative information; and Associational Autonomy) see two of three of their associated criteria – a majority, thus – being compromised. The table seen at Fig. 5 (showing all of the institutions in the Unaffected column) therefore commits an error of omission, as it fails to account for the institutions' substrata, the criteria, and how these *have* been affected – or at least three of the five, at any rate, which is still a majority. As such, when considering the 2016 United States presidential election, Dahl's institutions cannot be determined to have been affected much, if at all, by Russian information operations – when examined in isolation. However, when incorporating the associated criteria into the analysis, the revised conclusion is that those institutions most certainly have been impacted – if through somewhat of a proxy mechanism – by the compromise of the associated criteria.

3.3   Dahl's Conditions for democracy

The thesis now turns to the last of Dahl's components, the conditions. To recap, those are divided into Essential and Favorable conditions for democracy. According to Dahl, some "underlying […] conditions in a country are favorable to the stability of democracy and where these conditions are weakly present or entirely absent democracy is unlikely to exist, or if it does, its existence is likely to be precarious"[359]. The essential conditions are comprised of: Control of the Military and Police by Elected Officials, Democratic Beliefs and Political Culture, and No Strong Foreign Control Hostile to Democracy. The favorable conditions are a Modern Market Economy and Society, and Weak Subcultural Pluralism.

3.3.1   Control of the Military and Police by Elected Officials

According to Dahl, "perhaps the most dangerous internal threat to democracy comes from leaders who have access to the major means of physical coercion: the military and the police"[360]; he goes on to say that without civilian control of those instruments, "the prospects for democracy are dim"[361]. Information operations are exceedingly unlikely to have much of an effect on such a condition; as in previous components with a legal and/or constitutional foundation, the only realistic way information operations could effect any manner of change would be through influencing a target audience – which, were it to happen, would in any case be more accurately described as violating the Enlightened Understanding criteria. The IRA did target conservatives who espoused pro-Second Amendment views with pro-gun material; additionally, military veterans and members of the police were both "important subjects of IRA messaging, often in the context of allegations of poor treatment of veterans by the Obama administration, in comparison to how well refugees were allegedly treated"[362]. But the IRA's objective with these messages was not to encourage any manner of takeover of military and/or police power; rather, the aim was to mobilize those communities' votes in Trump's direction. Therefore, this condition finds itself Not Compromised.

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[359] *Ibid.*, 160.
[360] *Ibid.*, 162.
[361] *Ibid.*, 163.
[362] Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018," 20.

3.3.2 *Democratic Beliefs and Political Culture*

As Dahl says, "[a]chieving stable democracy isn't just fair-weather sailing; it also means sailing sometimes in foul and dangerous weather"[363]. The metaphor, of course, refers to the fact that countries will inevitably encounter crises, and it is during those trying times that democracy is likeliest to be tested, or even overturned, by authoritarian leaders. Thus, "[t]he prospects for stable democracy in a country are improved if its citizens and leaders strongly support democratic ideas, values, and practices"[364]. Dahl adds further clarifications that are particularly germane to this dissertation's analysis; namely, citizens should believe "democracy and political equality are desirable goals;[…] basic democratic institutions […] should be maintained; and political differences and disagreements among citizens should be tolerated and protected"[365]. This condition was significantly undermined by the IRA's campaign associated with the 2016 US presidential election.

Here again, the literature is fairly unanimous in saying the Russian campaign targeted precisely those beliefs. One of the first government-produced documents on the Russian campaign available to the public following the election was the intelligence community's assessment from the 6th of January 2017; even this early after the election, the intelligence community was already in a position to state that "Russia's goals were to undermine public faith in the US democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency"[366]. Of note here is the order in which said goals are listed – the very first takes clear aim at the condition of Dahl's under discussion. The second volume of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's report echoed the findings of the intelligence community's report from four years earlier, adding that while the Russian campaign in 2016 did take advantage of the election and election-related issues, "the preponderance of the operational focus […] was on socially divisive issues – such as race, immigration, and Second Amendment rights – in an attempt to pit Americans *against one another* and *against their government*"[367]; and that IRA content "discreetly messaged narratives of disunity, discontent, hopelessness, and contempt of others, all aimed at sowing societal division"[368]. Another Senate-commissioned report found that an analysis of the Russian's most active campaigns reveals that, in addition to mobilizing conservative voters, the IRA sought to "encourage the cynicism of other voters in an attempt to neutralize their votes"[369].

