



Stop Online Violence Against Women

## **How The Facebook Ads that Targeted Voters Centered on Black American Culture: Voter Suppression was the End Game**

Though it has been reported that overwhelming the 3500 ads on Facebook by the Russian Internet Research Agency were targeting race, what's been less noted is that the majority of these ads targeted Black American Culture. The 3,500 ads on Facebook by the Russian Internet Research agency were centered largely on Black American Culture over all other identity and race-based narratives. While the race-based focus of the Russian-purchased ads has been acknowledged in some reporting and previous studies, it has not been pointed out in the media that the themes of Black Identity and culture were the focus of the majority of the [ads](#) with the intent to engage in voter suppression of Black voters.

Facebook's statement, in Politico's 2017 article, in reference to the ads were misleading:

“The vast majority of ads run by these accounts didn’t specifically reference the U.S. presidential election or voting for a particular candidate. Rather, the ads and accounts appeared to focus on amplifying divisive social and political messages across the ideological spectrum — touching on topics from LGBT matters to race issues to immigration to gun rights.”(2)

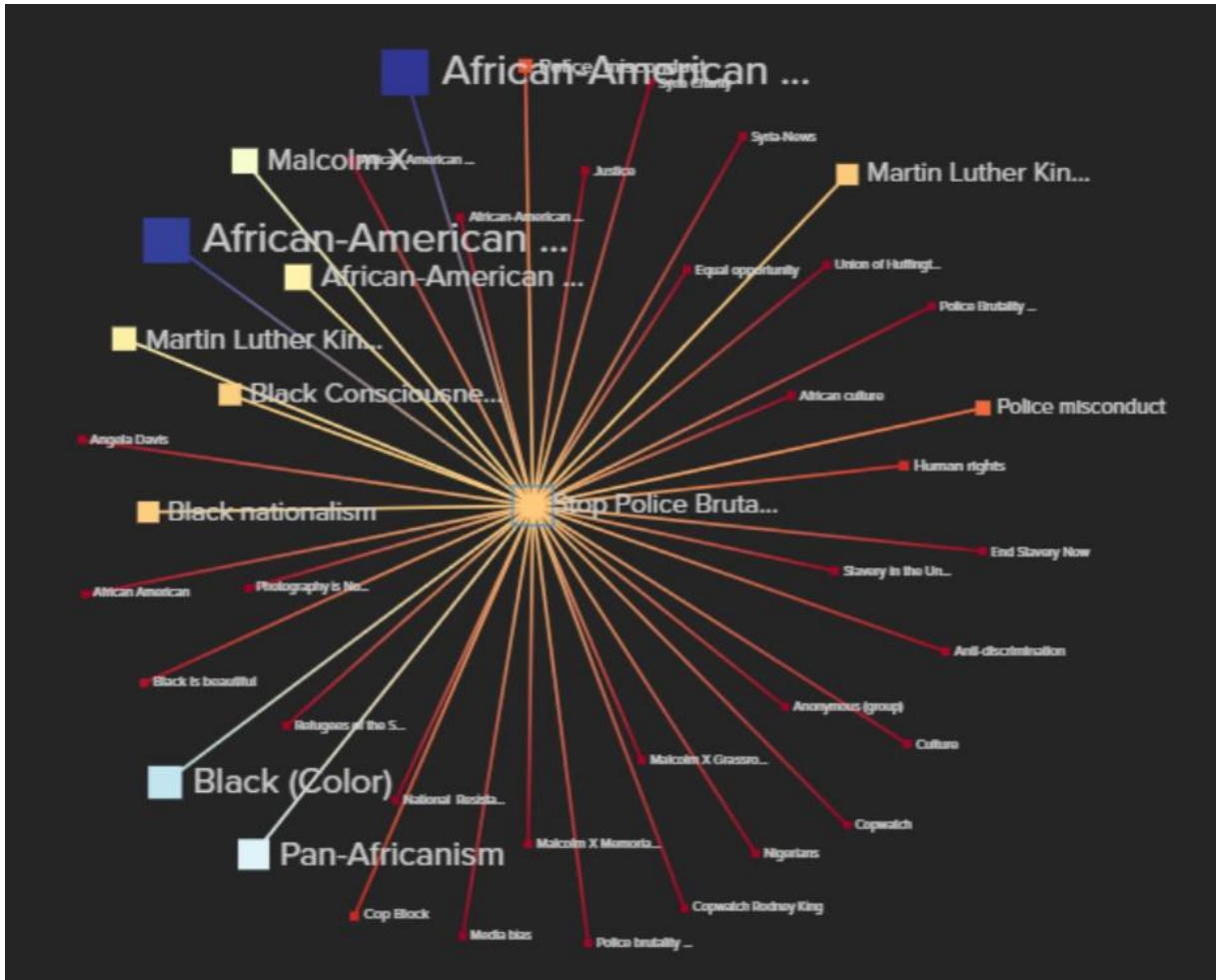
Our report shows that the depth and breadth of the ads specifically targeting black voters lead to criminal acts of voter suppression. Our interactive data visualization reveals that if we focus on volume, the order of identity targets and issue areas were: 1. Black Identity 2. Chicano Identity, 3. Policing, 4. Second Amendment Concerns and 5. Immigration. Those categories would be followed by religious ads citing Christianity and Islam and then Texas. Texas is the only state specifically targeted in these ads.

