

How Russian tweets backed Corbyn — and attacked the Tories

Our researchers analysed 20,000 tweets from Russian accounts from the 2017 election campaign and assessed whether they were positive or negative messages about Labour or the Tories. This is only a sample, so academics say the scale of the Russian intervention will be far higher. Retweeting helps a message go viral, which means it can be seen by many thousands of people

Daily messages

500
400
300
200
100
0

Positive messages for Labour

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

100
200
300

Negative messages for Tories

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

MAY

JUNE

Source: Twitter data sample from Swansea University

May 18
Tories launch manifesto

Gabrielle Wilson
@NR2AERXVfDY0N

Retweets Jeremy Corbyn's message: "@Theresa_May and the @Conservatives manifesto abandons older people & will do nothing to address inequality in our society. #ToryManifesto"

Account language: Russian
Account status: now suspended

RETWEETS	2,280
LIKES	2,731

May 22
Manchester bombings

Una Bailey
@BupMPaalzC9rWq

Retweets Corbyn's message: "I am horrified by the horrendous events in Manchester. My thoughts are with families and friends of those who have died and been injured"

Account language: Russian
Account status: since disappeared

RETWEETS	7,482
LIKES	16,949

May 25
Praise for Jeremy Corbyn's nationwide rallies

Camilla Howard
@ILVTXUK8AQKRF2x

Retweets John Prescott's message: "I've never seen crowds for a politician like this since 1997 #GE2017"

Account language: Russian
Account status: since disappeared

RETWEETS	1,956
LIKES	2,738

May 30
Liar Liar song about Theresa May enters top 10 in charts

Irene Gray
@Dtsuw2k9aZAGUdC

Retweets @VoteJezzaCorbyn's message: "The anti-Theresa May song 'Liar Liar GE2017' is officially in the top 10 on UK iTunes! Now let's go for number 1"

Account language: Russian
Account status: now suspended

RETWEETS	1,273
LIKES	1,137

May 31
Corbyn appears on TV debate but May fails to turn up

Irene Anderson
@TEP6IXYFSWahfMP

Retweets Corbyn's message: "@Theresa_May come & debate me. Any time. Any place. Britain deserves to see the only two people who could be the next Prime Minister debate"

Account language: Russian
Account status: since disappeared

RETWEETS	13,265
LIKES	22,544

June 2
May and Corbyn appear on Question Time

Jessica Ferguson
@3udLH4vNixhDkxX

Retweets message from Corbyn's account: "Tonight's the final 'debate' of the #GE2017 campaign, but @theresa_May & I will be on #BBCOT separately because she's refusing to take me on"

Account language: Russian
Account status: now suspended

RETWEETS	8,683
LIKES	14,325

June 8
Election day

Jessica Langdon
@7vqg0Bz2uNfL1Wl

Retweets message from Corbyn-supporting journalist Owen Jones: "The Tories think they're going to win big. Ring your friends, talk to your workmates, talk to younger voters. Tick tick..."

Account language: Russian
Account status: since disappeared

RETWEETS	1,813
LIKES	2,240

Invasion of the Russian bots to fight in Corbyn's army

Did Russia help close Labour's election gap with the Tories? *Insight* reports

INVESTIGATION

It was the moment that brought a tear to the eye of the prime minister. At 10pm on June 8, 2017, a shock exit poll revealed that Theresa May's seemingly well-judged gamble of bolstering her majority with a snap general election had backfired.

The Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, had defied expectations. When the campaign began there had been a widespread belief that he was unelectable and his demise would be swift following the inevitable Conservative landslide.

But the campaign changed that: Corbyn lifted Labour support from 25% to 40%. The party's gains cemented the most unlikely political transformation in decades, elevating Corbyn to a serious contender whose name would be sung with cult-like reverence when he appeared on stage at the Glastonbury festival a fortnight later.

The causes of the result are still being debated. Was it the galvanisation of the youth vote, did May run a lacklustre campaign or were the polls wrong from the beginning?

