Nyetwork News: The Convergence of the Russophobia Narrative in Russian Propaganda and Fox News in Election 2020

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Sarah Oates, University of Maryland, College Park
Gordon Ramsay, University of Akureyri
Olya Gurevich, MarvelousAI
Danielle Deibler, MarvelousAI
David Rubenstein, Middlebury College

Corresponding author email: soates@umd.edu

Abstract

This study demonstrates how the key 'Russophobia' narrative was woven both through Russian propaganda and Fox News coverage of the U.S. 2020 elections. As part of a larger study on how Russian propaganda narratives dovetail with rightwing media coverage in the U.S., this analysis uses human content analysis and machine learning to identify and track how a narrative that claimed criticism of Russia is based on Democratic paranoia was deployed on RT and Sputnik and echoed on Fox News. The study has three main goals. First, it presents the theory of 'Nyetwork News,' that former U.S. President Donald Trump and some American news outlets relied more on classic Russian techniques of propaganda than traditional U.S. news values. In addition, this paper identifies key elements of the Russophobia narrative, which is broader than any single frame or set of stories. Finally, this paper suggests two different methodological approaches to detecting Russian content in U.S. news. It demonstrates a way of combining human content analysis and machine learning to tag and trace news narratives on the MarvelousAI Story Arc system. We also use the open-source software tool Steno to detect the presence of Russian propaganda text in a broad sweep of U.S. media, with initial findings of a close relationship between Russian propaganda and the right-wing outlet Infowars.

Keywords: Russophobia, U.S. 2020 Elections, Russia, Trump, campaign narratives, machine learning, automated content analysis, Fox News, RT, Sputnik, InfoWars

Introduction

Trying to make sense of the U.S. presidential campaigns from 2016 onwards is confusing for citizens and scholars alike. Our established understanding of how media are supposed to function in the American elections has been significantly challenged. In large part, this is because Donald Trump broke so many rules about political communication and still won the election against an established Democratic challenger endorsed by the political elite. At the same time, compelling evidence of foreign interference in the election by Russian operatives has illuminated the vulnerability of democratic media ecosystems to malign influence. In a confusing environment that came to feature constant attacks on the free press and other democratic institutions from the White House itself, it became very difficult to discern the boundaries between domestic and foreign disinformation.

For content analysis scholars, this represents a significant and vital challenge. As a democratic society, we should be able to delineate between what is domestic free speech and what is foreign propaganda. Given that the United States has few legal limits on speech, it is easy for foreign actors to pose as citizens or otherwise distribute their content through the American media system. What we quickly discovered in our study, however, is that it was often difficult to tell the difference between messages from the Russians and those from the Trump campaign, a synergy also noted by Jamieson (2018). We are not attempting to study or even suggest that there was active cooperation among Trump, the White House, and the Russian government. Rather, we are interested in how the messages dovetailed.

In order to examine this overlap, this study uses the concept of narrative, i.e. "a coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories that share a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience expectations" (Halverson et al. 2011, page 14), to isolate and study messages as they move through media ecosystems. After studying a wide range of campaign narratives in 2020 as well as the post-election 'Stop the Steal' narrative, we were able to find resonance between Trump and Russian messaging. However, we were more struck by the way in which Trump's messaging more closely resembled that of propaganda rather than traditional American political campaigning. This suggests that the truly interesting link between Trump and Russia is the former American president's adoption of Kremlin propaganda techniques rather than Kremlin content appearing in U.S news. We would expect that U.S. news would follow what Siebert et al. (1956) defined as a libertarian or commercial model. Instead, what we witnessed from Trump was often closer to their authoritarian model, in which the media are co-opted to work only in the interest of the elite. Hence, our detection of an identical 'Russophobia' narrative in both Russian English-language propaganda and Fox News suggests that part of the U.S. media functions more as an authoritarian echo chamber than as a traditional libertarian media system, shifting from our traditional network news to one that favors propagandizing subjects over enlightening citizens.

Nyetwork News

Trump pursued a constant strategy of attacking the U.S. news media (Meeks 2020), but what was this system under attack? And how does this compare with the Russian media system and how does the open U.S. media system help Russians carry information out warfare on the United States?

The classic work of Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm divided media systems into four categories: libertarian, authoritarian, social responsibility, and Soviet. Although they labeled their analysis as "systems," the models were derived from observation of specific countries (including the United States and the USSR). The American media represent the libertarian model in which it is "the right and duty of the press to serve as an extralegal check on government," so the press has "to be completely free from control or domination by those elements which it was to guard against" (page 56). In practical terms, this means that the state should not own or control the mass media.[1] The fundamental principle of the U.S. media is that of objectivity, although it is

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[1] The United States does have the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), which was allocated $445 million in 2021 (https://www.cpb.org/aboutcpb/financials/budget). While PBS is an important part of the news landscape in the United States, it does not compare in size or scope with state or public broadcasting in other major nations.

certainly contested how much this is feasible in practice (Hearns-Branaman 2014). Hearns-Branaman more reasonably argues that U.S. journalists understand that objectivity is an impossibility, but that to strive toward it and hold it as a value is a norm that defines U.S. journalism.