The image below is a linked graph of the entire 3,500 Russian IRA ads released by Congress. The red lines are connected to square nodes. Each node is an identity, topic or issue. The differing color of the nodes indicate the volume of impressions (audience reach) including the number of ads bought. The number of impressions are color-coded, low (red) to mid-level (yellow) to high (blue) The clicks are visualized by size. The larger the node the more clicks were received for that issue or topic.

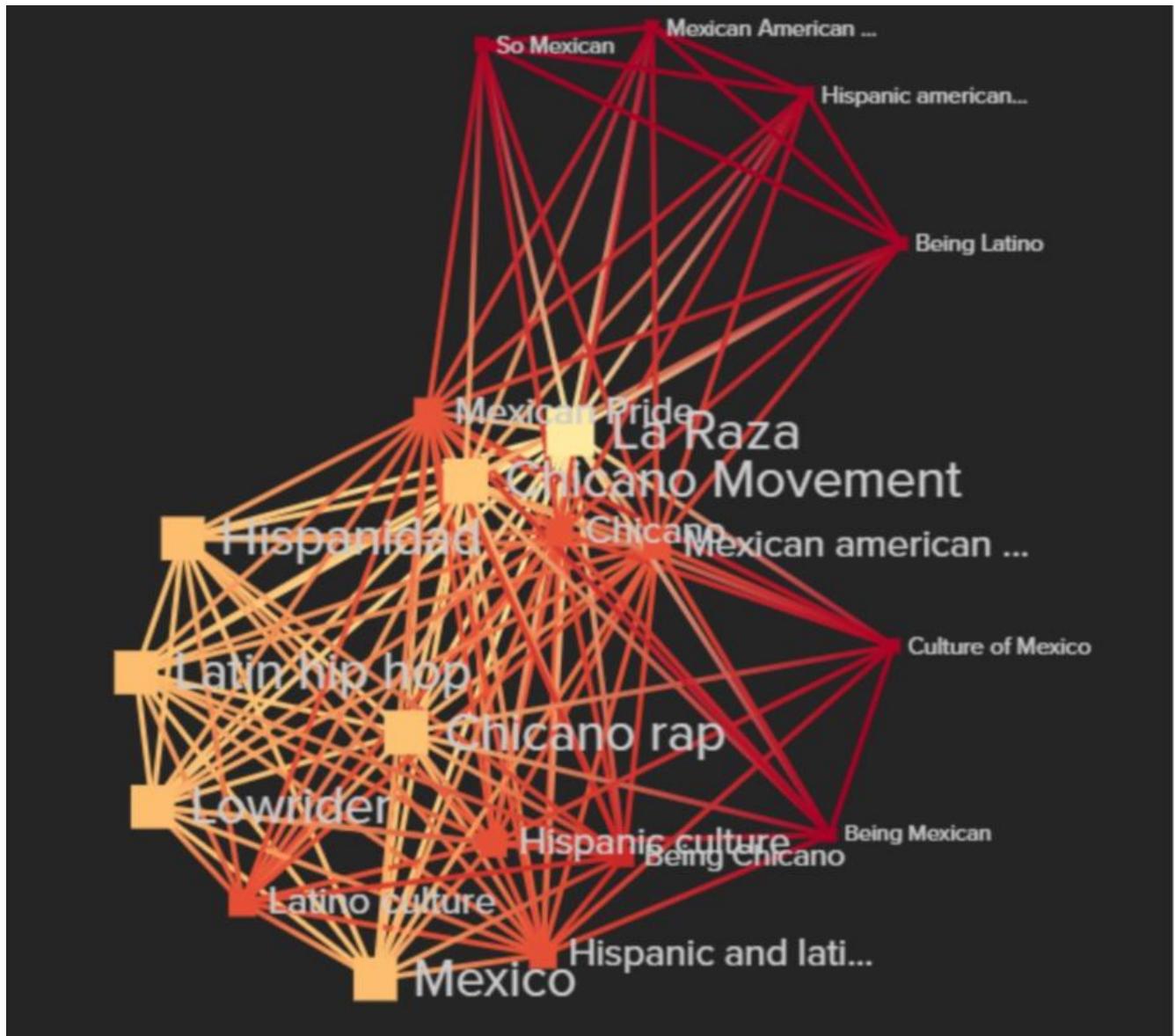