One question has been largely overlooked, until now. Did Moscow attempt to influence the British general election by using social media in the same way that it tried to boost the fortunes of Donald Trump during the 2016 American election?

A ground-breaking investigation by The Sunday Times in conjunction with Swansea University has found the first strong evidence that large numbers of mechanised Russian social media

accounts attempted to influence the result during the seven-week campaign. Our research suggests there was an orchestrated attempt to propel Corbyn into Downing Street by bombarding the public with positive messages in support of Labour, using Twitter accounts that were mostly created after the election was suggested early last year.

At the same time, the Russian accounts identified in our research disseminated a deluge of negative propaganda against Labour's main rival, the Conservatives. Comments such as "The Tories are literally killing our children" were retweeted by mechanised Russian accounts using fake English-sounding women's names.

Professor Oleksandr Talavera, the Swansea University economist who collected the data, said: "The samples provide evidence that Russian language bots were used deliberately to try to influence the election in favour of Labour and against the Conservatives.

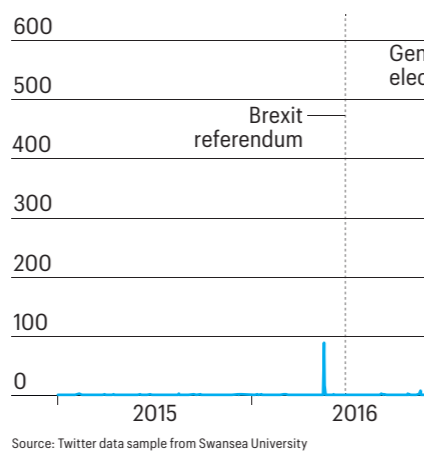
"The data represents just a small random sample and therefore the Russian-language automated bot behaviour we have observed is likely to be only the tip of the iceberg of their general election operation."

Our research centred on millions of election tweets collected by Swansea University during the campaign. We narrowed them down to a sample of 20,000 tweets from accounts using Russian language or Russian place names that were posted in the four weeks leading up to the election. We asked a team of researchers to read each one to assess whether they were positive or negative for the main political parties.

We discovered that many of the messages were retweeted sent by thousands of

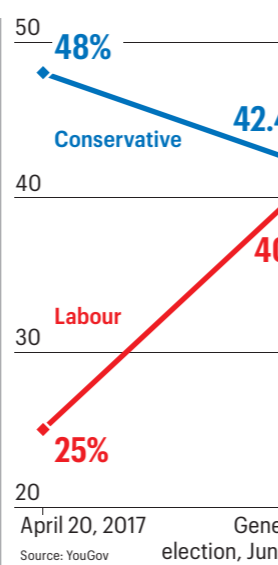
PUSHING UP THE ...

Creation dates and number of Russian Twitter accounts posting pro-Labour or anti-Tory messages during the 2017 general election



Source: Twitter data sample from Swansea University

... LABOUR VOTE



Source: YouGov

mechanised Twitter accounts – commonly known as bots. Most of the 6,500 Russian accounts supporting Labour were bots. They were typically created in huge batches at similar times in the lead-up to the election and were later suspended by Twitter's moderators or shut themselves down.

These accounts were often easy for our researchers to identify because they frequently hid behind 15-character user names that contained a mixture of numbers and letters in upper and lower case. On some occasions they retweeted the same message of support within seconds of each other.

The results were stark. Nine out of 10 of the messages that expressed an opinion on Labour were positive and conversely nine out of 10 which mentioned the Conservatives were negative. The interest in the other main political parties appeared minor.

The story of the Russian attempt to influence the election begins on March 6

last year, when William Hague, the former foreign secretary, set a hare running in the Conservative Party by suggesting that the prime minister should take advantage of Corbyn's dwindling support by calling an early general election.

