

# Social Media in the Aftermath of the 2016 US Presidential Election: Disruption at the Cost of Connection

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**Abstract:** This data captures people's experiences as unknowing targets of disinformation. Participants were US citizens naive to the actions of the different entities using social media to target Americans with disinformation in the months leading up to the 2016 US presidential election. Results indicated participants reported notable changes in their interactions on social media in the form of disruptions to existing relationships. Specifically, participants reported that they argued with their connections more, observed others disagree more, and reported an increase in the loss of friends and family connections through the unfriending or unfollowing features of social media. While, some participants found these changes amusing, most reported increased psychological distress. Not one participant mentioned Russian election interference or disinformation as the cause of these interpersonal difficulties. Analysis of text responses did not include any mention of disinformation, Cambridge Analytica, or Russia as causes of these disruptions. These results suggest that social media use has implications for individuals' social relationships and these disruptions may impact their psychological functioning. Implications of these results for the psychological impacts of social media use will be discussed.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Cognitive Warfare, Disinformation, Interpersonal Relationships, Facebook, Information Operations

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, people and organizations have shown a marked change in the way they consume news and information and communicate with one another. With the advent and adoption of social media and other forms of Internet Communication Technologies (ICTs), their use for communication and information consumption purposes has become increasingly common among people and organizations. Social media was initially intended to facilitate existing relationships and help people find new friends, employment opportunities, and groups of people with similar interests. However, as this technology evolved, it slowly became a vehicle to spread fake news and disinformation through targeted advertising and other mechanisms (Guadagno & Guttieri, 2021). While the past decade has generated much research to understand the effects of Cognitive Warfare and how to combat it, little research has examined whether individuals using social media noticed the way that their communications with others changed. To illustrate this, the present study presents data collected from US Facebook users five months after the conclusion of the divisive 2016 US presidential election. This was before it was widely known that multiple forces such as the Russian GRU, and the Russian Internet Agency, were using social media to sow disinformation, chaos, and discord.

### 1.1 Information Warfare and IC

The change in the information ecosystem has revolutionized many aspects of modern life. The affordances of features of this technology – particularly the ease of sharing information from one to many and the rapid spread of viral content – have created an environment rife with misinformation. This environment is ripe for bad actors to implement inexpensive but widespread influence or information operations (IO). This is also known as Information Warfare (IW) or Black/Grey Propaganda. Information warfare is the deliberate dissemination of disinformation by an individual, group, or state actor. Disinformation is classified as false or misleading information disseminated with the intent to affect the psychological functioning of an adversary by sowing chaos, disrupting interpersonal relationships, and influencing the emotions, beliefs, motivations, and behaviors of its targets. IW is also considered a "class of communication", separate from other forms of communication such as persuasion, because of its purpose. While persuasion attempts to balance the needs of the persuader and the persuadee, propaganda is designed to promote "the desired intent of the propagandist" through a "deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and guide behavior" (Jowett & O'donnell, 2018). While IW has existed since the dawn of human civilization, the recent technological developments in internet communications technology (ICT) have created significantly more opportunities for people to use this means of warfare at a much larger scale.

## **1.2 Facebook and Personal Relationships**

Humans have a fundamental need to belong; to affiliate with others and be a part of a group (Baumeister & Leary, 2017; Brewer, 1991). This is one of the many reasons why people find social media so engrossing – it is a convenient and easy way for people to connect with others from the comfort of their own home. Social media platforms have heightened people’s capacity to communicate, share data, discover, and collaborate with strangers and friends that live all over the world. These capacities have drastically improved, and changed, how we perceive and connect with society and people, at a scale never thought of before (Akram & Kumar, 2017). The single most well-known capability of social media is the ability to keep in contact with connections or create new ones, regardless of location, time, and physical constraints of the people involved. Even if its implications, drawbacks, and potential are still not fully understood by most of the public, especially the privacy risks involved in having an online persona (Eijkman & Weggemans, 2012). The ability to communicate easily and quickly through messaging, video, and voice calls, for most outweighs the real or perceived risks involved in this sort of online activities.