Siebert et al. differentiated the Soviet model from the authoritarian one, which both repressed journalists through censorship and government control. They argued that Soviet media theoretically served the interests of the working class, while in practice journalists experienced the authoritarian model, in which the media openly supported the ruling elite. While Siebert et al. have been criticized for being an artifact of the Cold War and more of an exercise in U.S. propaganda than a scientific study of political communication, the work highlights the importance of considering how media roles vary among countries. In both cases, the role of the media parallels the structure and aims of the state. In the case of the Soviet Union, the media's role was to support the Communist Party (which de facto was an authoritarian regime); in the United States, it is supposed to inform citizens and provide the 'watchdog' role of checking state power. These are strikingly different, indeed opposite, roles. In the Soviet Union and later in Russia, the state owns (and controls) significant parts of the media system (Oates 2007). The United States remains -- even 65 years after the publication of Siebert et al.'s models -- strikingly commercial in nature as the only major nation that lacks widespread state or public subsidies of its media system.

Hallin and Mancini (2004) updated these models, in particular by finding significant differences among media systems in Western democracies. They found that democratic media systems can function more as voices for political parties and interests rather than as watchdogs for the people. Arguably, we could fit either Trump or Russia into Hallin and Mancini's corporatist model, in which political parties co-opt media outlets essentially as a voice for political factions. However, this would suggest a greater degree of contestation, rule of law, and power sharing than is apparent in Russia. Sparks (2008) argues that there is variation of political opinion in non-free media systems such as Russia, given that elites often "use their control of media outlets to bargain with each other over the disposal of material assets and political power" (page 15). This work that reflects on Siebert et al.'s concept of models is important, in that it demonstrates that it is not useful to think of the way in which media function within countries as monolithic or static.

With those caveats in mind about the limitations of historical understandings of national media models, the comparison of the nature of media systems allows us to more clearly understand how Russian propaganda can penetrate the U.S. media system with relative ease. By its nature, the U.S. media system is decentralized and controlled much more by market forces than by legal measures. Yet, these very factors that are designed to protect the flow of information free from government control allow foreign governments to use social media, propaganda outlets posing as news websites, comment sections, paid placement of content, etc., to carry out propaganda 'in plain sight.' Should the United States choose to engage in counter-propaganda, the more centralized and controlled nature of the Russian media system would make it very difficult to reciprocate in kind.[2] In this way, Russia has a rare and useful opportunity, as relatively few

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[2] The United States does carry out what it terms public diplomacy, in particular through its international broadcasters Voice of American and Radio Liberty/Radio Free Europe. These efforts are funded directly by the U.S. government, although they are technically independent of control by the President or other government powers. This

countries have such an open media system[3] and almost none lack a powerful state media sector in the same way as the United States.

It is one thing for an authoritarian country to take advantage of the democratic nature of the U.S. media; it is another thing for American leaders to also attempt to 'weaponize' the media for their own, non-democratic ends. For most of the Trump era, the most prominent use of the media by Trump and pro-Trump Republicans for non-democratic ends was somewhat ironic: Trump and his allies constantly attacked the free media (Meeks). This was usually done by accusing the media of a liberal bias, although much of Trump's attacks were more chaotic and personal. At the same time, Trump made extensive use of the media to promote his messaging and smear his enemies.

To an extent, Trump's media strategy parallels the Russian strategy of *kompromat*. Short for "compromising material" in Russian, kompromat sits at the intersection of news and blackmail. It involves attacking the reputations of political opponents or pressuring allies through hints, images, videos, promises of disclosures, perhaps even some high-quality faked documentation. Kompromat only needs to create a sense of doubt, rather than prove its case conclusively. This is distinctive from fake news, as successful kompromat is designed to resonate with a small grain of doubt or concern with an audience. One of the best examples of how Trump used kompromat is in his development of the "Stop the Steal" narrative by claiming that mail-in ballots could easily be faked. In fact, there has never been any evidence of widespread issues with mail-in ballots, but Trump was able to leverage the high use of mail-in ballots during the pandemic as a key element of his Stop the Steal narrative.

A more concerning way in which Trump paralleled Kremlin media strategy was through his attack on the idea of free media itself. While the media served as a very useful tool for Trump, a free media system that functions as a watchdog was problematic for his administration. Indeed, from the very first moments of his administration when the Trump White House chose to lie about the size of the crowd at the inauguration, Trump signaled he would not adhere to facts. As such, undermining the power of the media as an American institution was an important part of the Trump strategy. As Pomerantsev (2014) wrote about Russia, creating an environment where "nothing is true, but everything is possible" is a good description of the Trump communication strategy.