A closer view of the ads targeting black identity reveals the number of ads, related topics, and impressions. Clusters reveal commonly linked topics, each cluster can be linked by a node to a different cluster of topics.

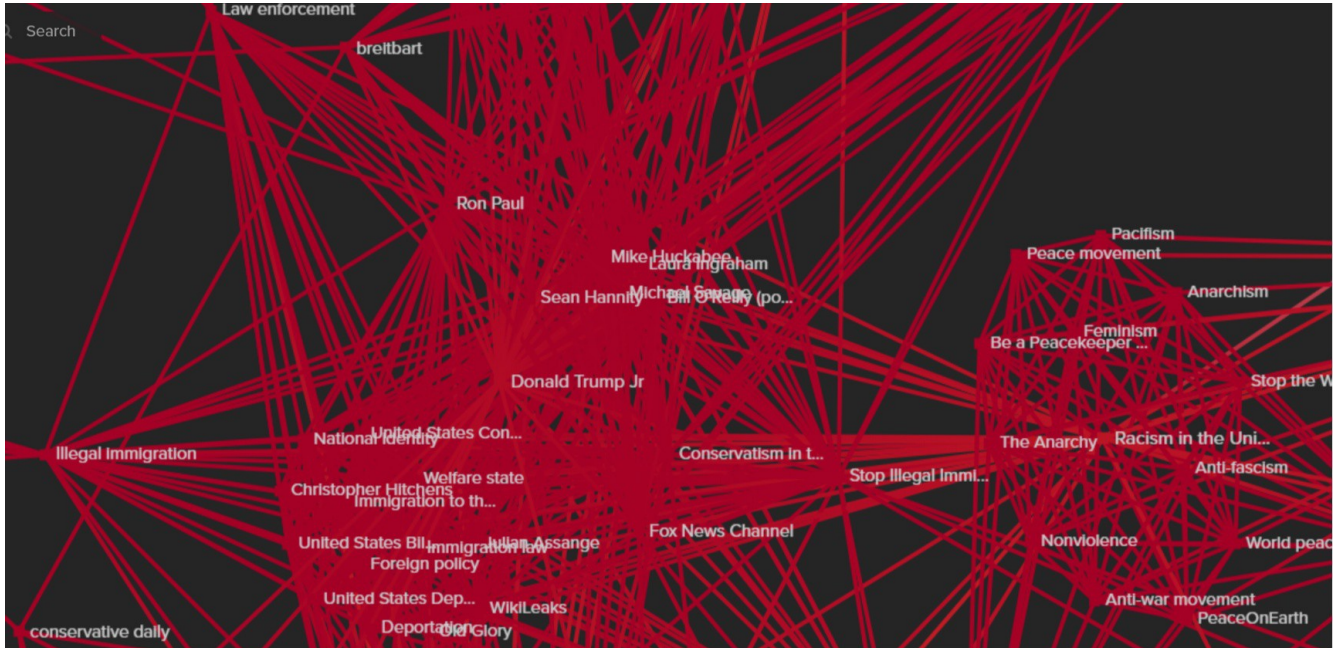
The linked nodes in this cluster with the center focused Stop Police Brutality can be linked to African American, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Black (color), Pan Africanism and many other topics or issues that are focused on Black Identity.