Another inherent attribute of social media is sharing. This capacity involves broader topics in fields like education, health, news, and critical message sharing during catastrophic events (Abbasi et al., 2012). This feature is also extremely important for interpersonal relationships, as the sharing of experiences, thoughts, and feelings with friends and family can act as a bonding agent that strengthens the group ties. A feature that partially overlaps with sharing is collaboration. Collaborative efforts through data sharing, or other networking endeavors abound in both the private and the public sectors, and in the private and public sphere (Abbasi et al., 2012). Social media platforms make the process of networking trivial, improving also the scale, reach, and speed of such processes. In the private sphere, individuals can benefit from all these new capabilities provided by technology. Moreover, new ties between family and friends could be created through these collaborative efforts, along with a new, or renewed, sense of belonging and community.

The last feature that will be discussed here is discovery. From hobbyists to protestors, passing through concerned parents and groups of interest, the ability to find and connect with other individuals or groups sharing similar interests or goals is invaluable (Abbasi et al., 2012). This ability lends itself as being a prime tool for community building, and it helps create a deep sense of connection and belonging.

All the features we presented have in common one more advantage, all the social networks are a continually live service. This creates a permanent stream of information going through groups, people, and platforms (cross-platform content sharing and diffusion is a common occurrence, regardless of whether the social network has a built-in function for that purpose), that allows users to see and keep track of what others are doing.

Furthermore, this connectedness was initially seen as a laudable improvement for keeping in touch with friends and family. The ability of social media to connect people to a wider selection of news, knowledge, and ideas, was positively received in various academic circles. Digital media were seen as an innovation with characteristics that could be useful to contrast propaganda tactics (McQuail, 2010). However, by networking people in this manner, social media also opened them up to campaigns of mass persuasion. The constant stream of information can cause information overload making people uniquely susceptible to heuristic-based persuasion (Guadagno, 2021; Guadagno et al., 2013). The positive effects of having so many options are greatly reduced by people’s tendency to attend to information consistent with pre-existing beliefs, and the end result is the creation of online echo-chambers (Quattrociocchi et al., 2016).

While there are many positive aspects to social media use, the current investigation focuses on using social media for mass persuasion. However, it urges a more nuanced approach that would like to underline the unanticipated issues that this technology in particular has brought to us. Generally speaking, progress, can be a challenging process that forces us to renegotiate previously held social norms and belief systems. Overall, social media is a powerful tool that allows us to build and maintain relationships that otherwise would have never come to fruition, with a reduced risk of deteriorating them because of time or distance. However, moderation is fundamental while approaching those platforms, and the risks inherent to our electronic lives should be better understood by the user base.

## **1.3 Russian Disinformation and the 2016 US Presidential Election**

The Russian Internet Research Agency (RU-IRA) was an organization in which employees attempted to manipulate and create conflict in online communities, also known as a “Troll Farm”. It was established by the former leader of Wagner Private Military Company and oligarch, Yevgeny Prigozhin. While in activity, played a

significant role in two of the major IO uncovered in recent American history. Alongside the recently formed IRA, another entity was involved in those IO. The Main Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, formerly known as the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) in Russian *Главное Разведывательное Управление (ГРУ)*, the foreign intelligence service of the Russian Federation, direct successor of the same agency during Soviet time. The GRU was the main actor in the cyber-attack on the Democratic National Committee, that resulted in a precise and controlled leak of email data related to the Clinton Presidential campaign team, on the well-known WikiLeaks platform (DiResta et al., 2019). The US Department of Justice investigated the cyberattacks and concluded that two units of the GRU were involved, Unit 26165 stole the material using spearphishing (targeted phishing emails) to get an initial foothold, and then applied network traversal techniques to compromise more machines on the Democratic network. After the data exfiltration, Unit 74455 assisted Unit 26165 in the release of the material, through a sympathetic WikiLeaks (Special Counsel's Office, 2019).