The Narrative Lens

Given the understanding that the Russians would attempt to promote their own interests by exploiting the open media system in the United States, we designed a study to identify Russian communication goals and look for evidence of messaging around these goals in U.S. media content. This is part of an ongoing project (Oates and Gray 2019, Oates et al. 2020, Oates and

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was challenged during the Trump administration (https://www.npr.org/2020/11/21/937467457/ceo-over-voa-acted-unconstitutionally-in-pursuing-bias-claims-u-s-judge-rules). Unsurprisingly, U.S. adversaries call these outlets propaganda rather than public diplomacy.

[3] It is relatively rare for media systems to even attempt to work in the service of the citizens; by 2017, only 13 percent of the world's population lived in a country with a free press, according to Freedom House, see https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/press-freedoms-dark-horizon#overview-essay

Steiner 2018, Steiner and Oates 2019) to operationalize Russian propaganda narratives so they can be tagged and tracked in U.S. social and traditional media content. What we found in our examination of campaign narratives is that there was significant overlap among narratives from Trump, Russian English-language propaganda on RT and Sputnik, and Fox News. We also conducted a study using the Steno open-source software, which allows researchers to identify content replication in databases of news articles, to detect Russian English-language propaganda in a range of U.S. news sites. The Steno project pilot results, which found 219 stories from RT and Sputnik shared on the InfoWars site, will be discussed below.

For our study, we chose to look at narratives, which we operationalize as a concept broader than a frame, yet still detectable and measurable in news. While the concept of narrative is becoming of greater interest to political communication scholars, the field still lacks a shared definition of the term. Halverson et al. (2011) wrote that narratives are "powerful resources for defining cultures and framing actions, and it is particularly important to understand how they operate if we hope to understand and counter them" (page 1). A narrative is broader than a story, which Halverson et al. define as "a particular sequence of related events that are situated in the past and recounted for rhetorical/ideological purposes" (page 13) while a narrative is "a coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories that share a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience expectations according to the known trajectories of its literary and rhetorical form" (page 14).

How does the well-developed concept of framing (Entman 1993) fit within the burgeoning idea of narrative analysis that would seem to better embrace Russian information strategy? The difference in frame and narrative is that framing operates within an organized view of reality and essentially accepted fact-based journalism. A narrative is more about a story that may or may not be grounded in facts. While a frame highlights the organization of material, a narrative resonates with a particular way of looking at the world. It can be argued that the power of a narrative often transcends language or logic; it becomes so resonant and embedded within societies, texts, and the minds of citizens that it can act as an inoculation against inconvenient truths. It allows people to navigate complex and often frightening realities. This can be positive, for example in rallying a population to action to overcome a war or an epidemic through acts that operate against self-interests (sending their children to fight, rationing, self-isolating, etc.). But it also can become a very powerful tool that mitigates against democracy because it creates a disconnect between information and governance, making it impossible for citizens to be reasonably informed. This then turns elections into conduits for power for authoritarian leaders with little regard or interest in serving the citizens or the public good. In other words, while frames can lead -- or mislead -- citizens with regard to policies, actions, individuals, etc., narratives can become more powerful and persuasive agents of particular world views. Specifically, viewing the transmission of information through the lens of narratives could illuminate how specific stories fit into compelling and widely shared narratives. Thus, while scholars such as Starbird (2017) have been justly puzzled by the prevalence of demonstrably false conspiracy theories having surprising popularity in the online sphere, the existence of "false flags" and "crisis actor" conspiracies make more sense within the narrative of a lack of trust in government and media.

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2017) offer a range of approaches on how to specifically define narratives by narrowing the concept of narrative into a particular category: "strategic"

narrative used by countries for propaganda. According to Miskimmon et al., strategic narratives have the following components (page 7): character or actors, setting/environment, conflict/action, tools/behavior, as well as a resolution (either suggested, realized, or merely a goal). For example, a Russian strategic narrative that democracy is fatally flawed may include stories about media bias, examples of media corruption, lack of fair coverage, etc. Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin argue narratives are "more important for ordering the chaos" in a world "with leaders who are ill-prepared for its complexities" as we develop into a more globalized community (2014, page 74). Just as Miskimmon et al. selected an area of focus for narratives, so did we by choosing to analyze political narratives surrounding the 2020 U.S. elections. While we initially planned to study the traditional campaign narratives, with a particular focus on trying to detect Russian resonance with the Trump campaign, we widened the analysis to consider the Stop the Steal narrative and the January 6 insurrection relating to Trump's disinformation.

