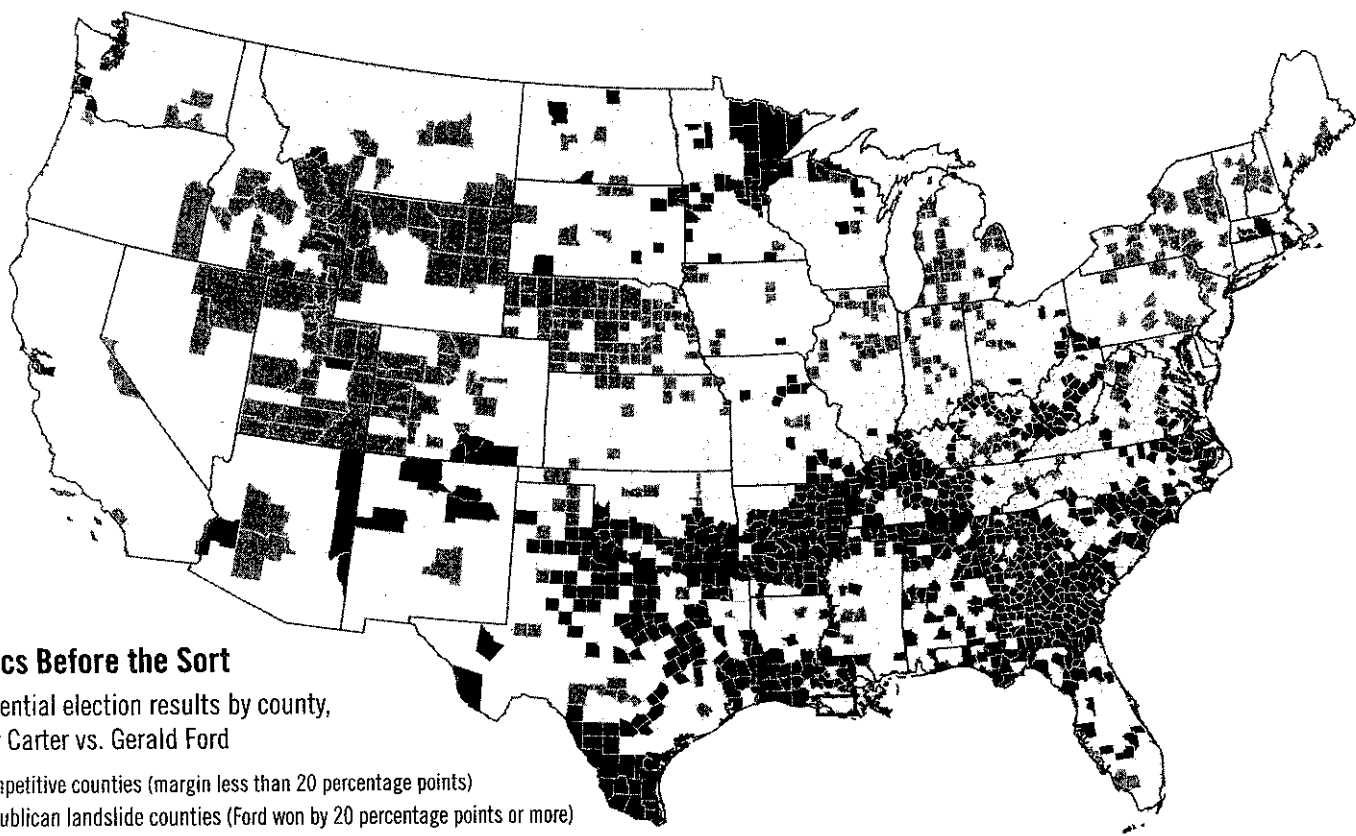




THE BIG SORT

WHY THE
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AMERICA IS
TEARING US APART