The IRA influence during the 2016 US presidential campaign (DiResta et al., 2019; Linvill et al., 2019), and the peak of the #BlackLivesMatter social movement (Stewart et al., 2018) was profound. Though challenging to quantify, it effectively sowed discord and exploited the deep ideological and societal divisions of the American public.

The researchers who studied the social scene on Twitter during the BLM protests, identified the existence of two, completely separated communities, divided along political lines (left and right). Embedded in both of these communities, the most influential and controversial accounts were linked to this state-sponsored foreign actor. The IRA used employees with fake accounts – trolls, to pose as US citizens, and generated artificial interactions through the use of bots (Stewart et al., 2018). The themes that these accounts were most interested revolved around violence and shootings, and the intent of destabilization through the exploitation of the deep divisions still present in the US social tissue is evident (Guadagno, 2021). This tactic is well known since the soviet times, as reported by Ladislav Bittman (Bittman, 1985), a former chief of the Czechoslovakian Intelligence Service Disinformation Department, and discussed in military circles since the cold war (Kux, 1985).

The same tactic of seeding dissent and division was used during the 2016 election, where the IRA conducted a sophisticated and multi-platform campaign infiltrating unwitting US citizens' discussions and interactions. In this IO, as in the previous BLM operation, the IRA infiltrated both sides of the political aisle. However, unlike in the BLM operation, the agency took a more biased approach in the operation in favor of Donald Trump. The trolls worked both to reinforce Trump's messaging and to undermine the legitimacy of Hillary Clinton as a candidate for the presidency. The U.S. House Intelligence Committee uncovered a staggering amount of data attributed solely to the IRA's activities targeting US citizens (DiResta et al., 2019). Recently the government of the United Kingdom also released a memorandum regarding interference in the 2019 elections by Center 18 of Russia's Federal Security Service, within an ongoing effort from at least 2015 till now. The UK faced spearfishing attacks, a compromise of a research institute that was leading initiatives against disinformation, and targeted leaks of the obtained information. The targets were universities, journalists, public sector, NGOs and other Civil Society organizations (National Cyber Security Centre, 2023). This new information seems to reinforce the idea of a well-developed and tested formula for conducting offensive IO from Russia, to influence and destabilize Western democracies.

The data collected for the US House Intelligence Committee regarding the 2016 US election, along with data coming from other IO of the IRA, spanning from 2014 to 2017 was thoroughly analyzed, and confirmed the presence of "a sweeping and sustained social influence operation consisting of various coordinated disinformation tactics aimed directly at US citizens, designed to exert political influence and exacerbate social divisions in US culture" (DiResta et al., 2019). In the months leading up to the 2016 US Presidential election in November 2016, The American voters were unaware of these various attempts to influence them through their social media. The gravity of the situation assessed by various agencies initially was not understood by the U.S. administration initially, and its first answer was slow and weak (Lipton et al., 2016; Sanger, 2016). This initial indecisiveness by the administration was intertwined with a general mistrust by the public of the reports regarding the Russian IO that took years to overcome (Gilberstadt, 2019), with half of the American public, the influence targets, unwilling to accept that this actually happened (Epstein, 2017).

#### **1.4 Overview of the Present Study**

This study employed a web-based survey to examine the extent to which attempts to interfere with the 2016 US presidential election through social media affected people's interpersonal relationships on those platforms.

These data were collected in February 2017 – at a time when knowledge of election interference was not widely accepted by both Republican and Democrats (Epstein, 2017; Gilberstadt, 2019). The present investigation, therefore, is intended to provide a snapshot of people’s perceptions of their social media experiences during this unprecedented election season. Given the literature reviewed above, we expected to find evidence of disruption in interpersonal relationships within friends and family circles on social media.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

Participants were 285 (128 men, 157 women) United States citizens over the age of 18 ( $M = 38.34$ ,  $SD = 12.81$ ). All were social media users and 253 (88.77%) reported voting in the 2016 US Presidential election.