Methods

This paper builds on content analysis that uses human annotation of content along with a machine learning system developed by MarvelousAI. It also deploys the Steno software content-marching system. The two methods were used on separate corpora, which will be discussed below. In both cases, we used RT and Sputnik content as examples of Russian English-language content. RT, formerly Russia Today, markets itself as an 'alternative' media outlet but is funded by the Russian government and promotes Kremlin messaging. Sputnik is also a Russian news outlet. Both RT and Sputnik are registered as foreign agents with the Department of Justice. Other work has explored the links between these news outlets and Russian government messaging (for an overview of the studies of Russian state-funded broadcasters, see Crilley et al. 2020).

MarvelousAI

MarvelousAI's StoryArc platform provides tools for collecting publicly available news or social media stories, annotating textual content, as well as building machine-learning models using those annotations. For this project, the data pipeline involved the following steps:

- Continuously collect news mentions for keywords (such as "Trump" and "Biden") using Google alerts for specific news websites.
- Scrape the full text of relevant articles.
- Apply heuristics to extract paragraph-sized snippets centered on the keyword matches.
- Allow users to label the snippets with one or more predefined narrative tags, or as explicitly *not* fitting a narrative. We begin with roughly 100 positive examples for each narrative.
- Build supervised binary classifiers for each narrative using the annotations. In this process, snippets are first converted into vector representations using an adaptation of the BERT pre-trained language model (Reimer and Gurevych 2019). We then use Principal Component Analysis to reduce the number of dimensions in the training set and fit a Support Vector Machine (Cortes and Vapnik 1995) model to discriminate between positive and negative examples.

- Use the resulting models to classify all snippets in a particular time period and surface the results to the user, including samples of snippets that the model classified as belonging to a narrative and not belonging to a narrative. The user can then correct the model's mistakes, thus creating more training data that is targeted at the less confident parts of the model.
- Re-train models using the larger training sets.

Steno

The content analysis tool Steno (www.stenoproject.org) was used to collect all newly-published URLs from pre-selected news sites between November 1, 2020, and January 31, 2021. This period covered Election Day itself, the violence at the Capitol on January 6th, and the aftermath of both.

Articles were scraped from the Russian news sites rt.com and sputniknews.com, as well as the following list of U.S. news sources from across the political spectrum, covering legacy print and broadcast media as well as digital-first outlets:

- huffpost.com
- msnbc.com
- us.cnn.com
- nytimes.com
- washingtonpost.com
- usatoday.com
- wsj.com
- foxnews.com
- breitbart.com
- cbn.com
- theblaze.com
- dailycaller.com
- nationalreview.com
- infowars.com
- oann.com
- dailywire.com
- newsmax.com

The full text of each article, cleaned to remove captions, embedded links, and advertisements was stored alongside metadata covering the date and time of initial publication; URL; headline, and publisher data. The full corpus of articles gathered over this period was 119,034: 38,650 in November 2020, 39,675 in December 2020, and 40,709 in January 2021. The total number of articles for the main outlets covered in this paper was 5,978 from RT, 9,832 from Sputnik, and 2,449 from Infowars.

Steno's 'Similarity' function was used to detect whether articles in the same dataset shared content with other articles in that dataset using a predetermined threshold to record matches. For this analysis, articles were selected using a match threshold of 0.5 (i.e. 50% of the text content in one article was found to be present in one or more other articles). Text matching is achieved by

using n-grams rather than matching strings of text. In this analysis, Steno's default n-gram length of three words was used. Results using the similarity function can be skewed if there are significant differences in article length. However, that issue was not encountered in this corpus.

Comparing Narratives

Our initial approach to finding narratives was inductive. While we were aware of Russian propaganda strategy aimed at the United States (Oates and Steiner, Steiner and Oates), the four main narratives that we had identified in previous work – democracy is flawed, the West is out to destroy Russia, Russia protects Russians no matter where they live, Russia is a resurgent great nation – were not directly relevant to the 2020 U.S. elections and its aftermath. The first narrative, that of flawed democracy, was the most relevant for study, but we needed a much more specific approach.

The MarvelousAI system scraped all stories on RT.com and Sputniknews.com that mentioned "Trump" or "Biden" over the course of several months. We then read the coverage from August 14, 2020, which was three days prior to the 2020 Democratic National Convention, until November 2, 2020 (the day before Election Day). We identified a range of promising narratives, nine of which we used to label snippets in the Russian English-language corpus (see Table 1). Two of the authors (Oates and Rubenstein) coded the material after checking for inter-coder reliability. One author (Oates) verified the annotations for all narratives that garnered more than 100 annotations at the end of the coding process.

Table 1: Russian English-Language Propaganda Narratives on RT and Sputnik
August 14 to November 2, 2020

RT/Sputnik Narratives	Political slant	Snippets (Documents)*
Biden is bad for America	Republican	260 (83)
The liberal media lies	Republican	251 (47)
Russophobia	Republican	188 (45)
Trump is incompetent	Democrat	127 (25)
Trump is better for America	Republican	117 (24)
Trump hates China	Republican	43 (15)
Trump and The Republicans bring disorder	Democrat	27 (11)
Biden is better for America	Democrat	27 (7)
Attacks on Trump supporters	Republican	2 (2)

These are snippets identified as being on the narrative by our human coders.