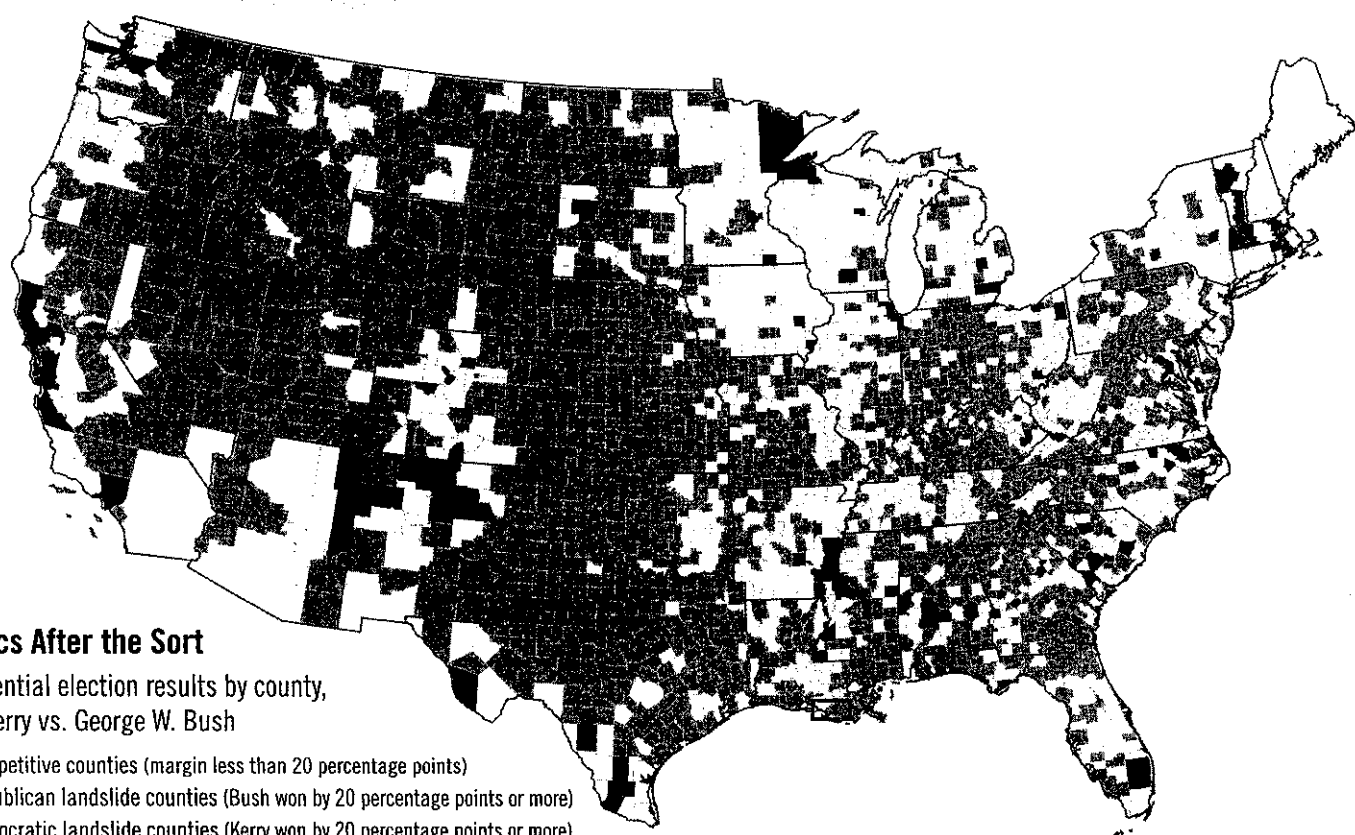
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**1976
Politics Before the Sort**

Presidential election results by county,
Jimmy Carter vs. Gerald Ford

- Competitive counties (margin less than 20 percentage points)
- Republican landslide counties (Ford won by 20 percentage points or more)
- Democratic landslide counties (Carter won by 20 percentage points or more)
(Democratic and Republican votes only)



**2004
Politics After the Sort**

Presidential election results by county,
John Kerry vs. George W. Bush

- Competitive counties (margin less than 20 percentage points)
- Republican landslide counties (Bush won by 20 percentage points or more)
- Democratic landslide counties (Kerry won by 20 percentage points or more)

Knowing he was a minority, he wondered what people thought of him as he walked Hotard. "In some way after that exchange, I think I'm viewed with suspicion by my neighbors because of an act of political expression, which is a little on the bizarre side," he said. "I'm just a guy who has a dog and works a job."¹

Discovering the Big Sort

The "red" and "blue" states shown on television maps during the past several national elections depict a country in a static standoff. On this scale, politics is a game of Risk. What will it take for Republicans to capture Michigan? For Democrats to regain Ohio? But people don't live in states. They live in communities. And those communities are not close to being in equipoise, even within solidly blue or red states. They are, most of them, becoming even more Democratic or Republican. As Americans have moved over the past three decades, they have clustered in communities of sameness, among people with similar ways of life, beliefs, and, in the end, politics. Little, if any, of this political migration was by design, a conscious effort by people to live among like-voting neighbors. When my wife and I moved to Austin, we didn't go hunting for the most Democratic neighborhood in town. But the result was the same: moving to Travis Heights, we took a side and fell into a stark geographic pattern of political belief, one that has grown more distinct in presidential elections since 1976.

Over the past thirty years, the United States has been sorting itself, sifting at the most microscopic levels of society, as people have packed children, CDs, and the family hound and moved. Between 4 and 5 percent of the population moves each year from one county to another — 100 million Americans in the past decade. They are moving to take jobs, to be close to family, or to follow the sun. When they look for a place to live, they run through a checklist of amenities: Is there the right kind of church nearby? The right kind of coffee shop? How close is the neighborhood to the center of the city? What are the rents? Is the place safe? When people move, they also make choices about who their neighbors will be and who will share their new lives. Those are now political decisions, and they are having a profound effect on the nation's public life. It

*The untold
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America coast to live and with people do. This social accident. We've all choose the news show—and beliefs. A quences of t country has t cally inbred, understand th The reason fo plications for groundbreaki

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wasn't just my neighborhood that had tipped to become politically monogamous. In 1976, less than a quarter of Americans lived in places where the presidential election was a landslide. By 2004, nearly half of all voters lived in landslide counties.