One of the ways this was carried out was with attempts to suppress or tamper the vote among specific, left-leaning communities, African-Americans being the standout demographic in this respect. For example, the Twitter IRA account @woke_blacks tweeted on the 17th of October 2016, "Want a quick lesson in racism & hypocrisy? Imagine in 08 if Obama had 5 children by 3 different women & was bragging about grabbing pussies", punctuating the tweet with an image that bore, among others, the texts "F*CK THE ELECTIONS" and "Operation

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[363] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 170.

[364] *Ibid.*, 171.

[365] *Ibid.*

[366] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections," January 6, 2017, p. ii.

[367] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 2," 6. Emphasis ours.

[368] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 1: Russian Efforts Against Election Infrastructure," 32.

[369] Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018," 32.

#BOYCOTT2016"[370].   In general, a large proportion of the IRA content targeting the African-American community "seemed designed to stoke distrust […] in democratic institutions and depress black turnout for Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton"[371]. The IRA's voting suppression effort was otherwise covered at length during the discussion on the Voting Equality criterion and there is therefore little need to repeat such material here, other than to say that it is just as firmly pertinent to this section.

Another means the IRA employed to undermine this condition is through encouraging "literal division"[372], as in secession – in direct contradiction to Dahl's "political differences and disagreements among citizens should be tolerated and protected"[373]. For the 2016 election, this sowing of division took the form of stoking secessionist fervor in Texas (#Texit – particularly in the case of a Clinton electoral victory) and California (#Calexit – although this last was most active after the actual election), mostly through select accounts on Twitter. The Twitter account @rebeltexas shared Brexit narratives on Instagram as justification for #Texit; the previously-referenced Heart of Texas page on Facebook posted on the topic of secession with notable frequency, and even coordinated real-world demonstrations pushing a pro-secession message across the state using the Facebook Events feature[374]. With regards to #Calexit, the hashtag became one of Twitter's top trends early on the 9th of November 2016, as Trump's victory was nearing certainty. The IRA's actions in this case were more circumspect, but nevertheless contributed to sowing division. An IRA Twitter account, @CalifroniaRep (misspelling intentional), was a proponent of the campaign; the since-deleted tweets include dozens using the #Calexit hashtag[375]. At its peak, #Calexit was mentioned 100,000 times in a few hours. The most-repeated tweet containing the hashtag, by a California teenager at the time, was re-tweeted 10,000 times, but evidence shows nearly 2,000 out of those 10,000 were from accounts that have since disappeared, "indicating that they were potentially automated bots, fake accounts, or otherwise violated the network's terms and conditions"[376].

This messaging was tailored to the IRA's varied audiences; at the local level, the IRA promoted a variety of public events like rallies to highlight a broad swathe of grievances; at the state level, the IRA encouraged secession; the IRA even promoted actual armed insurgency at the national level. Demonstrating yet again how conversant the IRA was with American cultural touchstones (particularly on the right), the organization used events like the 2014 Bundy standoff and the 2016 occupation of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge to further stoke their audiences. The IRA Facebook pages Stand for Freedom, Defend the 2nd, Heart of Texas and Being Patriotic all broadcast support for the Bundy standoff; those accounts, and several IRA Instagram accounts (@stop_refugees, @army_of_jesus_, @_american.made, @stand_for_freedom, and @rebeltexas,

[370] All three quotes: Diresta et al., "The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 86.
[371] Thompson and Lapowsky, "How Russian Trolls Used Meme Warfare to Divide America."
[372] Diresta et al., "The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 9.
[373] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 171.
[374] All data in this sentence from: Diresta et al., "The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 71.
[375] BBC Trending, "'Russian Trolls' Promoted California Independence," *BBC News*, November 4, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-41853131, last accessed April 1, 2021.
[376] *Ibid.*

among others), used memes to portray LaVoy Finicum of the Malheur occupation as a hero and martyr that had been murdered by the government[377].