Table 2: Russian English-Language Propaganda Narratives on Cable (Primarily Fox)
August 14 to November 2, 2020

Fox Narratives	Political slant	Snippets (Documents)*
Democrats make our streets unsafe	Republican	320 (65)
The liberal media lies	Republican	221 (35)
Democrats are socialists	Republican	146 (40)
Biden is old and feeble	Republican	142 (38)
Russophobia	Republican	125 (18)
Stop the Steal	Republican	46 (20)
Trump is COVID expert	Republican	43 (17)
Biden and his family are corrupt	Republican	40 (19)
Trump is winning	Republican	34 (11)
You can't trust the polls (which favor Democrats)	Republican	34 (11)
Democrats exaggerate COVID fears	Republican	33 (12)
Everyone loves Trump	Republican	33 (12)
Trump is a skilled diplomat	Republican	31 (7)
Trump handles COVID badly	Democrat	20 (17)
Anyone but Trump	Democrat	16 (10)
Trump and circle got COVID by being careless	Democrat	3 (3)

These are snippets identified as being on the narrative by our human coders.

Two results of this analysis are particularly interesting. First, the narratives on RT and Sputnik are not one-sided, although our qualitative review found a greater tendency to mock the Democrats rather than Trump. However, the coverage showed a fair bit of skepticism toward both. If one had to qualify the coverage overall, it would be that America was falling apart because there were no good choices in the race. In keeping with studies of U.S. media content

around elections, there was a huge focus on personalities and 'horse race' of who was ahead or behind rather than a deeper discussion of issues or ideology (Patterson 2016).

While we were able to identify several narratives that were present in enough snippets to attempt machine classification (see Tables 1 and 2), we were only able to achieve reliable results with the machine classifier for the Russophobia narrative. The technical definition of the word Russophobia is "strong dislike toward Russia and Russian things, especially the political system or customs of the former Soviet Union" (according to the Oxford Languages definition supplied by Google). For this project, we defined Russophobia in our codebook as:

U.S. unfairly hates and punishes Russia, attempting to denigrate and deny the county its fair place in the world order. Includes Russiagate.

In other words, the Russophobia narrative suggests that those using it are trying to place blame on Russia unfairly. While historically there has been much Russophobia in the United States, during Election 2020 the narrative was generally used by Republicans to mock Democrats. The Russophobia narrative was deployed by Trump and his supporters to claim that Democrats were trying to undermine Trump. The Republicans claimed that Democrats were using Russophobia to assert that Russia propelled Trump into office and that Trump was a Russian 'puppet' (Radnitz 2021, page 182). While this narrative started as a response to reports of Russian meddling in the 2016 elections, it gained traction during Trump's first impeachment and because the narrative was so often amplified by Trump and right-wing pundits. Hunter Biden was swept into this narrative in a somewhat odd way during the 2020 campaign (Trump supporters tried to use 'evidence' that Hunter Biden was in the pay of Ukraine but also conflated this with Russian influence).

We then turned to our cable news corpus, which we had scraped from the CNN and Fox News websites. For this part of the project, we focused on Fox News, in part because only about 20 percent of the corpus was CNN and in part because it was much easier to detect strong narratives on Fox. We followed the same coding process (from qualitative review to establish narratives to coding) as outlined above. As Table 1 above shows, we found two overlapping narratives between the Russian sources and Fox News, although overall Fox News was more pro-Republican and anti-Democrat than the Russian material. There were several promising narratives, particularly the oft-repeated tropes that the liberal media was lying to the public, that Democrats are socialists, and that Democrats would allow protests and immigrants to make American streets unsafe for common citizens. However, the only narrative with which we could successfully train the machine classifier was Russophobia.

Here are some examples of snippets with Russophobia from the two different corpora:

RT
October 6, 2020
After years of 'Russiagate' investigations, not a single US citizen was charged in relation to conspiring with agents of the Russian government, while many anti-Trump stories, which respectable US outlets ran with, turned out to be extremely exaggerated or completely bogus. Culminating this apparent bias was the decision of social media and MSM to

suppress allegations of corruption in the Biden family.
https://www.rt.com/op-ed/502661-msm-establishment-trump-win/