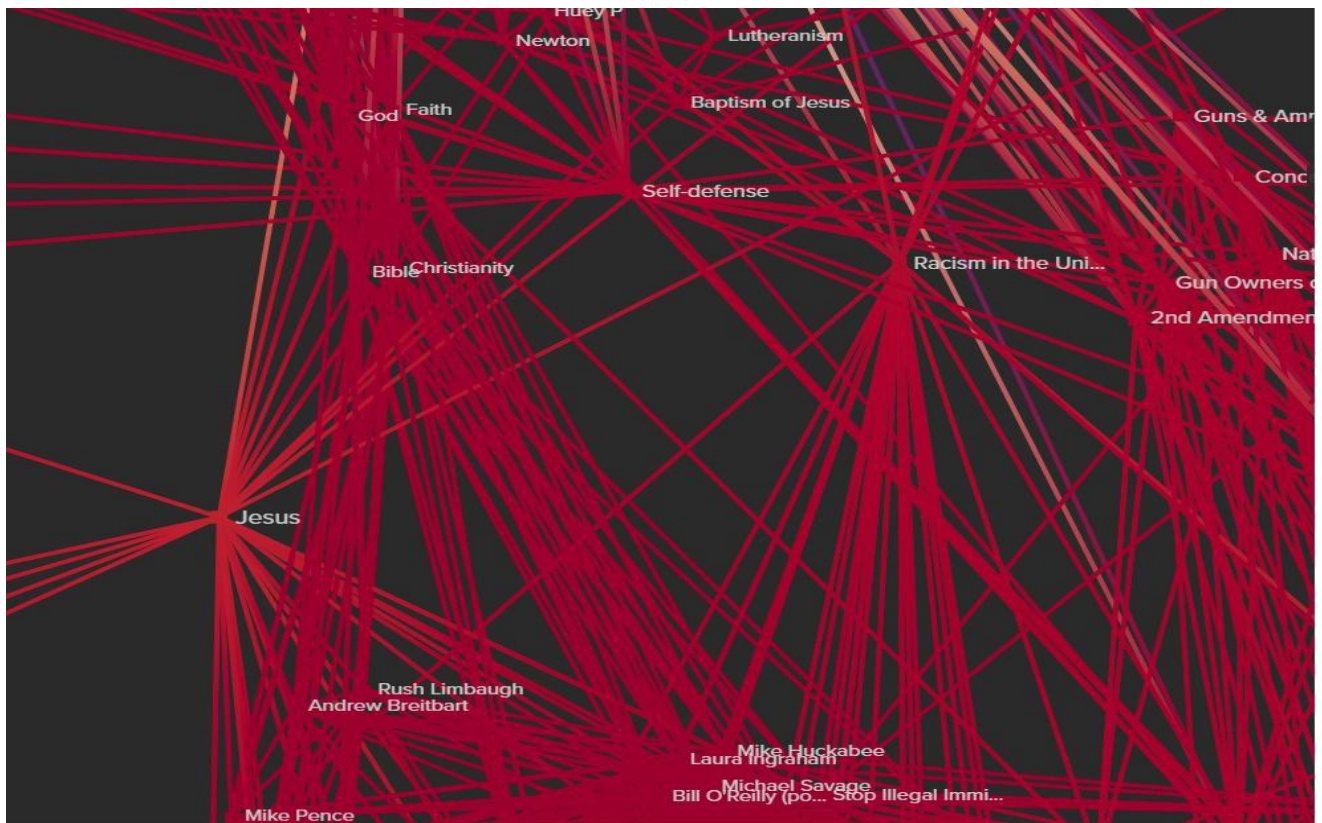
On an island of nodes alone are the ads for Chicano, Mexico, Latin hip-hop, Hispanic culture, & La Raza. All focused on various forms of Latinx identity.