Another means of fostering discord was through exacerbating existing tensions and societal fissures, and such a strategy was indeed one of the pillars of the IRA's campaign surrounding the 2016 elections. That said, the material and examples that would be used here could also – and, arguably, better – be used in a forthcoming condition, Weak Subcultural Pluralism. Suffice it to say for the moment that exacerbation of extant polarization was an IRA goal, and a core theme of its campaign.

In summary, the condition Democratic Beliefs and Political Culture was indeed a target of the IRA's, and was indeed effectively compromised by the use of voter suppression and mobilization initiatives; of narratives that consistently – if at times discreetly – encouraged discontent, division and apathy; of stoking secessionist movements; and of exacerbating existing societal tensions. All of these actions contribute to actualizing Dahl's words when he said that "unless a substantial majority of citizens prefer democracy and its political institutions to any nondemocratic alternative and support political leaders who uphold democratic practices, democracy is unlikely to survive through its inevitable crises"[378]. The Russians' actions ran directly counter to Dahl's words; this condition is therefore deemed Compromised.

3.3.3 No Strong Foreign Control Hostile to Democracy

"Democratic institutions are less likely to develop in a country subject to intervention by another country hostile to democratic government in that country"[379]. Dahl had in mind the kind of control the Soviets exerted over countries such as Poland and Hungary, and how the Soviet interventions prevented the development of democratic institutions in those countries; he also uses the now-anachronistic example of Czechoslovakia, saying the country might now count amongst the world's older democracies had it not been for Soviet intervention following World War II[380]. A more recent example that could be used to illustrate Dahl's condition being violated is Beijing's recent escalation in dismantling Hong Kong's democratic institutions. In any case, the United States is clearly in no such situation. While it is true that Russia is indeed a foreign power, and anti-democratic at that, it does not exert over the United States nearly the level of control that would be required to negate this condition. Therefore, Not Compromised.

The thesis now moves from the conditions deemed essential, to those deemed Favorable for democracy by Dahl, of which there are two.

3.3.4 Modern Market Economy and Society

Dahl acknowledges that capitalism and democracy have a complex relationship, even devoting two chapters to said relationship in his 1998 book. However, regardless of the nature of the interplay between a market economy and democracy, such a condition would be quite difficult

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[377] Diresta et al., "The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 72.
[378] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 171. The sentence following the one quoted above now seems eerily prescient towards the events of Jan. 6th 2021: "Indeed, event a large minority of militant and violent antidemocrats would probably be sufficient to destroy a country's capacity for maintaining its democratic institutions."
[379] *Ibid.*, 161.
[380] *Ibid.*

to undermine via the use of information operations; in any case, there is no evidence the Russians made of the American capitalist economy a target. Not Compromised.

3.3.5   *Weak Subcultural Pluralism*

The language Dahl uses to name this condition might seem opaque to readers not well-versed in the political or sociological sciences; the book's respective section header, "Cultural conflicts weak or absent"[381], is likely more accessible. In any case, Dahl says that democracy's essential institutions are "more likely to develop and endure in a country that is culturally fairly homogenous and less likely in a country with sharply differentiated and conflicting subcultures"[382]. For the purposes of this dissertation, there does exist a notable degree of overlap between this condition and the Democratic Beliefs and Political Culture one. But before proceeding, a quick look at Dahl's text will provide further insights on this condition that are likely to be of considerable use during the demonstration.

The first: "[d]istinctive cultures are often formed around differences in language, religion, race, ethnic identity, region, and sometimes ideology."[383] Several of those attributes have already been shown throughout this dissertation to have been exploited by the Russian campaign; most prominently, 'race' with the IRA specifically targeting African-Americans; 'region' through the promotion of secessionist ideologies in some states and the "amplifi[cation of] regional cultural differences"[384]; 'religion' through accounts like "Army of Jesus" and "United Muslims for America" (and, arguably, counter-accounts like "Stop Islamization of Texas"); and 'ideology', through driving further wedges between all manners of ideologically opposing groups in American society. Dahl emphasizes that such sub-cultures are far from trivial: "[i]ssues like these pose a special problem for democracy. Adherents of a particular culture often view their political demands as matters of principle, deep religious or quasi-religious conviction, cultural preservation, or group survival"[385]. As such, these adherents will be reluctant – if not unwilling – to compromise; and negotiation, conciliation and compromise are necessary ingredients of the peaceful democratic process[386].