Over the next 24 hours an army of Russian bot accounts was created. They were uniformly western women's names accompanied by alphanumeric user names and, although the primary language for the accounts was Russian, many claimed they were in the Pacific time zone. They would later take an unusual interest in the British general election.

The next month, after the prime minister stood outside Downing Street to announce the election, there was a series of new spikes in the creation of bot accounts identified by our researchers.

Many older accounts were also re-activated. Two days after the election announcement, Nikola from Moscow retweeted Corbyn: "They've broken

their promises for seven years. How can we believe a word they say over the next seven weeks?" And AlecMoody from the US retweeted a message railing against Corbyn's alleged censorship by the BBC, using the hashtag "Corbyn4PM".

In evidence to the US Congress, Twitter would later identify both those accounts as creations of the Internet Research Agency, a shadowy company in St Petersburg that employs hundreds of "trolls" to post Kremlin propaganda on social media. During the American elections the agency waged a campaign of messages supporting Donald Trump and disparaging Hillary Clinton.

The Russian bots identified by our researchers followed a similar pattern in the UK election. Over and over again, they amplified tweets that supported Labour and those that attacked the Conservatives, helping the spread of the messages to hundreds, thousands and possibly millions of people. Much of the propaganda centred on key events in the election. At the times when the bots spread positivity for Labour, they would also spread almost equal amounts of negativity for the Conservatives.

So when the Conservatives launched their election manifesto on May 18 the bots stepped up the output of pro-Labour tweets and were whithering about the Tories. For example, "Gabrielle Wilson" retweeted a message criticising Theresa May because that "manifesto abandons older people & will do nothing to address inequality".

On closer inspection, Wilson's first language was Russian and her account name was @sMzNFv7wWTKTWO4, a name that was created in Russian and it was suspended at some point after she had tweeted. She was a bot.

The same family of bots were quick to defend the Labour leader whenever Today inviting people to watch Corbyn's speech in Reading. The event drew criticism in the newspapers because a surprisingly large crowd attended during a workday lunchtime.

On closer inspection, Morgan's user name was @sMzNFv7wWTKTWO4, a name that was created in Russian and it was suspended at some point after she had tweeted. She was a bot.

They avidly retweeted his personal Twitter account and broadcast his movements around the UK. In early June, "Lillian Morgan" retweeted a message from the pro-Kremlin broadcaster Russia Today inviting people to watch Corbyn's speech in Reading. The event drew criticism in the newspapers because a surprisingly large crowd attended during a workday lunchtime.

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retweeted "Heather", "Hayley" and "Noelle" a few hours later at exactly the same time.

In fact, in our sample there were 34 accounts with similar-sounding English female names who retweeted this identical message that day in two batches less than 10 minutes apart. All the women were Russian speakers and their accounts had come into existence over the course of two days in the fourth week of the election campaign. They also all contained the familiar 15-character alphanumeric username and would later vanish from the Twittersphere.

By election day, the bots were again engaged imploring Labour supporters to get out and vote. "Jessica Langdon" was up early retweeting a message from the Corbyn-supporting journalist Owen Jones that said: "The Tories think they're going to win big. Ring your friends, talk to your workmates, talk to younger voters. Tick tick."

Ben Nimmo, of the Atlantic Council's digital forensic research lab, told this newspaper that the evidence suggested the bots has been used in "a dedicated effort" to influence the election.

"If you compare the rhetoric on Russia from Jeremy Corbyn and Theresa May it's pretty obvious which one's the Kremlin's party to prefer," he said.

He added, however, that the effectiveness of the bots and the precise role, if any, of President Vladimir Putin's government in this attempt were questions that remained. The election did, however, provide the most extraordinary result. Written off at the outset, Corbyn defied the doubters and increased Labour's share of the vote by more than any other Labour leader since 1945.