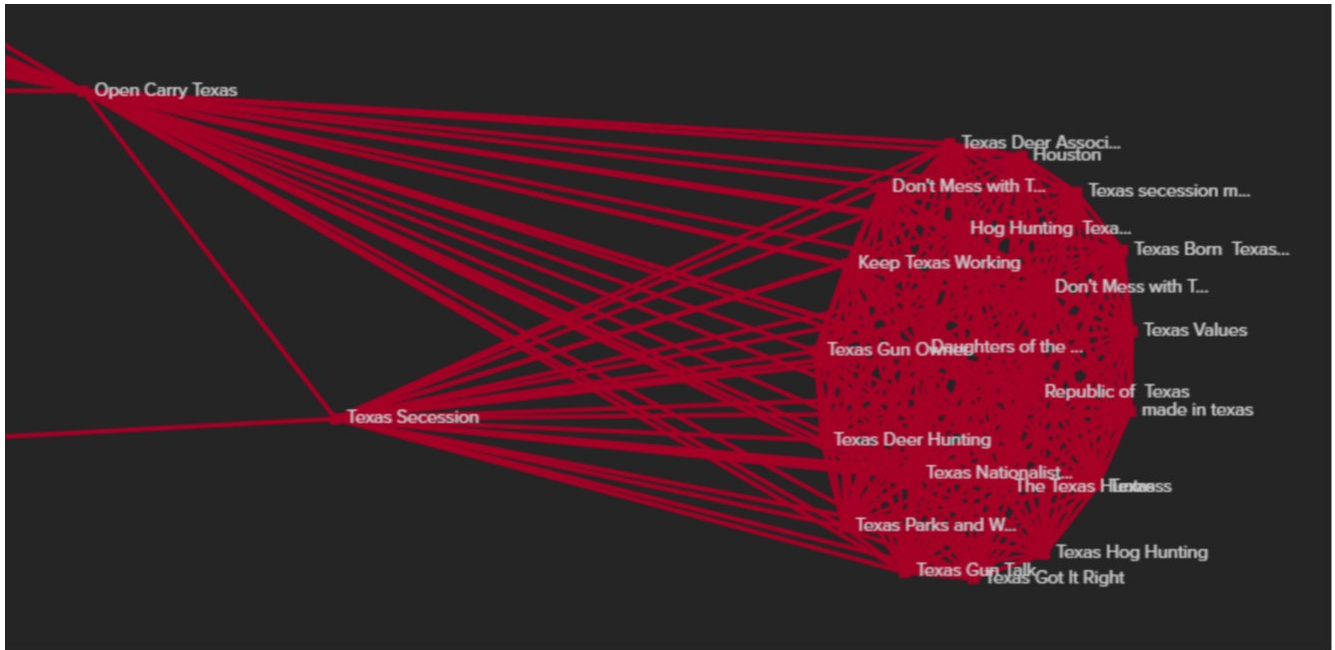
Other ads which were connected as clusters of nodes include other topics and issues. These clusters include ads that connected to Fox News, Donald Trump Jr., Sean Hannity, illegal immigration, peace movement, anarchism and others.



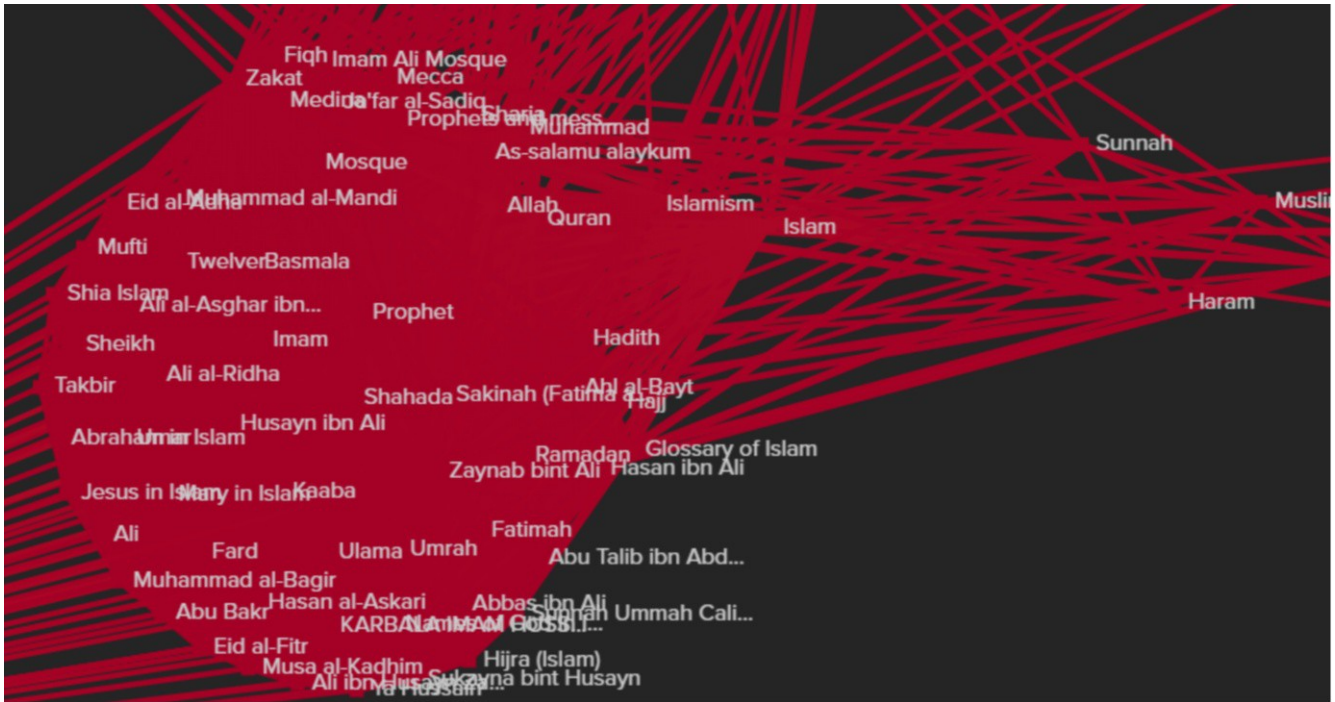
And here is a cross section of cluster nodes that includes Christianity, Mike Pence, and Guns.



