

[theverge.com](https://www.theverge.com)

The case that Russia is winning the cyberwar

Casey Newton@CaseyNewton

14-17 minutes

Kathleen Hall Jamieson is a prominent political scientist and professor of communications at the University of Pennsylvania. For the past 40 years, she has studied political communication: debates, advertisements, and speeches. In the aftermath of the 2016 election, she studied the effect that the debates between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton had on the electorate. That set Jamieson down a road that led her to a bold (if not particularly original) conclusion: Russia very likely tipped the election to Trump.

What makes Jamieson's take notable is her scrupulously data-driven approach to answering a question that many people have dismissed as impossible. And while she stipulates that no one will ever be able to say with absolute certainty what tipped the election, Jamieson's new book presents the case that Russia's covert influence campaign was likely decisive in Trump's victory.

Jane Mayer has read the book, *Cyberwar: How Russian Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President—What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know*. (The rest of us can buy it today.) In [a new piece at *The New Yorker*](#), Mayer traces the evolution of Jamieson's beliefs from her work analyzing the 2016 debates to a detailed theory about how

Russia won.

Jamieson believes Russia's campaign was decisive for three main reasons. One, the strategic release of stolen documents through WikiLeaks, which were amplified by the US media, helped Russia manipulate news cycles in ways that diminished trust in Clinton and distracted from Trump's gaffes. Two, a forged email purporting to be from Attorney General Loretta Lynch, in which Lynch promised to go easy on Clinton in the investigation into her private email server, led FBI Director James Comey to go rogue and hold a dramatic press conference calling Clinton's actions "careless." The email that sparked the press conference appears to have been Russian disinformation — but Comey's concerns that Lynch's integrity had been compromised changed the course of the campaign, and maybe history.

Finally, there's the much-discussed-around-here question of disinformation on social networks. Jamieson believes that voter modeling documents stolen from the DNC would have been useful to Russian hackers as they worked to sow division in key battleground states. (They made it easier for Russia to figure out where to post.) Ultimately, Trump's election came down to 80,000 votes across three states — and by selectively depressing turnout with divisive social media posts, Jamieson argues, Russia's interference was decisive.

As Mayer points out, Facebook data could likely shed more light on the subject:

Philip Howard, the Oxford professor, believes that Facebook possesses this data, down to the location of a user's computer, and that such information could conceivably reveal whether an

undecided voter was swayed after viewing certain content. He also thinks that, if there was any collusion between the St. Petersburg trolls and the Trump campaign, Facebook's internal data could document it, by revealing coordination on political posts. But, he says, Facebook has so far resisted divulging such data to researchers, claiming that doing so would be a breach of its user agreement.

Some academics disagree with Jamieson's conclusions, and Mayer speaks with them. But if Jamieson can't prove her theory with absolute certainty, she can at least offer a preponderance of evidence. If you read Jamieson's book — and I plan to — let me know what you think.

In the meantime, Monday brought fresh reminders that Russia's campaign is ongoing. Reddit's largest group devoted to celebrating Trump, TheDonald, [appears to have been targeted by Russian propagandists for years](#), reports Ryan Broderick:

The bulk of the investigation that was posted to /r/FuckTheAltRight focused on two suspicious domains: brutalist.press and usareally.com. Both domains were registered in Russia, both sites contain linguistic errors common with other Russia-affiliated sites, and both heavily targeted /r/The_Donald. Based on job listings posted online, brutalist.press appears to have been created in St. Petersburg in 2016. And usareally.com is owned by a member of a civil society institution called the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation.

Russell Brandom says Reddit [still hasn't confirmed what's going on](#):

Reached by *The Verge*, Reddit declined to confirm that the posts were taken down because of a specific Russia connection, but said

they were in violation of site policy. “We are continuing our investigation into suspicious content on Reddit and have [taken action](#) against several domains that break our [site-wide policies](#),” a spokesperson said. “As was the case here, we take user reports of suspicious activity very seriously and fully investigate any claims made to us.”

There are 43 days until the midterm elections. And the forces that shaped the 2016 presidential election appear to still be operating at full tilt.

