



THIS WEEK'S SPEAKER

May 11, 2021

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Dr. Patrick Warren, Clemson University presents “Spot the Troll”

By Henry Bostic

In September 2020, the [Clemson University Media Forensics Hub](#) released the [Spot the Troll Quiz](#), an online interactive educational tool that attempts to train users on how to identify inauthentic social media accounts used by coordinated false social media campaigns worldwide. The tool walks users through eight recreated social-media profiles, five of which were taken from an inauthentic campaign operated by the Russian Internet Research Agency and three of which were authentic accounts.

Since its release, almost a million people around the world have taken the Quiz! On May 11, Charlotte Rotarians enjoyed a fascinating and enlightening presentation about “Spot the Troll” by one of its Clemson developers, Dr. Patrick Warren, associate professor of economics.

Warren told Rotarians not to feel bad about their performance. “I have a secret to tell you only after you’ve taken the quiz,” he revealed. “The main thing we’re trying to accomplish . . . is not to teach you how to spot fake accounts, but rather to teach you how HARD it is to spot fake accounts.” There are people who spend their careers creating facing accounts with the goal of fooling you.

Warren explained that in 2018 he was discussing a newspaper article about fake media accounts believed to be originating in Russia with Dr. Darren Linvill, associate professor of communications. It was not clear how prominent they were or what they were up to, but both realized that there was an opportunity for Clemson to analyze these accounts and get a better sense of what was going on. “That has spawned a research stream that has spanned the world.” He and Linvill have collaborated to lead that effort.

The fake accounts in question, he said, originated in Russia at the Internet Research Agency – an organization sponsored by Vladimir Putin’s friend, oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin. It was targeted initially at Russians but beginning in 2013 shifted primarily to the U.S.

Dr. Warren said they were more interested in what the organization was up to, what they were trying to accomplish rather than just the output volume. The goal was to arm people and governments to combat this campaign. The three million tweets fell into five broad categories: fearmongers, newsfeeds, hashtag gamers, right trolls, and left trolls.

- Fearmongers concentrated on fake disasters; they were not effective and discontinued.
- Newsfeeds consisted mainly of online fake accounts that looked like a local news feed in a US city. They talked about local news and didn't try to interject bogus stories. They shared real local news to build credibility but often gave it a subtle twist to emphasize polarizing stories about violence, racially charged incidents to make the world seem more dangerous and divisive than it is.
- Hashtag gamers attempted to interject themselves into real time conversations and were particularly active near the end of the 2016 presidential campaign.
- Right(wing) trolls who pretended to be legitimate so they could infiltrate actual organization and change what they talked about.
- Left(wing) trolls were similar. Build credibility with actual news gleaned from local newspapers and television stations then, for instance, take a stand that that might play up divisions: for example, promote the idea of reparations for blacks descended from slaves to drive a wedge with non-slave descendants or add to animosity with conservative groups.

Quoting Oscar Wilde, "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," Warren noted that the success of the Russians efforts in the 2018 election cycle has led other authoritarian states to jump into the inauthentic social media account business, especially the Chinese and the Iranians. "The Russian playbook is open to all . . . and they are all using it."

Also, Warren noted the Russians have stepped up efforts and have improved their approach. Most notably they have outsourced and are now using surrogates in Ghana and Nigeria, especially for the left-wing trolls.

Warren said that although most of the Clemson research has been directed at Twitter accounts, the infiltration efforts are directed at all forms of electronic media.

What can we do to protect ourselves? Warren had several suggestions:

1. Be careful of accounts that play to our political biases. "They want to be your friends. They don't fight. They want others to fight."
2. Strengthen our democracy by investing in our civil, educational, and international institutions. He cited the effort in the 2018 campaign to target and divide NATO and Western allies.
3. Support and require high standards of ourselves, friends, family, politicians, policymakers, platforms, media, and brands.

"I've gotten and lot slower on my retweet button than I used to be." Ask some pointed questions. Do you know this person you're possibly giving your microphone to? How do you know they are who they proport to be? It's worth taking a second to reconsider. Think before you act. Warren emphasized he has started holding the people who represent him to higher standards based on the kinds of content they share.

Is it true? We learn growing up to try to figure out if something is true or not, Warren said. "In social media there's a second question we need to ask? Is it true and do I want to give this person my microphone?"

He encouraged us all to take the Spot the Troll quiz.

*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/548113382>

Dr. Warren's introduction begins at approximately 18:55 minutes.