This cluster of nodes included content ads focused on Texas. State focused ads are rare.



Other content clustered linked nodes were focused on Muslim and Islam.



The ad targets paint a very interesting picture particularly in view of voter suppression ads.

Facebook's management focused on growth and scale as their top business priorities. This objective translates into gaining more users. With user count as the base metric for growth, automated users or fake accounts were seen as legitimate aspects of user growth. This was revealed in the profile of Zuckerberg in the New Yorker article debating whether he could fix Facebook before it broke democracy.

“Scaling and growth are everything, individuals and their experiences are secondary to what is necessary to maximize the system.” Over time, Facebook devoted ever-greater focus to what is known in Silicon Valley as “growth hacking,” the constant pursuit of scale. Whenever the company talked about “connecting people,” that was, in effect, code for user growth.” (6)

This statement was key when Facebook embedded staff at the Project Alamo offices of the digital arm of the Trump Campaign. As a senior staffer notes:

“When we won the nomination, we decided we were going to do digital fundraising and really ramp this thing up to the next level,” says a senior official. Kushner, this official continued, “reached out to some Silicon Valley people who are kind of covert Trump fans and experts in digital marketing. They taught us about scaling. There's really not that much of a difference between politics and regular marketing.” (9)

### **Voter Suppression Campaigns or Political Ads**

In 2011 Facebook was given permission to not reveal the source of funding for political ads.

“In 2011, the company asked the Federal Election Commission for an exemption to rules requiring the source of funding for political ads to be disclosed. In filings, a Facebook lawyer argued that the agency “should not stand in the way of innovation.” (6)

During the 2016 campaign, Trump raised \$280 million via Facebook. Just days before the election, Trump's team paid for voter-suppression efforts. According to Bloomberg Businessweek, it targeted three Democratic constituencies—“idealistic white liberals, young women, and African Americans”—sending them videos precisely tailored to discourage them from turning out for Clinton. Theresa Hong, the Trump campaign's digital-content director, later told an interviewer, “Without Facebook we wouldn't have won.” (9)

However, the wording of Facebook's statement about these ads avoids stating that the majority of the Russian IRA ads were based on race. Yes, there were other societal arcs and commentary, but the focus of the overwhelming majority of these ads was on race with Black Identity at the center. This theme lines up to only one demographic target on the list of Trump's voter suppression campaigns: African American. A case in point would be using Hillary Clinton's statements on the super predator and the Black community, such as :

“her 1996 suggestion that some African American males are “super predators” is the basis of a below-the-radar effort to discourage infrequent black voters from showing up at the polls—particularly in Florida.”

and

“The animation will be delivered to certain African American voters through Facebook “dark posts”—nonpublic posts whose viewership the campaign controls so that, as Parscale puts it, “only the people we want to see it, see it.” The aim is to depress Clinton’s vote total. “We know because we’ve modeled this,” says the official. “It will dramatically affect her ability to turn these people out.” (9)

The data selected for the graph below from USA Today includes the frequency of the top five election-related ads placed by the Internet Research Agency.

