

**Foreign Interference in U.S. Politics:
An Examination of “Fake News” Content on Social
Media**

**by
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Abstract

Fake news has become a powerful and disruptive force in the social media environment, with serious consequences for democracy. As a result, news organizations and tech companies have taken measures to reduce or eliminate the propagation and dissemination of fake news. The current study analyzes data gathered from Facebook and Twitter from two major events that occurred in U.S. politics: the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial of Donald Trump. Qualitative content analysis revealed that the majority of posts and tweets examined in this study could be classified as fake news, and that they were decidedly pro-Trump in angle. Through the lens of agenda setting theory, it was observed that the major issues covered in both time periods under study favoured Trump and his policies, while they denigrated the Democratic party and its members. Multiple themes emerged that shed new light on the tactics employed by hostile foreign actors to micro-target and influence social media users.

Keywords: Fake News; Disinformation; U.S. Presidential Election; Impeachment; Agenda Setting Theory; Social Media

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my parents,

who instilled in me the virtues of perseverance and commitment and relentlessly encouraged me to strive for excellence.

To the loving memory of my father, Manjit Singh Padda, who raised me and gave me the strength to reach for the stars and chase my dreams. As you look down from heaven, I hope you are proud of your little princess.

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than anything in the world!*

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Table of Contents

Declaration of Committee.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vii
List of Tables.....	ix
List of Figures.....	x
List of Acronyms.....	xi
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	1
1.1. Aim of the Current Study.....	2
1.2. Layout of the Thesis.....	4
Chapter 2. Literature Review.....	6
2.1. Fake News.....	6
2.1.1. Misinformation.....	7
2.1.2. Disinformation.....	8
2.1.3. News Fabrication.....	9
2.2. Russian Interference in 2016 U.S. Election.....	10
2.3. Social Media Bots.....	11
2.4. Human Deception.....	14
2.4.1. Accepting Fake News at Face Value.....	14
2.4.2. Microtargeting.....	15
2.5. Charter Rights Considerations.....	16
2.6. The 2019/2020 Impeachment Inquiry and Trial.....	18
2.7. Agenda Setting Theory.....	21
2.8. A Criminological Perspective.....	23
2.9. Research Questions.....	25
Chapter 3. Research Methods.....	26
3.1. Sampling and Data Collection.....	26
3.1.1. 2016 U.S. Presidential Election.....	26
3.1.2. 2019/2020 Impeachment Data.....	28
3.2. Analytic Approach.....	31
Stages One & Two: The Decontextualization and Recontextualization Process.....	33
Stage Three: The Categorization Process.....	35
Stage Four: The Compilation.....	35
3.2.2. Credibility and Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research.....	37
Chapter 4. Result A: 2016 U.S. Presidential Election.....	40
4.1. Disinformation on Facebook in 2016.....	40
4.1.1. <i>Being Patriotic</i>	41
4.1.2. <i>Blacktivist</i>	44

4.1.3.	<i>Secured Borders</i>	47
4.1.4.	<i>LGBT United</i>	50
4.1.5.	<i>United Muslims of America</i>	53
4.2.	Disinformation on Twitter in 2016	55
4.3.	Conclusion.....	60
Chapter 5. Result B: 2019/2020 Impeachment Inquiry and Trial		62
5.1.	Disinformation on Facebook in 2019/2020.....	62
5.1.1.	<i>American Thinker</i>	62
5.1.2.	<i>Council on American-Islamic Relations</i>	66
5.1.3.	<i>Godfather Politics</i>	69
5.1.4.	<i>United American Patriots</i>	72
5.1.5.	<i>Wallbuilders</i>	75
5.2.	Disinformation on Twitter in 2019/2020.....	78
5.2.1.	<i>#Impeachment</i>	79
5.2.2.	<i>#RussianInterference</i>	82
5.2.3.	<i>#ShamImpeachment</i>	84
5.2.4.	<i>#Trump2020</i>	87
5.2.5.	<i>#Trump2020Landside</i>	90
	Conclusion.....	92
Chapter 6. Merging the Studies: Overarching Themes as seen through the Lens of Agenda Setting Theory		94
Chapter 7. Conclusion		104
7.1.	Key Findings.....	104
7.2.	Limitations and Future Directions	106
7.3.	Conclusion.....	108
References.....		110

List of Tables

Table 1	Classification and Angle of the <i>Being Patriotic</i> Facebook Page.....	42
Table 2	Classification and Angle of the <i>Blacktivist</i> Facebook Page.....	45
Table 3	Classification and Angle of the <i>Secured Borders</i> Facebook Page	48
Table 4	Classification and Angle of the <i>LGBT United</i> Facebook Page	51
Table 5	Classification and Angle of the <i>United Muslims of America</i> Facebook Page	54
Table 6	Types of Account and Angle of the Tweets	57
Table 7	Classification and Angle of the Tweets.....	58
Table 8	Classification and Angle of the <i>American Thinker</i> Facebook Page.....	64
Table 9	Classification and Angle of the <i>CAIR</i> Facebook Page	68
Table 10	Classification and Angle of the <i>Godfather Politics</i> Facebook Page.....	71
Table 11	Classification and Angle of the <i>United American Patriots</i> Facebook Page	73
Table 12	Classification and Angle of the <i>Wallbuilders</i> Facebook Page	76
Table 13	Classification and Angle of the <i>#Impeachment</i> Twitter Hashtag	80
Table 14	Classification and Angle of the <i>#RussianInterference</i> Twitter Hashtag ...	82
Table 15	Classification and Angle of the <i>#ShamImpeachment</i> Twitter Hashtag	85
Table 16	Classification and Angle of the <i>#Trump2020</i> Twitter Hashtag.....	88
Table 17	Classification and Angle of the <i>#Trump2020Landside</i> Twitter Hashtag ..	91

List of Figures

Figure 1	Overview of the process of qualitative content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016)	33
Figure 2	List of 10 Most Frequent Words for <i>Being Patriotic</i> Facebook Page	44
Figure 3	List of 10 Most Frequent Words for <i>Blacktivist</i> Facebook Page	47
Figure 4	List of 10 Most Frequent Words for <i>Secured Borders</i> Facebook Page ...	50
Figure 5	List of 10 Most Frequent Words for <i>LGBT United</i> Facebook Page	52
Figure 6	List of 10 Most Frequent Words for <i>United Muslims of America</i> Facebook Page	55
Figure 7	Breakdown of each Twitter Account Type	56
Figure 8	List of 10 Most Frequent Words of Tweets	60
Figure 9	List of 10 Most Frequent Words for <i>American Thinker</i> Facebook Page ..	66
Figure 10	List of 10 Most Frequent Words for <i>CAIR</i> Facebook Page	69
Figure 11	List of 10 Most Frequent Words for <i>Godfather Politics</i> Facebook Page ..	72
Figure 12	List of 10 Most Frequent Words for <i>United American Patriots</i> Facebook Page	74
Figure 13	List of 10 Most Frequent Words for <i>Wallbuilders</i> Facebook Page	78
Figure 14	List of 10 Most Frequent Words for <i>#Impeachment</i> Twitter Hashtag	81
Figure 15	List of 10 Most Frequent Words for <i>#RussianInterference</i> Twitter Hashtag	84
Figure 16	List of 10 Most Frequent Words for <i>#ShamImpeachment</i> Twitter Hashtag	86
Figure 17	List of 10 Most Frequent Words for <i>#Trump2020</i> Twitter Hashtag.....	89
Figure 18	List of 10 Most Frequent Words for <i>#Trump2020Landside</i> Twitter Hashtag	92

List of Acronyms

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GRU	General Main Staff Intelligence Unit
IRA	Internet Research Agency
KAG	Keep America Great
MAGA	Make America Great Again
MBFC	Media Bias/Fact Check
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSA	National Security Agency
SPLC	Southern Poverty Law Center
U.K.	United Kingdom
U.S.	United States

Chapter 1.

Introduction

Social media plays an essential role in the distribution of concepts about politics and public policies. Government and political leaders worldwide are employing bots, algorithms and people to engage in political conversations online (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016; Narayanan et al., 2017). On the other hand, legislators and government regulatory agencies around the world are facing serious challenges when it comes to dealing with these emerging online threats, such as the weaponization of social media that was witnessed in particular with the 2014 election in the Ukraine (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Mejias & Vokuev, 2017), the 2016 U.K. Brexit referendum (Bastos & Mercea, 2019; Evolvi, 2018; Howard & Kollanyi, 2016; Intelligence and Security Committee, 2020; Narayanan et al., 2017), and the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Badawy et al., 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Mueller, 2019). The Russian Troll Army, employed by the Internet Research Agency (IRA), distributed “fake news” posts and tweets via social media accounts, in order to manipulate public opinion during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Most of the fake news generated by the IRA favoured Donald Trump and disparaged his rival Hillary Clinton (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Badawy et al., 2018; Mueller, 2019; Shane & Mazzetti, 2018).

According to Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller’s (2019) report into Russian interference in the U.S. election, IRA-sponsored Facebook and Twitter accounts targeted certain groups, including Southern Whites (through the Patriototus Facebook page), blacks (through the Blacktivist Facebook page), and the right-wing anti-immigration movement (through the Secured Borders Facebook page), as well as through Twitter feeds such as @America_1st (an anti-immigration account), and @TEN_GOP (which falsely claimed to have a connection to the Republican Party of Tennessee) (Bastos & Mercea, 2019; DiResta et al., 2018; Evolvi, 2018). Evidence also indicated that the Russians used social media bots to spread fake news, in an effort to influence a much wider social media audience (Badawy et al., 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Howard et al., 2018; Shao et al., 2018).

Social media providers such as Facebook and Twitter are coming under pressure from legislators and government regulatory agencies to change their policies with respect to how they deal with fake news issues. In April 2018, Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, was questioned by the U.S. Congress regarding Facebook's involvement and knowledge of Russian-generated messaging during the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign (Politico Staff, 2018). Moreover, in April 2018, the chief technology officer of Facebook, Mike Schroepfer, was questioned by a Parliamentary Committee in the U.K. regarding Facebook's political advertising, fake accounts, and the role of Cambridge Analytica in voter targeting (Satariano, 2018). In Canada, yet again in April 2018, "Robert Sherman (Deputy Privacy Officer of Facebook), and Kevin Chan (in-charge of Facebook's public policy for Canada), were both questioned by a Parliamentary Committee about the role that Facebook and Cambridge Analytica played in the U.S. election and the U.K. Brexit referendum and about its possible violations of Canadian privacy law" (Tasker, 2018). In July 2019, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission fined Facebook \$5 billion U.S. for its failure to protect user privacy (McGill & Scola, 2019).

On the 25th of July, 2019, Donald Trump made a phone call to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and demanded that in exchange for a White House meeting and the release of \$400 million in military aid already appropriated by the U.S. Congress, Zelensky should publicly announce an investigation into the Ukrainian business dealings of Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden (Allin, 2020; Meacham, 2019). It was obvious that Donald Trump wanted the public announcement of an investigation to politically damage the former Vice President, Joe Biden, who is Donald Trump's rival in the upcoming election (Allin, 2020). Because of his phone call and his attempt to interfere in the 2020 election, President Trump faced an impeachment inquiry in the U.S. House of Representatives, followed by an impeachment trial in the U.S. Senate. Multiple questionable Facebook pages and trending Twitter hashtags were mobilized to offer support for Donald Trump and to denounce the impeachment process.

1.1. Aim of the Current Study

The ultimate aim of the current study is to deepen our understanding of how social media has been used thus far to influence the public when it comes to political opinions. The current study examines two major political events that transpired in the

U.S., both of which featured Donald Trump as a central character: the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial. To accomplish this, the first part of this thesis reports on the qualitative content analysis of five different Facebook pages sponsored by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) from January 2015 through December 2017, which encompasses the time period leading up to, during and following the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In total, 100 posts from each of five Russian IRA-sponsored Facebook pages were randomly selected for examination: *Being Patriotic*, *Blacktivist*, *Secured Borders*, *LGBT United*, and *United Muslims of America*. Further qualitative content analysis was conducted on 500 tweets from the same time period, to probe into the alleged degree of Russian involvement in that disinformation campaign. It was also found in this study that these posts and tweets were employed by the Russian IRA to micro-target specific populations, in order to maximize the potential voter base for Donald Trump (Badawy, Ferrara, & Lerman, 2018; Bastos & Dan, 2019). To better understand the micro-targeting behind these posts and tweets, NVivo was used to generate the 10 most frequent words appearing in each of the data sets. Inspection of these messages provided new insights into the language used to target specific social media users.

Secondly, this study reports on the findings from an examination of potential fake news posts and tweets that were posted from September 2019 to February 2020, that is, during the impeachment inquiry and trial against U.S. President Donald Trump. First, five different Facebook pages that were considered questionable/fake by the Media Bias/Fact Check website (MBFC) were examined: *American Thinker*, *Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)*, *Godfather Politics*, *United American Patriots*, and *Wallbuilders*. Moreover, Twitter data was collected from five different hashtags that were trending during the impeachment inquiry and trial: *#Impeachment*, *#RussianInterference*, *#ShamImpeachment*, *#Trump2020*, and *#Trump2020Landside*. Similar to the approach used in the study of the 2016 election dataset, qualitative content analysis was conducted on 100 posts from each Facebook page, and on 100 tweets from each Twitter hashtag. This study also reports on the 10 most frequently mentioned words in these posts and tweets, to further understand the micro-targeting of social media users. Finally, this study explores and reports on the overarching themes that emerged from the data analysis.

The qualitative content analysis of the social media messaging that occurred during both of these political events involved inductive and deductive approaches, and used agenda setting theory as a theoretical lens, as the theory helped to provide a better understanding of the use of the social media in politics. This study used both first level agenda setting and second level agenda setting theory. The application of first level agenda setting theory indicated how social media promoted certain issues to tell people what they should think about, whereas the application of second level agenda setting theory focused more on the characteristics of those issues and how people should view or interpret them (McCombs, 2007; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). To date, agenda setting theory has only been used to study mainstream media and news outlets. However, it has been demonstrated that more and more people get their daily news information through social media platforms, and that social media has begun to play an essential role in politics (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Therefore, for this present study, social media platforms were being examined, by applying the lenses of first and second level agenda setting theory.

1.2. Layout of the Thesis

The first chapter of this thesis explores the literature surrounding fake news, including the distinction between misinformation, disinformation, and news fabrication. Next, the literature review explores the issue of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S presidential election. It also discusses the use of social media bots in politics. Furthermore, it examines how users perceive fake news that they encounter in social media, and discusses Charter rights issues as they pertain to freedom of expression and the dissemination of fake news on social media platforms.

As mentioned above, this study reports on two different political events—the U.S. presidential election, and the impeachment process. Therefore, the literature review also provides an overview of the impeachment inquiry and trial of Donald Trump. An overview of the theoretical framework of agenda setting theory is also considered. Lastly, the literature review ties everything together with a discussion of the criminological perspective as it relates to the propagation and dissemination of fake news on social media.

Next, the methods chapter sets out the data collection and sampling approach employed in the two different phases of the study, and later explains the qualitative content analysis approach that was employed. The methods chapter also addresses the issue of the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research. Chapters 4 and 5 report on the results of the analysis of messages posted by foreign actors on social media, both during the 2016 presidential election campaign and possibly during the 2019/2020 impeachment process. Chapter 6 explores the overarching themes that emerged from both studies, as seen through the lens of agenda setting theory. This thesis concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the research, ideas for future research, and discussion on criminological and legislative perspectives on the dissemination of fake news content on social media platforms.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of the current research on fake news, the manner in which fake news was employed in the 2016 U.S. presidential election to support Donald Trump’s campaign, and how it may have influenced the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial. It explores how the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) interfered in the 2016 election, and explains how messages on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were utilized to micro-target users by highlighting specific inflammatory or divisive topics in those “fake news” posts. U.S. Constitutional and Canadian Charter rights issues concerning legislative and regulatory approaches to the handling of fake news are contemplated. As well, this chapter discusses the events of Trump’s impeachment proceedings. Agenda setting theory will be used to provide a contextual framework. Lastly, to tie everything together, a criminological perspective is advanced regarding the propagation of fake news on social media.

2.1. Fake News

There has been considerable discussion in recent years about “fake news” and the “post-truth” era (Berghel, 2017a). In fact, some have incorrectly attributed the term fake news to U.S. President Donald Trump, who views fake news as anything that runs contrary to his own narrative (especially when it comes from traditional news sources like *CNN* or *The Washington Post*) (Kirtley, 2018; Sullivan, 2019b). It is important to acknowledge that fake news is not a new phenomenon; indeed, rumours and false stories have been around for as long as humans have lived in groups where power matters (Burkhardt, 2017, p.5). Moreover, media manipulation—including trolling and memeification—is a strategic tool that is used by the political parties, especially alt-right groups, to disguise the revival of familiar, long-established racist and misogynist themes (Marwick & Lewis, 2017, p.4).

There are many other categories of fake news that scholars have contemplated throughout the years. For example, Claire Wardle (2017) identified seven different types

of fake news: satire or parody, false connection, misleading content, false context, imposter content, manipulated content, and fabricated content. Similar to Wardle, Tandoc et al. describe fake news as: news satire, news parody, news fabrication, photo manipulation, advertising and public relations, and propaganda (Tandoc et al., 2018). According to Al-Rawi (2018), fake news can be seen as “low-quality information” that goes viral on social networking sites (SNS), due to its partisan or sensational nature (p. 2). Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) emphasize the production of fake news as being motivated by both pecuniary and ideological considerations (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In other words, pecuniary motivation occurs when news articles go viral on social media and draw significant advertising revenue, especially when users click to the original site. An ideological motivation is observable when fake news providers seek to advance political candidates or political agendas that they favour (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 217). However, for the purpose of this study, the primary focus will be on misinformation disinformation and news fabrication, as set out below.

2.1.1. Misinformation

The type of fake news or false information contemplated in this thesis generally consists of misinformation, disinformation, and news fabrication circulating online in the social media. Misinformation, disinformation, and news fabrication represent the biases that are inherent in news produced by humans (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). These human biases help to explain this current phenomenon as “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent” (Lazer et al., 2018, p. 1094; Torabi Asr & Taboada, 2019, p.1-2). Put simply, misinformation is incorrect or false information (Desai et al., 2020; Lazer et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018). Misinformation may be based upon a genuine misapprehension of the facts, as opposed to wanting to deliberately deceive or manipulate people (de Cock Bunning, Ginsbourg, & Alexandra, 2019).

An example of misinformation might be when rumors were spread that the combination of pop-rocks (a popular 1970's candy) and drinking soda would cause the stomach to boil and explode. Urban legend, a common form of misinformation, claimed that John Gilchrist (who played the little “Mikey” character in a popular cereal commercial) died after eating pop rocks and drinking Coke (Blakemore, 2020). In 2012, a very much alive John Gilchrist told a reporter that his incorrectly reported death was “a

long-ago-urban legend” (Best, 2012). It is worthwhile to note that a full 30 years before the advent of the internet and social media, this myth or “urban legend” created a significant problem for the cereal manufacturers, General Mills, who were forced to send letters to school principals and buy ads in major publications to dispel the unfounded rumours (O’Neill, 2017). The Food and Drug Administration even had a hotline devoted to the issue as late as 1979 (Pop Rocks, 2011). This example shows the aggregated cost of the measures necessary to correct misinformation.

Another example of misinformation might be the oft-repeated claims by anti-vaccination groups that vaccinations contain toxins, or cause autism or sudden infant death syndrome (Kata, 2010). Many such claims are strengthened by referring to a discredited study by Andrew Wakefield (1998), which lacked reliability and validity and had been withdrawn by *The Lancet*. In this study, the research group consisted of only 12 children, had no control group, and relied upon the beliefs and recollections of the parents of those children (Bester, 2016). Even though the article was retracted by *The Lancet*, the misinformation it contained is still believed by many people, and to this day provides fuel for the anti-vaccination movement on the internet (Cartwright, Weir, Nahar, et al., 2019; Kata, 2010). Fake news may be promulgated for a variety of reasons, including pushing for a particular partisan ideology, or supporting unfounded beliefs, or to advance conspiracy theories (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Berghel, 2017a; Berghel, 2017b; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

2.1.2. Disinformation

Disinformation, especially in the hands of hostile foreign actors, is created and spread intentionally, to manipulate and deceive public opinion (Bovet & Makse, 2019; Desai et al., 2020; Kshetri & Voas, 2017; Lazer et al., 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018; Torabi Asr & Taboada, 2019). The interference by the Russian IRA in the 2014 election in the Ukraine (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Mejias & Vokuev, 2017), the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK (Bastos & Mercea, 2019; Evolvi, 2018; Howard & Kollanyi, 2016; Intelligence and Security Committee, 2020; Narayanan et al., 2017), and the 2016 U.S. presidential election serve to illustrate the impact of disinformation campaigns mounted by hostile foreign actors (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Badawy et al., 2018; W. L. Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Mueller, 2019). These acts were designed and carried out by the Russian IRA in order to disrupt the normal democratic processes of

the Ukraine, the U.K. and the U.S. (W. L. Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Bovet & Makse, 2019). With respect to the 2016 U.S. presidential election, it has been argued that the fake news distributed via “false” Facebook and Twitter pages that were created specifically for that purpose by the IRA was intended to fortify the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, while at the same time weakening the campaign of his opponent, Hillary Clinton (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Badawy et al., 2018; Cartwright, Weir, Frank, et al., 2019; Cartwright, Weir, Nahar, et al., 2019; Kshetri & Voas, 2017; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017; Shane & Mazzetti, 2018; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018).

2.1.3. News Fabrication

Tandoc et al. (2018), referred fake news as news fabrication. This refers to “news articles which have no factual basis but are published in the style of news articles to create legitimacy” (p. 143). Tandoc et al., further explained that “the producer of the item [news article] often has the intention of misinforming” (p. 143). They also noted that it is difficult to distinguish fabricated news as it looks very similar to the legitimate news articles. It is important to note that the news articles are also shared on different legitimate social media platforms to gain legitimacy. Similarly, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) defined fake news as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers” (p. 213). Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) examined intentionally fabricated news articles from now-defunct websites, such as denverguardian.com, wtoe5news.com, and 5news.com (pp. 213-214). An example of a fabricated news story, which was shared more than one million times on Facebook was titled, “Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump’s presidential candidacy” (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 214; Tandoc et al., 2018, p. 143). Study found that pro-Trump fake stories were shared on Facebook a total of 30 million times, and pro-Clinton fake stories shared a total of 7.6 million times (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 212). Approximately half of those who remembered these stories also believed them (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Tandoc, Lim, et al., 2018). The authors concluded that fake news might have been pivotal in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

2.2. Russian Interference in 2016 U.S. Election

It is widely thought that Vladimir Putin and the Russian government did their utmost to support Donald Trump's presidential campaign. In 2017, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National Security Agency (NSA) concluded in their joint report that the Russians deliberately set out to criticize and discredit Hillary Clinton, while actively promoting the candidacy of Donald Trump (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). Their assessment pointed a finger directly at Russia's Internet Research Agency (IRA) and their use of social media (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). In February 2018, U.S. Special Counsel Robert Mueller obtained a grand jury indictment against the IRA (financed by Yevgeniy Prigozhin, referred as "Putin's chef"), Concord Management and Consulting LLC and Concord Catering (companies operated by Yevgeniy Prigozhin), Yevgeniy Prigozhin himself, plus a dozen Russian "trolls" employed by Prigozhin's IRA (Chen, 2018; Mueller, 2019; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). The indictment stated that those companies and individuals had "operated social media pages and groups designed to attract U.S. audiences," with the Russians falsely claiming that those pages and groups were controlled by American activists (Mueller, 2019). The indictment further stated that the Russians had used social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube to advance divisive issues to create dissension and distrust (*United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). Overall, Mueller laid out his justifications for prosecuting various individuals linked to Donald Trump, such as his campaign organizers and cabinet appointees, and for indicting Russian individuals and organizations for their efforts to influence the 2016 election. While Mueller's report did not conclude beyond a reasonable doubt that the President committed a crime, Mueller stated that it also did not exonerate him (Mueller, 2019, p. 2).

The Russian IRA, located in St. Petersburg, employed hundreds of bloggers to mass-produce disinformation through Facebook and Twitter posts (Chen, 2018; Green, 2018; Reston, 2017). Those employees, working for Putin's chef, toiled in two shifts: a 12-hour day shift from 9:00 AM to 9:00 PM, and a 12-hour night shift from 9:00 PM to 9:00 AM, in order to ensure that the posts went online at what appeared to be regular, "Western" times. These shifts were also scheduled to coincide with U.S. holidays, to make it look as though the Facebook and Twitter posts were coming from people within

the U.S., and not from Russia (*United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018; Wagner, 2018).

It is important to note that the IRA trolls were not hackers, because they did not attempt to hack into computers or computer systems. Rather, they used social engineering and deception to influence public opinion (Kshetri & Voas, 2017). When it seemed that Hillary Clinton was going to win the election, the IRA trolls increased their efforts to influence public opinion, using fake news that was constructed to undermine Clinton's chances for the presidency (Chen, 2018; Mueller, 2019; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017; Reston, 2017).

It has been suggested that Putin wanted to discredit Clinton because of the grudge that he held against her for derogatory comments she made about him over the years. Clinton was also an opponent of Russian intelligence operations and military interventions around the globe. Apart from that, Putin felt that Trump's policies would be more favourable to Russia than those of Clinton (Bevan, 2018; Cartwright, Weir, Nahar, et al., 2019; Murray, 2018). At the press conference in Helsinki following his 2018 meeting with Donald Trump, when asked whether he wanted Trump to win the election, Putin replied: "Yes, I did. Because he talked about bringing the U.S.– Russia relationship back to normal" (Friedman, 2018).

As part of the Russian disinformation campaign, *Russia Today's* (RT) television coverage of Clinton focused mostly on her "leaked" emails, and on what was claimed to be her poor mental and physical health (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). However, those "leaked" emails were actually the result of a Russian-orchestrated attack on the Democratic National Committee's computer network – a hack conducted by Russia's General Main Staff Intelligence Unit (the GRU), which is the foreign military intelligence agency of the Russian Armed Forces (Mueller, 2019; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017).

2.3. Social Media Bots

Bots are social media accounts that automate interaction with other users. Bots can perform tasks that range from legitimate tasks such as generating a large volume of benign tweets that deliver news or update feeds, to more malicious tasks such as

spreading spam by delivering appealing text content with a link that directs the reader to malicious content or even malware (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016, p. 1). According to Howard and Kollanyi (2016), networks of such bots may be described as “botnets,” a term that combines “robot” with “networks” and that refers to a collection of connected computers with programs that communicate across multiple devices to perform specific tasks (p.1). The 2016 U.S. election was a defining moment in the evolution of computational techniques for spreading political propaganda via social network sites. In testimony before the U.S. Congress, Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook, admitted that around 126 million people might have been exposed to the IRA fake news posted on Facebook, as well as to the 11 million related advertisements that were paid for by the IRA (Politico Staff, 2018). However, Zuckerberg had been quoted earlier as saying: “Personally, I think the idea that fake news—of which it is a small amount of content— influenced the election is a pretty crazy idea” (Berghel, 2017a; Berghel, 2017b; Parkinson, 2016). These fake news posts were seen and shared by over 100 million people; therefore, the account of the events provided by Zuckerberg might be regarded as misleading (Berghel, 2017a; Berghel, 2017b; Parkinson, 2016). The content of those fake news items, which were seen and shared by millions of people, could arguably have had a large influence on the outcome of the election (Howard, 2018; Parkinson, 2016).

Multiple studies have focused on the use of social media bots in the U.S. presidential election and the U.K. Brexit referendum (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Badawy et al., 2018; Bastos & Mercea, 2019; Evolvi, 2018; Howard, 2018; Howard & Kollanyi, 2016; Intelligence and Security Committee, 2020; Narayanan et al., 2017; Reston, 2017; Shao et al., 2018; Zannettou et al., 2019). The Internet Relay Chat System is considered to be an early example where bots were being used to manage and regulate social interaction on the Internet (Howard et al., 2018). The Cambridge Analytica app that attracted so much negative attention to Facebook after the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the 2016 U.K. Brexit referendum is an example of an bot algorithm that was designed for the purpose of collecting behavioral and psychological data such as the shares, likes, dislikes and political activities of social media users (Stark, 2018, p. 206).

In other words, these bots are social media accounts that are controlled by software, rather than by real people. These social media bots are estimated to include between 5-9% of the overall Twitter population, and to account for approximately 24% of

all tweets produced on Twitter (Morstatter et al., 2016, p. 533). Stories and hashtags that “go viral” or start trending are often pushed there through manipulation by these social media bots (Morstatter et al., 2016).

The Computational Propaganda Project, a multi-national project attached to the Oxford Internet Institute, reports that 19 million identifiable “bot” accounts tweeted in support of Trump or Clinton in the week prior to the 2016 presidential election, with 55.1% in favour of Trump, and just 19.1% in favour of Clinton (Newman et al., 2018; Parkinson, 2016; Wineburg et al., 2016). In addition, Al-Rawi et al. (2019) reported that around 18 “pro-Trump” bots had been suspended by Twitter due to the high rate at which they were posting “fake news.” This disparity in Twitter support would appear difficult to explain, other than as deliberate and highly orchestrated political interference, given that Hillary Clinton received 65,844,954 votes in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, considerably more than the 62,979,879 votes for Donald Trump (Berghel, 2017a).