### 2.2 Procedure

Participants were recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk and paid \$0.25 for their participation. They were instructed that the purpose of the study was to learn about people’s experiences on social media in the months leading up to the election. Additionally, we obtained ethics approval to conduct the study, ensuring the respect of the standards of research integrity. The voluntary nature of the study, and the absence of any kind of penalty or loss of benefit if the subject decided to withdraw from the study at any time, were stressed. The participants were also informed of the potential risks of the survey, like the potential loss of privacy due to unauthorized third parties accessing their data (e.g., Hackers). After participants provided informed consent, they filled out a survey assessing their experiences on social media in the months leading up to the 2016 US Presidential election.

### 2.3 Measures

Participants completed a series of author-generated measures to assess their attitudes toward the impact of the election on their social media use, they used a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Next, participants were asked to write about their experiences on social media in the months leading up to the 2016 US presidential election. Specifically, they described their most negative experience during the pre-election and election period. They also reported with a “yes” or a “no” whether they had unfriended or unfollowed someone due to their political posts, explaining whether this was prompted by the political posts of those people or by their replies under their own posts.

Lastly, participants’ political affiliation was measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very conservative) to 5 (very liberal;  $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ). Their voting choices in the 2016 US Presidential election were gauged by asking participants to indicate which candidate they supported. Participant demographics, age, and gender were also assessed.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Participant’s Voting Choices

Overall, 253 reported voting in the 2016 US presidential election. Of these, 56.5% reported voting for Hillary Clinton, 32.8% for Donald Trump, 5.5% for Gary Johnson, 4.4% for Jill Stein, and 0.8% voted for other. There were no significant differences in results based on voting choice.

### 3.2 Evidence of Election-based Relationship Disruptions

When asked if they unfriended someone for their political posts in the months leading up to the US Presidential election, 32.3% of participants responded yes, while 42.8% reported unfollowing people for the same reasons. These two responses were significantly correlated  $r(283) = 0.59$ ,  $p < 0.001$ , indicating that the people who unfriended others owing to the election were also likely to unfollow people. Political affiliation and gender in our sample did not have any significant effect on the responses.

### 3.3 Unfollowing Results

In this series of analyses, we examined whether people who reported unfollowing others due to their social media connections' posts had different experiences while using social media in this timeframe. To examine whether unfollowing actions were related to the amount of political posting participants engaged in, we conducted a point-biserial correlation analysis. There was a significant positive correlation between the variables,  $r_{pb}(283) = .23$ ,  $p < .001$ . People who unfollowed someone were more likely to be people that post political content with higher frequencies than people that post political content with lower frequencies. Moreover, a series of independent-samples t-test was conducted to determine whether people who unfollowed others had different attitudes towards their experiences using social media in the months leading up to the 2016 US Presidential election. Specifically, people who unfollowed others had higher means on all 6 items assessing the extent to which their relationships were disrupted during this period. See Table 1 for means and standard deviations, and the t-statistics accompanying each item.

**Table 1: Independent-Samples T-test comparing six attitude items and the yes/no conditions to the question Unfollowing Due to Direct Posts (2-tailed)**

Did you unfollow anyone on social media due to their posts about the U.S. presidential election campaign?	Yes M(SD)	No M(SD)	t
The 2016 US Presidential election was more decisive than previous elections	4.20(2.21)	3.61(1.95)	2.37(282)*
The 2016 US Presidential election disrupted my friendships	4.22(1.87)	2.55(1.64)	8.00(282)***
The 2016 US Presidential election disrupted my family relationships	3.58(1.97)	2.21(1.47)	6.67(282)***
The 2016 US Presidential election disrupted my romantic relationships	2.12(1.52)	1.77(1.17)	2.15(282)*
The 2016 US Presidential election led me to unfriend people on Social Media	5.01(2.02)	1.82(1.20)	16.65(282)***
The 2016 US Presidential election led people to unfriend me on Social Media	3.98(2.13)	2.19(1.62)	8.05(282)***