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### Number of displays for top 5 election ads on Facebook from Internet Research Agency

(in millions)

Race

24.8

Crime or Policing

8.8

Immigration

2.6

Guns

2.1

Promote an upcoming event

1.3

Impressions from June 2015 to August 2017; ads can be in multiple categories

SOURCE USA TODAY Network analysis of House Permanent Select Committee

on Intelligence release of Facebook ads

George Petras/USA TODAY

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Combining the leading two categories of race and crime or policing, the content of these five ad categories would be inclusive of issues that disproportionately affect minority populations.

In September 2017 Senator Mark Warner asked several questions about the Russian IRA ads inquiring about how they knew where to target.

"Did they know this just by following political news in America? Did they geo-target both geography and by demographics in ways that at least at first blush appear pretty sophisticated? These are the kind of questions that we need to get answered and that's why we need them in a public hearing," (3)

Senator Warners essential questions were not answered at the many hearings on election interference by Social Media. A few members of Congress had questions about voter suppression or political ads during the hearings. Our data reveal based on the analysis of these ads that the intent was to collectively suppress the Black vote.

On November 3, 2016, The Washington post placed a headline several days before the election that read “No, you can’t text your vote. But these fake ads tell Clinton supporters to do just that.” The voter suppression campaigns were going in full force on many platforms but in large scale on both Twitter and Facebook days before the election. Not only was Twitter late to recognize what was going on but they waited until after the election to ban many of these accounts because they didn't want to be perceived as biased. (7) These were highly active and intense voter suppression campaigns targeting Black and Latino voters.



Some examples of these ads.

 **Publius Gaius**  
@TheRickyVaughn

#ImWithHer #GoHillary



11/1/16, 4:34 PM

36 RETWEETS 65 LIKES

 **Publius Gaius**  
@TheRickyVaughn

#ImWithHer #Go Hillary



Se requiere tener 18 años o más para votar. Un voto por persona. Se requiere ser ciudadano legal de los Estados Unidos. El voto por texto no está disponible en Guam, Puerto Rico, Alaska or Hawaii. Anuncio financiado por Hillary For President 2016.

These were captioned with ads for Jill Stein.

“Choose peace and vote for Jill Stein,” the ad reads. “Trust me. It’s not a wasted vote. ... The only way to take our country back is to stop voting for the corporations and banks that own us. #GrowASpineVoteJillStein.”



These ads were designed to build a trusted community of Black and Latino voters. When the election was close enough voter suppression ads were deployed.

Senator Klobuchar continued to bring up these voter suppression tactics at every hearing. Below is a clip of her questions for Nina Jankowicz and Eitan Hersh.

She asks Hersh to verify what is considered blatant criminal violations because they tell people to vote. “Save time avoid the lines” “Text 59925 and you can vote”. She wanted to clear up, “that there are grey areas, there are areas that you would probably just say is persuasion, and then there are areas that are purely illegal.” Hersh agreed.

<https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4729683/sen-klobuchar-hersh-defining-line-voter-suppression>  
<https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4736290/sen-klobuchar-asks-details-voter-suppression>

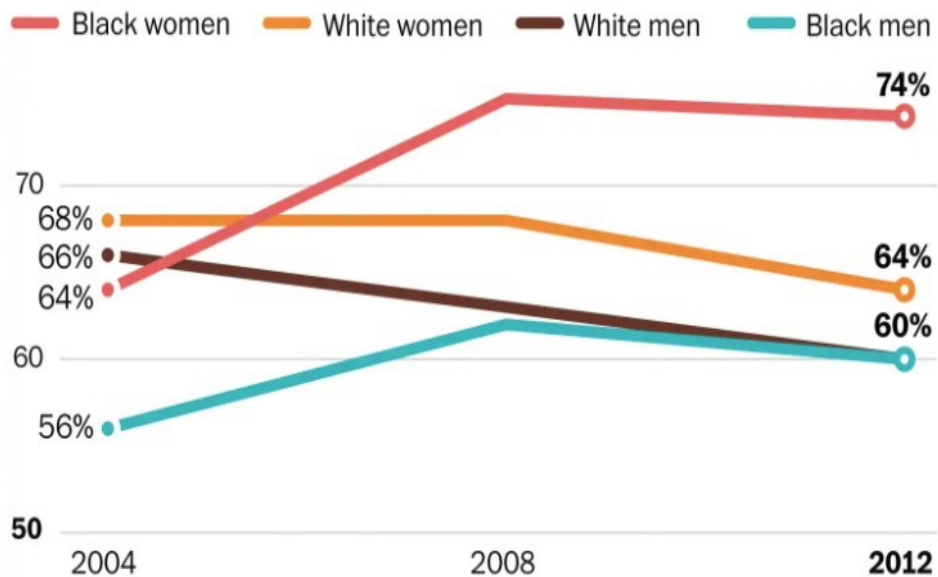
## Targeting Black Women Before the Election