Zannettou et al. (2019) found that 71% of the Russian Internet Research Agency’s (IRA) fake accounts were created before the 2016 U.S. election. In addition, the 2017 Intelligence Community Assessment reported that Russian operatives started researching U.S. electoral processes and election-related technology as early as 2014, which was two years before the election, and that the IRA started advocating for Trump’s candidacy in 2015 (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017). It was also found that 24 accounts were created on July 12, 2016, about one week before the Republican National Conference, when Donald Trump was nominated as the Republican candidate for the 2016 presidential election (Zannettou et al., 2019). Moreover, Russian IRA trolls attempted to mask their disinformation campaign by adopting different identities, such as changing screen names and profile information, and deleting all their previous tweets. In their examination of tweets posted between January 2016 and September 2017, Zannettou et al. discovered that 19% of the IRA accounts changed their screen names as many as 11 times. In order to start with a clean slate, they deleted tweets in large batches.

2.4. Human Deception

As indicated above, the main purpose of the disinformation campaign during the 2016 U.S. presidential election was to influence social media users to vote in favour of Republic candidate Donald Trump, or in the alternative, to suppress voting by social media users for Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. This section discusses the influence of fake news on social media users, and how some of them may accept such “news” at face value, without questioning the credibility of the source. As well, this section will discuss micro-targeting, the main tactic employed by the IRA-sponsored trolls in the 2016 election. Other topics to be considered include guns, race, and the mainstream media.

2.4.1. Accepting Fake News at Face Value

According to the Pew Research Center, 43% of Americans get their news from Facebook, while 12% get their news from Twitter (Shearer & Matsa, 2018). Other studies have indicated that two-thirds of Facebook users get their news from Facebook, while six-out-of-ten Twitter users get their news from Twitter (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Given the high percentage of people who depend on social media for their daily dose of news, there is definite reason for concern about the potential for manipulation of sentiment in social media. The main problem with fake news is that consumers tend to accept what they read at face value.

A study by Vosoughi et. al (2018) demonstrated that between 2006 and 2017, approximately 126,000 rumours were spread by almost 3 million people on Twitter. The Vosoughi et al. study found that fake news was more innovative than real news, and that people were more likely to share/retweet innovative information. It was also indicated that false stories inspired fear, surprise, and disgust, whereas real stories inspired anticipation, trust, joy, and sadness (Vosoughi et al., 2018). This Vosoughi et al. study also found that false political news travelled more broadly, reached more people, and was more viral than any other category of false information. According to another survey, conducted in December 2016, 64% of Americans indicated that they believed that fake news had created serious confusion over basic facts. Various studies have shown that, in general, social media users may have shared a fake news story, either knowingly or unknowingly (Barthel et al., 2016).

To illustrate the scope of the problem, a 2016 Stanford History Education Group study of 7,000 middle school, high school and college students found that regardless of their supposedly advanced technical knowledge, most were unable to recognize factual and non-factual content posted on social media pages such as Facebook, and Twitter (Kshetri & Voas, 2017; Wineburg et al., 2016). Many participants accepted the images and posts at face value, without questioning the source or the underlying motivation (Wineburg et al., 2016).

2.4.2. Microtargeting

Americans are very sensitive about their guns and gun laws, an issue which Donald Trump used against Hillary Clinton during the election campaign. Donald Trump frequently accused Hillary Clinton of stripping away the gun rights of Americans, while representing himself as protecting the rights of gun owners and preventing any legislation that might impede their right to bear arms (Marcotte, 2018; Sanchez, 2016). The topic of “guns” was mentioned repeatedly by the IRA trolls in order to influence the social media audience. Facebook pages designed for this purpose by the IRA, such as *Secured Borders*, *Defend the 2nd*, and *Being Patriotic*, talked at length about the 2nd Amendment, guns, and gun laws, in order to enflame the passions of gun owners and gun lovers (DiResta et al., 2018; Marcotte, 2018).

In addition, Russian troll accounts deliberately stoked racial anxieties in the American public. They posted tweets and messages on social media platforms that were intended to persuade the American public that they were being inundated and being taken advantage of by the blacks and immigrants (DiResta et al., 2018; Faris et al., 2017; Marcotte, 2018). One example of this would be the Facebook ad entitled “Another Gruesome Attack on Police by A BLM Movement Activist,” where a picture of a flag-draped coffin at a police funeral was shown (Marcotte, 2018, p. 113). These IRA-generated messages also attempted to organize rallies against immigration, and rallies in support of retaining Confederate statues, such as the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, which was slated for removal from a roundabout in the City of New Orleans (Marcotte, 2018).

The Russian-sponsored IRA messaging was aligned closely with the messaging of the Trump campaign. According to Marcotte (2018), Trump knew that running on

issues like cutting taxes for the rich or letting corporations poison the drinking water would not help him in the long run. Instead, Trump's strategy was to post race-baiting tweets, which he thought that White, right-wing voters would appreciate, leading them to overlook some of his other flaws and policy weaknesses (Marcotte, 2018, p. 114). Trump calculated that the best way to reaffirm his connection to his base voters and to maintain their loyalty was to attack racial and religious minorities. This nexus can be observed by examining Trump's personal social media pages, side-by-side with the pages of the Russian-sponsored IRA trolls.

Trump's war against the mainstream media was also a major topic in the election. This war has persisted throughout his presidency, and was even more noticeable during the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial (discussed further in section 2.6). Trump has continued to attack the mainstream media by insisting that mainstream media sources have a "liberal bias" and are not to be trusted, in particular saving his venom for sources such as *CNN* or *The Washington Post* (Kirtley, 2018; Marcotte, 2018, p. 162; Sullivan, 2019). On the other hand, Trump has often voiced support for *Fox News*, the foremost American conservative cable television news channel. Trump has referenced *Fox News* on multiple occasions on his social media accounts, to make it look like a credible (trustable) channel for the public to watch. However, studies have showed that *Fox News* viewers are less likely to be informed about the news than those who rely on other news sources. In fact, a 2016 study from Fairleigh Dickinson University demonstrated that people who took in no news whatsoever were better informed about current events than *Fox News* viewers (Cassino, 2011; Marcotte, 2018, p. 168). It is noteworthy that the Russian trolls posted similar messaging on their accounts to that of Donald Trump with respect to the mainstream media, reportedly to amplify the messaging with multiple links to *Fox News*.

2.5. Charter Rights Considerations

While there have been discussions about the potential for government regulation of the dissemination of fake news through social media, the issue is far too "new" to have fostered any legislation. Therefore, previous efforts to legislate and regulate comparable activities are discussed below.

According to the United Nations' *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression," including the right to "impart information and ideas through any media...regardless of borders" (UN General Assembly, 1948). Legal positions regarding "acceptable speech" vary widely from country-to-country (Walker, 2018). A number of European countries, such as the U.K. and Germany, have enacted and enforced laws that are consistent with the European Council's 2008 *Framework Decision on Combating Certain Forms and Expressions of Racism and Xenophobia by Means of Criminal Law*, which prohibits expressions that promote hatred or deny crimes of genocide (Article 19, 2018; Council of the European Union, 2008). On the other hand, some European nations, such as Lithuania, Italy, and France have struggled with the definition of "hate crime," and have been more lenient when it comes to legal enforcement (Cartwright, Weir, Nahar, et al., 2019; Garland & Chakraborti, 2012).

Although the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution does not protect speech that involves targeted harassment, threats, and imminent danger through incitement of violence, it does protect freedom of speech, no matter how offensive that speech might be. As a matter of fact, under U.S. law, there is no legal definition of unpatriotic speech (American Library Association, 2017). Moreover, Section 230 of the 1996 U.S. *Communications Decency Act* offers significant protections to social media platforms, stating that "no provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider"(Communications Decency Act, 1996), meaning that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram cannot be held liable for user-generated content. In other words, it could prove difficult for the U.S. to criminalize the type of activity conducted by the Russian IRA or any similar foreign interference, without some major amendments to long-standing American legislation, and dramatic changes to legal precedent (Cartwright, Weir, Nahar, et al., 2019).

In Canada, the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* states that individuals have the right to "freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication" (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982). While actions such as defamatory libel and hate propaganda are prohibited by the *Canadian Criminal Code* (Council of the European Union, 2008; Criminal Code, 1985), the courts have gone to considerable lengths to protect freedom of expression.

For example, in *Crouch v. Snell*, a case involving adult cyberbullying and the enforceability of the Province of Nova Scotia's *Cyber-safety Act*, the judge confirmed that the right to freedom of expression "extends to any number of unpopular or distasteful expressions, including some forms of defamatory libel, hate propaganda and false news" (Alexandra, 2016; *Crouch v. Snell*, 2015). *R. v. Elliott* (2016) was a criminal harassment case in the Province of Ontario in which the accused repeatedly communicated and allegedly harassed two feminist activists via Twitter hashtags (Rita, 2016). The judge opined that Twitter was like a "public square," observing that creating a hashtag where people could follow you was similar to "announcing a public meeting," further stressing that the fact that some opinions may be "morally offensive" to some people is not criminal (Alexandra, 2016; *R. v. Elliott*, 2016; Rita, 2016).

Evidently, controversial issues involving freedom of expression and freedom of opinion can be expected to limit any effort to regulate the publication of fake news on social media. To be effective, regulatory agencies may need to target the creation of fraudulent Facebook pages and Twitter tweets, and in addition, target the use of social bots that amplify messages in such a way that they create the false impression that the messages have more followers and interactions than they do in reality.

2.6. The 2019/2020 Impeachment Inquiry and Trial

"The Trump–Ukraine affair was an extension of the Trump–Russia affair, and indicated that violations of the Constitution were ongoing. He would not, perhaps could not, stop" (Allin, 2020, p. 230).

For the third time in the nation's history, late 2019 and early 2020 witnessed the impeachment of a U.S. President, in this case, Donald Trump. The first three years of Trump's presidency can be characterized by: multiple lies to the public on a daily basis from the president and his administration; multiple convictions and sentencing of high level election campaign and administrative officials for a variety of different crimes, including bribery, corruption, tax evasion, making false statements, fraud, perjury, and obstruction of justice; and an investigation by Robert Mueller into Russian involvement in 2016 U.S. presidential election (Hasan, 2019; Trautman, 2020).

In the days following the release of Robert Mueller's report, President Trump called the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, and inappropriately pressured him to launch an investigation into his political rival, Joe Biden's son (Hunter Biden), in exchange for the release for nearly \$400 million of congressional-mandated military aid (Gramlich, 2020; Meacham, 2019; Trautman, 2020). A formal impeachment inquiry into President Trump started on September 24, 2019 and ended on December 18, 2019. After the impeachment inquiry, an impeachment trial started on January 16, 2020, which ended on February 5, 2020. Trump was charged with two articles of impeachment: abuse of power, and obstruction of Congress (Cai et al., 2020; J. Walters, 2020). The House Judiciary Committee approved the two articles of impeachment on December 18, 2019 (Foran et al., 2019). The U.S. House of Representatives voted 230 in favour and 197 against for the first article (abuse of power); for the second article (obstruction of Congress), 229 voted in favour and 198 voted against Trump's impeachment (Foran et al., 2019).

However, the impeachment proceedings did not seem to diminish Trump's high popularity among Republicans. During the impeachment proceedings, Trump's allies did their best to make it clear that breaking with Trump would come with a political price. During the Senate trial, for article I (abuse of power), 47 Democrats and one Republican (Mitt Romney) voted "guilty" (total 48), and 52 Republicans voted "not guilty." After Romney became the only Republican who voted to convict Trump for Article I, Trump's son Don Jr. tweeted that Romney was "now officially a member of the resistance & should be expelled from the @GOP" (Bennett, 2020). For article II (obstruction of Congress), 53 Republicans voted "not guilty," and 47 Democrats voted him "guilty" (Cai et al., 2020). Hence, the Senate acquitted Trump on both counts of the House's charges on February 5th, 2020. In terms of public opinion regarding this issue, a survey by the Pew Research Center found that 46% respondents of U.S. adults felt that Trump did something wrong regarding the Ukraine issue, and that it was enough to justify his removal from the office (Gramlich, 2020). Twenty-eight percent of respondents felt that while he did something wrong, it was not enough to justify removing him from the office, whereas 25% felt that he did nothing wrong.

When Trump was questioned, he denied all of his wrongdoings and called the impeachment inquiry a "witch hunt" by Democrats and elements of the mainstream media (BBC News, 2019; Harriger, 2020; Keneally, 2020; Meacham, 2019). Moreover,

Trump denied using U.S. military aid as a bargaining chip with Ukraine President Zelensky, stating on multiple occasions that his phone call to the Ukrainian leader was “perfect” (Diamond, 2019; Gramlich, 2020; Meacham, 2019, p. 212; Walters, 2018). Contradicting his claims about the innocuous nature of the phone call, he insisted that it was appropriate for him to ask the Ukraine to investigate “corruption,” referring specifically to the energy firm where Joe Biden’s son, Hunter Biden, had previously worked for around five years (BBC News, 2019; Mayer, 2019). When things were not working Donald Trump’s way, he showed his frustration on his social media accounts, especially on Twitter. It was reported that on January 22nd, Trump broke his previous Twitter record by sending 142 tweets and retweets in a single day (Cillizza, 2020).

During the impeachment inquiry, many hashtags began trending in support of Trump, such as, *#ShamImpeachment*, *#Trump2020Landside*, *#Trump2020* and *#PresidentialHarassment*. There were also other hashtags that were in support of impeaching Trump, for example, *#impeachTheMF*, *#ImpeachTrump*, and *#Impeachnow*. There is no clear record of how many of these tweets were created by foreign bots or foreign trolls. However, multiple lawmakers have warned that Russia is again meddling in an effort to re-elect Trump in 2020 through disinformation campaigns on social media (Barbaro et al., 2020; Dilanian, 2020; Goldman et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be inferred that Russian trolls were actively participating on social media during the impeachment proceedings. Some have argued that Trump’s ongoing patterns of misconduct during the 2016 U.S. election, and his recent efforts to interfere in the upcoming 2020 election (referring to his phone call to the Ukrainian leader) indicate that he is a potential threat to national security and to the rule of law (Bertrand, 2020; Schiff et al., 2020).

Much has been said about the 2016 U.S. election and the accompanying disinformation campaign. However, there has been no study as of yet regarding the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and news fabrication during the impeachment inquiry and trial of Donald Trump. Therefore, this thesis helps to fill this gap by examining five different Facebook pages marked as questionable/fake by the Media Bias/Fact Check website. As well, five different Twitter hashtags that began to trend during the impeachment inquiry and trial are being examined in this thesis (see Chapter 5). Before examining the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial data, however, the results of the examination of the dataset of IRA-generated social media messages during the 2016 U.S. presidential election will be reported, in order to examine the

influence of the Russian IRA in the presidential election, and to search for evidence that refutes or supports the findings of previous studies (see Chapter 4). This study also explored the manner in which these posts and tweets micro-targeted social media audiences in an effort to influence them to vote for Donald Trump, and/or to discourage them from voting for Hillary Clinton.

2.7. Agenda Setting Theory

Research done by Dautrich & Hartley (1999) showed that Americans got their political information from various media agencies, such as talk radio, print, and television journalism. According to agenda setting theory, members of the public learn what importance to attach to an issue from the amount and position of the coverage of the issue in the news media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). There are two levels of agenda setting; the first level is “the transmission of object salience,” and the second level is “the transmission of attribute salience” (McCombs and Gnanem, as cited in Reese et al., 2001, p. 68). In other words, the first level of agenda setting happens when the media tells the audience *what* to think about, while the second level of agenda setting happens when the media tells the audience *how* to think about these topics (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

According to the first level of agenda setting theory, issues that are accorded higher priority by the media tend to gain greater prominence in the public sphere (Caulk, 2016; Wallsten, 2007). When second-level agenda setting is added to the mix, it examines those issues that the media consider to be important, and emphasizes the particular attributes assigned to those issues by the media (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Such attributes can then be framed in a positive, negative, or neutral way, presented in a cognitive or affective manner, and thus, the process of the second-level agenda setting becomes complete (Golan & Wanta, 2001).

Golan and Wanta (2001), who studied the coverage of Bush and McCain during the 2000 New Hampshire Primary, observed that second-level agenda setting is more effective for cognitive attributes than affective attributes. They found that the respondents of their study were more influenced by the factual information expressed by second-level cognitive attributes than the negative or positive opinions of the candidates within the stories (2001). Kiousis (2003) looked at favorable ratings for President Clinton

during the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Kiousis argued that favorability is an emotional or affective measure when looking at the president. This is compared with the job approval rating that he states to be a more cognitive or fact-based measure. In the end, Kiousis found that news coverage of scandals as an attribute of coverage of the office of the president, has more of an effect on favorability ratings. This suggests that affective second-level agenda setting can impact how the public views a politician (2003). A study by Gondw and Muchangwe (2020), examined the influence of agenda setting theory in the Zambian presidential election. They found that the presence of media agenda influenced their decisions in choosing one candidate over the other.

For over four decades, research in agenda setting theory has expanded its scope from the public agenda to factors that shape the media agenda (Fu, 2013; Golan, 2006). Past research on agenda setting shows that there is a relationship between the issues that the media emphasizes and the issues that the public thinks are important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Through first-level agenda setting, the media portrayed Trump as the most important candidate in the 2016 presidential race and portrayed Hillary Clinton as unfit for the job. In second level agenda setting, social media were used to frame the messaging in favour of Trump, in order to garner more voter support, while at the same time discouraging citizens from voting for Hillary Clinton. Additionally, during the impeachment proceedings, social media, in particular Facebook and Twitter, were used to support Donald Trump and disfavour the Democratic party and its members, especially Nancy Pelosi (Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives) and Adam Schiff (Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee and eventual House Manager at Donald Trump's impeachment trial).

In the past, agenda setting theory studied the influence of mainstream media, rather than the influence of social media. Nowadays, however, social media plays a significant role in bringing people their daily news. According to the Pew Research Center, 43% of Americans get their news from Facebook, while 12% get their news from Twitter (Shearer & Matsa, 2018). Other studies have indicated that two-thirds of Facebook users get their news from Facebook, while six-out-of-ten Twitter users get their news from Twitter (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Under the circumstances, there is justifiable concern for potential manipulation of political sentiment in social media. Therefore, agenda setting theory can play an important role in the examination of social media influence on recent political events.

2.8. A Criminological Perspective

It is important to note that foreign interference and disinformation activities are by no means restricted to social media in the United States. As mentioned earlier in this literature review, extensive use was made of Twitter during the 2016 Brexit referendum (Bastos & Mercea, 2019; Evolvi, 2018; Howard & Kollanyi, 2016; Intelligence and Security Committee, 2020; Narayanan et al., 2017). Media reports claim that around 150,000 active Twitter bot accounts linked to Russia were discovered during the Brexit campaign (Narayanan et al., 2017). The former British Prime Minister, Theresa May, accused Russia of interfering in the elections and planting fake stories in the media. The British Prime Minister said that it was an exceptional attack, and that it attempted to “weaponize information” in order to sow discord among the Western nations (BBC News, 2017; Mason, 2017). The government released the Intelligence and Security Committee Russia report in July 2020, and recognized that the threat was underestimated and U.K. was considered to be as one of Russia's top targets (Intelligence and Security Committee, 2020). However, the U.S. government has pursued this matter quite vigorously, compared to the U.K. government, which has been in a state of turmoil with respect to Brexit and repeated changes in political leadership.

In 2019, a progress report on an Action Plan Against Disinformation was released by The European Commission, working alongside the European External Action Service and other EU institutions and member states. This Action Plan put in place measures to prevent and expose disinformation attacks. According to this report, it was confirmed that ongoing disinformation activities were originating from Russian sources, and that they were believed to be undertaken for the purpose of influencing voter preferences and suppressing voter turnout in the EU Parliamentary elections (de Cock Bunning et al., 2019; European Commission, 2018, 2019). A recent study of Canadian Twitter data conducted by Al-Rawi and Jiwani (2019) indicated that Russian trolls were behind “fake news” stories that attempted to stoke fear and distrust between Muslims and non-Muslims following the 2017 shooting deaths of six worshippers at a mosque in Quebec City. Further, this study expressed concerns that foreign interference, especially Russian trolls, might have tried to influence the Fall 2019 Canadian federal election. In February 2019, *CBC* issued an analysis of 9.6 million tweets from Twitter troll accounts that were linked to suspected foreign influence

campaigns and that were stroking controversy in Canada over pipelines, refugees, and immigration (Oral, 2019; Rocha & Yates, 2019). These accounts were suspected to have originated in Russia, Iran, and Venezuela (Oral, 2019).

Foreign interference of this nature is by no means “new”—such activities have been documented in the Czech Republic and Slovakia as far back as 2013 (Smoleňová, 2015), and in the 2014 election in the Ukraine (Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Mejias & Vokuev, 2017). In 2009, the Kremlin founded a “school for bloggers,” apparently predicting the long-range possibilities of utilizing social media to influence political campaigns around the world (Falk, 2018; Hodge, 2009). It can be assumed that the disinformation attacks by hostile foreign actors on the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the 2016 Brexit referendum were able to achieve results that likely would not have been attainable through more conventional military tactics. The disinformation tactics employed by the Russians apparently succeeded in disintegrating the European Union, installing a pro-Russian figure in the White House, and testing the strength of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), all without firing a single shot. This could be construed as an all-out assault on Western-style democracy (Cartwright, Weir, Frank, et al., 2019; Cartwright, Weir, Nahar, et al., 2019).

With democracy under threat from the intentional and possibly criminal manipulation of social media, and the resultant “digital wildfires” (Webb et al., 2016), legislators and government regulatory agencies around the world are eagerly seeking solutions and defenses against disinformation warfare. Currently, much research has described the blatant attempts by foreign countries, particularly Russia’s Internet Research Agency, to manipulate public opinion in the Ukraine, U.K. and U.S., wherein the use of so-called “fake news” sought to influence democratic processes across international boundaries. However, no studies have been undertaken as of yet on the recent impeachment inquiry and trial against the president of U.S., Donald Trump. Thus, the current study will not only examine foreign interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, but also, look for possible inference in the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial, by examining the messaging on the two most widely used social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter.

2.9. Research Questions

It is important to note that the current study does not attempt to examine the success or failure of the social media and U.S politics, as the data to effectively test this outcome were not available and also it was out of this thesis's scope. Despite this, the current study is sufficiently important given that no previous study has examined the two data together, or 2019/2020 impeachment proceeding data alone to evaluate the impacts of foreign interference in U.S. politics. Accordingly, the current study is informed by the following research questions:

1. *What are the major issues covered in the selected social media data, Facebook and Twitter, during the 2016 U.S, presidential election and during the 2019/2020 impeachment proceedings of Donald Trump?*
2. *Which political party/political candidate was most supported by the fake news content disseminated in the selected social media data?*
3. *How did foreign interference in U.S. politics micro-target social media users in order to influence their political opinions?*

Chapter 3.

Research Methods

This chapter sets out the methodological approach used in the current study. In particular, this chapter discusses how qualitative methodology guided the exploration of the current study's research question(s), including: 1) the techniques for data collection and sampling of social media messages from the two most widely used social media outlets, Facebook and Twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial; and (2) the qualitative content analysis method used to analyze the data, a method that provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data. Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of what gives quality to qualitative research.

3.1. Sampling and Data Collection

The data was collected from two main events that occurred in U.S. politics: the 2016 presidential election, and the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial. Both of these events involved current U.S. President, Donald Trump. The sampling and the retrieval process for the two datasets were quite distinct from each other, as set out below.

3.1.1. 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

The first part of the current study involves a qualitative content analysis of 500 randomly selected “fake news” posts from Facebook (out of a total of 2,500 posts) and 500 randomly selected “fake news” tweets from Twitter (out of a total of 2,500 posts). In this context, the term “fake news” is applied to any data item that was posted on these social media outlets and/or that included inflammatory opinions without backing them up with a credible source. These messages and tweets were posted by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) between 2015 and 2017, which was the time period before, during, and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election (DiResta et al., 2018; Linvill & Warren, 2018; Mueller, 2019; Timberg, 2017). In order to analyze the data, two different software tools were utilized: NVivo 12, and Microsoft Excel. Both NVivo and Microsoft

Excel help with the codification and visualization of data and facilitate data queries of the entire dataset. Using computer software such as NVivo to assist with qualitative data analysis is believed by social researchers to produce superior results, by making analysis of textual content more systematic and transparent (Elg & Ghauri, 2019).

In 2018, Facebook shut down 138 Facebook pages, 70 Facebook accounts and 65 Instagram accounts that had been identified as belonging to the Russian IRA (Constine, 2018). All of these pages were deleted by Facebook when the company conducted an internal review of Russian penetration of its social network. However, the content and engagement metrics from these pages were captured by CrowdTangle, a social analytics tool, which was then gathered by Dr. Jonathan Albright (Confessore & Wakabayashi, 2017; Lapowsky, 2018; Timberg, 2017). It was found that these pages were tailored to fit seamlessly into the ordinary online conversation of particular audiences – politically activated gay women, African Americans, Muslims and people concerned about illegal immigration or the treatment of veterans. This was done to target voters with Russian-bought political ads shaped to their interests, with the intention in at least some cases of affecting voting behaviour (Timberg, 2017).

Five Facebook pages were analyzed in this segment of the study: *Being Patriotic*, *Blacktivist*, *Secured Borders*, *LGBT United*, and *United Muslims of America*. Initially, all of these IRA-sponsored Facebook pages were saved separately in an Excel file format, with a total of 500 messages in each file. A research decision was made to analyze 100 randomly selected posts from each group. These messages were randomized by using the randomization formula (“=RAND()”) in Excel. Once the randomization formula was applied, the random numbers column was later sorted in ascending order, with the first 100 posts being saved in a new Excel file. The same process was repeated for all five of the Facebook pages. Next, all of the final files were imported into NVivo for further analysis. Multiple NVivo query functions were used to analyze the data. In particular, the word frequency query option was employed, in order to identify the 10 words that appeared most frequently within each of the datasets.

In 2017, Darren Linvill from the Department of Communication and John Walker of the Department of Economics at Clemson University collected and saved vast numbers of Twitter posts, prior to their removal from the Internet by the social media platforms. Hence, removing the evidence of the IRA’s activities made it difficult to collect

further data for the purposes of academic research into foreign interference and disinformation campaigns as they relate to the U.S. presidential election. However, Linvill and Warren preserved the evidence and placed themselves in a position to make the data available to academic, law enforcement and cyber-security communities for further study and analysis (Linvill & Warren, 2018). It is noteworthy that Linvill and Walker investigated the Twitter dataset, both qualitatively and quantitatively, further breaking the tweets down into right trolls, left trolls, news feeders, and hashtag gamers. The first part of this thesis reports on the analysis of a randomized sample of the IRA's Facebook and Twitter postings that were gathered, saved, and made available by Linvill and Walker.

Initially, a dataset of 2,946,219 Twitter messages (tweets) from git.hub was downloaded from another website, fivethirtyeight.com. These tweets were described as originating from the Russian Internet Research Agency (Boatwright, Linvill & Warren, 2018). Only "English" language tweets (n = 2,500) were retained for analysis. Unlike the Facebook datasets, the Twitter dataset was not separated into hashtags or account names, nor was it divided into separate data items or unique file numbers. Therefore, it was retrieved as one large dataset, with 2,500 tweets. In order to have the same number of postings as the Facebook dataset, a research decision was made to analyze 500 tweets. Therefore, the first 500 ascending tweets (following the same randomization process as described above) were analyzed in this phase of the study. Again, this Twitter dataset was placed in an Excel file format and later imported into NVivo for further analysis. All words such as "the," "are," and "they" were excluded from the word frequency query in NVivo.

3.1.2. 2019/2020 Impeachment Data

The second part of the research reported in this thesis entails data retrieved from Facebook and Twitter pertaining to the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial. A formal impeachment inquiry into President Trump commenced on September 24, 2019, and ended on December 18, 2019, when the U.S. House of Representatives approved articles of impeachment. After the impeachment inquiry, an impeachment trial commenced in the U.S. Senate on January 16, 2020, ending with a contentious "not guilty" finding on February 5, 2020 (Cai et al., 2020; J. Walters, 2020). Both of these Facebook and Twitter datasets covered the time period of the impeachment inquiry and

subsequent Senate trial, that is, from September 2019 to February 2020. However, the data itself was collected in late February 2020.

In this study of the impeachment proceedings, five different Facebook pages were analyzed: *American Thinker*, *Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)*, *Godfather Politics*, *United American Patriots*, and *Wallbuilders*. All of these pages were considered to come from questionable sources, identified as such by the Media Bias/Fact Check website. Media Bias/Fact Check (MBFC) was founded in 2015 by Dave Van Zandt. This website rates factual accuracy and political biases in the news media (Media Bias Fact Check, 2020). It rates media sources on a political bias spectrum, as well as on the inclusion of factual reporting.

Sources considered by Media Bias/Fact Check (MBFC) to be questionable would exhibit consistent promotion of propaganda, extreme bias, complete lack of transparency and/or fake news, and poor or no sourcing to credible news/sources (Media Bias Fact Check, 2020). With the exception of the *CAIR* Facebook page, all of the other four pages were rated to have an extreme right-wing bias on the political spectrum scale. The *American Thinker* page was observed to promote conspiracy theories and pseudoscience, and to use poor sources to support its posts. *CAIR* was rated to have right-center bias on the political spectrum scale, was reported to have either poor or no sourcing, and to have questionable funding from foreign governments, along with allegations of anti-Semitism (Media Bias Fact Check, 2020). The *Godfather Politics* page was found to be routinely promoting propaganda and conspiracy theories that were considered to be harmful to and disparaging of left-wing groups. The *United American Patriots* page was rated to be questionable based on its poor sources, propaganda, promotion of conspiracies, and a complete lack of transparency in its posts. Lastly, the *Wallbuilders* page was considered questionable, based on extreme right-wing bias, promotion of propaganda, and being identified as a hate group by multiple sources. MBFC reported that *Wallbuilders* has faced criticism for being an anti-LGBT hate group, as well as being designated by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) as an anti-Islam and anti-immigration group (Media Bias Fact Check, 2020). According to MBFC, *Wallbuilders* also failed fact checks on multiple occasions, therefore indicating that *Wallbuilders* was a highly questionable source.