In 2004, the press was buzzing about polarization, the inability of the leaders of the two political parties to find even a patch of common ground. All the measures of political ideology showed widening divisions between Democratic and Republican political leaders, and unbridled partisanship in national politics became a topic for Sunday news shows and newspaper columnists. Meanwhile, unnoticed, people had been reshaping the way they lived. Americans were forming tribes, not only in their neighborhoods but also in churches and volunteer groups. That's not the way people would describe what they were doing, but in every corner of society, people were creating new, more homogeneous relations. Churches were filled with people who looked alike and, more important, thought alike. So were clubs, civic organizations, and volunteer groups. Social psychologists had studied like-minded groups and could predict how people living and worshiping in homogeneous groups would react: as people heard their beliefs reflected and amplified, they would become more extreme in their thinking. What had happened over three decades wasn't a simple increase in political partisanship, but a more fundamental kind of self-perpetuating, self-reinforcing social division. The like-minded neighborhood supported the like-minded church, and both confirmed the image and beliefs of the tribe that lived and worshiped there. Americans were busy creating social resonators, and the hum that filled the air was the reverberated and amplified sound of their own voices and beliefs.

This was not an area of concern for most of those who wrote about politics. Migration wasn't thought to be much of a factor in politics. People moved, sure, and some states gained votes while others lost. But the effects were thought to be essentially a wash.² Frankly, I only stumbled upon this trend in American politics—and that was only after I stumbled upon Robert Cushing.

I had previously worked for a small paper in the coalfields of Eastern Kentucky, and my wife and I had owned a weekly newspaper in rural

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right-wing. Knowing a real-life Republican might settle the nerves of a Democrat. In fact, exposure to a wide array of views increases tolerance.³⁹ But Americans are increasingly unlikely to find themselves in mixed political company.

Not Hearing the Other Side

Even if Americans don't live among those from another party as much as they did a generation ago, they certainly have increasing access through the media and the Internet to all manner of opinions and points of view. The choice is there, but there is a media corollary to the phenomenon of assortative mating. Given unprecedented media choices, people self-segregate into their own gated media communities. In cities (most outside the United States) where a variety of newspapers reflect an array of political points of view, people don't buy several newspapers to learn what others are thinking. Instead, they buy the one that best fits their political proclivities. "They read one newspaper or the other based on what they agree with," University of Pennsylvania political scientist Diana Mutz told me. "It's one of the main problems with choice; we choose to be with people similar to ourselves."

A Stanford University professor and a *Washington Post* reporter conducted an experiment to test how Republicans and Democrats viewed news from a variety of broadcast news outlets. Professor Shanto Iyengar and Richard Morin took news stories reported by MSNBC and randomly labeled them as coming from Fox News, CNN, National Public Radio (NPR), or the BBC. Participants in the study were given a list of headlines marked by the corporate logo of the four news organizations, and then they were asked to choose which stories they would like to read. Democrats preferred CNN and NPR. Republicans flocked to the stories they thought came from Fox (even though these stories were no different from those purportedly produced by NPR, the BBC, or CNN). Having a Fox label on a story tripled the hits from Republican readers. Meanwhile, the chances that a Republican would pick a story labeled NPR or CNN were only one in ten. The polarized reading habits of American partisans were strongest when they were asked to choose stories about national politics or the war in Iraq, but Republicans even pre-

ferred to read Fox's story. Iyengar exercised with Fox and a replica of Muzaffer Sherif to judge the literary work by a variety of great authors wasn't of the subjects' points of view.

The phenomenon is more familiar than readers or viewers might think. It runs counter to their research," Robert Barro says of those who favor Palestinian groups think the news is a partial evaluation. They tend to reach different conclusions."* Even if people don't hear or don't read opposing opinions. University of Pennsylvania Americans listen to NPR and watch debates in order to get their own ten for the parts of the story and tune out the parts that are especially true when people are in a hurry.

The human inclination to form an opinion within a speed of light. Two people with opposing views hear confirmation of their own most automatic, and the University tested thirty people in an election. Half were Republicans. The men were

*Another example of this is when I watched a film of a football game and noted a foul play. "Dartmouth's mostly Dartmouth's," reported the *Wall Street Journal*. "Dartmouth's Became a Milestone"

ferred to read Fox's stories about possible vacation destinations.⁴⁰ The exercise with Fox and the other news organizations is almost an exact replica of Muzafer Sherif's old experiment that asked Harvard students to judge the literary worth of passages that were labeled as being written by a variety of great authors. In this updated version, however, the test wasn't of the subjects' attachment to these literary greats but to political points of view.

The phenomenon uncovered in the news study is more insidious than readers or viewers just seeking to be soothed or reassured by a familiar point of view. People simply don't believe what they see or hear if it runs counter to their existing beliefs. "It's basic social psychology lab research," Robert Baron told me. "You show people who favor Israel and those who favor Palestine the same news coverage of the intifada. Both groups think the news media is biased against them. There is a differential evaluation. They both see the same stuff, but they draw very different conclusions."* Even if both sides of an issue are presented, people don't hear or don't remember arguments that counter their initial opinions. University of Kansas professor Diana Carlin has studied how Americans listen to presidential debates. She has found that voters watch debates in order to reinforce what they already believe. They listen for the parts of the debate that favor their candidate, she told me, and tune out the parts where their candidate does a poor job. This is especially true when people watch debates with like-minded companions.