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed), \*\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed)

### 3.4 Unfriending Results

A point-biserial correlation coefficient analysis was performed to evaluate the relationship between unfriending someone because of posts made directly by the unfriended person and participants' frequency of posts with political content. There was a positive correlation between the variables, which was statistically significant ( $r_{pb}(283) = .21$ ,  $p < .001$ ). People that unfriended others because of posts made directly by the unfriended person were more likely to be people that post political content with higher frequencies than people that post political content with lower frequencies. Moreover, a series of independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare six attitude items using the categorical (yes/no) response to the question: "Did you unfriend anyone on social media due to their posts about the U.S. presidential election campaign?". While not all items revealed a significant difference, all the means were in the same direction indicating that people who unfriended people experienced more disruption in their social relationships. See Table 2.

**Table 2: Independent-Samples T-test comparing six attitude items and the yes/no conditions to the question Unfriending Due to Direct Posts (2-tailed)**

Did you unfriend anyone on social media due to their posts about the U.S. presidential election campaign?	Yes M(SD)	No M(SD)	t(df)
The 2016 US Presidential election was more decisive than previous elections	4.13(2.23)	3.73(2.00)	ns
The 2016 US Presidential election disrupted my friendships	4.50(1.78)	2.67(1.70)	8.35(282)***
The 2016 US Presidential election disrupted my family relationships	3.83(1.95)	2.30(1.55)	7.12(282)***
The 2016 US Presidential election disrupted my romantic relationships	2.12(1.50)	1.82(1.25)	ns
The 2016 US Presidential election led me to unfriend people on Social Media	5.60(1.56)	2.03(1.48)	18.66(283)***
The 2016 US Presidential election led people to unfriend me on Social Media	4.32(2.08)	2.31(1.69)	8.69(283)***

\*\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed)



support for a particular candidate, and gender in our sample did not have a significant impact on the decision of cutting their digital ties with others. We also discovered that the type of online interaction has probably an influence. For example, the political posts that people posted directly on their pages were strongly correlated with our participants decision to unfriend or unfollow them. On the other hand, if the interactions with others were a response to the participant's own posts, or a response under other people posts, the correlation could be weaker. Our results also suggest that people who unfriended or unfollowed others during the 2016 election period perceived that period as more conflictual than people that did not unfriend or unfollow others. Lastly, we should stress how heavily threat actors tried to influence the American public during those elections. Unfortunately, the souring political discourse, marred by those external interferences, had a noticeable negative impact on people's interactions on social media but also on their relationships and social ties with family members and friends in real life. We should also remind that at the time of data collection – February 2017, people were largely unaware of the foreign election interference in their social media experiences, the evidence provided by these self-reports suggested that people felt the effects of this interference as it placed a strain on their interpersonal relationships.

#### **4.1 Limitations and Future Avenues of Research**

This study has fully explored the dataset within the scope of our research objectives, but the data and our conclusions could offer value in additional inquiries for other research questions. Given its specific focus on the general public's experience during the US election of 2016, researchers should also be especially wary of extrapolating general trends based solely on this study. Despite the temporal and geographical focus, combined with the preliminary nature of this study, and our warning toward generalization, we believe that other similar studies would probably reinforce the notion of propaganda as a core cause of strain between people (friends and family) on social media.

Future studies conducted with different temporal and geographical horizons would be the most suited for the objective, as they could fill the knowledge gap left by this study. We hope for a future meta-analysis of related studies, particularly those from regions where Russian propaganda is more aggressive, such as Central and Western Europe, the Baltic States, and Finland.