Fox News
October 22, 2020
That ploy didn't pass the smell test among critics. "Crazy. DNI, FBI, and DoJ have specifically rejected this claim," conservative writer A.G. Hamilton reacted. "There is no evidence to support it. Biden camp should be widely condemned for spreading conspiracy theories without evidence." "This has all the classic earmarks of a Russiagate disinformation operation #BlueAnon," progressive journalist Aaron Maté quipped. "We've now come full circle in the #Russiagate propaganda media campaign... @JoeBide borrowing Trump's fake news reflex with a side of "Russian disinformation" (with zero evidence of such)" ...
https://www.foxnews.com/media/biden-campaign-trump-amplifying-russia-disinformation-hunter-biden

Overall, we found 1,123 mentions of Russophobia in the RT/Sputnik corpus and 2,211 in the cable news corpus. About 80 percent of the mentions in the cable news corpus were on Fox. It is a flaw in our system that we did not screen out the CNN content; the original intent was to do both but we did not collect enough CNN in the corpus. Thus, the results are muddied to a certain extent, but given the dominance of Fox in the corpus as well as our qualitative review of the material, we are confident that Fox had strong use of the Russophobia narrative. In Chart 1, you can see the ebb and flow of the narrative in both corpora. The U.S. cable news network has larger spikes, particularly at the beginning and end of the period under study. Much of the activity on cable news questioned the motivations for investigating Russian interference in U.S. elections (with Republicans often convinced it was a witch hunt). The large spike in late October 2020 relates to rumors that a laptop had been found linking Hunter Biden to corruption in Ukraine and Russia. Much of the mainstream media did not consider the alleged laptop evidence as trustworthy.

Chart 1
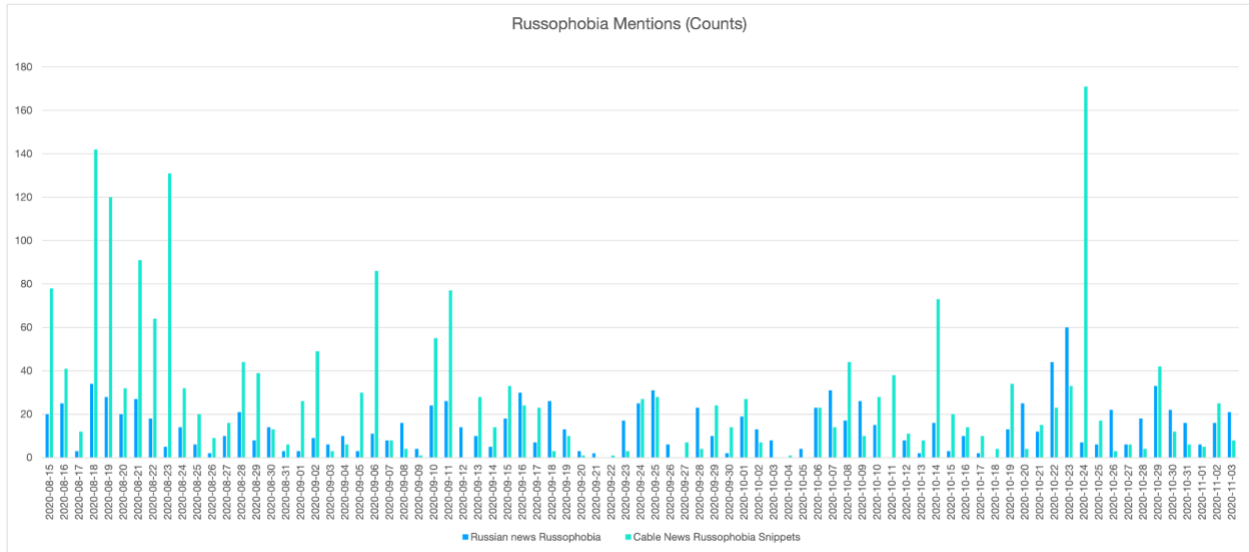
While the presence of the Russophobia narrative is clear in both the Russian English-language content and on cable news, what percent of the news snippets referenced Russophobia? In our qualitative review, we noticed a constant return to this narrative, particularly on Fox. Chart 2 shows which percentage of the content we scraped in the two corpora mentioned Russophobia. As the chart makes clear, Russophobia was a dominant narrative throughout the campaign period. Although it waxed and waned, there were times when it was present in more than half of the snippets we coded for cable news (one story often had multiple snippets).