The human inclination to find overwhelming support for an existing opinion within a speech or a news article is known as confirmation bias. Two people with opposite opinions listen to the same report, and both hear confirmation of their preexisting beliefs. The reaction seems almost automatic, and in a sense it may be. Psychologists at Emory University tested thirty men in the months before the 2004 presidential election. Half were strong Democrats, and half were strong Republicans. The men were hooked to MRI machines and then asked to listen

*Another example of this is a 1951 experiment in which students at Princeton and Dartmouth watched a film of a football game between the two schools. The students were asked to take note of foul play. "Dartmouth students saw mostly Princeton's offenses; Princeton students saw mostly Dartmouth's," reported the *Wall Street Journal* (Cynthia Crossen, "'Cognitive Dissonance' Became a Milestone in 1950s Psychology," *Wall Street Journal*, December 4, 2006, p. B1).

to and assess clearly contradictory statements from George W. Bush and John Kerry. The brain scans showed that as the subjects processed what the candidates said, they essentially turned off the sections of the brain associated with reasoning. Meanwhile, the scans revealed lots of activity in the parts of the brain associated with emotions, pleasure, and judgments about morality. "We did not see any increased activation of the parts of the brain normally engaged during reasoning," psychologist Drew Westen said. "What we saw instead was a network of emotion circuits lighting up . . . Essentially, it appears as if partisans twirl the cognitive kaleidoscope until they get the conclusions they want, and then they get massively reinforced for it, with the elimination of negative emotional states and [the] activation of positive ones."⁴¹

There is nothing new in these tendencies. "The human understanding when it has once adopted an opinion (either as being the received opinion or as being agreeable to itself) draws all things else to support and agree with it," Francis Bacon wrote in *Novum Organum* (1620). When Paul Lazarsfeld studied Erie County, Ohio, during the 1940 presidential election, he encountered all these same proclivities. Voters "somehow contrive to select out of the passing stream of stimuli those by which they are more inclined to be persuaded," he wrote. "So it is that the more they read and listen, the more convinced they become of the rightness of their own position." The more partisan the citizen, the less likely he or she was to listen to contrary arguments. Then as today, there was much public huffing and puffing about the need for free and open channels of discussion in a democracy. But, Lazarsfeld noted, "we find that consumers of ideas, if they have made a decision on the issue, themselves erect high tariff walls against alien notions."⁴²

In 1940, Lazarsfeld was disturbed that half of all citizens had decided how they would vote in the fall election as soon as the candidates had been chosen in the party conventions that summer. In January 2004, however, even before the first Democratic primary, the Bush campaign figured that 92 percent of the American electorate had decided how it would vote in November.⁴³ (As late as 2006, true uncommitted voters hovered between 6 and 10 percent, according to University of California, San Diego, professor Gary Jacobson.)⁴⁴ Meanwhile, communities have grown more politically segregated since Lazarsfeld conducted his

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studies. And as people are less likely to get their news from a common source, the tremendous choice of information offered by cable television and the Internet has separated people further.

Nearly sixty years of social psychological research confirms that as political majorities grow within communities, minorities retreat from public life. Majorities have their beliefs reinforced by seeing and hearing their inclinations locally repeated and enhanced. Self-reinforcing majorities grow larger, while isolated and dispirited minorities shrink. Majorities gain confidence in their opinions, which grow more extreme over time. As a result, misunderstanding between Republicans and Democrats grows as they seclude themselves.

Americans' political lives are baffling. Reconciling the narrowness of recent national elections with the lopsidedness of local results produces mass cognitive dissonance. The facts we see on television — a nearly fifty-fifty Congress, a teetering Electoral College, and presidential elections decided by teaspoons of votes — simply don't square with the overwhelming majorities we experience in our neighborhoods.

In focus groups held in Omaha, University of Nebraska political scientist Elizabeth Theiss-Morse revealed how confused people are by the consensus they see in their neighborhoods versus the conflict they see at large in the nation. "People said many times, 'Eighty percent of us agree,'" Theiss-Morse said. "We all want the same thing . . . It's those 20 percent who are just a bunch of extremists out there.' It didn't matter what their political views were. They really saw it as us against this fringe. The American people versus them, the fringe."

And in this age of political segregation, that "us" versus "the fringe" is often based on geography. The Nebraskans all agreed, Theiss-Morse said: "Those people in California are really weird."

The New York Times | <https://nyti.ms/2tzAchk>

SundayReview | OP-ED COLUMNIST

I'm O.K. — You're Pure Evil

Frank Bruni JUNE 17, 2017

In denouncing the hatred that brought bloodshed to a baseball diamond in Alexandria, Va., some people went ahead and spread more of it. Rush Limbaugh, take a bow. You called the shooter “a mainstream Democrat voter.” What do I call you? I want to be clear about my disgust, but not disgusting in my expression of it. That’s the hell of American politics and American discourse today, with its 140-character emissions.

To be seen in a thicket of hashtags and heard above the din, people screech. Passion and provocation blur. One is admirable, the other is adolescent, and too many of us have lost sight of the line between the two.

The shooting that wounded the Republican Congressman Steve Scalise and four others may or may not be the bitter fruit of that — the biography of the gunman, James Hodgkinson, suggests many prompts, including mental illness — but it demands soul-searching along those lines. If not physically then civically, we’re in a dangerous place when it comes to how we view, treat and talk about people we disagree with. Ugly partisanship may not be new, but some of its expressions and accelerants are. We’d be foolish to let this moment pass without owning up to them.