INSIGHT RESEARCH TEAM

George Arbuthnot, Jonathan Calvert, Kristyna Shields, Louis Goddard, Mary O'Connor, Katie Weston, Malik Ouzia, Rebecca Gualandri, Rosie Bradbury

It's pretty obvious who the Kremlin will prefer

HOW WE TRACED THE BALLOT BOTS

What did we do? Swansea University passed The Sunday Times 20,000 general-election-related tweets sent in the four weeks leading up to the vote by accounts that gave their language or location as Russian. A Twitter account's primary language is not usually clearly visible on a Twitter profile, but the data obtained by Swansea

included that crucial detail. A team of researchers then painstakingly analysed each tweet to determine whether the user had posted positive or negative messages about any of the major parties.

What did we find? From the tweets expressing a view on a party, the vast majority were pro-Labour or anti-Tory. Indeed, nine out of 10 messages giving a view on Labour were positive and nine out of 10 Conservative messages were negative. They were posted by 6,500 Russian accounts, most of

which were clearly identifiable as automated accounts.

How did we identify the Russian automated bots? We were able to spot the bots because the vast majority were created simultaneously in huge batches in the months immediately leading up to the election. Many then tweeted exactly the same pro-Labour message in unison, and have since either disappeared or been suspended by Twitter.

What is the scale of the

Russian interference? The Swansea University academics say the data is a very small sample of all general-election-related Twitter activity, which means the Russian interference detected is "the tip of the iceberg". Twitter failed to respond when asked how many Russian accounts that tweeted about the 2017 general election it had suspended. It says it provides academics with access to 1% of public tweets. When pressured into a retrospective investigation in America, Twitter admitted 50,000 Russian-linked

accounts had disseminated political content during the election cycle. The social network has been sharply criticised in the UK and the US for failing to prevent a torrent of disinformation on its platforms.

How does this compare to Russian activity detected in the US election? Several of the same tactics can be seen. Our data shows Russian accounts tweeted on election day to urge Labour supporters to vote. US analysis says they did exactly the same for Trump voters. Many of our Russian

bot accounts gave American states as their location in exactly the same way as was seen in the US.

Who in Russia is behind this? Putin made exerting soft power an official foreign policy in 2013. Since then, the country has been accused of interfering in elections across the western world. Experts say the interference in the UK general election seen in our data was likely either ordered by the Kremlin or directed by someone seeking to impress Putin.

Moscow mules: the left's long red romance

APOLOGISTS

Tim Shipman Political Editor

Jeremy Corbyn and his closest aide Seumas Milne have a long history of taking a more positive approach to Russia than any other mainstream political figures. The two share a passion for anti-colonial foreign policy stances, which has seen them explain away Russian aggression while denouncing the activities of the US, Israel and Britain.

Corbyn was a regular on RT, the Russian state-funded television channel, before he became leader. His shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, has since said Labour MPs

should not appear on the propaganda station, but Corbyn has refused to issue such an order.

He has also repeatedly criticised Nato, branding it "the father of the Cold War" and suggesting it should have "shut up shop" in 1990. After the Salisbury nerve agent attack in March, Corbyn received security briefings from the government but refused to say unequivocally that Russia was behind the attempted murders and called for "dialogue with Russia".

In the Commons, he preferred to attack the Tory party for taking donations from Russians – a move many of his MPs saw as ill-judged. Russian state media

reported his comments approvingly.

In a briefing for journalists, Milne, Corbyn's communications director, repeatedly suggested alternatives to the government's explanation that the Russian state was responsible, including that the nerve gas attack was ordered by another former Soviet state or mafia gang.

In October 2014, just a year before he became Corbyn's spin doctor, Milne was pictured shaking hands with Vladimir Putin at a conference in Sochi, Russia,

after his invasion of Ukraine. In March 2015, Milne wrote in The Guardian that "Putin has now become a cartoon villain" in the West and blaming the Russian invasion of Ukraine on Nato's "anti-Russian incitement". He later said Russia's annexation of Crimea was "clearly defensive".

The alliance, by embracing the Baltic nations and Ukraine, was guilty of having "marched relentlessly eastwards", ignoring the fact that the Baltic countries joined Nato of their own free will having spent 50 years under the Soviet yoke.