The process with the data collection for the Twitter dataset was different from the Facebook dataset. This dataset of hashtags was collected on the basis of a daily inspection of Twitter. In total, five Twitter hashtags were analyzed: *#Impeachment*, *#RussianInterference*, *#ShamImpeachment*, *#Trump2020*, and *#Trump2020Landside*. These hashtags were trending¹ on Twitter during the impeachment inquiry and trial. As indicated in chapter 2, there has been no research conducted to date on the influence of fake news posted on social media during the impeachment inquiry and trial of Donald Trump. Therefore, more research is required in this area.

Once all of the data were collected from Facebook and Twitter, the individual data items were saved in separate Excel files. Initially, the *American Thinker* page consisted of 785 posts, *CAIR* of 733 posts, *Godfather Politics* of 670 posts, *United American Patriots* of 599 posts, and *Wallbuilders* of 205 posts, all posted between September 2019 and to February 2020. In order to have the same number of posts as the 2016 Facebook dataset, all of these 2019/2020 posts were randomized using the randomization formula in Excel. The random number column was then sorted in an ascending order with the first 100 posts being selected from each Facebook page and saved in a new file/dataset. The same process was followed for all five of the 2019/2020 Facebook pages. All of the final Excel files/datasets were imported into NVivo for further analysis. In NVivo, the word frequency query option was again used to obtain the 10 most frequently appearing words, which were then subjected for further analysis. All words such as “the,” “are,” and “they” were excluded from the word frequency query in NVivo.

Much the same process was utilized for Twitter. All of the data items from the five hashtags were collected and saved in individual Excel files. In total, the *#Impeachment* hashtag had 14,893 tweets, *#RussianInterference* had 1,386 tweets, *#ShamImpeachment* had 13,608 tweets, *#Trump2020* had 2,380 tweets, and *#Trump2020Landside* had 13,936 tweets, all posted during the time period between September 2019 and February 2020. All of the files within each of the five different hashtags were randomized in Excel. Thereafter, the first 100 tweets in the ascending order from each of the five Excel files representing the different hashtags were selected

¹ A “trend” on Twitter refers to a hashtag-driven topic that is immediately popular at a particular time. A hashtag is a keyword or phrase that is preceded with a pound (#) sign (Doctor, 2012).

and saved in new Excel files. Finally, all of the final Excel files/datasets were imported into NVivo for further qualitative analysis.

3.2. Analytic Approach

Qualitative content analysis was the primary method used for this current study. Qualitative content analysis may be described as “a research method for subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Cho & Lee, 2014; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278; Moretti et al., 2011). It is “a method for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative material” (Cho & Lee, 2014; Schreier, 2014). Content analysis was best suited for the aims of this study, as it facilitated both inductive and deductive analytical approaches.

An inductive approach that allowed for the themes to emerge from the data, rather than from rigid theoretical assumptions and “a priori” expectations, was considered to be most appropriate for the current study (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). With an inductive approach, codes, categories, and/or themes are directly drawn from the data. On the other hand, a deductive approach starts with preconceived codes or categories derived from prior relevant research, literature, or theory (Cavanagh, 1997; Kondracki et al., 2002). A deductive approach might be more suitable when the objective of the study is to test existing theory, or to re-examine existing data in a new context (Cho & Lee, 2014). As mentioned above, the current study examines two quite different events that took place during two quite different periods: the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial. Through multiple Research Assistantship positions and the compilation of an extensive review of the literature on the Russian IRA’s disinformation campaign during the 2016 U.S. election, this researcher already had substantial prior knowledge about and understanding of the 2016 Facebook and Twitter datasets; therefore, many previously developed coding schemata were available for re-use (for example, pro-Trump, anti-immigration, and pro-veteran, all of which were later re-coded under the pro-Trump category). Nevertheless, many new codes were generated when the Facebook and Twitter posts were re-read for this current study. No prior research had been conducted on the 2019/2020 impeachment proceeding dataset; therefore, it was necessary to develop a new coding and categorization schemata.

However, from the initial reading of the messages, it was evident that there were many pro-Trump messages, supporting his policies, and arguing against his impeachment.

The qualitative content analysis approach can reveal both the manifest and latent content meanings of communication. With the analysis of manifest content, the researcher describes the information, uses the words, and describes the visible and obvious in the text as it is available in the data. In other words, manifest content analysis focuses on the data, and does not rely on interpretation (Bengtsson, 2016). In contrast, latent content analysis extends to the interpretive level, wherein the researcher seeks to uncover the underlying meaning of the text as well. To express it differently, the main question being asked by latent content analysis is: “what is the text talking about?” (Berg & Lune, 2001; Catanzaro, 1988; Downe-Wambolt, 1992; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Schrier (2012) contends that qualitative content analysis is suitable for data that requires a greater degree of interpretation. Indeed, this approach was thought to be most compatible with the research objectives of this study because its main purpose was to go beyond the manifest content of the messages and extend to the analysis of latent content. To illustrate, the 10 words that appeared most frequently in the tweets revealed the manifest level of information, whereas the categorization and coding of those messages gave the data its interpretative value.

A qualitative study is a process that includes multiple steps, in order to gain deeper understanding and more comprehensive results at the end. Although the following section may explain the analysis in a linear format, the analysis itself proceeded in a reflective and iterative manner, in that it relied on cycling back and forth between the stages. Below, a description is provided of how the current study proceeded through four different stages of qualitative content analysis, showing why both inductive and deductive analytical approaches were warranted. Further, both the manifest and latent meanings of communication are explored, to arrive at a better understanding of what transpired with the disinformation campaigns during the 2016 U.S presidential election and the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial.

According to Bengtson (2016), the four stages of qualitative analysis are decontextualization, recontextualization, categorization and compilation (Bengtsson, 2016) (see Figure 1, below). The first and second stages can be treated as one part for the current study and are explained together. The first stage (decontextualization) can

be described as familiarization with the data, while the second stage (recontextualization) includes initial coding, which was conducted during the first reading of the posts. The third stage (categorization) involves searching for main themes, while the fourth stage (compilation) includes reviewing, defining, and explicating the main themes.

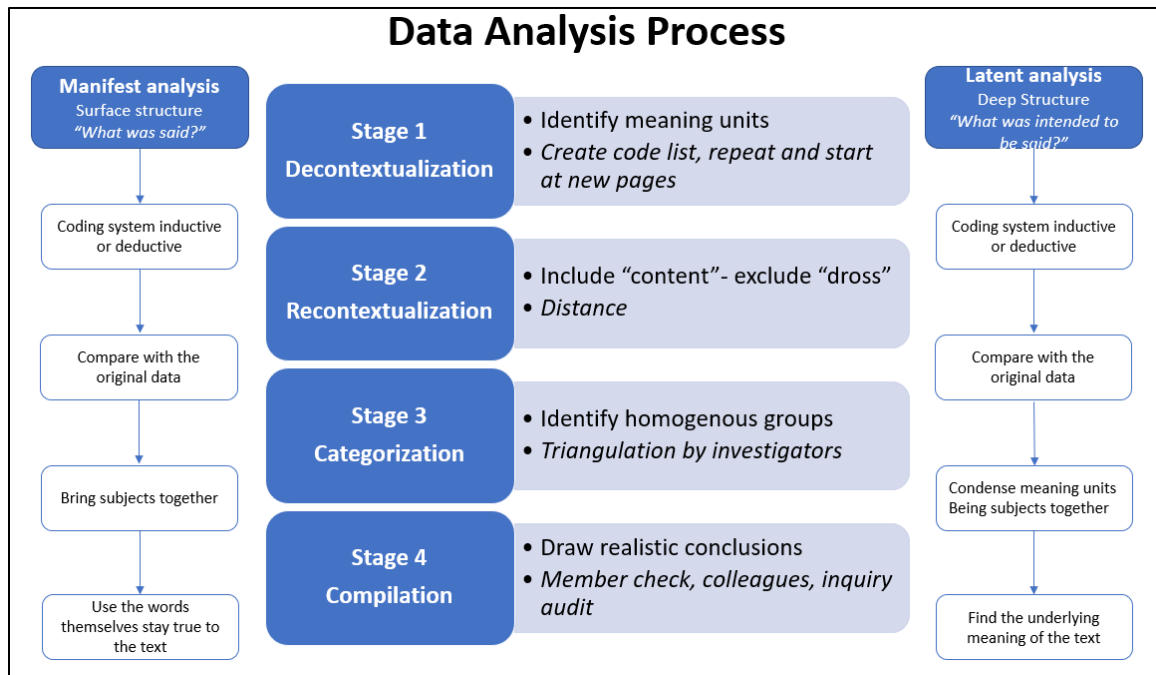


Figure 1 Overview of the process of qualitative content analysis (Bengtsson, 2016)

Stages One & Two: The Decontextualization and Recontextualization Process

The first step when conducting any content analysis is to become familiar with the data itself. This process involves reading the text to ask “what is going on?,” before the researcher deconstructs the textual content down into smaller codes or categories, or starts to draw inferences or ascribe meanings (Bengtsson, 2016, pp. 11–12; Berg & Lune, 2001). According to Saldana (2015), codes are “words or short phrases that symbolically assign a salient, summative, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute” to a segment of data (p. 3). Codes are subjective, and give “interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection” (Saldana, 2015, p. 3). For the current study, codes were generated using both an inductive and deductive approach. As a consequence of prior experience working as a Research Assistant on multiple projects pertaining to the disinformation campaign during the 2016 U.S. election, and

assisting with a number of related literature reviews, this researcher already had a well-developed knowledge about and understanding of the data; therefore, the deductive content approach was utilized in many instances. Nevertheless, many new codes were generated when the messages were re-read. Indeed, Downe-Wambolt (1992) states that the coding process should be performed repeatedly, as interpretations of the messages that seemed clear at the beginning may come to be obscured during the process. Therefore, the use of both inductive and deductive approaches increased the likelihood that the coding would have a higher degree of reliability.

Moreover, the current study made use of both manifest and latent approaches. Firstly, the word frequency query function in NVivo was used to analyze all of the data items from the 2016 and 2019/2020 datasets, in order to obtain the 10 most frequent words that appeared in the 2,000 postings that were studied. This was done for the purpose of exploring the language that was employed in these messages and tweets. Secondly, latent analysis was conducted during the coding stage. In particular, the goal behind the latent analysis was to identify the “underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations” in the given datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 13). The current study sought to find meaning at the latent level, as it pertained to the content of the messages themselves. The entire process was done in NVivo 12 and Microsoft Excel. In the decontextualizing and recontextualizing stages the Facebook posts and Twitter tweets were read, and provisional (tentative) codes were assigned in NVivo. Simultaneously, Facebook and Twitter posts were read and classified as fake news, real news, or undetermined in Excel. It is important to note that a Google search was also used in the decontextualization and recontextualization phases, to determine whether or not the content of the post was entirely fictional, partially true, or mostly true. The main purpose for using NVivo for coding was because it is believed by social researchers to produce superior results to manual coding, by making analysis of textual content more systematic and transparent, and thus, more readily accessible to replication and verification by other researchers (Elg & Ghauri, 2019).

Additionally, during this process, a reflexive journal/memo was kept in NVivo, where any patterns or content that were believed to be critical were contemporaneously noted for future references and recall. Moreover, use of NVivo annotation assisted with the writing process, discussed further in stage four (below). Writing these thoughts in the journal proved helpful, not only during the decontextualization stage, where several

patterns and themes began to emerge, but also throughout the entire analytic process. The memos created in NVivo were used to pinpoint where information should go, and/or whether a theme/parent node should be collapsed into the subtheme/child node. To express it differently, these memos provided “fresh” insight into this researcher’s initial thoughts.

Stage Three: The Categorization Process

In stage three, themes and categories were identified (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 12). According to Saldana, significant themes emerge as a researcher codes, categorizes, and reflects on the data (Saldana, 2015). Each post was read on the screen and, following this, codes were assigned to the relevant sections of text. A codebook was developed, and the posts and tweets were coded by following descriptive coding techniques. Descriptive coding was the most appropriate choice because it offered the ability to organize the vast amount of textual data into manageable word/topic-based clusters. Throughout this stage, Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guidelines were relied upon heavily to identify similarities between codes and themes, as well to merge together those that were related to one another.

During this phase, a new category, “angle of message,” was added to the Excel spreadsheet. Some of the predominant classifications for the angle of the messages in the 2016 dataset were pro-Trump, anti-Trump, anti-Clinton, racist, and apolitical chatter. In the 2019/2020 impeachment proceeding dataset, some of the predominant angles were pro-Trump, health care, anti-Democrats, and anti-impeachment. To draw further connections between the codes, the insights recorded in the memos as well as in the annotations that were made in NVivo proved their worth. By the end of this phase, a number of themes were assembled, for example, codes that were brought together related to Trump’s oft-repeated messaging, including rhetoric about “building a wall,” “illegal aliens,” and/or “immigration issues,” which in turn created an overarching theme, that is, the “pro-Trump” category.

Stage Four: The Compilation

This compilation stage included reviewing the findings and identifying the main themes, as well as the actual writing up of the research process and research findings. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), this stage includes refining and redefining those

themes that may not have truly been themes, and to further weed out and eliminate the themes that were identified earlier but that subsequently proved to be of little or no value (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this stage, examining prior literature on similar topics helped to establish the validity of the reasoning behind choosing particular themes (Aronson, 1995). According to Aronson, combining the extant literature with the chosen themes helps to provide a more coherent story “that stands with merit” (Aronson, 1995, p. 3). In order to achieve this, the initial themes that were created were re-considered, to determine whether they were truly in line with the overall findings of this study. During this phase, some themes and sub-themes required a bit of re-working, with changes being made as needed. To illustrate, in the “breakdown of the message,” another category was added as “part real, part fake.” When the messages were re-read and re-checked for factual content, many posts and tweets turned out to have elements of truth; thus, it was not possible to classify the entire posting as entirely fake or real. Therefore, this classification lent further accuracy to the analysis.

It is important to note that the final write-up (see Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) includes the narratives that were the most prominent and most relevant to the current study. For all the data items, annotations were created in NVivo for the purpose of cross-referencing the original postings with Google search results for the links that accompanied the messages. For the 2016 U.S. presidential election dataset, most of the original links attached to the messages had already been removed by the social media platforms. On the few occasions when a similar story was found in mainstream media sites, the hyperlinks to those stories were downloaded and saved as well, in many cases accompanied by a brief interpretation of the story and a brief explanation of why the Facebook post or Twitter tweet was designated as “real,” “fake,” or “part real, part fake.” For the 2019/2020 impeachment proceeding dataset, most of the links attached to or embedded in the postings were still active; however, the majority of those postings included links to questionable sources. Hence, if the same story that was referred to in the postings could be found on mainstream media sites, these links (along with interpretations) were added to the annotations. If it was a blatant “fake news” data item, where no mainstream media sites had posted similar news, then the designation of “fake news” was added to the annotation. This step not only helped in the write-up stage, but also helped to mitigate researcher biases and enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. Moreover, to present the themes and demonstrate the study’s validity, multiple

quotes (posts and tweets) have been included in the findings section (See Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) to provide detailed insight into the data and how it was interpreted. Lists of the 10 most frequently appearing words from each dataset have also been included in the finding sections, to provide further evidence of the discourse and/or narratives found throughout the various datasets.

3.2.2. Credibility and Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

Human mistakes are an ever-present possibility during the analytic process. These mistakes can be caused by errors of interpretation, as well as by personal biases. There is always a risk that different researchers would draw dissimilar conclusions from the same data. In the area of qualitative research, the terms credibility and trustworthiness are employed when assessing a particular study's quality. It can be said that the "trustworthiness of a research report lies at the heart of issues conventionally discussed as validity and reliability" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 294; Seale, 1999, p. 467). The current study follows the concepts introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which are essential criteria for qualitative research studies: Credibility, Transferability, Dependability, and Confirmability (Elo et al., 2014; Golafshani, 2003, p. 601; Pandey & Patnaik, 2014; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Credibility is comparable to the internal validity of the research, in that it contributes confidence to the "truth" of the findings. This is one of the most important factors in establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Pandey & Patnaik, 2014, p. 5746). A qualitative study may improve its credibility and trustworthiness through the use of triangulation. The current study relies on one particular form of triangulation, called "triangulation of sources," which involves "examining the consistency of different data sources from within the same method" (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014, p. 5478). Here, the current study analyzed the 2016 U.S. presidential election dataset collected from two different sources, Facebook and Twitter. The second dataset was collected from the same platforms but during the 2019/2020 presidential impeachment inquiry and trial. These can both be considered major events in U.S. politics. Both datasets contained equal numbers of tweets and messages, to ensure that the findings were as congruent as possible.

Transferability shows that “the findings have applicability in other context,” and in that sense, may be compared to the external validity/generalizability of the research (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 13; Pandey & Patnaik, 2014, p. 5746). Data saturation can address the issue of transferability. Data saturation is defined as “a point at which observing more data will not lead to discovery of more information related to the research questions” (Lowe et al., 2018, p. 191). The concept of data saturation was applicable in this case, as it was found that the posts and tweets from both datasets became repetitive in content over time, and therefore, that the codes that emerged from these posts and tweets eventually became repetitive. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), “there is a direct link between data triangulation and data saturation; the one (data triangulation) ensures the other (data saturation)” (p. 1411). Denzin (2009) reports that there is no single theory or method that can capture all of the important information. However, Denzin did state that triangulation is the method wherein the researcher “must learn to employ multiple external methods in the analysis of the same empirical events” (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1411). As mentioned earlier, the current study reports on two different events that occurred at different times in U.S. politics, thus partially meeting the requirements of data triangulation and data saturation.

There is no commonly accepted sample size for qualitative studies. However, optimal sample size depends on the research questions, and the richness of the data (Elo et al., 2014, p. 4). Both datasets had considerably greater numbers of textual items than might typically be subjected to qualitative analysis, that is, 1,000 posts from 2016 (500 from Facebook, 500 from Twitter), and 1,000 posts from 2019/2020 (500 from Facebook, 500 from Twitter), which helped to achieve data saturation and avoid generalization from too small of a sample size.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) have identified thick description as an important way to achieve external validity. This refers to keeping detailed notes and describing them in the write-up (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014), which was done meticulously throughout the present study.

Dependability is similar to reliability, in that its presence reflects that the findings are consistent and replicable (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014). An accurate description of the analysis and reporting of the relationships between the results and the original data should permit readers to draw their own conclusions regarding the trustworthiness of the

results (Elo et al., 2014, p. 7). It is important to note that dependability or reliability is higher when another researcher can readily follow the decision trail used by the initial researcher (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011, p. 153). Qualitative study can be subjective in approach; however, keeping a detailed record of critical research decisions in the reflective journal helps to ensure that research goals are met, while at the same time keeping the researcher on track. Moreover, the codebook plays a crucial role in keeping track of how codes were utilized to make sense of the data during the coding and writing stage (MacQueen et al., 1998). For the current study, all the reflective journal notes were written in NVivo memos, while the codebook was saved as an Excel file.

Lastly, confirmability occurs when the requirements for credibility, transferability, and dependability have been established in the research (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). The term “confirmability” is preferred to the term “objectivity,” and is evidenced by the “degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher biases, motivation, or interest” (Pandey & Patnaik, 2014, p. 5746). This is particularly important when analysis includes latent content as well as manifest content, as researcher bias or motivation may influence the interpretation (Elo et al., 2014). This thesis reports on two main events in U.S. politics, both receiving immense attention on social media, and sparking conversations about fake news content (misinformation, disinformation, and/or news fabrication). This project reports solely on those messages, rather than on any personal researcher biases. In order to mitigate any potential researcher biases, detailed notes (in the form of memos in NVivo) were kept throughout the analysis process. Moreover, a Google search was also conducted on all of the posts to ascertain whether the post was real, fake, or partially true, which reduced the likelihood of biases being interjected into the coding process. As an extra precaution, annotations on each post were also recorded in NVivo.

Chapter 4.

Result A: 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

This chapter presents the findings of the qualitative content analysis of the disinformation campaign that was orchestrated by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA) during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The first section of the chapter reports on the results of the content analysis of five different Facebook pages that were sponsored by the IRA (Mueller, 2019; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). The next section discusses the findings of the analysis of numerous Twitter tweets, also sponsored by the Russian IRA. To present these findings, this section relies on direct, word-for-word quotations from the messages themselves, as well as on rich description, to convey the nature of these findings in as thorough and transparent manner as possible. Moreover, the 10 most frequent words from each dataset are presented, to report on the language that the messages employed in their effort to micro-target social media users.

4.1. Disinformation on Facebook in 2016

Qualitative content analysis was conducted on 100 randomly selected posts from each of the five different Facebook pages from the 2016 election period. Recall that each of the Facebook pages that were studied originally contained 500 posts in total (all together 2,500 posts). All of the posts from each of the pages were randomized, with 100 posts from each being selected for analysis. Therefore, 500 randomly selected Facebook posts from the election time were read and analyzed in Excel and NVivo.

As noted previously, this dataset of “fake news” posts (part of the disinformation campaign orchestrated by the IRA) was collected and assembled by Dr. Jonathan Albright (Confessore & Wakabayashi, 2017; Lapowsky, 2018; Timberg, 2017). The importance of their decision to collect this data cannot be overstated, given that in 2018, Facebook deleted most of the pages and accounts that had been identified as belonging to the IRA (Constine, 2018), thereby removing much of the evidence of the IRA’s activities, and making further data collection by academic researchers more difficult.

4.1.1. Being Patriotic

One hundred posts were randomly selected from a total of 500 posts on the *Being Patriotic* Facebook page. These IRA-sponsored posts were analyzed in NVivo and Excel. Overall, it was found that this group micro-targeted White people from the American South, who were more likely to support anti-immigration policies, and more likely to belong to right-wing political groups. Mainly, this particular Facebook page contained complaints about the treatment of U.S. veterans. Research by DiResta et al. (2018) found that the content of this page garnered the most likes (6.3 million) as compared to all of the other IRA-sponsored Facebook pages (p. 21).

One of the patterns that became apparent in the early stages of analysis was that 79 of the 100 posts were clearly “fake news,” and that 61 out of those 79 posts were “pro-Trump” (see Table 1, below). The posts that were classified as “fake news” included inflammatory opinions and/or were engaged in outright falsehoods, without any supporting evidence. It is important to note that all the unsubstantiated opinion posts were also coded as “fake news.” As per Mueller’s report and research by Dr. Jonathan Albright, these pages and political ads were sponsored by Russian IRA, and it was done to target voters to shape their interests, with the intention to alter their voting behaviour. The posts that were classified as “pro-Trump” were very explicit in their support of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, as well as his general political views. The typical discourse found on this page might be best exemplified as follows: “The Second Amendment secures our lives, protects our property and makes us free from tyranny. Stay armed, America, stay armed forever!” or “Why is it so hard for our Government to understand that we want our own citizens to get care before illegal freeloaders who don't even try to become a part of the American society?” Both of these statements were coded as “fake news” because they both included unsubstantiated opinion rather than a fact. These statements from *Being Patriotic* were not premised on any empirical research, nor on any real event. Moreover, messages posted on this Facebook page clearly supported Donald Trump’s own narrative, in that they talked about 2nd amendment rights, deporting immigrants, building the wall, restricting travel and work visas, screening refugees, and curbing legal immigration (Amadeo, 2019).

Out of the 100 posts studied, 5 of the posts (4 of which were fake news, one of which was part real, part fake) were opposed to Hillary Clinton, and therefore, classified

as “anti-Clinton.” As cited in the literature review (see Chapter 2), a number of the posts created by the Russian IRA were intended to undermine Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Badawy, Ferrara, & Lerman, 2018; Bevan, 2018; Kshetri & Voas, 2017; Mueller, 2019; Murray, 2018; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017; Reston, 2017; Shane & Mazzetti, 2018; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018). The following example serves to illustrate how such posts were intended to undermine Hillary Clinton:

Both Clinton and Obama admitted that Hillary has lost and they both told her supporters that peaceful transfer of power is the most important thing that keeps our nation together. Yet the brainwashed liberal community is going mad with riots, petitions, and protests. When will they grow up and start acting like civilized people.

This post was partially true, in the sense that Obama and Hillary had in fact both given speeches conceding loss and encouraging the peaceful transfer of power (Collinson et al., 2016; Kosoff, 2016). However, there was no supporting evidence with respect to the alleged riots, petitions, and protests.

Table 1 **Classification and Angle of the *Being Patriotic* Facebook Page**

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Fake News	79	79.0%
Pro-Trump	61	61.0%
Undetermined	10	10.0%
Pro-Military	4	4.0%
Anti-Clinton	4	4.0%
Part Real, Part Fake	11	11.0%
Pro-Trump	7	7.0%
Undetermined	3	3.0%
Anti-Clinton	1	1.0%
Undetermined	8	8.0%
Real News	2	2.0%
Undetermined	1	1.0%
Pro-Trump	1	1.0%
Grand Total	100	100.0%

The posts that were partially true but that also included some false information were classified as “part real, part fake.” This accounted for 11% (n=11) in the data; out of those 11 posts, 7 were classified as “pro-Trump” (see Table 1, above). Most of these Russian-sponsored posts included inflammatory opinion, alongside some verifiable information. Out of the 11 posts, 10 talked about veterans and their struggles, for example:

At least 50,000 homeless veterans are starving dying in the streets, but liberals want to invite 620,000 refugees and settle them among us. We have to take care of our own citizens, and it must be the primary goal for our politicians.

This post was classified as “part real, part fake” because the information about 50,000 homeless veterans was confirmed through multiple mainstream media articles (ABC News, 2015; Lawrence, 2015); however, the information about the 620,000 refugees was embellished. This post contrasted the desperate condition of American veterans with the supposedly more fortunate fate of refugees, and used the numbers that Donald Trump had cited in an attack on Hillary Clinton. These examples also demonstrate that the *Being Patriotic* page targeted White American conservatives from the Southern United States, tapping into their support for anti-immigration policies, while at the same time encouraging those White Americans to vote for Donald Trump in the election.

Posts that were unclear or that presented insufficient information to determine whether they were real or fake were classified as “undetermined” (n = 8) (see Table 1, above). These posts could conceivably have represented a specific partisan stance, but due to the many links and images that had been deleted by the social media platforms, it was impossible to retrieve enough information about the original posts to make an accurate classification. It can be assumed that many of these posts included a link to a site, picture or a video. Examples of these included brief messages such as: “We won’t miss you here,” suggesting a place or an event, or simply asking the social media audience “do you agree?”, suggesting that there was an attached image or story.

NVivo was used to identify the 10 words that appeared most frequently in these 100 posts from the Facebook page, *Being Patriotic*. The most frequently mentioned word was “country,” appearing 30 times in the 100 posts (see Figure 2, below). Most of these posts portrayed America as a great country, and/or as a wonderful country. Some posts also attempted to create concern that illegal aliens and immigrants were going to vote illegally in the election, for example:

Illegal aliens are criminals. Criminals, who broke the immigration laws. Criminals, who don't pay taxes, but YOU pay taxes to feed them. They have no right to be here, but they're already deciding our country's future by voting illegally! This has to stop!.

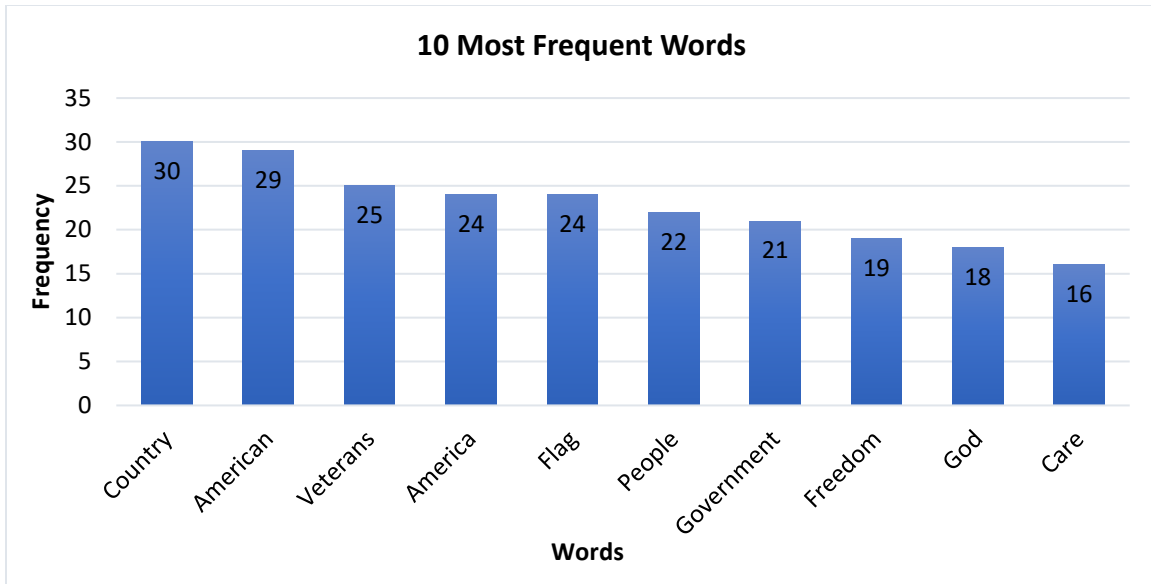


Figure 2 List of 10 Most Frequent Words for *Being Patriotic* Facebook Page

Other words that appeared frequently in the messages included: “veterans” (n = 25), “flag” (n = 24), “government” (n = 21), and “freedom” (n = 19) (see Figure 2, above). As mentioned previously, this page mainly focused on complaints regarding veterans not receiving proper treatment, using words like “country,” “flag,” “freedom” and “God” as sacred symbols that were intended to appeal to the reading audience. It also asked over and over again for the government to give priority to veterans, rather than to immigrants.