Democracy

[WhatsApp Has Appointed Someone To Handle Complaints From Indian Users After It Was Blamed For Fueling Violence](#)

Indian law requires tech companies operating in the country to have a “grievance officer” to address complaints, Pranav Dixit reports. But despite having more than 200 million users in India, WhatsApp failed to appoint one until the end of August:

Both India’s government and its Supreme Court [demanded](#) WhatsApp appoint a grievance officer after violent mobs who fell for rumors and misinformation spread through WhatsApp killed 29 people in 17 separate incidents of lynching across the country since May.

The officer is [Komal Lahiri](#), WhatsApp’s senior director for global customer operations and localization since March. Lahiri, previously a senior director at Facebook and Instagram working on community standards and content moderation, is based in the company’s Menlo Park, California, headquarters. Indian users can contact Lahiri with “complaints or concerns” about the app through

email or postal mail, [said](#) WhatsApp on its website.

[E-mail: Google CEO denies bias in search results](#)

Ina Fried reports that Sundar Pichai took time out of his day recently to tell employees that search results aren't politically biased, which they knew already.

[White House distances itself from reports that Trump could target Facebook, Google and Twitter with a new executive order](#)

Over the weekend, Tony Romm and Josh Dawsey reported on the existence of an executive order being passed around the White House that would create a federal investigation into political bias at Facebook, Google, Twitter, and other companies. The order is not being seriously considered, according to this report — to the consternation of Yelp, which apparently wrote it.

[#BeAVoter this US election](#)

Twitter, like Facebook before it, has a new campaign to register voters before the US midterm elections. It involves various in-app prompts, a hashtag, a hashtag, an emoji, and a promoted trend.

[Eric Schmidt, ex-Google CEO, predicts internet bifurcation with China](#)

Eric Schmidt says we are moving into a world where there are essentially two internets: the Chinese one, and the American one. Although with Europe mounting a serious new regulatory effort against US tech platforms, I'm not sure that there won't be a third:

SCHMIDT: If you look at China, and I was just there, the scale of the companies that are being built, the services being built, the wealth that is being created is phenomenal. Chinese Internet is a

greater percentage of the GDP of China, which is a big number, than the same percentage of the US, which is also a big number.

If you think of China as like ‘Oh yeah, they’re good with the Internet,’ you’re missing the point. Globalization means that they get to play too. I think you’re going to see fantastic leadership in products and services from China. There’s a real danger that along with those products and services comes a different leadership regime from government, with censorship, controls, etc.

[China shuts thousands of websites in clean-up campaign](#)

To Schmidt’s point, China is in the midst of a significant censorship campaign:

China has shut down more than 4,000 websites and online accounts in a three-month campaign against “harmful” online information, the official Xinhua news agency said on Saturday, citing the country’s illegal publication watchdog.

China keeps the internet under tight control and has been cracking down on a range of illegal online activities including pornography, gambling, religious proselytizing and even “spreading rumors”.

Elsewhere

[Content Moderator Sues Facebook, Says Job Gave Her PTSD](#)

In a new lawsuit, a former Facebook content moderators says she was subject to “highly toxic” content as part of the job. Jason Koebler and Joseph Cox report:

Scola’s lawyers say that she developed post traumatic stress disorder as a result of “constant and unmitigated exposure to highly toxic and extremely disturbing images at the workplace,” and allege

that Facebook does not have proper mental health services and monitoring in place for its content moderators. The case was filed as a class-action lawsuit, but at the moment Scola is the only named plaintiff; the lawsuit names a potential class of “thousands” of current and former moderators in California.

The lawsuit does not currently include specific details about Scola’s job and instead relies on news investigations about how content moderation works; Scola’s lawyers told Motherboard that further into the legal process she will detail them. “This complaint does not include these [specifics] because Ms. Scola fears that Facebook may retaliate against her using a purported non-disclosure agreement.”

[It took only a 45-minute Facebook outage for news traffic to spike](#)

When Facebook went down briefly last month, it was a boon to news websites, according to new data from Chartbeat.