One of the defining characteristics of American history is its embrace, for a time, of slavery – an institution around which the southern states developed, as Dahl himself says, "a distinctive subculture, economy and society" during the nineteenth century, and which led to a horrific civil war[387]. Even after slavery's abolition, this southern subculture "in which the subjection of African-American citizens was enforced by the threat and actuality of violence and terror"[388] persisted. As has been seen already at various points in the thesis, African-Americans were the IRA's prime audience, and the IRA deftly exploited the community's grievances to attempt to drive further wedges between it and other elements of American society. There is no need to repeat the previous, ample material on how the IRA stoked African American resentment, other than to say that those examples are just as pertinent here and have only been omitted for brevity. The important takeaway

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[381] *Ibid.*, 164.
[382] *Ibid.*, 163.
[383] *Ibid.*
[384] Diresta et al., "The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 72.
[385] Dahl, *On Democracy*, 164.
[386] *Ibid.*
[387] *Ibid.*, 166.
[388] *Ibid.*, 167.

is that the Russians deliberately fanned the flames of a subculture Dahl himself used as an example when describing such groups. The Senate-commissioned report by Howard et al includes more granular data on which messages were sent to which communities, the most blatant of which were discussed in an earlier section of the thesis (African American voters & conservative voters). Political leaning was indeed one method the IRA could use to segregate the audience into groups to which messages could be accurately tailored, but of all of those sub-groups, race was the most prominent. For example, evidence in IRA advertisement profiles suggests that even in swing states, race was a more consequential factor on IRA targeting than any other[389].

In addition to race, the United States have no shortage of divisive issues, and the IRA pounced on them to stoke outrage:

> On Facebook, the five most shared and the five most liked posts focused on divisive issues, with pro-gun ownership content, anti-immigration content pitting immigrants against veterans, content decrying police violence against African Americans, and content that was anti-Muslim, anti-refugee, anti-Obama, and pro-Trump […] The top five posts by known IRA accounts are overtly political and polarizing[390].

The IRA's foremost tool in driving communities apart was anger. A preferred procedure was stoking outrage (occasionally through outright false content) on both sides of a divisive issue; for example, conservative voters were incited to support veterans and police forces, and for the latter, most virulently support actions against the Black Lives Matter movement[391]. The IRA sought to create division on "just about every contentious topic" in American society: "race, immigration, policing, gun control, LGBT rights, vaccination, and other issues"; and in all cases, the modus operandi was to "magnif[y] dissonance and aggravat[e] divisions by promoting the polar expressions of both sides" of those issues[392].

Another preferred tactic was the organization, support and in some cases financing of diametrically opposite, real-world rallies and demonstrations. A sample timeline of the IRA's various real-world political events is a rather dizzying journey from one viewpoint to another:

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[389] Select Committee on Intelligence, "Russian Active Measures Campaigns and Interference in the 2016 U.S. Election, Vol. 1: Russian Efforts Against Election Infrastructure," 40.

[390] Howard et al., "The IRA, Social Media and Political Polarization in the United States, 2012-2018," 7. This also serves to reinforce how effective the stoking of anger can be towards building audiences, or at the very least generating engagement.

[391] *Ibid.*, 19.

[392] All quotes in sentence: Brian Michael Jenkins, "America's Great Challenge: Russia's Weapons of Mass Deception," September 2019, https://weaponsofmassdeception.net/, last accessed April 1, 2021. The full report from RAND is available to download at the URL cited, but cannot be linked directly; the quote is taken from the report's summary, available on the web site. Also, readers will undoubtedly have surmised said report is what inspired this thesis' title byline.