4.1.2. *Blacktivist*

One hundred posts were randomly selected from the *Blacktivist* Facebook page for further analysis. The posts on the *Blacktivist* page can generally be categorized as either promoting a positive view of black culture, or as portraying a negative view of the illegal and discriminatory treatment of black Americans. Several posts urged the sharing of a video. This page mainly targeted the black audience, and was the third most visited Facebook page of all of the known IRA-sponsored Facebook pages, with over 11 million total engagements, and was reported to have the most reactions (1.4 million) (DiResta et al., 2018, p. 21).

Similar to the *Being Patriotic* Facebook page, the majority of the posts in the *Blacktivist* page fell into the categories of “fake news” (60%) (see Table 2, below). The posts that were classified as “fake news” included inflammatory opinions and/or were engaged in outright falsehoods, without any supporting evidence. A research decision

was made to code all the unsubstantiated opinion posts as “fake news.” Research has shown that these pages were sponsored by Russian IRA, and it was done to target American voters, with the intention of affecting voting behaviour. Out of those 60 posts classified as “fake news,” 36 posts were “anti-racist.” Anti-racist posts were either critical of racist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), or were positively oriented toward black culture. Posts that were positively oriented, presented black culture as beautiful, or something to be proud of, with a focus on style, hair, or family, the latter in particular consisting of messages about having “good” black parents. Examples of posts of this nature would include: “Be proud of your race, be proud of who you are. Have a pride and dignity,” and “Educate your children on black culture appropriation. #Blackisonfleek.” These posts were deemed to be “fake news” because they did not include any real news story, but rather, an opinion only. Also, it was known for a fact that the authors were not African-American, but rather, Internet trolls working from the IRA headquarters in St. Petersburg (Linville & Warren, 2020; MacFarquhar, 2018), who likely knew nothing about the life experiences and/or culture of blacks in America. They were also poorly worded, seemed to be following a script that was presumably provided to them by their Russian employers, and consisted of nothing more than opinions or “feel-good” slogans. It seems that these Russian trolls and/or their handlers felt that American blacks would be attracted to a Facebook page that promoted ethnic pride and black culture. And if we accept that this was the third most visited of the IRA-generated Facebook pages, and the one that received the most reactions (see above), then it seems that the IRA may have been correct in this regard.

Table 2 Classification and Angle of the *Blacktivist* Facebook Page

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Fake News	60	60.0%
Anti-Racist	36	36.0%
Anti-Police	14	14.0%
Undetermined	6	6.0%
Anti-Government	4	4.0%
Undetermined	28	28.0%
Undetermined	19	19.0%
Anti-Racist	9	9.0%
Part Real, Part Fake	10	10.0%
Anti-Police	6	6.0%
Anti-Racist	4	4.0%
Real News	2	2.0%
Anti-Racist	2	2.0%
Grand Total	100	100.0%

Of the 60 posts categorized as “fake news,” 14 were “anti-police.” Anti-police posts were far less variable than the anti-racist posts. Anti-police posts primarily consisted of news-based postings about specific incidents involving police use of force against black Americans, although in some cases, they made general statements about the danger that police posed to black children in particular, or made reference to the names of those who had been killed by police. One of these posts stated: “The number of black men killed by police is less than the number of American soldiers killed in Afghanistan from 2001-2015. Most of those black men killed were unarmed and shot while running away.” This “fact” was deemed to be made up, as there was no evidence found to support the above-mentioned statement. Government policies and how the American government acts in a racist manner toward black Americans was also discussed in the *Blacktivist* Facebook page. For example, one post asked: “Maybe the criminal justice system, from start to finish, is seriously racist? What if the government is blind and deaf?”

Out of 100 *Blacktivist* posts that were analyzed in this present study, 10 were classified as “part real, part fake” (see Table 2, above). This occurred where some of the facts stated in the post were verifiable, but the post also included an interpretation or spun a story around the facts. This was possibly done to give a personal touch to the posts, or to make them seem more credible, for example:

After the shooting, Korryn Gaines' 5-year-old son, Kodi, was shot and injured. The child was taken to the hospital, where he is making a recovery. While in the hospital, the child's cousin recorded of Kodi discussing how the police entered his family house and shot first. So what are your thoughts on this? Do you trust cops now? I think police need to be fair with us but no! they are killing out kids.

It became evident from the reading and coding of these posts that the underlying intention was either to create a sense of “otherness” in the black population, in order to foster division, or to instill fear of law enforcement authorities and the American criminal justice system, or possibly both.

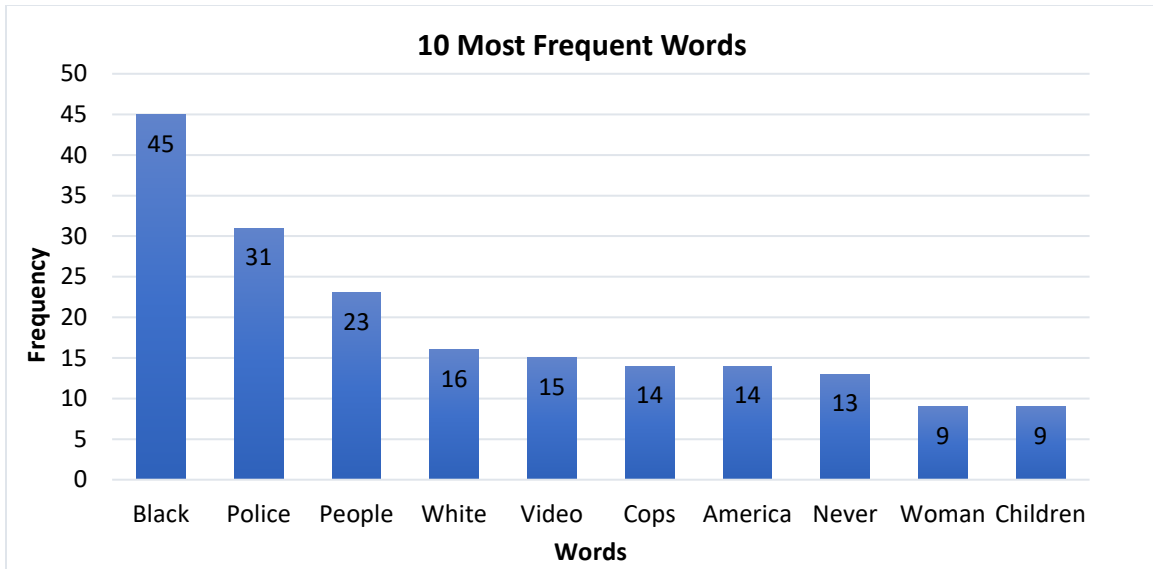


Figure 3 List of 10 Most Frequent Words for *Blacktivist* Facebook Page

Not surprisingly, “black” was the most frequently used word (n = 45) in the 100 posts (see Figure 3, above). The second most frequently mentioned word was “police” (n = 31). Moreover, “cops” were also mentioned 14 times in the 100 posts. The term “police” and “cops” were used interchangeably in the *Blacktivist* Facebook page. As noted earlier, this page routinely posted about police brutality and police misconduct; therefore, it stands to reason that police and cops would appear in the list of most frequently used words. “White(s)” were also mentioned unfavorably 16 times in the 100 posts, with discussions about white privilege and white power. Lastly, many posts asked the social media audience to watch a video or like a video; hence, the word “video” was mentioned 15 times in these 100 posts. While it was not possible to retrieve these videos, it is assumed that at least some of them portrayed “unjust” interactions between law enforcement officials and blacks.

4.1.3. Secured Borders

Secured Borders was another IRA-sponsored Facebook page that was analyzed in this study. This page focused mainly on appealing to the right-wing anti-immigration movement. Research by DiResta et al. (2018) found that this page had 2,126,061 engagements and over one million “likes.”

Most of the 100 posts sampled from *Secured Borders* (n = 78) again fell into the category of “fake news” (see Table 3, below). Out of these 78 posts classified as “fake

news,” 67 were further categorized as being “pro-Trump.” These posts were either explicitly supportive of Donald Trump, or used language similar to that utilized by Trump, such as “drain the swamp,” or describing Mexican immigrants as “murderers and rapists,” and immigrants as “illegal/illegals” or as “aliens.” To illustrate, one post pronounced that: “Trump is not your president? Go to Mexico and try to protest there - and you'll see how patient and kind was President Trump to the ungrateful idiots like you.” Hillary Clinton was also mentioned in 4 out of the 78 “fake news” posts in the *Secured Borders* page. These posts portrayed Hillary as a criminal, a corrupt politician, and an inadequate leader. Hillary Clinton was also referred to as “Killary” in nine of the 100 posts. Anti-Clinton related content also understandably reflected pro-Trump attitudes. The following example aptly illustrates both pro-Trump ideology and anti-Clinton attitudes:

US Marine veteran's plea to America: 'please do not put me or my fellow Marines at the mercy of the hands of Killary Clinton as our Commander-in-Chief' We totally agree. As Commander in Chief Obama humiliated our military. His blatant acts of disrespect toward the military are unacceptable. Killary already promised that she will continue Obama's policy on many accounts, including the way she's going to handle matters regarding our veterans, police, army, etc. And it's clear that illegals and refugees are much more important for her than our troops. We don't need another anti-American leftist-socialist as Commander-in-chief! Our military had suffered enough under Obama's regime! Do you agree?

While Donald Trump was not specifically mentioned in this particular post, it was clear that the author was discouraging people from voting for Donald Trump’s opponent, “Killary” Clinton, and encouraging them to vote instead for Trump.

Table 3 Classification and Angle of the *Secured Borders* Facebook Page

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Fake News	78	78.0%
Pro-Trump	67	67.0%
Anti-Clinton	4	4.0%
Undetermined	4	4.0%
Racist	3	3.0%
Part True, Part Fake	21	21.0%
Pro-Trump	19	19.0%
Anti-Clinton	1	1.0%
Racist	1	1.0%
Undetermined	1	1.0%
Grand Total	100	100.0%

In total, 21 of the 100 posts from *Secured Borders* were classified as being “part real, part fake” (see Table 3, above). The general layout of the posts classified as “part real, part fake” involved the presentation of a real news story, followed by inflammatory opinion. An example of this is as follows:

Guess what, friends? Illegal alien has voted for Dems in more than 20 elections! Shirley Anne Conners, a Canadian woman living in Cheektowaga, has been in America, against the law, for decades. Moreover she voted for the Democratic Party throughout all these years. Finally, recently she was arrested for voter fraud. Since 1995, prosecutors say the woman who went by the last name Faragalli voted in more than 20 federal, state and local elections. Most recently, Conners voted in the Democratic Presidential Primary this year. She could spend five years in prison if convicted of the charge. I personally think she should get 5 years for every time she voted illegally! I can't help but think “how many illegals like her committed this voter fraud over the years? I still don't believe Obama got all these votes legally. Hillary as well. These corrupt bastards (and in Obama's case he's literally a corrupt bastard) “how long they've been doing this? Did Bill Clinton similarly got his votes from dead people and illegals?? This is an outrage! Only US citizens should be allowed to vote!! Illegal aliens should not be rewarded with voting rights!

Shirley Anne Conners was indeed a Canadian woman living in Cheektowaga who voted in 20 federal state and local elections under the name of “Shirley Anne Faragalli” (Department of Justice, 2016). However, this post largely included inflammatory discourse about “voter fraud,” “illegals,” and “illegal aliens,” with no other factual information that could be verified by a Google search.

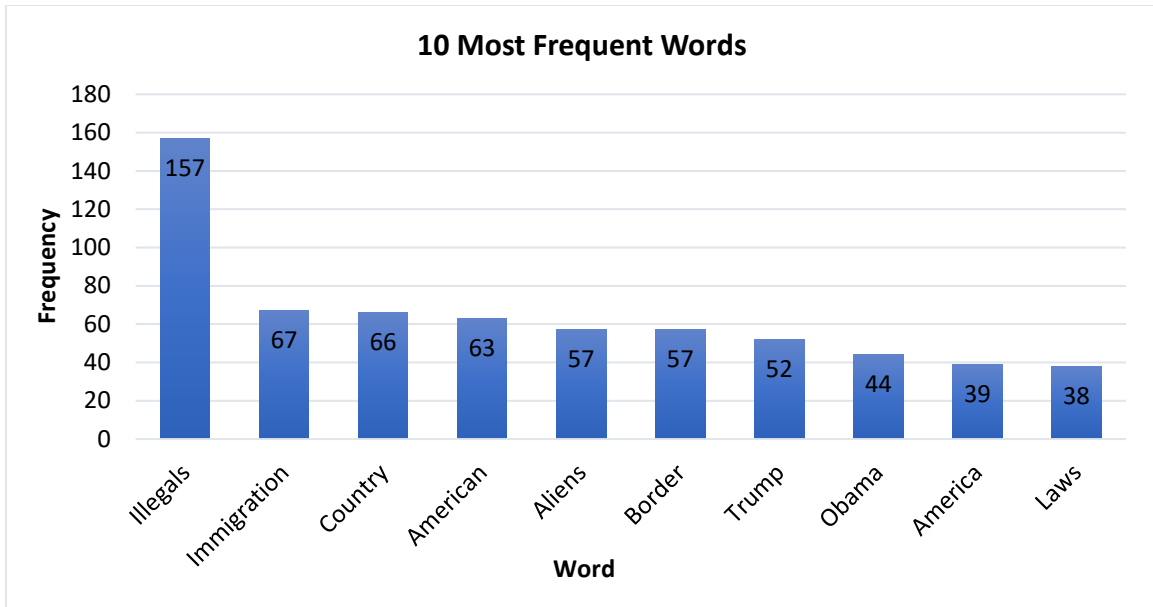


Figure 4 List of 10 Most Frequent Words for *Secured Borders* Facebook Page

For the *Secured Borders* page, words such as “illegals” (n = 157) and “aliens” (n = 57) were mentioned most frequently in the 100 randomly sampled posts (see Figure 4, above). As mentioned previously, 67 out of 78 posts classified as “fake news” included pro-Trump discourse about “draining the swamp,” about Mexicans as “murderers and rapists,” or about immigrants as “illegal/illegals” or “aliens.” Through the word frequency list, it was found that Donald Trump’s narrative was strongly supported by the postings on the *Secured Borders* page. Some of the other words that were included in the 100 posts were “immigration” (n = 67), “country” (n = 66), and “American” (n = 63). These words were used to instill fear of and distrust toward “racialized others,” and create division within the American populace.

4.1.4. LGBT United

The content of the *LGBT United* Facebook page was largely focused on left-leaning political groups. In their study of this group, Renee et al. found that the *LGBT United* page had 3,344,331 engagements, and over one million shares (DiResta et al., 2018, p. 21).

Of the 100 *LGBT United* posts analyzed in this present study, 49 were classified as “fake news,” while 46 were classified as “undetermined” (see Table 4, below). Most of the posts within the dataset were very short, especially when they made use of non-

textual media (for example, screenshots and images). Indeed, most of the posts on this page included the frequent use of non-textual media. There was also a surprising lack of political engagement or activism, with a focus on only one or two issues that were likely to be controversial or provocative. A very small number (n = 2) of the posts were actually based on verifiable, real-life events, and could therefore be classified with confidence as “real news.”

“Fake news” posts typically consisted of a statement of opinion, without any provable (or refutable) claims, for example: “LGBT pride is not a sin. It is not something to be ashamed of, because it is a part of our nature. Homosexuality is a natural thing and occurs in nature pretty often,” or “We live in a world where punching the “shy guy’s” face would be considered the normal thing to do... But this is just common fucking courtesy!! Why is it so hard just to be nice??”

Table 4 Classification and Angle of the *LGBT United* Facebook Page

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Fake News	49	49.0%
Pro-LGBT	42	42.0%
Undetermined	6	6.0%
Anti-Religious	1	1.0%
Undetermined	46	46.0%
Undetermined	23	23.0%
Pro-LGBT	23	23.0%
Part Real, Part Fake	3	3.0%
Anti-Religious	2	2.0%
Pro-LGBT	1	1.0%
Real News	2	2.0%
Grand Total	100	100.0%

Only three of the 100 posts sampled from *LGBT United* were classified as “part real, part fake,” which meant that the post used some factual information, along with personal interpretation. The personal interpretation included an inflammatory opinion. All three of these “part real, part fake” posts recounted incidents of homophobia, and even violence, which could be construed as an attempt to instill fear within the LGBTQ community. The following post helps to illustrate this theme:

Ignorance and Christian all go hand in hand... It's just so hard to fix stupid no matter how you try! Montana gay couple files bias complaint after losing foster child A couple in Montana is filing a discrimination suit after they say state social workers took their foster child away because they are gay, the Bozeman Daily Chronicle reports. "It seemed to us they really worked hard

to find somebody else to take him instead of leaving him with us, Joseph told the Chronicle. Montana's Department of Public Health and Human Services on Friday denied that its workers discriminated against the gay couple, noting that it has placed and continues to place foster children with same-sex couples. Yet they can place children in abusive foster homes and group homes with knowledge of the abuse. When are morons like this going to realize gay couple can and should be able to foster kids? With all the kids in the system you would think it would be great for a child to having loving parents. Gay or straight!!

With respect to the angle, 68% of the posts were classified as “pro-LGBT,” in that they featured some sort of positive statement about the LGBTQ community, or some sort of negative statement about homophobia or prejudice in general. This was true even with many of the posts that were designated as “undetermined,” as there was still some indication of this general thrust within the small amount of text that was visible.

Three of the posts were noteworthy because the angle was “anti-religious” (see Table 4, above). These anti-religious posts may serve double duty, in that they might lead conservative Christians to feel hostility toward the LGBTQ community. The three posts that exhibited anti-religious sentiment specifically targeted Christians, for example: “I often wonder why there are not more gay atheists, considering most major religions stand in opposition in homosexuality.”

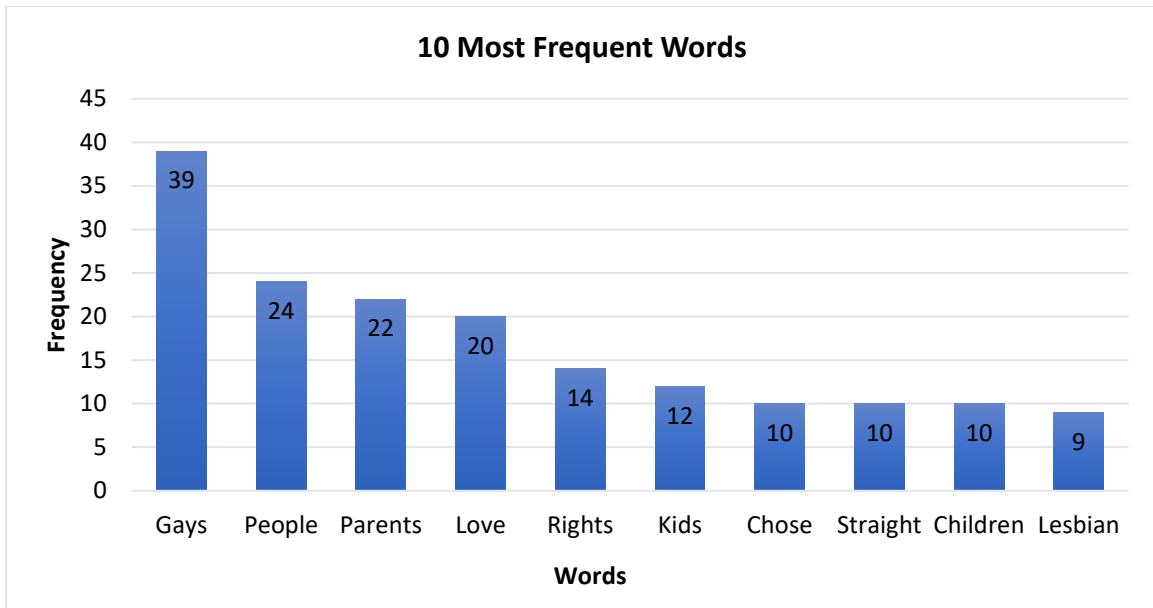


Figure 5 List of 10 Most Frequent Words for *LGBT United* Facebook Page

The most commonly-used words in the *LGBT United* page were “gays” (n = 39), “people” (n = 24), “parents” (n = 22), “love” (n = 20) and “rights” (n = 14) (see Figure 5, above). Many of the posts in the *LGBT United* page were observed to be spreading positive messages about the LGBTQ community. Some of the posts talked about how members of the LGBTQ community must face up to people who do not understand them, and how they have to fight for their rights. An example of this would be:

Sometimes I meet remarkably narrow minded people, who keep telling how "without us you wouldn't have any rights". But they're wrong. So my reply is: without you we wouldn't have to fight for these rights you enjoy all your life.

The apolitical nature of most of the posts found on the *LGBT United* page, and the seeming “disconnect” from the actual lived experiences of members of the LGBTQ community in America, could possibly be explained by the fact that these messages were posted by Internet trolls from Russia, a country where there are no “gay rights,” and where it would thus be difficult to recruit authors who were familiar with LGBTQ culture and/or LGBTQ concerns. It could be said that the *LGBT United* Facebook page was a failed experiment in social engineering.

4.1.5. United Muslims of America

The Facebook page *United Muslims of America* was targeting a left-leaning audience (DiResta et al., 2018). Most of the posts were about religion and pride, demanding respect, and seeking to distance the Muslim faith from terrorism and ISIS. The total engagements on this page were 3,933,223, with around two million likes (DiResta et al., 2018, p. 21).

The majority of the posts on *United Muslims of America* were classified as “fake news” (n = 57) (see Table 5, below), indicating that the post consisted of a statement of opinion, made up by an Internet troll working with the Russian IRA, rather than a provable (or refutable) claim, for example: “You can be Anyone from Anywhere BUT IN ISLAM WE ARE ALL THE SAME!” Of these “fake news” messages, 45 posts were broadly “anti-racist” in angle, as seen in this statement: “We are Americans, We are Muslims, We are successful in our society.....And no, we are not terrorists !!!.”

Table 5 **Classification and Angle of the *United Muslims of America* Facebook Page**

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Fake News	57	57.0%
Anti-Racist	45	45.0%
Undetermined	11	11.0%
Anti-Trump	1	1.0%
Undetermined	37	37.0%
Undetermined	29	29.0%
Anti-Racist	8	8.0%
Real News	3	3.0%
Anti-Racist	3	3.0%
Part Real, Part Fake	3	3.0%
Anti-Racist	3	3.0%
Grand Total	100	100.0%

Of the 100 posts, only three were classified as “part real, part fake,” in that they featured an element of provable truth, such as a news story, but also had further commentary or claims added. The following post, for instance, referred to the 2015 murder of three Muslim students in Chapel Hill, North Carolina: “The guy in the picture is an atheist, he shot and murdered three Muslim young students few years ago. yet no one called him a terrorist.” Likewise, only 3 of the 100 posts were classified as “real news,” and those that were classified as such involved only the simple sharing of a news story.

It became evident from the reading and coding of the posts on *United Muslims of America* that the underlying intention was to create a sense of “otherness” in the Muslim population, in order to foster division in American society. While the posts attempted to boost Muslim pride, they also emphasized the prevalence of racist attitudes toward people of the Muslim faith, the stereotypical portrayal of Muslims as “terrorists,” and the dangers that Muslims faced from non-Muslims.

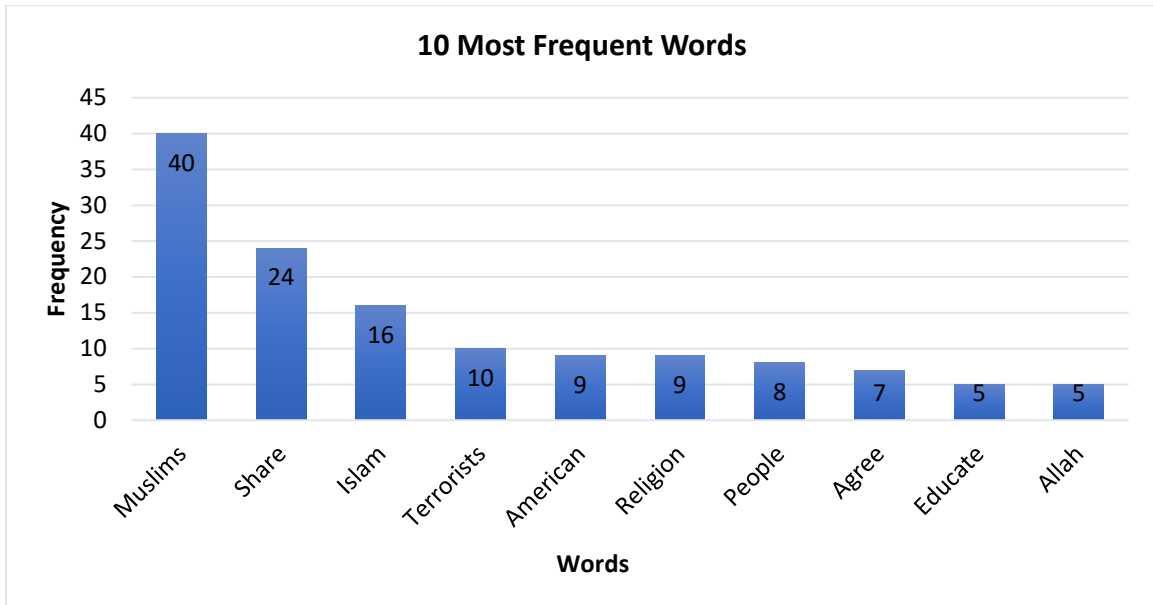


Figure 6 List of 10 Most Frequent Words for *United Muslims of America* Facebook Page

The words that appeared most frequently in the *United Muslims of American* page included “Muslims” (n = 40), “share” (n = 24), “Islam” (n = 16), “terrorists” (n = 10) and “Americans” (n = 9) (see Figure 6, above). All of the posts that included the word “terrorists” were observed to be arguing that Muslims were not terrorists, as illustrated by this post: “Terrorists are not Muslims and Muslims are not Terrorists. Like and Share if you agree!” The frequent use of the word “share” was likely intended to amplify the message itself, and to draw more followers to the *United Muslims of American* page.

4.2. Disinformation on Twitter in 2016

Initially, a dataset of 2,946,219 Twitter messages (tweets) from git.hub was downloaded from another website, fivethirtyeight.com. These tweets were described as originating from the Russian Internet Research Agency (Boatwright, Linvill & Warren, 2018), Only “English” language tweets (n = 2,500) were retained for analysis. These tweets were posted between December 2014 and August 2017, which encompassed the peak period of IRA activity in the run-up to, during and following the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

In total, 500 tweets (out of a total of 2,500 previously randomly sampled English-language tweets) were randomly selected, read and coded in NVivo and in Excel. Unlike

Facebook, the Twitter dataset was not separated into different pages, hashtags, and account names. Therefore, it was analyzed as one large, uniform dataset.

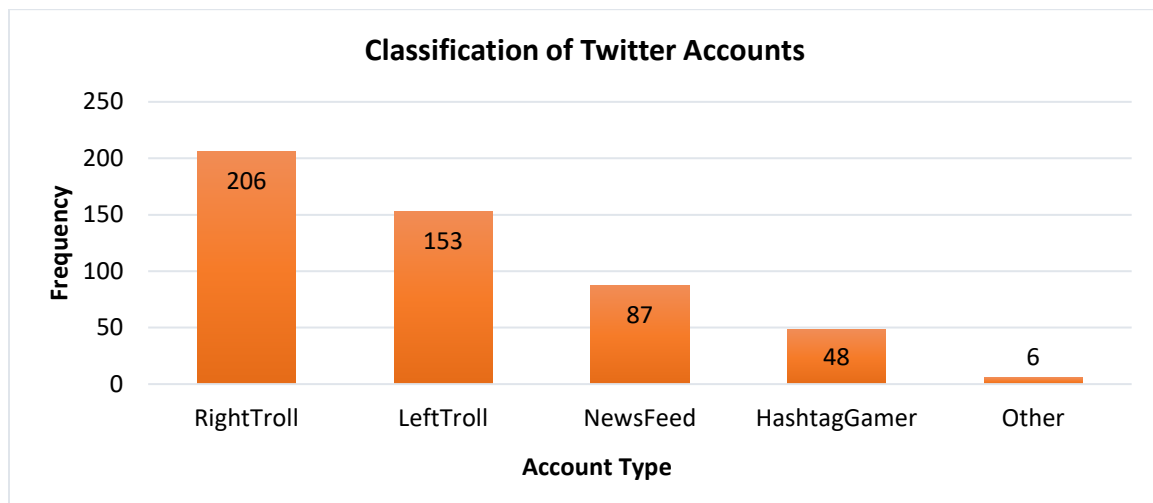


Figure 7 Breakdown of each Twitter Account Type

These Russian IRA tweets were coming mainly from four different and distinguishable types of troll accounts: Right troll (n = 206), Left troll (n 153), News Feed (n = 87) and HashtagGamer (n = 48) (see Figure 7, above). Right troll accounts mostly posted pro-Trump (n = 112, 22.4%) and anti-Clinton (n = 39, 7.8%) tweets (see Table 6, below). Left troll accounts posted more anti-racist (n = 53, 10.6%) and apolitical chatter (n = 44, 8.8%) tweets. Newsfeed accounts (n = 87) posted the local news, which were mainly anti-Trump (n = 34), apolitical chatter (n = 31), anti-racist (n = 10), anti-Clinton (n = 8), and only 3 pro-Trump tweets. Newsfeed account tweets used real news stories about death, horrific crimes and natural disasters, to draw attention, make the general populace more concerned about their safety and well-being, and to “rile up” Trump’s voter base (Badawy et al., 2018; Cartwright, Weir, Frank, et al., 2019; Mueller, 2019; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017; Shao et al., 2018; Zannettou et al., 2019). Lastly, HashtagGamer accounts regularly played hashtag games, with a substantial amount of retweeting² coming from these accounts. An assumption was made that it was done to make the posts and hashtags trend on Twitter, with the expectation of gaining a larger audience.