Over the past decade in particular, the internet and social media have changed the game. They speed people to like-minded warriors and give them the impression of broader company or sturdier validation than really exist. The fervor of those in the anti-vaccine movement exemplifies this. So did the stamina of Americans who insisted that Barack Obama was born abroad — and who were egged on by Donald Trump.

Admirers of a responsible politician or righteous cause coalesce quickly, but the same goes for followers of a hater or crackpot. One good articulation of this came from David Simas, who was Obama's political director, in a New Yorker article by David Remnick that deconstructed the 2016 election.

What people find on the web “creates a whole new permission structure, a sense of social affirmation for what was once unthinkable,” Simas told Remnick. Obama, in his own comments to Remnick, picked up that thread, saying, “An explanation of climate change from a Nobel Prize-winning physicist looks exactly the same on your Facebook page as the denial of climate change by somebody on the Koch brothers' payroll.”

“The capacity to disseminate misinformation, wild conspiracy theories, to paint the opposition in wildly negative light without any rebuttal — that has accelerated in ways that much more sharply polarize the electorate,” Obama added. Suspicion blossoms into certainty. Pique flowers into fury.

Shortly after that New Yorker article appeared, a 28-year-old North Carolina man named Edgar Welch showed up armed at a restaurant in Washington, D.C. Welch had fallen under the spell of #pizzagate and come to believe that children were being imprisoned and sexually abused by Democrats in a basement there. One of the fabulists who'd spread this tale was the son of Mike Flynn, Trump's short-lived national security adviser.

And then came Hodgkinson, who used social media as others do: to marinate in his political antipathies until swollen with them. In a Facebook post in March, he declared: “Trump Has Destroyed Our Democracy. It's Time to Destroy Trump & Co.” Facebook groups to which he belonged included one called Terminate the Republican Party and another called the Road to Hell Is Paved With Republicans.

His life online reflected the goosing, goading, amplifying power of social media and the eminence of outrage in public debate. As Michael Gerson noted in The Washington Post after the shooting, today's partisans "have made anger into an industry — using it to run up the number of listeners, viewers and hits." Mocking and savaging political opponents have been "not only normalized but monetized," Gerson added, and he stated the obvious, which needed stating nonetheless: "If words can inspire, then they can also incite or debase."

That's true whether those words are spoken from the right or from the left, and the monetization of partisan combat spans the ideological spectrum. I'm not in any way equating Alex Jones and Bill Maher — the former traffics in contemptible lies meant to whip the agitated into a full-blown frenzy — but both turn politics into spectacle, the better to keep watchers and listeners tuned in.

Our language is growing coarser. Our images, too. And even if they're only rarely a conduit to violence, they're always a path away from high-minded engagement.

Madonna fantasizes about blowing up the White House. Kathy Griffin displays a likeness of Trump's severed head. Stephen Colbert uses a crude term to describe Trump as Putin's sexual boy toy. Maher suggests that Trump and his daughter Ivanka have engaged in incest. I don't question the earnestness of these entertainers' objections to Trump, which are wholly warranted. I ask whether they're converting even one person with a contrary point of view.

Lately, Trump and his children have been playing the victims of all this, but save your tears. He has been an enormous part of the problem, from before his candidacy to the present. If anyone sets and bears responsibility for our country's tone, it's our president, and let's please not forget that he got all those plaudits last week for his dignified, sensitive response to the Alexandria shooting because we're never sure we can count on him to clear even the lowest of bars.

He doesn't so much lead the country as addle it, unhinging everyone in his orbit and anyone pressed to keep tabs on him. Anderson Cooper, flustered by Jeffrey Lord's blind worship of Trump, describes a vulgar scenario to ridicule it. Politicians litter their remarks with four-letter words.

We're surrendering restraint and a musty but worthy thing called tact, in ways guaranteed to widen the divisions between us. The Fusion website published a story noting that one of the cops who heroically took on Hodgkinson and possibly saved Scalise's life was a gay black woman and that Scalise, in his political career, has indulged white supremacists and fought against L.G.B.T. rights. That was worth telling.

But the headline *began* by branding him a "bigoted homophobe," and the story described this situation as an "especially delicious irony." "Delicious"? When the congressman is lying in a hospital bed in critical condition?

For more and more Americans, the other side isn't merely misguided in the extreme. It's evil in the absolute, and virtue is measured by the starkness with which that evil is labeled and reviled. There are emotional satisfactions to this. There is also a terrible price.

I invite you to follow me on Twitter (@FrankBruni) and join me on Facebook.

Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook and Twitter (@NYTopinion), and sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter.

A version of this op-ed appears in print on June 18, 2017, on Page SR3 of the New York edition with the headline: I'm O.K. — You're Pure Evil.

The New York Times | <https://nyti.ms/2xdVuXM>

POLITICS

The Fake Americans Russia Created to Influence the Election

By SCOTT SHANE SEPT. 7, 2017

Sometimes an international offensive begins with a few shots that draw little notice. So it was last year when Melvin Redick of Harrisburg, Pa., a friendly-looking American with a backward baseball cap and a young daughter, posted on Facebook a link to a brand-new website.

“These guys show hidden truth about Hillary Clinton, George Soros and other leaders of the US,” he wrote on June 8, 2016. “Visit #DCLeaks website. It’s really interesting!”