Labour MPs believe Corbyn's approach is a legacy of Moscow's opposition to the US in the Cold War and has

led to residual support for Putin's regime even though it is no longer communist but an authoritarian kleptocracy.

Milne wrote in 2006 that the USSR "encompassed genuine idealism", and "helped to drive up welfare standards in the West". His view was shared by Corbyn, who said in 1991 that he was "concerned at the break-up of the Soviet Union" and suggested in 2015, that the build-up of Nato forces had given Russia "more of an excuse" for its aggression in Ukraine.

Ben Nimmo, of the Atlantic Council's digital forensic research lab, said: "The Kremlin likes politicians who are not going to be too critical of Russia."

ELECTION SURPRISES

The 2017 election was full of surprises:

- Labour won the social media war because more people shared its posts even though the Tories outspent them on Facebook adverts
- When terrorists struck in Manchester and London Bridge, it was assumed Theresa May would benefit but Jeremy Corbyn gained support by focusing on police cuts
- Corbyn made rallies a campaign priority – and gathered crowds of 1,000 people with a few tweets
- Student turnout helped Labour win key seats such as Canterbury

Labour candidates' online vitriol leaves pledge of 'gentler politics' in tatters

Caroline Wheeler and Andrew Gilligan

Labour candidates standing in this week's local elections have routinely hurled vitriolic abuse at opponents online, despite Jeremy Corbyn's promise to embrace a "kinder, gentler politics".

An investigation by The Sunday Times has uncovered a series of insulting tweets and Facebook slurs from Labour candidates. The abusive messages include tweets by Tony Cottier, the Labour candidate for the Bebbington ward on Wirral council, who described the Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg, as an "Opus Dei c***" in March last year. He also tweeted that Theresa May was a

"heartless, blithering bitch" while watching BBC's Question Time debate shortly before the 2017 election. On the same day, he joked about a voter, who did not support Corbyn, dying from a "massive coronary".

Sam Gardner, the Labour candidate for Westminster council's Abbey Road ward, shared a video on Facebook in 2010 stating that "if you voted Tory, you're a c***". In another Facebook post in 2010 he said David Cameron should "f*** off and die". Other candidates have turned on members of their own party. In June 2016, Henry Fowler, Labour's candidate for the Nightingale ward on Wandsworth council in southwest London, called moderate Labour MPs "scum" in a tweet.

At the height of Labour's recent anti-semitism storm, Barbara Hallsworth, the Labour candidate for Birstall and Birkenshaw, Kirkcaldy, who joked in a tweet in October 2010 about referring to someone as "whacky blacky". She also called a



The Tory MP Jacob Rees-Mogg, centre, has often been been the target of abuse

character in Glee as "dyke lesbian bitch in a tracksuit" in a tweet in March 2010. Labour was urged to sign up to the respect pledge introduced by the Conservatives in January after the harassment and abuse of parliamentary candidates in last year's general election. Under the Tories' code of conduct, candidates will be suspended if they insult rivals – but Corbyn has never endorsed the policy.

The prime minister also announced a crackdown on the intimidation of candidates in February on the centenary of key aspects of women's suffrage. May said it was unacceptable for anyone to face threats for their views and that she might bring in a new offence to protect politicians and their families.

Labour gave up vetting shortlists of candidates centrally more than a decade ago, which has led to a number of embarrassing gaffes by the party. Last week Labour was forced to drop Mandy Richards – who questioned whether the Manchester terrorist attack and the murder of Labour MP Jo Cox happened – as the parliamentary candidate for Worcester after revelations in The Sunday Times. Other controversial appointments include a candidate selected in London, who wrote in an email he had "visited houses" to "help" voters fill in their postal ballot papers. Anisur Rahman, also known as Anisur Rahman Anis, was investigated by

police after the 2009 incident in Tower Hamlets. At the time the local Labour MP, Rubana Ali, condemned his behaviour as "completely unacceptable". However, Rahman has been chosen as a Labour candidate for the borough's Canary Wharf ward. He did not respond to requests for comment. Another Labour candidate in the borough, Ehtasham Haque, shared an article on Facebook describing Winston Churchill as a "mass murderer". The Labour Party, which has a code of conduct for candidates and a social media policy, said: "All complaints about breaches of our rules are fully investigated and any appropriate disciplinary action taken."