² Retweeting the same information multiple times to evoke any number of responses. It includes, tagging other users, and asking them to do the same with their groups of friends on social media outlets. These tweets include different hashtags that would be retweeted multiple times to make them trend on Twitter, to make it look like it’s an important issue.

Table 6 **Types of Account and Angle of the Tweets**

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Right Troll	206	41.2%
Pro-Trump	112	22.4%
Anti-Clinton	39	7.8%
Apolitical Chatter	25	5.0%
Anti-Trump	17	3.4%
Anti-Racist	13	2.6%
Left Troll	153	30.6%
Anti-Racist	53	10.6%
Apolitical Chatter	44	8.8%
Anti-Clinton	33	6.6%
Anti-Trump	16	3.2%
Pro-Trump	7	1.4%
News Feed	87	17.4%
Anti-Trump	34	6.8%
Apolitical Chatter	31	6.2%
Anti-Racist	10	2.0%
Anti-Clinton	9	1.8%
Pro-Trump	3	0.6%
HashtagGamer	48	9.6%
Anti-Clinton	22	4.4%
Pro-Trump	20	4.0%
Apolitical Chatter	3	0.6%
Anti-Racist	2	0.4%
Anti-Trump	1	0.2%
Other	6	1.2%
Grand Total	500	100.0%

If none of the legitimate news sources discussed the content or the so-called “news” contained in the message, or if legitimate news sources made statements refuting the accuracy of the messaging, then the post was classified as “fake news” (n = 311, 62.2%) (see Table 7, below). Out of 311 tweets, 135 were classified as “pro-Trump” and 79 tweets were classified as “anti-Clinton.” Moreover, 59 tweets consisted of fake news which could best be described as “apolitical chatter.” Tweets classified as “apolitical chatter” did not appear to be re-circulating “real news,” either to targeted or untargeted audiences. Moreover, these tweets appeared to be neutral, in the sense that they did not support the candidacy of either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton.

Out of 500 IRA tweets sampled, many of them were grounded in “real news” events, and thus, ended up being classified as “real news.” These “real news” tweets accounted for 33.6% (n = 168) of the dataset (see Table 7, below). Out of 168 tweets, 46 were “apolitical chatter” that appeared to be re-circulating “real news.” The majority of

these posts were word-for-word headlines that were taken directly from mainstream news media sites, and often included links leading to different sites. Most of the links were not retrievable, as they had been taken down by the social media platform.

Table 7 Classification and Angle of the Tweets

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Fake News	311	62.2%
Pro-Trump	135	27.0%
Anti-Clinton	79	15.8%
Apolitical Chatter	59	11.8%
Anti-Racist	38	7.6%
Real News	168	33.6%
Anti-Trump	68	13.6%
Apolitical Chatter	46	9.2%
Anti-Racist	34	6.8%
Anti-Clinton	20	4.0%
Part Real, Part Fake	19	3.8%
Pro-Trump	8	1.6%
Anti-Clinton	6	1.2%
Anti-Racist	5	1.0%
Undetermined	2	0.4%
Anti-Racist	2	0.4%
Grand Total	500	100.0%

There are number of possible explanations when trying to account for the presence of so much apolitical chatter and copying and pasting of headlines from other news sites. These tweets could be coming from automated (bot) accounts and not from a real person. If these tweets were to come from Russian trolls hired by the IRA, then this tactic may have allowed them to mask their lack of fluency in the English language. Another possible explanation is that these tweets could have been intended as “hiss” or “background noise,” designed to mask the true motivation behind this otherwise sinister online activity.

Posts in the “pro-Trump” and “anti-Clinton” categories could conceivably have fallen into either or both categories, especially the “anti-Clinton” tweets that were posted after the election, which in the final analysis ended up being classified under the “pro-Trump” category. An example of this would be the post: “REMINDER VIDEO : It’s HILLARY that has the KKK Mentor! #maga #trumptrain.” This post included a link that

led to the “truthfeed”³ website. The YouTube video from this website had been taken down, but the written article was still available. This tweet was posted in August 2017, after the 2016 U.S. presidential election; therefore, it was classified as “fake news,” under the “pro-Trump” category, partly because Hillary was no longer a factor, and partly because it explicitly featured Donald Trump’s MAGA (Make America Great Again) slogan.

Tweets that were grounded in real news, but included some information that was not real and that had been added in order to amplify the interactions on social media were categorized as “part real, part fake” (n = 19) (see Table 7, above). Out of these 19 tweets, “pro-Trump” tweets were the most prevalent (n = 8) in this category. An example of this would be the tweet: “Judge Blocks Trump Order cause "immigrants built America." Yeah, but some of these immigrants actually want to destroy it.” The first statement about the judge blocking Trump’s order was confirmed through *The New York Times* (Shear, Kulish, & Feuer, 2017); however, the rest of the post was deemed to be “fake news,” as it consisted of unsubstantiated, anti-immigrant opinion.

There were 79 tweets (6.08%) that deliberately used fake news to undermine Clinton’s chances for the presidency. These were classified as “anti-Clinton,” under the “fake news” category. Most (n = 43) of these tweets were coming from Right-leaning trolls accounts (see Table 6, above). To illustrate, one tweet said that “When she cut welfare she called welfare recipients 'deadbeats.' Hillary Clinton is straight up evil,” while another said: “#ThingsMoreTrustedThanHillary Jeffrey Dahmer [American serial killer] with a knife.” This was evidently some time after the 2016 presidential campaign, but it has been widely reported that the Russian IRA carried on with its “pro-Trump” and “anti-Clinton” discourse throughout 2017 and 2018 (Nakashima, 2019; Starks et al., 2019).

³Truthfeed is a website known for publishing false and exaggerated stories with pro-Trump headlines (Elgin, 2018; Bowden, 2018).

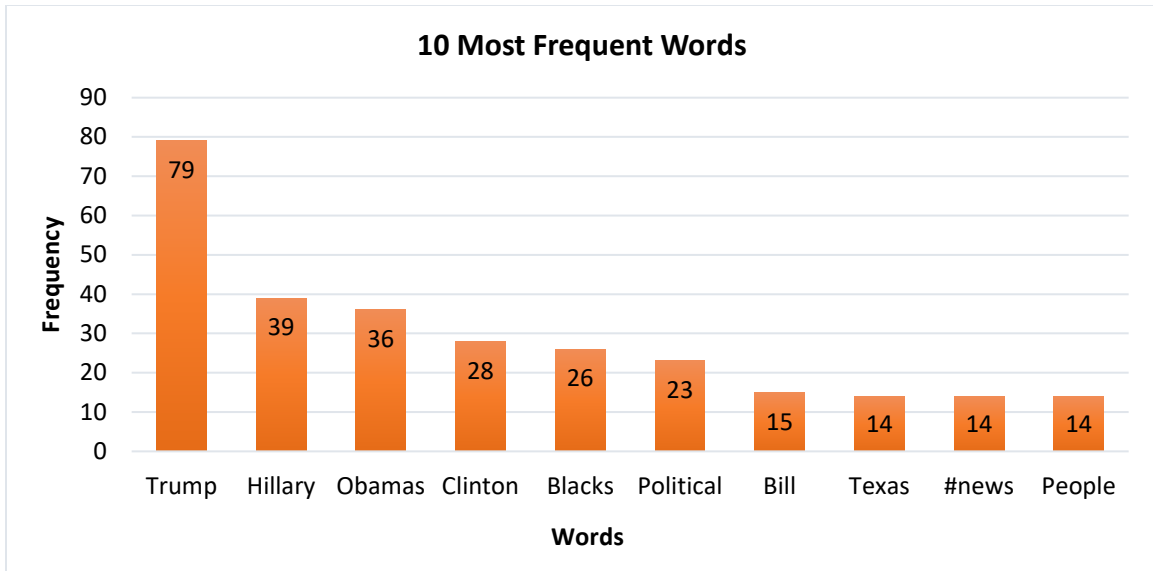


Figure 8 List of 10 Most Frequent Words of Tweets

As might be expected, “Trump” was the most frequent word in these tweets (n = 79), while the next was “Hillary” (n = 39) (see Figure 8, above). The name “Clinton” was mentioned 28 times, which not only included Hillary Clinton, but also included mentions of Bill Clinton. “Blacks” were mentioned 26 times in the 500 tweets. Moreover, “Obama” was mentioned 36 times, for example: “#ThanksObama for legitimaizing hateful groups, especially those racist Black life matter thugs.”

4.3. Conclusion

Overall, the findings of the qualitative textual analysis of the 500 messages that appeared in the set of 2,500 randomly sampled disinformation campaign tweets posted by the Russian Internet Research Agency strongly support the oft-reported conclusion that these Twitter feeds were intended to help the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, and to stoke dissension, distrust, anger and fear among American voters (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Badawy, Ferrara, & Lerman, 2018; Mueller, 2019; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017; *United States v. Internet Research Agency LLC*, 2018).

The analysis of both social media platforms suggested that the majority of the posts were fake news, and that there were multiple angles through which these posts attempted to target specific populations. The Facebook pages *Being Patriotic* and *Secured Borders* both featured pro-Trump and anti-Clinton posts. *Blacktivist* and *United*

Muslims of Americans, on the other hand, concentrated on anti-racist posts (at the same time attempting to instill fear of and hostility toward Whites among the Black populace). Last of all, the *LGBT United* Facebook page posted pro-LGBT and anti-religious messaging. The IRA-generated Twitter tweets exhibited similar patterns and themes to those of the IRA-sponsored Facebook groups. Analysis indicated that most of the tweets were fake news, and that the angle of those tweets were by-in-large pro-Trump. In addition, the 10 most frequently appearing words provided insight into the language that each Facebook group and Twitter feed employed in their posts in order to micro-target social media users.

Chapter 5.

Result B: 2019/2020 Impeachment Inquiry and Trial

This chapter sets out the findings of the qualitative content analysis of the social media messaging during the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial of U.S. President Donald Trump. This chapter begins with the findings from five different Facebook pages which were identified as sources of fake news by Media Bias/Fact Check website. The next part of the chapter discusses the findings from five different hashtags that were trending on Twitter during the impeachment inquiry and trial of Donald Trump. As was the case with chapter 4, this chapter relies on quotes as well as rich description to convey the nature of these findings in as thorough and transparent manner as possible. Moreover, the 10 most frequent words generated in NVivo's word frequency query for each dataset are discussed, to explore the language that was employed in the messages in their effort to micro-target social media users.

5.1. Disinformation on Facebook in 2019/2020

A qualitative content analysis was conducted on 100 randomly selected posts from each of five Facebook pages: *American Thinker*, *Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)*, *Godfather Politics*, *United American Patriots* and *Wallbuilders*. All of these pages were considered to come from questionable sources, identified as such by the Media Bias/Fact Check website. All the posts from each of the five pages were randomized, and the first 100 of those randomized posts were selected for this study. These randomly selected posts were read and analyzed in Excel and NVivo.

5.1.1. *American Thinker*

For the current study, 100 posts were chosen randomly out of 785 posts from the *American Thinker* Facebook page. As previously mentioned, these posts were analyzed in NVivo and Excel. This page was designated as "questionable" by the Media Bias/Fact Check (MBFC) website because it had failed multiple fact checks and was using poor sources to back up its posts. MBFC also found that this page posted messages with an extreme right-wing bias, and often promoted conspiracy theories (*Media Bias/Fact*

Check, 2020). As of May 2020, 141,301 people liked this page and 141,431 people followed this page.

Out of the 100 posts sampled from *American Thinker*, 69 were as “fake news” (see Table 8, below). These posts featured inflammatory opinions and blatant lies, without referencing any credible source. Out of those 69 “fake news” posts, 34 were categorized as “anti-Democrat.” These posts exhibited clear disdain for the Democratic party’s ideology and also attacked Democratic party leaders. To illustrate, a post from *American Thinker* proclaimed: “One of the standard jokes about Chicago politics is that a lot of people who voted Republican during their lives start voting Democrat after their deaths. Voting integrity group finds millions of inactive registrations.” Eleven of the posts portrayed the impeachment inquiry and trial against Donald Trump as a charade created by Democrats in order to get more votes in the upcoming 2020 presidential election. One such post stated that:

In many ways, the Democrats have accomplished their goals. First, they got to use the word ‘impeachment’ even though it was really only an inquiry. Second, they didn’t force the moderates into voting yes or no. I am betting no on a formal impeachment.

Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, also came under attack in many of the posts, for example: “So, I ask Ms. Pelosi: What contents of President Trump’s SOTU 2020 were so objectionable? Time for classless, clueless Pelosi to go.”

Fifteen of these 69 “fake news” posts were classified as “pro-Trump” (see Table 8, below). These posts supported Trump’s narrative and advocated for a finding of innocence in the impeachment inquiry and trial. One example of this might be:

Volodymyr Zelensky [the President of the Ukraine] was wiping his face from the crumbs of a 125-million-dollar meal, fed to him by the Pentagon between March and July of 2019, when he spoke to President Trump on July 25. President Trump Never Impounded Even One Dollar from Ukraine Aid.

Another example would be:

I wasn’t at all surprised when President Trump told Fox & Friends yesterday, ‘I want a trial.’ I’ve long believed that it could offer the perfect opportunity to turn over the boulder of the Deep State...conspiracy to

hobble his election and presidency and examine the creepy-crawlies that scramble in the light of day.

Some of these posts on the *American Thinker* page were blatantly showing support for Trump, and arguing that the impeachment inquiry and trial were part of a conspiracy by the Democratic party, deliberately designed to thwart Donald Trump.

Table 8 Classification and Angle of the *American Thinker* Facebook Page

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Fake News	69	69.0%
Anti-Democrat	34	34.0%
Pro-Trump	15	15.0%
Anti-Media	7	7.0%
Racist	7	7.0%
Anti-LGBTQ	3	3.0%
Undetermined	3	3.0%
Part Real, Part Fake	24	24.0%
Anti-Democrat	11	11.0%
Undetermined	7	7.0%
Pro-Trump	4	4.0%
Racist	2	2.0%
Undetermined	4	4.0%
Real News	3	3.0%
Pro-Trump	2	2.0%
Pro-Democrat	1	1.0%
Grand Total	100	100.0%

As discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2), Donald Trump has often exhibited hostility toward and distrust of the mainstream media. He refers to them as “lamestream” media and “fake news” because their reporting does not align with his own narratives. In total, 7 out of the 69 fake news posts (see Table 8, above) on the *American Thinker* page supported Donald Trump’s characterizations of mainstream media. One post read: “As usual, fake news media ignored a Democrat irresponsibly throwing a racial-hate-generating grenade into a crowd of blacks. Biden Throws Blacks Another Racist Dog Biscuit.” It was not only the Democrats who were attacked in these posts, but also, mainstream media, especially when it came to the level of credibility that these platforms held. Additionally, 7 out of 69 posts were “racist” in nature. These also aligned with Trump’s ban on Muslim travel, or his characterization of Mexicans as drug traffickers and rapists, or his insistence of building a border wall. For example, one post asked:

Just how extreme is the bill? It does away with all border enforcement, stops the deportation of immigrants who have engaged in serious felonies or acts of moral turpitude, and allows immigration judges to...step in and oversee federal criminal trials. The most shocking thing, though, is that, when it comes to criminals already deported over the last twenty years for serious felonies or acts of moral turpitude, the bill requires that American taxpayers pay the billion or so dollars needed to bring all 480,000 of them back to America. House Democrats work to open America's doors to criminal foreigners (posted on February 02, 2020).

Lastly, 3 out of 69 posts were classified as “anti-LGBTQ.” These posts were denigrating individuals of the LGBTQ community and their life-choices. One post asked: “Why have so many decided that the solution for children — children! — suffering from gender delusions is disfiguring surgeries and dangerous hormone treatments? The ‘Transgender’ Endgame.” In addition, these posts tried to portray members of the LGBTQ community as bad, and to demonstrate that the LGBTQ community did not comply with “Christian” values, for example: “Drag queens, the men who dress as sexualized women to outdo them with such irony, are showing some impressive male aggressiveness against the Christians who oppose them.”

Out of 100 posts, 24 were classified as “part real, part fake.” These posts included some information that was real and could be cross-verified on mainstream media sites through a Google search. Nonetheless, these same posts included inflammatory opinion and used questionable sources, for example:

This will not be the first time an anxious military accidentally shot down a non-threatening commercial aircraft. On July 17, 1996, a comparable missile strike destroyed TWA 800 off the coast of Long Island...shortly after the Boeing 747 took off from JFK. Ukrainian 752 Shoot-Down Mirrors Fate of TWA 800.

The post commences with an unsubstantiated opinion and then reports on some factual information, which is why this post was categorized as “part real, part fake.”

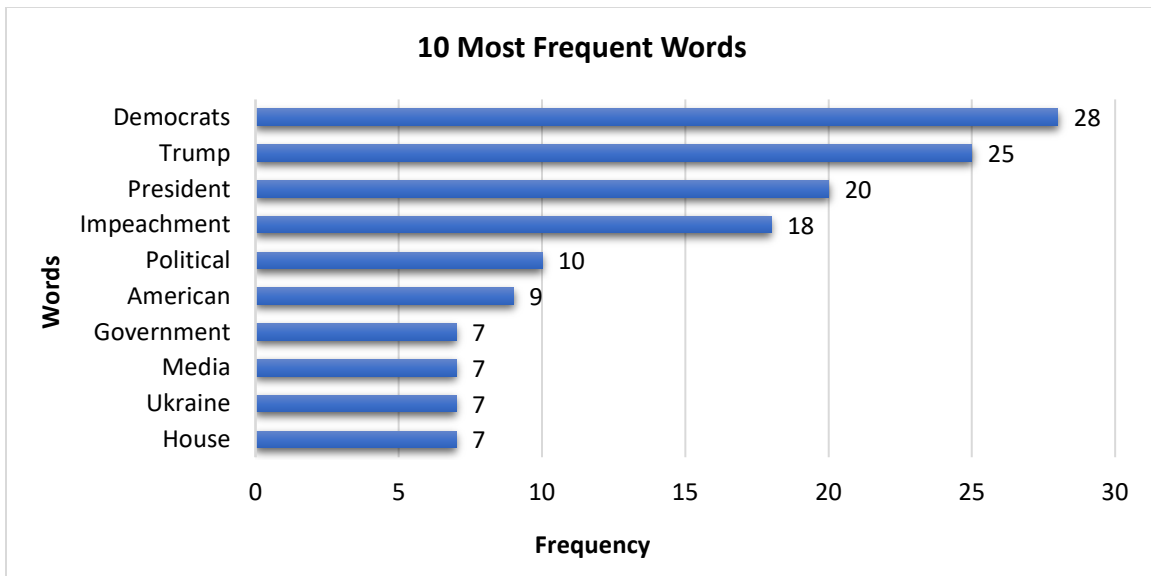


Figure 9 List of 10 Most Frequent Words for *American Thinker* Facebook Page

Lastly, the 10 most frequent words in the dataset were generated using NVivo’s word frequency query. These words assisted in understanding the overall thrust of the discourse used in these posts in their effort to target specific social media users. First and foremost, “Democrats” (n = 28) was the most mentioned word in the 100 posts (see Figure 9, above). Moreover, words such as “Trump” (25 times) and “president” (20 times) appeared quite routinely in the 100 randomly-sampled posts. Most of the posts attacked the Democrats and supported Trump and his policies. Lastly, the word “impeachment” was mentioned 18 times, while “political” was mentioned 10 times. Impeachment and negative discourse about politics often went hand-in-hand, where impeachment was referred to as “political disaster,” or a “political sham” orchestrated by the Democrats against the President.

5.1.2. Council on American-Islamic Relations

Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) has been identified as a questionable source by the MBFC website. *CAIR* has faced many allegations and criticisms over a lengthy period of time. In 2014, the United Arab Emirates designated *CAIR* as a terrorist organization, due to its alleged ties to the Muslim Brotherhood (*Media Bias/Fact Check*, 2020; UAE, 2014). Also, many academics have accused *CAIR* of being an American affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood (Merley, 2009). That said, the U.S. government has not yet designated them a terrorist organization (Taylor, 2014).

Overall, this page uses questionable sources to support its posts, and is considered to be right-center biased (Media Bias Fact Check, 2020). The *CAIR* Facebook page had 138,990 likes and 138,057 followers as of May 2020.

An analysis of 100 posts randomly selected out of 733 posts taken from the *CAIR* Facebook page showed that slightly more than half of them (n = 56) included inflammatory opinion alongside some real news context (see Table 9, below). These posts were classified during content analysis as “part real, part fake.” Of those 56 posts, 40 were “anti-racist” in perspective, many of them discussing how Muslims should be treated more equitably in America. These posts argued that Muslims were being treated unfairly in the U.S., but at the same time, claimed that *CAIR* was there to support them through their hard times. Many of these posts tapped into the issues of insensitivity toward the Hijab and the treatment that Muslim workers purportedly receive in the workplace, for example, “Columbus Police may reconsider hijab ban Shortly after that recruit left the academy, the Ohio chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations filed an employment discrimination complaint.” Another post on the same subject said that:

Soon after the incident, Coleman connected with the DFW chapter Council for American-Islamic Relations. “Asking a Muslim woman to take off her hijab would be like asking another lady to take off her shirt in...public,” said Faizan Syed, Executive Director of CAIR. “It really was like either you undress at work or you go home.” Syed said an attorney representing Chicken Express reached out to the organization. He says he hopes to partner with Chicken Express for diversity training. “What can be done to make sure that people like Ms. Coleman can go to work, feel safe, feel welcomed at their business?” said Syed. *Fast-Food Manager Reprimanded for Sending Worker Home for Wearing a Hijab*.

Of the 56 posts from the *CAIR* Facebook page that were categorized as “part real, part fake,” the angle of two of them could best be described as “anti-Trump” (see Table 9, below). These posts referred Trump’s policies as being dangerous and cruel toward immigrant people, to illustrate:

I have come to realize that I was clueless as to how far an administration might actually go in furthering Israel’s narrative at the expense of Palestinians — and how much they could undermine U.S. interests in the process. I’m a veteran Middle East peace negotiator. Trump’s plan is the most dangerous I’ve ever seen.

Another example would be:

CAIR "issued the following written statement late Monday: 'The Supreme Court's decision will further marginalize immigrant communities and will inevitably create a socioeconomic hierarchy in our immigration...system. The Trump administration's policy could quite literally kill people by making them too afraid to seek life-saving medical care, and the Supreme Court seems to agree such a cruel system is acceptable.' Local immigration advocates speak on SCOTUS "public charge" ruling.

Table 9 Classification and Angle of the CAIR Facebook Page

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Part Real, Part Fake	56	56.0%
Anti-Racist	53	53.0%
Anti-Trump	2	2.0%
Anti-Police	1	1.0%
Real News	31	31.0%
Anti-Racist	24	24.0%
Racist	3	3.0%
Undetermined	3	3.0%
Anti-Trump	1	1.0%
Fake News	13	13.0%
Anti-Racist	5	5.0%
Undetermined	5	5.0%
Anti-Trump	2	2.0%
Racist	1	1.0%
Grand Total	100	100.0%

Out of the 100 posts randomly selected for content analysis, 13 were classified as "fake news." These posts lacked verifiable information, and mostly asked people to join an event, talk, or attend conferences sponsored by CAIR, for example, "Show Up In Court & At Rally Against the Muslim Ban," or "Watch: Islam in 90: What's the deal with Jihad?" One post (out of 13 classified as "fake news") expressed great concern about Trump's immigration ban, but it was too broad to be considered "real news" or "part real, part fake." Therefore, it was coded as "fake news," while the angle of post was classified as "anti-Trump":

We long worried that what Donald Trump could do to one community, he could then also do to others. Today's new expanded Ban proves this fear true. In addition to banning even more Muslim countries, this...administration has gone further, banning immigrants from even more nations. We call on members of Congress to act now to support the current, comprehensive version of the No Ban Act and move to reign in the President's bigoted immigration agenda immediately. Enough is enough. No Muslim Ban Ever Coalition Condemns Trump Administration's Expanded Muslim Ban.

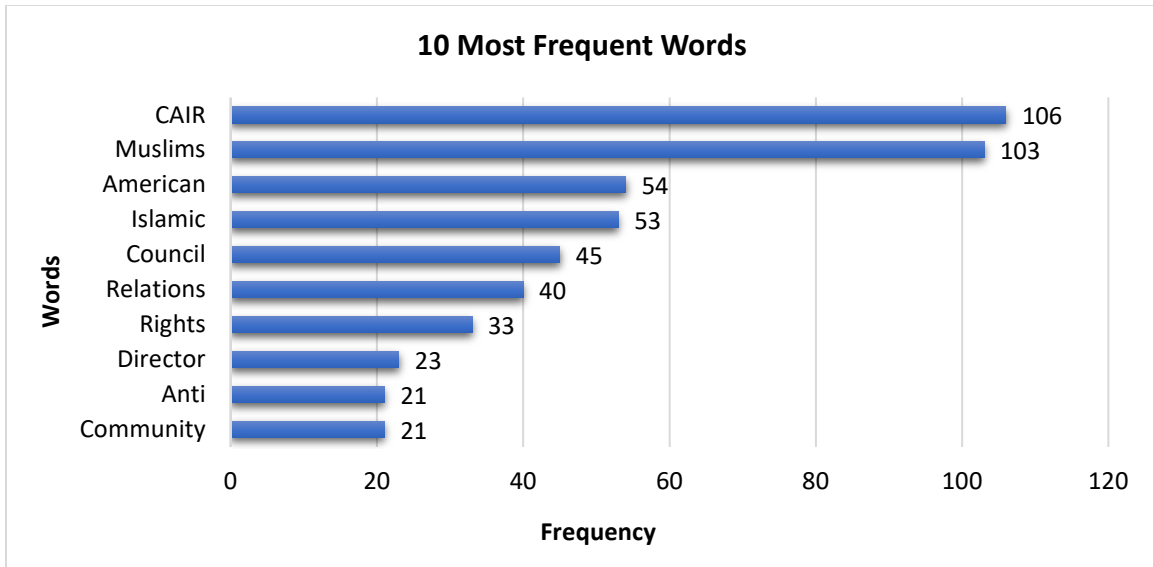


Figure 10 List of 10 Most Frequent Words for CAIR Facebook Page

According to the 10 most frequent words generated in NVivo for the posts sampled from the *CAIR* Facebook page, “CAIR” was mentioned 106 times (see Figure 10, above). As this page is about Muslims, the word “Muslims” understandably appeared 103 times in the 100 posts. As mentioned above, all of the posts argued that the *Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)* was there to support their fellow Muslims, thus words such as “American,” “Islamic,” “Council” and “Relations” appeared regularly in the 10 most frequent words list (n = 54, 53, 45 and 40 respectively). Lastly, *CAIR* also provides extensive coverage of Muslim Americans and their “rights” (n = 33) on its Facebook page.

Overall, the *CAIR* Facebook page mostly included “part real, part fake” posts, and only 13 “fake news” posts. This page is still considered to be a questionable source by the Media Bias/Fact Check website. All of the “part real, part fake” posts featured opinion which included advertisements of the *CAIR* website, with very little factual information. In future, however, it would be beneficial to analyze more posts from this page, before designating it as a fake news source.

5.1.3. Godfather Politics

The *Godfather Politics* Facebook page is considered to be questionable/fake based on the observation that posts on this page strongly favour right-wing groups while denigrating left-wing groups. The page is said to exhibit an extreme right-wing bias with

“over-the-top use of loaded language in headlines,” the routine publication of conspiracy theories, and the promotion of propaganda against left-leaning groups (*Media Bias/Fact Check*, 2020). As of May 2020, the *Godfather Politics* Facebook page had 21,532 likes and 20,649 followers.

For the current study, 100 posts were randomly selected out of 670 posts harvested from the *Godfather Politics* Facebook page during the impeachment inquiry and trial (September 2019 to February 2020). The majority of these posts (70%) were categorized as “fake news” (see Table 10, below). These posts used extreme right-wing sources (i.e., *The Washington Sentinel*, *Freedom Outpost*, and *The Republican Legion*) and included incendiary opinion. The analysis of these 100 posts produced similar findings to that of the *American Thinker* Facebook page, in that 27 out of 70 posts were “anti-Democrat” and 26 were “pro-Trump” in perspective. Posts in the “anti-Democrat” category featured advertisements of propaganda such as: “Get Your Making Liberals Cry Again T-Shirt. Making Liberals Cry Again T-Shirt (Made in the USA).” The “anti-Democrat” category also included negative messaging about Joe Biden, Trump’s rival in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Examples of these anti-Biden posts included: “How Did Five of Joe Biden’s Family Members Become Millionaires from His Political Career?,” and “Did someone wake ‘Sleepy Joe?’.”