Mr. Redick turned out to be a remarkably elusive character. No Melvin Redick appears in Pennsylvania records, and his photos seem to be borrowed from an unsuspecting Brazilian. But this fictional concoction has earned a small spot in history: The Redick posts that morning were among the first public signs of an unprecedented foreign intervention in American democracy.

The DCLeaks site had gone live a few days earlier, posting the first samples of material, stolen from prominent Americans by Russian hackers, that would reverberate through the presidential election campaign and into the Trump presidency. The site’s phony promoters were in the vanguard of a cyberarmy of counterfeit Facebook and Twitter accounts, a legion of Russian-controlled impostors whose operations are still being unraveled.

The Russian information attack on the election did not stop with the hacking and leaking of Democratic emails or the fire hose of stories, true, false and in between, that battered Mrs. Clinton on Russian outlets like RT and Sputnik. Far less splashy, and far more difficult to trace, was Russia's experimentation on Facebook and Twitter, the American companies that essentially invented the tools of social media and, in this case, did not stop them from being turned into engines of deception and propaganda.

An investigation by The New York Times, and new research from the cybersecurity firm FireEye, reveals some of the mechanisms by which suspected Russian operators used Twitter and Facebook to spread anti-Clinton messages and promote the hacked material they had leaked. On Wednesday, Facebook officials disclosed that they had shut down several hundred accounts that they believe were created by a Russian company linked to the Kremlin and used to buy \$100,000 in ads pushing divisive issues during and after the American election campaign.

On Twitter, as on Facebook, Russian fingerprints are on hundreds or thousands of fake accounts that regularly posted anti-Clinton messages. Many were automated Twitter accounts, called bots, that sometimes fired off identical messages seconds apart — and in the exact alphabetical order of their made-up names, according to the FireEye researchers. On Election Day, for instance, they found that one group of Twitter bots sent out the hashtag #WarAgainstDemocrats more than 1,700 times.

The Russian efforts were sometimes crude or off-key, with a trial-and-error feel, and many of the suspect posts were not widely shared. The fakery may have added only modestly to the din of genuine American voices in the pre-election melee, but it helped fuel a fire of anger and suspicion in a polarized country.

Given the powerful role of social media in political contests, understanding the Russian efforts will be crucial in preventing or blunting similar, or more sophisticated, attacks in the 2018 congressional races and the 2020 presidential election. Multiple government agencies have investigated the Russian attack, though it remains unclear whether any agency is focused specifically on tracking foreign intervention in social media. Both Facebook and Twitter say they are studying the 2016 experience and how to defend against such meddling.

“We know we have to stay vigilant to keep ahead of people who try to misuse our platform,” Alex Stamos, Facebook’s chief security officer, wrote on Wednesday in a post about the Russia-linked fake accounts and ads. “We believe in protecting the integrity of civic discourse.”

Critics say that because shareholders judge the companies partly based on a crucial data point — “monthly active users” — they are reluctant to police their sites too aggressively for fear of reducing that number. The companies use technical tools and teams of analysts to detect bogus accounts, but the scale of the sites — 328 million users on Twitter, nearly two billion on Facebook — means they often remove impostors only in response to complaints.

Though both companies have been slow to grapple with the problem of manipulation, they have stepped up efforts to purge fake accounts. Facebook says it takes down a million accounts a day — including some that were related to the recent French election and upcoming German voting — but struggles to keep up with the illicit activity. Still, the company says the abuse affects only a small fraction of the social network; Facebook officials estimated that of all the “civic content” posted on the site in connection with the United States election, less than one-tenth of one percent resulted from “information operations” like the Russian campaign.

Twitter, unlike Facebook, does not require the use of a real name and does not prohibit automated accounts, arguing that it seeks to be a forum for open debate. But it constantly updates a “trends” list of most-discussed topics or hashtags, and it says it tries to foil attempts to use bots to create fake trends. However, FireEye found that the suspected Russian bots sometimes managed to do just that, in one case causing the hashtag #HillaryDown to be listed as a trend.

Clinton Watts, a former F.B.I. agent who has closely tracked Russian activity online, said that Facebook and Twitter suffered from a “bot cancer eroding trust on their platforms.” But he added that while Facebook “has begun cutting out the tumors by deleting false accounts and fighting fake news,” Twitter has done little and as a result, “bots have only spread since the election.”

Asked to comment, Twitter referred to a blog post in June in which it said it was “doubling down” on efforts to prevent manipulation but could not reveal details for

fear of tipping off those trying to evade the company's measures. But it declared that Twitter's "open and real-time nature is a powerful antidote" to falsehoods.

"This is important because we cannot distinguish whether every single Tweet from every person is truthful or not," the statement said. "We, as a company, should not be the arbiter of truth."

Leaks and Counterfeit Profiles

Russia has been quite open about playing its hacking card. In February last year, at a conference in Moscow, a top cyberintelligence adviser to President Vladimir V. Putin hinted that Russia was about to unleash a devastating information attack on the United States.

"We are living in 1948," said the adviser, Andrey Krutskikh, referring to the eve of the first Soviet atomic bomb test, in a speech reported by The Washington Post. "I'm warning you: We are at the verge of having something in the information arena that will allow to us to talk to the Americans as equals."