- 01 June 2016: IRA personnel start planning "March for Trump" Manhattan rally;

- 23 June 2016: IRA agents contact an American to help recruit for the "March for Trump" rally, using the manufactured "Matt Skiber" account;

- 24 June 2016: Previously-referenced "United Muslims of America" purchases Facebook ads for a "Support Hillary, Save American Muslims" rally;

- 25 June 2016: "March for Trump" rally;

- 05 July 2016: "United Muslims of America" procures posters for its upcoming rally. One of those sports a purported quote from Clinton: "I think Sharia Law will be a powerful new direction of freedom.";

- 09 July 2016: "Support Hillary, Save American Muslims" rally in D.C.;

- 12 July 2016: IRA purchases Facebook ads for an upcoming New York rally called "Down with Hillary";

- 23 July 2016: "Down with Hillary" rally is held. Thirty media outlets are sent news releases by the IRA[393].

As mentioned earlier in the dissertation, the IRA even organized simultaneous, competing rallies at times, as the May 2016 "Stop Islamization of Texas" demonstration and its "Save Islamic Knowledge" counter-demonstration in Houston, illustrate.

As such, due to the IRA's stoking of African American fear and resentment, its amplification of opposed hot-button viewpoints, and its organization and support of real-world events spanning a wide ideological spectrum, this condition finds itself Compromised.

3.3.6 Summary

FIGURE 8 – Impact of Russian information operations on Dahl's Conditions of democracy; 2016 United States Presidential Election

Compromised	Not Compromised	Undetermined
Democratic Beliefs and Political Culture*	Control of Military/Police by Elected Officials*	-
Weak Subcultural Pluralism**	No Strong Foreign Control*	
	Modern Market Economy**	

* = Essential; ** = Favorable

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[393] Content in the above list from: Philip Bump, "Timeline: How Russian Trolls Allegedly Tried to Throw the 2016 Election to Trump," *The Washington Post*, February 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2018/02/16/timeline-how-russian-trolls-allegedly-tried-to-throw-the-2016-election-to-trump/, last accessed April 1, 2021.

One each of the essential and favorable conditions for democracy were found to have been compromised by Russian information operations. The three conditions in the Not Compromised column are markedly out of the realm of influence for information operations (when considering a direct assault, anyhow), and their status as such is therefore hardly surprising. Therefore, by simple virtue of having one of the essential conditions compromised, the conditions themselves can also be deemed such.

4   CONCLUSION

"Comment is free, but facts are sacred."
-- C.P. Scott, editor of the Manchester Guardian, 1921[394]

If using the 2016 United States presidential election as a case study, one will find that Russian information operations did have an effect on Dahl's components of democracy, though by proxy for one category (institutions). Of the three categories – *criteria, institutions* and *conditions* – the one that weathered the most sustained assault was Dahl's criteria, where three of the five were found to have been compromised and two were deemed Undetermined (which also means a Not Compromised verdict was not provable). In fact, a preponderance of the IRA's material and actions could best be linked to Dahl's criteria. A surprising finding was that institutions were found to have been rather untouched; but Dahl's institutions are based on citizens' *rights*. In general, rights are much more likely to be grounded in law, and thus rather unassailable (directly, at any rate) through information operations. If such a conclusion is reassuring for democracy's advocates, it is also premature; institutions' only role is to ensure democracy's criteria are satisfied. If this finding is taken into consideration, all but one of Dahl's institutions now find themselves compromised. Dahl's conditions were affected in those domains one would intuitively associate with information operations, with those unaffected being squarely out of (direct) reach for information operations.

However, caution is still warranted. The conclusion reached above could lead one to under-evaluate the impact of the Russian operation in 2016. Indeed, if one examines the various components of Dahl's that were affected, a pattern emerges: several, if not all, of those were components where the very *act* of the Russian participation amounted to an undermining of the component. Consider the Enlightened Understanding criterion, for example. For this criterion, the very act of injecting false or misleading content in the news streams dilutes the amount of accurate news available, especially if said injection is significant enough to drive an audience either to, or close to, saturation. By contrast, several of those components deemed unaffected were only so due to the considerable difficulty of tangibly *proving* an impact. That said, for several of those components, one could still perceive the contours of several ways in which the Russian actions *could* have had a nefarious impact; however, proving said impact, if at all possible, would likely require a cross-discipline approach (psychology is top of mind here), which was out of scope for this thesis. But if one considers, for example, the Effective Participation criteria, psychology might provide insights into how to more rigorously measure self-censorship. The key takeaway here is that the number of components in the Unaffected column might not be entirely representative of the true impact of the Russians' 2016 campaign; more study is required.