[Facebook appoints Hotstar’s Ajit Mohan as India head](#)

Ajit Mohan, who was CEO of a video streaming platform, will now run Facebook’s India business. But that doesn’t extend to WhatsApp, the source of so many of Facebook’s problems in India.

[James Woods locked out of Twitter for violating rules](#)

Woods, who moonlights as a right-wing Twitter troll, got suspended for sharing a hoax tweet discouraging people from voting, and refusing to delete it.

[The Evolution of BuzzFeed’s Jonah Peretti \(\\$\)](#)

If any media company was going to build a sustainable business by distributing on Facebook, it was going to be BuzzFeed. But it hasn’t

worked out that way, as Jessica Toonkel recounts in this profile of its CEO:

For years Facebook executives had told BuzzFeed that they would figure out a way to help publishers make money from having their content on the platform, according to a person familiar with the discussions. But BuzzFeed executives felt they never followed through. Mr. Peretti said that Facebook's algorithm change late last year confirmed his belief Facebook wasn't going to change.

"Toward the end of last year when I saw them sort of double down on this thing that they had tried five times, I was like, okay, they are just incapable of valuing content." Mr. Peretti said. "We can't really depend on Facebook."

[The Creator Of One Of YouTube's Top Tween Channels Was Arrested For Molesting A Minor. YouTube Is Keeping The Channel Up.](#)

A man who runs a network of popular YouTube channels was arrested on a charge of lewd and lascivious molestation, Charlie Warzel reports:

While the videos featured on Rylett's SevenAwesomeKids channels appear innocuous, the allegations against him raise questions about the safety of underage vloggers on YouTube and whether the company — which profits from advertising sold against the videos — is doing enough to protect its most vulnerable talent from exploitation.

Launches

[Snapchat is testing a camera feature that lets you easily buy items from Amazon](#)

Snap's latest e-commerce experiment involves getting people to think of the camera as a kind of Shazam for the real world, with the potential to generate affiliate fees from purchases.

[LinkedIn Is Coming to Office Apps](#)

One reason I was so excited about Microsoft buying LinkedIn is because it seemed to increase the likelihood that LinkedIn would be accidentally destroyed, paving the way for a calmer and more useful professional network. It's taken a while, but I believe we're getting there, as these useless new LinkedIn integrations with Microsoft Office would suggest. Mehedi Hassan has my thoughts exactly:

Now, you will be able to co-author documents with people in your LinkedIn network right in Word, Excel, and PowerPoint without needing to leave the respective apps. This feature seems like an interesting addition because it is quite unlikely you will ever need to co-author document with someone from your LinkedIn network.

Takes

[Dave Rubin and the rise of YouTube's reactionary right](#)

Responding to [last week's study of white supremacists on YouTube](#), Ezra Klein says the video site is the key to understanding the future of the reactionary movement that is now ascendant in the United States.

Extremism is interesting. That's part of the YouTube right's programming strategy and it's part of YouTube's algorithmic strategy. But whether anyone intends it to or not, this mixture of social, political, and algorithmic preferences for extremism means that a 17-year-old kid who begins watching videos on the YouTube

right can get drawn into very dark places very fast.

Ideological coalitions are strange things, and all the more so when they're young and untested. They're not really under anyone's control. They often end up grouping together people who don't much like each other. The boundaries of a movement aren't just defined by who leads it, but who its followers believe belongs in it, and who they're guided towards once they make contact with it.

Making it yet more complex, this is arguably the first time we've seen a distinctive ideological coalition emerging atop social media platforms and under the influence of social media algorithms.

And finally ...

[Facebook Warns Memphis Police: No More Fake “Bob Smith” Accounts](#)

Today I learned that a “Bob Smith account” is a fake Facebook profile that the Memphis police department uses to surveil activists. Dave Maass reports:

In a letter to Memphis Police Director Michael Rallings dated Sept. 19, Facebook's legal staff demands that the agency “cease all activities on Facebook that involve the use of fake accounts or impersonation of others.”

It's a shame, because we really could use more policing of content on Facebook. Just ... not this kind of policing.

Talk to me

Send me tips, comments, questions, and Russian Reddit posts:

casey@theverge.com.