Mr. Putin's denials of Russian meddling have been coy. In June, he allowed that "free-spirited" hackers might have awakened in a good mood one day and spontaneously decided to contribute to "the fight against those who say bad things about Russia." Speaking to NBC News, he rejected the idea that evidence pointed to Russia — while showing a striking familiarity with how cyberattackers might cover their tracks.

"IP addresses can be simply made up," Mr. Putin said, referring to Internet protocol addresses, which can identify particular computers. "There are such IT specialists in the world today, and they can arrange anything and then blame it on whomever. This is no proof."

Mr. Putin had a point. Especially in the social media realm, attributing fake accounts — to Russia or to any other source — is always challenging. In January, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Security Agency concluded "with high confidence" that Mr. Putin had ordered an influence operation to damage Mrs. Clinton's campaign and eventually aid Donald J.

Trump's. In April, Facebook published a public report on information operations using fake accounts. It shied away from naming Russia as the culprit until Wednesday, when the company said it had removed 470 "inauthentic" accounts and pages that were "likely operated out of Russia." Facebook officials fingered a St. Petersburg company with Kremlin ties called the Internet Research Agency.

Russia deliberately blurs its role in influence operations, American intelligence officials say. Even skilled investigators often cannot be sure if a particular Facebook post or Twitter bot came from Russian intelligence employees, paid "trolls" in Eastern Europe or hackers from Russia's vast criminal underground. A Russian site called buyaccs.com ("Buy Bulk Accounts at Best Prices") offers for sale a huge array of pre-existing social media accounts, including on Facebook and Twitter; like wine, the older accounts cost more, because their history makes chicanery harder to spot.

The trail that leads from the Russian operation to the bogus Melvin Redick, however, is fairly clear. United States intelligence concluded that DCLeaks.com was created in June 2016 by the Russian military intelligence agency G.R.U. The site began publishing an eclectic collection of hacked emails, notably from George Soros, the financier and Democratic donor, as well as a former NATO commander and some Democratic and Republican staffers. Some of the website's language — calling Mrs. Clinton "President of the Democratic Party" and referring to her "electional staff" — seemed to belie its pose as a forum run by American activists.

DCLeaks would soon be followed by a blog called Guccifer 2.0, which would leave even more clues of its Russian origin. Those sites' posts, however, would then be dwarfed by those from WikiLeaks, which American officials believe got thousands of Democratic emails from Russian intelligence hackers through an intermediary. At each stage, a chorus of dubious Facebook and Twitter accounts — alongside many legitimate ones — would applaud the leaks.

During its first weeks online, DCLeaks drew no media attention. But The Times found that some Facebook users somehow discovered the new site quickly and began promoting it on June 8. One was the Redick account, which posted about DCLeaks to the Facebook groups "World News Headlines" and "Breaking News — World."

The Redick profile lists Central High School in Philadelphia and Indiana University of Pennsylvania as his alma maters; neither has any record of his attendance. In one of his photos, this purported Pennsylvania lifer is sitting in a restaurant in Brazil — and in another, his daughter's bedroom appears to have a Brazilian-style electrical outlet. His posts were never personal, just news articles reflecting a pro-Russian worldview.

The same morning, “Katherine Fulton” also began promoting DCLeaks in the same awkward English Mr. Redick used. “Hey truth seekers!” she wrote. “Who can tell me who are #DCLeaks? Some kind of Wikileaks? You should visit their website, it contains confidential information about our leaders such as Hillary Clinton, and others <http://dcleaks.com/>.”

So did “Alice Donovan,” who pointed to documents from Mr. Soros's Open Society Foundations that she said showed its pro-American tilt and — in rather formal language for Facebook — “describe eventual means and plans of supporting opposition movements, groups or individuals in various countries.”

Might Mr. Redick, Ms. Fulton, Ms. Donovan and others be real Americans who just happened to notice DCLeaks the same day? No. The Times asked Facebook about these and a half-dozen other accounts that appeared to be Russian creations. The company carried out its standard challenge procedure by asking the users to establish their bona fides. All the suspect accounts failed and were removed from Facebook.

Mobilizing a ‘Bot’ Army

On Twitter, meanwhile, hundreds of accounts were busy posting anti-Clinton messages and promoting the leaked material obtained by Russian hackers. Investigators for FireEye spent months reviewing Twitter accounts associated with certain online personas, posing as activists, that seemed to show the Russian hand: DCLeaks, Guccifer 2.0, Anonymous Poland and several others. FireEye concluded that they were associated with one another and with Russian hacking groups, including APT28 or Fancy Bear, which American intelligence blames for the hacking and leaking of Democratic emails.

Some accounts, the researchers found, showed clear signs of intermittent human control. But most displayed the rote behavior of automated Twitter bots, which send out tweets according to built-in instructions.