#### **4.2 Conclusion and Implications**

Propaganda tactics rely heavily on the psychology of persuasion (Lin & Kerr, 2021). The principle of Commitment and Consistency refers to the tendency of individuals to align their actions and beliefs with their previous decisions and beliefs. Similarly, the principle of Social Validation is based on the idea that people look to the behavior of others to guide their actions in unfamiliar situations (Cialdini, 2009). These principles are frequently employed as key strategies in numerous propaganda campaigns.

People like to stay consistent with our own preconceived notions and their first impressions on an event or topic will somewhat tie to their future responses on similar events (Cialdini, 2009). Within propaganda, the aim is to reach people using their already preconceived biases as to influence their vision on related matters (Lin & Kerr, 2021). Tying the information to a political affiliation will affect the view that a reader has of the information itself. A conservative reader will be more likely to believe conservative sources, and a liberal one will be more likely to believe liberal sources (Hmielowski et al., 2020), and propagandists exploit this weakness.

Research on social norms indicates that, in unfamiliar situations, where people are not sure how to act, their rely on the behavior of others to guide their choices (Cialdini, 2009). This principle is extremely exploitable in online closed communities, and we find this type of community prevalent in alternative media groups (Pasquetto et al., 2022). Within those groups, threat actors find fertile ground in which to spread unopposed, and even aided by the social consensus, their messages.

Social Media Platforms promised to be a useful tool that would keep people connected, and up to date with others. Unfortunately, the platforms are designed to keep their users as engaged as possible, and divisive content is optimal to reach such outcome (Martin, 2022). Outrage creates traffic, and traffic helps company revenue streams. Threat actors understood quite rapidly how to exploit the platforms design to improve revenue through the promotion of divisive content, weaponizing it against liberal democracies. Our own tools are designed to further division, and expertly manipulated by Russian threat actors. This manipulation has true and tangible consequences for ordinary people. The negative impact on the lives and social interactions of ordinary citizens, due to the manufactured hyperpolarization of the political discourse, as discussed in the present study, is an issue for which solutions are needed, to prevent further damage to our society.

Societal institutions are becoming more aware of the extent of the disinformation and propaganda issue. In 2023 a start-up dedicated to monitoring disinformation in support of the EU code of practice on disinformation made the rounds in the news cycle as it highlighted the issue of social media misinformation and disinformation discoverability ratios within X (the platform formerly known as Twitter) (Vallance, 2023). The EU's Values and Transparency Commissioner Vera Jourova openly spoke about how "The Russian state has engaged in the war of ideas to pollute our information space with half-truth and lies to create a false image that democracy is no better than autocracy.". These are all signals that the legislative body of the EU will hopefully take further steps to regulate Social Media platforms in a stricter manner. This is also a sign that we should develop more proactive measures, rather than solely relying on passive reactions to these attacks. The USA has already been moving towards developing proactive measures, with seemingly promising results (Lee Myers Steve, 2023), but prebunking campaigns are time-sensitive endeavors. Their success is closely related to the ability of the people conducting them to reliably discern the emerging threats in the information space from the background noise. The rise in traction of manufactured stories aimed at eroding Western credibility can be viewed as the escalation phase of an informational attack on democratic systems, that requires early detection and responsive action to mitigate these threats.

The modern cyber threats take advantage of the internet high connectivity and ease of dissemination, the low latency of information spread, the anonymity, the low cost of this sort of operation, the multiple avenues of information delivery, the insensitivity of national borders, and the high availability of personal information (Lin & Kerr, 2021). In the case of the US election, the IO clearly used almost every one of those advantages. In particular, the anonymity made it possible for the IRA employees to pose as US citizens, and the availability of information on their target from Facebook itself (targeted advertisement) made their campaigns easier (DiResta et al., 2019; Guadagno, 2021). These cyber threats ultimately aim to influence the choices or to create enough noise to impair or block the decision-making processes of the population targeted. The threat actors exploit the openness of democratic society and are especially effective in weakening the institutions or radicalizing the population in our democratic regimes (Schleffer & Miller, 2021).

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