Why were Black voters the main targets? The highest voter turnout of both 2008 and 2012 was among Black women at 74%. In 2016, 94% of Black women turned out to vote for Clinton. Black men increased in voter turnout from 60% in 2012 to 80% in 2016.

### Voter turnout in black and white

Black women had the highest turnout rate in 2008 and 2012.

PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL CITIZENS WHO VOTED IN EACH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION



Source: U.S. Elections Project analysis of Census Bureau data

THE WASHINGTON POST

## The 2016 election exit polls results. (Source: CNN)

**national president** view as table graph

● clinton ● trump ● other/no answer

**all exit polls**

<b>race and gender</b>			
	clinton	trump	other/no answer
white men 34%	31%	63%	6%
white women 37%	43%	53%	4%
black men 5%	80%	13%	7%
black women 7%	94%	4%	2%
latino men 5%	62%	33%	5%
latino women 6%	68%	26%	6%
others ---	61%	32%	7%

The pattern of either mimicking or targeting the black community in Social Media is not new. Stop Online Violence Against Women <sup>(TM)</sup> has recorded online campaigns that have either disparaged Black Women or have pretended to be Black women as empowered by fake social media accounts. SOVAW has discovered that these types of campaigns had started as early as 2013 - several years before the 2016 election. We believe this activity was a testing bed for these campaigns. Researchers have revealed connections from false accounts pretending to be black women organized on Reddit and 4chan to the Russian troll farm. (1)

These tactics began with #StopBlackGirls, a meme created to demean and discredit Black girls. That meme progressed to include stop girls with various diverse backgrounds. All of these campaigns were designed to place stereotypical racist tropes into the social network ether, where they would go undetected, with the full understanding that the moderation algorithms would eventually learn to accept this content as normal.

Here are some examples of the memes.



Many of these posts violate Twitter's standard terms of service yet five years later many of these images are still up. The Twitter account referenced above has been live since 2013 <https://twitter.com/stopblackgirls> and hasn't been limited to date. The last update was October 2013 however, in 2014 new campaigns began.



The 2014 “Your Slip is Showing” Campaign was created by Black women to bring attention to these fake accounts posing as Black women. This was the testing ground for the future use of false accounts on various platforms misrepresenting Black identities to create conflict and sow discord. Later it would lead to suppressing the Black vote. These accounts were designed to disseminate content to perpetuate the reflexive narrative that Black women are angry by sometimes giving homage and support to celebrities like Beyonce for her proactive Black women empowerment messages.



In our full report, we will reveal the various ways real Black women activists were actively silenced by the moderation algorithms, failed reporting systems, and targeted campaigns while they used social media to get out the vote before the election of 2016. It will include how the platforms responded days before November 8<sup>th</sup> and their current responses.

## **Conclusion:**

Ahead of the midterm elections the key findings of our analysis indicate that the countermeasures announced by social media and tech companies to reduced additional instances of election interference are inadequate. These current measures will not address the misinformation techniques and population targeting described herein. In particular, Facebook's new policy to require submitters of ads deemed by Facebook to be political to present valid identification will miss the majority of malicious ads as executed in effect and form in previous elections cycles. The tech and social media solutions offered in response to the post-election questions from Congress fail to adequately address either voter suppression or hate speech. More sophisticated social media and online ad monitoring measures must be developed and deployed. Our recommendations for effective counter-measures that would increase the integrity of future elections will be included in our full report.

Contact Shireen Mitchell with any questions.

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Stop Online Violence Against Women addresses inadequate laws and policies that lack protections for women in particular women of color. We focus on online violence against women, laws and policy changes needed at the local, federal levels. We also focus on technology and social media company accountability. SOVAW serves as a resource of services and options for women and women of color, based on their level of harassment or violence. We report on the diverse issues and impacts for women who are willing to share their stories.

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