The researchers discovered long lists of bot accounts that sent out identical messages within seconds or minutes of one another, firing in alphabetical order. The researchers coined the term “warlist” for them. On Election Day, one such list cited leaks from Anonymous Poland in more than 1,700 tweets. Snippets of them provide a sample of the sequence:

@edanuro1 #WarAgainstDemocrats 17:54

@efekinoks #WarAgainstDemocrats 17:54

@elyashayk #WarAgainstDemocrats 17:54

@emrecanbalc #WarAgainstDemocrats 17:55

@emrullahtac #WarAgainstDemocrats 17:55

Lee Foster, who leads the FireEye team examining information operations, said some of the warlist Twitter accounts had previously been used for illicit marketing, suggesting that they may have been purchased on the black market. Some were genuine accounts that had been hijacked. Rachel Usedom, a young American engineer in California, tweeted mostly about her sorority before losing interest in 2014. In November 2016, her account was taken over, renamed #ClintonCorruption, and used to promote the Russian leaks.

Ms. Usedom had no idea that her account had been commandeered by anti-Clinton propagandists. “I was shocked and slightly confused when I found out,” she said.

Notably, the warlist tweets often included the Twitter handles of users whose attention the senders wanted to catch — news organizations, journalists, government agencies and politicians, including @realDonaldTrump. By targeting such opinion-shapers, Mr. Foster said, the creators of the warlists clearly wanted to stir up conversation about the leaked material.

J. M. Berger, a researcher in Cambridge, Mass., helped build a public web “dashboard” for the Washington-based Alliance for Securing Democracy to track hundreds of Twitter accounts that were suspected of links to Russia or that spread Russian propaganda. During the campaign, he said, he often saw the accounts post replies to Mr. Trump’s tweets.

Mr. Trump “received more direct replies than anyone else,” Mr. Berger said. “Clearly this was an effort to influence Donald Trump. They know he reads tweets.”

The suspected Russian operators at times lacked sophistication. “They are not always Americanophiles who know every nuance of U.S. politics,” said Mr. Foster, the FireEye researcher.

For instance, last October, hundreds of Anonymous Poland Twitter accounts posted a forged letter on the stationery of the conservative Bradley Foundation, based in Milwaukee, purporting to show that it had donated \$150 million to the Clinton campaign. The foundation denied any such contribution, which would have been illegal and, given its political leaning, highly unlikely.

‘A Battle of Information’

Only a small fraction of all the suspect social media accounts active during the election have been studied by investigators. But there is ample reason to suspect that the Russian meddling may have been far more widespread.

Several activists who ran Facebook pages for Bernie Sanders, for instance, noticed a suspicious flood of hostile comments about Mrs. Clinton after Mr. Sanders had already ended his campaign and endorsed her.

John Mattes, who ran the “San Diego for Bernie Sanders” page, said he saw a shift from familiar local commenters to newcomers, some with Eastern European names — including four different accounts using the name “Oliver Mitov.”

“Those who voted for Bernie, will not vote for corrupt Hillary!” one of the Mitovs wrote on Oct. 7. “The Revolution must continue! #NeverHillary”

While he was concerned about being seen as a “crazy cold warrior,” Mr. Mattes said he came to believe that Russia was the likely source of the anti-Clinton comments. “The magnitude and viciousness of it — I would suggest that their fingerprints were on it and no one else had that agenda,” he said.

Both on the left and the pro-Trump right, though, some skeptics complain that Moscow has become the automatic boogeyman, accused of misdeeds with little proof. Even those who track Russian online activity admit that in the election it was not always easy to sort out who was who.

“Yes, the Russians were involved. Yes, there’s a lot of organic support for Trump,” said Andrew Weisburd, an Illinois online researcher who has written frequently about Russian influence on social media. “Trying to disaggregate the two was difficult, to put it mildly.”

Mr. Weisburd said he had labeled some Twitter accounts “Kremlin trolls” based simply on their pro-Russia tweets and with no proof of Russian government ties. The Times contacted several such users, who insisted that they had come by their anti-American, pro-Russian views honestly, without payment or instructions from Moscow.

“Hillary’s a warmonger,” said Marilyn Justice, 66, who lives in Nova Scotia and tweets as @mkj1951. Of Mr. Putin, she said in an interview, “I think he’s very patient in the face of provocations.”

Ms. Justice said she had first taken an interest in Russia during the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia, while looking for hockey coverage and finding what she considered a snide anti-Russia bias in the Western media. She said she did get a lot of news from Sputnik and RT but laughed at the notion that she could have Kremlin connections.

Another of the so-called Kremlin trolls, Marcel Sardo, 48, a web producer in Zurich, describes himself bluntly on his Twitter bio as a “Pro-Russia Media-Sniper.” He said he shared notes daily via Skype and Twitter with online acquaintances, including Ms. Justice, on disputes between Russia and the West over who shot down the Malaysian airliner hit by a missile over Ukraine and who used sarin gas in Syria.

“It’s a battle of information, and I and my peers have decided to take sides,” said Mr. Sardo, who constantly cites Russian sources and bashed Mrs. Clinton daily during the campaign. But he denied he had any links to the Russian government.

If that’s so, his prolific posts are a victory for Russia’s information war — that admirers of the Kremlin spread what American officials consider to be Russian disinformation on election hacking, Syria, Ukraine and more.

But if Russian officials are gleeful at their success, in last year’s election and beyond, they rarely let the mask slip. In an interview with Bloomberg before the election, Mr. Putin suggested that reporters were worrying too much about who exactly stole the material.

“Listen, does it even matter who hacked this data?” he said, in a point that Mr. Trump has sometimes echoed. “The important thing is the content that was given to the public.”

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