To recap, the thesis' research question was 'How do Russian information operations qualitatively undermine democracy?', and the methodology chosen to give a partial answer to this question was to juxtapose Russian information operations as part of the 2016 United States presidential election with components of democracy as conceptualized by Robert A. Dahl. Using the above methodology, the answer to the research question is that, in the case of the aforementioned election, Russian information operations undermined democracy by compromising several of Dahl's components of democracy. The primary method for doing so was

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[394] Quote taken from: Glenn Kessler, "About The Fact Checker," *The Washington Post*, January 17, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/01/07/about-fact-checker/, last accessed March 29, 2021.

by information operations actions that ran directly counter to many of Dahl's precepts. Of the three categories of components – *criteria, institutions* and *conditions* – the first, criteria, suffered the broadest assault. Institutions, which are mostly rooted in law, were not directly assailable, but when taking into consideration that in Dahl's model, institutions exist only to ensure that criteria are fulfilled – and also taking into consideration said criteria were indeed compromised – the conclusion is that institutions were also compromised, albeit by proxy. Conditions seemed to be the least harmed, although one essential and one favorable – so two, out of five – were found to have been Compromised.

The above conclusions hint at several additional possible avenues of future research. The first of those consists of expanding, or at least changing, the geographic aspect of the analysis; indeed, if this thesis focused solely on the 2016 United States presidential election, a similar analysis could be carried out for any number of democratic targets of Russian information operations. Potential targets include, but are certainly not limited to, Ukraine (Crimea takeover and fomenting of separatist fervor in the Donbass, 2014); Estonia; France (2017 elections); Scotland (2017 Scottish independence referendum); and even some countries in Africa, a continent that is seeing a burgeoning Russian presence in the (dis)information space[395]. Related to this last would be the application of this model of information operation impact to burgeoning, or even nascent, democracies; in other words, to places where Dahl's institutions have not yet fully coalesced, and where information operations could thus have a much more pronounced impact. Another potential vector would be to broaden the range of IRA activities examined, beyond the strictly political; indeed, "11% of the total [IRA] content was related to the election and 33% of the engagement was related to the election"[396]. As has been seen, many of the IRA's activities did not aim to affect the election but rather had more generalized aims, such as undermining confidence in government and its institutions; the same analysis as has been carried out in this dissertation could be replicated towards those broader Russian objectives. The analysis could also be transposed to the democratic models of other prominent democracy theoreticians; or, it could even be used to see how Dahl's model could potentially be adapted or revised, to account for some 21st-century realities Dahl would have been unlikely to foresee at the time he conceived his theory. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine Dahl would disagree that having a foreign, antidemocratic, hostile power helping one side of an election, while harming the other – in a bipartite system, no less – undermines a country's democratic processes, or that the injection of outright lies and curated half-truths in the national conversation significantly undermines his Enlightened Understanding criterion. And yet, neither of those two examples offer a clean fit in the model as used in this dissertation. Yet another possibility – mentioned last in this essay, but certainly not final – would be to explore how else information operations, Russian or otherwise, can affect democracy. One report on the topic mentioned there is yet another way "by which we might expect all three of these variables [social media usage, political polarization, disinformation] to affect the quality of democracy, which is through political engagement."[397]. As the authors state, after a "brief period of euphoria about the possibility that social media might usher in a golden age of global

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[395] See: Shelby Grossman, Daniel Bush, and Renée Diresta, "Evidence of Russia-Linked Influence Operations in Africa," October 29, 2019, https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/29oct2019_sio_-_russia_linked_influence_operations_in_africa.final__0.pdf, last accessed March 11, 2021. The report is organized by country, and includes Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Madagascar, Mozambique and the Democratic Republic of Congo.
[396] Diresta et al., "The Tactics & Tropes of the Internet Research Agency," 78.
[397] Tucker et al., "Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature," 4.

democratization"[398], it is just as possible that "in an era of hyperpartisanship, experiences on social media could also drive people away from politics"; that polarization itself "makes politics less attractive"[399].

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[398] *Ibid.*, 3.
[399] *Ibid.*, 4.

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