Chart 2
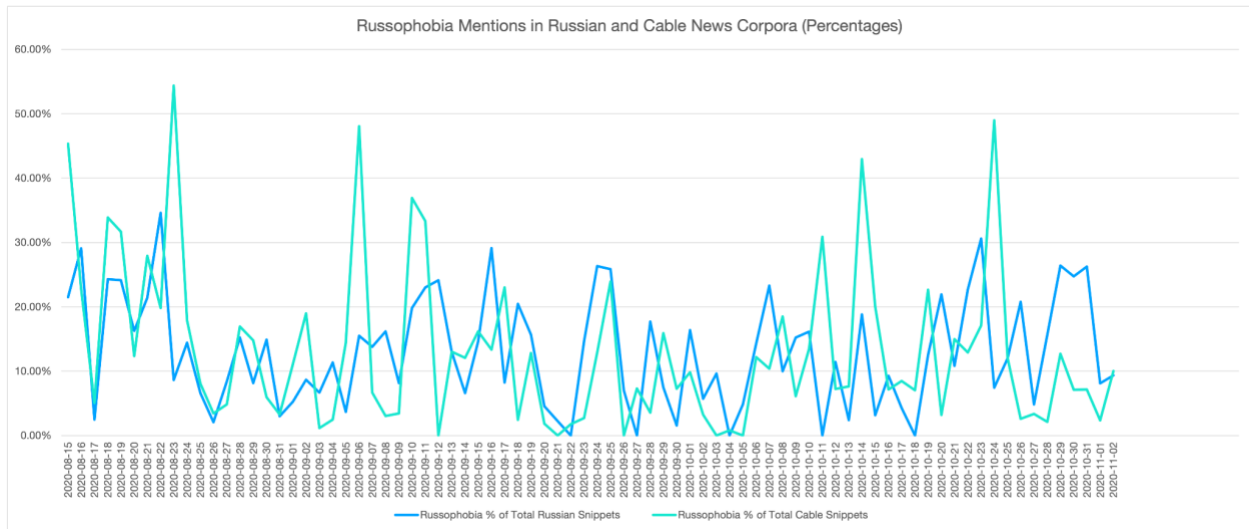
The graphics in Charts 1 and 2 would suggest a covariance between the mention of Russophobia in Russian English-language content and on cable news. A correlation test finds a significant,

positive correlation between both mentions and percentage of snippets with a mention (see Tables 3 and 4). As noted above, we are not studying whether there is specific collusion. Rather, we are interested in how a Russian outlet and American outlets may come to promote the same narratives. Much of covariance has to do with events, particularly the discussion around the alleged evidence linking Hunter Biden to Ukrainian and Russian corruption in late October 2020. However, the correlation between a narrative in Russian propaganda and on cable content that is mostly from Fox is striking.

Tables 3 and 4

Correlations

		Russian News Russophobia Snippets	Cable News Russophobia snippets
Russian News Russophobia Snippets	Pearson Correlation	1	.254[*]
	Sig. (2–tailed)		.022
	N	81	81
Cable News Russophobia snippets	Pearson Correlation	.254[*]	1
	Sig. (2–tailed)	.022	
	N	81	81

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2–tailed).

Correlations

		Russian News Russophobia Percent	Cable News Russophobia Percent
Russian News Russophobia Percent	Pearson Correlation	1	.267[*]
	Sig. (2–tailed)		.017
	N	80	80
Cable News Russophobia Percent	Pearson Correlation	.267[*]	1
	Sig. (2–tailed)	.017	
	N	80	80

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2–tailed).

While we view our measurement of Russophobia as useful and interesting -- particularly in that we were able to translate our qualitative coding into a machine classifier that accurately identified a narrative -- there are some important caveats and future work needed. The largest problem is that this is not purely Fox News in two important ways. First, there was a small amount of CNN content, although little of it (only 71 snippets) was picked up by the classifier. So while this is mostly Fox and representative of Fox, we need to completely eliminate CNN from this study. Secondly, we needed a more rigorous separation of different types of news -- notably straight news and commentary -- in our corpora. We scraped content based on keywords

("Trump" and "Biden") from Fox, RT, and Sputnik. This meant we were treating a straight news story and highly colored opinion articles as the same type of text. We also had some broadcast transcripts from news analysis in the Fox corpus. We note that the Fox material (in particular) varied significantly in tone and slant from the news stories. One could argue that a media outlet's brand reflects all of its content and, indeed, the political analysts at Fox are very influential in the national political conversation. However, it is more rigorous to treat news, opinion, and analysis as separate entities.

Steno: Content Matching to Find Russian Copy in U.S. News

We also deployed the Steno text-matching system to look for Russian narratives in U.S. news content. A key advantage of the Steno system was a larger corpus of U.S. news content through which to search. In addition, one author (Ramsay) has extensive experience in using the system (Ramsay and Robertshaw 2018). For this project, Steno used content matching to compare RT and Sputnik coverage with US news sources from November 1, 2020, through January 31, 2021. We were particularly interested in Russian propaganda relating to Trump's attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the election through his 'Stop the Steal' narrative as well as any efforts by Russian propaganda to exploit the chaos around the January 6 insurrection.

As noted above, the Steno system searched for matches between content scraped from RT/Sputnik and U.S. media content. The Steno system found 219 matches between RT/Sputnik and the rightwing disinformation site Infowars[4] (see Table 5). There were only a handful of matches between the Russian content and right-wing outlets other than InfoWars, with a few matches found in mainstream media. The InfoWars site was not shy about the use of Russian English-language copy as they tended to give credit (i.e. a byline to Sputnik or RT) for the material. In our study, it wasn't possible to determine whether the material first appeared on RT or Sputnik, but our guess is that InfoWars just finds the copy handy for its website. We did not investigate whether InfoWars has any formal arrangements with Sputnik or RT.