The “pro-Trump” category included multiple posts that supported Trump’s own narrative, advanced pro-Trump propaganda, and/or asked social media users to vote for Trump in the upcoming 2020 presidential election. Examples of such posts would include: “Twitter Blacks Out Trump Campaign Video Because it is Pro-Life ✦ The Washington Sentinel,” and

The TRUMPinator 2020 Limited Edition Print. The Trumpinator is here and he’s melting snowflakes. Despite liberal temper tantrums, Trump is coming back in 2020 to usher in the #RedWave. Are you with us? #Trump ... #2020 #GOP #TrumpTrain #MAGA #GOP #KAG2020.

There were 10 posts that made explicitly racist remarks, and were thus coded as “racist” (see Table 10, below). Most of these posts also supported Trump’s political messaging about “building the wall” and illegal immigrants. Examples of this would include: “Build The Damn Wall Men’s T-Shirt Only \$14.95,” and “Our country can’t afford judges who refuse to uphold our laws. How A Massachusetts Judge Allegedly Helped An Illegal Alien Escape ICE.” “Anti-media” posts (n = 3) and “anti-LGBTQ” posts (n = 2)

were also found in the 100 messages sampled from the *Godfather Politics* Facebook page. On multiple occasions, Trump has been observed referring to *CNN* as “fake news” (Schwartz, 2018). Similar characterizations of *CNN* were found on the *Godfather Politics* page. Indeed, some of the references to *CNN* found on the *Godfather Politics* page sounded a lot like the utterances of Donald Trump: “Isn’t it weird *CNN* hasn’t said anything about this yet? Illegal Alien Who Avoided Deportation Allegedly Murdered 22 Elderly People,” and “This in spite of the constant mainstream media attacking President Trump. President Trump's Approval Rating Hits Post-Impeachment High.” As well, attacks on left-wing groups were evidenced in “anti-LGBTQ” posts such as: “Left-Wing Medical Journal Claims Parents Who Won’t Allow Transgender Treatments are Child Abusers,” and “Leftist Court Forces Professor to Use Transgender Pronouns in Class.”

Table 10 Classification and Angle of the *Godfather Politics* Facebook Page

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Fake News	70	70.0%
Anti-Democrat	27	27.0%
Pro-Trump	26	26.0%
Racist	10	10.0%
Anti-Media	3	3.0%
Undetermined	2	2.0%
Anti-LGBTQ	2	2.0%
Part Real, Part Fake	17	17.0%
Pro-Trump	9	9.0%
Anti-Democrat	5	5.0%
Undetermined	3	3.0%
Real News	8	8.0%
Racist	3	3.0%
Undetermined	2	2.0%
Anti-Media	1	1.0%
Anti-Democrat	1	1.0%
Anti-Trump	1	1.0%
Undetermined	5	5.0%
Grand Total	100	100.0%

Seventeen out of the 100 posts sampled from the *Godfather Politics* Facebook page included partial information that was factual, but also included opinions that were intended to enflame or incite reaction, and were thus classified as “part real, part fake” (see Table 10, above). It is important to note that these posts also relied upon questionable sources, although some of the stories were reported by credible media sources. An example of this would be: “That’s why we all voted for Trump! Ohio: Two Lifelong Democrats Tell Why They’ll Vote For Trump Again In 2020.” This claim was

supported in recent polls conducted by *The New York Times* Upshot and Siena College, which found that “Two-thirds of battleground state voters who chose Trump in 2016 but selected Democrats in the midterms say they will return to the president next year” (Cohn & Miller, 2019).

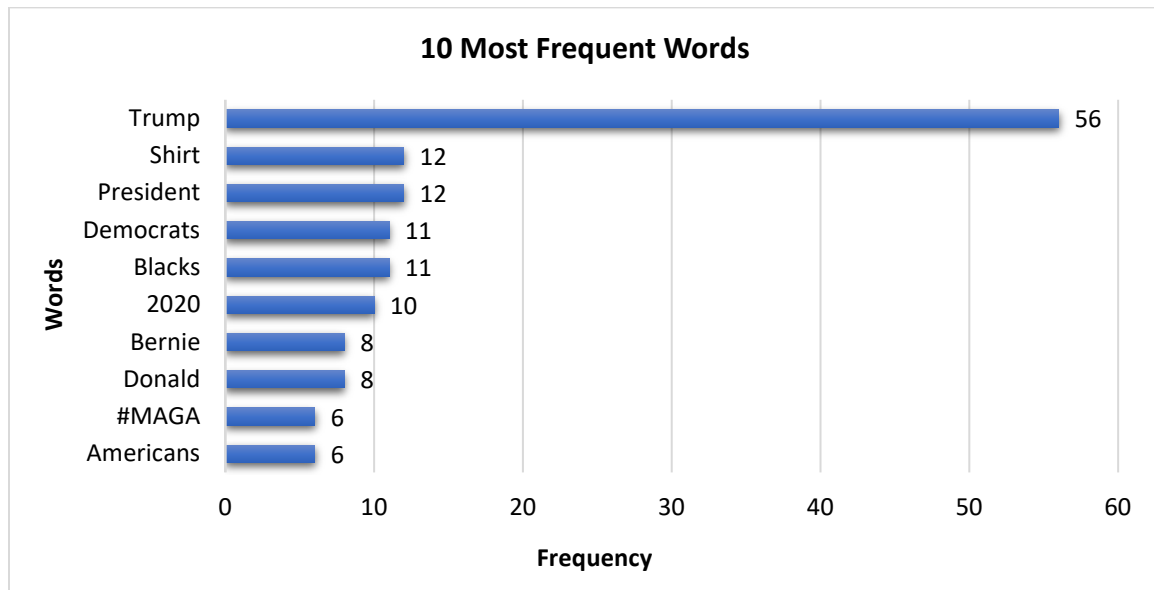


Figure 11 List of 10 Most Frequent Words for *Godfather Politics* Facebook Page

According to the NVivo’s word frequency query on the 100 posts sampled from the *Godfather Politics* page, “Trump” (n = 56), “shirt” (n = 12), “president” (n = 12), “2020” (n = 10), “Donald” (n = 8), and “#MAGA” (n = 6) were at the top of the 10 most mentioned words (see Figure 11, above). As seen in the above analysis, most of these posts were “pro-Trump,” and described him as being a great president. These posts also asked social media users to vote for Trump in the upcoming 2020 election. Moreover, advertisements of shirts were usually posted as a way of promoting Trump and his political agenda, examples including, “Trump 45 Suck It Up Snowflake Patriotic T-Shirt” or “Build The Damn Wall Men’s T-Shirt Only \$14.95.” On the other hand, “Democrats” were mentioned 11 times, but in order to degrade them. In all, 32 out of 100 posts were classified as “anti-Democrat” (see Table 10, above).

5.1.4. United American Patriots

For the current study, 100 randomly selected posts (out of 599) from the *United American Patriots* Facebook page were subjected to content analysis. This page has

been described as fake/questionable, based on the extreme right-wing bias of its reporting. This page routinely posts un-sourced, “loaded language” and disinformation (especially, conspiracy theories about the Democrats and other groups perceived as being “left wing”), with an eye to deceiving social media users into believing those fabricated stories (*Media Bias/Fact Check*, 2020). As of May 2020, the *United American Patriots* Facebook page had 1,059,465 likes and 1,047,864 followers.

Most of the posts in this group (n = 82) were categorized as “fake news” (see Table 11, below). These posts used questionable sources (e.g. *Patriot Journal*, and *gopdailybrief*), and some of them included provocative opinion. Out of 82 “fake news” posts, 52 were categorized as “anti-Democrat.” The “anti-Democrat” posts routinely attacked the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, and U.S. Congressman, Adam Schiff, who led the impeachment inquiry. Examples of posts that attacked the House Speaker and Adam Schiff include: “Prosecutor Pulls Back Pelosi's Curtain - Claims Nancy Will Most Likely Abandon Her Crusade For Impeachment,” and “Schiff's Impeachment Witness Is In Trouble - Her Emails Show She May Have Given False Testimony.” A few of the posts also attacked Donald Trump’s rival in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, former Vice-President Joe Biden. An example of a post that attacked the former Vice-President is: “Joe Biden Slips Up On Live TV Rally - Tells Teenage Girl And Anyone Under 15 He Has "Something Special" For Them.” This particular post refers to the oft-repeated (false) narrative that Joe Biden has engaged in multiple counts of sexually inappropriate behaviour, and that he has a predilection for younger females.

Table 11 **Classification and Angle of the *United American Patriots* Facebook Page**

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Fake News	82	82.0%
Anti-Democrat	52	52.0%
Pro-Trump	27	27.0%
Pro-Gun	3	3.0%
Part Real, Part Fake	14	14.0%
Pro-Trump	7	7.0%
Anti-Democrat	7	7.0%
Real News	4	4.0%
Anti-Democrat	2	2.0%
Anti-Trump	2	2.0%
Grand Total	100	100.0%

Twenty-seven of the posts that fell into the “fake news” category were classified as being “pro-Trump.” These posts presented Trump as a positive political figure, while portraying impeachment as a “Democrat game.” To illustrate, one post announced: “President Trump and Pence Stand In the Rain - Make Unscheduled Stop To Respect Two Fallen Soldiers,” while another said: “New Dug-Up Videos Of Schiff And Bolton Could Derail Democrats - President Trump Declares The Impeachment Game Is ‘Over’.” Lastly, 3 of the posts in the “fake news” category were further classified as “pro-gun.” These posts showed concern for the 2nd amendment rights of Americans, for instance: “After Virginia Governor Plans To Grab Our Guns - 2nd Amendment Leaders Send In The Reinforcements to Protect Our Rights.”

Fourteen out of the 100 posts sampled from *United American Patriots* were classified as “part real, part fake” (see Table 11, above). These posts included questionable/fake sources, although in many cases, similar information could be found on credible mainstream media sites. However, all of these posts were supplemented with inflammatory opinion. In this “part real, part fake” category, the angle of the posts was evenly divided between “pro-Trump” (n = 7) and “anti-Democrat” (n = 7). Examples of such posts might include: “After President Trump Commits To New Tax Cuts - He Also Says Social Security Could Be Back On The Table,” and “After Nancy Rips Up Trump's Speech On Live TV - Donald Turns The Tables On Her: ‘That's Her Legacy’.”

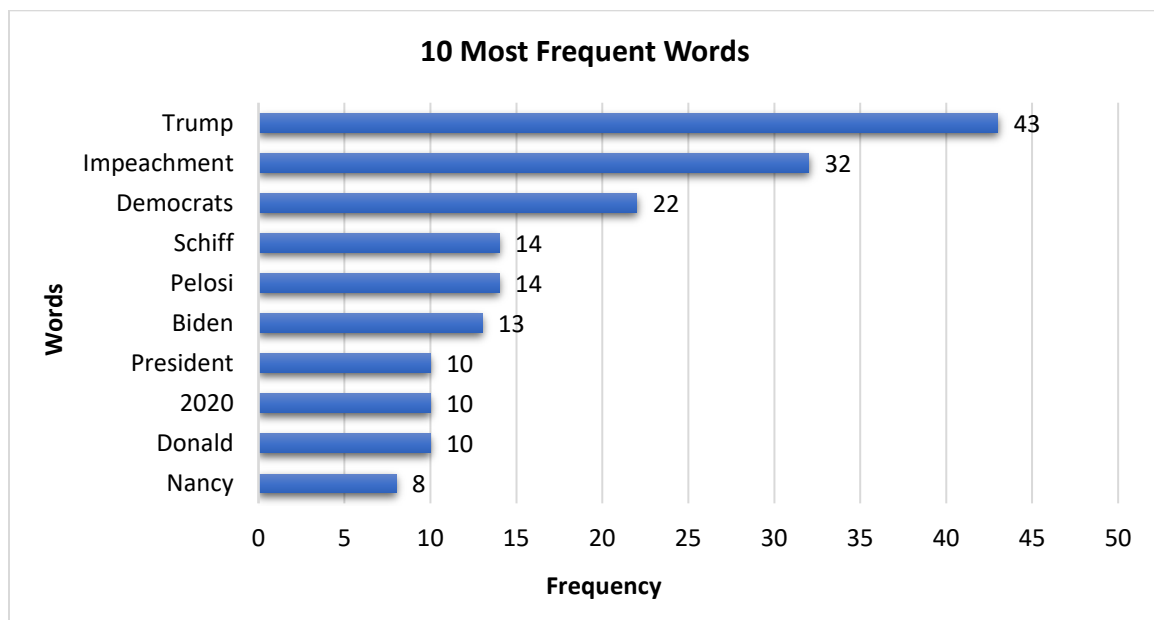


Figure 12 List of 10 Most Frequent Words for *United American Patriots* Facebook Page

As was the case with the *Godfather Politics* Facebook page, “Trump” (n = 43) was the most frequently-mentioned word in the *United American Patriotic* page (see Figure 12, above). In this page, Trump was featured as a respected political figure, while “Democrats” (n = 22) and members of the Democratic party “Schiff” (n = 14), “Pelosi” (n = 14), and “Biden” (n = 13) were highlighted as negative political figures. Moreover, many posts called for the support of Donald Trump in the 2020 election; as a consequence, “Donald” and “2020” appeared 10 times each in the 100 posts.

5.1.5. Wallbuilders

For the current study, 100 out of 203 posts harvested from the *Wallbuilders* Facebook page were randomly selected for content analysis. As of May 2020, this page had 185,078 likes and 182,315 followers. The *Wallbuilders* Facebook page usually posts supposedly historical information from a right-wing Christian perspective, which is typically non-factual. According to Media Bias/Fact Check, *Wallbuilders* often supports Trump on moral grounds, and most of the posts on this page are opinion-based and lack credible sources. The group has faced multiple criticisms for being an anti-LGBTQ “hate” group, as well as being an anti-immigration and anti-Islam group. The owner of the page, David Barton, has been criticized for publishing false history posts on multiple occasions (Mantyle, 2018; *Media Bias/Fact Check*, 2020). Overall, this page was believed to be fake/questionable based on its extreme right-wing bias, being regarded as hate group, and being known to promote propaganda (*Media Bias/Fact Check*, 2020).

The majority of the posts in this group (n = 70) were classified as “fake news” (see Table 12, below). Out of those 70 “fake news” posts, 53 were classified as pertaining to “American history.” While they purported to be about history, these posts were typically advertisements that led to the *Wallbuilders* website, and that called upon social media users to watch and learn about “Biblical values” on their website, as illustrated below:

One of the most important parts of WallBuilders is educating the next generation on the Biblical Values that this country was founded on. Tomorrow, we encourage all students and families and teachers and... Americans to pray at See you at the Pole. Tomorrow at 7am at your schools flag pole. The theme for the event is a Bible verse found in the Old Testament -- 2 Chronicles 7:14. "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their

wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land." Students Around the World Will Pray Together: 'See You at the Pole' Event Set for Sept. 25.

Table 12 Classification and Angle of the *Wallbuilders* Facebook Page

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Fake News	70	70.0%
American History	53	53.0%
Pro-Trump	8	8.0%
Pro-Life	7	7.0%
Anti-LGBTQ	2	2.0%
Part Real, Part Fake	22	22.0%
American History	18	18.0%
Pro-Life	2	2.0%
Anti-LGBTQ	2	2.0%
Real News	4	4.0%
American History	3	3.0%
Anti-LGBTQ	1	1.0%
Undetermined	4	4.0%
Grand Total	100	100.0%

Moreover, 8 of those 70 “fake news” posts supported President Donald Trump, and thus, were classified as “pro-Trump” (see Table 12, above). In this category, several of the posts questioned the basis of the impeachment of Trump, for instance:

With today's impeachment trial to begin we wanted to look back and see if there is a case for impeachment? Check this video out and let us know your thoughts in the comment section below. Is there a case for impeachment? #WallBuilders #Faith #Impeachment #Trump #Truth #history.

There were also messages that asked visitors to the social media site to vote for Trump in the upcoming election, for example, “Make sure to get out and vote this November! #MAGA #Donald #Trump #Tuesday #Vote #Voting #UnitedStates #America #WallBuilders #History #Local #Truth #City #Mayor #Video #YouTube.” Additionally, 7 out of the 70 “fake news” posts were classified as “pro-Life.” This category could also be regarded as “pro-Trump,” in that it coincided with Trump’s expressed political viewpoint, for example, “#good..Trump Admin Stops University From Forcing Nurses To Assist In Abortions- Good News Friday.” That said, it is questionable whether Trump is actually pro-Life, or if he has simply adopted this stance as a matter of political expediency (Los Angeles Times, 2020). Lastly, two out of 70 “fake news” posts were classified as “anti-LGBTQ,” in that they attacked the LGBTQ community, and used poor sources to bolster their claims, for instance, “We must pay attention to the dangerous ideology that is

taking root in our nation. Whose Children Are They?” This post included a link to the *FoundationofTruth.com*, where parents expressed their concerns regarding schools encouraging kids to choose their own sexual preference, rather than allowing the parents to decide on behalf of their children.

Lastly, 22 out of the 100 posts sampled from *Wallbuilders* included some factual information, along with inflammatory opinion. Even though all of these posts incorporated poor sources, similar information was available on credible sources through a Google search. In this “part real, part fake” category, two of the posts were designated as “anti-LGBTQ,” while two were designated as “pro-Life.” As mentioned earlier, these categories could arguably have been classified as pro-Trump,” in that they supported his political narrative. Examples of the above include: “Great news out of South Dakota. S.D. House Passes Landmark Bill Banning Transgender Treatment on Children”, or

Big win! Supreme Court leaves Kentucky ultrasound law in place. Franklin Graham. This is a win for life! I’m thankful that this week the Supreme Court let the Kentucky law stand that requires mothers to view an ultrasound and hear the baby’s heartbeat before going through with an abortion....The ACLU tweeted “Abortion is a right—and it’s legal in all 50 states.” Our Constitution says that LIFE is a right—not abortion. Yesterday was Human Rights Day—those who support human rights need to realize that abortion is the greatest human rights violation in the world today, robbing millions of children of their chance at life.

However, those four messages were categorized as “anti-LGBTQ” or “pro-Life” because of their emphasis on those particular issues, and because they did not mention Donald Trump by name.

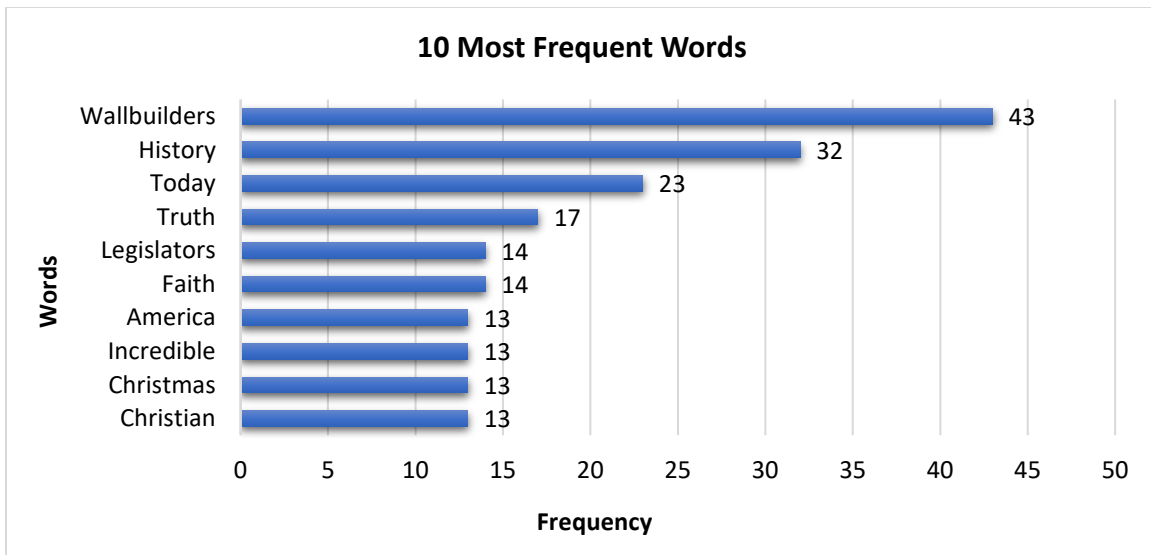


Figure 13 List of 10 Most Frequent Words for *Wallbuilders* Facebook Page

A list of the 10 most frequent words, generated in NVivo, ties this analysis together. The *Wallbuilders* Facebook page was observed to be advertising their own website page on 43 occasions in the 100 posts. Therefore, the word “Wallbuilders” (n = 43) was top on the list of 10 most frequent words (see Figure 13, above). This page is also known to talk about “history” (n = 32), “faith” (n = 14), “Christian” (n = 13) values, and report on “America” or “American” events (n = 13). The word “legislators” came up 14 times in the 100 posts, and all of these posts included an invitation to attend the ProFamily Legislators Conference organized by the owner of the *Wallbuilder* page, David Barton.

5.2. Disinformation on Twitter in 2019/2020

This current study also analyzed five Twitter hashtags that were trending during the impeachment inquiry and trial of U.S. President Donald Trump. In order to arrive at an equal number of tweets to those analyzed from the 2016 dataset of Facebook posts and Twitter messages and the 2019/2020 Facebook dataset, 100 tweets from each hashtag (500 tweets in total) were randomly selected. The main focus of the analysis of these hashtags was to investigate the potential role of disinformation campaigns and foreign interference in social media during the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial of Donald Trump. Qualitative content analysis was conducted on these 500 tweets, while Excel and NVivo software were used to code and analyze them. Moreover, NVivo’s word frequency query option was used to generate a list of the 10 most frequently-appearing

words on each of the five hashtags. This was undertaken to better understand the discourse used in the tweets.

5.2.1. #Impeachment

For this study, 100 tweets out of 14,893 tweets from *#Impeachment* were randomly selected for qualitative content analysis. During the early stages of analysis, it was found that the majority of these tweets (n = 98) included inflammatory opinions and lacked back-up sources for those opinions (see Table 13, below). Recall that according to the Pew Research survey, 46% respondents in the U.S. adults felt that Trump did something wrong regarding the Ukraine issue, and that it was enough to justify his removal from the office (Gramlich, 2020). However, 28% respondents felt that while he did something wrong, it was not enough to remove him from the office, whereas 25% felt that he did nothing wrong. Similar discourse could be observed in the analysis of *#Impeachment*.

Out of 98 “fake news” tweets, 90 were against Trump, and asked the justice system to impeach him (see Table 13, below). In many of the posts, he was described as “criminal,” “guilty,” a “lunatic” and an “orange orangutan.” The following tweets serve to illustrate the general anti-Trump flavour found on *#Impeachment*: “Something a guilty person tweets when he knows he can be *#impeached* for the *#crimes* he committed. *#Impeachment #ImpeachAndRemove*,” “You are a liar, corrupt and a threat to our National Security. *#Resign* or be *#Impeached #Impeachment*,” and “Will someone PLEASE invoke the 25th Amendment on this lunatic before he starts WWII? Is there anyone in his Cabinet who will *#DoTheRightThing*, or are you all a bunch of cowards?” *#Impeachment #ImpeachTheMF*.”

In contrast to most of the other Facebook posts and Twitter tweets considered in this study, only two out of 98 “fake news” tweets were categorized as being “pro-Trump.” One tweet questioned the integrity of the impeachment process, while another stated that Trump had done nothing to get himself impeached. The first tweet, questioning the integrity of the process asked: “*#Congress* said they *#Impeached #Trump* with in the house. If they wanted more witnesses why didn't they Subpoena them in the house? Why didn't they let *#Trump* defend himself?! *#Impeachment*.” The second tweet referred to above argued that Trump had done nothing wrong, and tried to deflect the attack

toward Hillary Clinton: “You are a #LyingSackOfIrrelevantShit you know the law, at least well enough to get a #ChildRapistOff #WeKnowWhatYouDid your Husband was #Impeached for #FelonyCrimes @realDonaldTrump didnt do #JackShit other than #BeatYourSorryAssin2016 #FadeAwayHillary #DontSethRichMe #Cult45 #Impeachment.” It is important to note that the second tweet could arguably have been classified as “anti-Democrat,” but a research decision was made to classify it as “pro-Trump,” as it was asserting that Trump was innocent.

Table 13 Classification and Angle of the #Impeachment Twitter Hashtag

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Fake News	98	98.0%
Anti-Trump	90	90.0%
Pro-Democrat	4	4.0%
Anti-Democrat	2	2.0%
Pro-Trump	2	2.0%
Undetermined	2	2.0%
Grand Total	100	100.0%

Out of 98 “fake news” tweets, four were categorized as “pro-Democrat” (see Table 14, below). Adam Schiff was praised for his work against Trump in the impeachment inquiry and trial, for example, “@AdamSchiff is an honest, smart, competent leader who excelled at the #impeachment hearing of #IMPEACHED #EvilToxicLawless #Murderer @POTUS @VP #CorruptLIAR @realDonaldTrump @SecPompeo @PressSec @GOP @FOXTV @FoxandFriends.” On other hand, two out of 98 “fake news” tweets under study were categorized as “anti-Democrat” (see Table 13, above). One of the posts was demanding that Nancy Pelosi be impeached instead: “#Pelosi NEEDS to be #IMPEACHED for failing to execute her responsibility to carry out #CongressDuties to Check 45! #Impeachment #ImpeachPelosi.” Another post attacked Hillary Clinton: “I think #HillaryClinton is all for the #ImpeachTrump scheme because she doesn’t want to be married to the only President to be #impeached since 1868 #Impeachment.”

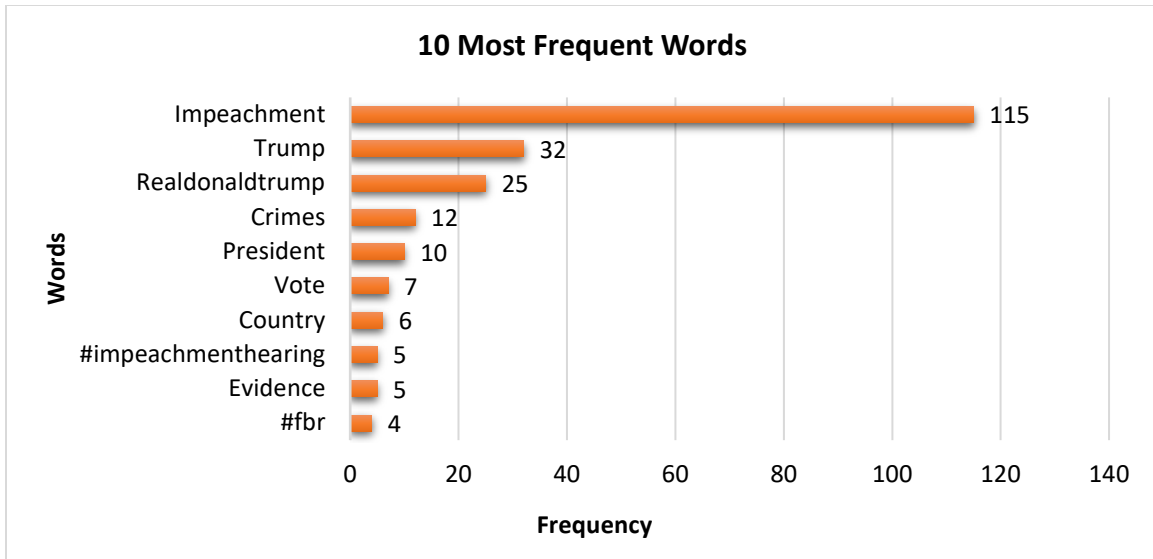


Figure 14 List of 10 Most Frequent Words for #Impeachment Twitter Hashtag

According to the results of NVivo’s word frequency query on these 100 randomly selected tweets, the word “impeachment” (n = 115) was top on the list. This included words such as impeach, impeachments, impeachable, and impeached. As shown in the analysis above, the vast majority of these posts were opposed to Donald Trump, with his name (“Trump”) being mentioned 32 times in the 100 tweets (see Figure 14, above). Twenty-five of the posts tagged Donald Trump’s Twitter page (“realdonaldtrump”). Moreover, 12 posts discussed whether Trump should face prison time for his “crimes,” a discourse that was also observed in the four posts that came from the “#fbr” hashtag (Follow Back Resistance against Trump) and the five posts that used the “#Impeachmenthearing” hashtag, all expressing disapproval of Donald Trump.

It is important to note that *#Impeachment* dataset seemed more like a forum for the expression of public outrage about Donald Trump and his actions than a deliberate propaganda or fake news hashtag created by hostile foreign actors. Additionally, it could be argued that individuals who are expressing strong political opinions without providing mainstream media sources to back up those opinions are not necessarily engaging in the manufacturing and dissemination of fake news. Therefore, it would be beneficial to analyze more posts from this hashtag, before designating it as a fake news hashtag created by hostile foreign actors.

5.2.2. #RussianInterference

Russian’s interference in U.S. politics has been under scrutiny for a number of years now. It is probably for that reason that the *#RussianInterference* hashtag appeared in Twitter’s trending list during the impeachment inquiry and trial. This hashtag was chosen for this study on the basis of how it was trending and not on the basis of potential influence of hostile foreign actors. For the current study, 100 tweets were randomly selected out of a larger sample of 1,386 tweets harvested from the *#RussianInterference* hashtag. Like the *#Impeachment* hashtag, the majority of these tweets (n = 96) included inflammatory opinion that lacked back-up sources to support the view being advanced (see Table 14, below). Therefore, these tweets were classified as “fake news.” Out of 96 “fake news” tweets, most (n = 61) were “anti-Russian” in their perspective. These tweets referred to Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election and the 2016 Brexit referendum. Further, these tweets demanded that the justice system publish the concealed report into Russia’s interference in the British political system. This concealed report included the results of an 18-month investigation conducted by the UK Parliament’s cross-party Intelligence and Security Committee on the Russian disinformation campaign during the Brexit referendum (Maidment, 2020). Concerns about Russian political interference can be exemplified as follows: “Much public interest in #RussiaReport Pls can we have info on #RussianReport & #RussianInterference as #BorisJohnson refuses to #ReleaseTheRussiaReport #ReleaseTheRussianReport,” “Vladimir Putin has destroyed the UK and the USA. #RussianInterference,” and

Special Counsel Robert Mueller was emphatic when he testified before House Intelligence on July 24 re. *#RussianInterference* in the 2016 election: ‘It wasn’t a single attempt. They’re doing it as we sit here, and they expect to do it during the next campaign’.