Leader ignored warning of anti-semitism 'Achilles heel'

Caroline Wheeler

Jeremy Corbyn was warned three years ago that anti-semitism would become his "Achilles heel" but chose not to address it, a former aide to the Labour leader has revealed.

Harry Fletcher, who spent a year as Corbyn's adviser on communications and strategy, said he was "extremely disappointed" by the lack of response. "I warned Corbyn three years ago that he needed to deal with the issue of anti-semitism otherwise it would become his Achilles heel," he said. "I even came up with a strategy but it was never acted upon."



The anti-semitic mural in east London that Corbyn at first defended

The claim came as Labour was urged to adopt a new definition of anti-semitism and punish any MPs, officials or candidates who use the words "Zionist" or "Zionism" in a pejorative way. A letter sent by the all-party parliamentary group against anti-semitism asks all the party leaders to adopt a

code of behaviour based on the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of anti-semitism. Disciplinary action would also be taken against those who engage in Holocaust denial or revisionism, or allude to Jews as a fifth column or as part of any global conspiracy theory.

The letter demands better pastoral care and welfare support for Jewish MPs subjected to abuse and for all new MPs to be given training on anti-semitism. The demands will put further pressure on Corbyn, whose past behaviour could have fallen short of the new standards. For a time he defended a mural in Tower Hamlets depicting Jewish bankers playing monopoly on the backs of the poor. Last week Corbyn met Jewish leaders to discuss anti-semitism in Labour. But the Board of Deputies of British Jews and Jewish Leadership Council described the meeting as a "disappointing missed opportunity".

Oligarchs salt away £34bn in British overseas territories

Leila Haddou

Russians have more than £34bn in British overseas territories, new figures reveal, as MPs prepare to vote on a bill that will force the territories to unmask corrupt individuals holding "dirty money" in their jurisdictions.

Theresa May promised to freeze Russian assets and money in response to the attempted murder of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury in March, saying "there is no place for these people, or their money, in our country". Yet analysis by campaign group Global Witness claims at least £34bn in Russian funds are currently invested in British overseas territories

– five times the sum directly held in the UK – more than £30bn of it in the British Virgin Islands alone. The figures show a further £10bn has passed through the territories in the past decade, making them second only to Cyprus as a preferred destination for Russian cash. The analysis comes as Andrew Mitchell, the former international development secretary, prepares to lead a back-bench move to compel the overseas territories to have publicly accessible ultimate ownership registers of companies by 2020. MPs will vote on the amendment, tabled by the Labour MP Dame Margaret Hodge, on Tuesday. "We've

just had the Commonwealth conference, where all these countries were proud to be associated with Britain," said Hodge. "Yet Britain, through our association with these overseas territories, is the destination of choice for dirty money from Russia. "If we're... serious about using our muscle to constrain the Russians then this is a very direct, straightforward way of curtailing some of the worst of their activity." Supporters of the move include the former chancellor Kenneth Clarke and Tom Tugendhat, chair of the foreign affairs committee. Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party are also

supporting the amendment. Campaigners say the territories enable tax avoidance and provide safe havens for stolen assets and the proceeds of crime. They have so far resisted calls to follow the UK's lead in providing publicly available "beneficial ownership" registers, which identify the real owners of companies. Murray Worth, senior campaigner for Global Witness, said: "The UK government is responsible for these shady island economies and must make sure they can no longer be used to facilitate laundering dirty money by enabling the secrecy that makes these outrageous schemes."