The Steno system was not successful at finding other significant matches between Russian English-language propaganda and U.S. media content. We will continue to use the system to see if specific keywords or other methods will yield interesting comparisons between the two.

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[4] For a ranking and discussion of InfoWars bias and reliability, see the Ad Fontes media ranking system at https://adfontesmedia.com/infowars-bias-and-reliability/

Table 5

US Publication

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Infowars	219	94.4	94.4	94.4
	Breitbart	2	.9	.9	95.3
	Newsmax	2	.9	.9	96.1
	Daily Caller	2	.9	.9	97.0
	The Blaze	1	.4	.4	97.4
	USA Today	2	.9	.9	98.3
	HuffPost	2	.9	.9	99.1
	NY Post	1	.4	.4	99.6
	Huffpo & Newsmax	1	.4	.4	100.0
	Total	232	100.0	100.0	

Conclusions

We undertook this project with the goal of operationalizing narrative so that it could be detected by automated coding techniques. We had success in operationalizing one narrative, Russophobia, and demonstrated strong resonance in this pro-Trump narrative in Fox News and Russian English-language propaganda. This method holds significant promise for a new way of studying how messages resonate across media ecosystems. The Steno results found a curious sharing of content among InfoWars, RT, and Sputnik, but no widespread resonance between Russian and U.S. news narratives.

While we were successful in training one classifier, we were not successful in automating others. Humans can perceive many narratives that machine learning cannot model. Part of this is a lack of volume, particularly when dealing with relatively limited amounts of content from RT and Sputnik. Most of the narratives that humans can perceive, define, and even assign with a list of keywords did not model properly in news content. This method did work for Twitter content (Oates et al. 2020; Oates et al. 2019); hence we learned that a method that works in one corpus may not work in another. We have identified the challenges, which have to do with both a) the verbal cogency of particular narratives – we can perceive them as humans, but they lack the same specific vocabulary found in Russophobia; and b) snippeting/unit of analysis issue (discussed below). We also learned that even with good coder training, secondary validation is a good idea. There is coding 'drift' but that is a common human content analysis issue. Fortunately, with the MarvelousAI system that can model a narrative with as few as 100 human annotations, checking annotations is not an onerous task.

News content comes in so many styles and formats that it is difficult to create human or machine models across a lot of it. We needed more sorting of news content, particularly between transcripts and news stories that appeared on the Fox News website. In addition, the unit of

analysis for coding in a news story remains a vexing problem, particularly in campaign stories because it is quite common to have both major candidates in the same paragraph or even the same sentence. With the MarvelousAI system set to retrieve and parse into snippets all online content from RT, Sputnik, Fox News, and CNN News that mentioned Trump or Biden from August 1 to November 2, 2020, most of the snippets mixed both names. This meant tagging a snippet with a Trump-based narrative, for example, typically meant Biden was swept into the classifier.

Although we had considered how to study a certain period that chimed with key election events (the two party conventions, ending just before Election Day, etc.), this project underlines that narratives will rise and fall very quickly with events. For example, there was some evidence of an election malfeasance narrative prior to Election Day on November 3, as Trump hedged his bets by attacking the integrity of mail-in ballots (which were likely to favor Democrats who were taking COVID precautions more seriously and planned to avoid voting in person). This narrative resonates with Russia's Flawed Democracy strategic narrative and, indeed, the coding team did see some mentions of issues with mail-in voting (as well as criticism of the decentralized nature of U.S. election procedures). But the Stop the Steal narrative changed and solidified from the evening of November 3, as Trump realized that the mail-in ballots were going to not only erode any leads, but would likely cost him the election. Thus, just as a 'human' needs to be in the loop to authenticate a narrative for machine classifiers, humans need to track and consider the world events that are shaping the online content.

Finally, what do these particular findings say about the idea of 'nyetwork' news, that an American president and significant elements of his party see the U.S. media as a vehicle for propaganda rather than as a pillar of democracy? The presence of the Russophobia narrative, pushed by Trump and echoed by the right-wing media, could be considered a legitimate use of the media to voice dissent from the Democrat-led effort to investigate Russian collusion with the Trump campaign. Is it a coincidence that the same narrative plays a significant role in Russian English-language propaganda on RT and Sputnik? There are many unanswered questions here, notably whether this presidential narrative happened to coincide with that of Russian propaganda. As noted above, we weren't looking for any conspiracies or collusion; instead, we were seeking to measure which political narratives were finding resonance in Russian propaganda and U.S. news. We did find resonance and it causes us to wonder.

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