Table 14 Classification and Angle of the #RussianInterference Twitter Hashtag

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Fake News	96	96.0%
Anti-Russian	61	61.0%
Anti-Trump	29	29.0%
Anti-Democrat	6	6.0%
Part Real, Part Fake	3	3.0%
Anti-Russian	3	3.0%
Undetermined	1	1.0%
Grand Total	100	100.0%

Out of 96 “fake news” tweets, 29 were classified as “anti-Trump” (see Table 14, above). These tweets suggested that Russian interference possibly helped Trump to become the U.S. president in 2016. Donald Trump was also referred to as the “illegitimate president,” “#TreasonousTrump,” and “corrupt” in multiple tweets, for example,

Putin, helped Trump win the White House in 2016, wants him to stay put. During his three years in office, the president has wreaked havoc across the U.S. government, undermined NATO, and blasted holes in the international trade system. #RussianInterference.

Moreover, tweets made reference to the bots that supported Trump during the 2016 election and indicated that all of these bots were coming from Russia: “There are only 2 types of people that still support Trump, after everything he’s done: imbeciles, co-conspirators, and bots. That’s not a typo. #bots aren’t people, they’re tools of #RussianInterference.”

Democrats were also discussed in these “fake news” tweets. Six out of 96 tweets presented Democrats as negative political figures, and thus were classified as “anti-Democrat.” These posts claimed that Bernie Sanders was somehow involved with the Russian bots, for example, “Ugh, #BernieBots!! #NoBernie #NeverBernie #RussianInterference #DropOutBernie #DropOutSanders”, and

Russian funded no doubt. There is no way that the "We want Free Stuff," BernieBros, donated any funds near this amount from their pockets. Media needs to do their job and dig deeper into where all this money came from! Putin & Oligarchs, no doubt. #RussianInterference.

Hillary Clinton was also discussed up in two of the posts, too illustrate: “President J.Trump @realDonaldTrump won the Democrats hands down, never forget that during the campaign and before election, @CNN reported that @HillaryClinton was leading. After the election,they brought #RussianInterference. Over 3yrs, did it make Democrats better? NO!”

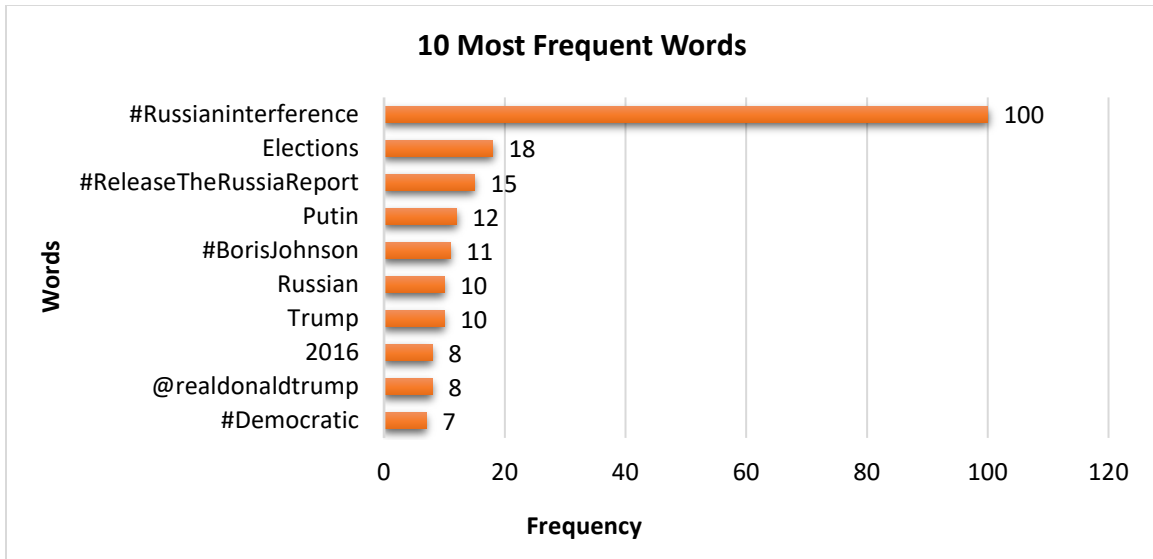


Figure 15 List of 10 Most Frequent Words for #RussianInterference Twitter Hashtag

The 10 most frequent words generated in NVivo indicated that “RussianInterference” (n = 100) was mentioned the most in the 100 posts, but only because this hashtag was used in all of the tweets. The word “elections” was referred 18 times in the dataset. Many of these posts discussed how “Trump” (n = 10) had funded “Russian”[s] (n = 10) to help him in the “2016” (n = 8) election (see Figure 15, above). Moreover, people demanded that the Prime Minister of the U.K., Boris Johnson, release the suppressed report into Russia’s interference in the British political system, which was expressed through hashtags “#ReleaseTheRussiaReport” (n = 15) and “#BorisJohnson” (n = 11). It is important to acknowledge that the report was recently released, and the government recognized that the threat was underestimated and U.K. was considered to be as one of Russia's top targets (Intelligence and Security Committee, 2020).

5.2.3. #ShamImpeachment

During the impeachment inquiry and trial, #ShamImpeachment was trending on Twitter. For the current study, 100 tweets were randomly selected for analysis from the 13,608 tweets using this hashtag. In the early stages of the analysis, it became apparent that all of the 100 tweets lacked credible sources, and that they all included inflammatory opinion; thus, all 100 of the tweets were coded as “fake news” (see Table 15, below). In total, 48 posts denigrated the Democratic party and its members. Democrats were described as “corrupt” and as a “disgrace” to their country, for example, “I still hear the

scurrying of panicked swamp rats Don't know what they have planned but they will try something else. The #Dems are truly like belligerent children having a major temper tantrum. #ShamImpeachment #Trump2020 #DrainTheSwamp #CorruptDemocrats.”

The Speaker of the United States House of Representative, Nancy Pelosi, was called “the alcoholic speaker Piglosi” and “Nashy” in multiple tweets. Likewise, Adam Schiff, U.S. Representative, was called names such as “Pencil neck Schiff” and Jerrold Nadler was referred as “Waddling Nadler.” One tweet managed to capture all of these insults in one shot:

The Radical DemocRAT Party ie: The Resistance has IMPLODED. The @DNC is in shambles, thanks to the likse of The Alcoholic Speaker Piglosi, Pencil Neck Schiff and Waddling Nadler. The Party of Corruption and Racism has destroyed temselves with the #ShamImpeachment.

It is important to note that this tweet was written poorly, with many spelling and grammatical errors, which could indicate that these posts were written by someone whom English was not a first language. In fact, another tweet actually raised the issue of Russian bots and language barriers: “There are vast amounts of Russian bots programmed to quote #ShamImpeachment, these bots need to attend English classes for us to believe this shit they are posting.” Since there has been no prior research on the data and it is hard to infer that it’s actually coming from hostile actors; therefore, more research is needed on this hashtag.

Table 15 Classification and Angle of the #ShamImpeachment Twitter Hashtag

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Fake News	100	100.0%
Anti-Democrat	48	48.0%
Pro-Trump	32	32.0%
Anti-Impeachment	19	19.0%
Anti-Russian	1	1.0%
Grand Total	100	100.0%

While Democrats were the target of derision in 48 of the 100 tweets, Donald Trump was commended in 32 of the tweets, which were therefore coded as being “pro-Trump.” In this category, tweets included Trump’s campaign slogan(s), KAG and/or MAGA, followed with #ShamImpeachment, and asserted that Trump was innocent. An example of a tweet where Donald Trump was said to be innocent and that also questioned the basis of impeachment process is as follows: “The only compelling &

overwhelming evidence is that @realDonaldTrump did not commit any impeachable offense. The only bipartisan vote was against impeachment. Five impeachment managers voted to impeach @POTUS before the Ukraine call. This is a targeted hit-job. #ShamImpeachment.” Another example where Trump was portrayed as a positive political figure, and that also included Trump’s KAG (Keep America Great) campaign slogan for the upcoming 2020 election, pronounced that,

For all the dimms ! They r left scratching their heads. Trump just keeps winning. Best economy , taking down terrorists etc. even the #ShamImpeachment ended up helping trump. Raised max \$\$, has independants , Hispanics and blacks all with him now ! #KAG #trump2020.

Lastly, an “anti-impeachment” category was created, in order to properly classify the 19 tweets that did not include any information, except for the hashtag #ShamImpeachment. This could be assumed that this was done to amplify the hashtag to reach larger social media audience.

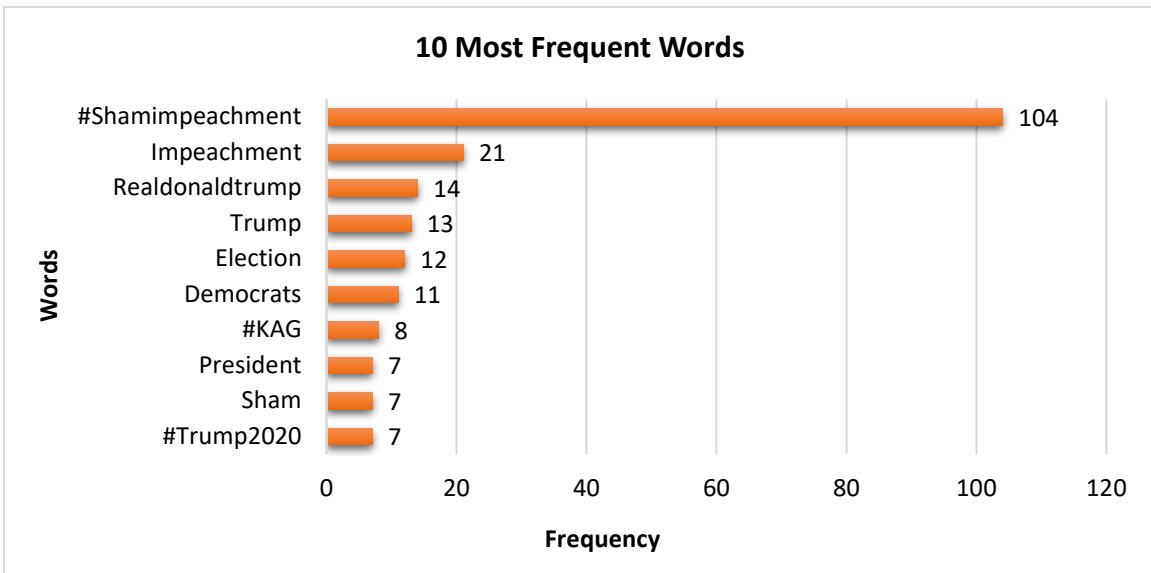


Figure 16 List of 10 Most Frequent Words for #ShamImpeachment Twitter Hashtag

To conclude the content analysis, and to better understand the language of the tweets, NVivo’s word frequency query option was used on these 100 randomly selected tweets. First, the word “#Shamimpeachment” (n = 104) was the most frequent in the list (see Figure 16, above), as this hashtag appeared in every message, sometimes more than once. In addition, the word “impeachment” was mentioned 21 times, including words such as #impeach, #impeachment, Impeachable, and Impeached. Donald

Trump's Twitter account ("realdonaldtrump") was tagged 14 times in the dataset, while the name "Trump" appeared 13 times on its own. Other hashtags were used to show support for Trump in the upcoming 2020 "election" (n = 12), including "#KAG" (n = 8) and "#Trump2020" (n = 7).

5.2.4. #Trump2020

For the current study, 100 tweets referring to *#Trump2020* were randomly selected from a total of 2,320 tweets downloaded from this hashtag. As was the case with other Twitter hashtags examined in the current study, all of the tweets sampled from the *#Trump2020* hashtag included inflammatory opinion and lacked credible sources to back up their opinions. Accordingly, all of these tweets were coded as "fake news" (see Table 16, below). Through multiple cycles of coding, it was found that these tweets fell under two major categories: "pro-Trump" (n = 46) and "anti-Democrat" (n = 41). There were some tweets that could have been placed under the "pro-Trump" category, as they followed typical Trump discourse about building a wall, protecting gun rights, and the mainstream media as being a source of fake news. However, a research decision was made to keep them separate, resulting in seven tweets being categorized as "anti-media," four as "racist," and two as "pro-gun."

Tweets that used messaging similar to that used by Trump regarding the media as "fake news" while at the same time expressing support for Trump in the 2020 election included: "Oh thank you for sharing the media suppressing the speech of our WONDERFUL and amazing President. #GodBlessPresidentTrump #Trump2020." As mentioned above, 4 posts were racist, but could also have been categorized as "pro-Trump," in that they talked about building a wall and reducing the number of refugees in the U.S., for example: "The STRONG WALL is going up! #KAG #PromisesMadePromisesKept #Trump2020 and Exclusive — Michelle Malkin: 60 Terrifying Reasons Trump Is Right to Reduce Refugees via @BreitbartNews @realDonaldTrump #Trump2020." Americans are very sensitive about their guns and gun rights, which also happens to be one of the assurances that Trump has used in his election campaigns: "And people out there actually believe this idiot. Yea the way that Jack Wilson controlled his gun is all the gun control you need to be talking about #Pro2A #Trump2020." Lastly, statements were made in these tweets, blatantly indicating that Trump should and would win the 2020 election, and that later, his family members would

hold the office, for example: “We are all going to feel great emptiness in 2025 when the @realDonaldTrump ride is over. #Trump2020 #Ivanka2024 [Daughter of Donald Trump] #DonJr2032 [eldest son of Donald Trump] #LeftistTearsForever”, “So GREAT to have an AMERICAN PATRIOT and not an Iranian ally as our PRESIDENT!! #Trump2020,” and “#Trump2020 or the US is dead!.”

Table 16 Classification and Angle of the #Trump2020 Twitter Hashtag

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Fake News	100	100.0%
Pro-Trump	46	46.0%
Anti-Democrat	41	41.0%
Anti-Media	7	7.0%
Racists	4	4.0%
Pro-Gun	2	2.0%
Grand Total	100	100.0%

Forty-one of the #Trump2020 tweets presented Democrats in a negative light. Those tweets referred to Democrats as “destroying the America,” and as being “corrupt.” Adam Schiff was attacked in many of the posts, for example, “@AdamSchiff get the hell out out of the basement and stop with the secretive shit. You are nothing but a worthless liar and POS. #fuckSchiff #SchiftySchiff #Trump2020LandslideVictory #DemocratsAreCorrupt #Trump2020.” Hillary Clinton was also mentioned in a few of the tweets, for instance: “Cannot accept the consequences of 2016 election. #Trump2020 #DemocratsAreDestroyingAmerica”, and “You lost...just like she did...go cry to ur mama now. bye bye #Trump2020.” In order to show that Democrats were destroying America, multiple posts talked about their involvement with a terrorist country: “Democrats hate trump so much they take sides with a terrorist country and guy killed 600 plus Americans smh. #DemocratsAreDestroyingAmerica #Democrats #shameful #Trump2020.”

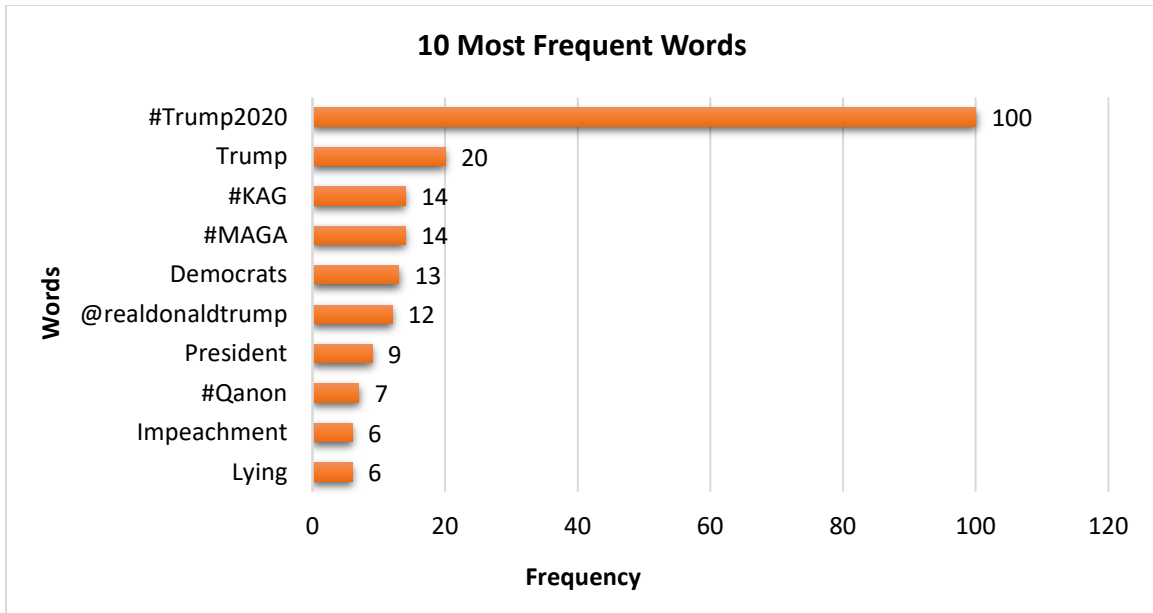


Figure 17 List of 10 Most Frequent Words for #Trump2020 Twitter Hashtag

To understand the language of the posts, a list of the 10 most frequent words was generated in NVivo. Not surprisingly, all of the 100 tweets included the word “#Trump2020” (see Figure 17, above). As explained in the above content analysis, more than half of the tweets were in favour of Trump and his policies. NVivo’s word frequency query produced similar results. In the 100 posts, there were 20 mentions of “Trump” and his campaign slogan “#KAG” (n = 14), and “#MAGA” (n = 14). Many (n = 12) of these tweets tagged Trump’s Twitter account, “@realdonaldtrump.” On the other hand, 41 out of 100 tweets (see Table 16, above) disfavoured the “Democrats” (n = 13), and stated that Democrats were “lying” (n = 6) about everything to aid with Trump’s “impeachment” (n = 6). The word “Qanon” was mentioned 7 times in the 100 posts. QAnon is a conspiracy theory group that posts a lot of pro-Trump and anti-Democratic material (LaFrance, 2020). QAnon is a group that believes in a deep-state conspiracy, especially in the FBI, CIA, the Department of Justice, and the Pentagon, that is out to get Donald Trump and his supporters. However, the conspiracy group also believes that “if you’re a Trump supporter, then you should believe that Donald Trump is in complete control of everything” (Coaston, 2018).

5.2.5. #Trump2020Landside

"#TRUMP2020Landside is something someone from the opposition party came up with to make supporters of the president look stupid. These are the tactics of the left."

The #Trump2020Landside hashtag was presumably intended to be named #Trump2020Landslide. However, the error in naming the hashtag provides further evidence that its authors were not especially fluent in the English language, spelling the title Landside, instead of Landslide. The Landside hashtag started trending during the impeachment inquiry and trial. In total, 13,936 tweets were retrieved from this hashtag between September 2019 to February 2020. For this current study, 100 posts were randomly selected for analysis. Similar to what transpired with the classification of the #ShamImpeachment and the #Trump2020 tweets, all 100 of the tweets sampled from the #Trump2020Landside were classified as "fake news" (see Table 17, below). These tweets did not contain any credible or verifiable pieces of information, with all of the tweets attempting to incite support for Donald Trump, or stir up hostility toward the Democrats, the media, or members of the LGBTQ community. The majority of these tweets (n = 57) were decidedly "pro-Trump" in angle.

Trump has referred to the media as "fake news" on multiple occasions. Five of the tweets classified as "pro-Trump" also favoured his "anti-media" narrative, while one of them coincided with his "anti-LGBTQ" agenda. Examples of pro-Trump, anti-media tweets would include: "OMG! Did you give him the debate questions in advance Donna? cheaters get hired to work at CNN don't they Donna? #TRUMP2020Landside #Trump2020LandslideVictory," and "sorry a reporter is not a FOUNDATION. They should be Unbiased but your socialist agenda, @georgesoros, and the evil LEFT LEANING(Lying) media, are all destroying AMERICA!!! #TRUMP2020Landside #SHIFFSHOULDBEINPRISION." The "anti-LGBTQ" community tweet said: "WOW! Comparing same sex couples with good ole fashioned God fearing population maintaining Heterosexual couples? No comparison! Ah come on man! Another reason not to vote for #DemocratsHaveLostTheirDamnMinds and put them back in the minority where they belong! #TRUMP2020Landside." Tweets also supported his narrative about building a wall along the Mexican border, and used similar language (i.e., drain the swamp and 2nd amendment) to that used by Trump on multiple occasions, for example:

Mr. President, I'm SO PROUD of you Sir, PLEASE BE CAREFUL CHOO-CHOO, All Aboard the #Trump Train #MAGA #KAG #BuildTheWall #1A #2A #BackTheBlue #DrainTheDeepStateSwamp #TRUMP2020Landside #Vets. Give my love to Melania” , “#TRUMP2020Landside.. Until the job is done to protect every #American citizen no other issue takes precedence, and no other candidate is acceptable. #TRUMP2020Landside.

Table 17 Classification and Angle of the #Trump2020Landside Twitter Hashtag

Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Fake News	100	100.0%
Pro-Trump	57	57.0%
Anti-Democrat	37	37.0%
Anti-Media	5	5.0%
Anti-LGBTQ	1	1.0%
Grand Total	100	100.0%

Thirty-seven of the tweets were distinctly “anti-Democrat” in flavour (see Table 17, above). These tweets attacked the Democrats, and portrayed them in a negative light, for example: “Between Pelosi’s temper tantrum, not being able to conduct a caucus, and losing their sham impeachment, wow democrats have really proved themselves as clowns. #TRUMP2020Landside,” and “Who are you again? #LibTards #TRUMP2020Landside.” Former President Barack Obama was referred to as “Obumer” on multiple occasions, to illustrate, “It wasn’t easy for us blue collar folks, happy to say i survived the obumer admin though! #MAGA #KAG #TRUMP2020LANDSIDE.” Likewise, Adam Schiff, U.S. Representative, was called names such as “Oh Little Adam Shit, I can’t wait until it comes out you were the whistleblower, oh my,just had a thought, could the whistleblower be the Russian you talked to about Trump? #TRUMP2020Landside.” It is noteworthy that the term “little Adam Shitt” was first coined by Donald Trump himself, back in 2018, when taking exception to the fact that Adam Schiff had (accurately) pointed out that Trump’s Acting Attorney General had not been duly confirmed by the U.S. Senate (Forgey, 2018).

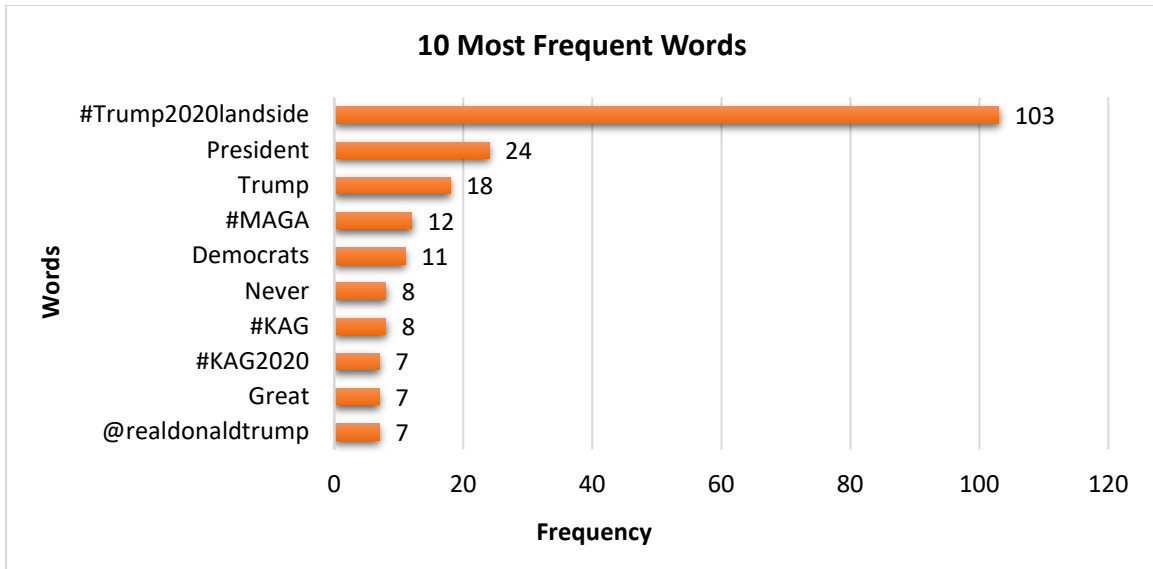


Figure 18 List of 10 Most Frequent Words for #Trump2020Landside Twitter Hashtag

Finally, NVivo was used to generate a list of the 10 most frequent words that appeared in the 100 tweets sampled from the #Trump2020Landside hashtag. First, the word “#Trump2020Landside” was mentioned 103 times in the 100 tweets, as this hashtag was used in all of the tweets. As illustrated above, 24 of the tweets mentioned the “president” (i.e., Donald Trump), 18 favoured “Trump,” while 11 disfavoured the “Democrats” (see Figure 18, above). Twelve of these tweets featured Trump’s campaign slogan “#MAGA,” (Make America Great Again), 8 used his new slogan, “#KAG” (Keep America Great), while 7 used the KAG slogan along with the year 2020. Seven of the tweets also tagged Donald Trump’s Twitter account (“@realdonaldTrump”), in support of his candidacy in the upcoming presidential election. There were eight tweets mentioning Democrats, also using the word “never,” in the context of proclaiming that the Democrats would “never” be able defeat Trump in the 2020 election.

Conclusion

The findings from the content analysis of the five Facebook pages and five trending Twitter hashtags that appeared during the 2019/2020 impeachment process have been presented in this chapter. The majority of these posts and tweets were classified as “fake news,” and exhibited multiple angles of attack. There were notable similarities across all of the Facebook pages and Twitter hashtags studied. The *American Thinker*, *Godfather Politics* and *United American Patriots* Facebook pages

featured many “anti-Democrat” posts. The Twitter hashtags, *#ShamImpeachment*, *#Trump2020*, and *#Trump2020Landside*, were replete with “anti-Democrat” tweets. On the other hand, “pro-Trump” messages appeared with frequency in the almost all of the Facebook pages and Twitter hashtags, except for the *CAIR* Facebook page and *#RussianInterference*. Only two of the Facebook pages, *CAIR* and *United American Patriots*, included “anti-Trump” messages. Similarly, only two Twitter hashtags, *#Impeachment* and *#RussianInterference*, included “anti-Trump” messaging. Of all the Facebook pages and Twitter hashtags subjected to content analysis in this study, only one dataset, *#Impeachment*, included “pro-Democrat” messaging.

Chapters 4 and 5 have reported on the results of the qualitative content analysis of social media messaging and disinformation campaigns during two major political events in the United States, the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial, both events centering around the current President, Donald Trump. Chapter 6 will discuss the overarching themes that emerged from this study of these two events, and the role that social media messaging and disinformation campaigns played in shaping how these events unfolded, as seen through the lens of agenda setting theory. Moreover, the themes described in the next chapter will be situated within larger empirical studies from a range of disciplines, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of disinformation campaigns and foreign interference in domestic politics.

Chapter 6.

Merging the Studies: Overarching Themes as seen through the Lens of Agenda Setting Theory

This chapter will discuss the overarching themes that emerged from the complementary analyses of social media messaging and disinformation campaign during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial. These themes represent the most prominent narratives that were observed in samples taken from Facebook and Twitter during the election and during impeachment proceedings. These themes will be studied through the lens of agenda setting theory. Recall that according to agenda setting theory, issues that are accorded higher priority by the media can be expected to attain greater prominence in the public sphere (Caulk, 2016; Wallsten, 2007). Beyond this, the news media also direct our attention to what they consider to be the specific and salient aspects of these issues. This combined influence of the news media on the public's attention to, and the learning of, the key details of the major issues may be regarded as the "agenda-setting" role played by the news media (McCombs, 2007).

Second-level agenda setting theory plays a vital role in understanding this process, because when agenda setting occurs, it signals to the public which issues hold the greatest importance. In other words, in the second level of agenda setting, the media not only tells us what to think about, but how to think about certain subjects and/or people (Golan & Wanta, 2001, p. 248). Donald Trump and the Democrats were frequently discussed in the sampled Facebook and Twitter postings, in order to attract public attention and shape public attitudes and beliefs. When the mass media focuses on a particular subject or individual person, and when the public thinks about and talks about that topic, certain attributes are emphasized (McCombs, 2007). As time goes on, or as circumstances change, these subjects or individuals may sometimes be mentioned less frequently, or at other times, only in passing. In the current study, multiple attributes were mentioned frequently, primarily favouring Donald Trump and his political policies.

It is important to note that the Facebook pages and Twitter hashtags were primarily selected for this thesis on the basis of the probable involvement of foreign

actors. The issues that were discussed on these pages and hashtags included 2nd amendment rights, immigration (both legal and illegal), the LGBTQ community, health care (pro-life), the legitimacy of mainstream media and race, all of which were in alignment with Donald Trump's main narratives. Some anti-Trump discourse was observed in a few of the Facebook pages and Twitter hashtags from the 2016 presidential election period, including the *United Muslims of America* Facebook page, which had only one anti-Trump post, along with the 2016 Twitter dataset with 68 anti-Trump tweets. From the 2019/2020 impeachment dataset, the *CAIR* Facebook page had five anti-Trump posts, while only two anti-Trump posts were found in the *United American Patriots* Facebook page. However, the *#Impeachment* hashtag on Twitter featured more anti-Trump discourse, with 90 out of 100 tweets offering disparaging comments about Donald Trump. Lastly, the *#RussianInterference* hashtag on Twitter had 29 anti-Trump tweets. Both the *#Impeachment* and *#RussianInterference* hashtags were selected for analysis on the basis of their trending rate on Twitter, rather than solely depending on a search for Russian-sponsored hashtags. These hashtags may provide legitimate opinions from the users of social media, rather than messages from foreign trolls. As mentioned earlier, there has not been any research done on the use of social media and disinformation during the impeachment proceedings. As a consequence, it is more difficult to prove conclusively that these hashtags were sponsored by foreign actors; therefore, further research should be undertaken into the provenance of these hashtags, and if possible, the authors of the individual messages. That, however, is beyond the scope of this present study.

In the past, agenda setting theory mainly studied the influence of mainstream media on politics, rather than the influence of social media on politics. Nowadays, however, social media plays a significant role in delivering people their daily dose of news. According to the Pew Research Center, 43% of Americans get their news from Facebook, while 12% get their news from Twitter (Shearer & Matsa, 2018). Other studies have indicated that two-thirds of Facebook users get their news from Facebook, while six-out-of-ten Twitter users get their news from Twitter (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Thus, there is well-founded concern for potential manipulation of sentiment in social media. Therefore, studying social media postings through the lens of agenda setting theory is essential to understanding the influence of social media on recent political events.

The qualitative analysis of these two recent events in U.S. politics provides insight into the overarching themes that were present in the type of “fake news” being circulated in social media at those times. Those themes or narratives were employed in order to micro-target specific populations, and at the same time tap into the widely held attitudes and beliefs of Americans, with an eye to influencing the voting choices of Americans. This included encouraging certain groups of Americans to get out and vote, in particular those who favoured law and order agendas, were pro-military, and were thought to be more likely to share anti-immigration sentiments and subscribe to racial stereotyping. On the other hand, the social media messaging attempted to discourage (suppress) voting by racialized minorities such as blacks, Latinos, Muslims and other marginalized minority groups such as the LGBTQ. To express it differently, these messages tapped into issues that were intended to create division among American voters and to further incite an “us vs. them” mentality. However, it was hard to infer how much of this data was driven by hostile foreign actors.

Moreover, throughout the analysis, numerous examples of posts and tweets were provided that either supported Donald Trump or opposed the Democrats. There were comparatively few messages that criticized Donald Trump or questioned his suitability for the presidency. However, approximately 480 posts out of 2,000 did not mention Donald Trump by name, but they clearly supported his political agenda. These posts included all the pro-gun, anti-immigration, anti-media, anti-LGBTQ, and anti-Democrat sentiments. A post from the *Secured Borders* Facebook page did not include his name; however, his political policies were considered, while at the same time attacking the Democrats:

I really don't understand this libtarded obsession with the rights of people who shouldn't be in the country in the first place, while neglecting safety and security of American people. This is unacceptable! I sincerely hope that there are no more successful Terrorist attacks on American soil. But hoping isn't enough in this case, we need to build the wall, enforce immigration law, deport illegal alien leeches, reinstate & reinforce travel ban and keep all invading scum out of the country! Better save our tax dollars for Americans than waste welfare money on possible terrorist!

One of the main discourses used to foster division involved legislative and policy issues pertaining to immigration. Through the analysis of the sampled social media postings during the 2016 and 2019/2020 political events, it could be seen that immigration-related issues were featured in *Secured Borders*, *Being Patriotic*, *American*

Thinker, CAIR, Godfather Politics, Blacktivist, LGBT United, Wallbuilder, 2016 Twitter, and #Impeachment. These immigration issues were aligned closely with Trump's campaign statements and day-to-day Twitter ruminations, as he has been observed on multiple occasions referring to immigrants as "illegal aliens," "criminals," "traitors," "scums," "rapists," and "drug-pushers" (Amadeo & Boyle, 2020; Blake, 2019). This present content analysis of 2,000 messages posted on Facebook and Twitter before, during and after the presidential election and during the subsequent impeachment process found that immigrants (both legal and illegal) were referred as "criminal aliens," "criminal illegal," "illegal aliens," "criminal scums," "sinful criminals," "greedy criminals," "freeloaders," "scumbags," and "alien leeches." These are similar to the derogatory names that Trump has used repeatedly when referring to immigrants. In fact, the immigration issues used in the 2016 election to discredit Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama have been rethreaded for the 2020 presidential election campaign. In 2016, the Russian-sponsored *Secured Borders* Facebook page included a message saying that: "Hillary Clinton has made it clear that she supports and will expand President Obama's immigration policies." This type of messaging re-appeared in the *#Trump2020* Twitter hashtag, for example: "We all know Trump's stance on the account of criminal illegals *#Trump2020*." These two examples can be explained through the lens of agenda setting theory, as on the one hand, Donald Trump was being portrayed in these social media pages and hashtags as a "savior," who would ride to the rescue and save the American people from "criminal illegals," while on the other hand, Democratic politicians (and especially Hillary Clinton) were being portrayed as the destroyers of the American way of life.

Throughout the analysis of both studies, it was found that Donald Trump was suggested as the better choice for president, because he would protect Americans from "illegal aliens." Moreover, in both 2016 and 2019/2020 datasets, 48 posts and tweets indicated that immigrants were dangerous and criminal. Therefore, American voters should be extremely careful with their choice of political leaders and in deciding who gets to sit in the Oval Office. The underlying message was that if more immigrants were allowed to come to America, then white Americans should be fearful of losing their long-held dominant position in the American social structure.

Moreover, 22 messages from both the 2016 and 2019/2020 datasets argued that veterans should be taken care of first, as they had not been receiving proper treatment

during Obama's presidential period. Those posts raised similar concerns that by bringing in more immigrants, or allowing illegal immigrants to remain, the veterans would not be able to receive the resources that they needed. These posts and tweets also discussed their fear of immigrants, how Obama brought more immigrants (criminals) into the country, and how he offered amnesty to undocumented immigrants so that they could have their status normalized and thus remain in the country legally. We should ask ourselves why there is so much discourse pertaining to the supposed plight of veterans on these social media sites. In the U.S., military service is held in higher esteem than others forms of civil service (The Economist, 2017). The U.S. places great emphasis on its military might, and on its military history (Karlín & Hunt, 2018). As noted by Daddis (2018), "the male combat soldier has long been the staple of American war literature." Historical and fictional movies and TV shows about American military heroes abound (Weikle, 2020). Thus, by making frequent reference to veterans, the creators of this social media messaging are attempting to tap into images of members of the military service being brave, invincible, and of them sacrificing their lives for the greater good of the country, only to be sacrificed by their country in favour of giving greater rights and benefits to undeserving groups of people (immigrants) who have not earned those rights and benefits.

To avoid the predicted cataclysm, American voters were encouraged to vote for Trump. The *Being Patriotic* Facebook page included messages saying: "Why is it so hard for our Government [Barack Obama and his administration] to understand that we want our own citizens to get care before illegal freeloaders who don't even try to become a part of the American society?," and "Veterans should be the first ones to get welfare, healthcare and housing. They have earned this right by spilling their own blood in the name of America!" Another message appeared on the same *Being Patriotic* Facebook page, arguing that "illegal aliens" were bringing crime into the country: "In 2013, the government released 36,007 convicted criminal aliens responsible for homicides, sexual assaults, kidnapping, and other serious crimes." *Secured Borders*, another IRA-generated page from the 2016 election period, had a message saying that: "Over past years, criminal aliens sexually assault 70,000 American women and that's just the tip of the iceberg, because full data on these cases is censored by liberals." These earlier messages can be compared to more recent messages, such as the one from *Godfather Politics*, claiming that "Illegal Alien Who Avoided Deportation Allegedly Murdered 22

Elderly People,” or another recent message from the *American Thinker* Facebook page, stating that “Trump Creates Division to Strip Citizenship from Criminals Who Were Naturalized.”

Issues such as “illegal immigration” are framed in a negative fashion, and then presented in a cognitive/affective manner, which is part of the second-level process identified by agenda setting theory (Golan & Wanta, 2001). This present study found that once the fear of immigrants and immigration in general were instilled in the American followers of these social media platforms, further follow-up messages were added, arguing that only Trump could save them, whereas Democrats would expose them to greater danger.

Legislative and policy issues pertaining to gun control, pro-life, and the LGBTQ community were apparent during both time periods under study. These topics underscored the notion that people should feel that they were under attack and that their rights had been or would be stripped away from them by Democrats. On the other hand, Donald Trump was often portrayed as the only person who would be able to rescue them from a fate worse than death. There are few issues that will rile up Americans more than gun control. This issue has been fought over in the executive and legislative branches, in the courts, in the media, and on the streets (Gun Control, 2018). Former U.S. President Barack Obama was loathed in some circles because of his efforts to introduce more restrictive gun control legislation (Vizzard, 2015). We can see how the authors of these social media messages attempted to tap into this fear and loathing, by examining, for example, a message from the *Being Patriotic* page during the presidential election period saying that: “Now, when the democrats are pushing more and more gun control legislations, we have to stand for our rights to be armed,” or a message from the more recent *United American Patriots* page, asking: “Why so liberal circles seek to set more restrictions on gun ownership?,” and another message from #Trump2020Landside Twitter hashtag: “@realDonaldTrump is genuine and truly real. He will protect our rights. The democrats are clowns, There is only one choice for election day. #TRUMP2020Landside #2A rights.”

The anti-abortion and LGBTQ discourses that appeared in the IRA-sponsored Facebook posts and Twitter feeds during the 2016 election period re-appeared in the 2019/2020 dataset from the impeachment inquiry and trial. Again, it was felt that this was

being done in order to micro-target social media users who were either in favour of abortion rights and LGBTQ rights or who were strongly opposed to abortion rights and LGBTQ rights, to further drive a wedge between them. Like gun rights, the issues of abortion rights and LGBTQ rights have been fought over in the executive and legislative branches, in the courts, in the media, and on the streets for the better part of the past century (Holland, 2016). These two issues have religious overtones, and seem to be particularly offensive to Catholics and evangelical Christians, who have been strongly opposed to LGBTQ members and abortions. Both abortion and anything remotely related to LGBTQ behavior have often been treated as immoral and even illegal (Minter, 1993; Pew Research Center, 2020). The *Wallbuilders* Facebook page brings up the issue of unborn children and their rights, saying: “Unborn don’t but illegals do have constitutional rights?” Another message, again from *Wallbuilders*, goes on at considerable length:

This is a win for life! I’m thankful that this week the Supreme Court let the Kentucky law stand that requires mothers to view an ultrasound and hear the baby’s heartbeat before going through with an abortion.... More The ACLU tweeted “Abortion is a right—and it’s legal in all 50 states.” Our Constitution says that LIFE is a right—not abortion. Yesterday was Human Rights Day—those who support human rights need to realize that abortion is the greatest human rights violation in the world today, robbing millions of children of their chance at life.

Additionally, posts and tweets asserted that the LGBTQ community did not adhere to “normal” American (Christian) values. Multiple posts have appeared on the sampled Facebook pages such as *LGBT United*, *American Thinker*, *GodFather Politics*, and *Wallbuilder*, and Twitter hashtags such as *#Trump2020Landside*, where they asked the justice system to ban clinics that supported gender transition options. Moreover, these messages used different names to denigrate the LGBTQ community, referring to them as “drag queens,” the “gender delusional group,” and a “dangerous rot to our nation.” Posts also stated that this was the reason they were not voting for Democrats, and were instead voting for Trump. These topics appeared to be designed to serve two main purposes: 1) to make the American public believe that these were clear and present dangers to the moral fabric of American society, and that they should be frightened of them, and 2) the Democrats did not care about these issues, whereas, Donald Trump would save the country by standing up on these issues.

As mentioned previously, Democrats were portrayed as negative political figures in most of the 2,000 messages sampled from multiple Facebook pages and Twitter hashtags at two different time intervals. The Democrats were portrayed as “illegitimate” and “not fit for the job.” This was done to make American voters believe that Democrats would not do their jobs properly, and therefore, that voters should not support them in the upcoming election(s). Meanwhile, the messages sampled from both time intervals tended to paint Trump as a great American leader. Often, as seen above, he was portrayed as the “savior” of the American people and of their values.

In the 2016 election, Trump’s rival, Hillary Clinton was quite routinely presented in a negative light, and was said to be unfit for the job. A lot of this discourse was misogynistic in nature, relying on the stereotype of women as being more frail and more emotional than men, and thus incapable of doing a man’s job (Stevenson, 2016; Sullivan, 2019a). It is thought that this notion would have held appeal for males, and especially those males who felt that normative masculinity could and should be demonstrated by possessing a gun, fighting for your country, being opposed to all forms of non-heterosexual practices, and believing that a woman’s place was in the home. This line of attack included Hillary’s frequent mention of her close relationship with Obama, and of her leaked emails (implying that as a woman, she was incompetent to run a political campaign, let alone a country). The names of Obama and Hillary were brought together on multiple occasions to prove to the public that if you voted for Hillary, she would continue with Obama’s policies, which would later destroy the American way-of-life, or leastwise, the way-of-life for gun-owning, church-going Americans who were opposed to abortion, same sex marriage, and to women or members of an ethnic minority holding high office.

In 2019/2020, Donald Trump was portrayed as a victim of a Democratic plot to impeach him and remove him from the office. This was especially evident in the Facebook pages *American Thinker*, *Godfather Politics*, *United American Patriots*, and *Wallbuilders*, and the Twitter hashtags *#shamimpeachment*, *#Trump2020*, and *#Trump2020Landside*, which all attempted to paint a picture of the impeachment inquiry and trial as a Democratic strategy to attack Donald Trump. On these Facebook pages and Twitter hashtags, impeachment was referred to as “sham,” “frenzy,” “fake,” “disaster,” and “unfair.” At the same time, Democrats were referred as “corrupt,” “traitors,” and it was also claimed that they were “destroying the America.” For example,

it has been claimed (without evidence) that the hashtag *#TRUMP2020Landside* was created by someone or some entity opposed to Donald Trump, in order to ridicule Trump and his supporters: “*#TRUMP2020Landside* is something someone from the opposition party came up with to make supporters of the president look stupid. These are the tactics of the left.” That said, it is felt that *#TRUMP2020Landside* was not an intentional parody of IRA-sponsored websites or extreme-right-wing websites, but rather, a failed attempt by someone or some entity to create and amplify pro-Trump messaging under the guise of a genuine discussion forum. It was claimed that the impeachment inquiry and trial were invented by the Democrats to discourage American voters from voting for Trump in the upcoming 2020 election. Furthermore, it was said that this was part of the Democrats “evil” plan, and that there was no basis for impeaching President Trump, because he had done nothing wrong.

Overall, the discourse, narratives and major themes that were identified in the messages sampled from the 2019/2020 impeachment process were similar in many respects to those identified in the messages sampled from the 2016 election period. Clearly, the earlier dataset may be regarded as evidence of foreign interference and disinformation campaigns in U.S. politics, as all of the messages were known to have come from the Russian-sponsored Internet Research Agency websites (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Badawy et al., 2018; W. L. Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Bovet & Makse, 2019; de Cock Bunning et al., 2019; Mueller, 2019; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2017; Parkinson, 2016; Silverman, 2016). The same cannot be said for certainty with the second (later) dataset. While these later social media sites can be regarded as sources of “fake news,” and often appear as though they are highly orchestrated (contrived), pro-Trump/anti-Democratic campaigns, there is little evidence at this time to suggest that they were IRA-generated. That said, the language, discourse and narratives found on some of these newer sites look remarkably similar to the language, discourse and narratives found on the earlier IRA sites. It is conceivable that there was hostile foreign activity on these sites.

The 10 most frequently appearing words in all of the datasets showed that “Trump” was the most common word, with 606 mentions. Most of these posts and tweets included positive messaging regarding Donald Trump and his political stance. Secondly, the word “Americans” appeared 383 times in the 2,000 posts. These posts mostly discussed American values, American Patriots, American veterans, and American

culture. Moreover, the word “impeachment” appeared 352 times. This included words such as #Impeachment, Impeach, Impeached, and Impeachable. The NVivo word frequency query revealed that the word “illegals” appeared 349 times. The word “illegals” was mostly attached with aliens, and immigrants, an example: “Illegal aliens put a strain on our economy, schools and hospitals and even pose serious national security threats”. Mostly (n = 157) this word was mentioned in the *Secured Borders* page. Words such as “country” (n = 261) and “like” (n = 245) also appeared in the datasets. Lastly, the word “Muslims” appeared 221 times in the two datasets. In the 2016 dataset, Facebook page *United Muslims of America* and Twitter dataset posted anti-racists posts regarding Muslims. However, *Secured Borders* page posted racists posts, example including:

The Quran explicitly instructs Muslim men on how to take sex slaves, including prepubescent girls. After bloody conquests of local Jewish tribes, the Islamic prophet Muhammad decreed, as stated in the Quran, that rape and sexual slavery are an earthly reward by Allah to devout (truncated).

Only the *CAIR* page from the later dataset discussed about Muslims. These posts talked about the struggles of Muslims Americans and explained how *CAIR* is helping them, for example “CAIR-NY & HNY Ferry Reach Settlement on Behalf of Three Muslim Families.”

Overall, for over four decades, research into agenda setting theory has expanded its scope from how the media shapes the public agenda to factors that shape the media’s agenda (Fu, 2013; Golan, 2006). Past research on agenda setting has indicated that there is a tangible relationship between the issues that the media emphasizes and the issues that the public deems to be important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Through the lens of first-level agenda setting, it can be seen that the postings from selected social media platforms portrayed Trump as the most prominent candidate in the 2016 presidential race. Through the lens of second-level agenda setting, it can be seen that these social media vehicles were used to frame messages that would favour Trump and his policies in order to gain more voter support. These messages mentioned “hot button” issues, such as: immigration, second amendment rights, the LGBTQ community, pro-life, and the media. Additionally, during the impeachment inquiry, various social media messaging sites including Facebook and Twitter were used in support of Donald Trump, and attempted to paint him as the victim of the supposed weaponization of the impeachment process by the Democratic party.

Chapter 7.

Conclusion

The primary goal of this research was to examine the major issues that were advanced by Facebook pages and Twitter hashtags that were involved in the propagation and dissemination of fake news and disinformation during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the 2019/2020 impeachment proceedings against Donald Trump. Trump was usually covered as a positive political figure, whereas Democrats were typically covered as negative political figures. “Hot button” issues such as immigration, guns, veterans and abortion were used to micro-target social media users on both Facebook and Twitter. That said, more work needs to be undertaken to understand the actual impact of disinformation when it comes to voting. The fact that people read something on social media does not necessarily mean that they take it to heart and act on that information. The remainder of this chapter includes a summary of the key findings. Further, this chapter addresses the strengths and limitations of the present research, and suggests steps that could be taken to move this research forward.

7.1. Key Findings

This study examined two major events that occurred in U.S. politics: the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and the 2019/2020 impeachment inquiry and trial. Both of these major events involved current U.S. president, Donald Trump. Further, the study examined political messaging on Twitter and Facebook, the two most popular social media platforms (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016).

It would be difficult to prove conclusively that the IRA’s disinformation activities on social media swayed public opinion enough to alter the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, or to alter the opinion about or outcome of the recent impeachment process. To determine this, it would be necessary to survey a large and representative sample of regular social media users who had wittingly or unwittingly been exposed to these fake news and disinformation campaigns, and ask them to indicate whether the fake news that they had been exposed to online had influenced how they voted on election day, or influenced how they viewed the more recent impeachment process.

In the 2016 election, most of the messages posted on Facebook and Twitter by the Russian Troll Army before, during and after the election sought to increase voter turnout for Donald Trump, and at the same time, suppress voter turnout for Hillary Clinton. These posts attempted to micro-target specific social media audiences, in order to drum up greater support for Donald Trump. Examples have been provided throughout this thesis to illustrate how this micro-targeting was accomplished. For example, the IRA sponsored *Being Patriotic* Facebook page messages specifically targeted Southern white Americans and conservatives, with “hot” topics such as veterans’ struggles and anti-immigration policies. The Facebook page *Secured Borders* posted more racist posts, which blatantly attacked Muslim Americans, Blacks, and also talked about keeping “illegals” out of the country by building a wall. On the other hand, posts on the Russian IRA-sponsored Facebook pages, *United Muslims of America* and *Blacktivist*, were anti-racist in tone, sometimes with religious overtones. It was thought that these particular pages were intended to foment distrust of white people, law enforcement agencies, and the American political system, and perhaps suppress voter turnout by Muslims and blacks. The Twitter dataset included mixed reviews about all the issues. Although, majority of the tweets still included pro-Trump agenda. Nevertheless, there was still a lot of apolitical chatter.

During the 2019/2020 impeachment proceedings, similar patterns were found to those of the 2016 election. This study found that most of the fake news were posted in favour of Trump and against his impeachment proceedings, whereas the Democrat party and its members were attacked in most of the sampled social media postings. These posts also micro-targeted specific populations by focusing on certain issues, for example, the Facebook *CAIR* page concentrated on anti-racist posts, while Facebook pages such as *American Thinker*, *Godfather Politics*, and *Wallbuilders* focused more on racist posts and anti-LGBTQ posts. The twitter dataset was more specific to the impeachment proceedings of Donald Trump. It mainly discussed issues of legitimacy of impeachment, and showed support for Trump and against his impeachment. There were two hashtags *#Impeachment* and *#RussianInterference* which discussed anti-Trump attitudes and support for his impeachment. It is important to note that it cannot be said with certainty that disinformation activities by foreign actors were in evidence throughout both datasets. It is likely that some of the activity in the second dataset came from foreign sources, but not to the same extent as the first dataset.

7.2. Limitations and Future Directions

As with most research projects, this project has a number of limitations, some of which could be addressed through future research endeavors. It is important to note that this is an exploratory research, as there have not been any other studies as of yet on the dissemination of disinformation on social media sites during the impeachment inquiry and trial; therefore, more research is needed on this topic.

The scope of the study and the time limitations did not permit consideration of all of the data that was harvested from both social media platforms during both events. Therefore, a larger sample size might alter the final results. There is a high level of confidence that the messages from 2016 were Russian IRA-generated. Recall that Robert Mueller brought up the issue of Russian interference in his report (Mueller, 2019), and that messages from the first dataset were selected for their known IRA origins. On the other hand, the Facebook data collected from the 2019/2020 impeachment proceedings were selected on the basis of an assessment made by a third party – Media Bias/Fact Check. While the Facebook pages typically expounded extreme views, with no supporting evidence, it was not possible to infer from that alone that they were being controlled by hostile foreign actors. The Twitter data was collected on the basis of whether or not the hashtag was trending, an assessment which may or may not reflect an orchestrated propagation and dissemination of fake news. However, it has been argued by other observers that many of these hashtags start “trending” as a consequence of amplification achieved through the coordinated use of social media bots (Barbaro et al., 2020; Dilanian, 2020; Goldman et al., 2020).

This study focused exclusively on data obtained from the two most popular social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Future research should also consider newly discovered disinformation campaigns in other online platforms or online news sources, for example, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, and Breitbart. Instagram was launched in October 2010, and at this point has the highest growth rate of any of the social media outlets. It had 10 million users one year after it was founded, but exceeded 500 million by June 2016, with about 100 million living in the U.S. (Schmidbauer et al., 2018). Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, was also thought to have been used (or abused) in the fake news campaigns surrounding the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the 2019/2020 impeachment proceedings. As it is

one of the fastest-growing social media platforms, further research into Instagram would definitely be beneficial, especially when it comes to research into the use of images and videos, something that was not done in this present study.

Another research direction would be to compare data from this current study to data taken from *The Buffalo Chronicle (Canadian Edition)*, *USAREally*, and the website EU Disinformation, where supporting evidence already exists that the messaging was in fact created by the Russian IRA. This would allow for an exploration of the continuity or discontinuity of discourses and themes across borders and across time periods, as the EU Disinformation site contains numerous known examples of IRA messaging during the 2019 European Parliamentary election (Satariano, 2019; Scott & Cerulus, 2019). *The Buffalo Chronicle (Canadian Edition)* was said to have targeted Canadians during the 2019 federal election (Oved, 2019), and *USAREally* is said to be targeting American voters in the upcoming 2020 election (Collins & Zadrozny, 2018; Roose, 2018).

Many of the IRA-generated fake news and disinformation posts and tweets pertaining to the 2016 U.S. election were deliberately taken down by Facebook and Twitter. Most of the links to external sources on those posts and tweets were erased at the same time. This made it difficult to know precisely what those links contained. It is possible that they may have led back to Russian websites that hosted fake news or falsified images. In a few cases, it was discovered that the links found on these posts did indeed lead back to Russian websites. Wherever such links still existed, they were saved for future research purposes. In future, all the data from those links should be downloaded and saved, to preclude any issues that might arise should any remaining links happen to be deleted. After that, any retrieved videos and images could be subjected to content analysis. The second data set was collected during the more recent impeachment inquiry and trial, and thus, the links to other news stories, videos, images, Facebook pages and Twitter hashtags were still active. The data available from following these links could and should be downloaded and saved for future inspection.

Another limitation is that all of the codes and classifications that were assigned to the posts and tweets that were sampled in this study were created by only one researcher. With additional coders, inter-rater reliability measures might provide more concrete measures of reliability across coder interpretations and coding techniques. That said, it is thought that the use of inductive and deductive approaches in both parts of this

study helped to prevent biases from being interjecting into the coding process. The multiple stages of coding and the cyclical nature of the data collection and analysis, which are consistent with the grounded theory approach, allowed for the careful interrogation of each code and theme. A breakdown of the classifications was presented at the beginning of the report on each of the datasets, and detailed descriptions and quotes were used across subjects to further promote transparency. Although this study is not triangulated by the use of multiple researchers, or through the application of different theoretical perspectives or research methods, it is felt that the analysis of two different events that occurred at two different times, plus the use of data from different data sources and platforms, enabled the patterns to emerge naturally, and allowed for internal triangulation of the findings across the two different datasets and the different time periods from which they were taken. However, future studies in this area could benefit from multiple researchers coding the data and triangulating their results, which in turn might enhance the validity of studies of a similar nature and/or that employ a similar methodological approach.

The posts and tweets that were classified as “fake news” included inflammatory opinions and/or were engaged in outright falsehoods, without any supporting evidence, and/or included an unsubstantiated opinion. As Facebook and Twitter are platforms for people’s opinions, and sometimes you cannot expect people to have opinions that are based on empirical research; therefore, future studies can benefit from adding another category as “unsubstantiated opinion” which will differentiate “news” from “opinion.”

7.3. Conclusion

Overall, this thesis straddles different fields across academia, including criminology, political science, linguistic. and communications. The current study reports mostly on U.S. political events; however, disinformation activities conducted by hostile foreign actors are by no means restricted to social media in the United States. Recall that extensive use was made of Twitter to advocate for Britain leaving the EU during the 2016 Brexit referendum (Bastos & Mercea, 2019; Evolvi, 2018; Howard & Kollanyi, 2016; Intelligence and Security Committee, 2020; Narayanan et al., 2017). Numerous Twitter bots were discovered during the Brexit referendum that were eventually traced back to the Russian-IRA, and accusations were leveled by the former Prime Minister regarding Russian interference in the U.K. elections and the spread of fake news on social media

(BBC News, 2017; Intelligence and Security Committee, 2020; Mason, 2017; Narayanan et al., 2017). Moreover, such activities have been documented in the Czech Republic and Slovakia as far back as 2013 (Smoleňová, 2015), and in the 2014 election in the Ukraine (Cartwright, Weir, Nahar, et al., 2019; Khaldarova & Pantti, 2016; Mejias & Vokuev, 2017). Further, there was evidence suggesting that foreign actors may have tried to influence the 2019 Canadian federal election. In February 2019, *CBC* issued an analysis of 9.6 million tweets from Twitter troll accounts that were linked to suspected foreign influence campaigns, that attempted to stoke controversy over pipelines, refugees and immigration in Canada (Oral, 2019; Rocha & Yates, 2019). These accounts were suspected to have originated in Russia, Iran, and Venezuela (Oral, 2019).

It appears that disinformation attacks mounted by hostile foreign actors during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the 2016 Brexit referendum were able to achieve results that likely would not have been attainable through more conventional military tactics. Again, the disinformation tactics employed by the Russians seemingly succeeded in disintegrating the European Union, installing a pro-Russian figure in the White House, and testing the strength of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), all without firing a single shot. This could be construed as an all-out assault on Western-style democracy (Cartwright, Weir, Nahar, et al., 2019). With democracy under threat from the intentional and possibly criminal manipulation of social media, and the resulting “digital wildfires” (Webb et al., 2016), legislators and government regulatory agencies around the world are eagerly seeking solutions and defenses against disinformation warfare. This present study analyzed data taken from suspected fake news and disinformation campaigns on Facebook and Twitter, which adduced evidence of foreign interference in U.S. politics, and highlighted some of the main narratives that appeared and re-appeared across the various datasets.

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